

**Wrong Life / Ethical Life: Reason, Ethics and History in Adorno**

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## Abstract

This thesis aims to provide an interpretation and defence of Adorno's claim that 'Wrong life cannot be lived rightly'. The central theme of this interpretation is that Adorno's claim expresses an antinomy between Kantian and Hegelian ethics, interpreting 'Wrong Life' as an inversion of Hegelian 'Ethical Life'. For Hegel, moral subjectivity is historically achieved, made possible within enabling social structures and institutions that give positive content to individual freedom. Adorno accepts central Hegelian insights while also subjecting them to critical scrutiny in light of post-19<sup>th</sup> century historical events and totalising social formations, characterised by the embeddedness of instrumental reason, which constitutes the 'Wrong Life' grounding and reproduced at the level of individual living. Rather than engaging in a persistent dialogue with Hegel's work, the juxtaposition between 'Wrong Life' and 'Ethical Life' is transfigured into the broader central argument that any account of moral philosophy must pass through the philosophy of history, which itself must tarry seriously with what history does to the subject.

I begin by reconstructing 'instrumental reason' in Weber and Horkheimer, two of Adorno's philosophical interlocutors whose influence can often be taken for granted. Following a re-articulation in the language of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 'Wrong Life' is characterised in terms of the embeddedness of instrumental rationality in objective conditions, demonstrated through Auschwitz, the exchange-relationship and Davis' account of the modern prison. I then interpret Adorno's claim in *Minima Moralia* in light of this contextualisation before exploring its return with reference to Kant and Hegel in his later work. Finally, I consider Adorno's critique of moral philosophy with respect to his concept of the 'addendum' and explore his notion of the 'guilt context' in terms of his relationship to Nietzschean nihilism and Hegel's philosophy of history, the last of which Adorno says must both be 'construed and denied'.

## Acknowledgements

Producing this PhD thesis has definitely been one of the most difficult tasks I have ever undertaken and I almost gave up on it multiple times. It is an understatement to say that there is no way that I could have completed it without the support, care and friendship of others.

I would first like to thank my supervisors David Rose and Mike Lewis. Without a doubt David's sympathy, kindness and patience have kept me hanging on and he went above and beyond, again and again, to keep everything running as smoothly as possible. I cannot express how grateful I am for his support and I owe him much more than it is really possible to express here. Mike's kindness and support, especially in the last few months, were invaluable and his faith in my ability to complete, despite seeming for a very long time to be plainly unreasonable, did, it seems, win out in the end. I am very grateful to Brian O'Connor and Lorenzo Chiesa for acting as the examiners for this thesis and challenging as it was, I am not sure I could have asked for a better experience of the viva. Finally, I also wish to express gratitude to Richard Stopford for his support and for sharing his knowledge about Adorno with me in the first year and a half of my candidature, which really helped me persist in the early stages.

I would also like to acknowledge the support, kindness and friendship of my colleagues in the department, over many years for some of them. There are too many to name here but in particular I would like to thank Adam Potts, who has been a good friend and an excellent philosophical interlocutor for many years now and the same is true of Dan Koczy, who is one of my closest friends and whose love and kindness I have been able to appreciate for the best part of two decades now. I must also thank Miriam Baldwin, with whom I have taught for six years on 'Networked Society', mostly as a teaching assistant but twice as module leader of the second semester. Large parts of the first half of the thesis arose through this teaching and I am indebted to Miriam for giving me the opportunity to encounter and think through the work of Max Weber especially. I would also like to thank Shreyaa Bhatt for her endless support, advice and accommodation, especially during the penultimate year. Holden Rasmussen has been a great philosophical conversation partner and has always encouraged me to talk through my ideas and academic struggles, which undoubtedly helped me a great deal in the last few months. I would also like to thank Jake Parkins and Jacob Parkin (not to be confused) for an array of gifts suited to my simple tastes in the last few months. In particular, it has been an absolute delight and privilege to have taught Jacob through undergraduate level and to now have them as a peer, undertaking their own PhD and to have had their support as teaching assistant last year, when we got to teach Adorno together to third year undergraduates.

There are too many friends to thank, so I will just name those whose support and friendship in the past year or two have been invaluable: John and Laura Nicholson, Graham Russell, Elodie Roy, Tamsin Margary, Michael Bavidge, Sian Gulliver and Pete Wolfendale. Alex Brown has been a great friend throughout my PhD period and the lockdowns of 2020 and 2021 would have been so much more unbearable if I hadn't been living with him. Agnieszka Gornikiewicz is and I hope will remain one my best friends and there is no doubt that I would not have been able to begin this PhD without her support in the first place. Alex Murray is perhaps my oldest and definitely my closest friend and I shall once again limit myself to saying that his friendship is indescribable. A special mention for Chris Fairbairn, whose friendship is unforgettable.

Finally, I owe an immense debt of gratitude to Zoe Waters. There is absolutely no way that I could have finished without her help, support, sympathy and friendship. She has been utterly amazing, especially in the final weeks and I could not hope for anything better. If this thesis had not felt like an albatross round my neck for the majority of my candidature, I would dedicate it to her. Actually, she'd probably like it if I did anyway.

This thesis is dedicated to Zoe Waters.

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## List of Abbreviations

### Works by Theodor W. Adorno:

#### *EAA*

(1998a) 'Education After Auschwitz'. *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*. Translated by Pickford, H. W. New York: Columbia University Press.

#### *HF*

(2006a) *History and Freedom*. Edited by Tiedemann, R. Translated by Livingstone, R. Cambridge: Polity Press.

#### *HTS*

(1993) *Hegel: Three Studies*. Translated by Weber NicholSEN, S. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press.

#### *LCIS*

(2003) 'Late Capitalism or Industrial Society?: The Fundamental Question of the Present Structure of Society'. *Can One Live After Auschwitz?: A Philosophical Reader*. Edited by Livingstone, R. Translated by Tiedemann, R. & Others. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

#### *MBCST*

(2022) 'Marx and the Basic Concepts of Sociological Theory'. *Adorno and Marx: Negative Dialectics and the Critique of Political Economy*. Edited by Bonefeld, W & O'Kane, C. Translated by O'Kane, C. London: Bloomsbury.

#### *MBP*

(1998b) *Metaphysik: Begriff und Probleme*. Edited by Tiedemann, R. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag.

#### *MCP*

(2001a) *Metaphysics: Concepts and Problems*. Edited by Tiedemann, R. Translated by Jephcott, E. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

#### *MM*

(2005) *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*. Translated by Jephcott, E. F. N. London: Verso.

*MTP*

(1998a) 'Marginalia to Theory and Praxis'. *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*. Translated by Pickford, H. W. New York: Columbia University Press.

*MWTP*

(1998a) 'The Meaning of Working Through the Past'. *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*. Translated by Pickford, H. W. New York: Columbia University Press.

*ND*

(2007) *Negative Dialectics*. Translated by Ashton, E. B. New York: Continuum Press.

*PdM*

(1997) *Probleme der Moralphilosophie*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. Edited by Schröder, T. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag.

*OSO*

(1998a) 'On Subject and Object'. *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*. Translated by Pickford, H. W. New York: Columbia University Press.

*PETS*

(2019) *Philosophical Elements of a Theory of Society*. Edited by ten Brink, T. & Nogueira, M. P. Translated by Hoban, W. Cambridge: Polity Press.

*PMP*

(2000) *Problems of Moral Philosophy*. Edited by Schröder, T. Translated by Livingstone, R. Cambridge: Polity Press.

*Progress*

(1998a) 'Progress'. *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*. Translated by Pickford, H. W. New York: Columbia University Press.

*SDE*

(2002) *The Stars Down to Earth*. Edited by Crook, S. London: Routledge.

With Ernst Bloch

*Something's Missing*

(1988) 'Something's Missing: A Discussion between Ernst Bloch and Theodor W. Adorno on the Contradictions of Utopian Longing'. *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature: Selected Essays*. Translated by Zipes, J. & Mecklenburg, F. London: MIT Press.

With Max Horkheimer

*DE*

(1997) *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Translated by Cumming, J. London: Verso.

*TNM*

(2019) *Towards a New Manifesto*. Translated by Livingstone, R., Macdonald, I. & Shuster, M. London: Verso.

**Works by G. W. F. Hegel:**

*Aesthetics*

(1975a) *Hegel's Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art, Volume I*. Edited and translated by Knox, T. M. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

*EL*

(1975b) *Hegel's Logic: Being Part One of the Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences (1830)*. Translated by Wallace, W. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

*EPR*

(1991a) *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*. Edited by Wood, A. W. Translated by Nisbet, H. B. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

*HP*

(2009) *The History of Philosophy, 1825 – 6, Volume 1: Introduction and Oriental Philosophy*. Translated and edited by Brown, R. F. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

*LNR*

(2012) *Lectures on Natural Right and Political Science: The First Philosophy of Right*. Translated and edited by Stewart, J. M. and Hodgson, P. C. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

*PH*

(1991b) *The Philosophy of History*. Translated by Sibree, J. New York: Prometheus Books.

*PS*

(1977) *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Translated by Miller, A. V. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

*SL*

(2010) *The Science of Logic*. Translated by di Giovanni, G. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

### **Works by Max Horkheimer:**

#### *BPSS*

(1993a) *Between Philosophy and Social Science: Selected Early Writings*. Translated by Hunter, G. F., Kramer, M. S. & Torpey, J. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press.

#### *CIR*

(2012) *Critique of Instrumental Reason*. London: Verso.

#### *D&D*

(1978) *Dawn and Decline: Notes 1926 – 1931 and 1950 – 1969*. Translated by Shaw, M. New York: The Seabury Press.

#### *ER*

(2004) *Eclipse of Reason*. London: Continuum.

#### *RAI*

(1993b) 'Reason Against Itself: Some Remarks on Enlightenment'. *Theory, Culture & Society*. 10(2). 79-88.

### **Works by Immanuel Kant:**

#### *CPR*

(2007) *Critique of Pure Reason*. Revised 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. Translated by Smith, N. K. Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

#### *CPrR*

(1996a) 'Critique of practical reason (1788)'. *Practical Philosophy*. Translated and Edited by Gregor, M. J. Cambridge: Cambridge University press.

#### *Groundwork*

(1996a) 'Groundwork of the metaphysics of morals (1785)'. *Practical Philosophy*. Translated and Edited by Gregor, M. J. Cambridge: Cambridge University press.

#### *MoM*

(1996a) 'The metaphysics of morals (1797)'. *Practical Philosophy*. Translated and Edited by Gregor, M. J. Cambridge: Cambridge University press.

#### *Religion*

(1996b) 'Religion within the boundaries of mere reason (1793)' *Religion and Rational*

*Theology*. Translated and edited by Wood, A. & di Giovanni, G. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

### **Works by Friedrich Nietzsche:**

*BGE*

(2003) *Beyond Good and Evil*. Translated by Hollingdale, R. J. London: Penguin Books.

*GS*

(2001) *The Gay Science*. Edited by Williams, B. Translated by Del Caro, A. and Nauckhoff, J. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

*HATH*

(2006) *Human, All Too Human*. Translated by Hollingdale, R. J. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

*OGM*

(1996) *On the Genealogy of Morals*. Translated by Smith, D. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

*TI*

(1976) 'Twilight of the Idols'. *The Portable Nietzsche*. Edited and translated by Kaufmann, W. London: Penguin Books.

*TSZ*

(1976) 'Thus Spoke Zarathustra'. *The Portable Nietzsche*. Edited and translated by Kaufmann, W. London: Penguin Books.

*WP*

(1968) *The Will to Power*. Edited by Kaufmann, W. Translated by Hollingdale, R. J. and Kaufmann, W. New York: Random House.

### **Works by Max Weber:**

*E&S*

(1978) *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*. Edited by Roth, G. and Wittich, C. Translated by Fischhoff, E., Gerth, H., Henderson, A. M., Kogler, F., Wright Mills, C., Parsons, T., Rheinstein, M., Roth, G., Shils, E. and Wittich, C. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

PESC

(2003) *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Translated by Parsons, T. New York: Dover Publications.

SV

(2009) 'Science as a Vocation'. *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*. Edited and translated by Gerth, H. H. and Wright Mills, C. London: Routledge.

Notes:

*References to Adorno's Negative Dialectics are primarily to Ashton's translation but occasionally Redmond's translation has been used, most often for comparative purposes aimed at clarifying Adorno's arguments. Similarly, references to Adorno and Horkheimer's Dialectic of Enlightenment are primarily to the translation by Cumming but occasionally Jephcott's translation has been used for comparative purposes. For similar reasons, occasionally I have made reference to the original German of several texts by Adorno, usually in tandem with reference to multiple translations in order to supplement my somewhat limited understanding of the German language. Citations to the Redmond and Cumming translations, where they occur, use the standard (Author, Date) format.*

*Following standard notation, citations of Hegel's texts that use numbered paragraphs will use the section symbol (§), while those that do not will be cited by page number. A section number followed by an R (e.g., §96R) indicates a remark [Anmerkungen] (usually indented in the original text), whereas a section number followed by an A (e.g., §124A) indicates an addition [Zusätze] (usually written in smaller text and preceded by the word 'Addition' in the original text). The section symbol is also used to provide citations to all other texts that are separated into numbered sections or aphorisms, which includes some works by Adorno and most citations to works by Nietzsche.*

*All citations to works by Kant use the margin numbers, which refer to the original German pagination of the standard edition of Kant's Gesammelte Schriften. Citations to the Critique of Pure Reason provide the margin numbers for both the A and B versions of the original German text.*

## Introduction

### *Wrong Life / Ethical Life*

This thesis is focused on the relationship between ethics, history and reason across Adorno's work in light of recent work on Adorno's relationship to moral philosophy and with reference to his chief philosophical interlocutors, especially Hegel and Kant. In particular, I attempt to provide an interpretation and defence of Adorno's claim in *Minima Moralia* that "Wrong life cannot be lived rightly" (*MM*, §18) – hereafter referred to as the 'Wrong Life claim'<sup>1</sup> – especially with reference to his later invocations of the claim in his two lecture series *Problems of Moral Philosophy* (*PMP*, 1; 162; 167) and *History and Freedom* (*HF*, 262 - 263), which are concerned with Kant's moral philosophy and Hegel's philosophy of history respectively, though each turns towards the other towards the end. These lectures will be key texts throughout the thesis, though much more so in the second half of the thesis but in general the project undertaken here is both expansive and comprehensive in scope with respect to Adorno's writings and the works of key philosophical interlocutors. More specifically, the central premise of this thesis involves interpreting Adorno's reference to 'wrong life' in the claim that 'wrong life cannot be lived rightly' as an inversion of Hegel's notion of 'ethical life' [*Sittlichkeit*], with an emphasis on Adorno's acceptance of key Hegelian premises drawn as much from the philosophy of history as from moral philosophy. While by the end of the thesis, I will argue that more emphasis should be placed on Adorno's work as not just accepting but rigorously pursuing insights made by Hegel that Adorno believes Hegel should have but did not manage to pursue himself, the thesis as a whole does not quite live up to the direct comparison implied in its title.

In Adorno's later lecture series on moral philosophy, he recontextualises the 'Wrong Life' claim in terms of a dialectic between Kantian 'right living' and Hegelian 'ethical life'. However, this is introduced very close to the end of the lectures, which are almost exclusively concerned with Kant's moral philosophy and as such, the material on Hegel leaves quite a large lacuna that I had originally hoped to fill through a comparative reconstruction of Hegel's mature concept of 'ethical life' from his *Philosophy of Right* and an Adornian critical inversion of it as 'wrong life'. The central idea was to be that Hegel and Adorno engage in a shared critique of

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<sup>1</sup> Freyenhagen (2013) refers to it as Adorno's 'No Right Living Thesis' (53) and Finlayson (2002) similarly refers to it as a 'thesis' (1 – 2), as does Bernstein (2001, 41), whereas Whyman (2019a) refers to it as a 'claim' (which he abbreviates as WLC). There is no important semantic or philosophical reason to use 'claim' over 'thesis' and my choice in following Whyman's phrasing of 'Wrong Life claim' is therefore somewhat arbitrary.

Kantian moral philosophy, criticising it as failing to take account of the social and historical constitution and mediation of the moral subject, especially through Adornian variations on Hegel's 'empty formalism' charge. The difference between 'ethical life' and 'wrong life' was to be demonstrated in the way in which the subject is mediated by modern societies. With Hegel, the moral subject is only properly possible within enabling social structures and institutions that give positive content to their freedom, with the success of this integration of morality and the intersubjective social fabric itself a "most grievous question of Hegel interpretation" (Knowles, 2002, 220).<sup>2</sup> Adorno at once agrees with Hegel in principle but finds that modern life enacts the opposite of this, atomising individuals while at the same time embedding them in opaque, complex structures that treat them as functions for the reproduction of those structures. In this way, reconciliation is not (or has not yet become) the result of a universal historical process that is frequently antagonistic towards individuals, "a slaughter-bench" that victimises them along the way (*PH*, 21). Instead, that historical process has produced at once the material and spiritual potential for a free and reconciled condition at the same time as the sources of that potential are actualised in the administrative mass-murder of Auschwitz, the atomic bomb and the exchange society. Rather than being emancipated, humanity is integrated antagonistically into a global social totality, which either functionalises the individual as means for the ends of its own reproduction or otherwise divests itself of those that cannot otherwise be integrated.

While much of these original intentions are present throughout the thesis, the direct comparison with Hegel's mature social philosophy encountered several obstacles that made this project difficult to pursue. Perhaps the biggest obstacle came in the ability to compare two thinkers whose thoughts on any given topic are difficult to disentangle from related issues. This raised the concern that a comprehensive understanding of both thinkers would be too demanding to manage. Much effort was needed even in simply trying to get a reasonable grasp of Adorno's thought in order to know, firstly, what to make of the Wrong Life claim, given how little argumentative context it is given in *Minima Moralia*; and secondly, what exactly Adorno's relationship to Hegel's thought was in the places where he does discuss him at length, chiefly *History and Freedom*, *Hegel: Three Studies* and *Negative Dialectics*. This first point regarding the expansive nature of Adorno's thought with respect to the Wrong Life claim is perhaps most succinctly expressed by Bernstein in *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics* when he says that "Arguably, the thesis that wrong life cannot be lived rightly instructs the whole of

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<sup>2</sup> See also: Walsh (1969, 47 – 55) and Hardimon (1994). The latter expresses the 'most grievous' nature of this question quite well in his conclusion: "Does the project succeed? Can we become reconciled to our social world? [...] to ask whether the project of reconciliation succeeds is to ask whether Hegel's social philosophy as a whole succeeds, and that is a very large question indeed" (251).

Adorno's philosophy" (Bernstein, 2001, 56). The breadth and length of Bernstein's own book, one of the earliest works on Adorno and ethics in the English language, is itself a testament to this difficulty. Rose, who also produced one of the first general books on Adorno in the English language, points out the second of these problems, namely that Adorno almost never engages with Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* and this is often (though not always) true even in the context of explicit discussions about subjects pertinent to ethics (Rose, 1978, 58).

The end result is less focused and substantial on the side of Hegel's own thought than was originally intended, even though thematically and argumentatively much of what I had set out to understand and argue is still present, though primarily drawn from Adorno's works and his reading of Hegel. The result involves relatively little reference to Hegel's own notion of ethical life, despite what might be indicated in the title and instead, a more focused attempt to provide an account of Adorno's notion of 'wrong life' and why it cannot be 'lived rightly'. Instead, the argument has ended up being a much broader transfiguration of this comparison between 'wrong life' and 'ethical life' with its guiding basis in the mirrored structures of *Problems of Moral Philosophy* and *History and Freedom*. If *Problems of Moral Philosophy* focuses largely on issues with subject-oriented moral philosophy, exemplified by Kant's practical philosophy, turning towards the end to Hegel's expanded social and historical account of ethics, then *History and Freedom* enacts basically the reverse by focusing for the majority of the text on issues with the philosophy of history, exemplified by Hegel's supra-individual notion of Spirit, turning towards the end to Kant and the ahistorical, subject-oriented account of freedom. The result is that the juxtaposition between 'wrong life' and 'ethical life' has been transfigured into the argument that moral philosophy must pass through the problems of the philosophy of history and the philosophy of history must itself pass through the problems of moral philosophy. Both moral philosophy and the philosophy of history share the central problem of the relationship between the universal and the particular, in terms of the antagonism, on the one hand, between the social whole and the individual, which the former venerates in order to instrumentalise the latter (*PMP*, 18 - 19); and on the other, the antagonism between the universal historical tendency and the individual (*HF*, 8), the latter of whose actions unknowingly contribute to the former (*HF*, 117) while frequently falling under its wheels (*HF*, 12).

### *The Wrong Life Claim in the Context of Contemporary Debates*

As stated, the claim that "Wrong life cannot be lived rightly" (*MM*, §18) first appears in *Minima Moralia*. In his lecture series *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, delivered almost twenty

years later,<sup>3</sup> Adorno re-contextualises the claim in terms of a dialectic between Kantian and Hegelian accounts of ethics. My reading of the Wrong Life claim involves arguing that Adorno follows Hegel's critique of Kantian ethics as insufficiently historical, which I undertake explicitly in Chapter 3 but which is more broadly transposed into a dialectic between ethics and history throughout the thesis. I am not the first to suggest that Adorno's Wrong Life claim should be read in terms of an antagonism between Kantian and Hegelian ethics, as Bernstein (2001) already makes this claim in the book mentioned above (40). Schweppenhäuser (2006) also comes close to suggesting it (336) and Bowie (2013) comes even closer (112). Bowie perhaps engages the most with Hegel's notion of ethical life in the context of discussions of Adorno's views on ethics amongst readers of Adorno, doing so with reference to Robert Pippin's account of Hegel's notion. In this way, Bowie represents a growing number of readers of Adorno who have begun to seriously engage with modern readers of Hegel with respect to their views relating to ethics. Other examples could include O'Connor's (2011; 2012) engagement with, again, Pippin but also Honneth.

One interesting case of perhaps inadvertently engaging with contemporary Hegelians from an Adornian perspective can be seen in Freyenhagen (2013). Freyenhagen's book, *Adorno's Practical Philosophy: Living Less Wrongly*, is one of the only other book-length studies focused on Adorno's relationship to ethics in the English language. In the final chapter of the book, Freyenhagen controversially attributes a form of Aristotelianism to Adorno,<sup>4</sup> drawing comparisons to the views of Taylor and MacIntyre, who he identifies as contemporary Aristotelians (Freyenhagen, 2013, 242 - 244). In responding to criticisms by O'Connor (2017) and Allen (2017) that attributing an Aristotelianism to Adorno seems to undermine his historicism, Freyenhagen responds that his idea of "negative Aristotelianism and Hegelian historicism need not be seen as alternatives" (Freyenhagen, 2017, 864). However, what Freyenhagen seems to miss is that he could just as well have invoked MacIntyre and (especially) Taylor as Hegelians. The reason why Freyenhagen's case is especially interesting is that, in the appendix to his book, he attempts to outline an Adornian philosophy of action with reference to Adorno's concept of the 'additional factor'<sup>5</sup> (Freyenhagen, 2013, 255 - 270), which at one point he describes as an 'expressive' theory (267). It is a shame that, again, Freyenhagen does not invoke Taylor here, who famously provides the most influential and enduring account of

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<sup>3</sup> Aphorism 18, 'Refuge for the Homeless', from *Minima Moralia* is dated to 1944, whereas the first lecture of *Problems of Moral Philosophy* is dated to May 7<sup>th</sup>, 1963.

<sup>4</sup> With respect to this controversy, see Allen (2017), Celikates (2017) and O'Connor (2017), who each raise issues with this attribution of an Aristotelianism to Adorno. See Freyenhagen (2017) for his response to several of these objections.

<sup>5</sup> I explore this concept in Chapter 4.

Hegel's philosophy of action, which Taylor himself describes as 'expressivist'.<sup>6</sup> However, the convergences and differences between Adorno and Hegel's philosophy of action could perhaps bear fruitful future considerations, with the way already being led in this regard by Sevilla (2018).

While Adorno himself never presents anything like a systematic or clearly coherent moral philosophy, his works are permeated with direct and indirect references to the centrality of the ethical for philosophy. Consequently, there has been disagreement as to what extent Adorno can be said to be engaged in or to hold a moral philosophy, especially in light of what seems like an apparent conflict across his work between strong critiques against the possibility of moral philosophy and statements that seem to rest on normative commitments that are not obviously justified. I do not myself take a position on whether Adorno can be said to hold something like a moral philosophy, though my inclination is to say that he holds one to the same extent that he holds a philosophy of history, which is to say that he does not think that we can dispense with either but neither can we provide a coherent or definitive account of either. My discussion throughout the thesis is heavily informed by the contemporary literature on Adorno and ethics and I do provide my own interpretations of some of the most commonly interpreted passages and concepts in Adorno, such as the 'New Categorical Imperative', the 'guilt context' and of course, the Wrong Life claim. Therefore, I will now briefly outline the range of positions within the literature that I will draw on throughout the thesis.

Perhaps the earliest attempts to draw out something resembling a traditional moral philosophy or at least a normative theory from Adorno's works include Bernstein's theory of 'ethical modernism' (2001, 415 – 456)<sup>7</sup> and Finlayson's (2002) 'negativist' reading of Adorno, from which he attempts to draw out an 'ethics of resistance' suggested by comments made by Adorno towards the end of *Problems of Moral Philosophy* (*PMP*, 167 - 171). The polarisation of attempts to characterise Adorno's distinctive position in moral philosophy or lack thereof, is probably best represented by Freyenhagen's systematic reconstruction of Adorno's 'moral negativism' as a definite ethical model (Freyenhagen, 2013, p. 4) at one end and at the other,

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<sup>6</sup> Although Freyenhagen does cite Pippin, who has provided elaborations on Taylor's original account of Hegel's philosophy of action. See my MPhil thesis, *Context and Causation: Hegel and the Philosophy of Action*, which involves a defence of Taylor's account against Michael Quante's Davidsonian reading of Hegel's philosophy of action and also involves some discussion of Pippin's elaboration of Taylor's 'expressivism' in terms of 'retrospectivism' (Brignell, 2018).

<sup>7</sup> I do not have space to outline Bernstein's account of 'ethical modernism' or the 'fugitive ethical experiences' it relates to and I must confess that I find it quite tricky to grasp but it seems to be based in Adorno's references to 'metaphysical experience' in the later parts of *Negative Dialectics*. Tassone (2005) attempts to briefly summarise Bernstein's idea, noting that it is "extremely problematic to establish how much of this theory is genuine reconstruction of Adorno's alleged ethics and how much Bernstein's own work" (260).

Tassone's denial that Adorno can be said to have anything like a normative position, making any attempt to extract a moral theory from his thought misguided (Tassone, 2005, p. 252). Tassone for his part names Bernstein, Finlayson and also Hammer (2000) as representative of the views he intends to reject in favour of an 'amoral' reading of Adorno (Tassone, 2005, 251 - 252), whereas prior to the publication of his book Freyenhagen (2009) has argued exactly against such an 'amoral' reading, explicitly naming Tassone as the chief representative of such readings. Somewhat straddling the divide between the 'moral' and 'amoral' readings in his rejection of the 'ethical turn' in Adorno scholarship is Zuidervaart (2006), who instead insists on something closer to an Adornian politics. In large part also focused on the political dimensions of Adorno's work but otherwise somewhere else entirely is Lanning (2014), who seems largely concerned to reject the notion that Adorno has a great deal to teach us about ethics, politics or really much of anything else at all. Other focused contributions on the 'aporetic' character of Adorno's views on ethics include Snir (2010), Menke (2005) and Schweppenhäuser (2006). Notably, Whyman (2019b) has recently attempted to synthesise many of these and other positions in a manner responsive to internal debates within Adorno scholarship, which he suggests have become inward-facing in their preoccupations with respect to certain internal problems, such as whether Adorno appeals to or needs to appeal to a positive source of normativity with respect to some of the concepts and claims I have already mentioned (Whyman, 2019b, 487).

Zuidevaart (2006) accuses the instigators of the 'ethical turn' of transforming Adorno's politics into "an apolitical ethics" (2006, 25). An important reason why he perhaps thinks this, in my view, is because he associates these readings of Adorno, as well as Adorno himself, too much with Kantian moral philosophy (32). However, I am not sure why exactly Zuidervaart thinks that attributing an ethical position to Adorno involves transforming his political position into an apolitical ethical one at the same time and it is harder to see how the consideration of ethics would make Adorno apolitical when understanding Adorno to be concerned as much with Kant as with Hegel, the latter of whom Adorno at one point praises for his insights that effectively extend the ethical into the political (*MTP*, §3). Zuidervaart does say that Adorno is more Hegelian than he is generally taken to be (2006, 29) but it is my view that Zuidervaart underestimates to what extent this is the case. This does bring out one important facet of Adorno scholarship on ethics that I hope I am able to contribute to, however, which is that there tends to be far less focus on the role of Hegel than that of Kant in general with respect to discussions of Adorno and ethics. The most obvious reason for this is simply that Adorno spends much more time discussing Kant in the context of moral philosophy and this is because Adorno

considers Kant to have the strongest and most philosophically consistent prescriptive moral philosophy. By contrast, Adorno almost never comments on other forms of moral philosophy, except generally only very briefly and by and large dismissively. At points throughout the thesis, I remark on several of these comments or otherwise why he seems to reject out of hand either the traditional alternatives to Kant, such as virtue ethics and utilitarianism – if he even engages with them at all – or what he identifies as ethical theories contemporary to his own time, such as existentialism and Scheler’s views. The latter two examples Adorno files under a contemporary appeal to ‘ethics’ which should be considered distinct from Hegel’s notion of ‘ethical life’, as I outline in Chapter 3. With respect to utilitarianism, it seems highly likely that Adorno simply sees this as replicating the dominant form of rationality within ‘wrong life’ anyway, which I argue in Chapter 2 is precisely characterised by the embeddedness of instrumental rationality in the deepest structures of the prevailing social and economic processes and reproduced in individual activity and intersubjective norms. With respect to virtue ethics, I make some brief comments with reference to a disagreement with Finlayson in Chapter 4 but it should perhaps be noted that Menke (2005) explicitly discusses Adorno’s ethical views with reference to notions of virtue.

Of the works mentioned above, this thesis is perhaps the most similar in scope to Bernstein’s book given the range of issues I attempt to cover and that he, as already noted, explicitly suggests that Adorno’s notion of wrong life involves an inversion of Hegel’s notion of ethical life. However, there are differences between my approach and Bernstein’s. Firstly, I make heavy use of Adorno’s lecture courses, especially *History and Freedom* and *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, as already noted, whereas Bernstein does not. There are almost no references to *Problems of Moral Philosophy* or *History and Freedom* in Bernstein’s book and early on he justifies this by stating in a footnote that, “at best [the lectures] only adumbrate the ‘Freedom’ chapter of *Negative Dialectics*” (Bernstein, 2001, 2). On this point I think that Bernstein is mistaken and in fact there is substantial discussion in Adorno’s lectures that does not simply adumbrate but usefully expands on and clarifies points of discussion that also appear in *Negative Dialectics* in important ways. Further than this, there are significant insights and arguments made in the lecture series that do not obviously appear in *Negative Dialectics* and which add a great deal, including the fact that Adorno contextualises the subject matter from the very beginning (*PMP*, 1) and again towards the end (162) as concerned with problems captured by the ‘Wrong Life’ claim from *Minima Moralia*.<sup>8</sup> A further significant difference is

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<sup>8</sup> By contrast to Bernstein, Freyenhagen covers many of the benefits, as well as considers some potential limitations in using Adorno’s lectures in addition to his published works (Freyenhagen, 2013, 15 – 17).

that Adorno provides a generally more sympathetic and detailed engagement with Kant and Hegel in the lectures, which tempers some of the more terse rebukes found in *Negative Dialectics*, giving more detail and making it clearer where Adorno sees his own thought in relation to them.

These two texts involve Adorno explicitly returning to the ‘Wrong Life’ claim and *Problems of Moral Philosophy* involves him doing so explicitly in the context of moral philosophy and specifically in terms of a dialectic between Kantian and Hegelian accounts of ethics. *Problems of Moral Philosophy* begins straight away with a reference to that claim but is otherwise almost exclusively focused on Kant, with Hegel only being raised in connection with the claim in the last few lectures. *History and Freedom*, however, almost inverts this focus, with the primary focus on Hegel’s concepts of history and freedom taking up the majority of the work, with questions of moral philosophy being brought in towards the end, alongside another reiteration of the Wrong Life claim and some more considerations of Kant’s moral philosophy. The use of these lectures allows me to develop an interpretation of the Wrong Life claim as expressing a tension between Kantian and Hegelian ethics that differs from Bernstein’s simply by virtue of drawing on different textual resources, most explicitly in the final chapter. Other differences are that Bernstein attempts to make his work accessible to readers of contemporary anglophone moral philosophy and more significantly, I do not engage in focused reflections about whether it is possible to retrieve a moral philosophy, even if minimal or negative, from Adorno’s thought beyond the comments above.

### *On the Significance of Weber and Horkheimer*

Another difference in my approach with Bernstein’s is that my discussion of Weber is much more extensive than his, despite disenchantment being a central theme of his book. In Chapter 1, I provide a largely expository and expansive reconstruction of instrumental rationality, beginning with a discussion of Weber’s account of the historical process of ‘intellectualisation’ or ‘rationalisation’ and the related concept of ‘disenchantment’. My discussion in the first two sections of the first chapter draws together central arguments relating to disenchantment through close readings of Weber’s ‘Science as a Vocation’ and *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, whereas Bernstein’s account of disenchantment with reference to these

two texts is much briefer and according to him, simplified in order to act as a heuristic device (Bernstein, 2001, 7 – 10).<sup>9</sup>

Following my interpretation of Weber's notion of disenchantment, I attempt to more closely tie Weber's notions of disenchantment, instrumental rationality and rationalisation to Adorno and Horkheimer's analysis of modernity in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* via an extended excursus through Horkheimer's account of the historical instrumentalisation of reason in what I believe to be his underappreciated work *Eclipse of Reason*. There is currently very little discussion of Horkheimer's text, which was written and published simultaneously with *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and which was received rather poorly at the time, which no doubt had an effect on a lack of engagement with the text amongst modern readers of the Frankfurt School up to the modern day.

The most important motivation for drawing out an account of instrumental reason and its place in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* prior to focusing on Adorno's views more directly relating to ethics is because according to Adorno (and Horkheimer), modern conditions are marked by the instrumentalisation and attendant formalisation of human beings, insofar as modern societies have a tendency to treat individuals and groups as exchangeable quantities or primarily as fungible objects in service of the reproduction of society. Ideologically, this tends to reproduce itself in the manner in which the most reasonable course of action for an individual to take in fundamental areas of daily life is typically in opposition to what Adorno considers might count as a properly free or human condition. As such, the instrumentalisation of reason, as the result of the reduction of reason to a faculty of the mind that aims at formalisation, calculation and administration, involves what Horkheimer calls 'subjective reason' absorbing and adapting itself to pre-existing, socially determined ends. Reason becomes concerned primarily with finding the most efficient 'means' to achieve pre-given 'ends', which may themselves be irrational and as such, reason easily comes to serve irrational purposes, perpetuate irrational systems and to treat its subject matter (including other human beings) instrumentally. This idea is perhaps best captured by Horkheimer's claim in *Eclipse of Reason* that in no longer being concerned with discovering objectively rational ends, 'subjective' reason

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<sup>9</sup> Bernstein himself actually points towards my attempt to provide an expanded account of Weber's contribution to Adorno's thought when he says that, "It is one of the curiosities of present philosophy that despite the continuing fascination with Nietzsche's account of asceticism, the ascetic priest, et al., in the formation of modern rationalized culture, almost no attention is paid to Weber's far more theoretically sophisticated and empirically documented development of Nietzsche's thesis. From the point of view of critical theory, this appears as a massive sociological deficit in the attempts to vindicate or appropriate Nietzschean ideas for contemporary philosophy" (Bernstein, 2001, 7). As I remark in the conclusion, my own decision to provide an expanded account of Weber's arguments in order to develop my understanding of the concept of instrumental rationality was motivated by my dissatisfaction with the lack of such accounts in works on Adorno.

becomes instrumentalised and easily harnessed to the social process, adapting itself to ends that are given to it from elsewhere (*ER*, 14 – 15).

Finally, I hope that providing an extended discussion of Horkheimer's *Eclipse of Reason*, will contribute to at least two areas of scholarship on the Frankfurt School. Firstly, I hope to contribute something reasonably substantial to what is, at the moment, rather sparse discussion of *Eclipse of Reason* in the secondary literature. To my knowledge, the discussion I engage in, particularly in the second half of Chapter 1, is one of the longest, if not the longest and most focused discussions of Horkheimer's text in recent English language. The lack of engagement with Horkheimer's text is a shame because it not only contains very clear argumentation and novel insights but also provides perhaps the most substantial and developed account of instrumental reason offered by any member of the first generation of the Frankfurt School<sup>10</sup> and it also anticipates many of Adorno's own insights. Therefore, the second contribution I hope to make is to urge readers of Adorno to take seriously Horkheimer's influence on the former's ideas and in general, to recognise how close their thought was, as Adorno himself repeatedly acknowledged, thereby challenging the idea that Horkheimer was in some sense merely a less insightful thinker or the 'pessimistic reactionary' counterpart to Adorno's 'radical hope'.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Although see Chapter 6 of Marcuse's (2002) *One-Dimensional Man* for an extended discussion of what he terms 'technological rationality' which bears close resemblance to Horkheimer's arguments in *Eclipse of Reason*.

<sup>11</sup> Shaw (1985) provides a fairly measured and informative account of Horkheimer's philosophical and political development, including his increasing pessimism and 'nostalgic' defence of liberalism in later life. However, I think even Shaw goes too far in associating *Eclipse of Reason* with a decisive turn towards "Total resignation" and the development of "a metaphysics and a philosophy of history which negate hope as a historical possibility in the twentieth century" (169). While *Eclipse of Reason* paints a fairly bleak view, I would argue that it is no bleaker than *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and even contains flashes of hope, such as the following lines in the later parts of the book: "Industrial discipline, technological progress, and scientific enlightenment, the very economic and cultural processes that are bringing about the obliteration of individuality, promise – though the augury is faint enough at present – to usher in a new era in which individuality may re-emerge as an element in a less ideological and more humane form of existence" (*ER*, 108). On Adorno's radical conception of hope, see Jütten (2019).

## Chapter 1. Reason Harnessed to the Social Process

This chapter will focus on the subordination of reason to heteronomous (that is, non-rational) ends as a result of an historical process that has refined, narrowed and formalised reason into a highly effective tool. In other words, this historical process involves the reduction of reason to instrumental rationality, following what Weber calls the historical process of ‘intellectualisation’ or ‘intellectualist rationalisation’ and the attendant disenchantment of the world (*SV*, 138 -139) or what Adorno and Horkheimer, drawing on Weber, describe as the ‘dialectic of enlightenment’. I do not intend to rehearse the central argument of the text bearing that name here, though I will address some of its core elements in the following chapter. Here, I aim to understand Adorno and Horkheimer’s assertion that the highly narrowed and formalised mode of reason that goes under the name ‘instrumental reason’ tends to become arbitrary, giving way and adapting itself to irrational elements, most succinctly captured by Horkheimer’s claim in *Eclipse of Reason* that in its instrumental form, “Reason has become completely harnessed to the social process” (*ER*, 15).

While the idea of instrumental reason is closely associated with Adorno, particularly with his and Horkheimer’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, that text and Adorno’s broader work tend to reference or define instrumental reason through context and related concepts rather than explicating it in detail. While instrumental reason is a widely understood and utilised concept in secondary literature, precisely defining it within Adorno’s works causes some difficulties with how exactly it is supposed to be understood. Furthermore, how uncommonly the phrase or closely related phrasings actually appear and are subsequently developed in Adorno’s writings can raise questions about whether it is being given somewhat outsized importance. With this in mind, this chapter attempts to justify the importance of the concept by systematically developing an account of the instrumentalisation of reason by drawing from what are some of the most influential sources on Adorno’s own use in Max Weber and Max Horkheimer. This will be undertaken here with the eventual aim of understanding Adorno’s reference to ‘wrong life’ as characterised by the embeddedness of instrumental rationality in modern social and economic structures and to which the ‘subjective’ use of reason, as Horkheimer calls it, becomes easily harnessed. To do so, I will primarily focus on Max Weber’s notions of rationalisation and disenchantment as developed in ‘Science as a Vocation’ and *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, followed by Max Horkheimer’s systematic and explicit account of the development of reason into instrumental reason in *Eclipse of Reason*, which itself parallels central arguments in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and anticipates many of Adorno’s

later ideas. Although at relevant points I will draw occasional comparisons to Adorno's ideas, I will not develop them here and Adorno will not become my primary focus until the following chapter.

In the first section (1.1), I begin to reconstruct the concept of instrumental reason by providing a largely expository account of Weber's notions of intellectualisation and disenchantment. While Weber's coinage of the term 'instrumental rationality' appears in his *Economy and Society* as part of a typology of action, the importance of Weber to Adorno and Horkheimer's understanding of the concept will be more closely focused on insights about the development of reason and the attendant disenchantment of the world that Weber makes in 'Science as a Vocation'. In particular, I intend here to focus on what Weber says about the relationship between disenchantment as involving the idea that the world is *in principle* knowable through scientific knowledge and calculation, while simultaneously heralding a much more complex world about which relatively little is known on an individual level. As such, disenchantment involves the idea that all things *could* be known in principle, while at the same time presenting to the subject an opaque network of social, political and economic conditions, which determine modern life and constrain individual knowledge and action as I go on to discuss in the next section (1.2). In this section, I consider the ways in which religious sources of value and meaning become gradually hollowed out but do not disappear, instead adapting to and buttressing rationalised modes of social and economic production. I pursue this discussion by building off of the account of disenchantment and intellectualisation drawn from 'Science as a Vocation' but primarily with reference to Weber's earlier work *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, which parallels and influences Adorno and Horkheimer's own analyses of modernity.

I then go on to reconstruct the more developed and sustained account of instrumental reason provided by Horkheimer in his underappreciated *Eclipse of Reason*,<sup>12</sup> which was published in

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<sup>12</sup> Perhaps counter-intuitively, Horkheimer's focused account of instrumental reason is to be found in this text rather than in what would seem to be his more aptly named *Critique of Instrumental Reason*, which instead consists of a collection of essays very broadly informed by the ideas developed in the earlier work. This later work involves only an account of 'instrumental reason' limited to the foreword (*CIR*, 5 – 6), which provides a very brief summary of the central argument of the first chapter, 'Means and Ends', from *Eclipse of Reason*. However, an endnote to Adorno's *History and Freedom* notes that *Eclipse of Reason* – which was first written in English – was translated into German in 1967 with the title *Zur Kritik der instrumentellen Vernunft*, which translates back into English as 'The Critique of Instrumental Reason' (*HF*, 330). To add to the confusion, the collection of essays published in English under the name *Critique of Instrumental Reason* was first published in 1976 in English and includes a translation of the aforementioned foreword that was actually written for the German edition of *Eclipse of Reason* in 1967. The reason for this seems to be that *Zur Kritik der instrumentellen Vernunft* in its original German publication included both *Eclipse of Reason* and the essays later published separately in English as *Critique of Instrumental Reason*. The essays that make up *Critique of Instrumental Reason* would later appear across the various volumes of Horkheimer's *Gesammelte Schriften* according to their respective periodisation and so no

the same year as his and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and which provides a variation on the central argument of that text.<sup>13</sup> I begin this discussion (1.3) largely with a focus on the first chapter of *Eclipse of Reason*, as it is here that Horkheimer discusses the history of the development of reason in terms of a somewhat schematic explanation of the historical diminishing of the 'objective' elements of reason, which leaves primarily the 'subjective', formalising and instrumentalising faculty of reason to stand in for the whole of reason in modern thought. In the final section (1.4) I discuss the way in which, according to Horkheimer, reason reduced to subjective reason becomes a merely formalised and instrumentalised reason that becomes easily harnessed to a variety of economic and social ends. By the same token, the rationalised social process itself tends to treat other things, including human beings, formally and instrumentally in a manner that a purely subjective form of reason finds difficult to oppose. Nevertheless, Horkheimer argues that this process is irreversible and attempts at reviving some form of objective reason in the light of its eclipse by subjective reason will tend itself to treat reason instrumentally.

### **1.1. Calculation and Mastery: Intellectualisation and Disenchantment**

Early in *Economy and Society*, Weber provides a typology of action which involves making a distinction between 'instrumental rationality' [*Zweckrationalität*] and 'value rationality' [*Wertrationalität*] and gives some indication of how value rationality appears irrational from the perspective of instrumental rationality (*E&S*, 24 – 26). While Weber's explicit use of the phrase 'instrumental rationality' here seems significant, especially because it is likely one of the earliest instances of identifying such a thing, I do not intend to make much of Weber's discussion in *Economy and Society* here. There are a number of reasons for this, one of which is that my main concern here is largely to provide some context for Horkheimer's development of the concept of 'instrumental reason', as well as to provide a specific reading of Weber's concept of 'disenchantment' for which 'Science as a Vocation' and *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* are more appropriate sources. Additionally, there are practical concerns involved in trying to precisely establish what Weber means in the distinction between

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longer alongside the German translation of *Eclipse of Reason*, which retains the foreword (Horkheimer, 1991, 21 – 23).

<sup>13</sup> Both *Eclipse of Reason* and *Dialectic of Enlightenment* were published in 1947. *Eclipse of Reason* was based on a series of lectures that Horkheimer gave in 1944, the same year that the first version of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* was published (as *Philosophical Fragments*). For a history of the development of both texts, see Schmidt (2007). See also Baynes (2019), who also argues that *Eclipse of Reason* parallels the arguments of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, specifically in the context of the historical emergence and atomisation of the individual (426).

instrumental and value rationality in *Economy and Society* with respect to at least two concerns that I do not think it is necessary to tackle for the purposes I have set out beyond briefly indicating them here.

One of these concerns is that there are potentially a large number of distinctions that can be drawn between Weber's uses of 'rationality' and related terms than simply the two already noted and there is substantial disagreement between readers of Weber regarding the number of such distinctions, what they might entail and whether Weber is consistent in his use of terms.<sup>14</sup> A more specific concern involves the translation of the German word *Zweckrationalität*, which in earlier translations of *Economy and Society* is rendered as 'instrumental rationality' but in more recent translations is rendered as 'purposive rationality' (Weber, 2019, 101 – 103). Given that Horkheimer's account of the development of reason into instrumental reason involves considering the relationship reason has to 'means' and 'ends', I would rather avoid the confusion of the language of 'purpose' that these more recent translations of Weber bring, as well as associated disputes about how to understand the relationship to means and ends in Weber's typology itself.<sup>15</sup> As such, I am more interested in now moving on to first draw out arguments that Weber makes in 'Science as a Vocation' and following this *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* that are more relevant to Adorno and Horkheimer's views, despite Weber not directly making use of the phrase 'instrumental rationality' in either text.

Ostensibly a consideration of the various issues arising from the pursuit of science on both an individual and more general level, one of the central themes of Weber's 'Science as a Vocation' is where the historical process of 'intellectualisation', as the continual development of reason, in terms of the development of the scientific method and the progressive accumulation of knowledge, has led. For Weber, this process of intellectualisation results not in the obvious betterment of humanity but in *disenchantment*: an irreversible and inevitable state in which our pursuit of ever-expanding knowledge brings the consequences of a corresponding contraction of meaning. As we learn more and know more, previously magical or religious explanations become replaced with rational scientific ones. Yet, those magical and religious explanations also gave meaning to the world, our actions and our place within it.

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<sup>14</sup> See Wallace (1990) for an overview of this disagreement and how widely views can vary on the meaning and amount of meanings Weber gives for 'rationality' and associated terms. For instance, Wallace notes that while Swidler distinguishes three meanings, one each for 'rationalism', 'rationality' and 'rationalisation' (200), Schluchter proposes three definitions just for Weber's use of 'rationalism' (200 – 201), whereas Brubaker claims that Weber uses as many as *sixteen* different meanings for the term 'rational' (199).

<sup>15</sup> To give an indication of this confusion, Wallace (1990) notes that Kalberg and Levine both translate *Zweckrationalität* as 'means-ends' or 'means/ends' rationality but Wallace himself goes on to argue that these translations are misleading and instead 'instrumental rationality' [*Zweckrationalität*] and 'value rationality' [*Wertrationalität*] should *both* be understood as 'means-end' rationalities *and* as 'value' rationalities (200).

‘Disenchanted’ the world involves providing explanations that tear out false beliefs about the world but at the same time tearing out the sense of *meaning* that those false beliefs conferred to life. Scientific methods provide more accurate, reliable and rational explanation but these explanations cannot generate meaning and so coming to understand the world more *rationally* means disenchanting the world, which is to say that it also involves coming to understand the world to be *meaningless*. At the same time, this process of disenchantment is not only the process of the emptying out of the meaning and value of the world but also the meaning of the pursuit of knowledge itself. Disenchantment thereby raises potentially irresolvable problems about why we value anything at all and this includes the pursuit of science, especially because this problem of value cannot itself be resolved on scientific grounds. This result should not be considered a mistake or an indictment of the pursuit of knowledge but the inevitable and irreversible outcome of and thus a necessary truth revealed by that pursuit.

However, another feature of Weber’s discussion of disenchantment in ‘Science as a Vocation’ is that while in principle reliable, scientifically rational explanations can be given for phenomena that were previously interpreted through less reliable, ‘enchanted’ forms of thinking, the modern, disenchanted world is not actually more transparently understood by the individuals who live within it. In many ways, according to Weber, even while we now believe everything to be in principle calculable, individually each of us understands much less about the complex, technologically organised world in which we live today than ever before. This includes, I will argue in the next section, the sources and reasons for the values, beliefs and mores that are still held to in a disenchanted world, reading Weber’s argument towards the end of *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* as a precursor to Horkheimer’s argument that instrumental reason is easily harnessed to social processes. Weber argues there that what structures the values and ‘meaning’ of our actions under modern, rationalised, market-based societies are certain Christian – specifically, Protestant – values that have become disenchanted. The formation of highly rationalised, market-based economies involves a ‘disenchantment’ of the world insofar as it replaces the religious values held by the early Protestant pioneers of modern capitalism with rational, economic ones, retroactively justified on an instrumental basis. Many of our current values, then, are merely a continuation of old, ‘enchanted’ values that we continue to hold onto even though they have since lost their spiritual basis. We hold onto them because they no longer require their spiritual basis, instead becoming tied to economic processes and transformed thereby.

I do not intend to draw any definite distinctions between Weber’s usage of ‘intellectualisation’, ‘rationalisation’ and ‘disenchantment’ in this section. As already indicated,

pinning down just Weber's use of 'rationalisation' is controversial enough<sup>16</sup> but in 'Science as a Vocation', which is the text I am chiefly extrapolating from, Weber sometimes seems to use these phrases in ways that suggest they may be distinct, such as when he states that, "The fate of our times is characterised by rationalization and intellectualization and, above all, by the 'disenchantment of the world'" (SV, 155). Often times, however, he seems to use them interchangeably, including at one point using the phrase "intellectualist rationalization" in a way that suggests it is identical to what in the previous sentence he had described as "intellectualisation", shortly thereafter going on to refer to 'intellectualisation' and 'rationalisation' separately but in a manner that suggests he considers them to be roughly equivalent terms for describing the same process (138 – 139). As such, I will use these phrases quite loosely and though I do try to specify what 'disenchantment' entails below, it is not a concept that can be treated distinctly from what 'intellectualisation' or 'rationalisation', which I shall use interchangeably, seem to cover.

That is to say that disenchantment is an inextricable part of the process of rationalisation from its very beginning and which Weber argues, "has continued to exist in Occidental culture for millennia" (SV, 139). On this basis, I disagree with Villa (2019), who claims that Adorno "takes Weber's rationalization thesis and radicalizes it to a point where it is almost unrecognizable" by interpreting it as a process that "reaches back to the pre-Socratic Greeks and beyond", rather than understanding it to be "inextricably linked to modernization and the rise of industrial capitalism", as Villa believes Weber does (272). The above statement from 'Science as a Vocation' is not the only place where Weber suggests a view more in line with the one Villa attributes to Adorno but claims Weber does not hold. For instance, in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber states that, "The great historical process in the development of religions, the elimination of magic from the world" began with "the old Hebrew prophets" (PESC, 109).<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, later in the same article, Villa seems to attribute a similar view to Habermas (who is treated somewhat more favourably in general) as the one he attributes to Adorno but does not raise the same objection, instead seeming to tacitly endorse it at this point (Villa, 2019, 275 – 276). Perhaps Villa could object that he is here specifically describing the 'disenchantment of the world' as the "millennia-long process", which the process of rationalisation merely has "an internal connection" to (276). Still, that Weber means rationalisation to specifically refer to the rise of industrial capitalism and modernisation, rather

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<sup>16</sup> Again, see Wallace (1990).

<sup>17</sup> See Weisz (2020) for a more developed account of the basis of my disagreement with Villa here, as well as the continued importance of the 'non-rational' elements of scientific endeavour, which I go on to suggest Weber did not think could or would ever be completely purged.

than having a variety of meanings, including a more loosely defined process that applies to the course of human history in general, is not obviously a shared view amongst readers of Weber and seems to run counter to Weber's own varied uses of the term.<sup>18</sup> Beyond this, it is also not clear on what grounds Villa believes that his narrowed definition of Weber's notion of 'rationalisation' is supposed to be justified, as he provides no textual evidence to substantiate his interpretation against what he takes to be Adorno's.<sup>19</sup>

What follows largely involves an exegesis and reconstruction of Weber's discussion of intellectualisation and disenchantment in his lecture 'Science as a Vocation', particularly focused on the middle portion of that text. I will eventually draw this interpretation together with the broad argument Weber makes about the transformation of historically religious, specifically Protestant, values that persist in modern, rationalised societies but which have become attached to and buttressed by social and economic processes that no longer require the originally spiritual basis to function. I am less interested in arguments about the veracity of Weber's supposed account of the development of modern capitalism from Protestant ethics or whether he actually argues this, a common view that has its detractors,<sup>20</sup> than I am in the broader process of disenchantment and the attendant transformation of value. In particular, I intend to read his claim in 'Science as a Vocation' that modern conditions entail an opacity regarding individual insight into society and its workings, despite an overall increase of knowledge and understanding on the part of humanity as a whole, alongside his description of the complex, mechanistic operations of late capitalism as an instrumentally rational basis for the persistence, transformation and compulsion of values that were once but are no longer justifiable through appeal to religious grounds. In doing so, I submit that Weber's account of disenchantment foregrounds Horkheimer's claim that reason reduced to an instrument tends to become

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<sup>18</sup> For instance, Weisz (2020) understands 'rationalisation' to describe a world-historical process and expands on modern science and Jewish prophecy as "both decisive parts of the rationalization process" (13). Much earlier, in their introduction to *From Max Weber*, a collection of Weber's works first published in 1946, Gerth and Wright Mills describe rationalisation as "the most general element in Weber's philosophy of history", noting that it comes to have a "variety of meanings" in various contexts (Gerth and Wright Mills, 2009, 51).

<sup>19</sup> Villa's (2019) article comprises a somewhat ambitious attempt to chart the role of Weber in the thought of the most prominent thinkers of the Frankfurt School. Nevertheless, I do not always find Villa's interpretations of Adorno and especially Horkheimer convincing and raise further disagreements with some of his comments on Horkheimer later in the chapter.

<sup>20</sup> See Peltonen (2008) for an historical overview of various criticisms, particularly with respect to interpretations of Weber's book as arguing that Protestantism is the cause of capitalism, which is dubbed the 'Weber Thesis'. The closing sentences of Weber's book, at least, directly state that he does not actually intend to argue this: "But it is, of course, not my aim to substitute for a one-sided materialistic an equally one-sided spiritualistic causal interpretation of culture and history. Each is equally possible, but each, if it does not serve as the preparation, but as the conclusion of an investigation, accomplishes equally little in the interest of historical truth" (*PESC*, 125).

harnessed to the social process. As such, instrumental reason has a tendency to become attached to pre-existing values, activity and irrational ends.

Weber's 'Science as a Vocation' sets out to consider what is involved in dedicating oneself to the pursuit of science, understood in a broad sense, first as an individual endeavour and then more generally as a collective human pursuit. Early on, Weber makes the point that today the pursuit of science has become highly specialised, with almost all of the most important advances made by people dedicated to very specific areas of enquiry, with little concern for what happens outside their own particular discipline, sub-discipline or problem. Weber claims that this move towards specialisation is unlikely to be reversed, stating that this "will forever remain the case [and] the individual can acquire the sure consciousness of achievement only in case he is a strict specialist" (*SV*, 134). Due to this strict specialisation, Weber argues that to pursue science today requires a rather strange attitude, as the scientist needs to be able to fixate on a single point and pursue that point with relentless hard work and 'passionate devotion', even despite the fact that such fixation may feel to others to be utterly strange, mysterious and potentially meaningless (136).

The pursuit of science as an individual undertaking, while requiring this strange fixation and dedication, is not however simply a matter of tireless thinking, experimentation and calculation. Instead, it is as much about chance and unexpected moments of inspiration that cannot be forced, regardless of how much work one puts in. Weber summarises these points by remarking that, "ideas come when we do not expect them," when we are out for a walk or having a shower, say, "and not when we are brooding and searching at our desks. Yet ideas would certainly not come to mind had we not brooded at our desks and searched for answers with passionate devotion" (*SV*, 136). The dedicated pursuit of knowledge requires not only that the scientist be dedicated, disciplined and fixated on some problem or subject that may interest only a few others but also that the pursuit of that knowledge is contingent on chance inspiration. It is possible that the scientist could spend years researching a problem with passionate devotion and the strict application of method and absolutely nothing will come of it, either because inspiration just never struck or perhaps because there was just nothing there to learn in the first place.

Weber goes on to remark that a difference between artistic work and scientific work is that unlike art, "scientific work is chained to the course of progress" (*SV*, 137). While an artwork that is good more than likely remains a good artwork for all time, a good scientific work is highly likely to be surpassed and made irrelevant at some point in the future. For instance, today, we still read Homer *and* Dante *and* Shakespeare *and* Dostoevsky because the later works

do not supplant the earlier ones. A good work of art is, according to Weber, often a good work of art for all times or at least, for a very long time. By contrast, Weber states, a good work of science is one that *hopefully will* be supplanted and invalidated in the future: “Every scientific ‘fulfilment’ raises new ‘questions’; it *asks* to be ‘surpassed’ and outdated. Whoever wishes to serve science has to resign himself to this fact. [...] We cannot work without hoping that others will advance further than we have. In principle, this progress goes on *ad infinitum*” (138). As a somewhat crude comparison, today we do not to the same extent still read Ptolemy’s 2<sup>nd</sup> century treatise on astronomy, the *Almagest* because many of its central assumptions and explanations, such as geocentrism, were supplanted by more accurate explanations, such as those to be found in Copernicus’ much later 16<sup>th</sup> century treatise *On the Revolutions of the Celestial Spheres*. However, today the same can be said of Copernicus’ text because while the core idea of heliocentrism has endured, the ideas and physical models have since been refined and supplanted, again and again, by more and more accurate and sophisticated explanations of the cosmos. The pursuit of science, then, involves not aiming at creating enduring works but producing insights in the hope that one day they may be surpassed and rendered obsolete, as one step on the path to greater and more accurate knowledge and understanding.

According to Weber, then, the pursuit of science at once requires painstaking labour, passionate devotion, an acceptance that there is no guarantee that it might not be a waste of time due to the contingency of inspiration and an acceptance that at some point any work that has been achieved will almost certainly be invalidated by someone else, buried under the ever-mounting heap of retroactively obsolete scientific endeavours. So, Weber asks, why do it? It is not at all clear, Weber says, that pursuing something like this is very sensible or meaningful in itself. “Why”, he asks, “does one engage in doing something that in reality never comes, and never can come, to an end?” (*SV*, 138). This seemingly personal or practical question about what the individual should dedicate themselves to and why raises the more general question of why science should be pursued at all. In other words: what is the *meaning* of science and its pursuit?

Before this question of meaning is addressed, Weber considers the effects of this scientific progress up until now, which he characterises as the most important fraction of the process of intellectualisation that has been ongoing for thousands of years (*SV*, 137 – 138). This process is to be understood as the progressive accumulation of collective knowledge, the increasing development of reason, including improvements in our methods to know, measure, calculate and explain the world more reliably and accurately. An important part of this process involves humanity’s ability to create and utilise more and more sophisticated technology, in turn

facilitating the continuation of this historical process of progressive intellectualisation, simple examples of which would include the telescope, the compass, the printing press, the computer and so on.

At this point, Weber introduces one of several problems that distinguish his historical account of intellectual development from standard Enlightenment notions of ‘progress’<sup>21</sup> by raising the following question: does intellectualisation as this scientific progress and accumulation of knowledge mean that we moderns, living in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, know more than our ancestors? It certainly seems as though it should but Weber argues instead that it is actually more likely that while the cumulative store of knowledge belonging to humanity as a whole has increased, individually we each know incomparably *less* about the world around us than someone living in a less technologically and scientifically advanced society. However, this needs to be qualified: it is not that individuals in previous eras had a greater knowledge or understanding of scientific matters than modern individuals – indeed, it is more likely the opposite – but rather, the point is that scientific knowledge has become so specialised and moreover, modern life comparatively so complex that modern individuals rely on all manner of highly advanced technologies, economic structures and institutional bureaucracies, the functioning of which is at once highly opaque but also unnecessary to know and understand from the standpoint of the individual. For instance, every day we spend money in the shop and charge our phones, yet most of us have no real idea why sometimes the same thing costs more and sometimes the same thing costs less (*SV*, 139) nor what is really involved in what seems to amount to electricity getting sucked out of the wall so that moving images can once again emerge on a screen that we tend always to keep in our pockets.

Weber remarks that the “increasing intellectualization and rationalization do not, therefore, indicate an increased and general knowledge of the conditions under which one lives” (*SV*, 139). Modern economies and societies, their technology and the level of scientific knowledge are increasingly complex and specialised but according to Weber, intellectualisation also means that we typically do not need to know these things. We know simply that tapping this rectangle

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<sup>21</sup> This of course raises questions about what such a notion consists in and to what extent it could be said to be ‘standard’ among Enlightenment thinkers. The most optimistic version of this notion would perhaps be represented by Condorcet’s *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind*, written in the mid-1790s. Yet, in the same decade Schiller raised the following question in his *Aesthetic Letters*: “The age is enlightened [...] why is it that we still remain barbarians?” (Schiller, 1954, 48 – 49), bearing more than a passing resemblance to the opening lines of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Regarding Schiller, it is perhaps worth noting that Lyons (2014) locates the origin of Weber’s notion of disenchantment in Schiller’s poem ‘The Gods of Greece’ (875). On Condorcet, it is also perhaps worth noting that in his essay ‘Progress’, Adorno suggests that Condorcet’s view of ‘progress’ was actually somewhat of an exception amongst 18<sup>th</sup> century thinkers, whose views otherwise tended to be far less “shallow” (*Progress*, 153).

of plastic on this other piece of plastic lets us walk out of a building with our shopping and plugging this end of the wire into the wall and this other end of the wire into our phone lets us browse the internet and contact our friends again.<sup>22</sup> The process of intellectualisation (or rationalisation) therefore means something other than the idea that we possess more knowledge about our world than previous eras:

namely, the knowledge or belief that if one wished one *could* learn it at any time. Hence, it means that principally there are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play, but rather that one can, in principle, master all things by calculation. This means that the world is disenchanted. One need no longer have recourse to magical means in order to master or implore the spirits, as did the savage, for whom such mysterious powers existed. Technical means and calculations now perform the service. This above all is what intellectualisation means. (*SV*, 139)

That *in principle* all forces are calculable, that ‘there is nothing new under the sun’, so that we *could* learn, know and calculate at any time but that we are not each of us actually in possession of very much knowledge in relation to the whole is the modern culmination of the process of disenchantment, a process which, as already noted, has continued for millennia. In this sense, intellectualisation and disenchantment are not recent phenomena but have been ongoing throughout history. Disenchantment involves our explanations becoming less reliant on beliefs in supernatural forces and more on rational, empirical or scientific grounds. Increasingly we come to learn that what we used to think was down to the whims of the spirits, the gods or nature is really within our ability to know and therefore also *to master* through rational, technological means.

In addition, religious belief loses explanatory relevance for natural phenomena because we discover explanations and create technologies that reliably allow us to predict, master and control the world around us. There is no need to read thunder and lightning as a sign of the anger of a god if every time thunder and lightning appears there are always the same preceding environmental and atmospheric conditions that we are able reliably to measure and predict. Scientific explanations of various natural phenomena involve the evacuation or ‘emptying out’ of supernatural, ‘mystical’, ‘magical’ or ‘enchanted’ elements. As scientific rationalisation increases, our understanding of the world becomes ‘disenchanted’, ‘unmagicked’ or ‘demystified’. This means that even religious worldviews become increasingly ‘disenchanted’ and rather than merely disappearing, they come to belong to different spheres or categories to

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<sup>22</sup> Horkheimer makes a similar, though more Marxist-inflected observation in *Eclipse of Reason*, as I point out later in the chapter (*ER*, 69 – 70).

rational, scientific explanation. Religions gradually become less bound up with our ways of understanding the natural world because we find other, more reliable means of explaining and mastering it.

## **1.2. The Ghosts of Disenchantment and the Persistence of Belief**

Mystical and religious beliefs, however, did not just explain the world but also conferred upon it value and meaning and this was true for the vast majority of the history of intellectualisation. It was, Weber argues, only relatively recently that the pursuit of science became so detached from supernatural and religious belief, which had previously given the pursuit of science its motive force and meaning. Weber is aware that for most of its history, intellectualisation as the progressive pursuit of science, was also a way to know and appreciate supernatural forces and so the pursuit of science was in a sense an obligation to know and honour these forces or beings. For many Christian scientists, learning more about the world was also learning more about God's plan for the world and so implicitly there was a *meaning* behind the pursuit of science. This was true even during the Scientific Revolution, which precipitated and is arguably co-extensive with the Enlightenment, during which the exact sciences, their specialisation and the development of the modern scientific method were brought into being. On this point, Weber quotes the 17<sup>th</sup> century biologist Jan Swammerdam's famous statement: "Here I bring you the proof of God's providence in the anatomy of a louse" (*SV*, 142), arguing that we no longer believe science to be the way to God, as Swammerdam did. This does not mean that disenchantment entails the end of religion or religious belief. Of course, many people continue to believe in God but Weber's point is rather that few amongst them who pursue science seriously will seek explanations that take aspects of their faith to be important premises, lest they be led into error. There are more reliable mechanisms of explanation than the caprice of a supernatural being if we are after certainty, so that even scientists with personal faith will tend to pursue science as a secular discipline today.<sup>23</sup>

For scientists like Swammerdam, each scientific discovery was worthwhile because it revealed the truth of God's creation of the universe, yet each scientific discovery was also another step on the path to eventual disenchantment – to the realisation that the world was explicable and calculable without any belief in God whatsoever, eventually revealing the

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<sup>23</sup> It is of course possible that there are people dedicated to science who think that their intensive study of, say, specific proteins that may aid in the absorption of vitamins might reveal something of God's plan but this would probably not be very common and many people who are religious – let alone most professional scientists – would likely think these were strange places to go looking for signs of providence.

possibility that there simply was no plan to be found and perhaps no meaning behind it all. Disenchantment therefore also means that our cumulative knowledge of the world expands as any meaning to be derived from such knowledge contracts. We know better *what* is here but we know less *why* we are here and so the world becomes in principle calculable, knowable but also cold, meaningless. The difficult question, then, is not to ask what the meaning of science and its pursuit are for the individual but, “within the total life of humanity. What is the value of science” *as such* (*SV*, 140)? Weber considers and then rejects various possibilities about the meaning of science in a disenchanted world, claiming that the pursuit of science has itself cleared away a number of false illusions about the meaning of its pursuit: it is not the way to true being; nor the way to true art; nor the way to true nature; nor the way to God; nor the way to happiness (143).<sup>24</sup>

Disenchantment, as the emptying out of meaning, is also the emptying out of meaning for science. The truth is, Weber says, that science has no meaning, no value beyond contingent, instrumental value. For instance, medicine can tell us how to preserve someone’s life but it cannot tell us why the preservation of life is meaningful, which instead is simply presupposed (*SV*, 144). Similarly, he argues, jurisprudence can tell us what decisions should be made on the grounds of legal rules that already exist but it cannot tell us whether law *as such* should exist in the first place and why these rules and not others should exist (144 – 145). That is to say, that if we have an end that we want to pursue, science can be an efficient instrument that we use to achieve that goal but it cannot itself tell us which goals are worth pursuing or why. Such presuppositions are not and cannot be supported or generated *by* the pursuit of science and this is true of the meaning of the pursuit of science in general, the value of which is itself presupposed. Science, Weber says: “presupposes that what is yielded by scientific work is important in the sense that it is ‘worth being known’. In this, obviously, are contained all our problems. For this presupposition cannot be proved by scientific means” (143). Disenchantment does not entail expunging all non-rational elements and replacing them with purely rational ones. Any pursuit of science must itself be motivated in some way and these motivations, values or goals must be presupposed and have some source other than what is revealed in the pursuit of science itself.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> On this last point Weber is especially dismissive: “After Nietzsche’s devastating criticism of those ‘last men’ who ‘invented happiness’, I may leave aside altogether the naïve optimism in which science – that is, the technique of mastering life which rests upon science – has been celebrated as the way to happiness. Who believes this? – aside from a few big children in university chairs or editorial offices. Let us resume our argument” (*SV*, 143).

<sup>25</sup> In this sense, Weber’s account of disenchantment can be understood as a variation on Nietzsche’s argument that nihilism is the result of the ‘will to truth’: “We did indeed pause for a long time before the question of the origin of this will [to truth] – until finally we came to a complete halt before an even more fundamental question. We

To summarise, disenchantment involves emptying the objects of scientific enquiry of mystery through more reliable and accurate rational and scientific explanation previously provided by religious and magical beliefs. However, these same religious and magical beliefs also provided meaning not just in terms of the reasons behind natural phenomena, such as thunder as a manifestation of the wrath of Zeus' but also as a source of normative value. Science supplants religious understanding of the world but if it cannot generate meaning or values then it cannot be a source for how we should live, including why we should pursue science at all.<sup>26</sup> Religious beliefs, then, potentially still seem to have an important function in orienting our lives and actions normatively. In other words, even if we accept that the world of natural phenomena is devoid of meaning, we still need non-rationalised sources that differentiate what is good from what is bad, including why scientific knowledge is worth pursuing and to what ends it should be applied.

However, the historical process of rationalisation brought with it another aspect of disenchantment that also undercuts this function of religious belief. In parallel to the undercutting of value that results from the historical process of intellectualist rationalisation, which replaces 'enchanted' explanations with rational scientific ones, there is an attendant form of rationalisation that somehow still preserves certain normative presuppositions (or values) in the modern day but now without the need for religious support. In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber argues that our presuppositions about what we should and should not do are today undergirded by another form of rationalisation that was itself conditioned by the process of scientific rationalisation. This is the rationalised economic structure of capitalism, which in fact does provide us with compelling reasons to perform actions and value specific things in a disenchanted world. Weber's argument is that these reasons and values that orient us today are in fact the despiritualised shells of certain religious values that have now become tied to economic processes and as such, no longer require a belief in God to orient action.

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asked after the *value* of this will" (*BGE*, §1). That is to say, the end point of the 'will to truth' eventually obliges us to turn our attention towards the will to truth itself and ask what it is that is supposed to ground it. I take up Adorno's relationship to Nietzsche with respect to these questions in Chapter 4.

<sup>26</sup> In *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche is at pains to argue that modern science provides no better a justification for the valuation of truthfulness in comparison to Christianity. On the contrary, arguably, those who take the methods of science to have superseded the religiously motivated search for meaning are even less able to justify their valuation of truth and instead more likely to simply take it as a given. As a result, the secular inheritors of the will to truth "are more inflexible and absolute than anyone else" (*OGM*, 126) in their belief in truth because having rejected some divine ground guaranteeing that the search for truth is worthwhile, they simply presuppose that it is, failing to recognise the fact that, "science itself requires justification" (128).

In other words, religious values still orient our actions but they have become disenchanting, now tied to rationalised processes of calculation, bureaucratisation and the pursuit of profit. More specifically, modern values which are now underwritten and supported by a rationalised, economic structure have the same form as certain Protestant values, which “stood at the cradle of the modern economic man” (*PESC*, 172) but now emptied of their religious content. The ‘protestant ethic’ has been disenchanting by processes of rationalisation and has been replaced by the ‘spirit of capitalism’. Weber argues in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* that traditionally Protestant values such as passionate devotion to one’s ‘calling’, hard labour, self-sufficiency, productivity, financial prudence and so on provided the psychological and moral conditions for the emergence of industrial capitalism as a financially disciplined, rationalised-bureaucratic economic system based on calculation and the continuous accumulation of wealth. Once this economic system was established, the basic form of the Protestant ethic continued to be amenable to the structures and demands of capitalism but activities once underpinned by Protestant beliefs could persist while no longer requiring justification beyond rational economic reasons of instrumentality. These values were transformed to a certain extent thereby but did not entirely lose their moral force, now prowling “about our lives like the ghost of dead religious beliefs” (180).

In Weber’s genealogical account of the origins of the ‘spirit’ of modern capitalism, the Protestant ethic of the mastery of the self, one’s possessions and the commitment to a ‘calling’ created the psychological and moral conditions for an economy based on the rational individual’s pursuit of profit and the moral worth of hard labour, “But victorious capitalism, since it rests on mechanical foundations, needs its support no longer” (*PESC*, 180). Put another way, certain important elements of Protestant morality become progressively ‘disenchanting’ of their religious origins and instead tied to rational, economic processes. Originally the deep commitment to one’s labour, financial prudence and various forms of self-mastery were justified as forms of demonstrating one’s faith in and reverence for God (170 – 171). As the age became disenchanting and economic processes more ‘rational’ – or *calculable* – the reason for the persistence of these values became economic, yet they still retained their form as values. In the transformation of the ‘Protestant Ethic’ into the ‘Spirit of Capitalism’, what remained were simply the unconditional value of the individualistic pursuit of profit as the justly deserved fruit of one’s own hard labour (175).<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> “What the great religious epoch of the seventeenth century bequeathed to its utilitarian successor was, however, above all an amazingly good, we may even say a pharisaically good, conscience in the acquisition of money, so long as it took place legally. Every trace of the *deplacere vix potest* has disappeared” (*PESC*, 180). Ghosh (1994) notes that ‘*deplacere vix potest*’ should read ‘*deo placere vix potest*’ (104). Nelson (1965) notes (as Weber does

For instance, Protestant morality sanctioned one's labour as a 'calling' and in so doing, even the mundane work of the everyday man became as much a glorification of God as the miracles of the saints once were. To undertake labour and not to resent it or to shirk it was also to do honour to God's providential will. In this way, Protestantism elevated even the most painstaking and menial labour to something worthy of praise. At the same time, Weber notes that the sanctification of work as one's 'calling' also sanctified the exploitation of this labour. The 'calling' of the employer too was sanctified and so it was, therefore, not only simply the *right* of the employer to make use of his workers but his *duty* to perform his calling as an employer as well as he possibly could (*PESC*, 176 – 177). If, for instance, the employer was the owner of a mill and therefore his 'calling' – God's plan for him – was to successfully produce and distribute as much flour from his mill as possible, then exploiting workers by making them work long hours and paying them little could also be sanctioned as his duty. In addition, if the mill workers were made to work harder and harder then so much the better, for it allowed them to pursue their 'calling' to greater effect too.

Modern human beings are, according to Weber, now tied to rationalised justifications of these processes of exploitation. They are rationalised insofar as they are now disenchanting and justified according to instrumental reason, as human activity has become primarily ordered on the basis that it is calculable and useful. The moral force of these values remains but now disconnected from what once had provided the grounding *meaning* of that moral force. In a certain sense then, the fact that these values persist is both *rational* because they efficiently support, complement and therefore cohere with modern economic relations but *irrational* because we continue to insist on their worth with no recourse to any sort of absolute ground that could justify them. In a certain sense, then, they are *rational* because they are *instrumental, calculable* but they are *irrational* because they are tied to a contingent, human-made economic system rather than a secure, eternal and universally valid ground, as the word of God had promised to be. Put another way, the values that arguably we still on the whole hold today – individualism, hard work, the importance of striving, financial independence and so on – find their origin in an 'enchanted' worldview. These values do not disappear once they are disconnected from their religious origins but instead persist in a zombified form, supported primarily by the way in which they are tied to and buttress rational economic interests and the pursuit of profit.

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not) that this phrase is shorthand for: "*Home mercator vix ant nunquam deo potest placere*. A merchant can hardly ever or never please God" (597).

The modern belief in the absolute value of hard work has no clear fundamental or absolute moral basis if it is disconnected from its Protestant origins that had once grounded one's labour and character in the will of God. Yet, this belief persists and the rationality that underpins it is now an *instrumental* one. The value of hard labour is now more likely to be justified in a manner "coloured by utilitarianism" on the grounds that hard work is good *because* it is supposedly the means by which the individual is able to acquire wealth (*PESC*, 61) and so if the individual strives and works hard, they will supposedly enjoy the fruits of their own labour. Underneath such a justification lies the truth that, as Weber puts it, "Whoever does not adapt his manner of life to the conditions of capitalistic success must go under, or at least not rise" but such ideas "are phenomena of a time in which modern capitalism has become dominant and has become emancipated from its old supports" (79 - 80). If, on reflection, however, this rationalisation about the virtue of labour on primarily instrumental grounds does not really bear out because huge swathes of the global poor continue to labour like the exploited mill worker just to stay alive, then this belief in the virtue of hard work as a guarantor of success reveals itself as just that: a belief.<sup>28</sup>

An instrument can help us perform actions to achieve particular outcomes and similarly, reason considered instrumentally can only tell us *that* an action is good when we want to achieve a given outcome but it cannot tell us *which* outcomes or ends are good or why. Reason used instrumentally, as calculation, cannot provide moral motivation, let alone the moral fervour involved in the judgement that someone should not receive something for nothing. While disenchantment was supposed to bring an end to the mystification of the world, if we still continue to believe and act in accordance with values that have since lost their spiritual core, then are we in fact more mystified than before as to why we consider this or that action to be valuable? Put another way, disenchantment, having done away with false beliefs about the absolute grounds of dedication to a calling and hard labour seems, in a sense, to have left us in a state of being even more mystified than before, tied to and determined by forms of activity that we cannot ultimately justify, yet still insist are rational and must perform anyway.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> At various points, Adorno makes it clear that he thinks that as false and problematic as they might have been, traditional attempts to situate the moral in the transcendental, in God or in examined reason *at least* tried to make their theoretical underpinnings transparent, whereas today the moral imperatives live on but merely as opaque shells that obscure their inner emptiness: "Their substance has evaporated, but people still cling to them, turning them into fetishes" (*PMP*, 170).

<sup>29</sup> In this way, disenchantment does not entirely do away with mystification but creates conditions for new forms of mystification, some of which I discuss below and in the next chapter. This is one reason why I think that talk of 're-enchantment' is generally wrong-headed, as well as the way in which such attempts tend not to fully grasp the manner in which such attempts are themselves premised on and thus affected by disenchantment. See Crawford (2020) for some discussion of these and other problems facing arguments in favour of the notion of 're-enchantment' pursued in recent works on the subject.

In discussing what Villa calls a “blind spot” with regards to the continued dominance of religious morality in the modern world, he argues that, “Contrary to Habermas’s appropriation of Weber’s ‘disenchantment of the world’ theme, *religion* retains a monopoly on morality and dictates the criteria of ethical behaviour for many millions, if not billions, worldwide”, which “suggests that Habermas and the rest of the Frankfurt School have put the Enlightenment cart before the horse” (Villa, 2019, 279). Villa may be right to point out that religious values are still globally dominant but my point is rather to emphasise to what extent they have adapted to and so been transformed by the historical and economic conditions with which they are bound up, whether ‘ethical behaviour’ involves conscious appeal to religious authority or not. As I also pointed out with respect to the pursuit of science, religious belief has not disappeared but is itself subject to the process of disenchantment and rationalisation, changing its function and relationship to this pursuit. As Horkheimer points out in *Eclipse of Reason*, religion today tends to find ways to integrate, rather than repudiate modern physics because the latter would not be plausible and in the realm of value and behaviour, religious ideas become formalised and adjusted to the social reality (*ER*, 44 – 45). Contrary to ‘putting the Enlightenment cart before the horse’, Horkheimer is well aware that enlightenment<sup>30</sup> and religion are not distinct but intimately entangled within the history of both the Church and the pursuit of science, even if today they seem otherwise (46).

The point, therefore, is not that religion has disappeared but rather that today our everyday activities and judgements are disenchanted because the demands and structures of a rationalised economic order of which we are all locked into provide more compelling forms of determination than religious morals, regardless of the presence of individual belief. The unconscious power of the disenchanted fabric of everyday life is considerably more powerful as a determining factor of everyday activity, belief and behaviour than conscious appeal to moral precepts, which take on new contours thereby. Even if resting on religious beliefs about the unconditional value of hard labour, moral precepts informed by those beliefs can be reflected and acted upon consciously, whereas structures that are everywhere entrenched merely compel. On an individual level, we may not know, as Weber pointed out in ‘Science as a Vocation’, how “one can buy something for money – sometimes more and sometimes less” (*SV*, 138), yet this does not affect the fact that we constantly spend money to buy something,

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<sup>30</sup> At points in this chapter, I sometimes capitalise the first letter of ‘enlightenment’, whereas other times I do not, as here. I address this explicitly at the beginning of the next chapter but briefly: ‘enlightenment’ refers to the process co-extensive with Weber’s use of ‘intellectualisation’, whereas ‘Enlightenment’ refers more specifically to the philosophical movement, period or set of ideas associated with this process. In general, my usage of one or the other follows Horkheimer’s renderings here.

sometimes for more or sometimes for less, rarely stop to ask why and are still compelled to do so whether we search for and find an answer to these questions or not.

Towards the end of *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber makes perhaps his most famous pronouncement:

The Puritan wanted to work in a calling; we are forced to do so. For when [religious] asceticism was carried out of monastic cells into everyday life, and began to dominate worldly morality, it did its part in building the tremendous cosmos of the modern economic order. This order is now bound to the technical and economic conditions of machine production which today determine the lives of all the individuals who are born into this mechanism, not only those directly concerned with economic acquisition, with irresistible force. Perhaps it will so determine them until the last ton of fossilized coal is burnt. In Baxter's<sup>31</sup> view the care for external goods should only lie on the shoulders of the 'saint like a light cloak, which can be thrown aside at any moment'. But fate decreed that the cloak should become an iron cage. (*PESC*, 179)<sup>32</sup>

The man-made structures and compulsions of the rationalised economic order are not choices, in the same way dedication to one's calling perhaps once was. Of course, the Puritan was morally obliged to dedicate themselves to their calling and not doing so had consequences.<sup>33</sup> By contrast, one simply cannot opt out of the rationalised economic structures of everyday life, let alone easily realise that they are what ground our activities and subject them to critical scrutiny. For the Puritan dedicated to a calling, the accumulation of wealth by the industry owner was just a step on the way to a salvation that was pre-ordained. Death would bring the elect, through grace, into the presence of God for all times and the material wealth accumulated through life cast off lightly, as if it were a cloak. For us, the belief in the value of hard labour and productivity remain but now inextricably bound to an opaque network of rationalised economic calculation, compelled towards endless labour and productivity with no sense that one day it might all be worthwhile or cast aside in virtue of something greater. The light cloak of the Puritan for us becomes an iron cage, determining our lives as bound up with endless

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<sup>31</sup> Richard Baxter, the 17<sup>th</sup> century theologian who Weber treats as representative of ascetic Protestantism and especially the notion of the 'calling' (*PESC*, 155 – 156).

<sup>32</sup> Talcott Parsons' translation of Weber's phrase '*stahlhartes Gehäuse*' as 'iron cage' has come in for some criticism, with Wells and Baehr opting instead for 'shell as hard as steel', retaining the direct translation of '*stahl*' as 'steel', "a product of *human fabrication*" rather than Parsons' use of 'iron' (Wells, 2001, 36). In any case, the important thing captured by this phrase under either rendering seems to be that it is a relatively rigid, determining structure within which the modern individual is encased.

<sup>33</sup> Of course, this leaves aside that the doctrine of predestination meant that many Protestants themselves, including Luther and Calvin, did not conceive of such things as 'choices'.

“economic acquisition”. Perhaps, as Weber says, “until the last ton of fossilized coal is burnt” (*PESC*, 179).

### 1.3. Reason Eclipsed

If we have reached a point where reason can no longer be said to be the way to determine ultimate values or identify which ends are worth pursuing and is instead conceived of as an instrument focused on co-ordination, problem-solving and calculating the most efficient means to pre-given ends, then reason also has a tendency to treat objects as instrumental in the pursuit of these aims. Modern, disenchanted humanity has been stripped of false beliefs about the meaning of the world as given by God for the sole benefit of humanity, as in the book of Genesis or as the site of meaningful good works acting as precursory deeds or signs of a true life and world beyond this one. Instead, imperious humanity stands before a nature that is in equal parts hostile, meaningless and indifferent and of which it is a part and yet, “nature”, Horkheimer proclaims in *Eclipse of Reason*, “is today more than ever conceived as a mere tool of man. It is the object of total exploitation that has no aim set by reason, and therefore no limit” (*ER*, 74). In this, Horkheimer takes his cue from Weber’s account of intellectualisation and disenchantment in arguing that reason, once instrumentalised, tends also to instrumentalise the natural world, including human beings and becomes attached to more or less automatic social and economic mechanisms that increasingly set its aims.

Villa (2019) is right to point out how noteworthy it is that Horkheimer and Adorno rarely discuss Weber, given how influential he is on their own ideas and especially *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, where he gets no mention whatsoever (266).<sup>34</sup> It is worth noting that there are a scant few references to Weber in Horkheimer’s *Eclipse of Reason*, at least one of which acknowledges the closeness of their ideas early in the first chapter, ‘Means and Ends’. There Horkheimer includes a fairly lengthy footnote noting the close resemblance of Weber’s contrast between ‘functional’ and ‘substantial’ notions of rationality to the notions of ‘subjective’ and ‘objective’ reason that he will develop throughout the book, chiefly in that chapter (*ER*, 5). As

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<sup>34</sup> It is not quite true that explicit reference to Weber is entirely absent in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, as there is a single quotation reproduced at one point (*DE*, 61), which is taken from the ‘Conceptual Preface’ of Weber’s *General Economic History* (Weber, 2023, xxvii). Villa’s point still stands, however, as this hardly attests to Weber’s more general influence on the text. See also, Bernstein (2001): “*Dialectic of Enlightenment* is without question a regimented and narrowed version of Weber’s rationalization theory” (123 – 124). Adorno notes the general importance of Weber’s influence on the Frankfurt School approach in a letter to the *New York Times* concerned with defending a paper Marcuse had recently given on Weber from an attack by Benjamin Nelson in the same newspaper: “It would be impossible to conceal basic antagonisms such as that between a critical theoretical approach to society and a more positivistic one. Both positions, by the way, have roots in the work of Max Weber himself” (Adorno, quoted in Müller-Doohm, 2005, 595).

*Eclipse of Reason* was originally written in English, the terms ‘functional’ and ‘substantial’ are presumably Horkheimer’s own translations of Weber’s distinction in *Economy and Society* between ‘instrumental’ and ‘value’ rationality. In the passage where Horkheimer places his footnote, he clearly associates ‘subjective reason’ as the analogue of ‘functional’ or ‘instrumental’ rationality with ‘means-oriented’ reasoning and ‘objective reason’ as the analogue of ‘substantial’ or ‘value’ rationality with reasoning about ‘ends’, as I will go on to describe.<sup>35</sup> For the following two sections, I will be outlining what Horkheimer means by ‘subjective’ and ‘objective’ reason, their relationship to each other and his argument, itself analogous to Weber’s account of intellectualisation and disenchantment, that objective reason has diminished over time leaving only the subjective form of reason, which has been transformed thereby into instrumental reason.

The first chapter of *Eclipse of Reason* focuses on distinguishing between subjective reason and objective reason, as well as the effects of their changing relationship to each other. There are two points of clarification about the nature of this distinction that are worth making from the outset. Firstly, ‘subjective’ and ‘objective’ are not being used here in what has become the commonplace association of ‘subjective’ with the ‘personal’ and ‘objective’ with the ‘factual’ and in certain respects they are being used almost in the opposite way. Put another way, typically we might consider ‘subjective’ to mean something like ‘my’ or ‘your’ ‘subjective’ (i.e., individual) opinion and ‘objective’ to mean what is actually true regardless of what anyone else thinks, although putting the distinction in this way is not entirely off the mark with respect to ‘objective’ and this description of ‘subjective’ still has some truth to it. That said, some things that we may commonly tend to associate with ‘objectivity’ today actually fall under subjective reason in Horkheimer’s picture, such as the scientific method, formal logic and calculation. The second point of clarification to make is that this distinction or ‘split’ within reason entails more than just a split within *our* reason, in our minds or our capacity for reasoning but is rather a split within reason *as such* – that is, reason both in our minds and in the world. The idea that reason is not just a feature or capacity of the minds of human beings but also a feature of reality more broadly may sound strange to modern ears, as though a relic belonging to earlier periods of the history of philosophy from Plato’s theory of forms up until at least Hegel’s account of a supra-individual form of reason as Spirit and both of whom Horkheimer treats as exemplary thinkers

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<sup>35</sup> See the earlier footnote of this chapter regarding dispute over the association of reasoning about ‘means’ and ‘ends’ in relation to *Zweckrationalität* (instrumental/purposive/functional rationality) and *Wertrationalität* (value/substantial rationality) amongst readers of Weber.

of objective reason.<sup>36</sup> This feeling is itself a reflection and result of the process of the dissolution of the concept of objective reason, a process that happened of necessity in the pursuit of more rational foundations for understanding and meaning (*ER*, 90) and which is now irreversible (42 – 43; 111). This process is what Horkheimer seeks to describe throughout *Eclipse of Reason*.

Horkheimer begins the book by suggesting that most people today, if asked to give an account of what ‘reason’ involves would more than likely give an account of what he calls subjective reason, which he describes as “the abstract functioning of the thinking mechanism” (*ER*, 3). Subjective reason is reason understood as a faculty of the mind common to all subjects and while each of us might reason our ways to different things depending on our goals or be better or worse at certain sorts of reasoning, this faculty is the same between all rational beings in principle. The ‘abstract functioning’ of reason conceived as a faculty of the mind includes the following operations: classification, in that reason can be put to use in order to work out what something is and what other things are like it; inference, in that I can utilise my reason in order to draw conclusions from evidence about what is likely to have happened, likely to happen or what is implied by a given premise in the form of inductive and deductive reasoning; calculation, insofar as this faculty can help me to work out how likely something is or what decision I should make if I want a specific result, given what I know; and also co-ordination, as determining and mobilising “the right means with a given end” (4). This is reason, as it is at one point described concisely in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, conceived as “the organ of calculation, of planning; it is neutral in regard to ends; its element is coordination” (*DE*, 88). This list is not exhaustive and both Horkheimer and Adorno will also refer to this form of reason in others ways, associating it with, for instance, ‘computation’<sup>37</sup> (*ER*, 9), ‘organisation’ and ‘administration’ (*DE*, 36).

Importantly, subjective reason is therefore reason as a faculty defined in terms of formal processes of thinking. It is the capacity of the subject to work through information regardless of the content that it might be being given, to reach reliable results in abstraction from any particularity. Subjective reason is therefore ‘means’ oriented, “It is essentially concerned with means and ends, with the adequacy of procedures for purposes more or less taken for granted and supposedly self-explanatory”, insofar as it is the faculty for determining what the best

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<sup>36</sup> According to Horkheimer, Hegel represents the greatest attempt at trying to construe a form of objective reason because he maintained and advanced critical insight into the tendency of objective reason towards romanticism and subjective reason towards “vulgar materialism” (*ER*, 118). I remark again on Hegel as a thinker of objective reason at the end of Chapter 4.

<sup>37</sup> See also: “The computer – which thinking wants to make its own equal and to whose greater glory it would like nothing better than to eliminate itself – is the bankruptcy petition of consciousness in the face of a reality which at the present stage is not given visually but functionally, an abstraction in itself” (*ND*, 206 – 207).

means are to achieve a given ‘end’ or to work out what is the most reasonable or efficient way to go about achieving what it is that I want to achieve, whatever that may be (*ER*, 3). Another way to put this would be to say that for subjective reason, reasoning is generally a procedure or tool aimed at problem-solving. However, this form of reason has no way of determining which kinds of problems are worth solving or which ends are worth pursuing and so “attaches little importance to the question whether the purposes as such are reasonable” (3). Subjective reason tends, then, to presuppose that the purposes to which it is directed are worthwhile and at best it can only help clarify subjective ends, in the ordinary sense of the term ‘subjective’. That is to say, subjective reason can help clarify what it is that I desire and how best to achieve my desires but it is not able to determine whether these *should* be the things I desire or why.

However, subjective reason is only one part of reason and the fact that this seems like it exhausts the common understanding of reason according to the average person today is, Horkheimer argues:

an important symptom of a profound change of outlook that has taken place in Western thinking in the course of the last centuries. For a long time, however, a diametrically opposed view of reason was prevalent. This view asserted the existence of reason as a force not only in the individual mind but also in the objective world – in relations among human beings and between social classes, in social institutions, and in nature and its manifestations. (*ER*, 4)

This opposed view is reason in the form of objective reason. Objective reason is not just a faculty of the mind but also a feature of reality as such and so certain features not present in the notion of subjective reason follow, including the idea that because reason inheres in the world and not just in the individual minds of human beings reason is therefore something discoverable. Where reason is discovered we learn more about the world and how we *should* think about it, how we *should* organise our lives and whether we live *rationally* in accordance with this reason. An important part of discovering this reason is through speculation, through creating concepts and trying to think through what is true, what is good and so on, following lines of reasoning and seeing where they lead, regardless of whether or not they turn out to be useful. That is, trying to think beyond what is merely calculable, probable, functional and efficient.

These elements of reason as objective, as something that we can discover in reality itself, therefore disclose to us fundamental truths about *what there is* and *why*. That is to say, objective reason is directed towards understanding the underlying structure of reality, how it all joins together and what it means. Objective reason therefore involves inquiring after fundamental

truths such as: ‘why is there something rather than nothing?’; ‘is everything causally determined or do some things have free will?’; ‘do we survive after death? What is the nature of this survival?’; ‘What is Good and what is Evil? Are they real forces or human judgements? If the latter, on what grounds can we make such judgements?’ and so on. In addition, this also means that objective reason is concerned with the correspondence between thought and being and so the idea that we should learn not just what is true for us here and now in view of contingent aims but what is true in general. The role of thought is here conceptualised as needing to reflect the true nature of being, that how we think and what reality is like should be in accordance and that how we think should be modified if it turns out that reality is different to how we have tended to think about it up until now. Reason, conceived in its objective form, involves the notion that reason in the subject should respond to reason in the world (*ER*, 8 – 9).<sup>38</sup>

If discovery of reason in the world acts as a corrective to how we think, by reflecting on this all-embracing, fundamental structure of being we can also derive how we should act and what we should value: “Objective reason does not focus on the co-ordination of behaviour and aim, but on concepts [...] on the idea of the greatest good, on the problem of human destiny, and on the way of realization of ultimate goals” (*ER*, 4). In this sense, then, objective reason is concerned with determining ‘ends’, not with ‘means’. It is concerned with what is *true*, what is *good* and what is *meaningful* and so not with the notion that something is valuable only if it is good for some other purpose but with what is valuable in and of itself. Objective reason is concerned with determining purpose and the determination of correct ‘means’ is thereby subordinated to determining what are the right ‘ends’ to pursue. In this sense, the work of subjective reason is secondary to that of objective reason because *what* one should pursue needs to first be determined before it is determined *how* one should pursue it. However, this and my earlier references to a ‘split’ in reason imply that objective reason and subjective reason are not merely antithetical forms of reason but in some other sort of relationship to each other. As Horkheimer states directly, “The relation between these two concepts is not merely one of opposition” and for the greater part of history, objective reason predominated over its subjective side, whereas today the relationship has reversed, diminishing objective reason and transforming subjective reason into a purely formalised and instrumental reason (5 - 6).

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<sup>38</sup> Sometimes Horkheimer talks about objective reason as though it is the idea of reason as something just present within the world independently of subjects and sometimes as though it is a form of reasoning that human beings do. At one point he clarifies that it refers to both of these things: “The term objective reason thus on the one hand denotes as its essence a structure inherent in reality that by itself calls for a specific mode of behavior in each specific case, be it a practical or a theoretical attitude. [...] On the other hand, the term objective reason may also designate this very effort and ability to reflect such an objective order” (*ER*, 8).

Subjective reason is, according to Horkheimer, a “partial, limited expression of a universal rationality from which criteria for all things and beings were derived” (*ER*, 4). That is to say, subjective reason is not separate from but rather only a part of objective reason or what could be called reason proper. That subjective reason is a part of objective reason is itself explicable on the basis of Horkheimer’s definition of objective reason because if reason is a property or principle inherent in the world and the subject and their mind are also a part of that world, then it would follow that reason as a property or principle inherent in the subject also involves it being a principle inherent in the world. This is suggested by the idea that the subject can make their thoughts correspond to being, insofar as the subject can discover what is true about the world and correct how it thinks about and acts in the world accordingly. On the full picture, in that case, subjective reason is an instantiation of objective reason or *reason as such* and “the predominance of the former over the latter was achieved in the course of a long process” (5).

That these forms of reason are not mutually exclusive and simply opposed but related to each other is an important point and a point that seems often to be missed in the reasonably scant secondary literature that makes reference to *Eclipse of Reason*. For instance, Jacobs (2019) briefly distinguishes the two but does not consider their relationship any further than this (181), as does Snir (2010, 410) and to some extent the same is true of Baynes (2019, 425 - 427).<sup>39</sup> This also holds for Villa (2019), who describes objective reason as an “apparently clear-cut alternative” to subjective reason and additionally makes the claim that Horkheimer ultimately appeals to objective reason over subjective reason (270 – 271), a position that I think is fairly seriously mistaken. Villa claims that Horkheimer both ‘appeals to’ (270) and “invokes” objective reason “against subjective reason” and goes on to paint him as reverting to a form of Romantic naturalism thereby (271). Villa’s characterisation of Horkheimer is incorrect not only because it rests on misunderstanding the relationship between subjective and objective reason as simple opposition but also because it ignores Horkheimer’s critical remarks regarding naturalism (*ER*, 115) and attempts to revive objective reason (42 – 43), including his negative association of romanticism with such attempts (14; 118).<sup>40</sup> Moreover, towards the end of the book, Horkheimer clearly states that there is no ‘philosophical decision’ to be made between subjective and objective reason (118) but rather the need to “foster a mutual critique”, as Baynes

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<sup>39</sup> While Baynes’ treatment is less cursory, a more complex relationship than opposition is not really explored beyond some of Horkheimer’s comments on the necessary emergence of both forms of reason and the possibility of their reconciliation towards the end of *Eclipse of Reason* (*ER*, 118 – 119).

<sup>40</sup> On the charge of romanticism specifically, Horkheimer makes the following remark in an essay published in the same year as *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and *Eclipse of Reason*: “Far from engaging in romanticism, as have so many eminent critics of Enlightenment, we should encourage Enlightenment to move forward even in the face of its most paradoxical consequences” (*RAI*, 87 – 88).

puts it (2019, 426). Jay provides one of the most extensive recent commentaries on *Eclipse of Reason* but does not highlight this relationship either, presenting the transition as though it were between two mutually exclusive types of reason, albeit largely implicitly compared to the previously mentioned authors (Jay, 2016, 100 – 105).

A notable exception in amongst the secondary literature is Freyenhagen, who points out that the problem Horkheimer identifies as instrumental reason is not subjective reason *per se* but rather its modern form, wherein it has become “decoupled from objective reason, as having become formalized, and as socially dominant” (Freyenhagen, 2023, 130). The full version of reason as objective reason denoted that reason was both a structure or principle inherent in reality *and* the ability to grasp that structure in thought (*ER*, 8) and the subjective faculty of thought was “the critical agent that dissolved superstition” but which required concepts it took to be objectively rational in order to undertake this work (5). Yet, Horkheimer has said that this is not how we tend to think about reason today and instead we tend to only recognise the subjective form of reason as standing in for the whole of reason. According to Horkheimer, this has come about through an historical process that involves the diminishing of the objective side of reason, resulting in the gradual reduction of reason to only its subjective aspect and thereby becoming fully instrumentalised. In other words, the relationship that has developed between subjective and objective reason today is that a purely formalised and instrumental form of subjective reason has ‘eclipsed’ objective reason or reason more fully construed, as Freyenhagen puts it, invoking the title of the book (2023, 131).

What is it that, according to Horkheimer, has undermined the full picture and left us with a diminished form of reason, reduced only to a formalising and instrumentalised faculty of the mind of any given individual? Much as Weber had argued that it was the historical process of intellectualisation that left humanity in the dark with respect to appeals to ultimate values, Horkheimer argues that what undermined and diminished the scope of reason was reason itself: “In modern times,” he says, “reason has displayed a tendency to dissolve its own objective content” (*ER*, 9). As mentioned, the idea is quite similar to the process of intellectualisation and the resulting disenchantment, insofar as the use of (subjective) reason in the search for (objective) reason in the world, through religion, metaphysics and Enlightenment ideals, involves philosophy gradually supplanting religion, metaphysics and even finally Enlightenment ideals by the purely subjective use of reason, though not in order to “abolish objective truth but [only] to give it a new rational foundation” (12). This process ends up gradually undermining the various accounts of objectivity or of reality as such until it eventually arrives at a point where we have become sceptical of the very idea that there is reason to be

discovered in objectivity at all. The dissolution of myths in search of new and more rational foundations culminates in the idea that truly rational foundations to be discovered beyond the registering of facts and probabilities afforded by the scientific method is itself unbelievable.

#### **1.4. ...and Harnessed to the Social Process**

In principle, the existence of God promised a rational, underlying and all-encompassing structure from which human destiny, meaning and activity could be derived. It provided answers to fundamental questions about the nature of reality: ‘why is there something rather than nothing?’ (‘God willed it’); ‘What happens when we die?’ (‘God judges, so order your actions accordingly’). Continuous subjection of these kinds of ideas to the search for objective reason would eventually reveal that there were not good enough rational grounds to accept them. They did not fully satisfy the criteria of philosophical reflection, including because of irresolvable conflicts between religious doctrines. However, eventually, increasingly rigorous modes of reasoning came to view even relatively abstract metaphysical conceptions of God to presuppose too much. Reason itself and not faith would have to become the criteria by which the truth of the nature of reality would be discovered, ascertained and then how we should live derived from fundamental truths obtained by rational insight. According to Horkheimer, rationalist metaphysics of the early modern period would attempt to “formulate a doctrine of man and nature that could fulfil the intellectual function” previously provided by religion but “The divorce of reason from religion marked a [...] step in the weakening of [reason’s] objective aspect and a higher degree of formalization” (*ER*, 10). That is to say, while religious notions of objective reason were gradually supplanted by increasingly secularised metaphysical systems that sought to provide more rational accounts of objectivity and firmer foundations for beliefs and norms,<sup>41</sup> these were in a certain sense weaker forms of objective reason because they were more formalised, more abstract and so actually provided less certain guides for human action than could be found in the religious philosophies.

According to Horkheimer, key moments in the historical process of the formalisation of reason happen first in rationalist metaphysics and eventually culminate in the Enlightenment’s ruthless subjection of everything to examination, including the very notion that reason is a principle inherent in reality itself, rather than just this faculty of examination.<sup>42</sup> That is, while

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<sup>41</sup> Horkheimer cites Spinoza as an example in this regard (*ER*, 10).

<sup>42</sup> Though, as he and Adorno point out in the introduction to *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Enlightenment thought itself, which they consider “social freedom to be inseparable from” (*DE*, xiii), stops short of its aims as enlightenment and falls into “blind domination” if it does not also subject itself to critical examination, which is the task that they set themselves in the book (*DE*, xv - xvi).

the Enlightenment clearly held to an idea that there was some form of objective reason – some truth to be discovered in the investigation of reality – where the project of Enlightenment actually leads is towards what Weber called disenchantment and Horkheimer calls the gradual formalisation of reason. Eventually, the scrutiny of objective reason in the quest for more stable, secure forms leads to a position where reason is sceptical of the very idea of objective reason, leaving reason as synonymous only with its subjective side, the faculty used for scrutinising. Horkheimer summarises the historical process in the following way:

The philosophers of the Enlightenment attacked religion in the name of reason; in the end, what they killed was not the church but metaphysics and the objective concept of reason itself, the source of power of their own efforts. Reason as an organ for perceiving the true nature of reality and determining the guiding principles of our lives has come to be regarded as obsolete. Speculation is synonymous with mythology and superstition. We might say that the history of reason or enlightenment, from its beginnings in Greece down to the present has led to a state of affairs in which even the word reason is suspected of connoting some mythological entity. (*ER*, 13)

Reason becomes reduced to a purely formalised subjective reason and solely concerned with determining correct means, having “liquidated itself as an agency of ethical, moral and religious insight” (13) and so with determining ends or ultimate values. Gradually, the idea that there is reason in the world from which we can derive guidelines for living becomes increasingly weak. As our ability to ascertain knowledge about the world diminishes, reason becomes more abstract and formal. This increasing abstraction makes it less compelling, to the point where even very modest and relatively convincing conceptions of reason that still rely on the idea of some universal aspect to reason lose their force and can be safely ignored.

As the objective side of reason diminishes it becomes a weaker source for meaning and action and gradually reduced to the subjective side of reason. As subjective reason gradually overtakes objective reason, reason as such also becomes more and more abstract. That is to say, the gradual reduction of reason to subjective reason is also the gradual *formalisation* of reason (*ER*, 6). This increasing formalisation of reason is also the increasing instrumentalisation of reason, reducing reason primarily to a tool for calculation, co-ordination and determining the most efficient means to a given end, given from somewhere other than reason itself. Reasoning correctly, therefore, becomes not about determining what is true and what is valuable but about determining what is consistent and what is efficient. That is to say, on the purely subjective account of reason, to be ‘reasonable’ in the theoretical sphere is to not deviate from logical and

empirical certainty and in the practical sphere the ‘most reasonable’ course of action is always the most efficient one. This formalisation of reason is exemplified for Horkheimer by the dominant strain of philosophy in the 20<sup>th</sup> century becoming primarily concerned with problems of formal logic, language and usefulness, with especially British and American philosophers viewing their tasks as subordinate to the work of the sciences and the strongest expressions of these strains being positivism and pragmatism.<sup>43</sup>

Despite the fact that what Horkheimer presents is a diminishing of reason over time, insofar as he thinks that one form of reason has effectively disappeared today, this is itself supposed to be a result of the development of reason as such and so analogous to what Weber calls intellectualisation or the historical process of rationalisation. The process of the development of reason, according to Horkheimer, has not led to reason expanding but rather to reason *narrowing*. This narrowing of reason entails both a *refinement* of reason – making it sharper – and a *reduction* of reason – making it myopic by reflecting the needs of the social process rather than ends determined rationally and independently from the current needs and assumptions of society, to which they may be antagonistic.<sup>44</sup> In other words, reason is reduced insofar as today it is almost exclusively considered to be a tool and refined in that its instrumental and formal powers are improved as part of this process. The narrowing of reason to the subjective form of reason alone is also the transformation of reason *as such* into instrumental reason; reason as an efficient tool used to calculate, to quantify, to co-ordinate, to administrate, to determine the correct *means* to any given *end* and these functional qualities of this transformed reason are also improved, insofar as we calculate better, we quantify better and so on.

However, reason has become so refined, so reduced to a merely functional role that it has lost the ability to determine its functions autonomously and even recognise what sort of a function it is supposed to have other than adaptation to whatever problems it is called upon to resolve. This tendency towards adaptation to heteronomous, socially produced ends is itself the result of this process of the instrumentalisation of reason:

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<sup>43</sup> Horkheimer discusses both positivism and pragmatism but especially the latter at length in the second half of Chapter 1, ‘Means and Ends’ and throughout Chapter 2, ‘Conflicting Panaceas’, which he contrasts with attempts at reviving objective reason, which he is also strongly critical of. Schmidt notes that the lengthy discussion of pragmatism at the end of Chapter 1 was included in response to a request by a young C. Wright Mills and the discussion of Dewey in Chapter 2 was included in response to a suggestion by a student that Dewey’s philosophy might constitute a solution to the problems Horkheimer described in the original lectures that formed the basis of the book (Schmidt, 2007, 64 – 65).

<sup>44</sup> “Complicated logical operations are carried out without actual performance of all the intellectual acts upon which the mathematical and logical symbols are based. Such mechanization is indeed essential to the expansion of industry; but if it becomes the characteristic feature of minds, if reason itself is instrumentalized, it takes on a kind of materiality and blindness, becomes a fetish, a magic entity that is accepted rather than intellectually experienced.” (ER, 16)

Having given up autonomy, reason has become an instrument. In the formalistic aspect of subjective reason, stressed by positivism, its unrelatedness to objective content is emphasized; in its instrumental aspect, stressed by pragmatism, its surrender to heteronomous contents is emphasized. Reason has become completely harnessed to the social process. Its operational value, its role in the domination of men and nature, has been made the sole criterion. (*ER*, 14 – 15)

If reason is only a tool, then the purposes towards which it is directed or for which it is utilised are not themselves decided on rational grounds but only on the grounds of its ability to efficiently master the material to which it is applied. In other words, reason, reduced to a purely instrumental state becomes a dull apparatus, unable to discriminate between rational and irrational uses to which it can be put. Ironically, then, instrumental reason as reason in its purely subjective form is in great danger of surrendering to irrationality. Having lost its orientation towards fundamental truths – using subjective reason to scrutinise and co-ordinate between truth and action as part of a broader conception of reason that sets its ends autonomously – reason in its instrumental form is able to conform to anything, mastering and utilising “men and nature” as themselves instruments in satisfaction of the ends to which it is set.<sup>45</sup>

If reason cannot discover rational ends, then what counts as rational and therefore what reason aims at becomes bound up with its formal and instrumental powers; formal, as its power to adapt to any given situation or problem and instrumental, as its power to master any material that may serve as means to efficiently achieve whatever aims it is set.<sup>46</sup> However, the reduction of reason to an instrument does not mean that value and meaning disappear but are themselves affected by the process of instrumentalisation and formalisation. Modern civilisation, Horkheimer argues, tends to live on the “residues” of previous forms of objective reason, presupposing their truth even as they become more and more residual, “They express themselves in the most 'natural' preferences and antipathies and are taken for granted in civilization. Because of the apparent lack of rational motive they become rationalized according

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<sup>45</sup> This closely mirrors a claim that Horkheimer and Adorno make early in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: “What men want to learn from nature is how to use it in order wholly to dominate it and other men. That is the only aim” (*DE*, 4).

<sup>46</sup> It is worth noting that it is not just the case that what problems and solutions instrumental reason responds to and decides on are somewhat arbitrary and influenced by social factors but also that ‘efficiency’ is itself sufficiently abstract a notion that it too is subordinate to presuppositions about how it should be measured: “efficiency, the modern criterion and sole justification for the very existence of any individual, [is not] to be confused with real technical or managerial skill. It inheres in the ability to be 'one of the boys,' to hold one's own, to impress others, to 'sell' oneself, to cultivate the right connections—talents that seem to be transmitted through the germ cells of so many persons today. The fallacy of technocratic thinking from St. Simon to Veblen and his followers has lain in underestimating the similarity of the traits that make for success in the various branches of production and business, and in confusing rational use of the means of production with the rational proclivities of certain of its agents” (*ER*, 104).

to subjective reason” (*ER*, 23 – 24). Put another way, if reason can no longer definitively determine what is the good, what is truth, what is justice and so on, then even if we still hold onto these ideas in some form, such as in the residues of religious morality, their content has itself become subject to processes of relativisation, formalisation and instrumentalisation.

Like Weber’s remarks on the result of what he had called the historical process of intellectualisation, Horkheimer argues that the result of the historical process of the diminishing of objective reason results in humanity’s collective knowledge having increased, its general powers of reasoning improved and compared to previous eras the general population are, “better trained, better informed, and much less naive” (*ER*, 101). Yet, alongside this, the formalisation of reason also means that the modern human being must adapt to increasingly rationalised social pressures and conditions bound up with rationalised means of production that preference instrumentality and efficiency (65). The causes of these social pressures and the means of production themselves have become more opaque and so difficult to gain insight into as, “material production and social organisation grow more complex and reified” and the world itself is transformed “into a world of means, rather than of ends” (69 – 70). Before objective reason itself was revealed as myth, it was able to oppose reality by confronting it with an ideal that the world should strive to become adequate to. By contrast, Horkheimer argues that a reality organised and understood in instrumental terms is instead elevated to the ideal and adjustment to reality *as* the ideal has become the prescription of all behaviour (66). Today, productivity, invention, usefulness and efficiency are idolised for their own sake, an absurd parody of the Enlightenment ideal of progress, wherein neither human fulfilment nor any other principle gives these categories any sense, jettisoned in favour of these categories and processes themselves, which instead use human beings and the natural world as their fuel (104 – 105). As such, “the triumph of subjective, formalized reason is also the triumph of a reality that confronts the subject as absolute, overpowering” and tends also to instrumentalise the subject as a means towards the end of reproducing that overpowering reality (66).

This is what Horkheimer has in mind when he says that historically objective reason was always the more portentous, if less direct source of resistance to the social order (*ER*, 9). As a somewhat rough example by way of extrapolation, leading up to the English civil war one of the prevailing ideas relating objective truth to social organisation was the divine right of kings. This idea was a form of objective reason, insofar as it posited something that was supposedly true about the world: that the monarch should be the one appointed by God through a line of heredity tracing itself back to Adam, as argued by Robert Filmer (1991) in his *Patriarcha*. Philosophers, such as Locke (2003) in his *First Treatise on Government*, would subject this

idea to scrutiny and find it to lack rational and biblical grounds, resisting it with a more plausible, rational conception of basic human rights derived from the nature of the human being as a creature in possession of free will and reason, with equal claim to the land gifted to humanity by God, as worked out in his *Second Treatise on Government*. This concept of basic human rights or something like it can be said to have eventually supplanted the previous form of objective reason, which now took on the status of myth.

Locke, however, as Horkheimer points out, “still spoke of natural reason’s agreeing with revelation in regard to human rights” (*ER*, 18 - 19) but without any equivalent idea that our actions and social arrangements should correspond to what is objectively rational and with the idea of rationality now reduced to the faculty of co-ordination and calculation, it is difficult to defend even this quite basic idea of human rights. That is the very precarious situation we find ourselves in today, resting on very vulnerable concepts that we presuppose but cannot claim are objectively true and last only until they are no longer favoured or actively denied through expressions of power. If someone were to say: where are these rights? Can you show me them? Can you point to them? Why these rights and not others? For what reason should I respect them, rather than just exploit you and use you for my own purposes, other than the fact that the law as it is currently formulated protects you and codifies these rights? What if those laws were to change? Without some objective standard of justice or humanity, it is not easy to know how we could respond to such fundamentally dehumanising questions and this is why subjective reason alone turns out to be weaker at resisting the world as it currently is and is just as likely to simply adapt to and conform to it (22).

Of course, Horkheimer is aware that historically objective reason’s strength often presupposed and was a source of conditions of oppression and it was subjective reason, as the faculty of critique, that was required in order to point to the mythological and repressive elements in previous ideas, such as that one man (the king) naturally stood higher than the rest of humanity. However, subjective reason was made more powerful in its critique if it could undertake it with reference to more rational objective values, so “had to use concepts that it recognized as adequate” (*ER*, 5). For instance, with respect to the idea of justice, Plato’s *Republic* attempts to determine a true idea of justice in order to then determine how to arrange the polis more justly than its present form (90). Yet, while forms of objective reason such as Plato’s bequeathed the idea that justice and truth are the correspondence between thought and reality, these systems posited an eternal order to the universe and were formulated amidst and presupposed the presence of forms of social injustice and so ultimately were mythological (122). Given this and Horkheimer’s various critical comments about attempts to revive

objective reason already mentioned, Villa's (2019) argument that, "Horkheimer's turn to the past, not just to distinguish 'subjective' from 'objective' reason but to renew the promise of such an emphatic rationality, certainly looks like an exercise in nostalgia", accusing him of clinging to "the dream of Western rationalism [...] while turning a blind eye to just how far the 'disenchantment of the world' has progressed" (270) does not seem to me to be justified and I confess that I am not sure I understand what he intends by this last claim about disenchantment. As I have sought to emphasise, throughout the book Horkheimer is clearly of the view that objective reason gradually came to meet its end of necessity and for good reason. Villa only ever cites the first and last chapter of *Eclipse of Reason* but early in chapter two, Horkheimer states that recent, broadly 'positivist' attacks by Sidney Hook, Ernest Nagel and John Dewey on attempts to revive "obsolete ontologies" are surely justified (*ER*, 41 - 42). He goes on to argue that the transition from objective reason to subjective reason was no accident and cannot arbitrarily be reversed and that the majority of such attempts to revive objective reason themselves evidence the effects of the process they attempt to reverse, insofar as they seek to utilise notions of the 'absolute' as mere means, either in order to fill gaps in meaning, to effect authoritarian political force in the case of fascism or because they otherwise become like commodities, thereby mobilising objective reason on subjectively rational grounds in each case (43).<sup>47</sup>

It is worth stating, however, that the other 'conflicting panacea' referred to in the title of the second chapter of *Eclipse of Reason* is the one proposed by these and other 'positivist' thinkers. Horkheimer argues that these thinkers, by contrast with attempts to revive objective reason, place too much faith in subjective reason and the scientific method to overcome social antagonism, blaming a 'failure of nerve' to commit to them (quoting Hook) as the problem (*ER*, 41 - 42). While Horkheimer does characterise Weber as adhering too much to the subjective side of reason and ending up in a form of pessimism and relativism as a result, as Villa points

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<sup>47</sup> Horkheimer lists as examples, "pseudo-religious or half-scientific mind cures, spiritualism, astrology, cheap brands of past philosophies such as Yoga, Buddhism, or mysticism" (*ER*, 42), anticipating Adorno's argument in *The Stars Down to Earth* that such things constitute 'pseudo-rationalities', which act as forms of 'secondary superstition' (*SDE*, 48 - 49) that allow the believer to disavow the blatant contradiction with modern scientific knowledge (50) and Adorno even discusses their resemblance to cultural commodities (67 - 68) and totalitarian social movements in terms of their "calculative though spurious adaptation to realistic needs" (51). Much of what I have argued with respect to Weber and Horkheimer can be found in Adorno's overriding argument in *The Stars Down to Earth*, insofar as 'pseudo-rationalities' such as astrology should not be understood as forms of 're-enchantment' but as symptomatic of and so integrating the effects of disenchantment and the subjectivisation of reason: "In spite of this comfort, astrology mirrors exactly the opaqueness of the empirical world and implies so little transcendent faith, is so opaque itself that it can be easily accepted by supposedly sceptical disillusioned people. The cult of God has been replaced by the cult of facts, just as the fatal entities of astrology, the stars, are themselves viewed as facts, things, ruled by mechanical laws. [...] science is hypostatized as an ultimate, absolute truth. The astrologist, as was pointed out in our brief survey of magazines, is very anxious to present it as a science" (157- 158).

out (2019, 267), Horkheimer goes on to argue in Chapter 2 that Weber, “a positivist at heart”, at least did not believe that science itself could overcome social antagonism and so the faith in science and “[w]hat Dewey calls organized intelligence” to ensure social progress shared by these other thinkers is a form of optimism involving more political defeatism than Weber’s pessimism (*ER*, 55 – 56). This actually puts Horkheimer very close to Villa’s (2019) characterisation of Weber, against what he perhaps incorrectly therefore calls Horkheimer’s ‘caricature’ (267), when Villa says that what Weber objected to was the idea that science could somehow resolve conflicts between values (269). In the realm of justice, for instance, Horkheimer argues that fully formalised subjective reason can rationally generate no ultimate standards and so will typically only be able to point to commonly understood standards of justice that are largely taken for granted (*ER*, 7). While justice may still be a widely discussed and prestigious notion that is sought after in practice, as an objective idea it cannot find “any confirmation from reason in its modern sense” and according to the standards of this reason, “[t]he statement that justice and freedom are better in themselves than injustice and oppression is scientifically unverifiable and useless” (16). A similar argument was made by Weber in ‘Science as a Vocation’ when he explained that while the science of jurisprudence is able to tell us what rules to follow on the basis of previously established rules and principles, it cannot answer the question as to why there should be law and justice at all or ultimately why these laws and not others, “It can only state: If one wishes this result, according to the norms of our legal thought, this legal rule is the appropriate means of attaining it” and so tends to presuppose answers to these questions on the basis of currently existing standards and beliefs (*SV*, 144 – 145).

Once fully formalised and transformed into an instrument, subjective reason is in constant danger of surrendering to irrational but formally coherent ends. Restricting thought to the registration and organisation of materials produced by the underlying social apparatuses, which themselves preference utility and calculation, causes such thought to simply reproduce the social process. That subjective reason today tends to become ‘harnessed to the social process’ is how we can understand Horkheimer’s discussion of democracy reduced to the ‘majority principle’, for instance, a highly formal standard based entirely on quantification that in effect replaces absent objective standards of what a free democracy should aim at. On this point, Horkheimer says:

Deprived of its rational foundation, the democratic principle becomes exclusively dependent upon the so-called interests of the people, and these are functions of blind or all too conscious economic forces. They do not offer any guarantee against

tyranny. [...] Once the philosophical foundation of democracy has collapsed, the statement that dictatorship is bad is rationally valid only for those who are not its beneficiaries, and there is no theoretical obstacle to the transformation of this statement into its opposite. (*ER*, 19 - 20)

Without some further objective standard of what is right, what is true, what freedom consists in, what is good and so on democracy has no other orienting concept than the ‘majority principle’, yet without objective standards, what the majority wants is itself likely to be determined by social processes. Instrumentalised reason prioritises calculation, measurable outcomes, efficiency and utility over other values, aligning with and so easily amenable to an economic and social situation that prioritises these also and which tends to all materials, including human beings, as its means, rather than its end.

While the development of reason was supposed to undermine the illegitimate authority of tyrants, demonstrating the irrationality of their claims to power, the reduction of reason to merely an instrument means that democracy provides no clear protections against the election of tyrants because there is nothing inherent to a formal notion such as the ‘majority principle’ that would protect against this, as Horkheimer well knew writing in exile and the shadow of the political process leading up to and including the Holocaust. Neither do scientific changes made possible by the progress of reason point in the direction of a better social order any more than they point in this direction and Horkheimer argues that to think otherwise is to misinterpret, “the interaction of economic, technical, political and ideological forces” (*ER*, 51). Subjective reason alone is reduced to the sole aim of co-ordination, instrumentalisation and the cataloguing of facts, within which the individual subject is reified as merely one among many things to be co-ordinated, catalogued and instrumentalised: “The individual once conceived of reason exclusively as an instrument of the self. Now he experiences the reverse of this self-deification. The machine has dropped the driver; it is racing blindly into space” (87).

## Chapter 2. 'Wrong Life': The Universal Context of Fungibility

Having set out Horkheimer's account of the instrumentalisation of reason and his argument that reason in this form tends to become easily harnessed to the social process, in this chapter I want to expand on comments I made towards the end of that chapter regarding the attendant instrumentalisation of the subject by the social process, in order to ground what Adorno has in mind by the phrase 'wrong life' in his claim that 'wrong life cannot be lived rightly', which I take up explicitly in the next chapter. Finlayson provides a useful summary of the argument of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* when he states that Adorno – and by that token Horkheimer – make two related claims about instrumental rationality: i) it privileges the accumulation of knowledge for the purposes of manipulating and mastering the external world; and ii) it takes the form of 'identity-thinking', in which particular ('token') instances of a more general ('type') concept are fungible with each other, subsuming the particular under the general in an effort to affix stable identities to things and so making them more useful for the purposes of i) (Finlayson, 2002, 3). Instrumental reason is a partial form of reason that is narrow in scope, tending towards generating and smoothing over irrational states of affairs and social antagonisms that only seem rational from a restricted purview, one that primarily considers utility (i) and formal consistency (ii) as signifiers of truth. As such, Finlayson argues that we necessarily participate in and reproduce:

... the social world of universal fungibility and identity-thinking [which] are mutually co-determining. On the one hand identity-thinking feeds into and shapes the social world according to the demands of instrumental rationality. On the other, the context of universal fungibility feeds back and forms human thought and action, redefining rationality as a mere calculus for the efficiency of means. (Finlayson, 2003, 4)

In this chapter, I argue that reason in this form is embedded in the objective structure of modern societies and so tends to be reproduced at the level of thought and behaviour, which itself falls within the same narrow purview of what counts as rational forms of action and that this entrenchment of instrumental reason at the social and individual level forms the context of what Adorno refers to as 'wrong life'.

Firstly, (2.1) I recapitulate central parts of the argument from the previous chapter in the language of the 'dialectic of enlightenment' in order to begin to set out what I take Adorno to mean by 'wrong life', which I understand to be the relationship between the process of

enlightenment as the formalisation of reason and the reduction of the individual to a fungible object in modern, rationalised societies. Following this, (2.2) I explore Adorno's notions of 'identity thinking' as an expression of the formalising tendencies of instrumental rationality, which prioritises formal consistency and utility by treating its materials as fungible. In the process of this conceptual discussion, I begin to draw important comparisons with Hegel in order to establish my understanding of Adorno's position relative to him. I next go on to explore identity thinking's more problematic social instantiations through three cases that involve the practical equivalent of the subsumption of human beings to the social process that characterises wrong life as the context of universal fungibility.

The first of the cases considered is Auschwitz (2.3), which demonstrates the formalising and violent logic of racism and violence, especially through 'genocide as absolute integration' and which is already signalled in the first section through the schematisation of the 'project of Enlightenment' and 'process of enlightenment'. This distinction is intended to bring out the divergence between what was hoped for (progress) and what actually came about (Auschwitz) respectively as a result of the historical process of intellectualisation and disenchantment. As I elaborate, Adorno almost always uses the name of the camp rather than the more usual terms 'Holocaust' or 'Shoah' because he reads the cold brutality undertaken at Auschwitz as the exemplification of a global system of human-made violence characterised by the reduction of the subject to a function of the social process and as the social counterpart to 'identity-thinking'.

This reduction of the human being to a fungible quantity and its integration into the social process as a means for the reproduction of this process as its end is expressed in the exchange principle, which is the subject of the following section (2.4) and is explored especially with respect to Adorno's most explicitly Marxist writings. I do not draw on Marx's own writings in this section, in part because interpretations of his concepts can be somewhat vexed and I want instead to focus on Adorno's own elaboration of the principles of exchange and surplus value, though I do make some use of Mario Tronti's interpretations of these concepts to aid my understanding and because his and Adorno's views bear some underexplored similarities.

Finally, in the last section (2.5) I undertake an extended discussion of Angela Davis' work on the 'prison industry' and the systemic racism at its heart. I intend to do this in order to elaborate the connection between Adorno's claims about an underlying logic of formalised, instrumental rationality that treats human beings as fungible objects that inheres in and underpins processes as seemingly starkly different as the concentration camp and the economic relations underpinning modern capitalism.

## 2.1. *Dialectic of Enlightenment: 'Progress', Disenchantment and Instrumentalisation*

For heuristic purposes, it is perhaps worth making explicit a distinction that I have at points implicitly relied on in the previous chapter relating to the term 'enlightenment', usually differentiated by sometimes capitalising the first letter and prefacing the term with either the phrase 'process of' or 'project of', an implied distinction that can be read out of Adorno and Horkheimer's own discussions relating to enlightenment.<sup>48</sup> By the process of enlightenment, we can understand what I have previously called the process of intellectualisation or the historical development of reason in its broadest sense. Early parts of this process began with the personification of parts of nature as gods or under the control of particular gods or spirits in the case of animism. While today we may consider such things to be mythical in the sense of being fabrications, they were themselves steps on the historical path of enlightenment, insofar as they were attempts to make nature comprehensible, gradually giving way to the much more consistent predictive and explanatory power of modern science. The distinction is between this idea of enlightenment as a general historical process that humanity has undergone for thousands of years and the Enlightenment as a broad intellectual project held to by a range of thinkers and which involves a set of principles and beliefs relating to this general development (the process of enlightenment), particularly in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Enlightenment thinkers tended to believe that the improvement of the human condition would necessarily follow from intellectual and scientific improvement (as I suggested while discussing Weber), which is the Enlightenment project's confidence in the process of enlightenment as entailing simultaneous 'progress' of both an intellectual and moral or political kind.<sup>49</sup> However, on this point it is worth

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<sup>48</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer do not schematise the distinction as I do here explicitly and it should be said that it can be difficult to map it onto their work directly, so to some extent I am imposing it here in a manner that it may not be possible to rigorously maintain. While occasionally they will directly refer to 'enlightenment' in terms of an historical process, usually the more telling linguistic expression is the presence of the definite article, 'the', as in 'the Enlightenment' to refer to what I call here the 'project' of Enlightenment. There are some inconsistencies in capitalisation of the term between translations at points, which is likely related to the fact that nouns are always capitalised in German. For instance, Cumming has: "[the] patriarchal solar myth is itself an Enlightenment with which the philosophic form can compare itself on the same level" (*DE*, 11), whereas Jephcott has: "the solar, patriarchal myth was itself an enlightenment, fully comparable on that level to the philosophical one" (Adorno & Horkheimer, 2002, 7). Checking against the original German, Jephcott's seems closer, as '*Aufklärung*' is missing the definite article '*die*': "ist der solare, patriarchale Mythos selbst Aufklärung, mit der die philosophische auf einer Ebene sich messen kann" (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1947, 22). That said, in this specific case Adorno and Horkheimer seem to want to imply both the process and project at the same time.

<sup>49</sup> Which thinkers could be called 'Enlightenment thinkers' is obviously a matter of contestation and even amongst those about whom there is relatively little contestation, it should be acknowledged that these were of course a diverse set of thinkers and the relationship to this notion of progress could vary substantially, as I indicated in fn.21 in the previous chapter. Therefore, the notion of 'progress' that I present here, at least for the time being, can be construed as involving a fairly generalised notion that improvement of human knowledge and understanding would also bring a more general improvement in the human condition over the course of history. According to Horkheimer, something like this notion is still reflected in the positivist and pragmatist thinkers he discusses in chapter 2 of *Eclipse of Reason* but in a presupposed, rather than explicitly theorised way, exemplified by Hook's insistence on a 'failure of nerve' to commit to scientific reason as at the root of a modern crisis of value: "It is not clear whether Hook's concept of intelligence implies the definite prediction that social harmony will ensue from

asking why intellectual and scientific development should also entail an improvement in the human condition in terms of a moral and political improvement. In other words, what is supposed to tie the improvement of reason to the improvement of humanity's condition?

One reason that increased knowledge and understanding should also entail improvements to the human condition is that the process of enlightenment makes the world less mysterious and so the natural world less fearful, which is to say that the process of enlightenment is attended by the process of disenchantment as the dissipation of mystery. For example, the ocean is a terrifying, unpredictable mass that can swallow up or disorient ships if the skies become angry without warning but the discovery and invention of meteorology, the compass, the map and the motor make it far less mysterious and so something to be mastered, rather than feared. In this way, increased knowledge and understanding also aims at greater control of the natural world, originally for the purposes of self-preservation. As Bernstein states, "Myth finally fails because, while it succeeds in making the unfamiliar familiar, as in the cycle of seasons" or the varying states of the ocean through the belief in Poseidon's anger or seafaring folklore about good and bad omens, these all finally fail because they do not "enable practical control" (Bernstein, 2019, 8). On the face of it, that reason developed out of self-preservation in seeking forms of practical control seems to contradict Horkheimer's argument that instrumental reason is the result of the *diminishing* of reason to its purely subjective aspect. I address this below but briefly stated, both Adorno and Horkheimer argue that reason (both subjective and objective) develops first out of the drive to self-preservation in view of practical control of the environment and is eventually led beyond this towards intersubjective ends that are no longer strictly bound up with self-preservation. This process itself eventually culminates in the process that Horkheimer describes in *Eclipse of Reason*, such that reason eventually redounds to something like self-preservation again but one that is directed at the preservation of the mechanisms of social functioning, rather than humanity itself.

The process of enlightenment undermines fear of the natural world's power over human beings by making it knowable, predictable and familiar and this at the same time involves bringing it under the power of human beings. The ocean is transformed into something traversable, from an obstacle and source of fear into a potential source of further improvements in knowledge, understanding and the human condition.<sup>50</sup> This too is supposed to hold for the

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experimentation, but it is certain that confidence in scientific tests as regards so-called values depends upon an intellectualistic theory of social change" (ER, 57). As I indicate below, I return to the notion of 'progress' in Chapter 4.

<sup>50</sup> Even at this point the double-edged nature of such 'progress' begins to rear itself as the question, 'progress for whom?' (HF, 12) because contained in mastery of the ocean is also the history of colonialism. In the next chapter,

political realm, since the process of enlightenment should also undermine illegitimate and mystified forms of human domination and control. As discussed towards the end of the previous chapter, if the king derives his authority from divine birthright, his authority is absolute and he is potentially able to do the most dreadful things, all legitimised in the name of God. Yet, if reason exposes this divine legacy to be fraudulent and the king is just a human being like any other, then a more rational organisation of human beings becomes necessary, derived from the fundamental equality and liberty of each human being. The process of enlightenment thereby undermines, “the foundations upon which fanaticism and fraud have raised their throne”, as Schiller puts it (1954, 48). That is, the process of enlightenment should also undermine the fear and domination that human beings hold over other human beings.

However, the process of enlightenment also entails the other horn of disenchantment as identified by Weber: as mystery is evacuated, so too is any sense of inherent meaning or purpose in the world and our position within it. As Adorno and Horkheimer affirm, disenchantment eventually undermines the process of enlightenment itself:

Mythology itself set off the unending process of enlightenment in which ever and again, with the inevitability of necessity, every specific theoretic view succumbs to the destructive criticism that it is only a belief – until even the very notions of spirit, of truth and, indeed, enlightenment itself, have become animistic magic. (*DE*, 11)

Disenchantment also entails that the ends of reason are no longer something that can be thought to be derivable from what Horkheimer had called ‘objective reason’ and this includes appeal to the Enlightenment notion of ‘progress’. The development of reason is also the evacuation of meaning from the world and the gradual transformation of reason into a pure instrument that becomes easily harnessed to dominant social, economic and ideological forces. As such, the Enlightenment project’s notion of ‘progress’ is undermined by the very process of enlightenment and eventually this notion too begins to look like a myth, perhaps, as Vattimo (1988) puts it, even just a worldly and secular elaboration of Christian eschatology (4) that is ultimately driven by its own internal logic towards self-dissolution without some orienting principle like the Christian notion of salvation (7 – 8).<sup>51</sup> Whatever progress has occurred as an

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I briefly take up Hegel’s argument that civil society is ‘driven’ towards colonialism as a result of the poverty it necessarily produces (*EPR*, §§245 – 248).

<sup>51</sup> In *The End of Modernity*, Vattimo states that Adorno, “is not an optimistic Hegelian and does not believe in progress” (1988, 57). Despite recognising the religious origins of the notion of progress, chiefly in Augustine (*Progress*, 146 – 147) and clearly also holding to a narrative of historical secularisation in the form of a modified version of Weber’s disenchantment thesis, Adorno himself does not hold as fatalistic a view as Vattimo attributes to him regarding the notion of ‘progress’. As I argue later, Adorno instead seeks to rescue a dialectical notion of progress. While finding affinity with Adorno, it seems to be precisely on the point of Adorno’s Hegelianism and ‘utopianism’ that Vattimo elsewhere disagrees with him. On this point, see Vattimo (2016, 131 – 146) and Giorgio

effect of the process of enlightenment, then, does not seem to signify anything clearly distinct from the evacuation of meaning and objective reason in the historical process of the increasing instrumentalisation of reason.

More than this, a good instrument is an *efficient* one; efficient at calculating, efficient at classifying, co-ordinating, computing and problem-solving. In other words, what reason reduced to instrumental reason demonstrates is something that was always implicit in the process of enlightenment, which is that eliminating fear and mystery from the world is also gaining mastery over the world, inverting the *domination of nature over humanity* into the *domination of humanity over nature*. The process of enlightenment does not just involve coming to understand the ocean but coming to *master* it by making it subject to the control of human beings. Discovering more efficient means of growing crops, through irrigation methods, for instance, is not just about becoming less in thrall to the seeming caprice of natural events or their personification as gods but is at the same time about controlling these forces in order to be free from dependence on such caprice. However, if improved knowledge and understanding also entails improved mastery and control, then this is also true of the other part of the Enlightenment's concern. If the process of enlightenment aims at mastery, the control and domination of nature at the same time as it does knowledge, understanding and the banishment of mystery, then the development of reason is *also* the development of the means for the domination of other human beings:

the human mind, which overcomes superstition, is to hold sway over a disenchanted nature. Knowledge, which is power, knows no obstacles: neither in the enslavement of men nor in compliance with the world's rulers. [...] What men want to learn from nature is how to use it in order wholly to dominate it and other men. That is the only aim. Ruthlessly, in despite of itself, the Enlightenment has extinguished any trace of its own self-consciousness. The only kind of thinking that is sufficiently hard to shatter myths is ultimately self-destructive. (*DE*, 4)

The Enlightenment's belief in progress, that the development of reason would also entail a positive development in the human condition turns out to be a myth – not simply a falsehood but at once a partial truth. Disenchanted the world, evacuating it of meaning, transforming reason into an instrument is *also* the transformation of nature into an instrument or a calculable material, a resource to be exploited and the same is true of human beings. Adorno argues that

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(2023, 21 - 23). Not much seems to have been written on the relation between Adorno and Vattimo specifically but for a wider discussion of the differences between Adorno and postmodernist thought see Dews (2012). For an illuminating discussion of Adorno's views on 'utopia' see *Something's Missing*, a dialogue between Adorno and Ernst Bloch.

if enlightenment involves transforming human beings into a resource to be exploited in service of something other than improvement of the human condition, an improvement that would necessitate an end to the exploitation of human beings (*HF*, 43), then instrumental reason involves enlightenment becoming irrational, for “What can it mean to say that the human race is making progress when millions are reduced to the level of objects?” (8).

This is the dialectic of enlightenment, which at one point Adorno also refers to at the same time as the “dialectic of reason” (*HF*, 45). Myth is supposed to be the opposite of enlightenment, as fable, rather than the unvarnished truth disclosed by reason but the process of enlightenment first began in myths. That is, myths were already a form of enlightenment as an attempt to understand and at the same time control nature in order to free humanity from dependence on it. However, Adorno and Horkheimer argue that in becoming harnessed to the social process, enlightened reason (as instrumental, as formalised) controls externality (as nature, as other human beings) in order to achieve independence, only to then become determined by another form of externality in the form of the social process: “The more the machinery of thought subjects existence to itself, the more blind its resignation in reproducing existence. Hence enlightenment returns to mythology, which it never really knew how to elude” (*DE*, 27). The process of enlightenment eventually undermines itself by reaching a point at which reason becomes so advanced that the capacity for the domination of inner and outer nature becomes extremely efficient. Both highly formalised (able to use its power regardless of content) and highly instrumentalised (a tool for calculation and problem-solving) but unable to determine what is inherently valuable, enlightened reason very easily becomes harnessed to social processes as a pure tool for the solution of any problems that it may be set by the current social and economic organisation. Many such ‘problems’ are themselves myths in the guise of enlightenment or rationalised forms of inherited values that continue to persist, presupposed as reasonable despite the fact that they may produce absurdities. Despite losing their objective basis, the continued valorisation of productivity and ‘hard work’, as Weber described, do not obviously seem to make sense when, as Adorno argues, humanity has at its disposal the technical means to eliminate want, itself a result of the process of enlightenment. Yet, what seems to prevent this elimination is precisely the current relations of production that are themselves a result of that process (*HF*, 143 – 144) and so what results is “purposeless purposiveness which might thus be attached to all ends” (*DE*, 89).<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> See also, Horkheimer, who notes the irony of the focus on utility in contemporary societies and which is reflected in the concerns of philosophy (especially pragmatism): “Paradoxically, a society that, in the face of starvation in great areas of the world, allows a large part of its machinery to stand idle, that shelves many important inventions,

The disenchantment of the world was supposed to involve coming to understand nature as composed of predictable, impersonal forces that follow natural laws, alongside transforming into reality the insight that no human being has an absolute right over others, whether through recourse to mystified conceptions of authority or naked force. As Adorno and Horkheimer say in the opening of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: “In the most general sense of progressive thought, the Enlightenment has always aimed at liberating men from fear and establishing their sovereignty” and “Yet”, they add “the fully enlightened earth radiates disaster triumphant” (*DE*, 3). That ‘triumphant disaster’ is exemplified by the previously unimaginable brutality of the Holocaust. Enlightened Europe, the place where civilisation, culture, science, reason and philosophy had reached such heights also turned out to be the site of systematic evil, fear and brutality. The Enlightenment aimed at freedom, in terms of increasing independence from nature and illegitimate political rule. The result, they argue, is that enlightenment produces new forms of control through integration into a complex social and economic system of organisation that reduces human beings to exchangeable quantities, tying humanity no longer to domination by nature but new, socially produced forms of control that at times veer over into extremely efficient and nightmarish violence. Adorno and Horkheimer have in mind the concentration camp but also the division of labour, in which human lives are tied to alienated and rationalised economic purposes that we have not chosen, which may not obviously benefit us but which we must participate in and reproduce anyway.

It is not just that moral and political ‘progress’ cannot be justified on scientific grounds or even that the Enlightenment thinkers were simply mistaken that moral and political progress should follow from intellectual and scientific progress. What Adorno and Horkheimer argue is that what happened in enlightened Europe in general and in the camps more specifically was simply not possible without the process of enlightenment. In a certain sense, ‘progress’ was what made the catastrophe possible and this is from at least two directions tied to the process of disenchantment. The first is that, as Horkheimer argues in *Eclipse of Reason*, there is no reason to think that developments in science and technology are not themselves part of the social process and so bound up with the economic and political conditions within which they are developed and put to use. Scientific changes, he argues, do not point in the direction of a better social order any more than they point in the direction of Auschwitz and to think otherwise is to misinterpret, “the interaction of economic, technical, political, and ideological forces. The death factories in Europe cast as much significant light on the relations between science and

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and that devotes innumerable working hours to moronic advertising and to the production of instruments of destruction – a society in which these luxuries are inherent has made usefulness its gospel” (*ER*, 97).

cultural progress as does the manufacture of stockings out of air” (*ER*, 51). The other is that, as Adorno puts it at one point:

For the element of enlightenment within it,<sup>53</sup> which terminates in the reconciliation with nature by soothing nature’s terror, is kindred to the aspect of the domination of nature. The model of progress, even if displaced onto the godhead, is the control of external and internal, or human, nature. (*Progress*, 248)

Disenchantment, which involves the freeing of humanity from the fear of an overpowering nature through progress in knowledge, understanding and the development of technology is at the same time progress in the ability to reduce the natural world and humanity to the status of objects useful for many purposes. ‘Progress’ therefore at once involves the emancipation of humanity from external dependence while at the same time integrating them into a human-made system that instrumentalises them and the natural world, aided by advancements in technology that facilitate the ability to bring both under new forms of control and exploitation.

On Adorno and Horkheimer’s account, the Holocaust was not a simple failure to carry through the project of the Enlightenment by regressively falling back into some thoughtless brutality of less civilised ages. On the contrary, the scale of mass extermination simply was not possible prior to the technical achievements of enlightened modernity, as made clear by Sabini and Silver: “Consider the numbers. The German state annihilated approximately six million Jews. At the rate of 100 per day this would have required nearly 200 years” (Sabini & Silver, quoted in Bauman, 2003, 84). As they also go on to make clear, improvements in technology were not themselves enough for a task of this scale, which also required other forms of rationalisation, involving complex infrastructure and affective distance on the part of the perpetrators and those complicit:

Mob violence rests on the wrong psychological basis, on violent emotion. [...] Thorough, comprehensive, exhaustive murder required the replacement of the mob with a bureaucracy, the replacement of shared rage with obedience to authority. The requisite bureaucracy would be effective whether manned by extreme or tepid anti-Semites, considerably broadening the pool of potential recruits; it would govern the actions of its members not by arousing passions but by organizing routines; it would only make distinctions it was designed to make, not those its members might be

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<sup>53</sup> The original version of the essay includes an explicit reference to disenchantment at this point: “that of demythologisation” (Adorno, 1998a, 359). See also *History and Freedom*, in which much of the argument in the earlier essay ‘Progress’ is reproduced, including the above cited passage and in which the reference to enlightenment’s “impulse towards demythologization” is reintroduced (*HF*, 150).

moved to make, say, between children and adults, scholar and thief, innocent and guilty; it would be responsive to the will of the ultimate authority through a hierarchy of responsibility - whatever that will might be. (84 - 85)

In other words, the sheer scale of the horror could only happen through being bound up with processes of rationalisation, increased scientific knowledge,<sup>54</sup> advanced technologies, bureaucratic calculation, an efficient, interconnected network of rationalised economic forces and an attitude of ‘coldness’, “the basic principle of bourgeois subjectivity, without which there could have been no Auschwitz” (*ND*, 363) and which is the “affective correlate of instrumental reason” (Bernstein. 2001, 372), by comparison to which “affections in the face of death, not only other people’s but our own, are frequently so feeble” (*ND*, 363). What was required, Adorno argues, was the technical ability to put into place and direct a train system that carried the victims to Auschwitz at the same time as the ability to forget what happens to them there as smoothly and efficiently as possible (*EAA*, 200).<sup>55</sup>

## 2.2. Instrumental Reason as Formalising Reason: Identity and Non-Identity

Adorno argues that there is an underlying logic of rationalisation and dehumanisation evident in reason’s development into a calculative and formalising instrument and which underpins all modern societies, regardless of the specific political differences between them. Reason in this form possesses tendencies towards instrumentalisation and totalisation and so tends to treat specific content, including other human beings, in measurable or calculable terms and thereby has a tendency to dehumanise and rationalise. If reason becomes concerned primarily with use, function and efficiency then it tends to look upon its subject matter in a similar way, which includes the natural world and other human beings. The *rational* treatment of nature and human beings then becomes their most efficient usage, which is usually also the most formally consistent or totalising treatment. That is to say, instrumental reason is also *totalising* insofar as it is *formalising* – in order to be a very efficient tool, it reduces usable

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<sup>54</sup> It is well known that justifications of the genocide were often made on the rationalised basis of a (false) attempt to ground it in supposedly neutral scientific terms, through ‘race science’ and ‘eugenics’, the acceptance of which were not unique to the Nazis. Responding to Hook’s claim that values should be tested by their causes and consequences, Horkheimer states: “To read Hook, one would never imagine that such enemies of mankind as Hitler have actually any great confidence in scientific methods, or that the German ministry of propaganda consistently used controlled experimentation, testing all values ‘by their causes and consequences.’ Like any existing creed, science can be used to serve the most diabolical social forces, and scientism is no less narrow-minded than militant religion” (*ER*, 48 – 49).

<sup>55</sup> For a discussion of ‘coldness’ as the underlying principle of modern subjectivity and its connection to Auschwitz, see Bernstein (2001, 396 – 414). I return to this notion of coldness briefly in the next chapter but at greater length in fourth chapter in the context of a discussion relating it to compassion.

content to the formally coherent and calculable, regardless of specific differences. The progress of reason was also the progress of the reduction of reason to an instrument to be used for problem solving, alongside the reduction of nature and other human beings to materials lacking any inherent value besides their use as resources or numbers to be computed. In this way instrumental reason is primarily concerned with integration, rational consistency and efficiency and not with particularity, in terms of what makes each thing different or ‘non-identical’ with others of a type or their ‘typing’ (as classification) in general. Anything that cannot be integrated, calculated or administrated tends, in some way, to be ruled out as a problematic remainder and either ignored, integrated negatively as collateral<sup>56</sup> or abolished. That is to say, the process of enlightenment as the development of reason into an efficient instrument is also the development of processes of rationalisation, dehumanisation and integration into the social totality through the rendering of various materials, including human beings, as *fungible*.

In the first chapter of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, ‘The Concept of Enlightenment’, Adorno and Horkheimer argue that:

The technical process, into which the subject has objectified itself after being removed from the consciousness, is free of the ambiguity of mythic thought as of all meaning altogether, because reason itself has become the mere instrument of the all-inclusive economic apparatus. It serves as a general tool, useful for the manufacture of all other tools, firmly directed toward its end, as fateful as the precisely calculated movement of material production, whose result for mankind is beyond all calculation. At last its old ambition, to be a pure organ of ends, has been realized. The exclusiveness of logical laws originates in this unique functional significance, and ultimately in the compulsive nature of self-preservation. And self-preservation repeatedly culminates in the choice between survival and destruction, apparent again in the principle that of two contradictory propositions only one can be true and one false. The formalism of this principle, and the entire logic in which form it is established, derives from the opacity and complexity of interests in a society in which the maintenance of forms and the preservation of individuals coincide only by chance. (*DE*, 30)<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> “Science in general relates to nature and man only as the insurance company in particular relates to life and death. Whoever dies is unimportant: it is a question of ratio between accidents and the company’s liabilities” (*DE*, 84).

<sup>57</sup> Jephcott has “calamitous” (Adorno & Horkheimer, 2002, 23) instead of “fateful” (*DE*, 30) and “The exclusivity of logical laws stems from this obdurate adherence to function” (Adorno & Horkheimer, 2002, 23) rather than “The exclusiveness of logical laws originates in this unique functional significance” (*DE*, 30).

This somewhat difficult passage brings together many of the arguments that I have attempted to outline throughout the first chapter and the previous section. Firstly, that the instrumentalisation or formalisation of reason purges meaning, becoming attached to the social process through its refinement into a tool useful for many purposes. The ironic outcome of the development of reason into “a pure organ of ends” is that it is put to work in service of any content it is given, “fit to do service for everything, wherever it can be applied” (*DE*, 39). The terms ‘instrumentalisation’ and ‘formalisation’ of reason signal the same process for Horkheimer as well as for Adorno because as Bernstein (2001) points out, instrumental reason is characterised by the primacy of generality over particularity, as much as by its reduction to a mere ‘means’ (213).<sup>58</sup> This is insofar as abstraction from content allows reason to be utilised for any number of different purposes, leaving only determining the most efficient ‘means’ as an end immanent to instrumentalised reason itself. As such, the social process, which has become increasingly complex and opaque, tends more and more to integrate and instrumentalise individuals and groups, transforming them into fungible objects of administration for various purposes (*DE*, 38). This is primarily through the reduction of populations to the ‘exchange principle’, which is not just the exemplification but the ‘social model’ of fungibility (Bernstein, 2001, 238 – 239) in all instances of advanced industrial societies,<sup>59</sup> irrespective of political rule. This same tendency also appears in the reduction of individuals to (e.g., racial) groups primarily characterised by some ‘difference’, which under 20<sup>th</sup> century fascism reaches the extreme conclusion that this ‘difference’ needs in some way to be abolished or, “‘polished off,’ as the German military called it – until one exterminates them literally, as deviations from the concept of their total nullity” (*ND*, 362).

In the reduction of human life to the fungible and the drive to totalisation or ‘absolute integration’, discernible in both fascism and in a less extreme but more pervasive form in

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<sup>58</sup> Bernstein aligns instrumental reason primarily with the element of abstraction: “the key to instrumental reason is not means-ends logic, but the primacy of the abstract over the concrete, the universal over the particular” (2001, 239).

<sup>59</sup> The phrase ‘advanced industrial societies’ is taken from Marcuse’s *One-Dimensional Man*, which he defines as ‘one-dimensional societies’: technologically advanced and economically complex and totalising societies that are the political realisation of an underlying technological rationality (a variation on instrumental rationality) that has come to predominate in all areas of social and political life. Such societies, he argues, are the political realisation of the organisation and domination of nature and of humanity by humanity (Marcuse, 2001, xlvi) and in which, “domination – in the guise of affluence and liberty – extends to all spheres of private and public existence, integrates all authentic opposition, absorbs all alternatives. Technological Rationality reveals its political character as it becomes the great vehicle of better domination, creating a truly totalitarian universe in which society and nature, mind and body are kept in a state of permanent mobilization for the defense of this universe” (Marcuse, 2002, 20). The ‘guise of liberty’ referred to in market-based advanced industrial societies, Marcuse argues, involves liberty reduced to the ‘freedom of enterprise’ and as such is ‘liberty’ integrated with and reinforcing the social totality, “Freedom of enterprise was from the beginning not altogether a blessing. As the liberty to work or to starve, it spelled toil, insecurity and fear for the vast majority of the population” (4).

societies grounded on the principle of exchange, the modern world demonstrates the movement towards formalisation that was characteristic of the development of reason into instrumental reason. This formalisation, according to Adorno, involves the social instantiation of the “rationalized rage at nonidentity” (*ND*, 23), at that which cannot be fully integrated into thought without doing violence to its particularity, subsuming it under general categories through classification or else abolishing that which cannot easily be subsumed. Classification in general involves identifying a particular thing primarily in terms of what it represents more generally while disregarding individual elements that make it different to other things within that class. The object and the concept thereby appear identical by cutting away the distinguishing features of the object. These distinguishing features are what make the object particular and ‘non-identical’ with the concept that it is instead treated as identical with. In this sense, what Adorno calls identity-thinking distorts the object thought about by sacrificing, excluding or transforming elements – those that are not identical with the concept, as specific to this particular thing – in view of the formal and instrumental aims of consistency and use. As such, identity-thinking necessarily fails to fully grasp that which it seeks to grasp because the way that identity-thinking grasps its object is conditional on misrepresenting what such thinking is about or trying to grasp, instead, “subsuming, classifying, subordinating and otherwise cutting them short” (*HF*, 13).

The problem is not the attempt to identify in thought as such, for as Adorno says, “to think is to identify” (*ND*, 5) and he is also of the view that it is simply not possible for thought to render an object in its full particularity (12). Adorno thereby shares Hegel’s observation that subject and object necessarily mediate each other (*PS*, §§17 – 18) and that ‘immediate’ knowing or intuiting is the result of an abstraction on the part of the understanding (*HP*, 215 – 216).<sup>60</sup> The disparity between a thought and its object is part of its truth (*PS*, §39), though departing with what he takes to ultimately be a priority on the part of the subject and the universal in Hegel.<sup>61</sup> Adorno wants to shift philosophical thinking towards what he calls the ‘preponderance

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<sup>60</sup> This involves Hegel’s distinction between reason and the understanding, which Adorno inherits in his conception of dialectic but which he does not schematise as Hegel does, as far as I can tell. Briefly, the understanding works through abstraction and holds subject and object apart, whereas reason grasps subject and object as mediated, as unified through their differentiation (*HP*, 51 - 52). In the case of Adorno’s discussion of ‘identity-thinking’, the understanding cannot grasp that the concept and the thing are mutually determining and has to treat them either as incompatible, so contradictory or as identical, subsuming the thing under the concept but in a manner that fails to grasp their differentiation. Both of these are abstractions compared to reason’s dialectical grasp that what seems mutually exclusionary is actually constitutive of what the thing is. For a detailed discussion of the distinction between understanding and reason in Hegel, see Limnatis (2006).

<sup>61</sup> It is perhaps worth emphasising here that Hegel’s thought does not so much exemplify ‘identity-thinking’ for Adorno, as some thinkers seem to suggest (Žižek, 2012, 258) but rather in the end Hegel succumbs to it despite his own insights that Adorno believes should lead him away from it (*ND*, 159). On the section of *Negative Dialectics* that Žižek occasionally draws on to claim that Adorno treats Hegel as exemplifying identity-thinking,

of the object' but he still holds that subject and object are always mediated through each other: "Perhaps objectivity takes precedence, but, just as there is nothing subjective that is not mediated, there is likewise nothing objective that is not mediated. This is the truth in idealism" (*PETS*, 124). Despite associating Hegel's thought ultimately with the preponderance of the subject, although in the form of Spirit,<sup>62</sup> Adorno does still credit Hegel with also first drawing attention to the way in which the subject is always mediated by the object in his critique of Kant's moral philosophy: "The primacy of the object must be respected by praxis; this was first noted by the idealist Hegel's critique of Kant's ethics of conscience" (*MTP*, §4).<sup>63</sup>

Adorno's contention is with a form of identification which takes over the object, rather than reflecting on thought's inability to ever fully determine any object. The subject is at once an object but the object is not in the same way a subject. This is because "the subject enters into the object altogether differently from the way the object enters into the subject", insofar as subjectivity always means in part to be an object, to have come into being, even down to the Kantian 'I think' that accompanies all my representations (*ND*, 183; *CPR*, B131). While it is true that an object cannot be conceived without a subject, it yet remains something other to it: "Not even as an idea can we conceive a subject that is not an object; but we can conceive an object that is not a subject" (*ND*, 183). This is also true of concepts and even thought itself, which are not free-floating but always imbricated with a non-conceptual whole, arising out of and referring to it: "That the concept is a concept even when dealing with things in being does not change the fact that on its part it is entwined with a nonconceptual whole. [...] To refer to nonconceptualities [...] is characteristic of the concept, and so is the contrary" (*ND*, 12). Reflecting on this is what Adorno refers to as the 'disenchantment of the concept', "insight into the constitutive character of the nonconceptual in the concept would end the compulsive identification which the concept brings unless halted by such reflection" (*ND*, 12). Identity-thinking, by contrast, treats the object as identical with its category, even if it needs to distort it in order to do so.

Adorno notes that we cannot think, especially not philosophically, except in terms of concepts and abstractions and so we cannot but misrepresent what is thought about to some extent, as no philosophy "can paste the particulars into the text" as fully distinct brute facts and be able to discuss them as such (*ND*, 11). Philosophy, Adorno argues, is the domain of concepts

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in which he refers to "the belly turned mind" that swallows up all particularity (*ND*, 23), it is true that Hegel is mentioned here but Žižek over-emphasises his importance in the passage, as Hegel is much less conspicuously treated as exemplary of this compared to Kant and especially Fichte.

<sup>62</sup> I return to this point at the end of Chapter 4.

<sup>63</sup> I discuss Hegel's critique of Kant's moral philosophy in the next chapter.

but the point is to recognise that concepts always refer to and arise from non-conceptualities and in accordance with various imposed requirements, such as (but not only) the control of nature (11). Recognising this would provide a more expansive form of rationality than a subjective, formalising rationality that takes what something stands for or what it is useful for as though it is the whole or core of what it is. By contrast, identity-thinking merely “says what something comes under, what it exemplifies or represents, and what, accordingly, it is not itself” (149).

Sherman points out that in Adorno’s “turn toward nonidentity” (*ND*, 12), Adorno takes Hegel’s argument for the “concept of the unity of differentiated and undifferentiated being – or of the identity of identity and non-identity” (*SL*, 2.60) and reverses it, instead arguing “in effect for the non-identity of identity and non-identity” (Sherman, 2016, 355), for the idea that the concept and its object are never fully commensurable. However, while Adorno does clearly criticise the “untruth” of the principle of identity, “the fact that the concept does not exhaust the thing conceived” (*ND*, 5) and emphasises the need to turn attention to the non-identical in this way, I do not think Sherman is right to consider Adorno’s ‘negative dialectics’ as quite so sharply distinct from Hegel’s views when he makes the claim that Adorno rejects “‘identity’ in favor of ‘non-identity’” (Sherman, 2016, 353). For one thing, Adorno does not think that it is actually possible to ‘reject identity’, even if we recognise how identity-thinking misapprehends what it seeks to grasp: “We can see through the identity principle, but we cannot think without identifying. Any definition is identification” (*ND*, 149). What Sherman perhaps misses here in an otherwise apt comparison is that for one thing, despite his criticism otherwise, Adorno credits Hegel for himself insisting “against epistemology that one becomes a smith only by smithing,” by thinking those things which resist thought, “things which are, so to speak, atheoretical” or non-identical with thought (*ND*, 28)<sup>64</sup> and this is itself very close to a definition of dialectics that Adorno suggests later on in *Negative Dialectics* (*ND*, 141).<sup>65</sup> Furthermore, Adorno also recognises that it is an insight of Hegel’s that concepts are never identical to the objects to

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<sup>64</sup> With Adorno’s phrase about only becoming a smith by smithing, he presumably has in mind here Hegel’s reference to Scholasticus in his criticism of Kant’s insistence on the need for epistemology prior to metaphysics: “A main line of argument in the Critical Philosophy bids us pause before proceeding to inquire into God or into the true being of things, and tells us first of all to examine the faculty of cognition and see whether it is equal to such an effort. We ought, says Kant, to become acquainted with the instrument, before we undertake the work for which it is to be employed; for if the instrument be insufficient, all our trouble will be spent in vain. [...] But the examination of knowledge can only be carried out by an act of knowledge. To examine this so-called instrument is the same thing as to know it. But to seek to know before we know is as absurd as the wise resolution of Scholasticus, not to venture into the water until he had learned to swim” (*EL*, §10).

<sup>65</sup> “Thought need not be content with its own legality; without abandoning it, we can think against our thought, and if it were possible to define dialectics, this would be a definition worth suggesting” (*ND*, 141).

which they are applied (*ND*, 70)<sup>66</sup> and that thinking is always at the same time a negation of what is thought about (*HTS*, 64; *EL*, §12). Moreover, Adorno argues that emphasising non-identity itself involves an attempt to identify, “to a greater extent, and in other ways, than [identity-thinking]”<sup>67</sup> and so the point is not to reject or replace identity but that emphasising the role of non-identity means that, “Under its critique, identity does not vanish but undergoes a qualitative change” (*ND*, 149). Negative dialectics, Adorno makes clear, does not endeavour to replace one ‘fundamental’ principle with another, more fundamental one; it does not seek to replace ontology with another ontology or even with the non-ontological and nor does it aim towards a new transcendental structure. Neither, more importantly, does it aim to replace identity with non-identity, merely rejecting one concept in favour of another.<sup>68</sup> Dialectics must face up to not being able to ‘stick’ to a principle and any attempt at ‘first philosophy’ or a primary principle cannot, according to Adorno, be what dialectics aims at: “If that were our purpose we would be merely positing another downright ‘first’ – not absolute identity, this time, not the concept, not Being, but nonidentity, facticity, entity [*Seiende*]<sup>69</sup>. We would be hypostatizing the concept of nonconceptuality and thus acting counter to its meaning” (*ND*, 136).

### 2.3. Auschwitz as Absolute Integration

No individual or thing is fully identical with its category or with any other thing with which it can be categorised because each consists of specific differences that are non-identical with their concept. As such, O’Connor points out that the formalising impulse to fit objects to their concepts results in a form of identity that is both non-rational and coercive because it involves forcing a semblance of identity onto the object, thereby distorting it, “And, for Adorno, this form of coercion is precisely what happens at the level of modern social organization” (O’Connor, 2013, 82). Formalising reason as it inheres in rationalised social processes tends

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<sup>66</sup> Adorno here actually talks in terms of ‘judgements’, rather than ‘concepts’. O’Connor notes that Adorno’s comments regarding concepts always making reference to nonconceptualities makes more sense in the language of judgement: “our *judgments* are conceptualizations of non-conceptual entities, objects. Hence judgments of experience contain conceptual and non-conceptual moments. They are a form of thought in which the concept does refer beyond itself to the object” (O’Connor, 2013, 79 – 80).

<sup>67</sup> Ashton uses the phrase ‘identitarian thinking’, whereas Redmond uses ‘identity-thinking’ (Adorno, 2001b, 152 – 154). I have modified Ashton’s translation to ‘identity-thinking’, which is the standard formulation in the secondary literature, as well as in translations of other works where Adorno uses the phrase.

<sup>68</sup> I return to this in the conclusion to the thesis but Adorno is reasonably clear about this with respect to universal history, relating identity and non-identity to the historical themes of continuity and discontinuity and arguing that universal history should neither be construed nor denied but rather construed *and* denied (*HF*, 92 – 93; *ND*, 320).

<sup>69</sup> Redmond has ‘the existent’ for Ashton’s ‘entity’ (Adorno, 2001b, 139 – 140) as the translation of ‘*Seiende*’ (Adorno, 1966, 138).

towards treating unlike things as though they are like or reducible to specific qualities or uses, including human beings, either under general grouping concepts ('workers', 'consumers', etc.) or even, as Hammer puts it, "the total reduction of the individuality of the individual – of the *principium individuationis* – to its generic concept" in the genocide that took place in the concentration camps (Hammer, 2000, 77). The "rationalised rage at nonidentity" in its socially realised form inheres in social processes that tend towards making what is non-identical commensurable, either through the instrumentalisation of humans as 'resources' to be quantified in production and consumption or with "potentially homicidal success" (*ND*, 23) in the "absolute integration" of genocide (*ND*, 364). In the latter case, some perceived (racial, sexual, ideological) difference is hypostatized<sup>70</sup> through the victims' reduction to this difference, until they are finally reduced to nothing but their 'generic concept' in death. Adorno thereby, "connects the crisis of metaphysics, the impossibility of its continuation, to its tragic parody represented by Auschwitz, but also, more broadly, by the world of total administration", as Vattimo (2016) at one point summarises (131). The 'crisis of metaphysics' is approached from at least two directions for Adorno: on the one hand, the disenchantment of the world outlined by Weber and the subjectivisation of reason described by Horkheimer; on the other, the cataclysmic events of Auschwitz, which impinge upon philosophy and undermine attempts to wring out some kind of sense or a metaphysical principle that might make those events or the underlying tendencies of the modern world explicable in accordance with some eternal order of meaning.<sup>71</sup> Of course, the whole world is not Auschwitz but the fact that Auschwitz happened at the point in history that it did, that other horrors have happened since and that there is now no reason to think that they will not happen again is itself enough to at least make Adorno's focus on the extreme phenomenon of the camps justifiable. This is the case even if initially it may seem inappropriate to compare what happened there with what on the surface seem to be problematic but less obviously malign features of contemporary societies.

Adorno tends not to use the now more common terms 'The Holocaust' or 'Shoah', instead almost always using 'Auschwitz', naming the most infamous network of concentration camps in which large parts of the genocide were carried out.<sup>72</sup> While Adorno uses 'Auschwitz' as a

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<sup>70</sup> When Adorno talks about something being 'hypostatized' he seems to mean the way in which something that is contingent, emergent, individual or historical is treated as though it is something universal or invariant: "The separation of subject and object is both real and semblance. True, because in the realm of cognition it lends expression to the real separation, the rivenness of the human condition, the result of a coercive historical process; untrue, because the historical separation must not be hypostatized, not magically transformed into an invariant" (*OSO*, §2).

<sup>71</sup> I return to this point about the relationship between Auschwitz and metaphysics in Chapter 4.

<sup>72</sup> As I go on to discuss, Adorno's use of the name 'Auschwitz' is somewhat idiosyncratic and aims at capturing broader phenomena than the genocide of European Jews but it might also be worth pointing out that while 'The Holocaust' is now the standard designation for the genocide enacted by the Nazi government, the use of this phrase

‘metonym’ that “underlines the specificity, the historical actuality” of what happened there (Bernstein, 2001, 373), in addition to this, what Adorno hopes to capture under the name ‘Auschwitz’ is broader than the concentration camp itself but “the entire system” in which “politics could merge directly with mass murder” (*HF*, 7). At its most brutal, extreme end are also included “the introduction of torture as a permanent institution” and the atomic bomb, all of which together “form a kind of coherence, a hellish unity” alongside the continuing prospect of recurrence (*MCP*, 104). Writing in the 1960s, Adorno would state that this ‘hellish unity’ persists in subsequent events and practices and so is not limited to events during the period of the second World War, continuing to present itself, for instance, in “horrific reports” from the Vietnam War (101). Additionally, Gordon refers to Auschwitz as a ‘sign’ of a “catastrophic shift” that necessitates that philosophy take up a new relationship to metaphysics, a “turning of the mind, from the fantasy of invariance and toward the mundane” because “whatever happiness we once attached to the promise of eternity must become responsive to our unhappiness and suffering if such thoughts are not to be condemned in toto as empty apologetics” (Gordon, 2010, 556 – 557). That is to say, such extreme events exert pressure upon philosophy to abandon its traditional aims of establishing some divine, transcendent or eternal order in isolation from the intra-mundane events that were traditionally considered only to supposedly evince but not themselves impact the notion of that underlying metaphysical order, “that somehow, in a secret order of being, all this would have had some kind of purpose” (*MCP*, 104). In light of the calamitous events of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and ever since, Adorno argues that to align truth with an eternal, meaningful order and the transitory and intra-mundane with irrelevance or at best a ‘sign’ of this order (*ND*, 361) after Auschwitz, “to speak of metaphysics without taking account of these things would really be nothing but empty verbiage” (*MCP*, 109).

More generally, as Freyenhagen has it, for Adorno Auschwitz represents the culmination of two general tendencies of enlightened modernity: firstly, the indifference towards the life of the individual and its reduction to an object, including the rationalising logic of dehumanisation; and secondly, the inversion of means and ends, for instance, in the instrumental use of the individual for the ends of humanity’s own creations or to put it another way, the reduction of human beings to functions in the reproduction of economic and social processes that were originally formed as means to satisfy human ends (Freyenhagen, 2013, 27 - 28). In *Marginalia to Theory and Praxis*, Adorno criticises Weber for ultimately treating instrumental rationality as though it is the whole of rationality. He goes on to claim that the inversion of means and

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is likely to have only become ubiquitous after Adorno’s death in 1969. See Garber and Zuckerman (1989), who credit Elie Wiesel as a key figure in popularising the now common designation, starting in the 1960s and noting that it gradually came to its widespread usage at some point in the following two decades (202).

ends in society arrives as though in revenge against Weber's own intentions, for "The development of a bureaucracy, the purest form of rational domination, into the society of the 'iron cage' and which Weber prophesied with obvious horror is irrational" (*MTP*, §10). The tendencies that Freyenhagen describes appear starkly in the death camps, in the "administrative murder of millions", where the indifference towards the depersonalised victims reduced each one to the status of an 'exemplar' or 'specimen' but Adorno argues that even under conditions of 'formal freedom':

the individual is as fungible and replaceable as he will be under the liquidators' boots. But since, in a world whose law is universal individual profit, the individual has nothing but this self that has become indifferent, the performance of the old, familiar tendency is at the same time the most dreadful of things. There is no getting out of this, no more than out of the electrified barbed wire around the camps. (*ND*, 362)

As such, the tendencies are mirrored in something fundamentally at play in the rationality that runs through capitalist economies as the underlying logic that conditions the life and activity of all people, regardless of social position. The elimination of particularity, the reduction of the individual to fungibility, as well as their integration into the aims of a social process that prioritises productivity for its own sake rather than the human life it should serve (Freyenhagen, 2013, 28) are exemplified by the predominance of the exchange principle and the maximisation of surplus-value. Auschwitz and the division of labour are not the same thing but these tendencies are instead at their most extreme in the former, which "fulfils and exemplifies the destruction of individuality and particularity that the disenchantment of the world and the rationalization of reason have been preparing from the beginning of the modern epoch", as Bernstein puts it (2001, 380).

As stated, the tendencies Freyenhagen refers to involve a mirroring of something in the roots of both the rationality of modern, capitalist economies as well as in fascist ideology, in terms of the elimination of particularity and the treatment of human life as fungible, insofar as both contain processes within which each individual is considered replaceable or interchangeable, reducible only to their function or mere concept. This is how Adorno's claim in *Metaphysics: Concepts and Problems* that "genocide is absolute integration" can be understood:

What meets its end in the camps, therefore, is really no longer the ego or the self, but – as Horkheimer and I called it almost a generation ago in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* – only the *specimen*; it is, almost as in vivisection, only the

individual entity reducible to the body or, as Brecht put it, the torturable entity, which can be happy if it has time to escape that fate by suicide. One might say, therefore, that genocide, the eradication of humanity, and the concentration of people in a totality in which everything is subsumed under the principle of self-preservation,<sup>73</sup> are *the same thing*; indeed, that genocide is absolute integration. (MCP, 108)

What Adorno describes is the reduction of the individual to its generic concept, devoid of any meaningful sense of individuality beyond what can be represented as just one interchangeable example of an indefinite mass and at its extreme end, “the pure identity of all people with their concept is nothing other than their death” (MCP, 108). Adorno goes on to cite Hegel’s anticipation of this point when the latter states in his discussion of The Terror that followed the French Revolution that reduced to its sheer concept, the death of an individual becomes a matter of indifference, “the coldest and meanest of all deaths, with no more significance than cutting off a head of cabbage or swallowing a mouthful of water” (PS, §590). Bernstein points out that as ‘indifferent, cold and mean’ as Hegel describes this kind of death, The Terror still forms an historical “moment in the formation – the deformation and reformation – of human freedom and self-determination” (2001, 378) but that this cannot be the case after Auschwitz is an important distinguishing feature of Adorno’s picture of ‘wrong life’. No sense can be wrung from the obliteration of the individual in this way, in which mass murder through administrative measures reduced the victims to an indifferent, fungible mass even before but ultimately through their deaths. The indifference towards the dehumanised victims was precipitated by their reduction to an instance, example or ‘specimen’, interchangeable with any other victim or even just their current use; a worker, a kapo, a specimen for medical experimentation or even as their inevitable future form as ‘smoke wiggling skyward from a chimney’, as Adorno reports the SS used to say to taunt their victims (ND, 362; MCP, 109).

In an aphorism from *Minima Moralia* titled ‘Mélange’, Adorno argues that the ideal of liberal tolerance is one that implicitly seeks to level off differences and belongs to the same form of thinking that will end up turning on those who do not sufficiently integrate: “That all men are alike is exactly what society would like to hear. It considers actual or imagined differences as stigmas indicating that not enough has yet been done; that something is still left outside of its machinery, not quite determined by its totality” (MM, §66). Adorno does not name

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<sup>73</sup> As suggested above, the idea is that societies premised on the exchange principle and the pursuit of surplus value, as I explore below (2.4) are societies in which human activity is functionalised in pursuit of the reproduction of the means for self-preservation (the forces of production) as the ends of human activity.

it but his immediate juxtaposition between liberal tolerance and the “technique” of the concentration camp, which makes “the prisoners like their guards, the murdered, murderers” and its racist logic in which “The racial difference is raised to an absolute so that it can be abolished absolutely, if only in the sense that nothing different survives” (§66) calls to mind the ‘Jewish Question’ or ‘Jewish Problem’, in which the dehumanising logic of totalisation literally appears in the instrumentally rational language of ‘problem-solving’. In the former through the inability to account for what seems to be the ‘part’ of liberal tolerant society that refuses to ‘fit’ or conform and in the latter through the fascist discriminating hatred that stares past the most compelling evidence that this or that ‘group’ are not a distinct ‘race’ from any other.<sup>74</sup> In fascism, as Žižek puts it, “The anti-Semitic figure of the Jew, the foreign intruder who disturbs and corrupts the harmony of the social order, is ultimately a fetishistic objectivization, a stand-in for the ‘inconsistency’ of the social order itself” (2012, 201). Adorno and Horkheimer too argue that this ‘inconsistency’ in the social order involves a projection and one which is ‘blind’ because it refers to an abstraction and so, “the victims are interchangeable according to the circumstances – gypsies, Jews, Protestants, Catholics and so on” and that because of this element of abstraction, so too “any one of them may take the place of the murderers, with the same blind lust for blood, should they be invested with the title of norm” (*DE*, 171). As such, the antisemitic figure of the Jew is both marked out by some stigmatising difference while simultaneously an abstraction that refers to no real features, an objectified substitute for some sort of perceived generalised social disharmony, hence why Adorno says that, “If anti-Semitism primarily has its foundation in objective society, and only derivatively in anti-Semites, then – as the National Socialist joke has it – if the Jews had not already existed, the anti-Semites would have had to invent them” (*MWTP*, 101 – 102).

What the Nazis referred to as ‘The Final Solution’ – the genocide of Jewish Europeans – was supposed to refer to a ‘solution’ to a specific ‘problem’ that itself had a much longer history: what is to be done about this element of the European population that is ‘clearly different’ and supposedly disturbs the social order, somehow simultaneously from outside while still being within it?<sup>75</sup> As Jay puts it, “The Jews, in other words, in their very refusal to be assimilated, represent an obstacle to the total integration of the ‘administered world’” with its ultimate

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<sup>74</sup> See also: *DE*, 169 – 170.

<sup>75</sup> There is not space to discuss it here but arguably the uncomfortable and perhaps closer dovetailing between the logic of liberal tolerance and fascism that Adorno discusses in §66 of *Minima Moralia* is visible in 21<sup>st</sup> century Europe through the emergence of the ‘Muslim Question’. For a discussion that draws comparisons between the ‘Jewish Question’ with the contemporary ‘Muslim Question’, see Norton (2013), who argues that just as European anxieties were projected onto the figure of the Jew in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, “In our time, the figure of the Muslim has become the axis where questions of political philosophy and political theology, politics and ethics meet” in which, “Islam is marked as the preeminent danger to politics” (2 – 3).

source, at least in the modern context, being “the rage against the non-identical that characterizes the totalistic dominating impulse of western civilization” (Jay, 1980, 148).<sup>76</sup> Some early attempts to ‘solve’ this ‘problem’ involved demands that European Jews integrate by giving up their ‘Jewishness’ and assimilate to modern secular practices,<sup>77</sup> but even this was not really considered enough with the democratic election of a fascist government in Germany during the 1930s. ‘The Final Solution’ was a plan enacted by the ruling Nazi party in 1942 with the full title of ‘The Final Solution to the Jewish Problem’, a ‘solution’ that aimed at the complete genocide of the Jewish population of Europe. In this sense, genocide was an attempt at ‘absolute integration’ because it aimed at doing away with what could not be fully integrated without some remainder. The horror of how the genocide was undertaken does not consist in the fact that a few insane monsters got into power, unleashing some kind of regressive violent rage that just utilised modern means but rather the horror consists in the fact that it was a rationalised, efficient, calculative and for that reason utterly dehumanising operation, perpetrated by cold bureaucrats operating within impersonal economic networks, buttressed by popular democratic and intellectual legitimation from what purported to be the most advanced knowledge in the sciences. The victims of Auschwitz were subject to the cold logic of instrumental reason, objectified into a racist abstraction because of some ‘difference’ that supposedly could not be integrated, reduced to numbers to be administrated and treated as fungible units in a totalising project – each the same as each other and recognisable in a multitude of forms except as human beings: “The Fascists do not view the Jews as a minority but as an opposing race [*Gegenrasse*], the embodiment of the negative principle. They must be exterminated to secure happiness for the world” (DE, 168).<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> I do not have space here to consider at any meaningful length Adorno and Horkheimer’s conception of antisemitism and in fact, Jay’s (1980) article, which gives a useful history of Adorno and Horkheimer’s theoretical relationship to antisemitism, highlights their reticence to engage with the ‘Jewish question’ directly, especially in Horkheimer’s early (pre-1940s) work which tended to subordinate questions of racism to questions of class conflict. For a similar but somewhat expanded account, see Jacobs (2019), who highlights Adorno’s influence in turning the Frankfurt School’s attention towards antisemitism as a more complex phenomenon in need of special focus (Jacobs, 2019, 179 – 181).

<sup>77</sup> For instance, in the debate between Bruno Bauer and Marx. See Peled (1992) for a discussion of Marx’s response to Bauer, which includes reconstructions of Bauer’s views as put forward by Bauer in his book *The Jewish Question* (rather than primarily relying on Marx’s characterisations of Bauer’s views). See also Avineri (1964) for a considered view of Marx’s later return to the debate.

<sup>78</sup> Jephcott has “antirace” rather than “opposing race” (Adorno, 2002, 137). Stone (2010) explains that the Nazi state was conceived of and in effect was a racial state informed by the pseudo-sciences of race science and eugenics – ‘applied biology’, as Rudolf Hess stated. However, the ‘race science’ Hess and others were informed by positioned Jews as somehow outside of the schema of a racial hierarchy, conceiving of them as a ‘counter-race’ and so “not really human at all” (Stone, 2010, 2).

## 2.4. Formalisation, Fungibility and the Exchange Principle

As already noted, Adorno argues that these tendencies towards integration and the inversion of means and ends also appear under conditions of ‘formal freedom’. For instance, in the sense that a certain amount of the population can be considered ‘collateral’ to its overall operation, falling under the wheels and through the gaps of a society “which in its absurd present form has rendered not work, but people superfluous,” and so “predetermines, in a sense, a statistical percentage of people of whom it must divest itself in order to continue to live in its bad, existing form” (*MCP*, 113).<sup>79</sup> The underlying tendencies evince and inform a dehumanising logic of integration and formal fungibility in conditions of ‘formal freedom’ in the way in which each worker becomes less the subject of society (insofar as society does not primarily aim at their individual well-being) than its object (insofar as they are instead primarily the instrument of society’s functioning), reduced to their function within the prevailing economic apparatus. In effect, they become appendages of the machines originally built to serve them or a statistic of the overall workforce or growth of GDP, each individual in principle replaceable with another, similar body or eventually a better machine.

Modern production processes instantiate an inversion of means and ends, insofar as human labour power increasingly becomes a facet of reproducing the machinery of production and its purposes (the pursuit of surplus-value), rather than satisfying the drive for self-preservation that these means were originally built to satisfy. As part of this inversion, human life is reduced to an exchangeable quantity to be calculated and administrated for various purposes and as such, human activity functions primarily as an appendage of the technological machinery of production in facilitating the generation of surplus-value, rather than that machinery being aimed at the satisfaction of human life (*HF*, 50 – 51). In ‘Marx and the Basic Concepts of Sociological Theory’, Adorno explains the fundamental centrality of surplus-value and its relation to exchange in modern societies in the following way:

In order to understand the concept of surplus-value, two-time spans have to be compared: the time which is necessary for the production of labour-power and the time that the worker gives in labour. One must not start with the commodity produced by the worker, rather it is a matter of an exchange process: the worker sells his labour-time [*Arbeitszeit*] for which he receives his equivalent. But the time he gives and the time that is needed for the production of his labour-power are different. On the one hand, exchange takes place in the form of equivalents: the

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<sup>79</sup> In the next chapter, I relate this idea to Hegel’s account of the ‘rabble’ [*Pöbel*].

worker gives his labour-time and receives what is required for the reproduction of his labour-time in return. Here lies the source of surplus-value without having to consider the commodity produced. One exchanges the same for the same [*Gleiches mit Gleichem*] and simultaneously the same for the not-same [*Gleiches mit Nicht-Gleichem*]. (MBCST, 248 – 249)

In its concept, exchange is supposed to involve something equivalent received in place of that which is exchanged and again, in concept, exchange therefore carries the promise of equality, justice and rational identity as ‘the same for the same’ and so “If no man had part of his labor withheld from him any more, rational identity would be a fact, and society would have transcended the [coercive] identifying mode of thinking” (ND, 146 – 147).<sup>80</sup> However, in order to make a profit, exchange must involve an inequality between the value that the worker generates and the remuneration of their work as ‘the same for the not-same’ and as such, dissimilar things are made similar through a process of abstraction (DE, 7), which usually takes the form of a wage.<sup>81</sup> The exchange principle, “the reduction of human labor to the abstract universal concept of average working hours, is fundamentally akin to the principle of identification” and “it is through [exchange]<sup>82</sup> that non-identical individuals and performances become commensurable and identical” (ND, 146). In Tronti’s account,<sup>83</sup> the worker is thus reduced to a part of capital, excluding them from any claim to it, despite capitalist production fundamentally requiring co-operation between the worker and capitalist. This transforms the process of production into a false semblance of the division of contributions by worker and capitalist through the transfiguration of labour-power into the abstract form of a wage (Tronti, 2019, 14). As a result of this process, “the realisation of surplus-value not only hides the specific conditions of its production; the realisation of surplus-value also *appears* as its effective creation” (17). This is Tronti’s explanation of Marx’s concept of the process of valorisation, the dominant perspective (in modern societies) from which capital appears to create capital

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<sup>80</sup> For more discussion of the distinction between ‘rational identity’, which attempts to understand an object but without forcing an identity upon it by cutting away that which resists the attempt to identify (the non-identical) as ‘coercive identity-thinking’ does, see O’Connor (2013, 77 – 85).

<sup>81</sup> “in the wage, there disappears any trace of the division of the working day into necessary labour and surplus-labour. All of labour appears as paid labour; this distinguishes wage-labour from other historical forms of labour. The more that capitalist-production (and the system of its forces of production) develops, the more the paid and unpaid parts of labour become inseparably confused” (Tronti, 2019, 15).

<sup>82</sup> Ashton’s translation is ‘barter’, which I have amended to ‘exchange’ to make consistent with the standard translation of Marxist terminology. ‘Exchange’ is used by Redmond (Adorno, 2001b, 149 – 151).

<sup>83</sup> I rely on Tronti here as an exponent of Marxist concepts but it is worth remarking that similarities between his thought and Adorno’s have been noted, though seemingly not explored in much depth up until now, at least not in a form easily available in the English language. For some rather brief comparisons, see Holloway (2009, 14 – 17) and Chanson & Monferrand (2018, 1307 - 1309). I am indebted to Zoe Waters for pointing out the affinity between Adorno and Tronti.

through the reduction of labour-power to a part of capital, which increases in dominance “as capitalist production develops and the more that the capitalist form of production becomes the master of all other spheres of society, invading the entire web of social relations” (12). That is to say, the worker and their labour are reduced to their function in the generation of surplus-value by being transfigured through abstraction into a form or part of the capital owned by a capitalist or company that is ‘invested’ in order to then generate more capital, a perhaps simplified but clearly telling exemplification of which is the designation of workers as ‘human resources’ in the modern workplace (*MM*, §85).

Despite how it appears, it is not just the worker that is integrated and functionalised, reduced to an abstraction, “For the union boss, let alone the director, the proletarian (should he ever come face to face with him) is nothing but a supernumerary example of the mass, while the boss in turn has to tremble at the thought of his own liquidation” (*DE*, 38) and so all members of society operate under the exchange principle and pursuit of profit, the latter of which the capitalist is forced to pursue lest they go under and become reduced to fungibility themselves (*MBCST*, 247 – 248; *LCIS*, 116). This, according to Adorno, means that even overproduction is rational on the basis of a social process that is structured according to the pursuit of profit and the exchange principle, despite the fact that this same process may also be described as irrational if at the same time it leads to the increased threat of the destruction of the very conditions of production, in the development of nuclear weapons or through contributing to ecological collapse (*LCIS*, 122).<sup>84</sup>

A point to make with respect to what I have previously said with regard to disenchantment is that the ‘process of valorisation’, in which the labour-process is reduced to a part of capital, making it appear as though it is capital (rather than workers) that produce capital, is that rationalised economic processes thereby result in a form of mystification (Tronti, 2019, 13). On the account I developed in the previous chapter, disenchantment does not entail that we are not still subject to forms of mystification but it does involve believing that all things are in principle

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<sup>84</sup> With regards to this point, it is worth remarking on the by now well-known claim that mobilises Mark Fisher’s *Capitalist Realism*, “that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism” (Fisher, 2009, 2). Fisher attributes the claim to either Jameson or Žižek but similar arguments can be found in the first-generation Frankfurt School thinkers. Arguably the sense captured by the claim is one of the central arguments motivating Marcuse’s *One-Dimensional Man* but versions of the argument can also be found in Adorno: “This sense of threat [of destruction and underlying crisis] is real enough and some of its expressions such as the A and H bombs are about to outrun the wildest neurotic fears and destructive fantasies. The more people profess official optimism, the more profoundly they are probably affected by the mood of doom, the idea, correct or erroneous, that the present state of affairs somehow must lead towards a total explosion and that the individual can do very little about it. The sense of doom may today obtain a peculiarly sinister coloring by the fact that the present form of social existence seems to go down whereas no new and higher form of social organization appears on the horizon” (*SDE*, 156 – 157).

knowable and calculable, even while society seems more opaque than ever before from an individual standpoint and so, “From the commanding heights of the economy to the latest professional rackets, the tangled mass of cliques and institutions which ensures the indefinite continuation of the status quo is impenetrable to each individual” (Adorno & Horkheimer, 2002, 30). This itself entails a powerlessness in the face of an overwhelming social whole (*LCIS*, 120) that tends to utilise the individual for various purposes through their reduction to something calculable, whereas the individual themselves in confronting this society struggles to resist it to any meaningful degree due to its power and abstruse complexity.<sup>85</sup> This ‘mystification’ is not, therefore, simply some form of subjective illusion but rather the mystification is built into the very conditions of life in rationalised, profit-driven societies structured by the exchange principle and the maximisation of surplus-value. Even if we have asked ourselves why sometimes things cost more or sometimes less or what money even is at all or why it exists, like the economists Weber addresses in his lecture (*SV*, 139), this does not affect the fact that each of us must and do act according to this underlying structure on a daily basis. Indeed, it is very likely that in a certain sense, people on the whole today are *more* likely to recognise and have insight into their dependence on a system that functionalises them:

the world appears to most people today more as a ‘system’ than ever before, covered by an all-comprising net of organization with no loopholes where the individual could ‘hide’ in the face of the ever-present demands and tests of a society ruled by a hierarchical business set-up and coming pretty close to what we called ‘*verwaltete Welt*,’ a world caught by administration. (*SDE*, 155)

The exchange principle, Adorno argues, “permeates the whole of society” as the “objective abstraction to which the social process of life is subject” (*LCIS*, 120) and so, as stated previously, the reduction of the worker to a fungible resource to be utilised in the pursuit of profit in a certain sense comes to be a rational form of behaviour within this society. However, it also has the effect that each of us is merely a statistic, by chance an “intrusive occupier” of a position that could be taken by any other stand-in that society inevitably has at the ready (*MM*, §148):

A situation has been reached today, in the present form of the organization of work in conjunction with the maintenance of the existing relations of production, in which every person is absolutely fungible or replaceable, even under conditions of

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<sup>85</sup> See also: *HF*, 118 – 119.

formal freedom. This situation gives rise to a feeling of the superfluity and, if you like, the insignificance of each of us in relation to the whole. (*MCP*, 109)

The reduction of the human to a function of the overall economic apparatus also makes the individual easily replaceable as an abstract quantity of human labour power. The same effect is had in the sphere of consumption where the individual is reduced to their formal value as a consumer, transfigured into “statistics on research organization charts” (*DE*, 123) and in which their consumption of products is aimed rather at sustaining and generating surplus-value, rather than the fulfilment of needs that are not themselves manufactured by the same process that reduces the individual to a consumer (Freyenhagen, 2013, 32 – 33).<sup>86</sup> Despite the fact that modern technology and scientific knowledge is sufficiently advanced to satisfy at least the basic needs of humanity, “what is decisive is the primacy of the apparatus of production over needs”, the latter of which are themselves integrated into, ‘dragged along’ (*MBCST*, 245 – 246) and generated by the productive process in order to then be satisfied by that same process, even at the expense of basic needs such as housing (*LCIS*, 117).<sup>87</sup>

Adorno’s analysis of the exchange principle is an example of immanent critique, revealing the simultaneous rationality and irrationality of a society permeated by the exchange principle. As stated, according to the concept of exchange, two things of equivalent value should be exchanged (‘like for like’) but capitalism does not actually adhere to this supposed principle in practice, as its growth requires instead always an unequal exchange, insofar as the labourer is paid only enough to reproduce their labour power, not the equivalent of the labour-power plus the product of that power. Freyenhagen points out that this is what it means to say that capitalist relations are exploitative, where what is actually exchanged is ‘like for unlike’ and that Adorno’s appeal to ‘fair exchange’ is not an endorsement of a positive ideal<sup>88</sup> but rather an

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<sup>86</sup> This is a key component of Adorno and Horkheimer’s conception of the ‘culture industry’: “although the culture industry undeniably speculates on the conscious and unconscious state of the millions towards which it is directed, the masses are not primary, but secondary, they are an object of calculation; an appendage of the machinery. The customer is not king, as the culture industry would have us believe, not its subject but its object” (Adorno, 2001c, 99).

<sup>87</sup> In ‘Theses on Need’ Adorno makes it clear that ‘needs’ cannot be divided into ‘natural’ and ‘social’ or ‘secondary’ and ‘primary’: “Need is a social category. [...] Each and every drive is so socially mediated that its natural moment never appears immediately, but always only as produced through society. The appeal to nature in relation to this or that need is always merely the mask of frustration or domination” (*TNM*, 81 – 82). For instance, one might argue that eating is a ‘natural’ need but Adorno’s point is that this can never really be uncoupled from *what* one eats, which is always the result of mediation. It has been suggested that this social and historical mediation of needs could cause some potential issues for Freyenhagen’s (2013) arguments that attribute a kind of ‘Aristotelianism’ to Adorno, as O’Connor (2017) highlights (855 – 857). See Freyenhagen (2017) for his response to O’Connor and others. See Hegel for a similar consideration of the impossibility of distinguishing ‘natural’ and ‘social’ needs (*LNR*, §98).

<sup>88</sup> However, it is the *imago* of progress, according to Adorno: “The fulfilment of the contract of exchange, whose terms are constantly being broken, would converge with its abolition; exchange would disappear if the objects exchanged were truly equivalent. Genuine progress is not simply quite different from exchange; it

immanent criticism of capitalism through an investigation of its own ideal or principle (fair exchange), thereby demonstrating its discordance with this principle, which it cannot live up to (Freyenhagen, 2013, 34 – 35). This instance of immanent critique reveals that modern capitalist societies are both highly rational, insofar as our technical means and knowledge of the world are highly advanced in comparison to previous systems but also highly irrational, insofar as that knowledge and those means are turned against the ends of human life and the satisfaction of its needs (38 – 39). As such, Freyenhagen rightly points out that Adorno’s claim about the irrationality of society deserves to be taken seriously when considering at least two problems facing modern societies: “(a) with the way our production processes threaten the very basis of our survival and (b) with a world of abundance in which almost half of humanity nonetheless lives in extreme poverty” (40).

Despite the sharpness of some of the statements Adorno and Horkheimer make in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in which science and technology and so the process of enlightenment that their development results from can appear to lead irredeemably and necessarily towards domination and catastrophe, it is *also* the case that they believe it has otherwise led to generally improved conditions and contains the potential to lead away from disaster, a point that Adorno and Horkheimer assert again and again.<sup>89</sup> In *Surplus Enjoyment: A Guide for the Non-Perplexed*, Žižek characterises the argument of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in terms of a baldly pessimistic fatalism that I want to dispute when he says that we should reject:

The over-hasty generalization of danger into what Adorno and Horkheimer called ‘instrumental reason’ – the idea that modern science is ultimately just a radicalization of a basic anthropological tendency (for Adorno and Horkheimer in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, there is a straight line from primitive use of magic to influence natural processes to modern technology). (Žižek, 2022, 56)

Instead, Žižek argues, “The danger resides in the specific conjunction between science and capital” (56) and goes on to illustrate this point by arguing that in terms of the division of labour and the valorisation of capital, modern science usually tends to end up on the side of capital in facilitating enhancements to the production process (57), presumably through advances in the

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would be exchange worthy of the name” (HF, 170).

<sup>89</sup> Apart from passages I have already cited, that the contemporary world has the capacity to alleviate the scarcity that plagued previous eras and meet everyone’s vital needs but does not is a point repeatedly made by Frankfurt School thinkers. For instance, Horkheimer also makes this point in ‘Materialism and Morality’ (BPSS, 35), in *Towards a New Manifesto* both Adorno (TNM, 14) and Horkheimer (21) separately raise the point and Adorno makes a similar claim about the abolition of labour in ‘Marginalia to Theory and Praxis’ (MTP, 267). In addition, it is also one of the central contradictions contained by advanced industrial societies that Marcuse explores throughout *One-Dimensional Man*.

automation of production, for instance. As he points out in the same manner as Adorno and Horkheimer, modern science facilitates the very dire consequences of enhanced production that now constitute one of the major threats to human life, an internal threat issuing from “human activity permeated by science” in, for instance, the mounting ecological effects of over-productive industry and the enduring presence of nuclear warheads, despite the fact that at the same time modern science also facilitates the means for identifying and thus potentially resisting such threats (58).

What leads to science tending to generally fall on the side of the productive process rather than resistance against the capitalist relations that perpetuate the threat, according to Žižek, is that science “‘has no memory,’ since it ignores the dimension of truth” and so under conditions of capitalism, science has a “specific blindness for its own social mediation” (Žižek, 2022, 58). In other words, while science and its products in the form of technology can and often do diagnose and even sometimes remedy the threats produced by human activity, the major part of scientific and technological activity contributes to and thus reproduces and accelerates the mounting threats to human life and the natural world that are already underway. Yet because it is also true that scientific expertise and technological advances can and sometimes do diagnose and address such threats, under less coercive and exploitative conditions they could perhaps devote the better part to improving and ensuring life without at the same time bringing it under threat (58). Because this is not the case and because science has little or no theoretical relationship to truth, its development and what it produces are likely to be imbricated with the dominant mode of production more often than in accordance with some notion of the true or the good (though Žižek does not suggest there could be such notions) that would lead away from expansive industry and technical developments in the means for dominating the natural world and other human beings.

However, is this not as much as to say that, “Science itself is not conscious of itself; it is only a tool” (*DE*, 85) and that “Having given up autonomy, reason has become an instrument” and so “completely harnessed to the social process” (*ER*, 14 – 15)? It seems to me that what Žižek presents as an alternative account regarding how the relationship between domination and technology should be understood, by contrast with his characterisation of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, is actually much closer to Adorno and Horkheimer’s views than he initially suggests on my account of instrumental reason and its social embeddedness. That science is blind to its own social mediation because it ignores the dimension of truth beyond its own method and what that method discovers is an argument that Horkheimer makes in *Eclipse of Reason* as part of a criticism of positivism, stating that, “By denying an autonomous philosophy

and a philosophical concept of truth, positivism hands science over to the hazards of historical developments” (*ER*, 50). According to Horkheimer, positivism fails to recognise that the category of ‘fact’, no less than the specific histories underlying particular facts, are historically produced.<sup>90</sup> Ignoring this and instead restricting thought to the registration and organisation of materials, many of which are produced by the underlying social apparatus that it thereby fails to interrogate, causes such thought to simply reproduce the social process (56 – 57). The point is not that reason is, at its basis, necessarily instrumental and so thereby can only lead to catastrophe, the point is rather that instrumental reason, a restricted and partial form of reason, enters into a reciprocal relationship with the functionalisation of all materials by the social process in modern societies. However, both Adorno and Horkheimer also agree with Žižek that the solution is not to be found in recovering some kind of pre-scientific form of wisdom or ‘objective reason’, in Horkheimer’s language (Žižek, 2022, 58). This is because objective reason had diminished of necessity but also because pre-scientific wisdom would almost certainly fail to identify and find effective remedies to the threats that are now here and would itself be affected and transformed by its artificial resurrection for instrumentally rational purposes.<sup>91</sup>

It is true that with the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer subverted the Enlightenment notion of progress into an account of the destructive effects of the development of reason into instrumental reason but at various points elsewhere Adorno made it clear that this was not the full story because the progressive development of reason is not purely destructive but ambivalent (*Progress*, 154), even if today its destructive side needs to be

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<sup>90</sup> This does not entail that the idea of a ‘fact’ or particular facts are somehow less real because they emerged historically and so also through social mediation. Adorno makes a similar dialectical point with respect to formal logic in *History and Freedom* when he states that there is no absolute separation between its genesis and validity. In this case, the fact that formal logic has an historical and social origin, insofar as it has emerged historically and so constructed by human beings on the basis of motivations that are pre or non-logical (in the sense of formal logic), does not mean that it does not also have objective validity. Adorno attributes the identification of this point to Hegel’s notion of ‘disappearance’, which: “In this instance, refers to the idea that, despite its dependence on the genetic elements I have referred to, logic possesses an objective validity – and this is something Hegel really did understand very clearly. What this means is that these genetic elements, in other words, the elements related to particular aspects of being, ‘disappear’ in the context of the validity of logic.” Logic thereby contains a contradiction, while also being precisely *the* system of non-contradiction: “this contradiction is the fact that logic both is and is not a historical product. This will perhaps enable you to see that dialectics is not simply an additional factor superimposed on traditional logic, but something that penetrates to, and is encapsulated in, the inner-most cells of pure logic itself” (*HF*, 258 - 259). Given this, Lanning (2014) is wrong to straightforwardly insist that Adorno rejects formal logic (30; 32). On Hegel’s concept of ‘disappearance’ or ‘vanishing’ [*Verschwinden*], see Norris (2012).

<sup>91</sup> “Although there are naturally some important counter-tendencies, attempting to bolster the collapsing categories, most of the philosophical and religious attempts at artificial respiration of old metaphysical doctrines contribute, against their will, to the pragmatization and dissolution of the concepts they hope to revive. The direct or naive contact with any supposed eternal entities or principles, whether they belong to a pagan or orthodox philosophy, has been disrupted. [...] There is no intellectual way back” (*RAI*, 86).

emphasised.<sup>92</sup> With respect to the relationship between technology, capitalism and instrumental reason, in ‘Late Capitalism or Industrial Society?’, Adorno discusses the matter in terms of the Marxist distinction between the forces of production and the relations of production when he straightforwardly rejects succumbing to “a kind of theoretical Luddism on an expanded scale” in the face of man-made threats to humanity by seeking the cause of the catastrophe simply in the forces of production: “It is not technology that is the catastrophe but its imbrication with the social relations that embrace it” (*LCIS*, 118).<sup>93</sup> That is, the problem is that the production, development and use of technology and scientific knowledge is primarily bound to the exchange relationship and the expansion of capital in modern societies and so technological development tends towards goals set by these – the relations of production – which occasionally “coincides in a disastrous way with the need to exercise control”, all the while technologies that turn away from “domination, centralism, and violence against nature, and that would doubtless help to heal much of what is damaged literally and figuratively by the technology we have, are allowed to wither away” (118).<sup>94</sup> Perhaps Žižek’s view may have applied to Horkheimer eventually<sup>95</sup> but Adorno continued to hold open the possibility that things could be different, maintaining that despite the totalising account of society he continued to describe, this was still a society riddled with contradictions, the identification of which could momentarily open up the space to recognise suppressed potential and catch a glimpse of the possibility for a truly human condition, holding that: “the world contains opportunities enough for success [...] The possibility of a completely unshackled reality remains valid” (*TNM*, 14).<sup>96</sup> This is also to indicate that the Enlightenment notion of ‘progress’ developed earlier in this chapter will turn

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<sup>92</sup> “Only those reflections about progress have truth that immerse themselves in progress and yet maintain distance, withdrawing from paralyzing facts and specialized meanings. Today reflections of this kind come to a point in the contemplation of whether humanity is capable of preventing catastrophe” (*Progress*, 144).

<sup>93</sup> In *History and Freedom* Adorno also makes it clear that neither science, reason nor technology *as such* are to blame but rather how they are entwined with real social conditions (*HF*, 62).

<sup>94</sup> See also: *PETS*, 136 – 137.

<sup>95</sup> Although, even at the point that he and Adorno wrote *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer clearly still held out some hope for change, as previously mentioned. See: *ER*, 108.

<sup>96</sup> At this point Horkheimer responds to Adorno: “In the long run things cannot change [...] We can expect nothing more from mankind than a more or less worn-out version of the American system” (*TWM*, 14). In discussing a series of letters between Adorno and Horkheimer from 1962 regarding a collection of essays they were in the process of compiling, Müller-Doohm (2005) relates that: “Horkheimer had long since jettisoned the hope that society might of itself generate a social movement that would represent the universal interest and with it the abolition of systems of domination that had become obsolete. In contrast, Adorno emphasized in the draft sketch of the introduction that the authors were conscious of the claim they had made to a coherent theory of society ever since the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. However, in the light of the systematic state of total societalization, it would be wrong to entertain a theory that merely duplicated this coherence. Furthermore, even though society appeared to be so unified and utterly organized, it was really riddled with contradictions. This irrationality of the whole could not be grasped in a rational theory, but only in a fragmentary form” (423 – 424). A similar disagreement documented in their conversations making up *Towards a New Manifesto* concerns whether the contemporary world is merely “mad” (Horkheimer) or “mad and rational as well” (Adorno) (*TNM*, 26).

out, for Adorno at least, to be one-sided, which I will discuss when revisiting the concept in Chapter Four.

## 2.5. ‘Acres of Skin’: Dehumanisation, Imprisonment and the Integration of ‘Human Surplus’

Beyond this, Adorno’s account of the reduction of the individual to the fungible is not limited to an account of Marx’s theory of exchange and surplus-value – rather, Adorno’s discussion of the exchange principle is indicative of the tendency of modern societies and economies to treat human beings as objects of administration or function and the integration of the worker into the productive process is one way in which this manifests. So, while, as Freyenhagen points out, “capitalism is the ultimate form of means-ends reversal” because “what developed as a way of securing human needs has become an end in itself, using human needs (both real ones and those capitalism artificially creates) for its own purposes”, these means for ensuring self-preservation (e.g., technological advantages and industrial productive processes) that have come to be treated as ends are also the same ones that can be used instead for untold destruction, in the terrifyingly efficient modes of dehumanisation and murder in Auschwitz and the bombing of Hiroshima (Freyenhagen, 2013, 31). However, even beyond such extreme events that may be read as radically exceptional, there are other, more persistent features of societies under conditions of ‘formal freedom’ that sometimes veer uncomfortably close to such examples.

In *Minima Moralia*, Adorno produces the isolated statement that “The splinter in your eye is the best magnifying-glass” (*MM*, §29). Freyenhagen reads this statement as related to Adorno’s use of ‘exaggerations’ and intended to mean that “overstating one’s case can shake people out of their slumber into which society and their manipulative mechanisms have put them” (Freyenhagen, 2013, 85). I think that Freyenhagen is wrong in this interpretation and this statement should not be read as relating to the rhetorical usage of exaggeration as a consciousness-raising exercise on Adorno’s part but that he is instead making an epistemological point about the actual truth of what seems to be an exaggeration from the mollifying perspective of the whole. One place where he (and Horkheimer) explores a similar idea is in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, which immediately follows the claim that “only exaggeration is true”:

The essential nature of prehistory is the appearance of extreme cruelty in detail. The statistical account of those slain in a pogrom, which includes those mercifully shot,

obscures the essence which comes to light only in an exact portrayal of the exception, of the very worst atrocity. A fortunate life in a world of cruelty is shown to be the vicious contradiction it really is in the mere existence of that world. Torture becomes the essential truth, and the happy life vanity. (*DE*, 118)

The point is reasonably easy to grasp in terms of the metaphor from *Minima Moralia* if you have ever had a corneal scratch, which is really quite uncomfortable and completely distracting, despite the fact that from a ‘neutral’ perspective it is really quite small and the rest of the eye is fully functioning. The point of this metaphor, then, is that despite the fact that it is seemingly exceptional and from an outside perspective has a relatively minor, perhaps unnoticeable effect on the eye as a whole, it actually completely determines the functioning of the eye because it really is something that hurts and should be paid attention to and not smoothed over. The wound, though small, really is a wound and it really does hurt and so bears upon the whole. This can be thought about on a social level not as exaggeration but as the real ‘splinters’ or ‘wounds’ that really should call for our attention, even if they can be dismissed from a ‘neutral’ or more generalised perspective as exceptions. Adorno elaborates on these ideas in *History and Freedom*, arguing that the antagonistic relationship between individual and society should be sought in what might be considered relatively marginal cases, “where matters become critical, where it ‘hurts’, rather than in less aggravated circumstances or in the countless situations where things still seem more or less to function” (*HF*, 200). In this way, highly specific or ‘exceptional’ circumstances, circumstances where it ‘hurts’, can often bring issues into sharp focus and the example that he cites here is the case of criminal law (200), the same subject that introduces the claim above taken from *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.<sup>97</sup>

What I intend to do in this final section is not to elaborate on Adorno’s own example in *History and Freedom* but instead consider Angela Davis’ analysis of the modern prison to try to bring the context of universal fungibility that constitutes Adorno’s notion of ‘wrong life’ in the inversions of means and ends and the embeddedness of instrumental rationality in opaque social and economic structures into sharper relief. The idea here is to give a concrete example that synthesises parts of the discussion I have pursued up to this point that might not be immediately evident and is meant in some way to demonstrate the expansiveness of instrumental reason by bringing the analysis of the exchange principle and the more obvious horror of Auschwitz together. I also hope that it might uncover thematic connections between

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<sup>97</sup> The context of the quotation above forms part of a discussion of Sade’s *Juliette* and the line immediately preceding the quotation is the following: “The justice of bad rule is not quite so consistent as to reward crime alone” (*DE*, 118).

Adorno and Davis, which, as far as I am aware, seems to be largely unexplored. In addition, Davis' work will also help broaden Adorno out from his time by showing how extensive the account of instrumental reason can be in encompassing various forms of racism beyond Nazi antisemitism, as well as showing its relevance within our present (and also generally, broader) historical and cultural contexts. Of course, it would be possible to do something similar to this by examining other atrocities but the prison strikes me as much more interesting because it is a pervasive and highly integrated feature of modern societies – an institution – stretching back for more than 200 years that we assume is necessary but do not tend to question. This focus on a 'relatively marginal case' that is nevertheless deeply integrated into modern societies seems to me to be a distinctive way of elaborating on the embeddedness of instrumental reason that is not in terms of an 'event' like Auschwitz, which could be explained away as an historical 'aberration' or a kind of deep social substrate like the exchange-relationship, which can be hand-waved as too broad and which also 'hurts' because as I shall argue, demonstrates uncomfortable connections.

Davis, herself a student of Adorno, Horkheimer and Marcuse,<sup>98</sup> argues that the 'prison industry'<sup>99</sup> or 'prison-industrial complex'<sup>100</sup> operates according to a formalising and instrumentalising rationality that reduces human beings to fungibility as part of the normal functioning of modern economies in 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century liberal democracies. What she describes under the name of the 'prison industrial complex' is itself complemented by already existing forms of dehumanisation. One such form of dehumanisation inheres in the status of the prisoner as involving a forfeiture of their status as a 'full' human being or citizen through the loss of rights and liberties, which she argues can easily itself come to be taken as evidence that full humanity was already lacking. In 'Race and Criminalization', Davis argues that failure to read structural racism into the disproportionate numbers of black Americans in prison, through insistence on the individualistic liberal notion that racism is a 'matter of the heart', for instance, is likely to result in the belief that these statistics are "proof of an assumed black monopoly on

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<sup>98</sup> Marcuse was Davis' doctoral advisor and in an interview she credits him alongside Adorno as two of the most important influences on her own thought and political activism, noting that part of the latter involved her producing a pirate edition of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* because Adorno and Horkheimer would not republish it (Davis, 1998, 316 - 317). Müller-Doohm notes that Davis was also a student at Adorno's regular philosophy seminars focused on discussing *Negative Dialectics* in 1967 (2005, 440).

<sup>99</sup> I do not discuss Adorno and Horkheimer's concept of the 'culture industry' in what follows – or indeed, much at all anywhere in the thesis – but it would also be possible to draw parallels with Adorno and Horkheimer's idea and what Davis discusses under the name 'prison industry', including the role of the culture industry within the prison industry. For instance, a brief consideration of the role that the consumption of images of the prison may play in the widespread acceptance of the proliferation of prisons can be found early in *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (Davis, 2003, 17 - 19).

<sup>100</sup> These two terms will be used interchangeably. Davis tends to use the former in 'Race and Criminalization' and the latter more often in *Are Prisons Obsolete?*.

criminality” (1998, 62).<sup>101</sup> Additionally, I do not have space to discuss this here but Davis is keen to point out that the rise of imprisonment as the primary form of punishment was grounded on Enlightenment ideals about the individual as the bearer of fundamental rights and liberties (2003, 43 – 44). In this way imprisonment involves the removal of what constitutes the human being while simultaneously acknowledging it through that removal, in Hegel’s sense that the punishment acknowledges the rationality of the individual (*EPR*, §100). One element that distinguishes Davis’ account of punishment from Hegel’s is the legacy of slavery and racism, which tend to mark out certain groups – slaves, prisoners and especially black prisoners – as somehow already less than human, evidenced by their membership of these overlapping groups in the first place.<sup>102</sup>

Alongside this is the dehumanising structural racism embedded within the legal system through its historical relationship with U.S. policies of segregation and convict labour, which led to the mass incarceration of black Americans following the abolition of slavery in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries and their continued use as free labour through the convict lease system, as Davis points out: “With the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment, slavery was abolished for all except convicts – and in a sense the exclusion from citizenship accomplished by the slave system has persisted within the US prison system” (Davis, 1998, 72). While the introduction of the 13th amendment to the US constitution formally ended all practices of slavery and emancipated black slaves, in reality indentured labour of black Americans was reintroduced through so-called ‘Black Codes’ and the successor ‘Jim Crow’ laws that codified the criminalisation of certain activities but only if they were performed by black people. These included acts such as vagrancy, absence from work, the possession of firearms, being drunk and handling money carelessly. Such activities were punishable by imprisonment, where prisoners would be required to undertake hard labour, sometimes even on the same plantations that they had previously worked on as slaves (Davis, 2003, 28 – 29). It is not hard to imagine how easy it might be for a recently freed slave to be convicted of vagrancy, for instance, having just been cut loose from indentured labour, especially in the context of the continued and widespread persistence of racist attitudes.

In *Are Prisons Obsolete?* Davis paraphrases the historian Alex Lichtenstein, who argues that the use of convict labour in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries should not be understood

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<sup>101</sup> A corollary of Adorno’s argument in ‘Mélange’ and also expressed in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: “But since the liberal theory assumes that unity among men is already in principle established, it serves as an apologia for existing circumstances” (*DE*, 169).

<sup>102</sup> For Hegel’s own views on slavery as resting on the false treatment of humans as merely natural beings, see *EPR*, §57.

as an irrational regression but an efficient and in a certain sense “rational deployment of racist strategies to swiftly achieve industrialisation of the South” and so in fact part of that region’s first steps toward modernity (Davis, 2003, 34 – 35). The racist institution of slavery and its replacement in the use of convict labour involved the dehumanisation of the individual by stripping away their particularity and abstractedly drawing correlations primarily on the basis of a perceived fundamental difference, supposedly visible in skin colour, which then facilitated further reductions of the human being marked out by this difference to something more abstract: a prisoner, a labourer or a resource. Davis argues that the “structures of exploitation” present in slavery and the convict lease system continue to present themselves today, “in the patterns of privatization, and, more generally, in the wide-ranging corporatization of punishment that has produced a prison industrial complex” (36). She argues that processes of rationalisation sustain the use of the prison today in two, complementary senses: firstly, through the reduction of the human being to an exchangeable quantity; and secondly, through the economic relations of the ‘prison industry’. Together, these facilitate the integration of what she says have in advance been “implicitly declared to be a human surplus” into the opaque, rationalised network of late capitalist economies and political structures (91).

To take these in turn: firstly, Davis argues that our ways of rationalising the use and necessity of the prison tends not only to miss the ‘paradox’ at the heart of the prison – that the expansion of prisons is posed as the antidote to crime while at the same time generating further conditions and justifications for imprisonment – but also the conditions for and the racism that sustains it.<sup>103</sup> Adorno argues in *Negative Dialectics* that as a form of administrative rationality, the law treats everyone alike but in the sense of diminishing or erasing difference. This form of equality at the same time serves to promote inequality and he argues that at the level of administration, law raises instrumental rationality to the level of violence, which always lurks behind it (*ND*, 309). In ‘Race and Criminalization’, Davis argues along these lines that anti-crime debates tend to take place within a “reified mathematical realm” in which the prioritisation of thinking in abstract, calculative terms elevates the statistical evidence of exponential prison numbers and the disproportionate amount of black prisoners over the realities that these figures represent by considering the real human beings as “fetishistically exchangeable with the crimes they have already committed or will allegedly commit in the

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<sup>103</sup> “race provides a silent justification for the technological expansion of law enforcement, which, in turn, intensifies racist arrest and incarceration practices. This skyrocketing punishment industry, whose growth is silently but powerfully sustained by the persistence of racism, creates an economic demand for more jails and prisons and thus for similarly spiraling criminalization practices, which, in turn, fuels the fear of crime” (Davis, 1998, 70). Davis credits the insight that prison tends “to serve as its own enduring justification” to Foucault (71).

future” (Davis, 1998, 62 – 63).<sup>104</sup> The type of thinking that Davis highlights here is indicative of a formalising rationality, which strips away anything particular to the individuals represented by the statistics, obscuring the complex political realities that cause these statistics to emerge. In mistakenly reading complex, individual lives as though they are primarily a calculable quantity, each individual is treated as though they are simply exchangeable with any other prisoner or even simply reducible to abstract representations of crimes they have committed or will supposedly commit in the future.<sup>105</sup>

Secondly, Davis argues that modern economic ‘needs’ sustain the use and expansion of the prison today in what she refers to as the ‘prison industry’ or the ‘prison industrial complex’. Just as in the 19<sup>th</sup> century a confluence of ideological and economic ‘needs’ structured the use of the prison through the convict lease system, the same is true of today. The prison and its expansion, Davis argues, has become a hugely important component of the U.S. economy, an economy that incentivises and is built upon the ability to generate large profits and is reliant on specific forms of dehumanisation in order to do so. In *Are Prisons Obsolete?*, Davis says that the term ‘prison industrial complex’ was coined to challenge the notion that rising prison populations were the result of rising crime and instead argue that the proliferation of prisons in the latter half of the 20th century and early 21st century has instead been driven by ideologies of racism and the pursuit of profit (Davis, 2003, 84):

as the U.S. prison system expanded,<sup>106</sup> so did corporate involvement in construction, provision of goods and services, and use of prison labor. Because of the extent to which prison building and operation began to attract vast amounts of capital – from the construction industry to food and health care provision – in a way

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<sup>104</sup> One of the examples of this kind of ‘reified mathematical’ thinking that Davis gives is the following passage produced by the Heritage Foundation: “If the 55 percent of the estimated 800,000 current state and federal prisoners who are violent offenders were subject to serving 85 percent of their sentence, and *assuming that those violent offenders would have committed 10 violent crimes a year while on the street*, then the number of crimes prevented each year by truth in sentencing would be 4,000,000. That would be over 2/3rds of the 6,000,000 violent crimes reported” (Wooten, n.d., quoted in Davis, 1998, 63, emphasis added).

<sup>105</sup> Alongside the Enlightenment ideals mentioned above, another Enlightenment assumption at the basis of the move to imprisonment as the primary form of punishment was the notion that the individual was capable of continual improvement (Davis, 2003, 51). The purely administrative reasoning of prisoners as statistics exchangeable with supposed future crimes that Davis cites in ‘Race and Criminalization’ by contrast seem to tacitly assume that reform of the prisoner will not occur. Davis herself discusses various signs that suggest that the idea of self-reform has been all but abandoned in practice (49 – 50; 56 – 59).

<sup>106</sup> According to statistics collected by the U.S. Bureau of Justice, between 1925 – 2013 the prison population in the U.S. expanded from about 100,000 to around 1.6 million, with the vast majority of that increase occurring from the 1980s onwards (The Sentencing Project, 2024). Davis notes that at present (in 2003, when her book was written), the prison population of the U.S. made up more than 20% of the global prison population (Davis, 2003, 11).

that recalled the emergence of the military industrial complex, we began to refer to a ‘prison industrial complex’. (Davis, 2003, 12)

Although the structures are in many ways very different, she notes that we can draw an obvious parallel between 19<sup>th</sup> century exploitation of prison labour and the economic context of the prison industry, stating that: “While the convict lease system was legally abolished, its structures of exploitation have re-emerged in the patterns of privatization, and, more generally, in the wide-ranging corporatization of punishment that has produced a prison industrial complex” (37). The most obvious example of this prison industry is the use of private prisons, which are paid a fee for each inmate they house by the federal, state and county governments, “which means that private companies have a stake in retaining prisoners as long as possible, and in keeping facilities filled” (95). However, private prisons, Davis points out, are a somewhat misleading example because prisons are not a separate set of markets but are intimately linked to the general economy, where many recognisable corporations provide products for use in prisons whether public or private and “are so thoroughly saturated with the profit-producing products and services of private corporations that the distinction is not as meaningful as one might suspect” (98 – 100).<sup>107</sup>

Davis argues that the rapid increase of black prisoners in the aftermath of slavery<sup>108</sup> set the stage for acceptance of the majority black populations of prisons that we see today, where either as low-cost labour or the consumption of commodities that are made by companies specifically for prisons, prisoners are not primarily considered individual human beings undergoing a process of reform but are instead regarded primarily as a source for profit (Davis, 2003, 94 – 95). In ‘Race and Criminalization’, Davis describes the wider role that modern, global economic relations and the pursuit of profit have in the perpetuation of a punishment industry that she argues is at the same time also an effective criminalisation industry. She points out that corporations under globalised trade agreements withdraw from the US to find cheaper labour pools elsewhere, which tends to leave communities in conditions of poverty, which itself tends to produce candidates for prisons. Prisons themselves then become expanding sources of jobs and wealth in the spaces left by this movement of global capital. Additionally, the expanded prisons then come to provide a certain amount of cheap labour and potential profit themselves (Davis, 1998, 67).

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<sup>107</sup> Private prisons are also a misleading example because at present they only house around 8% of the U.S. prison population (Sawyer & Wagner, 2024).

<sup>108</sup> Davis cites Mary Ellen Curtin’s study of Alabama prisons, which found that before the 400,000 black slaves in Alabama were emancipated, 99% of the penitentiary population of that state was white but within a short period of time following the end of slavery the prison population became overwhelmingly black (Davis, 2003, 29).

The important point I want to draw out from Davis' analysis with respect to what I have argued in the previous two sections is that the prison seems to be a site in which the instrumentalisation and formalisation of human beings is present both in the form of racism as well as in the reduction of human life to exchange value, both appearing here in a mutually reinforcing manner. Apart from being a further demonstration of the embeddedness of instrumental rationality within the social and economic organisation of contemporary societies, Davis' analysis is remarkable because what she describes occurs under conditions of what Adorno describes as 'formal freedom' and additionally because it is ongoing today.<sup>109</sup> As destructive and contradictory as the prison industry Davis describes might be, its presence and continued expansion involves a process of rational decision making in the instrumental sense. If the primary and motivating purpose of a company operating under the exchange principle and pursuit of surplus value is to achieve profit, then the reduction of the human beings who work for that company or consume its products to a calculable 'resource' or 'labour pool' makes sense on the basis of an instrumental rationality that is embedded within contemporary life.

The reduction of human beings to their exchange value in the context of the prison is perhaps most cynically expressed in the corporate literature that Davis reproduces at one point in her essay, from which she lists some of the manifold products produced through prison labour in the U.S. in nine Californian prisons since 1994:

Under the auspices of the Joint Venture Program, work now being performed on prison grounds includes computerized telephone messaging, dental apparatus assembly, computer data entry, plastic parts fabrication, electronic component manufacturing at the Central California Women's facility at Chowchilla, security glass manufacturing, swine production, oak furniture manufacturing, and the production of stainless steel tanks and equipment. (Davis, 1998, 68)

She then goes on to quote from a brochure that promotes the various benefits to companies of using prison labour, which really amounts to zero benefits, securities or rights for the employee (in this case a prisoner). Part of the brochure entreats businesses to see prison labour as a sensible, rational decision: "If you're a business leader planning expansion, considering relocation because of a deficient labor pool, starting a new enterprise, look into

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<sup>109</sup> Davis' book was written in 2003 but the imprisonment trends that she cites have barely changed. Data gathered between 2020 – 2024 shows that there are currently almost 2 million people total or 355 people per 100,000 residents incarcerated in the United States, which represents a roughly 500% increase in the prison population over 40 years and there are 4.8 black Americans incarcerated to each white American (The Sentencing Project, 2024). Over 1/3 of all those currently incarcerated in the U.S. are black, despite black Americans only making up 14% of the overall population (Sawyer & Wagner, 2024).

the benefits of using inmate labor”. Here, the reduction of the human being to a resource or source of profit is directly visible as a form of economically motivated rationalisation and dehumanisation that – to quote the brochure again – just “makes good business sense” (California Corrections Department, n.d., quoted in Davis, 1998, 68).

Another reason to draw on Davis’ analysis of the prison is because Adorno’s argument that the underlying logic of instrumental reason and formal integration somehow unites systems as seemingly disparate as the capitalist division of labour and the horrific violence at Auschwitz can make some readers baulk at what seems on the surface to be an inappropriate comparison.<sup>110</sup> However, the point is not that the dehumanisation of the worker in service of abstract economic goals in liberal democracies is a directly comparable form of brutal violence to genocide but rather that the underlying logic of both are primarily characterised by the embeddedness of instrumental rationality and its reflection at the level of practice. Yet, in addition to this, we should also be aware that they can and sometimes do come uncomfortably close on the basis of this shared connection. I have already discussed one such instance above in Adorno’s discussion of the liberal notion of tolerance and integration in *Minima Moralia* but more generally, it should also not be forgotten that liberal democracy seemingly proved no obvious bulwark against fascism coming to power in Germany in the 1930s, something about which the Frankfurt School were painfully aware.<sup>111</sup>

Furthermore, we should not underestimate the brutality of imprisonment either, both in its history and its current form because as Davis notes, “we take prisons for granted but are often afraid to face the realities they produce” (2003, 15). With that in mind, the network of economic relations and interests that Davis describes as characteristic of the modern, U.S. prison industrial complex are strikingly similar to a description given by Primo Levi of the rationalised economic network that grew up to facilitate and then became mutually interdependent with the concentration camps. In his description, Levi even highlights presumptions about the complete fungibility of the incarcerated on the part of their tormentors:

Especially during the last years of the war, the Lagers constituted an extensive and complex system which profoundly compenetrated the daily life of the country; one

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<sup>110</sup> For instance, see Villa (2019, 82) and Herf (2012, 87).

<sup>111</sup> The writing on the wall regarding the need to flee Germany for Horkheimer came not just with the Nazi party’s election but strong indications in the years leading up to 1933 that there was a sizeable, widespread sympathy towards fascism on the part of blue and white-collar workers, revealed through a large scale study led by Erich Fromm: “In analysing the interviews attempts were made to explore workers’ attitudes towards authority. It turned out that members of the left-wing parties during the Weimar republic were often just as fixated on authority as members of the middle-class or Nazi sympathizers. This finding forced Horkheimer and his co-workers to recognize the latent authoritarianism of both manual and non-manual workers before 1933. It was evident that in all likelihood only a minority would resist a victory of the National Socialists” (Müller-Doohm, 2005, 174 – 175).

has with good reason spoken of the *univers concentrationnaire*, but it was not a closed universe. Small and large industrial companies, agricultural combines, agencies, and arms factories drew profits from the practically free labor supplied by the camps. *Some exploited the prisoners pitilessly, accepting the inhuman (and also stupid) principle of the SS according to which one prisoner was worth another, and if the work killed him he could immediately be replaced*; others, a few, cautiously tried to alleviate their sufferings. Still other industries - or perhaps the same ones - made money by supplying the Lagers themselves: lumber, building materials, cloth for the prisoners' striped uniforms, dehydrated vegetables for the soup, etc. The crematoria ovens themselves were designed, built, assembled, and tested by a German company, Topf of Wiesbaden [...]. It is hard to believe that the personnel of these companies did not realize the significance of the quality or quantity of the merchandise and installations being commissioned by the SS command units. The same can be, and has been, said with regard to the supplies of the poison employed in the gas chambers at Auschwitz: the product, substantially hydrocyanic acid, had already been used for many years for pest control in the holds of boats, but the abrupt increase in orders beginning with 1942 could scarcely go unnoticed. It must have aroused doubts, and certainly did, but they were stifled by fear, the desire for profit, the blindness and willed stupidity that we have mentioned, and in some cases (probably few) by fanatical Nazi obedience. (Levi, 2003, 32, emphasis added)

Levi's account of the way in which the network of concentration camps and wider economy of Germany compenetrated each other is more than just similar to Davis' account of the modern prison industrial complex but rather, *it is quite literally an account of a prison industrial complex*, down to their shared emphasis on the systems not comprising a closed universe or separate set of markets that were reliant on a workforce already constituted as fungible by forms of dehumanisation (including racism) and treated in practice as radically exchangeable. Once again, I am not striving to make some kind of one-to-one comparison between the concentration camp and the 21<sup>st</sup> century U.S. prison system. To do so would, of course, ignore highly significant differences, the chief of which is the presence of mass extermination and all sorts of extremely inhumane conditions in the former. Another important difference is that the racism that underpinned the use of concentration camps was explicit in a way that the structural racism that Davis analyses in the modern prison is not, insofar as the Jews taken to the camps and murdered there were taken and murdered there explicitly *because* they were Jews, according to

dictates issuing from the highest levels of government.<sup>112</sup> Though, again, the racialised convict labour of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries was itself legally codified and it is likely that many of the individuals involved in the companies Levi describes that drew labour from or supplied products to the camps were, as he stated, most likely motivated less by antisemitism than more mundane concerns bound up with work and the running of a business.

I want to consider one final example that illustrates the way in which Davis' work can elaborate the connections described in Adorno's account of the embeddedness of instrumental reason in objective structures of modern societies regardless of political rule before closing out this chapter. In an aphorism titled 'Passing muster' in *Minima Moralia*, Adorno begins by considering the instrumentalising gaze of the person with an eye to business: "In looking [at others] with a view to deciding how well they fit in with his intentions, he reduces them from the outset to objects: some are usable, others an obstacle" (*MM*, §85). The attitude evinced by the "so-called man of affairs" is taken by Adorno to be indicative of the difficulty in modern settings, especially those of business and the workplace, to maintain a relationship to others that does not implicitly encourage actually viewing or relating to them as other human beings, rather than as "functions of one's will":

This way of reacting, however, the pattern of all administration and 'personnel policy', tends of its own accord, and in advance of any education of the political will or commitment to exclusive programmes, towards Fascism. Anyone who has once made it his concern to judge people's suitability sees those judged, by a kind of technological necessity, as insiders or outsiders, as belonging or alien to the race, as accomplices or victims. (§85)

The functionalising gaze of the businessman, arising according to a tendency that inheres in a state of affairs that itself integrates all materials as functions, suggests a line between the quantification of human beings as a standing resource and the dehumanisation in which each person in the camps can be made at once a worker, a victim and sometimes, as a kapo, simultaneously an accomplice.

In the aphorism, where this process in which the gaze falls upon human beings as utterly fungible in their reduction to changeable functions and interchangeable with each other ends,

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<sup>112</sup> But even here the difference is not entirely sharp. Davis himself was arrested on false charges during the operation of the FBI's counterintelligence programme (COINTELPRO), of which J. Edgar Hoover was the architect. COINTELPRO would later be publicly exposed and acknowledged as having targeted mostly left-wing and black activists, including through false imprisonment and assassinations. At the time of Davis' arrest and imprisonment "police, assisted by federal agents, had killed or assassinated over 20 black revolutionaries in the Black Panther Party" as part of the programme. After spending 16 months in prison, Davis was acquitted of all charges (James, 1998, 11 – 12).

according to Adorno, evokes the medical language of the 'specimen' that Adorno uses in *Metaphysics: Concepts and Problems*, as well as the reality of the transfiguration of the victims of the camps into bodies for medical experimentation that this language alludes to: "The last stage", Adorno says, "is the medical examination to decide between capacity for work and liquidation" (*MM*, §85). In *Are Prisons Obsolete?*, Davis says that while corporate ties to the punishment industry became prevalent during the 1980s, prisoners had always been considered a source of profit or a standing resource and so dehumanised and reducible to their function. This included conceptualising them as sources of labour or profit but also in the link between universities and prisons where prisoners have served as subjects for medical research. One such example of medical research that Davis cites was performed by the dermatologist Albert Kligman, who conducted hundreds of experiments on U.S. prisoners that exposed them to high doses of dioxin, a toxic component used in chemical weaponry and in the process he also trained many other researchers to use what would later be recognised as unethical methods (Davis, 2003, 89). Commenting in an interview in 1966, Kligman explained that during this research on prisoners what he saw was not individual human beings that he was placing in danger but merely candidates for experimentation. Davis quotes Kligman, who states that when he looked out across the prison, instead of seeing individual human beings, "All I saw before me was acres of skin. It was like a farmer seeing a fertile field for the first time" (Hornblum, 1998, quoted in Davis, 2003, 90). Each prisoner was considered so fungible that from Kligman's rationalised, instrumental point of view they were entirely indistinguishable – just a mass of skin to be subjected to experimentation, made possible because prisoners had already been subjected to a logic of dehumanisation that easily facilitated a further reduction to their collective skin.

The fault in the instrumentalising and dominating gaze of the 'man of affairs' that Adorno discusses in §85 of *Minima Moralia* lies less in his failure to reason correctly or some individual moral failing, so much as that the world he operates in guarantees that such action seems to be both natural and rational. To reason instrumentally is not itself the issue, as this was always a power of reason as such, as Horkheimer described it but rather the entrenchment of instrumental rationality in the underlying 'life' of social and economic conditions, which reproduces itself in human activity and in which:

Even injustice, hatred and destruction are regulated, automatic procedures, since the formalization of reason has caused all goals to lose, as delusion, any claim to necessity and objectivity. Magic is transferred to mere activity, to means – in short,

to industry. The formalization of reason is only the intellectual expression of mechanized production. (*DE*, 104)<sup>113</sup>

The issue, then, is rather when the formalising and instrumentalising tendencies of reason take over and begin to coercively formalise and incentivise the cold reduction of human beings to fungibility and where it finds no defence against the dehumanising logic of racism, ‘subjectively’ rationalised as race-science and eugenics and often justified through erroneous appeal to false notions of objective reason.

But even beyond such explicit reasoning, Adorno’s picture of ‘wrong life’ is one in which modern conditions regularly implicate us in the dehumanisation of others, either directly or indirectly, on a day-to-day basis. This is because modern life has become so complex and globally interconnected with the suffering and dehumanisation of others, to an extent that we can become more or less aware of but which we are generally impotent in the face of and so instead often need to find ways to suppress or disavow. For instance, in the prison, which lies below the surface of society like some barely acknowledged unconscious layer, “a black hole into which the detritus of contemporary capitalism is deposited” (Davis, 2003, 16). This unconscious layer is today so intimately connected with the economy that it requires an ever-increasing statistical percentage of ‘human detritus’ of whom society must divest itself. From the perspective of the society within which it is embedded, to dismantle what Davis describes as the prison industry would seem to be irrational, insofar as it would constitute a devastating act of social and economic harm to the continuance of society, even if “in its bad, existing form” (*MCP*, 113).

As we are implicated in a global context of universal fungibility, in which we are sometimes dimly aware that our daily activity relies on the exploitative inequality of the exchange principle, where a seemingly innocent purchase of goods has a high chance of relying on hidden networks and mechanisms of oppression involving people on the other side of the world, so we are implicated in what Adorno calls a universal context of ‘guilt’. In this context of guilt, “One is pushed into a form of forgetfulness” not only due to the embeddedness of instrumental rationality but because it would be overwhelming and unbearable were we really

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<sup>113</sup> For this reason, I am not sure what to make of the following claim by Finlayson: “Adorno is a Marxist and believes that capitalism – the process of the reification of things and persons by which concrete use-values are reduced to abstract exchange-values – is nefarious. However, he departs from Marx insofar as he holds that capitalism is only symptomatic of a more fundamental evil. For Adorno, the underlying cause of radical evil is not socio-economic: it resides in the form of rationality itself” (Finlayson, 2003, 2). This seems to me to be too one-sided and also conflicts with statements Adorno makes to the contrary, such as when he says: “Anyone who traces de-formation to metaphysical processes rather than to the conditions of material production is a purveyor of ideologies” (*ND*, 284).

able to know how our daily activities contribute to or fail to ameliorate the perpetuation of the suffering others and recognise that it was them and not we who were candidates for the prison, the concentration camp or the modern equivalent of the workhouse, which we only escaped by statistical luck (*MCP*, 113). The problem that stands at the centre of Adorno's reflections on ethics and that I now move on to consider, then, is how life as this condition within which all individual actions take place can be lived, a variation on the traditional central question of moral philosophy: 'what ought I to do?'. The point I have tried to emphasise throughout this chapter is the *embeddedness* of instrumental reason into the organisation of modern societies as forming a totality. The condition of modern life as I have tried to describe it is what is characterised by Adorno as 'Wrong Life' or 'Damaged Life', as the subtitle of *Minima Moralia* refers to it, which we of necessity contribute to either through acting, which always minimally involves a manner that perpetuates the wrong state of things but also through refraining from attempting to right it by inaction (Freycenhausen, 2013, 61).

### Chapter 3. Living Wrongly: The ‘Wrong Life’ Claim and Moral Philosophy

In the previous chapter I attempted to set out and justify Adorno’s description of the modern world as ‘wrong life’ as the entrenchment of instrumental rationality in the social and economic framework, within which the individual is embedded and functionalised. In this chapter, I intend to focus on the other part of the Wrong Life claim: ‘living rightly’. The discussion will explore the supposed impossibility of living rightly due to the way that individual action inevitably reproduces the underlying structures of wrong life, first by considering the Wrong Life claim in its original context in *Minima Moralia* and then Adorno’s concerted attempt to revisit and think through the claim in the context of moral philosophy in his later lecture series *Problems of Moral Philosophy*. In particular, I argue that Adorno accepts central Hegelian insights to do with the social and historical embeddedness and emergence of the individual subjectivity that is the focus of Kant’s moral philosophy, which Adorno considers to be the most philosophically rigorous and consistent attempt to theorise ‘living rightly’.

In the first section (3.1), I briefly consider the relationship that *Minima Moralia* and Adorno’s thought more generally has to moral philosophy in order to set out the context in which the Wrong Life claim first appears and to anticipate Adorno’s revisiting of the claim in his later discussions of moral philosophy, which I take up in the second half of this chapter. This is undertaken with some consideration of contemporary interpretations of Adorno’s relationship to moral philosophy, as well as his relationship to moral philosophy in terms of three of Adorno’s most important philosophical interlocutors, each of which he discusses in the context of the Wrong Life claim at some point: Hegel, Kant and in the next chapter, Nietzsche.

With the broader context set out by these preliminary remarks and the characterisation of wrong life provided in the previous chapter, in the next section (3.2) I go on to discuss the claim that ‘wrong life cannot be lived rightly’ as it appears in its original context, which is at the end of the aphorism ‘Refuge for the homeless’ in *Minima Moralia*. I attempt to expand on the problems that Adorno indicates in this aphorism in terms of the specific contemporary problem that forms its subject matter: living in a home. This expansion attempts to consider the ways in which the individual’s choices are always undertaken against the background of an exchange society in which the ability to ‘feel at home’ is only possible on the basis that the ‘universal right’ to feel at home is contingent on exclusion, alongside affective distance in the form of ideological rationalisations of wrong life. Following this, I connect these concerns to the broader problem that the Wrong Life claim captures in terms of what I described at the end of the last chapter as the ‘context of guilt’, in which the individual is enmeshed and necessarily

reproduces through their actions by introducing and briefly considering what has come to be called Adorno's 'New Categorical Imperative'.

I do this in order to then transition in the next section (3.3) to Adorno's re-contextualisation of the Wrong Life claim as the central problem of moral philosophy in his lecture series *Problems of Moral Philosophy*. Following a brief comparison of Hegel's distinction between 'morality' [*Moralität*] and 'ethical life' [*Sittlichkeit*], I then discuss Adorno's distinction between 'morality' and 'ethics' in the earlier parts of *Problems of Moral Philosophy* before comparing Adorno's terms with Hegel's. I argue that Adorno's notion of 'ethics' does not map onto Hegel's notion of 'ethical life' but rather that the Adornian counterpart to 'ethical life' is actually 'wrong life', which I argue is heavily indebted to and an inversion of Hegel's notion of ethical life. By contrast, it will be argued that Adorno and Hegel have a shared association of the term 'morality' with Kant's moral philosophy, which represents the strongest challenge to Adorno's Wrong Life claim through its insistence on abstraction from empirical content – its formalism – and its insistence that for action to be moral it must be undertaken in conformity *with* duty and *from* duty alone, regardless of any consequences – its rigorism.

This sets out the foundations for understanding Adorno's claim that 'wrong life cannot be lived rightly' as expressing a moral dialectic between Kantian and Hegelian ethics in the final section (3.4). In this section, I argue that Adorno shares with Hegel his account of the historical and intersubjective emergence and embeddedness of the modern individual, informing his notion of 'wrong life', whereas Kant's moral philosophy as an extremely rigorous account of individual rationality, represents a critical challenge to Hegel's account of historical rationality when the two come into conflict in the individual's pursuit of 'living rightly'. I end by considering this dialectic in terms of Adorno's interpretation of Ibsen's play *The Wild Duck* in *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, which he reads as expressing an antinomy between Hegelian and Kantian approaches to ethics and which he suggests is captured by the Wrong Life claim, which he explicitly invokes. I do not say a great deal about Ibsen's play or Adorno's interpretation of it here beyond what I have indicated because I provide an interpretation of a similar, though importantly different dramatisation of an ethical subject trying to perform right actions in wrong conditions in Masaki Kobayashi's *The Human Condition* in the next chapter. Instead, this chapter attempts to bring together the social critique of Adorno's earlier version of the claim in *Minima Moralia* with his re-contextualisation of the claim explicitly in terms of the categories of moral philosophy, especially with reference to Kant and Hegel, that he pursues in his later lecture series *Problems of Moral Philosophy*.

### 3.1 *Minima Moralia* and Moral Philosophy

Leaving aside his much later lecture series *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, amongst Adorno's major works *Minima Moralia*'s title seems to mark it out as the work most likely to be concerned with moral philosophy. Rather than a continuous argument, *Minima Moralia* is comprised of reflections on various topics in the form of aphorisms and while some of these reflections relate to common subjects of moral philosophy, such as happiness (*MM*, §38), lying (§9), amorality (§60) and the relationship between reason and desire (§79), the nature of these reflections are themselves anything but reflective of standard approaches to moral philosophy. Of course, this raises questions about what 'standard approaches' are supposed to amount to and in what sense Adorno's approach thereby differs, a question that I return to in the final section of this chapter. For now, it will suffice to remark that the view that Adorno does not take anything like a standard approach to moral philosophy is also suggested by Rose, who argues that Adorno is concerned with morality in a manner more comparable to Nietzsche's various critical writings on morality. Rose notes more generally that Nietzsche's influence is prevalent throughout Adorno's work and in no text is it more conspicuous than in *Minima Moralia* (Rose, 1978, 18 - 19). The title of *Minima Moralia* is one of several inversions that occur throughout the book, in this case a play on *Magna Moralia*, itself the title of a book traditionally considered to be one of Aristotle's works on moral philosophy.<sup>114</sup> The fragmentary, aphoristic style of the text is partly reflective of a wider, anti-systematic approach to philosophy that Adorno shared with Nietzsche and the former's indebtedness to the works of the latter is itself expressed straight away in Adorno's description of his own work as a "melancholy science" (*MM*, 15),<sup>115</sup> with this too being an inversion of the title of another book, this time Nietzsche's *The Gay Science*.<sup>116</sup> While I consider Nietzsche's influence on Adorno's approach to moral philosophy in the next chapter, I think that Rose's comparison to Nietzsche is only part of the picture and that he shares as much or more in common with Kant and especially Hegel in his approach.

Given what I have said so far, however, Rose is clearly right that Nietzsche's influence is especially conspicuous in *Minima Moralia* and at the very least this is true in the way the book is structured into numbered aphorisms. Bernstein attempts to succinctly summarise the

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<sup>114</sup> The authorship of *Magna Moralia* is disputed. For discussion about its authorship, see Cooper (1973) and Rowe's (1975) response to Cooper.

<sup>115</sup> Itself informing the name of Rose's book (1978, ix).

<sup>116</sup> See Rose for discussion of Adorno's use of 'ironic inversion' throughout *Minima Moralia* (Rose, 1978, 16 - 18). Apart from the examples listed here, she also notes several others including Kierkegaard with "The Health unto Death" (*MM*, §36), Freud with "This side of the pleasure principle" (§37) and Hegel with "The whole is the false" (§29).

approach taken in the 153 aphorisms or ‘fragments’ that make up the text of *Minima Moralia* by saying that: “Each fragment offers an objective expression of the subjective experience of ethical life in late modernity” (Bernstein, 2001, 36). Similarly, Thomson also emphasises the subjective but also the moral philosophical character of Adorno’s method in *Minima Moralia* as “explicitly grounded not in the detached observations of objective fragments of the social totality, but in the individual’s subjective experience of it and reflection on it” (Thomson, 2006, 91). In this sense, *Minima Moralia* can be understood as a series of reflections on the part of the subject from ‘within’ the ‘wrong life’ that I attempted to give an account of in the previous chapter, although I am not quite sure that these reflections are as consistently of a moral philosophical nature as Thomson suggests (91 – 92). By contrast, Tassone argues against moral readings of Adorno in general, arguing instead that the ethical substance of his work should be understood as bound up with his Hegelianism and Marxism as involving a descriptive or explanatory account of the rift between individual and society (Tassone, 2005, 256). More specifically, his decidedly more Marxist characterisation of *Minima Moralia*, in comparison to those provided by Bernstein and Thomson, summarises Adorno’s work as concerned with making explicit manifestations of class conflict that have moved into the private sphere in modern conditions, “To read and decode them as epiphenomena of the conflict between capital and labour, which is no longer manifested at the macroscopic level, is the task that Adorno sets for himself in the aphoristic reflections of *Minima Moralia*” (257). While I think Tassone’s characterisation is ultimately difficult to defend on certain points to be raised below, I am generally sympathetic to his account, as Adorno does clearly consider the ways in which the antagonisms inherent to modern economies produce insoluble dilemmas at the level of individual experience, which additionally tend to push individuals towards ideological rationalisations of those antagonisms. Something of this position is apparent not least in the aphorism ‘Refuge for the homeless’, which I discuss in the following section and in other aphorisms Adorno will sometimes engage in much more straightforward analyses of objective conditions of the kind he would later express in ‘Late Capitalism or Industrial Society?’.<sup>117</sup> Sections such as these seem more like the explanatory account of class society that Tassone

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<sup>117</sup> For instance: “The naive supposition of an unambiguous development towards increased production is itself a piece of that bourgeois outlook which permits development in only one direction because, integrated into a totality, dominated by quantification, it is hostile to qualitative difference. [...] Perhaps the true society will grow tired of development and, out of freedom, leave possibilities unused, instead of storming under a confused compulsion to the conquest of strange stars” (*MM*, §100).

argues Adorno is primarily concerned with, rather than the conversion of social and political questions into moral ones as Thomson suggests.<sup>118</sup>

While Rose's emphasis on the Nietzschean elements of *Minima Moralia* are immediately apparent in its subtitle and aphoristic structure, Adorno himself claims that the book's method was "schooled" by Hegel, despite the dismissive attitude that he believes Hegel would likely take towards the "isolated" form of aphoristic writing that makes up Adorno's text (*MM*, 16). In particular, *Minima Moralia* attempts to do justice to Hegel's insight expressed in the preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit* that truth is to be gleaned from "looking the negative in the face, and tarrying with it" (*PS*, §32), which involves not merely taking a negative attitude towards a given concept or object from some position "beyond it", which would involve only an external criticism or an 'abstract negation' but instead by recognising the ways in which negativity is always constitutive of "the heart of the matter" under examination itself (*PS*, §59; *MM*, 16). To put it another way, in view of Adorno's comments on Hegel in the 'Dedication', the approach of *Minima Moralia* involves inverting what Adorno takes to be Hegel's typical approach, which prioritises grasping the essence of the social – or 'Spirit' – that moves through the chaotic actions and pursuits of individuals (*PH*, 20 – 36)<sup>119</sup> and instead attempts to grasp something about the nature of subjective experience in the manner in which it is constituted by the contours of contemporary society. That the chaotic, self-interested actions of individuals constitute and are constituted by the historical objectivity that asserts itself "in" and "through" individuals is not disputed by Adorno, nor is Hegel's view that the 'individual' as such is produced through particular historical formations of the social in the first place. What is at issue for Adorno is whether this historical objectivity in the form of Spirit really constitutes some comprehensible 'meaning' to history beyond its antagonism with and towards the individual in societies that have become inherently antagonistic (*HF*, 26 - 27). I return to these questions regarding the history of philosophy later but I have foregrounded them now to emphasise that Adorno wants to supplement and thereby problematise Hegel by emphasising the effects that the objective historical process has at the level of individual experience, which Adorno argues in the 'Dedication' to *Minima Moralia* Hegel considers unimportant. Adorno thinks, holding to Hegel's insight not just in "thought" but also in its "practice", as he believes Hegel did not

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<sup>118</sup> In some ways Tassone's characterisation of *Minima Moralia* is a more appropriate description for the most direct influence on Adorno's book, Horkheimer's 'Dawn', the first of the two books that make up *Dawn and Decline*.

<sup>119</sup> The means by which Spirit develops includes not only the conscious aims of individuals and groups but also, "physical craving, instinct, passion, private interest, as also opinion and subjective conception [...]. This vast congeries of volitions, interests and activities, constitute the instruments and means of the World-Spirit for attaining its object; bringing it to consciousness, and realizing it" (*PH*, 25).

always do, would today involve according more weight to “individual experience than Hegel conceded” (*MM*, 16 – 17).

However, in my view, while this does support Tassone’s account, his interpretation of Adorno more generally tends to underplay Adorno’s emphasis on the moral urgency experienced at the level of subjective experience and the critical element captured by Kant’s moral philosophy, regardless of whether or not moral dilemmas are either theoretically or practically resolvable within wrong life.<sup>120</sup> As stated, Tassone argues that Adorno merely provides a purely amoral and theoretical account of ethics or politics in the manner of Hegel and Marx<sup>121</sup> and against readers who emphasise the role of normativity in Adorno’s thought, chiefly Bernstein (2001), though also Finlayson (2002) and Hammer (2000). Freyenhagen’s (2013) book, which was published after Tassone’s article, would also fall under this. Prior to the publication of his book, Freyenhagen produced a rebuttal of ‘amoral’ readings of Adorno, chiefly Tassone’s (Freyenhagen, 2009). I do not intend to rehearse Freyenhagen’s objections to Tassone here beyond his pointing out that on a fundamental level, the idea of a purely descriptive or explanatory account of anything, let alone social theory, is highly dubious because ‘critical theory’ as it was conceived by Adorno and Horkheimer involves acknowledging that normativity is always implicit in any attempt at description or explanation, even if only at the level of motivation or interest (Freyenhagen, 2009, 42 – 44). While I am sympathetic to Tassone’s view, insofar as my own argument also attempts to place emphasis on the importance of the philosophy of history for Adorno’s reflections on moral philosophy, my worry is that Tassone’s argument ends up eliding the importance Adorno identifies in the critical attitude common to both Kant’s moral philosophy and also Nietzsche’s critique of morality, a topic I will return to in the next chapter.

It is perhaps worth pointing out that Kant and especially his practical philosophy are notable in their absence from *Minima Moralia*, given the importance that is elsewhere placed on him in Adorno’s discussions of moral philosophy and the relevant secondary literature, as well as the emphasis on individual deliberation and action that is the focus of many of the aphorisms in *Minima Moralia*. While there are several references to Kant at various points throughout *Minima Moralia*, most of these appear in the context of discussions regarding aesthetics, rather than ethics. The more substantial discussions of Kant’s moral philosophy instead occur in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* but to a greater extent in Adorno’s later work,

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<sup>120</sup> On whether Adorno thinks that just insight into right action is blocked or whether both insight *and* right action are blocked, see Finlayson (2002), who argues the former and Freyenhagen’s (2011) response to Finlayson, where he argues the latter.

<sup>121</sup> Of course, this itself seems to assume that there is no normative element in Marx either.

especially his two lecture series *Problems of Moral Philosophy* and to some extent *History and Freedom*, as well as in *Negative Dialectics*. *Problems of Moral Philosophy* focuses on Kant's moral philosophy and the Wrong Life claim is there recontextualised as expressing a tension between Kantian and Hegelian ethics, as I will explore following a discussion of the original instance of the Wrong Life claim in *Minima Moralia*.

At points in the following section, it will likely be noticed that Kant's designation of the locus of morality at the level of the will and not "what it effects or accomplishes" (*Groundwork*, 4:393 – 4:394), as stated in the opening pages of the *Groundwork*, can sometimes seem to be an obvious rejoinder to the problems I will raise. In fact, despite criticisms that I will begin to consider in the second half of this chapter, the focus on the will at the expense of any consideration of the empirical grants Kant the rigorism that Adorno believes ultimately leads to unreasonable demands in the context of wrong life on the one hand but which, on the other, is also "more critical, that is, it is more intransigent towards existing circumstances than the seemingly more humane and appealing account of ethics in Hegel's philosophy" and so is "precisely the point at which [Kant's] radicalism appears" (*PMP*, 149). Adorno ultimately agrees with Hegel that individual subjectivity is in the first instance historically emergent and intersubjectively embedded and so "its capacity for experience [...] is in truth much more constitutive than the role idealism ascribed to the transcendental subject, which is itself a profoundly, precritically hypostatized abstraction of individual consciousness" (*OSO*, §11). However, Adorno will also argue that Hegel ultimately ends up affording too little attention to the rationality of the individual subject against the objective rationality of history and the state. Therefore, while the Kantian dualism that places the will in the realm of the 'intelligible' and everything else in the realm of the 'sensible' cannot in the final instance be maintained, Kant's emphasis on the transcendental nature of subjectivity is, according to Adorno, "a reminder that thinking, by virtue of its own immanent elements of universality, transcends its own inalienable individuation" (§11). For now, I will otherwise leave aside any consideration of Kant or possible Kantian objections to the ensuing discussion in the following section, which does not itself refute them, until I turn to Adorno's discussion of Kant's moral philosophy in *Problems of Moral Philosophy* in the second half of the chapter onwards.

### 3.2. ‘Wrong life cannot be lived rightly’ in *Refuge for the Homeless*

It is somewhat difficult to straightforwardly expand on the significance of these various influences on *Minima Moralia* as a whole because the fragmentary structure and style, the range of topics under discussion and the general difficulty of Adorno’s writing produce challenges to identifying a definite position or overall argument in this work. However, from the very beginning of *Minima Moralia*, the concern with the subject matter of moral philosophy is made clear when Adorno states in the ‘Dedication’ that the book “relates to a region that from time immemorial was regarded as the true field of philosophy”, namely the “teaching of the good life”, a region that has since fallen into “intellectual neglect” (*MM*, 15).<sup>122</sup> Yet, Adorno does not seem to consider the positive exposition of ‘the good life’ to be a task that *Minima Moralia* can directly contribute to. In fact, in the later lecture series *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, he refers to *Minima Moralia* as a book not about the ‘good life’ but rather about the ‘bad’ one (*PMP*, 1).

Adorno’s characterisation of his earlier text is meant to express his view that it is not (or at least, no longer) possible to give a positive account of the good life, either prescriptively (how one should act) or descriptively (what the good life might look like). His view is expressed by a claim made in *Minima Moralia* that has rightly been recognised as central to understanding his views on ethics, which is that “Wrong life cannot be lived rightly” (*MM*, §18). This claim occurs at the end of the aphorism titled ‘Refuge for the homeless’, which consists of reflections on various irresolvable problems involved with the right mode of private or individual living in the sense of dwelling, which is to say being ‘at home’ within one’s home or even having a home at all. The specific issues that Adorno engages with in the aphorism are not always easy to follow<sup>123</sup> but in what follows, I first try to give an account of what he calls the ‘arena’ of the problem in general and then attempt to interpret his general reflections just prior to the Wrong Life claim in terms of modern housing conditions. Much of the description will be given at quite a general level with only occasional reference to other literature because my focus here is specifically to make sense of and elaborate on ‘Refuge for the homeless’.

Towards the end of ‘Refuge for the homeless’, Adorno states that today “it is part of morality not to be at home in one’s home. This gives some indication of the difficult relationship in which the individual now stands to his property, as long as he still possesses anything at all”

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<sup>122</sup> In *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, this is put into the somewhat more familiar terms from Chapter 1 in relating it to the separation of scientific knowledge from the realm of meaning and value, which Adorno suggests is somehow intimated by Kant’s separation between practical and theoretical philosophy (*PMP*, 68).

<sup>123</sup> Although Freyenhagen (2013) provides a helpful summary and interpretation of some of these concerns (54 – 55), as does Bernstein (2001, 54 – 56).

(*MM*, §18). Here, Adorno summarises the manner in which even one of the most private aspects of modern life – feeling at home in one’s home – takes on a moral character when it is implicated in a wider social and political context of private property that is ostensibly grounded on some claim to universality (the right to life and a place to call home) but which in reality subsists on benefiting some while disadvantaging others. From this, as he says at the very beginning of the aphorism, “The predicament of private life today is shown by its arena” (§18), indicating that what follows is supposed to be illustrative of a much wider problem facing the individual today. What Adorno means by ‘arena’ refers to both the individual’s private place of dwelling – their home – and the conditions that determine how it is possible to experience and make choices regarding this first sense of ‘arena’ – the conditions I have described as ‘wrong life’. The existence of private property and the individual’s experience of and choices regarding it serve as the illustration of the more general predicament captured by the Wrong Life claim, which also signals the manner in which Adorno treats the realms of morality and politics as very closely connected, if not inextricable (*PMP*, 1), insofar as the choices open to the individual are functionally related to the needs of a society grounded on the exchange principle (O’Connor, 2013, 138 – 139).

This general illustration regards the fact that the existence of private property is in principle supposed to allow each individual a place that they can call and feel at home, yet the current form of property ownership precludes the possibility that everyone is actually able to participate. ‘A Premium Placed on Vileness’, from the first half of Horkheimer’s *Dawn and Decline*, explores similar themes to ‘Refuge for the homeless’. Horkheimer writes that, “This society certainly has available the human and technical means to abolish the most blatant forms of physical wretchedness” and that, “Only property arrangements stand in the way of its realization, i.e., the fact that the huge productive apparatus of mankind must function in the service of a small stratum of exploiters” (*D&D*, 28). That is to say, despite the fact that productive forces are sufficiently developed that we could build a society that provides enough for all without the need for a legal system of private ownership that protects some and excludes others (Freyenhagen, 2013, 55), this system continues to be justified and appears to be necessary only on the basis of principles of self-preservation that were once rational in periods of scarcity but have become increasingly irrational in the face of expanded productive forces and the increased material wealth of modern societies (Tassone, 2005, 264). Adorno’s ‘Refuge for the homeless’ attempts to think through the various ways in which the individual can attempt to feel at home in a system that at once formally acknowledges the universal right to feeling at home, has the technical means to actually realise this right universally by providing everyone

with a home where they could feel at home and yet does not do so. Against the background of these contradictory conditions, actually being able to feel at home in one's home is implicitly bought at the expense of others, who are excluded from this possibility through arbitrary conditions that produce unnecessary precarity and dependence – renting, homelessness – for some to the benefit of others.

The unaffordability of housing stock for those who do not inherit wealth or property means that in order to guarantee oneself a home, one is encouraged to either: 'climb the property ladder', temporarily living in cheaper, possibly inadequate housing "to be thrown away like old food cans" (*MM*, §18) until a profit can be made in order to afford better quality housing; or to buy housing in order to rent out some or all of it and make a profit to afford better quality housing in that way. In the first instance, the goal of 'feeling at home' is made difficult by the need to climb the property ladder in its pursuit, perhaps indefinitely deferring the feeling of being able to finally 'feel at home'. While the second instance relies on denying others the same pursuit of feeling at home by directly fostering conditions of dependence through requiring them to rent, thereby living a temporary and precarious existence dependent on those financially more powerful. Both of these cases involve perpetuating a cycle of precarity and inequality, even if only implicitly in the former case, insofar as one must endure some amount of precarity and inequality in order to at some distant point finally feel at home, if that feeling ever comes at all but also because even this option is still bound up with a system in which some must be more dependent than others.

Even if the feeling of being at home is ever actually achieved then it is nevertheless achieved in the knowledge that others are in various ways excluded from the possibility of enduring even temporary precarity in view of a distant similar hope. Therefore, on the other hand, even if one is able to feel at home, either by inheriting property, succeeding in climbing the property ladder to the point of satisfaction or simply refusing to play the game by trying to make do with whatever private property can be afforded, this 'refuge' is still bought at the cost of the many who are priced out of the home owner market, subject to capricious landlords and estate agents whose stock the unfortunate people enhance and businesses they keep afloat through comparatively extortionate rent and fees, often in exchange for poor quality and temporary accommodation. This is to say nothing of the many homeless, whose utterly precarious existence makes a complete mockery of the idea that it is important to feel at home within one's home when some have no recourse to a dwelling at all within a society that is otherwise materially abundant.

In such a situation, it is not clear what the individual who is actually in a position to make a choice in view of trying to feel at home should do, as to feel at home in such conditions would seem to be undertaken in a spirit of denying the problems of dependence, precarity and homelessness that the world as it is currently arranged enforces on some but not others. Towards the end of ‘Refuge for the Homeless’, Adorno summarises the structure of the dilemma as I have outlined it in the following way:

The trick is to keep in view, and to express, the fact that private property no longer belongs to one, in the sense that consumer goods have become potentially so abundant that no individual has the right to cling to the principle of their limitation; but that one must nevertheless have possessions, if one is not to sink into that dependence and need which serves the blind perpetuation of property relations. But the thesis of this paradox necessarily leads to destruction, a loveless disregard for things which necessarily turns against people too; and the antithesis, no sooner uttered, is an ideology for those wishing with a bad conscience to keep what they have. Wrong life cannot be lived rightly. (*MM*, §18)

On the one hand, to feel at home in a world in which doing so involves ignoring or justifying the fact that baked into that world is the exclusion of others from the possibility of feeling at home or even being in a home at all is only possible in bad conscience. In this context, to own a home and to feel at home in it would involve reinforcing the current shape of the world by denying the problem, either by ignoring it or perhaps through some attempt to justify the current shape of the world and one’s position within it. This could take the form of believing that it is just the way of the world that some will lose out or otherwise believing that those who have homes are deserving of them because they have worked hard for them, for instance, despite the fact that in reality the hardest work often pays too little to easily facilitate home ownership, if at all. This position would be wrong because it simply justifies rather than criticises a bad situation, covering over the ways in which the current arrangement relies on some being disadvantaged in order for others to achieve some comfort. Yet, to purposefully not make oneself at home in light of this knowledge by deliberately renting or living a transitory life would be to make a “wisely-chosen norm”<sup>124</sup> out of the problem, which in effect would be to deny the problem as a problem. That is to say, converting precarity into a deliberately undertaken practice or treating it as a virtue would be to treat it as though it is actually a superior

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<sup>124</sup> This phrasing is from Jephcott’s translation of *Minima Moralia* but Freyenhagen uses the phrase ‘prudential norm’ for the German word ‘*lebenskluge*’ (2013, 55), which seems more appropriate in this context because ‘prudential’ also implies that the norm is not just wise but also something practiced.

mode of living and thus cover over the fact that a great many people are forced into precarity and dependence through circumstance.

The Wrong Life claim in its original context, then, seems to express an intractable problem regarding one of the most fundamental elements of living a life in modern conditions: having a place to call home. In ‘Refuge for the homeless’, the immediate use of ‘life’ in the Wrong Life claim relates to ‘living’ in terms of one’s living situation but the ‘paradox’ described regarding this form of living is clearly intended in a broader sense of how the individual is able to *live* their life in the sense of what choices one should make and norms one should follow and practice. That the Wrong Life claim captures a much broader and pervasive problem is already stated at the beginning of ‘Refuge for the homeless’ and is confirmed by Adorno’s return to the claim in *Problems of Moral Philosophy* and *History and Freedom*, as I shall discuss later. For now, the claim that ‘wrong life cannot be lived rightly’ can be understood to express a more general problem with individual action in the context of wrong life. Stated baldly, this more general problem is that within conditions that provide the individual with only bad options, right decisions cannot be made. In the face of this one either feels powerless because the issues are beyond individual action or one otherwise lives in denial, finding ways to rationalise – rather than criticise – the current state of the world and one’s position within it.

These rationalisations can be understood as facilitating the reproduction of the wrong life that I presented in the last chapter, insofar as they evince the way in which the embeddedness of instrumental rationality informs action and deliberation by naturalising the treatment of things, in this case, housing and other human beings, instrumentally on the basis of the exchange relationship that forms the background against which any choice can be made, hence Adorno’s statement that, “the thesis of this paradox necessarily leads to destruction, a loveless disregard for things which necessarily turns against people too” (*MM*, §18). These rationalisations are not simply the result of bad reasoning or conveniently held beliefs, perched on top of a neutral system by bad actors looking to justify their self-advancement but are “implicit in the exchange relation itself”, which, in the form of ideology, is not “an extraneous false mechanism but something which sustains the entire mechanism” (*HF*, 119). They are implicit in the exchange relation itself, as I argued in the last chapter because this relation involves the false promise of equality (like for like) while of necessity producing the opposite (like for unlike). Exchange true to its concept would make impossible the exchange relation as it appears here, as profit accrued from the tenant who must of necessity pay more than the landlord strictly needs, exchanging like for unlike. This helps to explain how, as Freyenhagen puts it, “we inescapably get entangled in ideological claims when trying to get on in our social world” (2013, 60).

Adorno accepts as a fact that if we do not own private property in the current social world, then we face need and dependency. However, it is when this fact is employed as a justification for individual action that goes beyond survival or as a justification for the way the social world is currently arranged, which really are the same thing, that it becomes ideological (59 – 60). In this sense, ideology is an effect of the underlying material relations that justifies unreasonable conditions by in some way rationalising these conditions as though they are reasonable, natural or otherwise as the sole coincidence of the actual and the possible, thereby leaving them undisturbed, if not also reinforcing them.<sup>125</sup> To paraphrase a related argument that Adorno makes in *Negative Dialectics*: to make ideological excuses for the bad state of the world is to leave it in its bad state and even endorse it, whereas to try to renounce it is equally to leave it as it is while covering one's ears to the fact that the situation cries out for change. Wallowing in one's powerlessness is no good either, as “[n]ot even silence gets us out of the circle. In silence we simply use the state of objective truth to rationalize our subjective incapacity, once more degrading truth into a lie” (ND, 367). Considering each of these possibilities, we are left only with the knowledge that ‘life’, in terms of the social and political conditions that ground action, is ‘wrong’ and that it therefore cannot be ‘lived’, in terms of making free individual choices and acting upon them, ‘rightly’.

Yet, the situation is actually even worse than this: even if we try to take a principled stance towards our choices and attempt to ‘live rightly’ by doing our duty towards others, there is no guarantee that our actions will not simply become distorted by the concrete background of ‘life’ in which our actions are always embedded and attempt to intervene. This is indicated in ‘Refuge for the homeless’ by the ‘principled stance’ of someone who takes up rental or temporary accommodation voluntarily. Someone might take up this principled stance because it attempts to eschew a materialistic and consumption driven culture represented by private property and its trappings or perhaps otherwise as an attempt to express solidarity with those excluded from the lottery of wealth and private property. As already indicated, the problem with such a principled stance is that it seemingly ends up treating precarity as though it is to be chosen as a matter of principle, a principle that it is not really possible for those excluded from private

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<sup>125</sup> See also, from the same aphorism in Horkheimer's *Dawn* as mentioned above: “For although it brings unnecessary suffering, an outdated social order that has gone bad also fulfils functions which maintain and renew the life of mankind at a certain level. Its existence is evil because a better one would be technically possible. It is good because it represents the present form of human activity and also includes elements of a better future. It follows from this dialectical relationship that during such a period, the struggle against things as they are also appears as the struggle against what is necessary and useful. On the other hand, positive effort within the existing framework is also positive cooperation which helps assure the continued existence of an unjust order. Because a bad society transacts mankind's business although it does it badly, the person that endangers its survival also acts directly against mankind; its friend appears as its enemy” (D&D, 30).

property to take up by choice. That is to say, the problem is not just that social conditions are such that we have only bad options to choose between but that these conditions may themselves structure the manner in which we deliberate and theorise about what ‘living rightly’ might entail, including the way that our responses to moral dilemmas may end up rationalising the conditions that produce these dilemmas in the first place.

In *Dawn and Decline*, Horkheimer argues that the possibility of ‘right living’ in “bourgeois society [...] the chance for being moral is a variable that depends upon social position” (*D&D*, 87) and so even our very basic criteria of moral worth can be structured according to the underlying social and economic conditions, as Adorno himself discusses in a different aphorism in *Minima Moralia* titled ‘Model of Virtue’. Here Adorno reflects on the manner in which moral worth has been historically tied to the possession of wealth and which takes on a particular form in the individualistic exchange societies of the present day. This is not just in the sense that the rich man is associated with the norm of being self-made but also because “he himself and others perceive him as the realization of the general principle. Because this [general principle] is one of injustice, the unjust man regularly becomes just, and not merely in illusion, but supported by the supreme might of the law by which society reproduces itself” (*MM*, §119). In a society that emphasises the role of the individual but which at the same time operates according to the principle of exchange, wealth and goodness become tied together in terms of the individual’s power to have an effect on things, which the rich can do to a far greater extent than the poor, who instead tend to have choice forced upon them; he who has wealth can choose to spend it on ‘good deeds’ and so goodness becomes increasingly tied to economic power and the valorisation process, especially in the ‘philanthropist’ or ‘wealth-creator’, for instance:

The rich control the means of production [...] Their pre-established privilege makes it appear as if they are relinquishing something belonging to them – that is, the increase of use-values, while they are really, in the blessings they administer, only letting a part of the profit flow back where it came from. (§119)

Not only does one in the possession of wealth have the privilege of the kind of moral dilemma described in ‘Refuge for the Homeless’ but economic power also becomes ‘good’ insofar as the mechanisms of justice treat people unequally: wealth insulates the rich man from injustice and so “While the policeman beats up strikers with a rubber truncheon, the factory-owner’s son can drink an occasional whisky with a progressive writer” (§119).<sup>126</sup> The emphasis in modern

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<sup>126</sup> Hegel also worried about this point regarding the unequal distribution of justice relative to social and economic position in his early lectures on the philosophy of right: “The right to live is absolutely essential in humanity, and civil society must make provision for it. A poor person is one who possesses neither capital [*Kapital*] nor skill. In states where the poor are left to fend for themselves their situation may become miserable in the extreme. For

societies on individual responsibility and the belief in the ‘myth of success’ of the self-made man ties the power to do good deeds to capital, supposedly the reflection of the rich man’s worth – both moral and financial and of which the home in which one can feel at home, as property, is an instance. The man in possession of wealth is also insulated from injustice compared to the poor and so, while holding a greater power to do good deeds, the distribution of responsibility is not reflected equally: to be rich is to be treated better by mechanisms of justice, while also proportionately having less to lose than the poor from their mistakes, whose lives are characterised by precarity.<sup>127</sup>

A related problem with the kind of principled stance described in ‘Refuge for the homeless’ is that if precarity were taken as a ‘prudential norm’ this would imply that living precariously is in some way virtuous. Apart from anything else, a further problem with this is that treating precarity in this way would quite plainly involve a justification of unequal conditions because that very inequality would be what produces the capacity for virtue in the form of precarity. This would be despite the fact that many of those who would supposedly embody this virtue (the poor, the homeless, the refugee) would only do so because they are consigned to precarity against their will, despite the fact that many would prefer to have a place that they could call home than live precariously given the choice. If to live precariously were to be considered virtuous, then it seems as though those with the least choice are virtuous simply because they are poor and had no other choice. On the other hand, if it is the case that ‘living rightly’ involves not simply being born into but having to deliberately take on a principled stance by voluntarily living precariously, once again it is unequal conditions that seem to provide the possibility for right living by providing the possibility of choosing to live precariously. As Adorno puts it in an earlier aphorism from *Minima Moralia*:

To adapt to the weakness of the oppressed is to affirm in it the pre-condition of power, and to develop in oneself the coarseness, insensibility and violence needed to exert domination. [...] All collaboration, all the human worth of social mixing and participation, merely masks a tacit acceptance of inhumanity (*MM*, §5).

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instance they have no clothing and, since they cannot go to church, they are deprived of the comforts of religion. It is not possible for them to obtain their right through formal justice – merely appearing in court – owing to the costs involved in the formal process of justice” (*LNR*, §118).

<sup>127</sup> “If a person’s responsibility means that not merely others depend on him but that he may experience the results of his acts in his own life, then the little people bear an infinitely greater burden than the powerful. An act of negligence which will quickly lead to the dismissal of an employee will also ruin his family. Every day, he has countless opportunities for making mistakes which may have a catastrophic effect on his and his family’s fate. But how insignificant are such chances in the case of the magnate. Even if he should make a wrong decision, it will only rarely appear as a clear-cut instance of stupidity or carelessness, and frequently will benefit from the ‘blessing of revocability’. It will hardly have an effect on the person he loves. There are a thousand ways of making up for it” (*D&D*, 86).

Whether one takes the ‘principled stance’ or one rationalises this inequality from the other direction, “wishing with a bad conscience to keep what one has” (*MM*, §18), the ‘promise’ of the universality contained in the idea of private property as a universal right to a home in which one could feel at home is undermined and the fact that this promise is not actually realised is in some manner rationalised away. This is how, as I argued in the last chapter, wrong life can be said to inculcate ‘coldness’ and why Adorno claims that this ‘coldness’ is the “basic principle of bourgeois subjectivity” (*ND*, 363), which itself tacitly expresses the ‘guilt-context’ in which an affective distance is required on the part of individuals in order not to have to suffer the guilty realisation that one’s relative happiness relies on the creation and maintenance of varying levels of ‘human surplus’.

To think about whether wrong life can be lived rightly is to think about what Adorno later describes as one of the chief problems of moral philosophy in the modern world: the tension between the general and the particular (*PMP*, 15) in an individualistic society that is at the same time an administered world (175 – 176) containing the repressive force of the general through the self-assertion of the individual (18). As long as society remains individualistic the problems of moral philosophy appear in the question of how one can ‘live rightly’, which is to say, “under the general rubric of a private ethics” (175), even if only in negative form as the disjunction between the general and particular *through* the integration of the former into the latter captured by the claim that ‘wrong life cannot be lived rightly’. The problems of moral philosophy, then, relate to whether the individual can act rightly against an overwhelming, opaque background within which one’s actions are always implicated in perpetuating the bad state of things, so that “anything we can call morality today merges into the question of the organization of the world” (175).

At the very least, ‘living rightly’ is blocked until we live in a world in which Auschwitz is no longer possible, in which our actions do not contribute to perpetuating one in which it is. Until then, Adorno says: “A new categorical imperative has been imposed by Hitler on unfree mankind: to arrange their thoughts and actions so that Auschwitz will not repeat itself, so that nothing similar will happen” (*ND*, 365). To speak of this ‘new’ categorical imperative seems blatantly to flout fundamental elements of the Kantian one that Adorno invokes, including the implication that there could be more than one kind of categorical imperative, rather than *the* categorical imperative, which describes only the form of an imperative that is categorical.<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> “all imperatives are formulae for the determination of action that is necessary in accordance with the principle of a will which is good in some way. Now, if the action would be good merely as a means *to something else* the imperative is *hypothetical*; if the action is represented as *in itself* good, hence as necessary in a will in itself conforming to reason, as its principle, *then it is categorical*” (*Groundwork*, 4:414).

To say that the imperative is ‘categorical’ is to say that it is *unconditional* and so cannot include considerations of concrete situations and the outcomes of action resulting from such imperatives (*Groundwork*, 4:416), as Adorno’s seems to. To what extent Adorno thinks that this constitutes a *moral* imperative in this sense of a ‘private ethics’ that somehow aims at bringing about such a world is a matter of debate<sup>129</sup> but explaining how this could be the case cannot be straightforward. If the world in which Auschwitz is possible is understood as representative of the context or ‘web’ of guilt within which our actions of necessity contribute to perpetuating or at least not dismantling it, then the idea that Adorno means it as a moral imperative in the sense of ascertaining right action by the individual seems straightforwardly contradicted by the Wrong Life claim,<sup>130</sup> as well as by the scale of task, which would be over-demanding on the individual in the way in which, as I will go on to argue, Adorno thinks that Kant’s own categorical imperative can be in conditions of wrong life.<sup>131</sup>

The connection between the ‘guilt-context’ of wrong life and the ‘New Categorical Imperative’ is more apparent in *Metaphysics: Concepts and Problems* where Adorno’s discussion of the former (*MCP*, 113) eventually leads him to the latter (116). By contrast, in *Negative Dialectics* the ‘New Categorical Imperative’ appears as the first sentence of a new section titled ‘Metaphysics and Culture’, although the previous section, ‘After Auschwitz’, does itself refer to the context of guilt towards the end, which also includes a version of the Wrong Life claim:

Spellbound, the living have a choice between involuntary ataraxy – an esthetic life due to weakness – and the bestiality of the involved. Both are wrong ways of living.  
[...] The guilt of a life which purely as a fact will strangle other life, according to

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<sup>129</sup> It is not possible to summarise the various positions within the secondary literature on this point without devoting much more space, as almost every author who writes on Adorno’s relationship to ethics provides at least a brief discussion of what has come to be called the ‘New Categorical Imperative’. For some recent discussions that involve attempts to recover a moral philosophy from Adorno with reference to the ‘New Categorical Imperative’, see Snir (2010), Freyenhagen (2013, 133 – 162) and Bernstein (2001, 384 – 396). For interpretations of the ‘New Categorical Imperative’ that does not entail that Adorno held a systematic moral philosophy, see O’Connor (2013, 136 – 144), Tassone (2005, 259 – 261) and Bowie (2013, 98 – 100).

<sup>130</sup> Freyenhagen’s (2013) book *Adorno’s Practical Philosophy: Living Less Wrongly* probably represents the most systematic attempt to address this problem, hinted at by its subtitle. While wrong life cannot be lived rightly, it can be lived, according to Freyenhagen, more or less wrongly (65), which involves not joining in and resisting the temptation to conform to the world as much as possible (162 – 167). However, even this minimal, ‘negativist’ version of an Adornian moral philosophy still causes Freyenhagen to wonder whether critical reflection and resistance can really have any effect on an administered world or if it might not somehow help to reproduce it (179 – 184).

<sup>131</sup> Something worth noting with respect to moral philosophical interpretations of the New Categorical Imperative is that Adorno makes closely analogous claims in much more overtly political, rather than moral, language elsewhere. For instance, in ‘Marginalia to Theory and Praxis’ he says, “The sole adequate praxis would be to put all energies toward working our way out of barbarism” (*MTP*, §6) and in ‘Education After Auschwitz’, “The premier demand upon all education is that Auschwitz not happen again” (*EAA*, 191).

statistics that eke out an overwhelming number of killed with a minimal number of rescued, as if this were provided in the theory of probabilities – this guilt is irreconcilable with living. And the guilt does not cease to reproduce itself because not for an instant can it be made fully, presently conscious (*ND*, 364).

Yet, if the context of guilt is understood as being – at a minimum – a world in which Auschwitz is still possible, then the invocation of Kantian vocabulary does capture something of Kant's own: that a world in which Auschwitz is no longer possible, in which it will not repeat itself because mankind has arranged its thoughts and actions in a way that prevents its repetition, would unconditionally be a right world, a world which, by this token, would itself perhaps be the condition for living rightly. Whatever its status as an imperative, at least one other thing that Adorno believes it definitely does share with Kant's own concept of the categorical imperative is that, in the final instance, it is impossible to rationally ground either one (*MCP*, 116), a point I take up in the next chapter.

### **3.3. 'Morality', 'Ethics' and 'Ethical Life'**

When Adorno talks about moral philosophy he almost always has Kant in mind and his general approach to Kant in this regard, including key criticisms of Kant, are informed in important ways by his reading of Hegel, as well as by Nietzsche.<sup>132</sup> Adorno tends to be critical of the idea of moral philosophy *as such* but this criticism is itself bound up with his reception of Hegel's own views that connect ethics with the philosophy of history, to the extent that both thinkers share the view that 'morality', as well as the emergence and role of moral philosophy is in some ways historically specific. This does not mean that Adorno simply accepts the Hegelian picture of ethical life because moral philosophy, as Kant conceives of it, represents a significant side of the dialectic captured by the Wrong Life claim in the reference to 'living rightly'. The critical element inherent to Kant's insistence on autonomy as involving a complete abstraction from empirical conditions, desires and inclinations – the realm of heteronomy – alongside Hegel's historical picture of the social emergence and embeddedness of the modern individual is what affords insight into the fact that 'wrong life cannot be lived rightly' in the first place.

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<sup>132</sup> This is not supposed to be an exhaustive list of influences, as he is clearly also influenced by Weber's account of disenchantment, as I have argued, which is itself a variation on Nietzschean nihilism and also by Horkheimer. Of course, this itself is not an exhaustive list either and there are other thinkers who could be emphasised here but for the purposes of what remains of the thesis, Hegel and Nietzsche are the two that are the most important.

At the beginning of the next section, I will be considering Adorno's return to the Wrong Life claim in *Problems of Moral Philosophy* as indicating an antinomy between Kant and Hegel, which will follow a return to Rose's comment from the beginning of this chapter that Adorno does not take a 'standard approach' to moral philosophy by considering what a 'standard approach' might entail and how Adorno's approach relates to and differs from it. Before this, however, I want to engage in some preliminary discussion of how Adorno distinguishes 'morality' from 'ethics' in *Problems of Moral Philosophy*. While it will turn out that this distinction itself is not altogether careful on Adorno's part and so not something that is particularly useful to hold to in and of itself, it will be useful for understanding the role of Hegel's notion of 'ethical life' in Adorno's thought, as well as a shared focus on 'morality' as standing in primarily for concerns and ideas represented by Kant's moral philosophy. In addition, I think it is also worth engaging in this preliminary discussion because Adorno's characterisation of 'ethics' here does not actually map onto Hegel's notion of 'ethical life', which can cause confusion. I will first briefly outline how Hegel himself makes the distinction between 'morality' and 'ethical life' before distinguishing what Adorno means by 'ethics' in the context of his discussion from the early parts of *Problems of Moral Philosophy* from Hegel's notion of 'ethical life'. Following this, I will close this chapter by considering Adorno's relationship to Kant and Hegel in the context of the Wrong Life claim.

On the distinction between 'morality' and 'ethics', it can be said, briefly, that in the *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel seems to distinguish 'morality' (*Moralität*) as having to do with privately motivated actions involving individual conviction or reasoning about what one ought to do and for what reasons one ought to do them in abstraction from the social and historical situation an individual finds themselves in. Whereas this social and historical situation, in terms of the intersubjective fabric of life that more broadly contains law, custom, mores, norms, institutions, economic relations, as well as morality in this narrow sense (at least today), is designated as the realm of 'ethics' or 'ethical life' (*Sittlichkeit*). 'Morality' can be understood as more or less referring to the subject matter of Kantian moral philosophy, with Hegel remarking that Kant's practical philosophy itself has no room for 'ethics' in this sense of 'ethical life', restricting itself only to the narrow sphere of morality: "Kantian usage prefers the expression *morality*, as indeed the practical principles of Kant's philosophy are confined throughout to this concept, even rendering the point of view of *ethics* impossible and in fact expressly infringing and destroying it" (*EPR*, §33R). The wider sphere of what Hegel calls 'ethics' is discounted by or made impossible for Kant because he conceives of its subject matter as 'heteronomous' to and in tension with the rationally generated practical principles of the

narrow, 'autonomous' sphere of morality. These principles are defined precisely by their ability to abstract from what Kant considers to be 'external' influences and coercions, many of which Hegel includes alongside morality in the sphere of ethical life.

At this point, I want to set out the main claim I intend to go on to argue, by noting that Adorno should be understood to more or less adopt Hegel's view of the distinction between morality (*Moralität*) and ethics (*Sittlichkeit*), including Hegel's claim that Kant restricts his philosophy to the narrow realm of morality. However, while Adorno also agrees with Hegel that the integration of morality into the wider sphere of ethics is a modern achievement, he disagrees with Hegel in arguing that it is not an unproblematic achievement, even going so far as to make it the central problem of moral philosophy today and which is expressed in the Wrong Life claim. Kant's practical philosophy as restricted to the narrower concept of 'morality' takes up most of the discussion in Adorno's *Problems of Moral Philosophy*. By contrast, Adorno provides far less explicit discussion of Hegel's views on ethical life, either in *Problems of Moral Philosophy* or elsewhere. However, towards the end of the lectures, Adorno engages in a discussion of Ibsen's play *The Wild Duck*, which he interprets as illustrating the Wrong Life claim in terms of Hegel's critique of Kantian ethics, as well as considering how the play also reflects problems in Hegel's alternative. In this he identifies the Wrong Life claim with the chief problem of moral philosophy and which is explicable in terms of an antinomy between Kantian moral philosophy and Hegelian ethical life (*PMP*, 158 – 167). This antinomy should be understood as dialectical in the sense that there is a fundamental tension between the two poles of Kantian agent-centred, universally binding morality and the Hegelian historicised and context-bound realm of intersubjective norms of ethical life. This dialectic involves the inversion of ethical life, rendering it as 'wrong life', as well as the Kantian injunction to 'live rightly', which in 'wrong life' becomes 'living wrongly'.

However, to what extent making a terminological distinction between 'morality' and 'ethics' is meaningful is not a straightforward matter when it comes to Adorno, even though he tries to do just that in the early parts of *Problems of Moral Philosophy*. While I have claimed above that Adorno accepts something like Hegel's distinction between morality and ethics, it is important to note straight away that Adorno's discussion of the term 'ethics' does not actually map very well onto Hegel's use. This is especially important to consider because when reading Adorno's discussion it can look as though Adorno simply rejects one (ethics) in favour of the other (morality). Why this is the case will be considered below but for now it should be noted that what Adorno rejects is not 'ethics' in the Hegelian sense of 'ethical life' but what he sees as a problematic theme in contemporary attempts to move away from the difficult questions of

moral philosophy, the central one of which is the relationship between the universal, as the interests of the social whole and the particular, as the interests of the individual (*PMP*, 18 - 19) and which is captured in the Wrong Life claim (1). The relation of the general to the particular in terms of the relation between society and the individual is a major, if not the central theme of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*. Adorno is acutely aware of this and himself takes the view that Hegel attempted to think through this relationship with more rigour and ruthlessness than any who had come before him (*HTS*, 45 – 46). Therefore, Adorno's discussion of the terms in *Problems of Moral Philosophy* will require some disentangling and clarification in order to make convincing the claim that he accepts something like Hegel's distinction between morality and ethical life.

One reasonably straightforward issue with Adorno's discussion of the two terms is simply that in *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, where he does make something of a distinction, he is not strict in his implementation of it. This seeming inconsistency with his use of terms is itself at least partially explained by the format of *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, which was first delivered as a series of lectures and then transcribed from tape recordings (*PMP*, 215). In some of Adorno's other lecture series that use the same method of transcribing from recordings, such as *History and Freedom*, his lecture notes are included in place of recordings that could not be transcribed.<sup>133</sup> These lecture notes are generally very brief and typically only take up two to three pages and are usually more like bullet-points than scripts. Comparing these to the ten or so pages that generally make up the transcribed lectures, we can infer that Adorno's inconsistency with his use of the terms was partly a result of the fact that his lectures would have involved a great deal of speaking freely. In fact, Adorno himself says as much when he makes an aside in the second lecture following his attempt to distinguish the terms, addressing the inconsistency as simply an unintentional effect of the medium he is working in (*PMP*, 19).<sup>134</sup> For this and other reasons, the reader should assume that Adorno generally does not cleave closely to the distinction he makes and tends to use the terms interchangeably following his explicit discussion of the difference between them in the first and second lectures, including sometimes going on to use the phrase 'private ethics' to refer to what he otherwise seems to want to capture under the rubric of 'morality'.<sup>135</sup> Despite this, his attempts to distinguish

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<sup>133</sup> See the first lecture in *History and Freedom* for an example of Adorno's lecture notes (*HF*, 3 - 9).

<sup>134</sup> "Incidentally, you must forgive me if I sometimes alternate between ethics and morality. I do so because the constant repetition of the word morality simply gets on my nerves, but I think I have said enough on that score to prevent any misunderstandings" (*PMP*, 19).

<sup>135</sup> "The entire Kantian ethics is [...] a private ethics" (*PMP*, 116). As I will go on to argue, during the early discussion distinguishing 'morality' from 'ethics', Adorno considers 'ethics' inappropriate to designate the subject matter of Kantian moral philosophy. To then refer to it as a 'private ethics' therefore looks like a blatant contradiction but to reiterate, the point of considering Adorno's distinction here is less about extrapolating or

‘morality’ from ‘ethics’ in these lectures still needs to be taken seriously because it is an important part of his effort to more precisely set out what he identifies as the appropriate subject matter and the key issues facing moral philosophy today.

Another issue has to do with his concern regarding what might be called the historically accumulated semantic ‘baggage’ that the two terms are bound up with. These include philosophical definitions but also the manifold semantic accretions and connotations that terms like ‘morality’ and ‘ethics’ tend to accrue over time, “what Simmel would have called the ‘cachet’ of the term” (*PMP*, 12). For instance, Adorno points out that a concept like ‘morality’:

is not simply identical with its pure meaning. Over and above that it has an aura, a layer of connotations which are not necessarily reducible to that meaning. And the concept of morality is in fact bound up with a particular notion of moral rigour, of conventional narrowness and conformity with a whole series of given ideas that have now become problematic. (*PMP*, 12 – 13)

Like the previous issue, Adorno’s immediate concern here may once again be partly pedagogical. In this case, he is attempting to clarify what sorts of contemporary connotations a term like ‘morality’ might have acquired and which his students (or readers) might need to bracket but not discard in order to better follow the arguments that proceed throughout the rest of the book. However, more importantly than this, I think that Adorno wants more generally to raise the issue of the historical genesis and embeddedness of philosophical concepts in social contexts in order to better outline the difficulty and dangers inherent in attempts to extricate concepts from their ‘cachets’ absolutely. Adorno is often concerned to emphasise that concepts stand in ‘constellations’<sup>136</sup> of relation to and in tension with other concepts, making attempts to define any given concept in abstraction from these relations problematic. For that reason, to believe that a concept like ‘morality’ can be reduced to ‘its pure meaning’ would be to believe that a strict philosophical definition of the concept can be given in advance and in abstraction from this ‘cachet’, thereby sweeping away many of its hard and problematic aspects, including, for instance, the urgency of moral problems, which abstract reasoning has a tendency to undermine,<sup>137</sup> as well as tensions between right conduct and desire.

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arguing that he held a firm set of clear terms and more about what his discussion can help reveal regarding his relationship to Kant and especially Hegel.

<sup>136</sup> The notion of ‘constellations’ has to do with Adorno’s reinterpretation of dialectics as needing to maintain tensions between concepts in order to preserve, rather than subsume, their non-identical aspects.

<sup>137</sup> See, for instance, *ND*, 285 – 286 or *PMP*, 97. This concerns what Adorno calls the ‘additional factor’ or ‘addendum’, which is a major part of the discussion in Chapter 4.

In this way, Adorno also sees an attempt to sweep away the difficult problems of moral philosophy coming in the guise of a language that emphasises ‘ethics’ over ‘morality’. Both ‘ethics’ and ‘morality’, in the way in which Adorno contrasts them, involve attempts to respond to the question ‘how should one live?’. However, he understands the contemporary appeal to ‘ethics’ to have a tendency to respond to the question in a sentimentalising manner through an appeal to one’s ‘character’ or ‘inner nature’, noting that these phrases are both possible ways to translate the Greek word ‘ethos’ from which the term ‘ethics’ is derived (*PMP*, 10). That is to say, that from the standpoint of what he refers to as ‘ethics’, one should appeal not to an external set of customs or a system of rules for answers about how one should live but rather one should appeal ‘inwardly’ to what one is ‘really’ like ‘deep down’ and live accordingly: “here the idea of the good life, of right action, is reduced to the notion that one should act in accordance with the way one is anyway” (14). Adorno argues that such views are dishonest because they claim that what one should do can be directly harmonised with what one already is, again effectively sweeping away the major problems that characterise moral philosophy: “In other words, to reduce the problem of morality to ethics is to perform a sort of conjuring trick by means of which the decisive problem of moral philosophy, namely the relationship of the individual to the general, is made to disappear” (10). At their worst, these sorts of views seem to manage, sometimes with a simple injunction to ‘be yourself’, to sweep aside the hard issues that Adorno argues characterise moral philosophy. Such issues swept aside include, as Adorno says above, the relationship of the individual to the social. That is to say, the conflict between what I want and what I should do, between my individual desires and my duty to others, is simply dissolved. This is because in these kinds of appeal to ‘inner nature’ what I want to do simply *is* what I should do because my only duty is towards my own particular ‘character’, which is both the home of my desires and my guide to proper conduct. In this way, ‘ethics’ tends to ignore the way in which the social process informs and determines character by treating character in abstraction from it, despite the fact that such appeals often arise in response to an alienating and opaque social world within which how one should live is difficult to ascertain. As a result, appeals to ‘character’ in abstraction from how it has been pre-formed by the social, including to various forms of heroic individualism or ‘character-typing’, are likely to merely reproduce forms of social determination if “the fact that one is ‘constituted’ [*geartet*] one way rather than another, becomes the yardstick of behaviour” (14).

This form of ‘ethics’ responds to what Bernstein calls ‘affective scepticism’, itself a result of the historical process of disenchantment (Bernstein, 2001, 6 – 7). Essentially, he argues that modern secular society experiences affective scepticism due to a distorted diremption of the

universal (socially determined, motivating reasons) and the particular (rationally determined, justifying reasons) for action. The problem takes root at the level of disenchantment and societal rationalisation but also seems to do so at the conceptual level, which is to say that the universal and particular are conceived of as entirely separate, rather than as reciprocally determining and antagonistic (18 - 19).<sup>138</sup> Much more would need to be said than I have space for here but it seems to me that what Bernstein is describing is related to Horkheimer's argument regarding the formalisation of reason, in which subjective reason comes to predominate over objective reason. Appeals to objective reason in the form of an appeal to one's 'true inner nature', including its potentially mystical sources, in the age of its dissolution subordinate the notion of objective reason to subjective reason. This is because such appeals treat objective reason instrumentally through the attempt to resolve problems that were created by the subjectivisation of reason and the rationalisation of the social world.<sup>139</sup> To bring together Bernstein's Weberian point with Horkheimer's language: "Said otherwise: there is a nonarbitrary homology or elective affinity between disenchanted theories, on the one hand" or 'subjective reason', which cannot produce justifications for action in the form of ascertaining meaning or value, "and rationalized social practices on the other", which produces individuals whose lives are subsumed into the instrumentally rationalised and opaque social process, which is necessarily in conflict with their self-understanding as rationally determining free individuals responsible for their lives (Bernstein, 2001, 18).

I think that one version of what is described here can be seen in Adorno's discussion of 'pseudo-rationality' in *The Stars Down to Earth*, paradigmatic of which is astrology. According to Adorno, in modern astrology, one's 'character' (as zodiac sign) receives meaning from a supposedly objective source of wisdom that is known through the subjectively rational discoveries of the modern science of astronomy, in order to derive instrumentally rational advice to cope with forms of alienation produced by an opaque social process. Astrology in the modern form is a form of 'pseudo-rationality' insofar as it combines rationality, in the form of astronomical facts and common sense advice, with irrationality, in the way actual astronomical facts and human life are supposedly related to each other. Modern astrology is characterised by the way in which it typically does not involve a rejection of modern science, even though the supposed 'mechanisms' of astrology are in reality incompatible with it. Its irrationality thereby involves a short-circuiting of the gap between fact and value (*SDE*, 159). Through this short-circuiting, 'down to earth' advice can supposedly be derived from 'scientific facts' in order to

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<sup>138</sup> Which is to say, instead of being conceived of dialectically.

<sup>139</sup> See fn. 48 in Chapter 1, which contains some examples given by Horkheimer.

cope with life in a way that also seems to invest it and the individual's character with meaning but which really just amounts to finding ways to adapt to the world as it is already constituted and constitutes the individual (58). Astrology may seem like a relatively harmless phenomenon but Adorno's use of it as an example of 'pseudo-rationality' can just as easily be applied to more obviously problematic forms of 'character-typing', such as race science, Myers-Briggs personality typing or even genetic determinism, all of which posit in various ways that one's 'character' and thereby value are supposedly derivable from a set of scientifically discoverable 'facts', in view of giving life meaning as a response to disenchantment and social forms of alienation. In this way, appeals to 'character' as an uncritical response to affective scepticism often have much in common with forms of authoritarianism than may at first be apparent (56 – 57).<sup>140</sup>

However, the example of a properly philosophical expression of an 'ethics' that responds to affective scepticism in this way, by taking the source of how one should live to be located within the individual themselves in terms of their 'character' or 'inner nature' that Adorno provides is existentialism. Adorno sees existentialism as one of the most recent attempts at replacing 'morality' as a system of duties to be abided by with an appeal to the self as the sole authority and justifying ground of moral action. According to Adorno, "the theory of Existentialism – which essentially regards itself as an ethical, moral movement, albeit in a negative sense" contrives to circumvent the crucial question of the relationship between the general and the particular through taking the position that, "the idea of the good life, of right action, is reduced to the notion that one should act in accordance with the way one is anyway" (*PMP*, 13 – 14). This is perhaps a rather generalised and dismissive characterisation of existentialism that seems to involve an implied association with authoritarianism, given what I have said above. If so, it is likely that this implied association is bound up with Adorno's concerns regarding Heidegger's Nazism. Having said this, Adorno does also seem to think that this risk involving a propensity towards forms of authoritarianism also applies to Sartre, who he perhaps has more in mind in the early sections of *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, given that he comments on "Existentialist ethics" again at the very end, this time explicitly associating them with Sartre:

Motivated by [Existentialism's] protest against the administered world, it made an absolute of spontaneity and of the human subject in so far as it has not been co-

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<sup>140</sup> Adorno's study of popular astrology was actually motivated by the similarity he found to be the case between those who believe in astrology and those who scored highly in authoritarian beliefs through the study undertaken in *The Authoritarian Personality* (*SDE*, 163).

opted. That is the error of this ethics since precisely because this spontaneity lacks reflexivity and is separated from objective reality, objectivity re-enters it, just as Sartre has ended up placing himself at the service of Communist ideology. (*PMP*, 176)

Whether this characterisation of Sartre or existentialism in general is fair or would stand up to scrutiny, especially if applied to more robust attempts to outline an existentialist ethics,<sup>141</sup> is something that I do not have space to go into. Adorno's most sustained discussion of existentialism is in *The Jargon of Authenticity* but scattered references can be found elsewhere. In *Minima Moralia*, for instance, he also criticises an existentialist ethics of 'authenticity' [*Echtheit*], again identifying it as resulting from disenchantment and involving a profound restriction of the ethical to a focus on the discrete individual as the locus of moral action (*MM*, §99).<sup>142</sup>

What Adorno means by 'ethics' in these early sections cannot be conflated with Hegel's view of ethics, as Zuidervaart seems to suggest when he says that Adorno "prefers the term 'morality' (*Moralität*) to 'ethics' (*Sittlichkeit*) and follows Kant more than Hegel in his own moral philosophy" immediately after reproducing a passage from these early sections of *Problems of Moral Philosophy* (Zuidervaart, 2009, 32). There is some ambiguity about how Zuidervaart is drawing this conclusion and so whether he actually is associating what I have presented as Adorno's characterisation of 'ethics' with Hegel's notion of ethical life is arguable. In any case, there seems to me to be several other possible problems with his claim regardless, which are worth discussing because it will help to clarify some further points with respect to Adorno's relationship to Hegel's use of 'ethical life'. One of the problems is that Zuidervaart seems to base his claim on the following passage from *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, which he reproduces immediately preceding his claim:

the reason why the question of moral philosophy has become so very problematic today is that the substantial nature of custom, the possibility of the good life in the forms in which the community exists, which confront the individual in pre-existing

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<sup>141</sup> I am thinking here specifically of de Beauvoir's *Ethics of Ambiguity*.

<sup>142</sup> "Among the concepts to which, after the dissolution of its religious and the formalization of its autonomous norms, bourgeois morality has shrunk, that of genuineness [*Echtheit*] ranks highest" (*MM*, §99). '*Echtheit*' can also be translated as 'authenticity' and it is clear in context that Adorno intends the existentialist notion. See Jay (2010) for an interpretation of Adorno's critique of the "ideological notion of authenticity" as "based on a dangerous search for ultimate origins as legitimating fictions, a mistaken reification of the individual as a self-possessed monad, and the transfer of cultish notions of aura from the sphere of religion to art, philosophy, and everyday human existence", which "evokes the myth of autochthonous rootedness to denigrate the wanderers who are condemned to permanent exile" (Jay, 2010, 28).

form, has been radically eroded, that these forms have ceased to exist and that people today can no longer rely on them. (*PMP*, 10; Zuidervaart, 2009, 32)

The immediate context of this passage does not mention Hegel but instead follows a discussion of the common origins of the German words ‘*Moral*’ and ‘*Sitte*’ in the Latin word ‘*mores*’, which itself relates to ‘custom’ (*PMP*, 9; *PdM*, 21). Adorno’s actual target in the passage Zuidervaart quotes are conservative attempts to preserve customs after they have come in for critical reflection and ceased to be self-evident, which Adorno takes up more explicitly in the next lecture and specifically with reference to Scheler (*PMP*, 17).<sup>143</sup> To a large extent, this is actually a claim shared with Hegel, who notes that historically subjective reflection in the form of individual morality has tended to have a dissolving effect on the self-evidence of tradition and custom, which begin to appear arbitrary rather than rational once their origins and legitimacy are reflected upon.<sup>144</sup>

While Adorno does relate this discussion to “what Hegel called ‘the substantial nature of the ethical’” with its distinctive emphasis on the role of customs or mores at the beginning of the next lecture (*PMP*, 12), Adorno clearly does not intend this to capture Hegel’s considered notion of ethical life in the *Philosophy of Right*. Adorno’s reference better describes what Hegel characterises as the Ancient Greek form of ethical life (*PS*, §349) but does not describe the modern form of ethical life as it appears in the *Philosophy of Right*, the “pivotal and focal point” of which is the “The right of the subject’s *particularity* to find satisfaction, or – to put it differently – the right of *subjective freedom*” and which constitutes the difference between the Ancient and modern forms (*EPR*, §124R).<sup>145</sup> This is a distinction about which Adorno was clearly aware and he elsewhere explicitly credits Hegel with the insight that the ‘immediate’ and ‘harmonious’ form of the substantial ethical life of antiquity must come to an end with the emergence of individual subjectivity (*PS*, §355), “that the rift between individual and society is a necessary element of the emancipation of the individual” and that “Without this rift, the idea of freedom, which points the way beyond both this rupture and the undifferentiated state

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<sup>143</sup> To further dispel any notion that ‘ethics’ might refer to ‘ethical life’ or that these terms are being used consistently, Adorno describes such conservative attempts to artificially revive and compel participation in ‘*Sitten*’ (customs) as repressive and tending towards violence and coming into conflict with *Sittlichkeit*, which is translated here as ‘morality’ (*PMP*, 17). Actually, Adorno seems to only very rarely use the terms ‘*Moralität*’ and ‘*Sittlichkeit*’ in the original German text, which would likely make comparing Adorno’s German text with Hegel’s terms no more fruitful. The upshot of this is that, once again, Adorno’s use of terms is much less important than the conceptual overlaps that can be drawn out of what can be Adorno’s rather confusing discussion of these terms by comparison to Hegel’s much stricter use.

<sup>144</sup> “In short, Subjectivity, comprehending and manifesting itself, threatens the existing state of things in every department – characterized as that state of things is by Immediacy [a primitive, unreflecting simplicity]. Thought, therefore, appears here as the principle of decay. – decay viz. of Substantial [prescriptive] morality; for it introduces an antithesis, and asserts essentially rational principles” (*PH*, 267).

<sup>145</sup> On the distinction between the Ancient and modern forms of ethical life, see Hardimon (1994, 33 – 36).

of affairs, would be inconceivable” (*HF*, 208).<sup>146</sup> Importantly, Adorno also agrees with the other side of Hegel’s insight about modern ethical life, that “The sphere of [abstract] right and that of morality cannot exist independently [*für sich*]; they must have the ethical as their support and foundation” (*EPR*, §141A).<sup>147</sup> In *History and Freedom*, Adorno says that the idea of freedom as it “appears to us as a subjective quality, as if the judgement about whether freedom exists is one that falls exclusively to the subjective mind” as it appears in Kantian morality is an abstraction and that Hegel’s insight “enables us to see how dependent freedom is on objective realities and to gauge the extent to which we are capable of influencing the real world with its overpowering, structured institutions by what we do as formally free subjective agents” (*HF*, 204). In this sense, it is Hegel’s notion of ethical life that provides Adorno with the basis for his own insight into the modern world as a context of guilt, as ‘wrong life’, an insight that he explicitly credits to Hegel (*HTS*, 30; *HF*, 113).<sup>148</sup>

However, *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, as I have mentioned, is not primarily concerned with Hegel’s notion of ethical life but with Kant’s moral philosophy, which he associates with the term ‘morality’. Adorno ‘prefers’ the term ‘morality’ in that text because he thinks that it is more appropriate for bringing out the problems of moral philosophy, of which Kant’s is exemplary, owing to its narrow focus on correct reasoning and action in abstraction from empirical concerns. This is because Kant sharply contrasts the locus of moral philosophy from other spheres of existence (*PMP*, 20 - 21) by restricting it to the plane of pure practical reason alone without reference to any external or ‘heteronomous’ influences (26 – 27). The thrust of Kant’s argument is that moral action is grounded solely on the moral law, which “expresses

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<sup>146</sup> Regarding the Ancient form of ethical life, Adorno expresses scepticism that these periods were as ‘happy’ and harmonious as Hegel sometimes suggests (*PS*, §§353 – 356): “More likely, they were ages characterised by a repressiveness that was so powerful that what has come down to us from them is merely the end result, namely, the triumph of the universal, without our being able to give an account of the excesses of suffering and injustice without which these so-called meaningful times, as Lukács once called them rather romantically in his youth, would not have existed” (*HF*, 208).

<sup>147</sup> Of the three parts of Hegel’s conception of ‘right’ (Abstract Right, Morality and Ethical Life), I have not yet said anything about ‘Abstract Right’, which is covered in the first part of the *Philosophy of Right*. ‘Abstract Right’ is the most formal of the three and is essentially concerned with the legal realm of laws and rights and within which the individual subject is conceived of as the ‘Person’. Adorno describes the Person as “the ancient spell of the universal, entrenched in the particular” and criticises the search for ethics in the Person as motivated by the lure of universality, with its content being little more than self-unity, which leads to an ethics of a “threadbare legal title for license” (*ND*, 276 - 277). This is very close to Hegel’s account, where an ethics of the Person leads only to a Lockean prohibition against offence to other Persons (*EPR*, §38).

<sup>148</sup> After explicitly crediting Hegel with insight into the ‘guilt context’ in ‘Aspects of Hegel’s Philosophy’, Adorno says that: “Even the false claim that the world is nonetheless a good world contains within it the legitimate demand that the empirical world become a good and reconciled world, not merely in the Idea that is its opposite but in the flesh. If in the last analysis Hegel’s system makes the transition into untruth by following its own logic, this is a judgment not simply on Hegel, as a self-righteous positivist science would like to think, but rather a judgment on reality” (*HTS*, 30 - 31). Adorno elsewhere defends Hegel against positivism in similarly acerbic manner: “To assume that the journey from Hegel to the logical positivists, who dismiss him as obscure or meaningless, has been progress is simply laughable” (*HF*, 169).

nothing other than the *autonomy* of pure practical reason, that is, freedom” and so duties must be determined in abstraction from any content that is outside of pure practical reason alone (CPrR, 5:33). Put another way, only actions that are undertaken primarily on principles that are arrived at rationally in abstraction from any particular determining content, such as desire, convention or any specifics of a situation or its consequences can be said to be *freely* or ‘autonomously’ chosen and therefore represent a *moral* obligation or duty for: “the two concepts [of freedom and the moral law] are so inseparably connected that one could even define practical freedom through independence of the will from anything other than the moral law alone” (5:93 – 94). If any particular determining content has a conditional relationship to an action, if an action is carried out on the basis of a desire, say, then this action proceeds from heteronomy of choice and its grounds have been determined non-rationally and therefore cannot be considered to be a moral action or duty and this would be the case “even though the action may be in conformity with the law” (5:33). Actions that are in conformity with duty – with what one ought to do – can only be considered moral if the “determining ground” or the motivation for the action is – that is, chosen on the basis of – duty alone or rather *from* and not just conforming *with* what duty would require (5:81).

To illustrate all of this with a simple example, if according to the moral law I should always tell the truth, then obviously I cannot perform my duty by lying. Following this, there are several scenarios to consider: 1) I tell the truth *because* it conforms with the moral law; 2) I fear that I will be caught out if I lie, so I tell the truth in order to avoid the consequences of being caught out by the other party. Both 1) and 2) are in conformity *with* duty but only 1) is undertaken *from* duty and can be said to be moral (*Groundwork*, 4:441). Kant thereby places the worth of moral action only on the side of consciousness or more properly, on the side of *the will*<sup>149</sup> and this separation is so strict, so rigorous, that even actions that fail to achieve what they set out to achieve can be considered to be good if they were undertaken on the basis of good intentions. Even in the failure to carry out duty, the goodness of the will “like a jewel, would still shine by itself, as something that has its full worth in itself” (4:394), according to Kant. To illustrate this last point with the previous example, 1) would still be acting *from* duty even were the other party to believe that I was in fact lying, regardless of what consequences might result.<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>149</sup> Kant places the will on the side of the intelligible, with which it is identified with the realm of freedom and the moral law: “It is impossible to conceive anything at all in the world, or even out of it, which can be taken as good without qualification except a *good will*” (*Groundwork*, 4:393). I discuss Kant’s notion of the will further in Chapter 4.

<sup>150</sup> Kant defends this scenario and in general the idea that duty always consists in telling the truth regardless of its consequences in *On a Supposed Right to Lie from Philanthropy*.

Kant's moral philosophy therefore represents the most serious challenge to the Wrong Life claim because its formalism and rigorism expressly resist considering how the world or human beings are constituted in determining right action.<sup>151</sup> For this reason, Kant's moral philosophy represents "moral philosophy *par excellence*, moral philosophy as such" precisely because "the extreme segregation of the realms of nature and morality [in Kant], is what makes possible something like a fully articulated and logically consistent philosophy of morality" (*PMP*, 106). Precisely because of his so-called 'rigorism' and 'formalism', that he rules out the role and significance of empirical – more properly, heterogenous – considerations in morally correct reasoning and action, except insofar as such things are subordinated to practical reason, Kant is able to articulate a theoretically consistent and for that reason very powerful account of morality.<sup>152</sup>

Hegel, as Kant's successor, by contrast, was not so minded or able to create a moral philosophy in the prescriptive sense because he did not accept this strict separation of the moral and empirical spheres (*PMP*, 106). For this reason, moral philosophy as the domain concerned with how the individual can 'live rightly' is better undertaken initially with an eye towards Kant than Hegel, the latter of whom recognised the individual as a social and historical product. Hegel's own critique of morality is by this token close to Adorno's, insofar as Hegel's involved, "the recognition that the moral can by no means be taken for granted, that conscience does not guarantee right action, and that pure immersion of the self in the question of what to do and what not to do entangles one in contradiction and futility" (*HTS*, 48). On the other hand, according to Adorno because of Hegel's exceptionally powerful philosophical account of

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<sup>151</sup> Of the two other 'standard' schools of moral philosophy that comprises deontology, consequentialism and virtue ethics, I discuss virtue ethics briefly in the next chapter. Adorno does not really engage with utilitarianism or consequentialism much at all and I think this is because it is, through implication, subject to the critique of instrumental reason that he and other members of the Frankfurt School engage in and as discussed in the previous chapters, insofar as contemporary societies have a tendency to lead us towards thinking about moral action in broadly instrumental, consequentialist terms. I think this is what Bernstein has in mind when he says: "I think the real issue about consequentialism is not its validity, but its entrenchment: its continuing *appeal* relates to its embeddedness within and its convergence with rationalized social practices that leave individuals *no option* but to employ its deliberative mechanisms" (Bernstein, 2001, 16). A recent example of the kind of embeddedness Bernstein suggests would be the mutual attraction between 'effective altruism' and speculative finance in view of supposedly "optimising our positive impact on the world through scientific philanthropy", as Wolfendale (2022) summarises.

<sup>152</sup> See also Sedgwick (2010), who, like Adorno, argues that it is Kant's formalism that makes his practical philosophy worthwhile, an argument she undertakes in response to recent attempts to foreground Kant's 'empirical' contributions to practical philosophy in his writings on history and anthropology. She argues that while these are clearly significant considerations for Kant, they were clearly not his priority nor were they the reason Kant has earned a significant place in the history of practical philosophy: "Kant was preoccupied with what he took to be the far more fundamental project of grounding practical philosophy. He saw himself as responding to an urgent need, namely, to save ethics and human freedom from the threat of scepticism. [...] Those eager to highlight the place of empirical content in [Kant's] system tend to pass quickly over the fact that his profound contribution to practical philosophy is his unique response to the challenge of securing its basis" (Sedgwick, 2010, 48). This firm basis is characterised by its exclusion of empirical content – that is, by its formalism.

history, he ends up effectively disregarding the legitimacy of the rational interests of the individual, which are often in conflict with and frequently pass through the “slaughter-bench” that is the objective rationality of history (*HF*, 113; *PH*, 21), which I take up towards the end of the next chapter.

### 3.4. Freedom and History, Kant and Hegel

Earlier I remarked on Rose’s claim that Adorno’s approach to moral philosophy is anything but standard, so it is worth saying something about what a ‘standard approach’ might be, as well as Adorno’s relationship to such an approach. One such answer to this question of what constitutes a ‘standard approach’ to moral philosophy is provided by Geuss’ (2005) ‘Outside Ethics’, in which he characterises ‘standard approaches’ as being centrally concerned with the question ‘what ought I to do?’, as well as with on what grounds an answer to this question can be ascertained, in terms of what sort of grounding should be appealed to in seeking an answer to this question, such as ‘God’, ‘reason’, ‘utility’ and so on. Against this approach, Geuss identifies a counter-tradition involving a series of (mostly German, post-Kantian) philosophers whose thinking about ethics tend to either eschew or radically reinterpret such questions and instead attempt to in some way get “outside the whole realm of ethics [...], either finding a place to stand beyond it or by dissolving it, as it were, from within” (Geuss, 2005, 46). Geuss identifies Adorno as belonging to this counter-tradition in ethics, alongside Hegel and Nietzsche,<sup>153</sup> two of the thinkers that are arguably most important to informing Adorno’s own approach to ethics, as I have suggested.

However, Adorno is himself in an important sense concerned with the question ‘what ought I to do?’ and takes this question, in terms of a universally applicable demand upon the individual to undertake the right kind of deliberation and corresponding action according to the correct grounding, to be the core of what is meant by ‘morality’ and therefore the locus of moral philosophy. While Geuss is right to position Adorno as part of the ‘counter-tradition’ in philosophical approaches to ethics that he describes, Adorno’s relationship to the tradition is anything but straightforward, given that he at one point not only identifies the question ‘what ought I to do?’ as being the crucial question of moral philosophy *as such* but seems to go even further in stating that “it is the crucial question of philosophy in general” (*PMP*, 3). Despite this, rather than attempting to respond to this question directly by arguing for a particular moral

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<sup>153</sup> Other thinkers Geuss explicitly mentions as belonging to this tradition include Marx, Kierkegaard, Heidegger and Badiou.

theory, Adorno instead takes the position that the manner of thinking about ethics captured by this question reveals something particular to modern subjectivity and its relationship to the social world in which it is embedded, which I characterised in the last chapter as ‘wrong life’. For one thing, Adorno, like Hegel, takes the position that the kind of subject that finds itself asking the question ‘what ought I to do?’ only arises alongside a modern form of subjectivity, which itself emerges amidst certain historical formations (*HF*, 207). Unlike Hegel, however, Adorno does not think that this question is answerable within modern societies and that there might be a real contradiction, “between the idea of a good and moral action and the ability to put it into practice” in a fundamental way (*PMP*, 75). That is to say, the subject that finds itself asking the question ‘what ought I to do?’ may at the same time be incapable of adequately responding to it, while at the same time, the urgency of our need to find an answer to this question is not undermined and does not disappear by virtue of either its historical contingency or our inability to satisfactorily respond to it either practically or theoretically.

Furthermore, it may also be the case that just as morality and moral philosophy are historically emergent on the Hegelian picture that Adorno shares, by this same token they could themselves someday disappear. They could disappear either because morality has already ‘grown old’ and become inapplicable to an opaque and continuously expanding social world (*PMP*, 98 – 99) or because the kind of historical formation within which the question ‘what ought I to do?’ could actually find a clear answer would already be a world in which it would no longer be necessary to ask it, as there would no longer be a deep antagonism between the needs and actions of the individual and that of society – a world that at present is difficult, if not impossible to imagine. These possibilities, one seemingly pessimistic and one seemingly utopic, should not be understood as mutually exclusive. The kind of society in which the question ‘what ought I to do?’ seems most urgent and relevant may also be the same society within which actually ascertaining and carrying out the right thing to do is opaque and perhaps even makes this task impossible, insofar as it is outside of the understanding and power of the same subject that such a question makes an appeal to. On the other hand, Adorno seems to think that the kind of society within which the question ‘what I ought to do?’ could be adequately answered would be less marked by the urgency that is of necessity contained within the question because the needs of the individual would not be so radically set off against the instrumentally rational needs of the social process. That is to say, the realisation that ‘wrong life cannot be lived rightly’ is of necessity pessimistic because it recognises the impossibility of action and the bad state of the world, yet in this very recognition the space is briefly opened up to conceive of a condition in which individuals would no longer need to attempt to right the wrongs of the

world nor rationalise them. To recognise that ‘wrong life cannot be lived rightly’ is to recognise that “Black shrouds cover the horizon of a state of freedom that would no longer require either repression or morality, because drives would no longer have to be expressed in destruction” (*ND*, 285).

Put another way, morality is both a feature of modern subjectivity, itself a result of historical, social change but it is also over-demanding or perhaps simply inappropriate in the context of modern societies and this has to do with the way in which Adorno understands freedom to be an historical, rather than a transcendental condition and that therefore:

The trouble is not that free men do radical evil, as evil is being done beyond all measure conceivable to Kant; the trouble is that as yet there is no world in which [...] men would no longer need to be evil. Evil, therefore, is the world’s own unfreedom. Whatever evil is done comes from the world. (*ND*, 218 – 219)<sup>154</sup>

Apart from the implication that the ‘evil’ Adorno refers to here is represented by Auschwitz, another important contextual point is that this passage comes from a section in which Adorno is arguing that freedom is an historical, rather than a transcendental feature of the individual and that it makes no sense to talk about the individual without reference to freedom. In other words, both are historically emergent together and actualised in a community of subjects. Put another way, Kant is right that freedom constitutes selfhood but is wrong to posit it as a transcendental and so ahistorical feature of the subject. Hegel, by contrast, correctly understands both as historical and intersubjective achievements. For Adorno, there are two consequences to this: firstly, that the correct subject matter for thinking about ethics must be the constitutive parts of freedom, which means that it cannot merely relate to freedom in a transcendental or subjective sense but must also take account of whether it is socially realised; and secondly, if freedom is socially and historically emergent as an idea, in Hegel’s sense, then it follows that social conditions can exist in such a way as to conflict with freedom’s subjective aspect, insofar as modern individuals can have the idea of freedom but without being able to actualise it within conditions of unfreedom. An important consequence of the second point is that freedom in Kant’s sense as the moral law can be over-demanding if actual social conditions do not allow us to put it into practice and in some cases even compound conditions of unfreedom. In these conditions, the idea of freedom can lead to insoluble dilemmas or else become integrated into conditions of unfreedom as ideological insistence on individual autonomy and responsibility. Freyenhagen describes such dilemmas as the kind of ‘practical

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<sup>154</sup> I explore Kant’s account of evil to some extent in the next chapter, although my focus is on the role of ‘diabolical’ rather than ‘radical’ evil.

antinomies' that exist pervasively throughout and thus characterise modern societies (2013, 59 – 60). According to Menke, on the one hand moral action requires the possession of moral knowledge, i.e., that one knows what to do in a given situation and to act accordingly; and on the other, the situation itself is the context in which action takes place and this is determined by underlying social structures. The general antinomy involves the claim that moral action must be both practically effective and socially reflexive but these aims are mutually exclusive in wrong life, "As Adorno expresses it, moral knowledge is either 'dumb' but practical, or reflexive and, in this, 'skeptical'" (Menke, 2005, 37).

Bowie suggests that the problem can be understood as a kind of intensified social and historical realisation of a thought experiment posed in Balzac's novel *Père Goriot*, in which one character asks another if he would be willing to accept whatever his heart desires at the cost of the life of an old man, somewhere far off in Peking. In a globally-interconnected, complex society in which one is dimly aware that daily comforts are provided at a cost of mass exploitation and dehumanisation, especially of migrants and people in the developing world, "where a trip to the supermarket can oppress a third-world farmer without realizing it", the thought experiment is realised in inverted form: the hypothetical question 'would you choose to have untold good for distant, minimal evil?' has today become the daily reality that you instead have minimal goods (i.e., commodities) at the exchange of untold suffering and dehumanisation, about which you can never be quite sure when and where it is happening (Bowie, 2013, 68). The poverty and inequality that Hegel evidently worried that civil society necessarily produces as it becomes wealthier, that "despite an *excess of wealth*, civil society is *not wealthy enough* – i.e. its own distinct resources are not sufficient – to prevent an excess of poverty and the formation of a rabble" (*EPR*, §245), at once demonstrates Hegel's profound foresight and also the necessarily naïve view of a 19<sup>th</sup> century thinker who could not have foreseen the efficient realisation of a social totality of universal exchange (*HTS*, 27 – 29). Adorno points out that Hegel's insights on this point also reveal what he himself was perhaps unable to foresee, that "capitalist society, whose liberal economic theory Hegel accepted, has no antidote for the fact that poverty [...] increases with social wealth" and that the wildly advanced forces of production today compared to Hegel's time "make a mockery of the assertion that society is not rich enough in goods" to a far greater extent than even Hegel's own acknowledgement was able to register (29).

Another way to describe the inversion of Balzac's thought experiment is to say that today Hegel's rabble has merely been displaced and concealed by the mechanisms of a global exchange society. No longer located in workhouses but in a sense 'off-shored' to poorer but

resource-rich nations or otherwise into “abstract site[s]” and “black hole[s] into which the detritus of contemporary capitalism is deposited”, like – but not only like – the prison and on which the exchange society feeds in turn, forming the unconscious layers of society’s functioning (Davis, 2003, 16 – 17). Ironically, the ‘off-shoring’ of a nation’s ‘human surplus’ as an outcome of the increase and concentration<sup>155</sup> of wealth bears out some of Hegel’s own suggestions regarding the rabble. After noting civil society’s necessary creation of a rabble as a result of the increase of wealth (*EPR*, §§244 – 245), Hegel immediately goes on to consider how this “inner dialectic of society” pushes it towards the aim of increasing wealth outside of the nation through colonisation (§§246 – 248), including “the colonial export of civil society’s surplus population, but only as an effect of poverty, not as a cure for it” (Wood, 1990, 248).<sup>156</sup> Adorno notes that Hegel was thus able to recognise the antagonisms at the centre of modern societies, although he interpreted them as leading towards the reconciliation of ‘ethical life’, rather than the increase of antagonisms *through* the mechanisms of advanced integration of ‘wrong life’, in which “the unity of the system derives from unreconcilable violence” (*HTS*, 27).

The question central to morality in the form of ‘what ought I to do?’, then, often arises in the form of dilemmas in which it is not clear which or if there even is any right action to take but also in a more general form as an antinomy between a need to respond and the possibility that a response will exacerbate the problem. In fact, Adorno argues, the world might be so constituted as to compel the individual to respond to dilemmas created by that world amongst options that at the very best only offer ways to mitigate<sup>157</sup> the badness of that world but which any action, by necessity, must at least also affirm and contribute to:

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<sup>155</sup> When there is a large amount of people within society who are impoverished, this “leads to the creation of a *rabble*, which in turn makes it much easier for disproportionate wealth to be concentrated in a few hands” (*EPR*, §244). In *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, Hegel describes the ‘rabble’ [*Pöbel*] as not strictly identical with the poor but rather as involving a “disposition associated with poverty” of discontent, which he compares to what he thinks are the more content poor to be found in some countries (*EPR*, §244A). Hardimon points out that despite Hegel’s rather conservative criticisms of the ‘rabble disposition’ or ‘mentality’, Hegel reads this disposition as reflecting the fact that the rabble understand themselves as entitled to a meaningful place within society but are excluded by mechanisms of the same society which should guarantee this place (Hardimon, 1994, 238 – 239). It is perhaps worth pointing out that Hegel’s notion of the ‘rabble disposition’ does not strictly apply only to the poor and Hegel suggests that it can also appear in those possessing extreme wealth (Pinkard, 1994, 319).

<sup>156</sup> Knowles sees Hegel’s recommendation of colonisation as “Hegel’s final proposal of a desperate remedy to the endemic problem of poverty” but draws attention to a point made by Hardimon (Knowles, 2002, 291). Even were we only to consider the colonising peoples without reference to the colonised, Hardimon points out that given that Hegel sees the problem of poverty emerging necessarily in civil society as a result of the accumulation of wealth, presumably the same problem would occur within the colonies, which would eventually produce their own rabble and after a while the problem would likely begin to reappear in the home nation as well (Hardimon, 1994, 244).

<sup>157</sup> I raise the idea of mitigation hypothetically here but this language would suggest that there might be degrees of being able or unable to ‘live wrong life rightly’ or at least live it ‘less wrongly’. This is signalled by the subtitle to Freyenhagen’s (2013) book *Adorno’s Practical Philosophy: Living Less Wrongly* and is construed as an ‘ethics of resistance’, first formulated by Finlayson (2002) on the basis of hints made by Adorno in his final lecture in

The more mercilessly an objective-antagonistic society will comport itself in every situation, the less can any single moral decision be warranted as the right one. Whatever an individual or a group may undertake against the totality they are part of is infected by the evil of that totality; and no less infected is he who does nothing at all. (*ND*, 243)

That is to say, that there is an antinomy between what the situation seems to demand of the individual (a decision and corresponding action) and what would actually mitigate, rather than merely contribute to the badness of the situation (social change that is beyond the power of any given individual). Another way to put this would be to say that it is not simply the case that what appear today to be moral problems of individual responsibility are in fact political problems requiring structural solutions. As Adorno notes in a rather understated way, “the realm of politics is very closely connected to the sphere of morality” (*PMP*, 1). Rather, *that* they appear as moral problems is itself an effect of social and intellectual structures that produce and contribute to these problems and that are in turn *reinforced by the fact that they appear as moral problems*, even though these are problems which really do demand a response.

Unless one takes an extremely rigorous and abstract version of an “ethics of conviction”, as Adorno at one point frames the Kantian principled stance that “recognizes the interiority of the moral subject” as the sole authority for moral action (*PMP*, 149), then attempts to do the right thing must face how they can be transformed into their opposite through their entanglement with the social conditions that form the context through which reflection is undertaken and in which action is realised. In *Marginalia to Theory and Praxis*, Adorno takes this to be the nub of the disagreement between Kant and Hegel. Kant’s moral philosophy is individualistic, insofar as it is addressed “to the individual as the substrate of correct – that is, for Kant, radically reasonable – action” and this means that ethics is conceived of as corresponding to the isolated individual, whereas:

What comes to expression for the first time in Hegel is the experience that the behaviour of the individual – even if he has a pure will – does not come near to a reality that prescribes and limits the conditions of any individual’s action. Hegel in effect dissolves the concept of the moral by extending it into the political. Since then no unpolitical reflection upon praxis can be valid anymore. (*MTP*, §3)

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*Problems of Moral Philosophy* (*PMP*, 167 – 171). I find Freyenhagen’s version of what he describes as a “negative, minimalist ethics” (2013, 186) better worked out and more persuasive than Finlayson’s version, especially in light of the former’s caveat that we cannot know if resistance itself may reproduce the world (184), although to what extent the idea of an ‘ethics of resistance’ is fully compatible with Adorno is a matter of debate. For a discussion of Freyenhagen and Finlayson’s differing accounts of the ‘ethics of resistance’, see Freyenhagen (2011) and Whyman (2019b). For critical responses to Freyenhagen, see O’Connor (2017), Allen (2017), Celikates (2017) and Freyenhagen’s (2017) reply to some concerns that each of them raise.

This necessary constitution by and entanglement with the social conditions that inform not only how our actions are realised but even our notion of ourselves as discrete individuals in the first place is a view that Adorno shares with Hegel.<sup>158</sup> The intention or ‘conviction’ cannot be disentangled from the “external forces which attach to it things quite different from what it is for itself, and impel it on into remote and alien consequences” (*EPR*, §118). It is, at least, both the individual’s free reflective decision-making and the substance of the social world that informs the character of moral action and therefore freedom, a point on which Hegel and Adorno therefore agree.

At one point Adorno endorses Hegel’s thesis that “the owl of Minerva begins its flight only with the onset of dusk” (*EPR*, 23), saying that it is nowhere truer than in the reflection on moral questions (*PMP*, 16), even echoing Hegel’s claim that Socrates’ attempt to discover the good through reflection and his related interrogations of the Athenian political world and ethical order occurred only because that world had already long since started to slip away (*EPR*, §138; *PMP*, 16 – 17).<sup>159</sup> The ‘retreat into inwardness’ happens as particular historical formations begin to slip away and morality in the form of inward reflection that attempts to discover universal laws about how one should act irrespective of social conditions only makes its appearance at a particular point in history (*EPR*, §185) and is not simply an ahistorical feature of rational beings, as Kant argued (*Groundwork*, 4:389).<sup>160</sup> Where Adorno disagrees with Hegel is whether the substance of the current social world is such as to ground right action or: “whether culture, and whatever culture has become, permits something like the good life, or whether it is a network of institutions that actually tends more and more to thwart the emergence of such righteous living” (*PMP*, 14).<sup>161</sup>

Kant’s strict separation of the intelligible and sensible, in which the moral law is restricted only to the realm of the intelligible constitutes the formalistic aspect of Kant’s moral

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<sup>158</sup> “Not only is the self entwined in society; it owes society its existence in the most literal sense. All its content comes from society, or at any rate from its relation to the object” (*MM*, §99).

<sup>159</sup> “Socrates made his appearance at the time when Athenian democracy had fallen into ruin. He evaporated the existing world and retreated into himself in search of the right and the good” (*EPR*, §138A). Adorno’s reference is technically to Plato: “Plato’s philosophy was the first of which it could be said that its entire philosophical interest was dominated by moral questions in the sense in which we have been speaking of them. And it is no accident that its historical emergence should have coincided with the disintegration of the Athenian polis” (*PMP*, 16).

<sup>160</sup> Horkheimer expresses similar views in, ‘Materialism and Morality’, an early essay: “Autonomously attempting to decide whether one’s actions are good or evil is plainly a late historical phenomenon” (*BPSS*, 15).

<sup>161</sup> Snir (2010) reads this passage as involving a direct criticism of Kantian ethics (413), a criticism that is also implicit in my own discussion up to this point. However, in a sense we would both be eliding the original context of the quotation, as Adorno is actually criticising “the theory of Existentialism – which essentially regards itself as an ethical, moral movement, albeit in a negative sense” for contriving to “undercut” this question, although he does locate this contrivance as originating in Kant’s concept of ‘personality’ (*PMP*, 13 – 14).

philosophy, which Hegel describes as an ‘empty formalism’. The Kantian demand that morality not be conditioned by anything outside of it, Hegel argues, “is abstract universality, whose determination is *identity without content* or the abstractly *positive*, i.e., the indeterminate” (*EPR*, §135). The criticism consists in the fact that without importing content from outside of pure practical reason alone, that is, from the sensible world, the categorical imperative cannot have any content to consider. For instance, regardless of whether or not the universalisation test, to “*act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law*” (*Groundwork*, 4:421), tells us that theft would be dissolved if everyone were to do it, the very notion of theft is not contained in the mind alone but must first come to it from the sensible world and so relies on the subject being already embedded in a world in which property exists (*EPR*, §135R). Adorno too clearly does not think that it is really possible to completely abstract from the world and so accepts something like Hegel’s ‘empty formalism’ charge against Kant:

the categorical imperative does indeed exist on paper, but it is not really valid in the strict, internal Kantian sense. This is because it is tacitly assumed that I can verify my judgement, that I can establish whether my maxim is an appropriate basis for such a universal law, whereas in reality my judgement presupposes innumerable reflections, reflections which are beyond the capacities of individual human beings. For a vast amount of knowledge would be called for, something which cannot be claimed to exist as a self-evident moral fact. (*PMP*, 156)

In addition, an aphorism titled ‘Promise me this, my child’ in *Minima Moralia* seems to me to involve another variant on the ‘empty formalism’ criticism of Kant, here through a deliberate perversion of the universalisation test with respect to lying, though without mentioning either Kant or Hegel. There Adorno argues that lying now lives on in a condition of “universal untruth” but primarily now serves to “express contempt” and has thereby ironically lost its ‘honest’ ability to distort truth: “Among today’s adept practitioners, the lie has long since lost its honest function of misrepresenting reality. Nobody believes anybody, everyone is in the know” (*MM*, §9). Here Adorno suggests that the proliferation of lying does not lead to the dissolution of lying, as the categorical imperative suggests but instead both the context in which truth and lies are told and so also the function of lying itself have simply changed as a result.<sup>162</sup> However, it is also Kant’s formalism, alongside his rigorism, that gives his moral philosophy its critical power, according to Adorno. Through its insistence on abstracting from all

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<sup>162</sup> Freyenhagen (2013, 112 – 115) and Snir (2010, 412 – 413) present further arguments that Adorno accepts the ‘empty formalism’ charge.

determinate content, Kant's moral philosophy is able to hold up a negating vision of the world through the demands of the moral law, which issues imperatives about how things should be, regardless of the specific situation. While the content of the moral law must be drawn from society, the rigour of the moral law means that it does not straightforwardly repeat it and may in fact stand radically opposed to it (*PMP*, 151).

Yet, as a result of the strict separation between the intelligible and the sensible, Kant does not address the difficulty of moving from the universality of the categorical imperative to the specific case,<sup>163</sup> which raises the serious and difficult problem that it is blind to situations in which the pursuit of duty for duty's sake alone can under certain conditions be over-demanding if it cannot be met (*PMP*, 100 – 101) to such an extent that “a pure moral demand can by virtue of its own purity be transformed into evil [...] by destroying the object, or more accurately, the subject, on whom this moral demand is imposed” (158). Adorno illustrates this problem towards the end of the lectures by relating the Wrong Life claim to Ibsen's play *The Wild Duck*, which Adorno argues “deals with the question of how a man becomes immoral simply by defending the moral law – or, as [Ibsen] puts it in an almost Kantian way, by defending the ethical commandments in their purity” (158). The play dramatises the actions of Gregers Werle, a man who consistently acts on the basis of the abstract principle of the good – or according to a ‘purely good will’, to put it in another, more explicitly Kantian way – within a world in which the characters' lives are held together through a web of ‘life-lies’ and deceit (159 – 161). In this context, Gregers' attempts to embody the good by revealing the truth of these life-lies at every step foster nothing but further misery and discord, eventually leading to the death of the only character who seems to be relatively innocent.

According to Adorno, *The Wild Duck* dramatises the conflict between “the conditional nature of moral action”, in terms of its necessary imbrication with the complex of empirical, social and other features of the context in which it takes place and “the authority of moral concepts themselves”, in the Kantian abstract ideal represented by Gregers insisting on the pure interiority of the will, only to have it result in tragedy and destroy this very conviction and integrity. This destruction of the ‘purely good will’ of Gregers is revealed in a final exchange between the ‘Kantian’ Gregers and Relling, who Adorno reads as representing the views of Hegel and who castigates Gregers for failing to appreciate that his dogged insistence on moral purity destroyed the context that had made life liveable. In this way, Adorno says that the fate

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<sup>163</sup> The categorical imperative, “has not to do with the matter of the action and what is to result from it”, that is, it has nothing to do with any of the specific elements of a situation or what consequences the action may or may not bring about, “but with the form and the principle from which the action itself follows” (*Groundwork*, 4:416).

of Gregers in the play embodies Hegel's critique of Kant (162). However, the benefits of Kant's separation of the intelligible and the sensible is also visible here because if moral philosophy does include consequences and the situation into its considerations, then in the context of delusion that is also a context of guilt – of wrong life – into which Gregers intervenes it gets caught up with the badness of it all and merely reproduces it (165). The web of 'life-lies' hides various forms of deceit and wrong but until Gregers, the outsider, arrives and begins to point them out, it is quickly revealed that these 'life-lies' were what made the lives of the other characters liveable. Analysing this web and Gregers' actions against it, Adorno says, it would in some sense be justified to think that, "all of the characteristics of all of these people have come together to create the meaningful constellation that was then attacked so violently by the young Gregers Werle" and yet, to conclude from this that this web of deceit and the wrong life it is premised upon should therefore go undisturbed, "would be to convert the principle of morality into a principle of conformity" (165). In this way, Adorno says, Ibsen's play "reveals the insolubility of the contradiction [...] the fact that 'there can be no good life within the bad one'" (162).<sup>164</sup>

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<sup>164</sup> Adorno leaves little room for doubt that he is referring to the Wrong Life claim from *Minima Moralia*, as he immediately follows it up with "if you don't mind my repeating this old quote of mine" (*PMP*, 162).

## Chapter 4. Reason and the Additional Factor: Nihilism, Morality, History

In the final lecture of *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, Adorno states that following the discussion he has engaged in over the course of the lectures, perhaps all that may be said about moral philosophy today is simply limited to its urgent critique and an awareness of its antinomies (*PMP*, 167), a form of critique that he goes on to attribute to Nietzsche (171) before saying of Nietzsche that: “of all the so-called great philosophers I owe him by far the greatest debt – more even than to Hegel” (172). There are two initial reasons why Nietzsche is relevant to an interpretation of Adorno’s Wrong Life claim: firstly because Adorno agrees with Nietzsche that we can no longer claim to have access to any transcendental notions of truth and goodness that would ground our actions as right or moral, as Nietzsche demonstrated in his ruthless critique of morality; and secondly because of a shared scepticism of the idea that the historical process is guided by a harmonising movement of reason within which we can find ourselves at home – that over the course of history, ‘life’ will at some point become properly ‘ethical life’. These are themes that have already been explored: in Chapter One, with its emphasis on Weber’s concept of disenchantment and Horkheimer’s history of the development of instrumental reason; and in Chapter Two, with the consequences of the process of enlightenment being contrary to the project of Enlightenment’s belief in progress, the results of which have instead been the embeddedness and entrenchment of instrumental reason and the practical equivalent of identity-thinking in Auschwitz, the exchange relationship at the basis of societies of ‘formal freedom’ and the demonstration of their connecting logic in the prison industry.

However, a further reason to consider the importance of Nietzsche to an interpretation of Adorno’s Wrong Life claim that seems significantly under-explored in the secondary literature is why it is that Adorno attributes the Wrong Life claim to Nietzsche in both *Problems of Moral Philosophy* and *History and Freedom*. While I do not claim to have discovered a definitive connection or the passage in Nietzsche that Adorno was unable to recollect (*HF*, 264) – if such a passage even exists – I do attempt to elaborate a connection here on the basis of a clue provided by Schröder (*PMP*, 182), which I explore in the first section of this chapter (4.1) in terms of Adorno’s reference to the context of guilt and the ungroundable nature of Kant’s notion of the moral law. In the final instance, I argue that Adorno’s reception of Nietzsche tempers his Hegelianism, rather than overshadows it and Adorno remains a dialectical thinker committed to pushing Hegel’s thought in the direction that his thought pointed towards but did not, in the last instance, follow. This direction has now been forced upon philosophy by Auschwitz, which

itself inculcates the ‘coldness’ that has become the principle by which the context of guilt can be endured and which cannot be countered by its opposite in compassion, as I explore in the following section (4.2).

Towards the end of this section, I raise and interpret Adorno’s claim that moments of discontinuity or ‘breaking off’ are not only characteristic of Kant’s philosophy as a whole but pivotal to his moral philosophy (*PMP*, 95). I note that two such moments have already been explored in the chapter up to this point: firstly, that Kant attempts to put an end to the nihilistic question ‘for what?’ and the inevitable conclusion that the moral law is ungroundable by instead identifying the moral law directly with reason; and secondly, Kant’s brief, mysterious and hasty introduction of and subsequent ‘breaking off’ from analysing the concept of ‘diabolical evil’. I then introduce a third instance of discontinuity, which I explore throughout the following section (4.3): the moment of ‘breaking off’ the chain of deliberation that is required for action to take place but which cannot be made a formal feature of moral theorising without distorting it. According to Adorno, Kant attempts to account for this moment through his account of ‘the will’, which relies on a clear separation between the sensible and intelligible but which really leaves the decisive moment of action appearing as something extra or ‘additional’ when analysing specific instances. I explore this ‘additional factor’ through close attention to the section of *Negative Dialectics* that bears its name in order to explore the dialectics of moral action, which I attempt to illustrate through analysis of a scene from Masaki Kobayashi’s film *The Human Condition* (1959). My interpretation of the additional factor attempts to draw attention to the ways in which it is not opposed to reason, as some readers suggest but is necessarily imbricated with it, alongside the importance of the philosophy of history in Adorno’s account of this necessary element of action that cannot be captured by moral philosophy.

Adorno’s focus on the importance of Auschwitz also go beyond the influence of Nietzsche’s thought in terms of Adorno’s shared concerns regarding moral philosophy and truth more generally. Adorno’s major point of departure from Nietzsche is that he is not responsive enough to the role that history and the social play in constituting the individual subject and as a result Nietzsche ends up reproducing some of the same issues plaguing Kantian moral philosophy. Yet, Nietzsche’s critique of moral philosophy and the philosophy of history, with which it is entwined, represents, like Kant, the significance of the critical role played by the rationality of the individual that is today at odds with the historical process and which should not just be subsumed under the objective rationality of that process as Adorno believes Hegel does, as I explore in the final section (4.4). Following up on this last point, Adorno thinks that

the ‘hellish unity’ captured in the name ‘Auschwitz’ necessitates a rethinking of the central tenets of Hegel’s philosophy of history, a philosophy that Adorno argues must be “construed and denied” in light of “the catastrophes that have happened, and in view of the catastrophes to come” (*ND*, 320).

#### 4.1. Nihilism, the Moral Law and the Context of Delusion

Prior to the statement about his indebtedness to Nietzsche, Adorno begins the final lecture of *Problems of Moral Philosophy* almost exactly as he did the first: by raising the Wrong Life claim, “namely, that in the bad life a good life is not possible” and attributing a version of the claim to Nietzsche (*PMP*, 167), an attribution that he also makes in the first lecture (1) and again in the final lecture of *History and Freedom* (*HF*, 263). In both instances in *Problems of Moral Philosophy* Adorno does not give much of a clue as to which argument or text of Nietzsche’s he has in mind and in *History and Freedom* he simply says, “I can no longer recollect the passage” (*HF*, 263). Schröder in the ‘Editor’s Notes’ to *Problems of Moral Philosophy* states that he was unable to find a comparable claim in Nietzsche, although he suggests that Adorno may be thinking of §§33 - 34 of the first part of *Human, All Too Human* (*PMP*, 182).<sup>165</sup> It is initially difficult to illuminate this comparison much further, partly because Adorno himself says nothing more that would help determine whether these are the passages he has in mind and the only other clue he gives is to say that the statement is “very differently phrased” by Nietzsche (167). Schröder does not elaborate on this comparison any further beyond the above suggestion either and upon examination, it is not obvious why he draws attention to these passages from *Human, All Too Human*, especially because they are relatively long sections, whereas Adorno uses the terms “statement” and “assertion” to describe Nietzsche’s equivalent expression, rather than, say, ‘argument’ or ‘discussion’.<sup>166</sup>

Upon reading §§33 – 34 of *Human, All Too Human* it is difficult to easily see the parallel with Adorno’s ‘Wrong Life’ claim that Schröder suggests. These are the last two sections of the first part of Nietzsche’s book, which comprises a series of reflections in which, as Abbey (2020) notes, “Nietzsche is suggesting that even if it were possible, exposure to the unvarnished truth would be undesirable” (32). In the sections Schröder points to in particular, Nietzsche

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<sup>165</sup> Tiedemann’s note in *History and Freedom* simply states that “A statement to this effect could not be found in Nietzsche” (*HF*, 331).

<sup>166</sup> Of course, ‘statement’ or ‘assertion’ can be used to describe a longer discussion but it seems to me that, in context, the connotation is that Nietzsche’s version is a ‘statement’ comparable in form to Adorno’s Wrong Life claim, i.e., a relatively brief sentence or few sentences. Adorno refers to his own version of the claim as a “sentence” in the relevant passage from the final lecture (*PMP*, 167).

seems concerned with the relationship between truth and falsity in terms of one's ability to reconcile oneself with existence. More specifically, in §33 Nietzsche seems to be arguing that it is only because human beings lack knowledge and engage in "false thinking" about the value of life that they are able to get on in their lives and find existence bearable at all, "possible only through the fact that empathy with universal life and suffering of mankind is very feebly developed in the individual" (*HATH*, §33). In this sense, error and false beliefs about life, its meaning and the suffering of others appear to be necessary to avoid falling into despair in view of "the ultimate goallessness of man, [before which] his actions acquire in his own eyes the character of useless squandering" (§33). According to Abbey, in §34 Nietzsche then moves to give a sketch of the "new philosopher" who would not only be able to bear such truths about the meaninglessness of existence but even relish it, suggesting that "there is also a joy in this person's wisdom" (Abbey, 2020, 32).

Whatever the statement by Nietzsche he has in mind may be, Adorno says that he did not discover it until later (*PMP*, 1) and by this he presumably means after he had already formulated the Wrong Life claim in *Minima Moralia*<sup>167</sup> and so it seems as though not much can be made of Adorno's indebtedness to Nietzsche in formulating the Wrong Life claim.<sup>168</sup> On the other hand, §§33 – 34 of *Human, All Too Human* do raise problems that Adorno is also responsive to and that are of relevance to my discussion so far, initially in terms of the corrosive effect that knowledge has on our ability to ground and undertake moral action and as such, Nietzsche's discussion here anticipates his later discussions of the 'will to truth' and nihilism. While I do not know that Schröder is quite right to read these sections as a parallel to Adorno's Wrong Life claim, they do anticipate something of his and Nietzsche's shared scepticism regarding the assumption that the pursuit of truth is a good in itself and will lead to the betterment of the human condition. More than this, however, these sections in Nietzsche actually express something very close to Adorno's reference to the 'context' or 'web' of guilt [*Schuldzusammenhang*], which he associates with the similarly phrased 'context' or 'web' of delusion [*Verblendungszusammenhang*]. Adorno does not attribute the insight into these

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<sup>167</sup> Perhaps it should be noted that Adorno does quote Nietzsche in the course of 'Refuge for the homeless' in *Minima Moralia* but it is not really possible to construe the quotation as expressing a similar sentiment to Adorno's Wrong Life claim in that section. The quotation is part of a short aphorism in *The Gay Science* which involves reference to the topic of home-ownership, which itself forms the context of Adorno's aphorism. The full aphorism from *The Gay Science* that Adorno quotes runs as follows: "I wouldn't build myself a house for myself (and it is part of my good fortune not to be a home-owner!). But if I had to, I would, like some Romans, build it right into the sea—I certainly would like to share a few secrets with this beautiful monster" (*GS*, §240).

<sup>168</sup> About Adorno's claim in *Problems of Moral Philosophy* to be indebted to Nietzsche, Thomson interprets this to be about their shared understanding that "philosophy and history are intimately connected" (Thomson, 2006, 120). This is a more general point than the specific one about the 'Wrong Life' claim that I consider here and while I broadly agree with Thomson, I think as much can be said about Adorno's indebtedness to Hegel on this point, something that Thomson presumably also thinks (106 – 107).

concepts to Nietzsche but rather to Hegel.<sup>169</sup> Nevertheless, I argue that Nietzsche's statement to the effect that human beings are required to deny the breadth of human suffering and meaninglessness to live life at all is very close to what I have previously said about the guilt context.

What I have referred to as Nietzsche's 'nihilism' here refers specifically to his thesis that the coupling together of truth and goodness that underpins much of Western intellectual history, including much of philosophy, religion and modern science, inevitably reveals that this coupling has always been a prejudice. That is, the historical search for truth, which is taken to be a good in itself, eventually necessitates reflection on *why* the search for truth has been taken for granted as a good in itself. In this reflection on the association of truth as a good in itself, itself the end result of the historical search for truth, it is revealed that it is not possible to justify this association on the grounds of truth itself. A version of this argument has already been considered by Weber in Chapter One: the pursuit of science results in the development of a powerful scientific method for the acquisition of knowledge but through this development it is revealed that reasons for the pursuit of science – the *meaning* or *value* of science – cannot be discovered through the pursuit of science itself. Why science is worth pursuing cannot be known on the grounds of science itself and its meaning and worth has instead been presupposed (*SV*, 143).

Nihilism involves the negation of the undergirding assumption that truth and goodness are necessarily connected precisely because our drive towards uncovering truth as inherently good eventually motivates us to uncover the truth of this assumption, by asking what grounds our belief that what is true is also what is good and that what is good is also what is true. Beyond this, as Nietzsche argues in the sections from *Human, All Too Human*, there is no more reason to think that the increase in our store of knowledge and understanding is likely to overcome fear and improve the human condition any more than it is to make life unliveable, as Nietzsche puts it in another text that echoes that argument: "Something might be true although at the same time harmful and dangerous in the highest degree; indeed, it could pertain to the fundamental nature of existence that a complete knowledge of it would destroy one" (*BGE*, §39). Put another way, an assumption that has undergirded the search for truth, the acquisition of knowledge and the development of more efficient methods for generating knowledge has always been the assumption that these are in and of themselves inherently good; it is good to know more, to

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<sup>169</sup> I take this attribution up further in the final section of the chapter (4.4), as well as a different attribution about insight into the guilt context that Adorno makes contemporaneously with the attribution to Hegel, this time to Stoicism (*MCP*, 112), which I attempt to interpret with reference to Hegel's own discussion of Stoicism.

understand more and to strive towards the truth. At the same time, what is good must be grounded upon and justified by what is true, examples of which would include God's authority as the ultimate source and guarantee of religious moral systems but also Kant's insistence on the 'given' nature of the Moral Law.<sup>170</sup>

In *The Will to Power*,<sup>171</sup> Nietzsche says that the nihilistic question 'for what?' is rooted in the habit of supposing that the ground of moral action is 'given' externally (*WP*, §20) and effectively argues in *Beyond Good and Evil* that Kant dishonestly attempts to ward off this question in his account of the source of the Moral Law as already contained in reason (*BGE*, §5),<sup>172</sup> an argument that Adorno himself takes up in *Problems of Moral Philosophy*. According to Adorno there, Kant grounds moral philosophy in his theoretical philosophy and takes 'reason' to mean the same thing across all of his thought as "the capacity for right, correct thought, the ability to form concepts correctly, the ability to make correct judgements and precise deductions, [...] all this is constitutive of both theory and practice in his philosophy" (*PMP*, 26). With respect to practical reason, Kant understands it as 'pure' in two senses, according to Adorno: i) according to reason alone, without influence by external (empirical) factors; and ii) in terms of action *purely* in accordance with this reason. In this way, practical reason is concerned with satisfying the laws of reason, disregarding any consequences or material that may impinge on the subject from outside, which is itself to act freely (26 - 27).

Adorno points out that Kant already defines freedom as independence from the laws of nature in his discussion of the third antinomy in the first *Critique* (*PMP*, 34). The concept of an antinomy in Kant involves an irresolvable conflict between two mutually contradictory but equally plausible assertions, which reason is led into "of itself and even unavoidably" (*CPR*, A407/B434) when it attempts to resolve one of four cosmological problems. The third of the four antinomies that Kant identifies in the *Critique of Pure Reason* involves the irresolvable conflict between absolute causal determination (which would lead to an infinite regress, undermining the notion that every effect must first have a cause) and freedom as a spontaneous

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<sup>170</sup> Nietzsche associates Kant's categorical imperative with 'tartuffery' or 'religious hypocrisy' in *Beyond Good and Evil* (*BGE*, §5).

<sup>171</sup> I am aware that the use of this text, as a compilation of unpublished notes or *Nachlass*, to characterise a Nietzschean position is sometimes considered controversial within Nietzsche scholarship. For a summary of this controversy, see Reginster (2006, 16 – 20). For a justification of the use of *The Will to Power* in the discussion of nihilism, see the same sections of Reginster and also Clark (2019).

<sup>172</sup> Philosophers come in for mistrust, Nietzsche argues because "they display altogether insufficient honesty, while making a mighty and virtuous noise as soon as the problem of truthfulness is even remotely touched on. They pose as having discovered and attained their real opinions through the self-evolution of a cold, pure, divinely unperturbed dialectic [...]: while what happens at bottom is that a prejudice, a notion, an 'inspiration', generally a desire of the heart sifted and made abstract, is defended by them with reasons sought after the event". Nietzsche gives as an example "old Kant as he lures us along the dialectical bypaths which lead, more correctly, mislead, to his 'categorical imperative'" (*BGE*, §5).

‘uncaused’ cause (which would flout the laws of causality that the notion of ‘freedom’ otherwise assumes) (*CPR*, A444/B472 – A451/B479). I do not here intend to go any further into Kant’s notion of the antinomies but the important point to make here with respect to the *Critique of Practical Reason* is that freedom as independence from the causal laws of nature – that is, from heteronomy – “however, is freedom in the *negative* sense, whereas this *lawgiving of its own* on the part of pure and, as such, practical reason is freedom in the *positive* sense” – that is as autonomy, as the use of pure practical reason in conformity with the moral law (*CPrR*, 5:33).

What Adorno points out is that in both its negative and positive sense, Kant’s notion of freedom does not ultimately derive from reason alone but by presupposing something that breaks off the chain of questioning, ‘for what?’ in either case. Firstly, insofar as the ‘negative’ notion of freedom involves Kant presupposing ‘necessity’ as the causal necessity that freedom is independent from (*PMP*, 36 – 37), thereby not deriving it from reason but treating it as a given and even eventually expanding the concept of causality in order to embrace freedom, “so that freedom, too, is a causality, a causality *sui generis*” (39). More significantly, the ‘positive’ notion of the moral law is, Kant says, not deducible through reason but “the moral law is given, as it were, as a pure fact of reason” (*CPrR*, 5:47). In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer describe this as a “*coups de main* by reason of the consciousness that morality itself is underivable” (*DE*, 85). What looks like an attempt to derive moral philosophy on the grounds of reason alone breaks off at the point at which reason, that which is supposed to be the source of duty in the form of the moral law, cannot itself be further rationally grounded without endlessly provoking the nihilistic question ‘for what?’ and so reason and morality are effectively made identical. However, as Freyenhagen points out, given that Kant is otherwise committed to the idea that we must only accept ideas on the basis of good reasons and not on appeals to authority, “Kant cannot appeal to the idea that something just by its very existence has or is an authority that we cannot question further” (Freyenhagen, 2013, 116).<sup>173</sup>

The givenness of the moral law is not an empirical given but it is a ‘fact’ – the only ‘fact’ of reason, so-called “because one cannot reason it out from antecedent data of reason [...] and because it instead forces itself upon us” (*CPrR*, 5:31). According to Adorno, Kant’s notion of the moral law and the evidence of it as a given involves the compulsion or coercive aspect of obligation, although he believes that Kant would deny this: “At the basic psychological level,

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<sup>173</sup> Snir puts the problem in the following way: “Since Kant identifies the moral law with reason and insists that the categorical imperative is nothing but a consistent use of reason, the validity of moral law obviously cannot be proven by rational means, for reason cannot lean on itself” (Snir, 2010, 425).

[Kant] is thinking simply of the whole realm of experience summed up in the word ‘conscience’” (*PMP*, 81). Adorno argues that, empirically, Kant is right to appeal to obligation but that he fails to acknowledge that the existence of conscience and its compulsiveness does not by itself legitimate anything.

In the second *Critique*, Kant himself refers to conscience, “that wonderful capacity”, as “the prosecutor within” that causes us pain and makes us aware of our capacity to suppress our inclinations, desires and habits in order to follow the moral law, including causing us pain through reflection on past actions in which we failed to do so (*CPrR*, 5:98) and in the *Metaphysics of Morals* states that “Although the *pain* one feels from the pangs of conscience has a moral source it is still a natural effect, like grief, fear or any other state of suffering” (*MoM*, 6:394). Conscience, along with moral feeling, love (of one’s neighbour) and respect for oneself are subjective conditions for the receptivity of duty and which each person supposedly just has already and by virtue of which human beings can be put under obligation (6:399). In this way, there is no duty to acquire conscience because it is just something that we already have as that which makes us alive to duty in the first place and so “To be under an obligation to have a conscience would be tantamount to having a duty to recognize duties” (6:400). However, while conscience is not something that can be acquired, it is something that can – and according to Kant *should* – be cultivated, “to sharpen one’s attentiveness to the voice of the inner judge and to use every means to obtain a hearing for it” (6:401). However, if conscience, as a feeling or a source of feeling, can be cultivated then it, like any other feeling, can also be suppressed. This is the point that Adorno and Horkheimer make with respect to Sade’s novel *Juliette* in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, reading the eponymous Juliette as embodying “intellectual pleasure in regression – *amor intellectus diaboli*, the pleasure of attacking civilization with its own weapons” (*DE*, 94). In service of becoming a great murderer, Juliette recommends the cultivation of callousness, as non-receptivity to feeling, in order to habitually quieten the pangs of conscience (95). Juliette and the characters who mentor her in the novel thereby negatively mirror the Kantian commandment to utilise reason to master one’s emotions – dispelling heteronomy – but in the service of crime and evil: “For formalistic reason, freedom from the bite of conscience is as essential as the absence of love or hate” (94 - 95).

According to Kant in *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, this should be impossible and what is interesting is that he actually says very little more than this. There Kant argues that the subordination of inclination to reason, making the moral law the ground of action, is what makes an action morally good, whereas the subordination of duty to inclination, making compliance with the moral law conditional on the satisfaction of self-love, is to act in

conformity with ‘radical evil’ (*Religion*, 6:36). However, before this definition of radical evil, Kant states that reason cannot itself be the ground of abolishing or suppressing the moral law within, as to act according to the principle of evil, elevating resistance to the moral law as an incentive to act would be ‘diabolical evil’ and this, Kant says, is impossible for a human being (6:35). Kant simply breaks off here and does not really give any further argument for this impossibility other than through an implied comparison to a prior consideration about the source of evil that he has already dismissed, which is that it is grounded on our sensuous nature suppressing the moral law. This cannot be the case, he says because if our sensuous nature by itself eliminated the moral law then we would no longer be talking about a human being but a mere animal; but neither can evil be grounded on pure reason eliminating the moral law because we would no longer be talking about a human being but a demon: “the subject would be made a *diabolical* being. - Neither of these two is however applicable to the human being” (6:35). In that case, Sade’s Juliette seems to teach one how to become a demon.

In *Ethics of the Real*, Zupančič gives a concise argument for how diabolical evil fulfils Kant’s criteria of an ethical act:

1. It is a purely *formal* act; it complies with the form solely for the sake of form, which is, as we know, the very definition of morality: what distinguishes morality from legality is precisely a surplus of form, the fact that we act not only in conformity with duty, but exclusively because of duty.
2. The feeling of horror it provokes is not aesthetic but is, rather, a *moral feeling*.
3. It cannot be explained as arising from a sensible impulse but, rather, only as *arising from a maxim*.
4. ‘It cannot be explained, since only what happens in accordance with the mechanism of nature is capable of being explained’ – thus it is an act of *freedom* (Zupančič, 2000, 85).

One problem with Zupančič’s argument that I can see, however, is that it is perhaps guilty of exaggerating Kant’s formalism, insofar as her account makes no reference to the categorical imperative. Presumably, conformity to the procedure of the categorical imperative would distinguish a good act from a diabolically evil one for Kant. In Juliette’s case, she is advocating murder and this flouts the ‘humanity’ formulation, “*act that you use humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means*” (*Groundwork*, 4:429), even before passing it through the universalisation test. However, Zupančič’s own omission raises the question of why Kant himself does not argue with reference to the categorical imperative that diabolical evil is impossible but merely raises the far more puzzling reference to diabolical beings before simply breaking off. What is

interesting is that Kant does not actually argue that there is a contradiction in the idea that reason could subordinate the moral law to resistance to the moral law but rather that we are no longer talking about human beings and simply moves on or ‘breaks off’. This ‘breaking off’ or argumentative ‘rupture’, as I will argue below and in the conclusion to the thesis, appears in more crucial places in Kant’s thought and is something that Adorno thinks is characteristic of Kant’s philosophy more generally (*PMP*, 95).

Moreover, while Kant would also likely deny the obligation of the moral law as having anything to do with it, there is little reason to think that the compulsiveness of conscience is not empirical in origin. Bowie points out that Adorno’s insistence on the mediation between the empirical and intelligible character of moral reasoning is a Hegelian one, “the ‘givenness’ of reason in Kant’s sense [...] cannot be independent of some kind of ‘experience’, in which we are aware of reason as something that affects the world we inhabit. Otherwise there could be no connection of reason to what actually happens in moral life” (Bowie, 2013, 109). Adorno is aware that Kant would resist this because otherwise he would have to admit the insights of psychoanalysis that these compulsive mechanisms are internalisations of power structures, dominant social norms and importantly, irrational behaviours (*PMP*, 82). If Kant were to deny the specific form of obligation in the categorical imperative as being like these other forms of compulsion, he would thereby lose what makes it obligation as its motivating aspect (82 - 83). While Adorno believes that psychoanalysis has demonstrated the connection between moral obligation and compulsion, he credits the first insight into this to Nietzsche, who “had a keen eye for the limitations of Kant’s concept of duty and an incredibly sure instinct for the element of heteronomy at the heart of Kant’s so-called doctrine of autonomy” (83).

However, Adorno does think that ultimately Nietzsche only provides an abstract negation of Kantian morality and that he fails to appreciate its radical nature, which can be shown by returning to the sections of *Human, All Too Human* mentioned above. Nietzsche’s discussion there appears to be about the difficulty the individual has in reconciling the meaninglessness of life with their lived existence, in which each action seems to be worthless in view of the full truth of things. What this entails is that humans, as the beings characterised precisely by their rationality, must *of necessity* constantly engage in a ‘life-lie’ in order to *live*. As such, while human beings live in the midst of extreme and pervasive suffering and meaninglessness, they are only able to get by *because* they are able to utilise reason, as the organ of truth but in a manner that denies the truth in order to pursue other ends. In Nietzsche’s discussion, it is necessary that the individual not grasp the whole truth of the meaninglessness of existence and the suffering of others in order to function in their day-to-day existence. In order to be able to

‘get on’ in life, ‘lies’ make life liveable, as Relling pointed out to Gregers Werle at the end of *The Wild Duck*. For Adorno, ‘false thinking’ most obviously comes in the form of false consciousness or ideology. An important part of this form of false thinking involves believing that we are free and can make meaningful choices and perform meaningful actions under present conditions, whereas the truth would reveal that in fact we live in unfree conditions, in ‘wrong life’ and that most, if not all, of our actions tend to reproduce and are conditioned by these conditions of unfreedom.

However, a major difference for Adorno is that such false thinking is only part of the picture – even if we recognise that we think falsely we are still unfree. Individual actions, no matter how well-intentioned or how detached the attitude of the individual who acts will still become distorted and reproduce ‘wrong life’. In other words, the ‘wrongness’ of Adorno’s Wrong Life claim not only relates to false consciousness in the sense of being ‘untrue’ but the ‘wrongness’ is much more importantly a claim that the material conditions and social world of the present period are bad. In other words, Adorno is concerned with how a certain kind of ignorance prevents us from recognising the antagonism between individual action and the social context in which agency is embedded, which is to say, the antagonism between the general and the particular but is insistent that this recognition is not itself enough. Nietzsche, on the other hand, is concerned with how ignorance prevents the majority of people from falling into the despair that would result from recognition of the antagonism between what we might call individual purposiveness and metaphysical emptiness, an antagonism that can be characterised as ‘nihilism’ and in §34 of *Human, All Too Human* suggests that an exceptional individual would be able to live joyfully in light of the full picture of the meaninglessness of existence if they were able to take the appropriate attitude towards this knowledge.

This is one point on which Adorno will depart from Nietzsche. In Adorno’s view, Nietzsche does not fully connect the individual’s ignorance up with its embeddedness within a social and historical context, instead arguing on an individualistic basis that a strong individual is able to rise above that context and become a ‘new philosopher’, perhaps even a truly ‘ethical’ agent in respect of having the strength to affirm meaninglessness and live one’s life on the basis of a confrontation with the pervasiveness of suffering and its meaninglessness.<sup>174</sup> Ultimately, Nietzsche repeats the same problem that Adorno, agreeing with Hegel, thinks plagues the Kantian notion of autonomy in the suggestion that a strong enough individual could negate the

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<sup>174</sup> In this sense, §34 of *Human All Too Human* anticipates Nietzsche’s later notion of ‘active nihilism’ (*WP*, §22).

social order without thereby being affected by it.<sup>175</sup> Although Nietzsche demonstrates a penetrating sense of the formation of modern individuals and forms of morality, in the last instance he treats the individual as though it is able to remove itself from this embeddedness, to independently rise above the world as a ‘higher self’:

A man from whom the ordinary fetters of life have fallen to such an extent that he continues to live only so as to know better must, rather, without envy or vexation be able to forgo much, indeed almost everything upon which other men place value; that free, fearless hovering over men, customs, laws and the traditional evaluations of things must *suffice* him as the condition he considers most desirable. (*HATH*, §34)

Ultimately, according to Adorno and Horkheimer, the ‘higher self’ or the ‘new philosopher’ of Nietzsche,<sup>176</sup> able to withstand the suffering and meaninglessness of life not through a life-lie but through desiring knowledge of it and “happy to communicate his joy in this condition” (§34), like the Kantian autonomous subject, aims “at independence from external powers, at the unconditioned maturity defined as the essence of enlightenment” (*DE*, 114 – 115). However, Kant’s moral philosophy, through its extreme separation between the sensible world and the intelligible world of freedom and the moral law, is in one sense more radical than Nietzsche’s critique. As Schweppenhäuser puts it, Kant’s moral philosophy involves “the demand to order social reality in a rational way and to create the basis for human happiness by means of rational praxis” (Schweppenhäuser, 2006, 337) and so is able to be far more intransigent towards contemporary conditions through the implicit demand that the world should be otherwise than it is (*PMP*, 113 - 114).

In *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, Adorno says that Nietzsche saw that morality had degenerated into ideology but only provided an abstract negation of it:

If his critique had been as consistent as it ought to have been, but isn’t – because he too was in thrall to existing conditions, because he was able to get to the bottom of

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<sup>175</sup> Taylor, himself deeply influenced by Hegel, makes a similar argument regarding Nietzsche but in terms of what he calls ‘language communities’ or ‘webs of interlocution’ within which we are always embedded and our sense of self is formed. The stance taken by Nietzsche, as standing outside of the social and linguistic order, “transforms” but in no way takes him out of what Taylor refers to as “the original situation of identity-formation”: “Even where I believe that I see a truth about the human condition that no one else has seen – a condition that Nietzsche seems to have approached sometimes – it still must be on the basis of my reading of others’ thought and language. I see the ‘genealogy’ underlying their morality, and therefore hold them too to be (unwitting and unwilling) witnesses to my insight. Somehow I have to meet the challenge: Do I know what I’m saying? Do I really grasp what I’m talking about? And this challenge I can only meet by confronting my thought and language with the thought and reactions of others” (Taylor, 1989, 37).

<sup>176</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer refer to Nietzsche’s notion of the *Übermensch* (*DE*, 114).

what people had become but was not able to get to the bottom of the society that had made them what they were – it should have turned its gaze to the conditions that determine human beings and make them and each of us into what we are. (*PMP*, 174)

According to Adorno, Nietzsche's abstract negation of bourgeois morality is visible in the norms that Nietzsche advocates in opposition, which are really just "the negative mirror-image of the morality he repudiated" and so are really just an attempt to read off the 'good' from the 'bad'<sup>177</sup> or else derived from feudal values that will necessarily produce very different outcomes and interpretations when filtered through the social and economic mechanisms underlying modern societies (172 – 173). As such, Nietzschean values seem pulled from a time before the expansion of industry and the rule of profit, making them seem in this sense arbitrarily imposed or even Romantic in the attempt to recover something that was 'lost' but their expression today would be filtered through these mechanisms and so not merely in opposition to them. The businessman committed to Nietzschean 'nobility' would probably go bust or the *Übermensch* would likely be "the go-getter or captain of industry today" (173). In Nietzsche's statement in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, "No shepherd and one herd!" (*TSZ*, 130), Nietzsche discovered the formula of the exchange society but falsely understood it as the prevalence of the 'last man' [*letzten Menschen*] (128 – 131), rather than as "a completely functionalized and anonymous form of domination, that nevertheless rules over this herd with incomparably greater brutality than if there were a visible bell-wether for them to follow" (*PMP*, 174). What Nietzsche's formula conceals, Adorno says elsewhere, is the social oppression common to both the modern and the Ancient world, the latter of which he says that Nietzsche did not want to see:

Only now that oppression has become anonymous. If the old pauperization theory has turned out not to be literally true, it has done so in the no less alarming sense that unfreedom, dependency upon an apparatus that has escaped the control of those who use it, has spread out universally over mankind (*LCIS*, 116).<sup>178</sup>

No one, according to Adorno, is independent of these mechanisms, no matter how intellectual, confident or critical in spirit. Socialisation to wrong life, that is, identification with the universal, cannot be achieved via reason but tends instead to happen through the irrational or anti-rational processes described especially by psychoanalysis that allows people to cope with

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<sup>177</sup> Adorno is obviously aware that Nietzsche would himself reject the insinuation that what he advocated constituted a 'morality' or its associated terms (*PMP*, 172).

<sup>178</sup> Adorno raises Nietzsche's phrase in *Towards a New Manifesto*: "'No herdsman and one herd.' A kind of false classless society. Society finds itself on the way to what looks like the perfect classless society but is in reality the very opposite" (*TNM*, 22).

a world that functionalises them (*HF*, 72). Almost as a negative invocation of Nietzsche's 'new philosopher', Adorno states that if one were to recognise that even their most personal idiosyncrasies bear "the negative imprint of the universal", such an insight would become unbearable for the individual (74) and an individual truly independent of the process of socialisation would in fact not be a strong one but an extraordinarily feeble one, defenceless against the world (75).<sup>179</sup>

#### 4.2. Coldness, Compassion and the Context of Guilt

As has already been discussed, Adorno's Wrong Life claim is directed at the difficulty that individuals have in determining and performing morally right action against the background of social and economic conditions that are both opaque and also the material realisation of the instrumentally rational inversion of means and ends. The latter aspect treats human beings as fungible, transforms them into functions and expresses its entrenchment at the level of human thought and activity. Philosophical expressions of instrumental rationality include, according to Adorno and Horkheimer, positivism<sup>180</sup> and pragmatism most directly but also various responses to affective scepticism and forms of alienation that are produced by modern life, which is also wrong life. More significantly, instrumental rationality is expressed in the everyday activity and rationalisations of individuals who must themselves assume the perspective of instrumental rationality towards things and other human beings in order to get on in the world through adaptation to it.

Wrong life, as the context of guilt, is the context in which our actions find their source and which these actions themselves contribute to, reinforce and fail to dismantle. It is also a context of delusion because we do not know the extent of the ways in which this happens, with how

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<sup>179</sup> Adorno perhaps has in mind his discussion of the character John from Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, who he mentions in a similar context in the first lecture of *History and Freedom*. John is a seemingly strong, critical and moral man of firm convictions who comes into the 'World State' from the outside 'Savage Reservation'. Unable to adjust to what he can only perceive as the mutilating mechanisms and inhuman practices of the dystopia that is also a utopia and also unable to mount effective arguments against it, he is eventually destroyed: "it can be said that a direct progress towards freedom cannot be discerned. Objectively, such progress is impossible because of the increasingly dense texture of society in both East and West; the growing concentration of the economy, the executive and the bureaucracy has advanced to such an extent that people are reduced more and more to the status of functions. [...] If you were to sit down, reflect, and make decisions, you would soon fall behind and become an eccentric, like the Savage in Huxley's *Brave New World*" (*HF*, 5 - 6).

<sup>180</sup> Previously I have only really mentioned positivism with reference to Horkheimer. Adorno applies the term perhaps more broadly and usually also in a highly critical manner. O'Connor explains that Adorno uses the term 'positivism' to mean any philosophy that extends the methods and concepts of science outside of the realm of physical nature (O'Connor, 2013, 88) and Freyenhagen describes it as intending "the post-Idealist (positivist) idea that the object is the residuum which remains if all subjective experience is abstracted from it" (Freyenhagen, 2013, 50).

even a simple purchase can contribute to society's divestment of its 'human surplus', through exploitation and over-production, the treatment of human beings and nature as fungible means for the reproduction of ends that are alien to whatever might constitute the good life, whether happiness, fulfilment or even just not needing to be hungry anymore. Within this context, even withholding from such forms of simple purchase because of ethical concerns where connections between markets, production and exploitation are known feels utterly feeble and may itself have unintended consequences on the livelihoods of workers who perform inhuman and immiserating labour in order just to live. It may also give us the false impression that the solution to widespread immiseration lies in individual choice and action, located especially at the point of our economic power, itself the expression of an ideological veneration of an individualistic society that abrogates itself of faults through its emphasis on individual responsibility.

In order not to become entangled in insoluble dilemmas and so to be able to live in the context of wrong life, which is also a context of guilt, we cannot remain or perhaps even fully make conscious this context and still be able to live. As such, like Nietzsche's argument in *Human, All Too Human* this context is also a context of delusion. As a context of guilt, the meaninglessness and suffering that Nietzsche refers to carries specific historical connotations, for Adorno:

Guilt reproduces itself in each of us – and what I am saying is addressed to us as subjects – since we cannot possibly remain fully conscious of this connection at every moment of our waking lives. If we – each of us here – knew at every moment what has happened and to what concatenations we owe our own existence, and how our existence is interwoven with calamity, even if we have done nothing wrong, simply by having neglected, through fear, to help other people at a crucial moment, for example – a situation very familiar to me from the time of the Third Reich – if one were fully aware of all these things at every moment, one would really be unable to live. One is pushed, as it were, into forgetfulness, which is already a form of guilt. By failing to be aware at every moment of what threatens and what has happened, one also contributes to it; one resists it too little; and it can be repeated and reinstated at any moment. (*MCP*, 113)

The question of whether life can be lived in the universal context of guilt is, for Adorno, intimately connected with the reality of Auschwitz. The question of how one can live is itself a question of how one can live after Auschwitz, how one can live in a world in which Auschwitz is possible, "is possible *again* and is possible *for the first time*" (104) and in which we have no

reason to believe that it *is not* possible, especially because similar things have happened again and again.<sup>181</sup>

The vital question that philosophy – including moral philosophy – must measure itself against finds its starkest expression in the question that is asked by a character in Sartre’s play *Morts sans sépulture* that Adorno paraphrases: “whether or why one should live in a world in which one is beaten until one’s bones are smashed” (*MCP*, 111). To fully identify with or become conscious of the universal context of guilt would be unbearable and hence impossible as a result. However, this itself reveals that even before asking the question of ‘living rightly’, the fact that, for the most part, each of us is able to go on living requires cultivating, on some level, an indifference to the suffering of others in the pursuit of our own goals, including the reduction of others to functions of our will. This indifference in pursuit of our goals, as Adorno has said, is the ‘coldness’ that made Auschwitz possible in the first place. This may give the false impression that ‘living rightly’ in part requires each of us to cultivate becoming less cold but this is not what Adorno argues. For one thing, the embeddedness of instrumental rationality in modern societies means that to some extent, we necessarily cultivate and are subjected to coldness but what might be the opposite of coldness – compassion or ‘warmth’ – is also problematic. It would also be a false impression because it would suggest that the individual is able to exist within the overwhelming context of universal fungibility and integration – the totality – without being overwhelmed and it is part of the mechanism of the reproduction of the present totality to over-emphasise the role of the individual as bearing responsibility for their fate in the first place.

If the problem is that wrong life produces the need to inculcate ‘coldness’, then it might be wondered if ‘right living’ might be a matter of individuals needing to work against this by instead cultivating its opposite, which we could variously describe as ‘warmth’, ‘compassion’, ‘love’ or ‘affection’.<sup>182</sup> Were this the case, it would mean that Adorno advocates for a kind of virtue ethics, a prospect raised by Finlayson in a highly attenuated form. Finlayson attempts to identify three key Adornian virtues, with one of these being ‘love’ or ‘affection’, “the very opposite of coldness and indifference” (Finlayson, 2003, 7).<sup>183</sup> I do not intend to examine

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<sup>181</sup> Adorno’s notion of the universal context of guilt in which we become aware that we only escape being part of the statistical percentage of whom modern societies divest themselves by luck and in reference to the question of how one can live after Auschwitz, finds its clearest expression in Adorno’s own experience of survivor’s guilt, “in the recurring dreams which plague me, in which I have the feeling that I am no longer really alive, but am just the emanation of a wish of some victim of Auschwitz” (*MCP*, 110; *ND*, 363).

<sup>182</sup> From this point I will treat these terms largely interchangeably as the antithesis of coldness.

<sup>183</sup> The other two are ‘*Mündigkeit*’, which Finlayson says Adorno takes over from Kant and modifies to mean “the capacity to take a critical stand, but which is conscious of its own fallibility” and the other is humility (Finlayson, 2003, 6 - 7). I am not sure why Finlayson separates these two virtues out, as on his account Adorno’s re-definition

Finlayson’s wider argument here or engage in any sustained reflection on why Adorno might reject virtue ethics as an appropriate model<sup>184</sup> beyond reiterating a point that Freyenhagen makes while discussing Finlayson’s argument, which is that if it were possible to cultivate virtues in wrong life then this would imply that it is possible to live it rightly (Freyenhagen, 2013, 175 – 176). Furthermore, in ‘Education After Auschwitz’, Adorno seems to express scepticism that the most significant presence of coldness that contributed to Auschwitz located at the level of the “desktop murderers” is likely to be much affected by even mass educational efforts (*EAA*, 204), let alone individual attempts at cultivating virtue. At best Adorno seems to think that such efforts could have a mitigating effect on the amount of active torturers and murderers, the ‘Bogers’ and ‘Kaduks’ in the world. Wilhelm Boger and Oswald Kaduk were officers at Auschwitz whose excessively sadistic behaviour and cruelty were particularly noteworthy (Wittman, 2005, 136 – 137). The brutality of Boger and Kaduk came to dominate press coverage of the Auschwitz trials, becoming synonymous with Nazi crimes and supporting the dominant view that their excessive actions demonstrated their culpability as individual actors. According to von Miquel, this individualising ignored “the insight that struck every attentive observer of the [Auschwitz] trials—namely, that the accused were *ordinary men* of their time” (von Miquel, 2007, 55 – 56). In *History and Freedom*, Adorno argues that, “Freedom in the sense of moral responsibility can only exist in a free society. And a free society will have to be conceived as one which has ceased to produce people like Boger and Kaduk – at least in significant numbers” (*HF*, 203). Yet, if Adorno is right and such efforts can only meaningfully affect those who have direct roles in dehumanisation and cruelty, then the situation today in which more and more of life is automated and undertaken at an affective distance through the mediation of modern technology, including warfare, the prospect of mass educational efforts having a meaningful effect is even more slight.

While Finlayson is right that Adorno counterposes ‘love’ with ‘coldness’ (*EAA*, 201 – 202), of the three virtues that Finlayson identifies, ‘love’ or ‘affection’ is potentially the most problematic. Bernstein counterposes ‘coldness’ with ‘compassion’ and notes that neither

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of *Mündigkeit* seems to already contain humility, which Finlayson also defines as “the consciousness of one’s own fallibility” (7), though he also says that it is “the reverse side of *Mündigkeit*” and what keeps it in check (18). This seems to suggest either that *Mündigkeit* is not a virtue on its own because it requires humility as a supplement whereas the other two are self-sustaining, in which case it is not clear what makes something a virtue or else *Mündigkeit* already contains humility, in which case humility as a virtue seems superfluous. That Adorno identifies humility as a virtue has some direct textual evidence supporting it, although Adorno qualifies this statement heavily, prefacing it by saying that humility (‘modesty’ in Livingstone’s translation) is the only thing he would think of, “if you were to press me to follow the example of the Ancients and make a list of the cardinal virtues” and says that under this duress he would be identifying it “cryptically” (*PMP*, 169).

<sup>184</sup> However, for an illuminating account of the reasons why Adorno would have to reject virtue ethics, including some consideration of Adorno’s own closeness to such accounts, see Menke (2005).

‘coldness’ nor its opposite are straightforward concepts for Adorno right away in his own discussion of compassion (2001, 396), which I go on to discuss below. Adorno notes that the false promise to do away with the social alienation of bourgeois ‘coldness’ was partly what the Nazi *volkisch* movement was supposed to offer: “For countless people it seemed that the coldness of social alienation had been done away with thanks to the warmth of togetherness, no matter how manipulated and contrived” (*MWTP*, 95). Whereas ‘coldness’, as alienation from others, certainly does make Auschwitz and its repetition possible but it is also what allows us to go on living in light of the repetition of atrocities that continue to pile up in the wake of Auschwitz and which form the universal context of guilt:

In the security of America, an emigrant could endure the news of Auschwitz; it would be difficult to believe that Vietnam is robbing anyone of any sleep [...]. Whoever imagines that as a product of this society he is free of the bourgeois coldness harbors illusions about himself as much as about the world; without such coldness one could not live. The ability of anyone, without exception, to identify with another’s suffering is slight (*MTP*, §12).

Adorno’s language here in particular is evocative of Nietzsche’s when the latter says that living is “possible only through the fact that empathy with universal life and suffering of mankind is very feebly developed in the individual” (*HATH*, §33). However, the affective distance that Adorno describes as the coldness necessary to endure wrong life is not something that someone strong-willed could simply transcend and rise above and it is also linked to a specific historical condition. If anything, such ‘rising above’ would seem to call for something very similar to, if not a greater form of coldness than the minimum that is required just to go on living and not face up to the suffering we have escaped but must indirectly exploit daily. In addition, Nietzsche’s reference to suffering and meaninglessness seems almost abstract compared to “the suffering which in the camps, without any consolation, burned every soothing feature out of the mind, and out of culture, the mind’s objectification” (*ND*, 365).

In *Adorno’s Practical Philosophy*, Freyenhagen notes that, “According to Adorno, compassion mitigates existing injustices, but does not change them. Rather, it (often) inadvertently helps to cement them” (2013, 58), a point also made by Bernstein (2001, 405). When Adorno makes reference to compassion, which is not often, he sometimes has in mind Nietzsche’s critical attitude towards it,<sup>185</sup> towards which Adorno himself is somewhat ambivalent. In *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, Adorno argues that Nietzsche’s “purely abstract

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<sup>185</sup> For instance, see *The Antichrist* (§7), *Will to Power* (§368) and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (200 - 202).

negation” of a Schopenhauerian ethics of compassion contains an element of brutality that, “was put to the test by the Third Reich and in general by the totalitarian states in a way that would have horrified Nietzsche more than anyone” and yet Nietzsche’s view contains a significant element of truth:

This is because the concept of compassion tacitly maintains and gives its sanction to the negative condition of powerlessness in which the object of our pity finds himself. The idea of compassion contains nothing about changing the circumstances that give rise to the need for it, but instead, as in Schopenhauer, these circumstances are absorbed into the moral doctrine and interpreted as its main foundation. In short, they are hypostatized and treated as if they were immutable. (*PMP*, 173)<sup>186</sup>

This ambivalence in actions taken from a spirit of compassion – in terms of what Adorno objects to in Nietzsche but also where Nietzsche’s criticism is right – can be recognised, he goes on to say, in the experience of giving to a beggar, an experience that, “too shows that there is no right behaviour in the wrong world” (174). This experience involves a complex set of feelings and reflections that may be felt when giving money to a homeless person: I may feel, at once, compelled to do so because this person is comparatively (to me) destitute but also that my contribution is inevitably utterly inadequate, so in a certain sense utterly shameful as a result, yet I also feel as though such ‘worthy’ actions simply reflect and thus reinforce the hierarchy between my comparative fortune and the unjust destitution of others and as such, “are still intensified confirmations of the distinction between rich and poor” (*DE*, 103) – that the world was ever thus. Claiming that Nietzsche associates compassion with justice, both of which he regards as forms of weakness, Adorno and Horkheimer point out that in an important sense compassion actually conflicts with justice, insofar as compassion is a contingent expression of individual dismay at the universal inhumanity that prompts it. Rather, they contend that it is not as an expression of weakness but the inadequacy of compassion that condemns it and so what the critics of compassion – Nietzsche but also Kant and Sade – rail against is the acceptance that things were ever thus, that misfortune is merely the fate of humanity, as Schopenhauer believed, rather than an outrage (*DE*, 102 – 103).

As I indicated earlier, it is not only that compassion is typically inadequate and contingent but that actions born out of compassion may also inadvertently help to cement the conditions they are unable to change. Freyenhagen cites as an example the way in which attempts at humanitarian aid born out of compassion can lead to actions that can exacerbate the structural

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<sup>186</sup> The problem Adorno identifies here seems to be similar to that of treating temporary living as a ‘prudential norm’, as discussed in the previous chapter (3.2).

problems that cause the need for the aid in the first place or at least leave such problems untouched.<sup>187</sup> Yet, on the other hand he notes, without such intervention, many people really will suffer needlessly in the short-term without such mitigating action (Freyenhagen, 2013, 58). For instance, compassion may lead volunteers to donate and distribute food to those in need through the use and establishment of food banks. Yet such activities can help cement the state's retreat from social responsibility towards helping the impoverished because needs are being fulfilled (however inadequately) from elsewhere in the form of volunteer-run food banks. This could potentially foster conditions in which further cuts can plausibly be justified, further increasing the overall level of poverty under the assumption that any new needs will also be fulfilled by compassionate groups and individuals.<sup>188</sup> Yet, at the same time, it really is the case that people need to eat in the short term and that without interventions from compassionate individuals and groups, such as the establishment of volunteer-run institutions and networks of distribution, many really will go hungry. In such circumstances, inaction is unlikely to help either, given that the need was allowed to exist in the first place and so it is unlikely that a lack of volunteer-led action would force the hand of political institutions to provide better, properly funded welfare. There is clearly a need for compassionate action to mitigate such injustices, for without them people really will starve, go hungry or otherwise experience misery. Yet, compassionate action, in the form of charity undertaken within a world that could but does not meet its subjects' vital needs easily becomes "administered beneficence, the planned plastering-over of society's visible sores [...] the gift is necessarily accompanied by humiliation through its distribution, its just allocation, in short through treating its recipient as an object" (*MM*, §21).

Bernstein reads Adorno as counterposing compassion against the 'bourgeois coldness' that characterises modern conditions, including morality (Bernstein, 2001, 402 – 410), which in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* he and Horkheimer describe straightforwardly as "the antithesis of compassion" (*DE*, 103). Bernstein is clear that in doing so they are not thereby promoting compassion as a corrective but attempting to diagnose coldness, including its role in bourgeois morality (Bernstein, 2001, 406). He does, however, argue that compassion is "the historic archetype for the moral addendum" (405), describing it as "ethical reason in naturalized form"

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<sup>187</sup> Hegel makes a similar argument in his Heidelberg lectures on the philosophy of right: "A benevolent person has the intention of helping others, and this depends on his free choice. But in this [class] system of mediation those who care for themselves are also caring for others; they are acting for themselves and [at the same time] looking after others. [...] Nevertheless, an element of contingency can enter in here, namely that provision is not made for others: want or need. On the general plane it is for the state to prevent universal need by taking appropriate measures, but there can also be subjective want or need, where people have to be helped in their frame of mind by word and deed; but even in the case of individual need it is better for provision to be made by the state. [...] Subjective assistance must be reduced to the minimum because it can harm instead of helping" (*LNR*, §107).

<sup>188</sup> See Poppendieck (1999) for the concern that charities such as food banks can entrench their usage within societies by responding to a need (poverty) caused by a lack of state infrastructure.

and attributes a position to Adorno that is similar to the view expressed by Rousseau in the *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*: that modern human beings utilise reason in order to drown out the voice that calls out for us to identify with the suffering of others, a voice that arises from our animal propensity towards compassion (408).

I discuss the ‘addendum’ or ‘additional factor’ at some length below but stated briefly, it is something like a response to the urgency of a situation, an ‘impulse’ or ‘jolt’ that is required for action to take place, “both somatic and mental at the same time” (*HF*, 235) but which cannot be made a formal feature of moral theorising. I think that Bernstein’s account of compassion and its relationship to the ‘additional factor’ places too much emphasis on the physical side and treats it too naturalistically in describing compassion as the ‘historic archetype’ of the addendum as a form of “animal solidarity” (Bernstein, 2001, 407). As a result, he ends up counterposing compassion and the ‘additional factor’ too much against rationality, with which I think they should be understood as always necessarily imbricated. For one thing, Rousseau’s view of compassion, a pre-rational, “natural repugnance at seeing any other being, and particularly any of our own species, suffer pain or death”, as naturally belonging to all animals, including humans (Rousseau, 1993, 47), is highly questionable anyway and so it would be if Adorno were to hold to it also. Beyond this, as I will emphasise in the next section, rationality and the impulse Bernstein refers to are not opposed and compassion is not tied to one and coldness to the other, as he sometimes comes close to arguing. Rather, as Schweppenhäuser points out, Adorno does not attempt to play compassion and rationality off against each other but rather “to make the subtle yet undeniable interplay between them transparent” (Schweppenhäuser, 2006, 334). Of course, Adorno does think that it is true that “Human beings do things in a far more terrible way than animals” and implicitly this has to do with the fact that humans possess reason, given everything that has been discussed up until now, nevertheless he also points out that “the idea that things might be otherwise is one that has occurred only to humans” (*TNM*, 31). Human beings, not in spite of but because of their rationality, are uniquely able to reach the conclusion that “violence is not necessary” because “Once you start to reflect on the motif of self-preservation, you must necessarily go beyond it, because you will soon realize that uninhibited self-preservation always ends up in destruction” (31).<sup>189</sup>

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<sup>189</sup> This is another moment in *Towards a New Manifesto* in which Horkheimer’s pessimism is contrasted with Adorno’s openness to hope. After Adorno states that only human beings can have the idea that things could be otherwise Horkheimer counters, “Individual humans, not mankind”, to which Adorno responds, “Isn’t that really a matter of chance?” before going on to argue that human beings are constituted in such a way that eventually drives them to question the necessity of violence (*TNM*, 31). Horkheimer for his part actually presents an argument very close to Adorno’s one here at one point in *Eclipse of Reason* (*ER*, 118 – 119).

Bernstein cites a long extract from the second *Discourse* that includes the following passage, in which Rousseau argues that modern human beings – especially philosophers – are well-versed in using reason to rationalise away the urgency with which compassion discloses a need to respond to the suffering of others, attributing a similar view to Adorno:

Nothing but such general evils as threaten the whole community can disturb the tranquil sleep of the philosopher, or tear him from his bed. A murder may with impunity be committed under his window; he has only to put his hands to his ears and argue a little with himself, to prevent nature, which is shocked within him, from identifying itself with the unfortunate sufferer. (Rousseau, 1993, 75; Bernstein, 2001, 408)

It is true that Adorno also worries about how reason can separate someone “from all that bothers and afflicts him” (Rousseau, 1993, 75) and that there is something inherent to moral reasoning in its philosophical form that inevitably tends to suppress the urgency of responding to the situation that motivates the reasoning in the first place and that for this reason has a close connection to what Bernstein refers to when he describes ‘coldness’ as the “specific form of not mattering that attends instrumental rationality” (Bernstein, 2001, 409). In *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno argues that statements such as that ‘no man should be tortured’ are “true as an impulse, as a reaction to the news that torture is going on somewhere” but as soon as such statements are carried up into moral philosophy, they quickly become subject to the extension of the logic of consistency and easily rationalised away, transformed into philosophical problems and falling “promptly into the bad infinities of derivation and validity” (*ND*, 285 – 286). In a similar vein, Adorno considers an example in *Problems of Moral Philosophy* that is very close to the passage from Rousseau that Bernstein cites:

For example, consider the moment when a refugee comes to your door and asks for shelter. What would be the consequence if you were to set the entire machinery of reflection in motion, instead of simply acting and telling yourself that here is a refugee who is about to be killed or handed over to some state police in some country or other, and that your duty therefore is to hide and protect him – and that every other consideration must be subordinated to this? If reason makes its entrance at this point then reason itself becomes irrational. (*PMP*, 97)

Adorno’s point here is that in order for endless reflection to cease and for an individual to actually do the thing that moral reasoning is supposedly there to tell us to do (whatever that may be) requires an element that breaks off the process of reasoning, almost arbitrarily, an element that is not itself derivable from this process of reasoning. In this passage, Adorno is

arguing that this moment of breaking off is contained in what he refers to as the Kantian principle that reasoning always requires a moment of the absurd to put the deliberation to an end. It might seem paradoxical to attribute this to Kant, the arch moral rationalist, perhaps concerned above all with logical consistency but Adorno's point is that this is actually reflected at the deepest level in Kant's moral philosophy in his characterisation of the moral law as a 'given', which acts as a decisive point of rupture in breaking off the process of discursive grounding. This 'breaking off', which Adorno thinks is characteristic of Kant's thought has already been seen in his discussion of diabolical evil. It is also there in the antinomies, in his refusal to follow the dialectical logic to the end by seeing the antagonism not just as arising from an error that reason is by necessity led into but as contained within the heart of the matter itself, as Hegel recognised. Hegel argued that Kant was mistaken in limiting his thinking to only four antinomies, whereas in fact there are innumerable (*SL*, 21.180) and "they appear in all objects of every kind, in all conceptions, notions, and Ideas" (*EL*, §48). This latter point is one that Adorno is keen to emphasise, stating in *Negative Dialectics* that the contradictions represented by the antinomies do not demonstrate the limits of reason, arising only within reason but "After Hegel, this has no longer been tenable. The contradictions may lie in the thing itself" (*ND*, 239). This 'breaking off' with respect to the moral law, however, acknowledges two important aspects that Adorno reads into the Kantian principle: that it tacitly acknowledges the ultimately ungroundable nature of morality in pure reason alone and at the same time tacitly acknowledges that the moral law needs something more to translate itself into action – some additional factor to get off the ground.

#### **4.3. 'Wait – no more!' – Freedom, History and the Additional Factor**

In the first lecture of *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, Adorno relates a conversation he had with one of the plotters involved in the July 20<sup>th</sup> conspiracy to assassinate Adolf Hitler. Adorno asked the officer why he went through with it, given how unlikely it was to succeed and the risk of a fate worse than death were they to be caught. Adorno relates that he was given the response, "But there are situations that are so intolerable that one cannot continue to put up with them, no matter what may happen and no matter what may happen to oneself in the course of the attempt to change them". This act of resistance as he expressed it, Adorno says:

is the precise point at which the irrationality, or better, the irrational aspect of moral action is to be sought, the point at which it may be located. But at the same time, you can see that this irrationality is only one aspect, because on the level of theory [he] knew perfectly well how evil, how horrifying this Third Reich was, and it was

because of his critical and theoretical insight [...] that he was brought to the point of action. [...] But we then find that this other factor comes into play, the conviction [...] that, ‘things cannot go on like this, I cannot allow this to happen’ [...]. This will perhaps help to give you something of an idea of the complexities of what is meant by moral philosophy in a concrete instance. This [irrational] feature that I have just described introduces something alien into moral philosophy, something that does not quite fit. (*PMP*, 8)

I want now to try to think through this ‘irrational feature’ and its relation to moral philosophy, which Adorno discusses explicitly in several of his later works, though related references can be found at least as far back as *Minima Moralia*. I am chiefly concerned with trying to think through the concept in question by expanding on one of these explicit discussions in a section from *Negative Dialectics* bearing the name of this concept: ‘*Das Hinzutretende*’. This word is variously translated as the ‘addendum’, ‘additional factor’ or ‘supplementary’,<sup>190</sup> and sometimes Adorno will talk about it in terms of an ‘impulse’ [*Impuls*] or ‘jolt’ (*Ruck*, which could also be translated as ‘jerk’ or ‘shock’), even saying at one point that “The addendum is an impulse” (*ND*, 228). For consistency, I will use the phrase ‘additional factor’ unless quoting from a text where it is translated as ‘addendum’ and I will be expanding on what Adorno argues in *Negative Dialectics* with reference to parallel discussions in his lecture series *History and Freedom* and *Problems of Moral Philosophy*.

The ‘additional factor’ is something like a response to the urgency of a situation, an ‘impulse’ or ‘jolt’ that is required for action to take place, “both somatic and mental at the same time” (*HF*, 235) but which cannot be made a formal feature of moral theorising. As a result, Adorno argues that moral philosophy “almost compulsively ignores” the ‘additional factor’ because it cannot be theoretically accommodated without being conjured away or distorted. As such, the ‘additional factor’ is a limit on moral philosophy’s ability to be adequate to its object, “To that extent,” Adorno says following on his discussion of the July 20<sup>th</sup> plotter, “we might even say that because the moral involves action it is always more than thought, and that moral philosophy, the reflection on moral questions, stands in something of a contradiction to the object of its own reflections” (*PMP*, 9).

Adorno has especially in mind here, as he usually does, Kant’s moral philosophy, which, as I discussed in Chapter Three, Adorno considers to be by far the most significant and robust philosophical attempt to construct a moral philosophy on account of its formalism and rigorism,

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<sup>190</sup> ‘Supplementary’ is Redmond’s rendering of *das Hinzutretende* (Adorno, 2001b, 133).

themselves the result of Kant's strict division between the sensible and intelligible realms. It is also for that reason that Kant cannot account for the 'additional factor' that is an integral feature of moral action, even though, Adorno argues, it nevertheless keeps sneaking back into Kant's considerations in his use of examples. In *History and Freedom*, Adorno cites a fairly well known example from the second *Critique* in which Kant seeks to demonstrate that the cognition of freedom is reliant on the presence of the moral law, supposedly demonstrable in the power that the will holds over desire when he rhetorically questions whether a man could control his supposedly irresistible desire if a gallows were erected in front of the object of desire (*CPrR*, 5:27 – 5:28). In such examples, Adorno argues, Kant attempts to "have his cake and eat it too" through their use, insofar as Kant uses empirical determinants in order to demonstrate that one could act otherwise and so freely against empirical determinants (*HF*, 224). Apart from commenting that this and other examples in Kant are easily dismantled through even a little psychological prodding, despite their aim being the supposed demonstration of the validity of the moral law through its psychological force (225 – 226),<sup>191</sup> Adorno generally discusses how philosophy often proceeds in this abstract way when concerned with questions about freedom and the will, attempting to control variables in examples aimed at demonstrating or undermining freedom to the extent that they no longer resemble concrete situations enough to be of much use (222 – 224).

One such non-Kantian example that Adorno discusses is Buridan's Ass, a thought experiment designed to demonstrate the supposed absurdity of Buridan's philosophy by imagining a donkey torn between two equally delicious and voluminous bales of hay that are equidistant from it. According to the experiment, lacking any reason to find one bale of hay more appealing than the other, the donkey will starve because it cannot freely choose. Such examples reveal an aporia: in the absence of a relationship to empirical reality, there is no way of imagining freedom as manifest rather than just ideal, yet once empirical reality is considered, it determines and so impairs freedom (*HF*, 226 – 227). What the donkey needs in order not to starve, Adorno tells us, is something 'additional': a little 'jolt' (229). This 'jolt' or 'impulse' is elided in such examples, yet for the same reason even in examples as abstract (and absurd) as Buridan's Ass the impulse can be made visible because what they suggest is that something else, something 'additional' to the 'laboratory conditions' of the example must be present for an action to take place. What this 'jolt' is – almost physical, somatic, not reducible to

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<sup>191</sup> Adorno here gives the straightforward example of people defying laws for emotional or impulsive reasons despite the threat of punishment but 'psychological prodding' of this example from the Lacanian perspective can also be found in Žižek (2016, 332 – 333) and Zupančič (2000, 99 – 100), who argue that it is perfectly possible for the prohibition represented by the gallows to motivate the consummation of desire.

intellectualisation – simply cannot be represented in such examples without threatening what the experiment sets out to demonstrate (228).<sup>192</sup>

Each of the terms used to translate *das Hinzutretende* are noticeably ambiguous and this reflects, as Adorno says, “the vague way in which [the additional factor] is experienced” (*ND*, 226) and elsewhere he states that the somewhat arbitrary name given for this concept is one that, “I feel comfortable with for that very reason” (*HF*, 229). That none of these terms suggest much in the way of definition at first glance is supposed to reflect something about the elusive and indeterminate nature of what they describe: an integral feature of human action that philosophical language cannot properly express except as though, “something else were added to rationality” (*ND*, 229). The ‘additional factor’ stands alongside and against rational explanation as a necessarily true, seemingly ‘irrational’ component of moral acts, which is thereby incapable of being integrated into a theoretical schema of such acts. The ‘additional factor’ therefore stands simultaneously as both the completion and negation of moral theorising.

That the existence of the ‘additional factor’ is at once constitutive of moral action and yet cannot be articulated in the philosophical language of morality makes it exactly the kind of concept that Adorno argues, standing in the tradition of dialectics and so in the tradition of Hegel, philosophy must wrestle with. Indeed, after noting this contradiction between moral philosophy and its content at the beginning of *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, Adorno echoes Hegel’s declaration in the preface of the *Phenomenology* that truth is not to be gleaned from eliminating or discarding such contradictions but from “looking the negative in the face, and tarrying with it” (*PS*, §32). Though Adorno does not mention Hegel explicitly, what he says is that where philosophy finds such contradictions, “what we have to do is to become conscious of them, to generate the strength to look them in the face, instead of arguing them out of existence by more or less logical procedures” (*PMP*, 9). We need, therefore, to find ways to think through the ‘additional factor’ that is true to the experience it describes as a constitutive and so necessary component of moral action but which also stands to demonstrate the limit of

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<sup>192</sup> As an aside, this strikes me as one reason to abandon the so-called ‘Trolley Problem’ and I agree with Bowie’s argument that that problem is similarly formulated in such a way that pushes towards either deontological or utilitarian consequentialism as a result of its abstract nature (Bowie, 2013, 112 – 113). What I would add is that this itself perhaps explains the enduring contemporary nature and prevalence of versions of the ‘Trolley Problem’ because it is remarkably well attuned to the formalistic and instrumental rationality that are embedded in contemporary societies. In that sense, the ‘Trolley Problem’ could be considered the modern problem of moral philosophy *par excellence* from the perspective of subjective reasoning, much in the same way as Horkheimer characterises positivism and pragmatism as representative of the theoretical and practical poles of subjective reason’s formal and instrumental aspects respectively. That recent studies have sought to utilise the ‘Trolley Problem’ to measure cultural differences (Gold, Colman & Pulford, 2014) or derive normative theories on the basis of neurological responses to it (Boyd, 2012) should therefore come as little surprise.

attempts to provide a ‘logically consistent and fully articulated’ moral philosophy because it can only stand as though it were something ‘extra’ or in addition to it.

In *History and Freedom*, Adorno says that historically, at least since Leibniz and Spinoza but especially with Kant, the ‘additional factor’ has been subsumed into the theory of the ‘will’ as though fully aligned with consciousness, insofar as it is the will that is supposed to spontaneously intervene and ‘break off’ the chain of natural causality, noting that there is a grain of truth to this and to deny it would be to revert to a purely voluntaristic account of spontaneity (*HF*, 230). Returning to *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno states that while it is true that the “self-experience of the moment of freedom” does depend on consciousness, on the ability to recognise an action as self-authored, consciousness and rational insight are not the same as an action or the will, as they are conflated by Kant (*ND*, 277).

What Adorno has in mind especially are arguments that Kant makes in the second *Critique* and the *Groundwork* where the idea seems to be that the subject rationally deliberates and determines what should be done without regard to empirical motivations. The will, according to Kant, supposedly freely translates this deliberation into action, intervening into the chain of causality, governed by natural laws. The will does this by freely choosing instead to abide by the moral law as the determining ground of action and this is the only type of intervention that can break off the chain of natural causality. Action in the form of the ‘practical’ for Kant is aligned with freedom, which really means nothing but a part of the process that occurs on the side of consciousness as the will, “The will is conceived as a power of determining oneself to action *in accordance with the idea of certain laws*” (*Groundwork*, 4:427), as Kant says in the *Groundwork*, later defining it as a “causality” belonging to rational beings which has the quality of freedom. That is, freedom is a causality “able to work independently of *determination* by alien causes” (4:446). ‘Alien’ here meaning anything heteronomous, anything not strictly bound up with the practical laws generated solely by reason, such as ‘external’ influences but also sensuous inclination or desire (*ND*, 227 – 228). These sensuous desires and ‘impulses’, Kant goes on to say, can only be experienced as “burdensome” by even the most “hardened scoundrel” when confronted with examples of the freely determining power of the will in moral actions, like “honesty in purpose” or “kindness towards all” – actions defined precisely by their independence from heteronomous – that is to say, sensuous, empirical, ‘external’ – causes (*Groundwork*, 4:454 – 455).

The subject is thereby split into a being that belongs to the empirical world (the realm of heteronomy) and a being that belongs to the intelligible world (the realm of autonomy). It must belong to both worlds because if it belonged only to the empirical world then it would be solely

determined by natural, causal laws, yet if it only belonged to the intelligible world then it would be purely determined by the moral law *as though* this law were a natural, causal law, in which case rational beings would *need* be honest in the same way that the Earth *need* orbit the Sun (*Groundwork*, 4:453 – 454). But the moral law and so freedom as a form of determination, according to Kant, must possess a superiority over the sensible world as an ‘ought’ – as something which can ‘freely’ but not by causal necessity intervene (4:454). Basically, there must be something for freedom to intervene into, to break off the chain of purely sensuous (desire, inclination, etc.) or natural causality. What Kant seems to argue in the *Groundwork* is that in free action, the intelligible world stands in the position of being able to subordinate the empirical world, insofar as the ‘will’, as the form of efficient causation belonging to rational beings, from the side of the intelligible world, intervenes into the empirical and suppresses ‘impulses’, which are instead aligned with the realm of heteronomy against rational, free and therefore moral action.

At this point Adorno turns instead to the Hegelian insight (although, again, he does not name Hegel) that the modern subject, which takes itself to be the author of its own actions for which it is responsible, is an historical achievement.<sup>193</sup> This modern subjectivity, for Adorno, is exemplified by Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*: “And yet,” Adorno says, “it is at the outset of the self-emancipating modern subject’s self-reflection, in *Hamlet*, that we find the divergence of insight and action paradigmatically laid down” (*ND*, 228). This divergence of insight and action is starkly visible in Hamlet’s indecision, his endless deliberation, reasoning himself in and out of the act of revenge for the assassination of his father, the king, who was poisoned and usurped by Hamlet’s uncle Claudius. The act of revenge for the murder of the king or the father in prior epochs was merely the law of fate and also thereby an immediate ethical law (*PS*, §465). What makes Hamlet quintessentially modern is the divergence between insight and action but also this divergence between external laws and his free, conscious deliberation.

By contrast to the Ancient world, Oedipus also acts to resolve the assassination of Laius, the king of Thebes, who unbeknownst to Oedipus is also his true father. Oedipus is compelled by the law of the state, which is also a law of fate, to discover who had assassinated the king and to punish them accordingly. The assassin, unbeknownst to anyone – including Oedipus – is Oedipus himself and so he is compelled to seek himself out (to ‘find himself’) and take responsibility, in a kind of parody of what would become modern subjectivity but which really has nothing to do with Oedipus’ decisions (*PS*, §469). This is a point that Hegel makes about

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<sup>193</sup> See also: *HF*, 231.

Oedipus in distinguishing the historical achievement of modern subjectivity from the Ancient form of ethical life (*EPR*, §117 – 118). Upon discovery that it was he himself who murdered the king and thereby also his father, Oedipus attributes the entire deed<sup>194</sup> to himself and accepts all of the punishment, even though from a modern perspective this seems unfair, as there was no way that Oedipus could have known that Laius was the king and also his father. Indeed, the reason Oedipus ends up in Thebes at all is because he attempts to avoid murdering the man that he believes to be his father, the king of Corinth, after being told he was fated to murder his father by the Delphic oracle.

And Hegel also, like Adorno, locates the exemplary difference in depictions of subjectivity from Ancient to modern in Shakespeare and especially in *Hamlet*. In his *Lectures on Aesthetics*, Hegel contrasts the motivating force of action between the Ancient and modern by noting that in *The Iliad* when Achilles is about to draw his sword on Agamemnon, Athena literally appears behind Achilles and grabs him by the hair. Here the gods intervene as external forces but they also ‘dwell within the heart of man’ insofar as Athena also resolves Achilles’ inner turmoil between his rage and what he knows is sensible deep down: the good judgement not to draw one’s sword against the king in rage (*Aesthetics*, 228). In this sense, the right thing to do is also shown to be that which is external to the subject – the law exists out there, embodied by the gods, as a form of objective reason and Achilles need only act in accordance with this, which he is compelled to do by Athena, as though what Achilles should do is identical with a law of nature.

With *Hamlet*, however, this concordance between the external and the internal has come apart. Hegel notes that *Hamlet*, as though on the way to disenchantment, has to decide for himself whether the ghost that appears to him is actually telling the truth or whether it is even really the ghost of his father and not some devil or hallucination. Unlike the Greek gods, who directly intervene and dictate the movements and fates of individuals, the ghost of *Hamlet*’s father imparts only a story about his death that may or may not be true. As Hegel says, whether to believe the information the ghost seems to impart and act on the king’s likely (though not certain) assassination in revenge against his uncle is left to *Hamlet*: “the apparition does not command a helpless *Hamlet*; *Hamlet* doubts, and, by arrangements of his own, will get certainty for himself, before he embarks on action”. The price of the freedom that comes from the division of the internal and the external of the modern subject is that the appearance of the

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<sup>194</sup> On Hegel’s distinction between ‘deed’ [*Tat*], as describing what the subject did and ‘action’, [*Handlung*] as describing what the subject did but also with reference to their intention, see my MPhil thesis *Context and Causation: Hegel and the Philosophy of Action* (Brignell, 2018, 21 - 26).

supernatural is not an external force that Hamlet must obey but rather, Hamlet must decide for himself what is really true and compel himself to act accordingly and so Hegel says that for the modern subject, “freedom and decision are continually reserved for man” (*Aesthetics*, 231).

But another consequence of this is that Hamlet, the modern subject, also experiences a sharper division between what he thinks he should do and actually making it come about. I think this is how we can understand what Adorno goes on to say after noting the divergence between insight and action in Hamlet: “The more the subject turns into a being-for-itself, the greater the distance it places between itself and the unbroken accord with a given order, the less will its action and consciousness be one” (*ND*, 228). Hamlet continuously deliberates about what he should do, continuously flitting back and forth throughout the play between steely resolve, doubt, moral fervour, cowardice and even philosophical ruminations on the paralysing effects of moral deliberation towards the end of his famous, ‘To be, or not to be’ soliloquy:

Thus conscience does make cowards of us all,  
And thus the native hue of resolution  
Is sicklied o’er with the pale cast of thought,  
And enterprises of great pitch and moment  
With this regard their currents turn awry  
And lose the name of action. (Shakespeare, 2003, 85 – 86)

And yet, having spent the entirety of the play unable to act and in endless deliberation, Hamlet does eventually act. In *History and Freedom* Adorno says that this moment towards the end of the play allows us to study the ‘additional factor’, “that is to say, the element in [Hamlet’s] taking action that goes beyond rationality” as though in a test tube (*HF*, 234). Hamlet’s deliberation about whether or not to commit the act of revenge finally breaks off when he is wounded by a poisoned blade during a duel and only at this point does a violent impulse take him over and he is able to complete the act, killing his uncle Claudius.

Adorno notes that the philosophy of history enters at this point, as it is as though Hamlet’s rational deliberations throughout the play are unconnected with the ensuing violence and the multiple deaths that pile up in this scene of the play. Yet it is also true that the action would likely not have happened without all of this deliberation. The wound Hamlet suffers acts as a jolt, triggering him to pursue and act out the obligation to familial vengeance that really, especially at this point, seems like a relic belonging to an earlier epoch than a rational duty.<sup>195</sup>

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<sup>195</sup> According to Hegel, what distinguishes revenge from retributive justice, the latter of which is appropriate to modern subjectivity in recognising the individual as rational (*LNR*, §46), is that revenge is simply the attempt to annul a criminal act through the action of another subjective will, rather than through a court or judge representing

Thus, Adorno says, at this point the play seems to stand on a knife's edge between the modern, reflective era and the substantiality of a prior epoch (*HF*, 234). The 'additional factor' appears as a moment between the dictates of convention in terms of what Hegel calls 'ethical life' in the sense he applies to Ancient Greece in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (§§444 - 476) and morality as the rational deliberation of the individual who must decide for themselves what it is they should do (*HF*, 233 – 234). The moment rises up spontaneously and appears irrational, reducible to neither dictate but nevertheless necessary and elided in the language of moral philosophy. The 'additional factor', as this piece of seeming irrationality that ruptures with rational reflection, "survives as if it were the indestructible phase in which the separation between inner and outer had not yet been consolidated" (*HF*, 234). As such, the 'impulse' appears both aligned with consciousness as well as what is outside of consciousness, both 'somatic and mental' at the same time and incapable of being separated out. While Adorno does say that the impulse perhaps began as a simple physical reflex, like a withdrawal from pain, this may itself be the origin of reason too as developing out of the need for self-preservation. On first glance, this might appear to be a piece of naturalism on Adorno's part but this is not his point. Human beings are now so far from either 'self-preservation' or the 'physical reflex' in their animal origins that it is impossible to disentangle them from the social and rational factors which have grown out of them and through which our understanding of the natural will always be mediated. That is to say, rationality is in some sense a piece of nature, insofar as it finds its origins there but what we understand as 'nature' is always filtered through the rational, social and historical forms that it has taken on. To put it another way, what we understand as 'nature' is always already 'second nature'; it is what the natural has become through rational and social mediation. It is not possible to get at a purely natural understanding any more than it is possible to get at a purely rational one.

To think dialectically means to recognise that a concept, in this case the 'additional factor' or 'spontaneity of the will' in the Kantian language, is composed of "mutually contradictory elements" (*HF*, 217) but it also means to recognise that nothing remains identical for all time. The impulse allows the subject to leap outside of the prison of mere consciousness and translate thought into action, into objectivity, the latter itself the origin of the impulse both in its historical nature but also as the brute suffering or the urgency of a bad situation. The 'will' exists only insofar as these opposed elements are united, as "theoretical consciousness at its most advanced, and, on the other hand, it [also] needs the corporeal element, the very thing that cannot be fully

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a universal will. The universal will represents law and thus issues punishment from a non-particularistic perspective, preventing the infinite back and forth of injury that particular individuals are liable to visit upon each other in a 'cycle of revenge' (§48).

identified with reason” (237). This ‘impulse’ is simultaneously immediate and mediated, as the explosive translation of thought into action, an urgency crying out to resist and change bad objective conditions that is as much the result of rational reflection and deliberation as the physically unbearable objectivity of the situation that incited thought in the first place.

As already noted, the Kantian position, according to Adorno, conflates will with consciousness but Adorno’s point is that without will (in an expanded sense) there is no consciousness. In order to reflect, I must first want to reflect and so thought must be motivated by something outside of itself (*HF*, 259; *ND*, 230). This point is an iteration of Adorno’s emphasis on the preponderance of the object, insofar as much philosophy (especially Kant but also to some extent Hegel) involves an identification of the subject with what differentiates it from its origins in objectivity, reading subjectivity as though it always was what in reality it first had to have become. Falling within a too narrow purview of what constitutes reason ends up treating it in the unreflective sense of ‘second nature’, misrecognising and disavowing the historical origins of reason in its history and out of objectivity. Reason and therefore the will, freedom, subjectivity, is always more than just reason because it is also constituted by that which seems to fall outside of it: nature, objectivity, history, the impulse, that it is exogenous and so on. As historically achieved, self-consciousness is at the same time nature but *also* the differentiation from it, for “The truth is that we are no longer simply a piece of nature from the moment we recognize that we are a piece of nature” (*PMP*, 103).

Associating the impulse only with consciousness in the form of will separates the empirical off from the rational in another sense, insofar as the rational can supposedly impinge upon the empirical but the empirical cannot impinge upon the will, at least not in a way in which it remains rational, free or moral from the narrow, Kantian point of view. Yet the examples Adorno draws upon to draw out the ‘additional factor’ – *Hamlet* and the 20<sup>th</sup> July plotters – do not just involve rational deliberation about a situation but a response to the urgency that issues from that situation, one which cries out for action. This urgency cannot alone come from reason – indeed, this urgency *impinges* upon reason. But the will *is also* this detached and reflective conscious deliberation and so neither is this urgency cut off from reason as *merely* something bodily or contingent. In this way, I disagree with commentators who identify the ‘additional factor’ too much or even solely with the physical or material, as Hammer (2000, 80) and Zuidervaart (2009, 36) seem to. It is true that Adorno emphasises the corporeal element but this is partly because the most widely cited contexts in which he raises the ‘additional factor’ are usually in relation to Kant’s practical philosophy and primarily drawn from *Negative Dialectics*, where he is keen to emphasise the element that is missed out in accounts that abstract too much

from the material elements bound up with thought and action. *History and Freedom* and *Problems of Moral Philosophy* by contrast are much clearer that the ‘additional factor’ is imbricated with and include important contributions from rationality. In my view, it is important that rationality and the ‘additional factor’ should not be considered to be separate, as apart from being contradicted by textual evidence this would paradoxically place Adorno too close to Kant by treating Adorno as operating according to a dualism between rationality and materiality, rather than identifying a dialectic. Adorno repeatedly argues that thought is itself a kind of action:

Thinking is a doing, theory a form of praxis; already the ideology of the purity of thinking deceives about this. Thinking has a double character: it is immanently determined and rigorous, and yet an inalienably real mode of behaviour in the midst of reality. To the extent that subject, the thinking substance of philosophers, is object, to the extent that it falls within object, subject is already practical. (*MTP*, §1)<sup>196</sup>

The ‘additional factor’ is not rationalisable but it is not a physical reflex either, instead forming out of a confluence of factors – including, importantly, historical ones – and is not reducible to any of them. In addition, its emergence and effect are not really predictable as a result and this last point explains Adorno’s emphasis on its relevance at points at which situations become intolerable. Without the chain of deliberation, the historical situation and the reflection on the situation the urgency could not arise and the action could not take place. The 20<sup>th</sup> July plot was exactly that: a plot, carefully deliberated over and involving multiple actions, co-ordinated with others, including failed attempts and recalibrations over the course of many months.

I want to end by considering an extended example from Masaki Kobayashi’s film *The Human Condition*, which gives a useful illustration of this last series of points that, I think, bears some close resemblances to Adorno’s discussion of *Hamlet*, as well as of Ibsen’s play *The Wild Duck* in *Problems of Moral Philosophy*. In *The Human Condition* (1959), the protagonist Kaji is similar to *The Wild Duck*’s Gregers Werle: a character who acts on strong moral principles about how the world should be, ceaselessly attempting to set right the wrong world into which they find themselves thrown and in which each of their good-willed actions seem only to make things worse. However, Kaji is not simply a subject attempting to satisfy ‘the moral law’ regardless of what happens, as Adorno reads Gregers Werle. Kaji’s drive to do

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<sup>196</sup> See also: *TWM*, 51.

the right thing is constantly undermined, reshaped and deadened by the manner in which his actions crash up against and are distorted by brutal and cruel objective conditions.

Adapted from Junpei Gomikawa's six-volume novel and set in Japanese-occupied Manchuria during the second World War, Masaki Kobayashi's three-part film *The Human Condition* chronicles the conflict between the relentlessly battered good will of its protagonist Kaji and the near-ubiquitous cruelty of the world against which Kaji's moral ideals stand in opposition. Early in the first film, *No Greater Love*, Kaji converses with a superior in the office of the Manchurian mining operation for which he works. In this scene, Kaji and his superior discuss a report that Kaji has recently submitted regarding labour conditions in the mines in which mostly Chinese workers are made to extract ore to support the Japanese war effort. In what seems to be a rather scholarly report informed by his deeply held moral humanism and (unspoken) socialist politics,<sup>197</sup> Kaji advances arguments calling for wide-ranging improvements to the treatment and condition of the colonised workers. In what will become the dominant theme of the film, Kaji is told that his moral claims are premised on a conflict with reality, most clearly expressed when his supervisor rebuffs Kaji's humanist claim that "men are men" by pointing out that this idea seems to contradict the premise of having colonies (*The Human Condition*, 1959).<sup>198</sup>

Shortly after this exchange, Kaji is given the opportunity to attempt to put his suggested reforms and thereby his moral convictions into practice, when he is offered the opportunity to become a labour supervisor at a remote mining site. Once at the site, although he occasionally seems to make progress towards small gains for the workers, Kaji's compassion and moral conviction are not only regularly thwarted but more often distorted by powers that lie beyond his attempts at principled action and reasoned interventions: indifferent, frustrated or violent colleagues; non-compliant workers; cruel military officers; the war itself; various hierarchical and bureaucratic structures; and finally, the antithetical, inhuman context that is a colony. The strength and pervasiveness of these and other factors are not presented as mere obstacles to the exercise of Kaji's good will, as though everything would come off aright if they were not present but rather, they constitute the determining ground of possible action, reliably leading Kaji's attempts at principled intervention to actively worsen the situation for the majority of those involved.

A scene around a third of the way into the film involves the introduction of several hundred 'special workers' provided by the military – suspected political dissidents rounded up from

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<sup>197</sup> Kaji's supervisor claims that the report "smells of leftist tendencies" (*The Human Condition*, 1959).

<sup>198</sup> Kaji's report is titled 'Supervision of Colonial Labour'.

nearby villages, who spill, emaciated, groaning and wailing, from overstuffed train carriages in which some have baked to death during the journey. These 'special workers' are placed into an on-site concentration camp at the military's orders and Kaji spends most of the rest of the film attempting to negotiate between his indifferent and callous superiors, who view the Chinese as less than human and the largely unsympathetic prisoners, who view the Japanese (including Kaji) as their tormentors and are desperate to escape, in order to win for these prisoners the same working and living conditions as the rest of the workers. This seemingly modest but in actuality insurmountable change is prefigured by Kaji's apparent failure to have actually improved the lot of the regular workers prior to being placed in charge of the prisoners.

Although Kaji fails to improve working conditions, in a sort of special irony Kaji is later credited with having improved productivity and is commemorated for this at an award ceremony. The only other employee credited for improving productivity is Okazaki, a cruel and violent foreman who dehumanises and regularly beats the workers and who reacts to Kaji's criticisms and interventions by becoming even more cruel and violent, at one point beating a worker to death. The pivotal scene in the film occurs after Okazaki falsely alleges that seven prisoners have attempted an escape (in reality fleeing his beatings), causing the military police to step in, who decide to stage an execution of these seven prisoners, justified on the grounds that it will act as a deterrent for the remaining prisoners, as well as a rejoinder to Kaji's sympathising, with Kaji also forced to attend. At this point, Kaji has lost the trust of his colleagues and superiors, who feel that his sympathetic approach has allowed multiple workers to successfully escape and he has also lost the trust of the prisoners he has frantically tried to liberate.

Following the execution of the first two prisoners, Kaji stands paralysed, trembling and incapable of action, unable to bear the deaths he is forced to witness, yet knowing that if he intervenes he will be killed too, leaving no one to fight for the remaining prisoners, though also knowing that they will never trust him again for standing by while their comrades are executed. The third prisoner to be executed is Kao, a principled man whom Kaji respects and had resolved to help pursue marriage with Yang Chun Lan, one of the on-site Chinese 'comfort women'. Just before he is forced to kneel, Kao turns to the cowering Kaji and exclaims: "Inhuman wretch! This is your true form! The face of a man... but the heart of a beast!" (*The Human Condition*, 1959).

Throughout the film, Kaji's will to do the right thing becomes more frantic and eventually here his ability to act becomes paralysed, transformed into silent, shuddering deliberation about a situation that seemingly has no possible right resolution. Yet eventually, following Kao's

horribly botched execution, another prisoner is brought before the executioner and at this point Kaji acts. Suddenly the urgency drives itself up, straightening his slumped body and exploding out through his mouth as a cry of “wait - no more!” (*The Human Condition*, 1959). This ‘wait - no more!’ is no simple result of deliberation about the right way to act – time and again, Kaji’s previous reasoned interventions have worsened conditions and here there is no clear way to intervene without severe consequences. The cry bursts forth, as though from a purely bodily abhorrence of the suffering he witnesses but which joins together with the complex network of inhumanity, moral reasoning, past failure, personal guilt and so on, experienced all together as an impulse that jolts him into action. The previous rigidity of his limbs pulled close to his body followed by a loose slumping to his knees, the impulse generates a force that pushes him upwards and cries out. Yet, this ‘wait – no more!’ would not have been possible without the deliberation, without the reasoning, without the intellectual edifice of socialist justice that Kaji had spent his years before conscription studying. Yet, it also would not have been possible without the physical repulsion at suffering and the ensuing sense of urgency, the materiality of the objective historical conditions that placed him into a real hell with the task of tempering its demons while he seemed destined to either become one himself or otherwise be destroyed – of his repeated failure to put into practice the right conditions that could actually facilitate right action.

What follows could not have been predicted and in a sense cannot be rightly attributed to Kaji’s small, seemingly futile interjection but could also perhaps not have been possible without it. Initially, the commanding officer threatens to kill Kaji, who responds that he is not frightened any longer – though his body shrinking, shaking and retreating, belies that he really is afraid. As the officer advances on Kaji with the executioner’s sword held aloft, the ‘special workers’ each stand to their feet and begin to chant “Murderers!” at the Japanese soldiers, slowly advancing despite the threat of gunfire (*The Human Condition*, 1959). Despite their numbers, the prisoners – unarmed, malnourished, exhausted – are as powerless before the soldiers’ bayonets as the lone, unarmed, emotionally broken Kaji is before the commanding officer. Yet, now clearly shaken and himself momentarily wracked with indecision, the commanding officer calls the execution off. Kaji later becomes jubilant upon learning that several of the prisoners have escaped but their fate after this point – along with those who remain in the concentration camp – is otherwise left unknown.<sup>199</sup>

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<sup>199</sup> Kaji, for his part, has greater suffering to come across the next two films, following orders he receives at the end of *No Greater Love* that he is to be sent to the front, a fate he hoped to avoid through being made supervisor of the mining site.

The rationalistically narrow conception of ‘the will’ which distorts or otherwise ignores the ‘additional factor’ tends to produce absurdities when applied to situations in which the good is most conspicuously absent. To hold a prisoner in the camps to the categorical imperative, that one should always tell the truth, for instance, is so removed from the desperation of the situation as almost to transform this imperative into a form of abuse. The demand that one not only be desperate, subjected to extreme brutality and evil but also a good, rational subject mocks the concrete situation and can only compound the desperation and the extremity experienced, a situation played out time and again throughout *The Human Condition*. Furthermore, against the background of a situation so suffused with brutality and badness, the attempt to be a good, rational subject may just serve to produce further misery – not through bad individual actions as a result of incorrect deliberation but because the world is too wrong to facilitate any attempt to live rightly. Of course, on this last point Kant would simply point out that this is because the sensible realm is also the realm of heteronomy and so of contingency. Once you begin to consider anything contingent, anything other than the necessary laws of moral reasoning, you of course do not know how things will turn out and so this is exactly why the intelligible and sensible realms are distinguished from each other. This strict separation is what gives Kant’s moral philosophy its critical impulse, in the ability to stand over the world and judge it. Yet everything we have said of the ‘additional factor’ and how it cannot be accommodated to Kant’s narrowed account of the will, a full account of which must on some level involve the motivation for deliberation and the impulse for action, speaks against this strict separation. Without accounting for that which cannot be strictly separated out, the critical impulse becomes uncritical, in the inability to recognise where the world secretly informs and constructs the supposedly separate and superior law of the intelligible realm on the one hand and where it rains down impossible and abusive demands on the worst victims of wrong life on the other.

The paradoxical way in which Adorno states that morality can become immoral (*PMP*, 100 – 101) should be understood in just such extreme situations as that of *The Human Condition*. The urgency that impinges on the subject in a desperately bad situation can only be satisfied by the material cessation of that situation, with the only appropriate, though usually inadequate, response being a cry of ‘Wait – no more!’. This urgency, experienced as an impulse, as the ‘additional factor’, Adorno says, is the name for that which was eliminated through abstraction, “without it, the will would not be real at all. It flashes like a bolt of lightning between the poles of something long past, which has become almost unrecognizable, and that which it one day could be” (*ND*, 229). In an early discussion of the ‘additional factor’ under the name of ‘impulse’, Adorno argues against the view that thought must exorcise emotion to truly be

thought, describing this view as lacking in intelligence. Impulse, desire and emotion are not the antitheses of reason, knowledge and thought but structure and inform it “Because even its remotest objectifications are nourished by impulses” and so in the attempt to suppress them, “thought destroys in the latter the condition of its own existence” (*MM*, §79). It is true, however, that thought releases the subject from the bonds of thoughtless impulse. Without the ability to abstract from a situation through reflection, the impulse would hurtle us along a path of sheer dominance, as we are subjected to and subject the world to the unbridled authority of the immediately felt. Without the intellectual contribution, the additional factor would be nothing but blind voluntarism and the will would again be vulnerable to becoming harnessed to any purpose whatsoever, in the same manner that Horkheimer argues that instrumental reason is easily harnessed to the social process, as I outlined in the first chapter (*HF*, 260).<sup>200</sup> Yet, once again, thought must not thereby abandon impulse, as though it is corrupting, stupid and false. To do so would be to elide the very history and life of thought and lead to submission to the tyranny of a reason reduced to instrumentality:

the castration of perception by a court of control that denies it any anticipatory desire, forces it thereby into a pattern of helplessly reiterating what is already known. When nothing more may actually be seen, the intellect is sacrificed. Just as, under the primacy of the autonomous production process, the purpose of reason dwindles away until it sinks into the fetishism of itself and of external power, so reason itself is reduced to an instrument and assimilated to its functionaries, whose power of thought serves only the purpose of preventing thought. (*MM*, §79)

#### **4.4. Nihilism, Reason and the Philosophy of History**

Nietzsche claims that truthfulness was particularly recognised and cultivated by Christian morality (*WP*, §1) and that nihilism, as the realisation of the valuelessness of both existence and the morality that undergirded the cultivation of truthfulness, was the result of this same morality (§4). This process of the ‘will to truth’ leading to nihilism is described in *The Gay Science*:

One can see what it was that actually triumphed over the Christian god: Christian morality itself, the concept of truthfulness that was taken ever more rigorously; the

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<sup>200</sup> “If the will were nothing but what I have called ‘the additional factor’, if it were no more than an impulse [...], then the will would be at the disposition of every conceivable purpose, just as much as instrumental reason is according to the analysis with which you are familiar” (*HF*, 260). The editor’s endnote suggests that Adorno is here likely referring to Horkheimer’s analysis of instrumental reason in *Eclipse of Reason* (330).

father confessor's refinement of the Christian conscience, translated and sublimated into a scientific conscience, into intellectual cleanliness at any price. Looking at nature as if it were proof of the goodness and care of a god; interpreting history in honour of some divine reason, as a continual testimony of a moral world order and ultimate moral purposes; interpreting one's own experiences as pious people have long interpreted theirs, as if everything were providential, a hint, designed and ordained for the sake of salvation of the soul - that is over now. (*GS*, §357)

That is, the dissolution of the idea that the world has a coherence, an underlying truth and that our actions make sense within it was itself a result of the cultivation of truthfulness by Christian morality, its will to truth. While the language Nietzsche uses in this passage reflects Christian belief, it should not be read as an attack on a specific religious worldview but should be understood to extend to its secularised forms. What is “over now” does not just include, for instance, the specifically religious idea that history flows “in honour of some divine reason, as a continual testimony of a moral world order and ultimate moral purpose” (§357) but also its secularised form as ‘progress’, which itself assumes a moral order to history, though notably weaker without the undergirding of the objective reason inherent in the notion of salvation. Similarly, the idea that one’s actions are no longer part of some providential order means that one loses the guarantee that one’s actions are meaningful at all, something already clear from §33 of *Human, All Too Human*.

According to Nietzsche in *The Will to Power*, there are three major consequences of the nihilism that results from the self-dissolution of the will to truth: “Existence has no goal or end; any comprehensive unity in the plurality of events is lacking; the character of existence is not ‘true’, is *false*” (*WP*, §12). These three consequences of nihilism can be rendered as: 1) the loss of transcendental sources of value and meaning with which to orient and justify our actions or judgements; 2) the sense that history does not aim at anything in particular; alongside a third consequence made more explicit here, which is 3) the loss of belief in the idea of the truth itself as corresponding to something higher than an existence of need and senseless becoming. To be clearer, this third consequence is the realisation that there is no ‘true’ world beyond this senseless one of mere existence. In this relatively long section of *The Will to Power*, Nietzsche goes on to attribute the cause of these realisations not to the triumph of ‘Christian morality’ over itself as he did in the passage from *The Gay Science* and again in an early section of *The Will to Power* (*WP*, §1) but more generally lays it at the feet of *reason*.<sup>201</sup> ‘Christian morality’

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<sup>201</sup> “The faith in the categories of reason are the cause of nihilism” (*WP*, §12).

and 'reason' should not be taken to be two distinct explanations for nihilism. As already stated, the will to truth and its nihilistic consequences applies not just to Christian morality but also to its secular inheritors, especially in the form of the belief in the power of modern science to reveal the world and the attendant belief in moral and political progress characteristic of the European Enlightenment. These ideals are just as driven by the will to truth and vulnerable to its nihilistic consequences as Christianity.

At first glance, the 'disinterested' search for truth guided by the scientific method seems to readily accept or to be unmoved by the dissolution of the three metaphysical categories above, which can be rendered as 'aim', 'unity' and 'truth' respectively. But in stripping away these metaphysical notions, the scientific search for knowledge leaves no point to which it can refer that could justify the valuation of truth implicit in this search and so seems to be left only with the unexamined prejudice that the search for knowledge is inherently worthwhile, as Weber was to point out again later. In this way, the presuppositions underlying the search for knowledge, including what really grounds the valuation of truth, are left even more opaque than the faith in God which grounded the same prejudice in Christianity and which could be called upon as a justification. That is to say, at least Christianity had God and God's word as a guarantee that truthfulness was meaningful and a good worth pursuing. As a corollary, we should no longer be able to believe in the Enlightenment ideal of 'progress', as the secularised form of salvation and providence (Vattimo, 1988, 7 – 8). While providence functioned as a guarantee that the course of the world was part of a divine plan, progress is the belief that the increase in the store of our knowledge of the world can only increase our understanding of it, our place within it, as well as how better to arrange the world and live with each other. In its secularised form, the Enlightenment ideal of progress seems to also function as a kind of guarantee that history unfolds in a certain order, one of constant improvement and so also provides a minimal guarantee of a better world to come.

In other words, the Enlightenment captures most succinctly just this coupling of truth and goodness in the form of the prejudice that we ought to pursue knowledge because we ought to live better and that knowing more will necessarily help us achieve this. However, Nietzsche argues against this prejudice of the will to truth common to both its Christian and secular Enlightenment forms that there is no reason to believe that knowledge and understanding will lead to beneficial results and make life more liveable. As we have already seen in §§33 – 34 of *Human, All Too Human*, the increase in our store of knowledge and understanding is just as likely to make life unliveable, something that Nietzsche states again and again, such as in *Beyond Good and Evil* when he states that, "It could even be part of the fundamental character

of existence that people with full knowledge get destroyed” (*BGE*, §39). The belief that history has a meaning, that things will get better and better as our intellectual methods for providing certainty about the world increase and become more encompassing seems itself to be simply that: a belief.

Adorno does not shy away from these consequences of nihilism with respect to the philosophy of history but he thinks at once that the damage to the metaphysical notion of ‘historical progress’ is in fact much worse than Nietzsche accounted for because it is also damaged by the events of history itself, as I discussed in Chapter Two. In the last five lectures of *Metaphysics: Concepts and Problems*, which form the basis of the last part of *Negative Dialectics*,<sup>202</sup> Adorno argues that historical materiality impinges upon the content of metaphysics. His argument involves the claim that the catastrophic events of the 20<sup>th</sup> century signified by Auschwitz have damaged traditional philosophical questions about the coherence between thought and being, including any meaningfulness of existence or the course of world history that could be derived thereby. The point is not or not just that to read Auschwitz as having some place in the overall meaning of existence or the progressive march of history is an insult and an affront to the victims who were murdered, attempting to wrench some positive meaning from the brutal calamity of the Holocaust, although it would also be that (*MCP*, 104). Rather, “Our metaphysical faculty is paralyzed because actual events have shattered the basis on which speculative metaphysical thought could be reconciled with experience”, as he puts it in a parallel section of *Negative Dialectics* (*ND*, 362).

This broader point with respect to history impinging upon philosophy, which he calls the “objective side” of what would be an affront to the victims (*ND*, 361), is that this affront itself would be a sign of what must now be considered a fundamental naivety involved in presupposing that there could be some positive metaphysical meaning about the world to be secured by philosophy (*MCP*, 121). In addition and in light of these events, such a position would most likely involve subordinating philosophy – or more properly, reason in its objective sense – to some other end: the need to palliate the feeling that life without meaning is intolerable (106); the need to find a way to live with the fact that suffering goes on while we fail to ameliorate it, even where we are not the cause or are otherwise powerless to help (113); or to provoke courage, which allows us to carry on, rather than succumbing to the despair that would

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<sup>202</sup> These last five lectures are drawn from notes that would become the basis of the first four sections of the last part of *Negative Dialectics*, ‘Meditations on Metaphysics’, although Tiedemann remarks that from Adorno’s lecture notes it is clear that he had intended to go at least part way into what would become the fifth section, ‘Nihilism’ (*MCP*, 188 – 189).

register the truth (124); or especially to the need to have an answer to the question, ‘what ought I to do?’ (126).

However, Adorno also thinks that there are good reasons to think through and not simply abandon the notion of progress. The occurrence of Auschwitz means that there has come into existence a kind of “coherence, a hellish unity” of “socially produced evil [which] has engendered something like a real hell” and that, having come into existence, reveals that Auschwitz was possible and is possible again (*MCP*, 104). That is to say, the conditions that led to it are still with us, it is not clear that there is anything that would prevent it from happening again and the potential for its occurrence can also be read retrospectively into history. Yet, at the same time, recognising Nietzsche’s insights about the loss of historical meaning entails recognising that even though it is possible to read a negative philosophy of history in light of Auschwitz, one leading not “from savagery to humanitarianism but from the slingshot to the megaton bomb” (*ND*, 320), this cannot be maintained as an historical necessity in the last instance either, as this would merely be to replace the Enlightenment concept of progress with a Spenglerian one of decline (*HF*, 4; *Progress*, 147).

Nevertheless, history is not simply some disordered and chaotic series of isolated facts, as Adorno thinks that positivist views of history seem to tend towards (*HF*, 10 – 11) and neither can history be affirmed as meaninglessness, as “Saying Yes to life even in its strangest and hardest problems” (*TI*, 562), as Nietzsche argues. Adorno does not simply argue that the philosophy of history should be abandoned but rather that there is perhaps more to be wrested from taking Hegel’s philosophy of the objective tendencies of history seriously than there is from accepting Nietzsche’s own response to nihilism. Adorno argues that Nietzsche correctly identifies Christianity’s prejudice for conflating hope with truth, “that the impossibility of living happily, or even living at all, without the thought of an absolute, does not vouch for the legitimacy of that thought” (*MM*, §61). In doing so, Christianity illegitimately ties truth to happiness because as Nietzsche points out, there is no reason why what is true should also be a source of happiness or hope, as Weber himself noted with reference to Nietzsche (*SV*, 143). Yet, Adorno argues that Nietzsche is himself guilty of a similar move in his teaching of *amor fati*, for why should we love what happens to us any more than believe to be true what we hope for? Adorno points out that “Both are cases of the same ignominious adaptation which, in order to endure the world’s horror, attributes reality to wishes and meaning to senseless compulsion” (*MM*, §61). Morgan points out that Nietzsche’s inability to posit hope by understanding it as always involving a failure to confront or recognise the truth, whether the truth of nihilism or the truth of wrong life, means that Nietzsche falls into a theological mode of thinking with *amor*

*fati*, which involves more blind acceptance than the negative glimpses of hope wrought from the untruth of the world that Adorno emphasises (Morgan, 2007, 19 – 20).

While the Enlightenment faith in a positive notion of progress turned out to be mythical, Adorno still thinks that a dialectical concept of progress can be recovered. What progress entails cannot be pinned down without threatening to dissolve the concept, yet that in itself does not mean that the concept should be abandoned entirely (*Progress*, 143). The problem Adorno discusses in this regard is related to his discussion in *Negative Dialectics* regarding the problematic nature of the positivist designation of certain concepts as ‘pseudo-problems’. Demanding an exact definition of ‘progress’ would involve submitting the concept to formalising, subjective reason, which would eliminate any content that may actually be contained in an antagonistic (that is, dialectical) fashion:

What may or may not be reflected on, however urgent, is regulated by a method blithely modeled after the current methods of exact science. Approved modes of proceeding, pure means, gain primacy over the ends, the goals of cognition. Experiences that balk at being unequivocally tagged get a dressing-down: the difficulties they cause are said to be due solely to lose [sic], pre-scientific nomenclature. (*ND*, 211)

Under these kinds of demands – which really constitute a form of coercive identity thinking to decide one way or the other – the notion of ‘progress’ can only be grasped in a one-sided way: either history moves in a positive direction, which leaves open the question ‘towards what?’ and seems refuted by the various forms in which human beings have been made fungible and integrated into a social totality that does not obviously aim at their well-being; or there is no such thing, which would seem to necessitate treating history as either a random series of events, denying continuity and improvement entirely (which in many cases would be counter-intuitive, as, for instance, with the development of scientific understanding) or simply reinterpreting the direction (towards decline), which would raise the same problem as before.

The point is that, as Adorno puts it in *History and Freedom*, to treat concepts like ‘progress’, ‘freedom’, ‘the will’, ‘justice’ and ‘morality’ as ‘pseudo-problems’ because they cannot be precisely defined is to effect a semantic taboo that denies related questions their urgency, yet it is nevertheless not enough to simply dismiss semantic criticism through appeal to ‘fallible needs’ (*HF*, 187 – 189). As such, the idea can only be stated roughly as what the concept promises, “the hope that things will finally get better, that people will at last be able to breathe a sigh of relief” (*Progress*, 143 – 144). This rough definition and the nature of how the concept can be thought about are both bound up with an historical situation in which knowledge,

understanding and technology have developed to the point that it is possible to imagine the elimination of material needs in the face of the fact that they are not and this is because the technical machinery that could alleviate suffering is mobilised in directions that create greater sources of fear for humanity than were previously possible when merely under the thrall of natural events. Therefore:

Only those reflections about progress have truth that immerse themselves in progress and yet maintain distance, withdrawing from paralyzing facts and specialized meanings. Today, reflection of this kind comes to a point in the contemplation of whether humanity is capable of preventing catastrophe. (144)

This means having to uncover the destructive tendencies implicit in the notion of progress itself, while at the same time holding to the idea that the concept of progress bears greater examination at a time when history has reached a point in which “Material needs, which long seemed to mock progress, have been potentially eliminated” (144). This potential stands alongside the production of the gas chamber and the atomic bomb: “while indeed progress from the slingshot to the megaton bomb may well amount to satanic laughter, in the age of the bomb a condition can be envisaged for the first time in which violence might vanish altogether” (153).

Adorno vacillates between the idea that the social totality could one day become so overpowering that the impulse reverts back to being something like the ‘physical reflex’ it may have originated from but in a socially conditioned form, transforming human beings into something closer to “amphibians” (*DE*, 36; *HF*, 235 - 236)<sup>203</sup> on the one hand and the idea that were things to approach such a point, it would intensify antagonisms to the point at which they would explode (*TWM*, 26) on the other. This, however, is because he understands history to move according to a general tendency, a view that he shares with Hegel’s philosophy of history but a tendency which is perhaps meaningless (*HF*, 9) and at least to some extent contingent. This tendency involves what he considers to be one of the central problems of the philosophy of history and in this way is also what Hegel’s philosophy of history and his notion of ethical life thematises: “namely, the relation between the universal, the universal tendency, and the

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<sup>203</sup> Adorno’s repeated reference to ‘amphibians’ specifically I find slightly mysterious, especially his and Horkheimer’s reference to a “human super-amphibian” later in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (*DE*, 224), which seems to be related to the general point that just as freedom and individuality emerged historically, there is no telling whether they will eventually be replaced by something else entirely (222). In *History and Freedom* Adorno goes on to clarify what he has in mind better than in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: “We might say that, once this archaic aspect of the will [i.e., the impulse] has been entirely ousted by planning and rationality, it paradoxically provokes a regressive reaction on the part of human beings. It means that they are no longer capable of will, impulse or spontaneity, but that they increasingly behave like guinea pigs about to be subjected to vivisection” (*HF*, 235). He then goes on to provide several further examples: the complete deprivation of will-power that happens to some of those in the camps; the effects of some psychiatric treatments, such as shock therapy; and Pavlov’s dogs.

particular, that is, the individual” (*HF*, 11). The relation between the universal and the particular, it will be recalled, was also what Adorno identified as the central problem of moral philosophy and which was captured by the Wrong Life claim. Like that problem, this general tendency is characterised not by reconciliation but by an antagonism that ruthlessly integrates the individual even while it forms the web of delusion which produces that notion of individuality in the first place.<sup>204</sup> The subject, Adorno argues, in believing itself to have freedom in the ‘here and now’, as though a quality it simply possesses, obscures what conditions and determines the subject. As such, this notion of freedom acts as a spell, binding the subject and becomes a web of delusion blinding the subject to the true origins of its situation and actions (*HF*, 220).

Adorno credits the ‘context’ or ‘web’ of guilt [*Schuldzusammenhang*], which he associates with the similarly phrased ‘context’ or ‘web’ of delusion [*Verblendungszusammenhang*] not to Nietzsche, as was considered above but as being made visible for the first time by Hegel through his notion of Spirit (*HF*, 112 - 113). The idea of this attribution, as far as I can tell, seems to be that the activity of individuals contributes to and is informed by the objective historical rationality as the realisation of freedom that is Spirit (*EPR*, §342). Individuals themselves are the unconscious instruments of this process, which they advance through their various activities (§344) but do not have any insight into this process or how their activities contribute to it (§348). In fact, Hegel is emphatic in the *Philosophy of History* that those explicitly concerned with pushing history in some direction or other, attempting to realise what they have subjectively determined is ‘right’, contribute far less than the great multitude of those following their various passions and diverse interests (*PH*, 20).

However, in *Metaphysics: Concepts and Problems*, Adorno instead attributes the insight into the context of guilt to Stoicism, though he notes that it was not conceived of by the Stoics as also being a context of delusion. To explore this attribution, it is worth here considering that Hegel’s characterisation of Stoicism in the *Phenomenology* is that the attitude of Stoicism demonstrates only an abstract notion of freedom. This is because freedom is conceived of by Stoicism as an attempt to negate the material conditions of unfreedom through the association of freedom purely with thought and in opposition to the world of fear and slavery from which it retreats inward (*PS*, §§198 – 201). In this sense it seems as though both Adorno and Hegel associate Stoicism with the recognition that individual thought represents a separate realm to

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<sup>204</sup> “The individual, who considers himself the legitimate basis of truth by virtue of what is supposed to be immediately given for him, obeys the web of delusion of a society that falsely but necessarily thinks of itself as individualistic” (*HTS*, 63).

an existence characterised by “universal fear and bondage”, although also only made possible as a result of “universal culture that had raised itself to the level of thought” (*PS*, §199). Further, they both criticise it for holding only to an abstract notion of freedom that attempts to retreat from the world rather than recognise that it is the world that makes the subject unfree and so also the cause for that retreat. Stoicism thereby fails to realise that “*Withdrawn* from existence only into itself, it has not there achieved its consummation as absolute negation of that existence” (*PS*, §201) but only, Adorno adds, “ataraxy, that is, the deadening of all affects, just to be capable of living at all” (*MCP*, 112). In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer suggest more explicitly that this Stoic attitude is the ancestor of bourgeois coldness (*DE*, 103) and it is coldness that allows the subject to be able to live in the context of guilt.

Stoicism thereby recognises the world as a context of guilt but it negates it only abstractly, essentially by treating subject (the inner life of thought) and object (the world of fear and bondage) as separate existences and so fails to recognise the way in which even the inward retreat from that world participates in and contributes to that world. Stoicism thereby fails to recognise that the context of guilt is *also* a context of delusion. Adorno of course was familiar with the *Phenomenology of Spirit* and was almost certainly influenced by Hegel’s discussion of Stoicism on this point, as will become clear. However, to bring Adorno and Hegel even closer on the point that Stoicism recognised the context of guilt but not as a context of delusion, the next ‘shape of consciousness’ after Stoicism in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* is Scepticism (*PS*, §§202 – 205). Unlike the Stoic, whose inner freedom is confronted by an unfree existence to which it must deaden itself, Scepticism retains this inner freedom but recognises that existence to be false. In Adorno’s terms, the Sceptic recognises the world as a context of delusion but not as a context of guilt. In its solipsism, the Sceptic pronounces Scepticism, “an absolute vanishing” about everything, yet “this pronouncement *is*, and this consciousness is the vanishing that is pronounced” and so recognising the context of guilt *only* as a context of delusion, Scepticism nevertheless ends up participating in what it negates as simple delusion, compared to what it seeks to recognise as the single truth that is the individual self:

From this self-identity, or within its own self, it falls back again into the former contingency and confusion, for this same spontaneous negativity has to do solely with what is single and separate, and occupies itself with what is contingent. [...] At one time it recognizes that its freedom lies in rising above all the confusion and contingency of existence, and at another time equally admits to a relapse into occupying itself with what is inessential. [...] It affirms the nullity of ethical principles, and lets its conduct be governed by these very principles. (*PS*, §205)

If we continue this comparison, does it follow from this that Adorno's position, the recognition of the context of guilt as at the same time a context of delusion in the form of Wrong Life, is equivalent to the final of these three 'shapes of consciousness' in the *Phenomenology*: the 'Unhappy Consciousness'? Elsewhere, Adorno anticipates this question in the context of the philosophy of history and emphatically distinguishes the position of criticism from the Unhappy Consciousness. While criticism does involve a kind of melancholy characteristic of the Unhappy Consciousness:

This is a melancholy that has become active, not a melancholy that makes do, that remains stuck fast in an unhappy consciousness, not at home with itself, but a consciousness that exteriorizes itself as a critique of existing phenomena. Such a melancholy is probably the pre-eminent critical, philosophical stance. In other words, if you read the phenomena of history as the cyphers of their own transience or their own natural deterioration, they will also always be defined by their own negativity. [...] In general terms, we might say that interpretation means reading nature from history and history from nature. Interpretation teases out of the phenomena, out of second nature, out of what has been mediated, out of the world around us that has been mediated by history and society, the fact that they have evolved [...]. (*HF*, 134)

Adorno claims that Hegel failed to follow through his own insights about the dialectic of universal and particular by siding with the objective order over the individual's critical conviction. Hegel thereby fails to put to work his own conviction that the element of the universal in the particular is what allows the particular to be raised to the universal *through* the realisation of itself as an individual and it is only individuals, Adorno points out, that can think (*HF*, 64).

I want to now finish by considering the attention that Adorno draws to Hegel's phrasing in a passage from the *Philosophy of Right*, in which Hegel suggests in passing that individual conscience may "justifiably" regard the law, as "the actual world of right and the ethical, [which] are grasped by means of *thoughts* and give themselves the form of rationality", as its "main enemy" (*EPR*, 17). Adorno remarks in *Negative Dialectics* that this passing remark, that the individual conscience will 'justifiably' consider the actual world of ethical life to be hostile to itself, "this word ['justifiably'] of Hegel's looks like a philosophical slip of the pen. He is blurting out what he denies in the same breath" (*ND*, 310) and so:

If [...] the individual conscience regards right, rational right or, as Hegel calls it, 'the actual world of right and the ethical' as the enemy, then a philosophy that teaches the

positive doctrine of the reconciliation of the particular and the universal should focus on this question instead of skating over it. (*HF*, 65)

Ultimately, the reason why Hegel ‘skates’ over this problem, insisting on ethical life as a condition of reconciliation, despite the way it necessarily produces a rabble as it increases its wealth and concentrates it unequally, despite the fact that the individual conscience may ‘justifiably’ consider the actual world of the right and ethical its enemy, is because between the universal and the particular, he takes only the universal to be reason proper – or objective reason: “There is reason in the world. Reason in the world is not subjective reason [...] Thought is not merely a feature of our consciousness but is what is objective, what has being in and for itself” (*HP*, 56 - 57). In the last instance, Hegel refuses to recognise a conflict between subjective reason and objective reason as a real antagonism, instead he splits off subjective reason from objective reason, with the former subordinated to the latter:

For if we suppose that the object really does possess reason, this means that there is a kind of conflict of reason with itself in a far more serious sense than the relatively harmless ‘antinomy of practical reason’ that Kant examined in the *Critique of Practical Reason*. In other words, the reason that makes itself objective and gives shape to itself in the world, on the one hand, and critical reason, on the other, are not only not one and the same thing, as Hegel would like us to believe, but they are utterly incompatible with each other. Therefore, in this distinction between a reason that objectifies itself and a reason that thinks subjectively we see the questionable nature of the total reason embodied in a single moral principle, or what might be termed the moral principle. To act in accordance with reason would be abstract self-preservation freed from the self, and it would degenerate into the evil that is the way of the world in which the stronger emerges as the victor. For this reason, then, there is no good life in the bad one, for a formal [Kantian] ethics cannot underwrite it, and the [Hegelian] ethics of responsibility that surrenders to otherness cannot underwrite it either. (*PMP*, 166)

## Conclusion

This thesis has sought to defend and explain Adorno's claim that "Wrong life cannot be lived rightly" (*MM*, §18) in light of recent work on Adorno and ethics by interpreting Adorno's reference to 'wrong life' as an inversion of Hegel's notion of 'ethical life'. This juxtaposition between 'wrong life' and 'ethical life' was not taken through direct comparison between these two concepts but instead by attempting to reconstruct what Adorno means by 'wrong life' as the social, economic, legal and intersubjective context within which human activity is given content in much the same way that Hegel defines 'ethical life'. I hope to have shown that Adorno accepts central Hegelian insights, including sharing elements of his critique of Kant's moral philosophy, while also advancing his own. These Hegelian insights include the way in which 'living' can only be determined in relation to this context, which itself involves Adorno's acceptance of Hegel's historical picture of the emergence of freedom, the modern individual and therefore the field that Kant designates as the 'moral'.

Adorno, however, emphasises that modern 'life' does not obviously involve a reconciliation between the individual and social whole within which it is embedded – a reconciliation that, according to Hegel, is itself the result of a historical process that passes via antagonisms towards an increasingly rational and so free condition, in which the 'right life' of a society and the 'right living' of its subjects are mutually reinforcing and find their content through each other. Rather, Adorno places emphasis on the ambivalence of the historical process, as one characterised as much by the emergence of the spiritual and material conditions of emancipation as by catastrophe and unfreedom, arguing that there is as much, if not a greater right to view the latter as the objective rationality unfolding in history after the events of Auschwitz. This process has today reached a point at which modern societies do not obviously embody the reconciliation of antagonisms, especially the antagonism between the individual and the social whole as 'ethical life'. Rather, what Adorno designates as 'wrong life' involves the integration of all *through* the maintenance of antagonisms, including the reduction of human beings to fungibility in the pursuit of the instrumentally rational inversion of means and ends of the social process. Adorno, therefore, insists on understanding history as much in terms of the development of reason and the notion of freedom as he understands it to be a universal context of violence that at the same time holds and withholds the promise of an end to violence once and for all, a context in which "human beings are not, *pace* Hegel, *at home with themselves*" (*HF*, 28).

To begin building this argument in Chapter 1, I first undertook an extended genealogical reconstruction of Adorno's notion of instrumental rationality and its tendency to become harnessed to the social process. This was undertaken via a largely expository account of two of Adorno's immediate influences: Max Weber, often considered the originator of the concept and Max Horkheimer, who, I have argued, presents its most fully developed account in his book *Eclipse of Reason* – an account that has, up until now, gone largely underappreciated. In this way, I have also sought to bring attention to Horkheimer as not just closer to and more influential on Adorno's own thought than is generally appreciated but moreover, to make the case that he should be taken seriously as an original thinker in his own right. While at times Horkheimer's distinction between objective reason and subjective reason can be overly schematic and perhaps, on close scrutiny, could be accused of taking liberties, it is nevertheless a highly useful heuristic for understanding how the early thinkers of the Frankfurt School understood the development of reason to result in its reduction to instrumental reason (1.3). Furthermore, Horkheimer's emphasis on the formal character of this partial but dominant form of reason helps to explain the limits of philosophical appeals to scientific rationality, as well as to renewed conceptions of 'objective reason' that persist and multiply in the age of disenchantment, as well as the vulnerability of this form of reason and so each of these appeals to adapt and become harnessed to destructive and irrational elements of the social process (1.4). Horkheimer's account of instrumental reason and its 'harnessing' to the social process became the basis of my account of 'wrong life' as this social process that continuously harnesses reason to formally consistent but irrational ends. Beyond this, I have also sought to indicate throughout the thesis where ideas associated with Adorno were likely developed in tandem with Horkheimer, if not first expressed by him. Ultimately, while I remain of what is the mainstream view that Adorno is the more insightful and robust philosophical thinker of the two, I have come to appreciate Horkheimer as an original and insightful thinker in his own right, while also being an impressively clear writer. I hope my discussion of his work can go some way towards advancing this appreciation.<sup>205</sup>

In the discussion of Max Weber's 'Science as a Vocation' and *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* that precipitated my discussion of Horkheimer, I have sought to show how many of these ideas had already been signalled by Max Weber's account of

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<sup>205</sup> In many ways I owe this insight to Arne Beswick, who once said to me something along the lines of, 'I think Adorno is the better philosopher but Horkheimer is the more original thinker'. My initial response was to consider this preposterous and even faintly outrageous. However, seeing insights and arguments I had previously associated with Adorno come up on multiple occasions while reading *Eclipse of Reason* and parts of *Dawn and Decline*, the latter of which influenced Adorno's own decision to write *Minima Moralia* (Müller-Doohm, 2005, 206), have led me to question my initial reaction.

intellectualisation and attendant concept of disenchantment. Apart from laying the groundwork for Horkheimer's account of instrumental reason generally and the notion of disenchantment that Adorno and Horkheimer make thematic, I hoped to contribute to an understanding of Weber and his influence on the Frankfurt School in two further ways. Firstly, I hoped to provide an extended account of Weber's own ideas and how they relate to instrumental reason and disenchantment, including what they already advance relative to the Frankfurt School that I found to be generally lacking in the secondary literature on Adorno. Often, I encountered a tendency instead to generally summarise the concepts of disenchantment and instrumental reason, with the latter often drawn from Weber's typology of action in *Economy and Society*, which does not itself do justice to his own genealogical account that parallels and clearly influences Horkheimer's, nor does it provide much sense of the connection between these two concepts, which instead are often brought into connection in the context of Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. This is not meant as a criticism of these summary approaches, as I am aware that any work has its own priorities and that an extended excursion through Weber's own thought would in most cases be time-consuming and unnecessary and by the same token, I am aware that my own excursion on Weber could be accused of being unnecessary.

Apart from being motivated by a desire to understand and provide the account of Weber in the literature on Adorno and Horkheimer that I found lacking, the second contribution I hoped to make was to bring out a distinctive element of Weber's account of disenchantment as the result of the historical process of intellectualisation (1.1) that I also found to be underappreciated and generally attributed to Adorno and Horkheimer. This element is his emphasis on disenchantment as at once involving the belief that all things are, in principle, calculable, while at the same time, the actual workings of daily life have become indescribably more opaque and mysterious to the individuals that have to live it. This helps to bring together Weber's notion of disenchantment with his discussion toward the end of *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* that quasi-religious values persist but become attached to social and economic processes. These processes tend towards the irrationality of the world of the 'iron cage' that looks set to burn its 'last ton of fossilised coal' before it is able to break out (1.2). In other words, Weber already signals the way in which, as Horkheimer explicitly argues, once formalised and instrumentalised, reason is harnessed to the social process.

With the account of instrumental reason explored in the first chapter in hand, in Chapter 2 I move on to elaborate an account of Adorno's reference to the 'wrong life' alluded to in the Wrong Life claim. The 'life' of 'wrong life' here is implicitly understood as mirroring Hegel's

reference to ‘life’ in ‘ethical life’ as the social, economic and political conditions in which human activity is embedded and given content, although I do not make explicit reference to Hegel’s own concept until Chapter 3. In the second chapter, I argue that ‘wrong life’ should be understood as our contemporary condition, a condition which mirrors and exemplifies the formalising and instrumentalising tendencies of purely subjective reason, as Horkheimer has described it and which is characterised by the inversion of means and ends through the formalisation and instrumentalisation of nature and human beings, which are reduced to fungible materials for the reproduction of the social process.

I began (2.1) this account of wrong life by rearticulating the account of instrumental reason in the language of the dialectic of enlightenment in order to bring out the concept of ‘progress’ that is thematic for the philosophy of history, which I revisit in Chapter 4. In this first section, I emphasise the divergence between the philosophical hopes of the ‘project of Enlightenment’ towards progress and the historical ‘process of enlightenment’ that makes possible the occurrence of Auschwitz. Following this, I then (2.2) sought to emphasise the formalising elements of instrumental reason through Adorno’s concept of ‘identity thinking’, as thought that aims primarily at formal consistency, reducing objects to fungible quantities to be made useful for many purposes. This conceptual discussion also allowed me to begin to consider Adorno’s indebtedness and closeness to Hegel, as well as points where he diverges from Hegel. I attempted here to emphasise that Adorno’s divergences with Hegel, which I take up again in other contexts later, should place less emphasis on the idea that Adorno is a “staunch critic of Hegel” (Schweppenhäuser, 2006, 343) – though admittedly his language can sometimes be very sharp, especially in *Negative Dialectics* – but rather that Adorno considers Hegel to have failed to fully carry through his own dialectical insights, which Adorno himself attempts to carry through.

Following this, I then consider three cases of the formalising and instrumentalising tendencies described in the accounts of instrumental reason and sharpened in the previous discussion of identity thinking at the level of the social process: Auschwitz (2.3), which exemplifies the most extreme end of these formalising tendencies that reduce human beings to some perceived (racial) difference in order to then treat them as absolutely fungible; the exchange principle and pursuit of surplus value (2.4) at the basis of modern economies, which demonstrates the irrationality of a system that most conspicuously exemplifies the way in which identity thinking treats unlike things as alike through the inequality of the principle of exchange; and finally Davis’ account of the prison industry (2.5), which attempts to elaborate the

connection between the racialising dehumanisation of Auschwitz and the universal context of fungibility represented by the exchange principle.

The discussion of Auschwitz in some ways is perhaps the most matter-of-course in discussions of Adorno but this is because: a) it is so central to his thought and what he thinks philosophy now has to reckon with; and b) because its occurrence demonstrates that it was possible, is possible again and continues to occur and as I suggest in the next chapter, this provides a minimum of what counts as ‘wrong life’ as the universal ‘context of guilt’. The discussion of the exchange principle, which is “fundamentally akin to identification” (*ND*, 146) attempts to emphasise the way in which ‘coercive identification’ and instrumental rationality are inherent in the material fabric of wrong life itself and reproduced at the level of human activity and thought, which in turn reproduces wrong life, rather than instrumental reasoning being imposed upon the economic and social processes from above. In this section, I also attempted to focus primarily on Adorno’s own account of the relationship between the relations of production and forces of production in contemporary society as drawn largely from his most explicitly Marxist texts. The exception to this was the inclusion of Tronti, whose ‘Factory and Society’ helped me understand key Marxist concepts and whose closeness to Adorno has gone largely unexplored, particularly his argument that the factory increasingly becomes the model of all areas of society (Tronti, 2019, 30), an argument that Adorno also makes (*LCIS*, 117). On this point, Davis provides one such exemplification of this idea in her account of the prison industry, which draws together the connection between the dehumanising logic of racism with the reduction of the human being to exchange value in a fundamental and pervasive institution of modern societies. I also attempted to elaborate this connection further by drawing out two specific examples that pull Auschwitz and the American prison system uncomfortably close: Levi’s account of a prison industrial complex bound up with the concentration camps and Albert Kligman’s medical experiments that involved the complete reduction of the prisoners to the fungible, as merely ‘acres of skin’. The discussion of the theoretical connections between Adorno and Davis here may arguably be the most conspicuously original contribution in the thesis, as the relationship between their ideas seems to have largely gone unexplored. In the final paragraphs of this chapter, I introduce Adorno’s notion of the ‘guilt context’ and Davis’ language of a ‘human surplus’, both of which I take up in the next chapter and the latter of which prefigures my discussion of Hegel’s notion of the ‘rabble’.

Having elaborated this account of ‘wrong life’, in Chapter 3 I turn my attention to the Wrong Life claim itself and in particular its other half: ‘living rightly’. The first section of the chapter (3.1) provides some preliminary discussion of what the chapter as a whole sets out to

attempt, which is to connect Adorno's original iteration of the claim in *Minima Moralia* with his later revisitation of it in *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, where it is recontextualised as expressing a dialectic between Kant's moral philosophy and Hegel's notion of ethical life, in light of the account of wrong life provided in Chapter 2. I then went on (3.2) to interpret the original iteration of the Wrong Life claim by expanding on Adorno's discussion of the problematic nature of living in a home in wrong life, which forms the context for the claim, which appears at the end of the aphorism 'Refuge for the Homeless'. In this way, I attempt to draw out some implicit and further considerations regarding the relationship between the unequal-equality of the exchange principle and its effect on the moral status of the responsible individual and their actions. Put another way, by considering attempts at 'living rightly' within the context of modern economies that produce unequal conditions but formally distribute responsibility equally, wealth becomes the capacity to perform moral acts, while simultaneously insulating the wealthy from the negative consequences of individual responsibility compared to the poor.

I then continued to move towards the language of moral philosophy, highlighting the central problem of moral philosophy captured by the Wrong Life claim as the tension between the particular and the universal or the individual, on the one hand and the social whole, that at once integrates and stands against it, on the other. With this in mind, I then provided an interpretation of what has come to be referred to as Adorno's 'New Categorical Imperative'. This interpretation was made in relation to the context of guilt, which expresses our necessary imbrication in a world in which Auschwitz is still possible. In other words, the minimum requirement for 'life' to no longer be 'wrong life' and so facilitate 'living rightly' is that a condition is reached in which Auschwitz has ceased to happen and is no longer possible. Beyond this, I attempted to place greater emphasis on the ways in which the New Categorical Imperative is expressive of difficulties facing any moral philosophy, rather than its status as either categorical or an imperative issued to the individual, about which I remain sceptical because of the reasons just given.

In the following section (3.3) I focused on Adorno's distinction between 'morality' and 'ethics' through comparison to Hegel's distinction between 'morality' [*Moralität*] and 'ethical life' [*Sittlichkeit*] in order to argue that both thinkers associate 'morality' with Kant's moral philosophy but that the counterpart to 'ethical life' is 'wrong life' and not 'ethics', which instead relates more closely to issues bound up with disenchantment and the reduction of reason to subjective reason discussed in Chapter 1. Following an account of Hegel's 'ethical life', with emphasis on Adorno's awareness of Hegel's distinction between its 'Ancient' and 'modern'

variants and an introduction of Kant's moral philosophy with emphasis on its 'formalism' and 'rigorism', I then moved on (3.4) to consider Adorno's position in relation to these. I argued that Adorno shares fundamental premises with Hegel and against Kant regarding the historically emergent and embedded nature of freedom and the individual, including the historical emergence of morality and moral philosophy itself. I argued that Adorno not only shares with Hegel but also advances his own version of Hegel's 'empty formalism' charge against Kant. Here and towards the end of the previous section, I also begin to more sharply distinguish Adorno's notion of 'wrong life' from Hegel's account of 'ethical life' with reference to the latter's concerns about the necessary emergence of a 'rabble', which I argue is much more characteristic of modern societies than Hegel could have foreseen by drawing on points regarding the 'guilt context' and 'human surplus' indicated at the end of Chapter 2. I finish this chapter by considering Adorno's interpretation of Ibsen's play *The Wild Duck* as expressing a moral dialectic between Kant and Hegel and which Adorno states is itself captured by the Wrong Life claim.

In the final chapter, I considered Adorno's notion of the guilt context as also a context of delusion that necessitates the inculcation of coldness by the modern subject, especially in the context of his relationship to Nietzsche. I also began to consider Adorno's claim that a 'principle' evident in Kant's philosophy is that of 'breaking off', which I explored with respect to his arguments regarding the moral law and diabolical evil (4.1). From these considerations, I then moved to reject the seemingly tempting appeal to some form of 'animal' or 'material' solidarity in the concept of 'compassion' in opposition to 'coldness' and its' association with rationality (4.2). Part of my argument here was that these conceptions were too one-sided and failed to appreciate the extent to which 'compassion' itself is a problematic concept for Adorno. Towards the end of this section, I considered a final example of Kant's principle of 'breaking off' in the 'additional factor', which I took up in the following section (4.3). As in the previous section, my interpretation of this difficult but highly important concept placed emphasis on its necessary imbrication with rationality and the philosophy of history, against readings that associate it primarily or even solely with the body and physical suffering. I attempted to illustrate this account with an extended analysis of a scene from Masaki Kobayashi's film *The Human Condition*, which itself parallels Adorno's interpretation of *The Wild Duck*.

Finally (4.4), I turned to my most focused discussion of the philosophy of history, first by considering where Adorno accepts and diverts from Nietzschean nihilism with respect to the concept of 'progress', which I revisited and revised from the discussion in the second chapter. I considered Adorno's attribution of insight into the 'guilt context' to Hegel's notion of Spirit,

as well as a separate attribution to Stoicism. I attempted here to show that Adorno's attribution was actually commensurate with Hegel's own discussion of Stoicism and by juxtaposing their discussions demonstrated the connection between the context of guilt and the context of delusion. Finally, I considered Hegel's attitude towards what Adorno considered to be the central problem of the history of philosophy, as the relation between the universal and the particular, which is also the central problem of moral philosophy.

As such, my interpretation of Adorno has not involved reading him as rejecting Hegel in favour of Kant, as some readers have suggested (Schweppenhäuser, 2006, 343; Zuidervaart, 2009, 32; Snir, 2010, 411) because it could be the case that a truly reconciled condition may come and that would involve a truly free and rational state of affairs, which is the only condition in which living rightly would be possible. However, this cannot be read off of a social and historical process that produces Auschwitz, functionalises human beings for its own perpetuation and necessarily produces and divests itself of a 'rabble' more numerous, desperate and global than Hegel was, understandably, able to predict. Neither does my interpretation entail that by this token Adorno considers moral philosophy – which by and large means Kant's moral philosophy – to be unimportant either. As I have noted, Adorno suggests that the chief problem of moral philosophy is the relationship between the universal and the particular in terms of the relationship or antagonism between the social whole and the individual (*PMP*, 18 - 19) and this itself is also expressed as the need to find an answer to the question of 'what ought I to do?', which he suggests may also be the chief problem of philosophy *as such* (*PMP*, 3). However, it is also the relationship between the universal and the particular in terms of the relationship between the universal, as the objective tendency of history and the particular, as the individual, that Adorno treats as the central problem of the philosophy of history in *History and Freedom* (*HF*, 1). This central philosophical problem of the relationship between the universal and the particular — either as the relation between the objective tendency of history and the individual crushed under its wheels or as the antagonism between the individual and the social whole through integration — was first made visible *through* the rift between universal and particular. This rift “between individual and society is a necessary element of the emancipation of the individual. Without this rift, the idea of freedom, which points the way beyond both this rupture and the undifferentiated state of affairs, would be inconceivable” and this rift, this rupture and so the possibility of freedom occurs only in the course of history, an insight that Adorno attributes to Hegel (*HF*, 208).

It is not just that, as Tassone says, Adorno's critique of Kant's moral philosophy in *Negative Dialectics* and *Problems of Moral Philosophy* necessitates a shift towards the

philosophy of history (Tassone, 2005, 253), most clearly evident in the later parts of *Problems of Moral Philosophy*. Tassone misses that it is also the case that Adorno's critique of Hegel's philosophy of history necessitates a shift towards moral philosophy, a shift most clearly evident in the later parts of *History and Freedom*.<sup>206</sup> In other words, my complaint with Tassone is perhaps a version of a now standard Hegel-inspired criticism, which is that Tassone's reading is too one-sided. As stated, while I have tried to emphasise the role of Hegel in Adorno's thought, as Tassone does, in my view he sacrifices too much Kant in order to make room for Hegel and Marx. A fundamental problem for philosophy in Adorno's eyes is the need and urgency to have an answer to the question 'what ought I to do?' in the face of dehumanising historical and social tendencies, chief of which is the unbridled horror of Auschwitz, while at the same time recognising that no clear answer to this question seems to be available. The crux of the matter is that this need and urgency does not disappear simply because there is no apparent answer.

This interpretation of Adorno's notion of 'wrong life' and why it cannot be 'lived rightly' as an inversion of 'ethical life' has been pursued in terms of the broader argument that for Adorno, any account of moral philosophy must pass through the philosophy of history and any philosophy of history must tarry with what catastrophes history piles upon its subjects. This way of posing my interpretation of the Wrong Life claim is not simply justified on the basis of the mirrored structure of his lectures, as indicated above but is directly justified by a claim that Adorno makes to this effect in *Negative Dialectics*:

In fact, there is horror because there is no freedom yet. Reflection on the question of free will does not abolish the question but turns it into one for the philosophy of history: why have the two theses, 'The will is free' and 'The will is not free', become an antinomy? (*ND*, 218)

Here, Adorno conjures up Kant's third antinomy from the *Critique of Pure Reason*, the antinomy between free will and determinism, while subjecting it to an Hegelian twist. The antinomy is not a transcendental feature of reason attempting to go beyond itself, necessarily becoming entwined in an irresolvable contradiction. Rather, the antinomy *has been historically*

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<sup>206</sup> In *Negative Dialectics* the shift is from a critique of Kant's moral philosophy (the 'Freedom' chapter) to the critique of Hegel's philosophy of history (the 'World History' chapter), the first two 'Models' that make up Part Three of the book and which parallel *Problems of Moral Philosophy* and *History and Freedom* respectively. However, even here the third and final 'Model' ('Meditations on Metaphysics') involves a dialectical interplay between these two critiques in light of Auschwitz, beginning with a continuation of the critique of Hegel's philosophy of history in the first section (*ND*, 361) but which then leads immediately back into moral philosophy in the second with an explicit invocation of the language of Kant's moral philosophy with the 'New Categorical Imperative' (365).

*arrived at* because Adorno, like Hegel, thinks that freedom has to be historically achieved, rather than thinking that freedom is an immutable, transcendental feature of rational beings as such, as Kant thinks. Instead, Adorno argues alongside Hegel that “Whole epochs, whole societies lacked not only the concept of freedom but the thing” (218). The difference with Hegel is that freedom, which would only be actual in modern ethical life, has instead *become* a practical antinomy because consciousness of freedom and realised unfreedom have resulted in the antagonistic structure of wrong life. This is a dialectical antagonism because both the universal and particular sides of the antagonism reciprocally determine each other and they do so antagonistically. The more that the freedom of the individual is insisted on as a fact, either transcendental or realised, the more that the actualised conditions of unfreedom as the universal context of guilt are compounded:

The more freedom the subject – and the community of subjects – ascribes to itself, the greater its responsibility; and before this responsibility it must fail in a bourgeois life which in practice has never yet endowed a subject with the unabridged autonomy accorded to it in theory. Hence the subject must feel guilty (221).

According to Adorno, the philosophy of history must register history as the unity of continuity and discontinuity (*ND*, 320). History appears to have a unity in both Hegel’s philosophy of history, as the progressive realisation of Spirit becoming conscious of itself – as the progressive realisation of freedom – on the one hand and Adorno and Horkheimer’s dialectic of enlightenment as the progressive realisation of catastrophe – of the antagonism between freedom and unfreedom or from the slingshot to the megaton bomb. Both describe more than how history merely ‘appears’; they both contain moments of substantial truth that are difficult to deny – yet they cannot be resolved into one another. Auschwitz is neither a moment in the meaning of history positively, an instance of the slaughter-bench upon which peoples must be victimised on the path to Spirit’s self-realisation; nor merely negatively as an indication of decline, as the culmination of a fate that can retrospectively be read into the first human tool that was turned against another human being. Yet history is both of these simultaneously, holding at its most advanced stage of development the potential to obliterate the sources of another Auschwitz, even while simultaneously those sources persist, intensify and occasionally explode, hurling wreckage upon wreckage on history’s shore, causing suffering to those who stand confusedly by.

But this unity of unity and discontinuity is also visible in Adorno’s discussions of moral philosophy, in which the aspect of discontinuity in particular is made visible there. Firstly, in

the additional factor, which must be present to put an end to the otherwise infinite chain of deliberation. It is even there at the purely theoretical level, however and not just in terms of this moment of discontinuity that cannot be brought into the formally consistent and rigorous unification of Kant's moral philosophy. It is present too in the various other chains of reasoning that Kant must break off in order to avoid being led into insoluble contradiction – into dialectic. It is visible in the compulsions of conscience, in which something must intervene to rouse the philosopher from her sleep, bring the moral law to her attention and compel her to act, itself suggesting that the moral law needs an additional element. It is also there in the intimation of horror in Kant's consideration of diabolical evil, in the breaking off from the possibility that pure, practical reason itself could suppress the compulsions of conscience, as *Juliette* suggests and which Kant must hastily dismiss as possible only for something truly inhuman, possible only for a demon. Finally, this is visible in the moral law itself, for which Kant needs to break off the chain of nihilistic questioning 'for what?' in order to give practical reason and moral action a rational grounding in reason itself, blocking the question from seeking any further rational explanation. Yet this chain of questioning 'for what?' itself has only become nihilistic as a result of the process of enlightenment, which had taken this question as its very motor in the effort to clarify reasoning and provide explanation.

Both moral philosophy and the philosophy of history of Kant and Hegel respectively demonstrate from different standpoints the unity of unity and discontinuity – which is also the discontinuity of unity and discontinuity. In Kant, the discontinuity of these forms of 'breaking off' and the strict separation of the sensible and intelligible in the name of unity as consistency is emphasised; in Hegel, the unity of history as the progressive coming to self-consciousness of Spirit and the reconciliation of ethical life and individual moral subjectivity *through* the historical moments of discontinuity, in catastrophe and the creation of a rabble, is emphasised.

In *Negative Dialectics* Adorno says that universal history must be "construed and denied" (*ND*, 320) in view of registering it as the unity of unity and discontinuity. At the end of *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, he says that to do moral philosophy today calls for nothing other than its urgent critique. I think this should read as the need to register its dependence on its own moments of discontinuity. For this reason, moral philosophy as the urgent call for its own critique, means that moral philosophy too must be neither construed nor denied but 'construed *and* denied'. It is only by drawing moral philosophy together with the philosophy of history, something first undertaken seriously by Hegel and arising out of his own philosophy of continuity and discontinuity, identity and non-identity, that this is possible. That is, the continuities and discontinuities between and within moral philosophy and the philosophy of

history can only be construed and denied in dialectics, which tries to grasp its object not in spite of but through its contradictions, its own internal antagonisms. Antagonisms that cannot be resolved in thought but only exposed there, according to Adorno, as the resolution, the reconciliation would require the actual movement of history, as Hegel perhaps prematurely argued for. Right living will be possible in right life – but until then, we cannot point to an ethical life that seems confuted by material realities, subjective experience and critical reason, which exposes the persistence and pervasiveness of the elements of wrong life. Until that time, humanity and philosophy perhaps have more to gain and more truth to glean by emphasising the presence of wrong life, including the ways in which we fail to live it rightly.

What Adorno conceives as ‘wrong life’ is the social, political and economic conditions within which ‘living rightly’ is not possible for the individuals who live it. ‘Living rightly’ is not possible both in the sense of determining what ‘right living’ would entail and in the ability to actually carry out whatever it would entail. Insight into right living is not possible because this highly complex, globally interconnected, rationalised socio-economic order is impenetrable from the perspective of the individual. The instrumental rationality at the basis of modern societies reflects a society that is at once rational and irrational. Rational because it continually reproduces itself through human activity, which adapts itself to the exchange principle and the pursuit of profit at its basis; irrational because in this it instrumentalises and exploits human beings for the purposes of its own perpetuation and so at once produces the conditions for ‘living’ as well as the chief threats to humanity and so these very conditions, to which humanity must adapt and instrumentalise others in turn.

In this way, human activity in wrong life, which is always a form of living wrongly, can be understood as “a life pursued within the space of the social totality in which our beliefs and decisions are directed by institutional norms which seem objective and reasonable. These, however, are the norms through which the social totality preserves itself” (O’Connor, 2013, 27). This itself reflects the formal definition of moral action within Hegel’s philosophy of right, in which the right of subjectivity always acts under the right of objectivity. The right of subjectivity, “to recognize nothing that I do not perceive as rational is the highest right of the subject, but by virtue of its subjective determination it is at the same time *formal*; on the other hand, *the right of the rational* – as the objective – over the subject remains firmly established”. The right of objectivity with respect to human action “takes the following shape: since action is an alteration which must exist in an actual world and thus seeks recognition in it, it must, in general, conform to what is *recognized as valid* in that world” and so the right of the subject to pursue their individual interests or live rightly is subordinated to the ‘norms through which the

social totality preserves itself' in the sense that "Whoever wills an action in the actual world has, *in so doing*, submitted itself to its laws and recognized the right of objectivity" (*EPR*, §132R).

But just as Adorno remarks, "What can it mean to say that the human race is making progress when millions are reduced to the status of objects?" (*HF*, 8), we should also ask: what can it mean to say that 'life' is 'ethical' when the beliefs, decisions, norms and laws that are recognised as 'valid' continuously issue from an objective condition in which millions are reduced to the status of objects? A 'life' in which its subjects are required to inculcate coldness just to live in a context of guilt. A context in which human activity must continuously reproduce and recognise as valid forms of dehumanisation that underlie daily life and that, again and again, has spilled over into the brutal administrative rationality exemplified by Auschwitz, with no reason yet to think that 'this' will be the last time. In conditions of 'wrong life', there is no reason to think that we live in a truly free or reconciled condition, any more than we have reason to believe that the Spirit of the age is reason and freedom, rather than death and catastrophe:

'I have seen the world spirit', not on horseback but on wings without a head, and that refutes, at the same stroke, Hegel's philosophy of history. [...] Millions of Jews have been murdered, and this is to be seen as an interlude and not the catastrophe itself. What more is this culture waiting for? (*MM*, §33)

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