

## **Adorno's Modal Utopianism: Possibility and Actuality in Adorno and Hegel**

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ACCORDING to a longstanding metaphysical tradition, actuality is prior—and in some ways superior—to possibility. From Aristotle to Hegel, the exceptions to this fundamental belief are fairly rare. But there is a marked trend in post-Hegelian thought to undermine this traditional priority, with Theodor W. Adorno representing an important line of attack.<sup>1</sup>

In this vein, Jay Bernstein remarks that, for Adorno, “lodged somewhere between logical and actual possibility,” there is something that is “neither fully actual nor fully non-actual.”<sup>2</sup> This is an extremely important insight into Adorno’s thoughts, but one that neither Bernstein nor Adorno makes fully explicit. What, then, is Adorno’s view of possibility and what is the modal status of what he calls “difference with respect to what exists”<sup>3</sup> (*die Differenz vom Bestehenden*)? The answers to these questions will involve showing how Adorno’s notion of utopian ‘difference’ relies, crucially, upon a critique of the defective metaphysical thesis concerning the priority of actuality, which finds its highest expression in Hegel’s thought. Succinctly put, the trouble is that, “according to Hegel’s distinction between abstract and real possibility, only something that has become actual is possible. This kind of philosophy sides with the big guns. It adopts the judgement of

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<sup>1</sup> Other lines of attack are to be found, for example, in the works of Herbert Marcuse and of Ernst Bloch, but also in those of Martin Heidegger.

<sup>2</sup> Jay M. Bernstein, *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 418, 435. See too Deborah Cook, “From the Actual to the Possible: Nonidentity Thinking,” *Constellations*, vol. 12, no. 1 (2005).

<sup>3</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (London: Routledge, 1973), 313; Theodor W. Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Gretel Adorno, Susan Buck-Morss, and Klaus Schultz, 20 vols. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1997), 6:308.

## 2 | Adorno's Modal Utopianism

an actuality that always destroys what could be different.”<sup>4</sup> Understanding this claim begins with Adorno's critique of Hegel's notion of totality.

### The Whole and the 'More'

The frequently cited rallying cry of Adorno's critique of Hegel—"The whole is the untrue"<sup>5</sup>—means first of all that the claim to spirit being a whole, a "system of totality,"<sup>6</sup> is untenable. More precisely, as Adorno says elsewhere, any "affirmative and self-assured reference" to such a whole is "fictitious."<sup>7</sup> However, if reference to the whole is fictitious, it is not simply because the Hegelian whole is an unattainable metaphysical dream. More concretely, it is because our vision of the whole has become the socially necessary illusion (*gesellschaftlich notwendiger Schein*) of a thoroughly antagonistic society.<sup>8</sup> As Adorno puts it: "The force of the whole...is not a mere fantasy on the part of spirit; it is the force of the real web of illusion in which all individual existence remains trapped."<sup>9</sup> The whole is thus the web of actuality understood as the sum of repressive forces to which there is no

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<sup>4</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, "The Experiential Content of Hegel's Philosophy," in *Hegel: Three Studies*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholson (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1993), 83; Adorno, *GS*, 5:320.

<sup>5</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 1978), §29, 50; Adorno, *GS*, 4:55.

<sup>6</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, trans. George Di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 749; G. W. F. Hegel, *Werke*, 20 vols. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1969–1971), 6:569.

<sup>7</sup> Adorno, "The Experiential Content of Hegel's Philosophy," 87; Adorno, *GS*, 5:324.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Adorno, "Aspects of Hegel's Philosophy," 31; Adorno, *GS*, 5:277.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 87 / 5:324.

apparent alternative. The task of philosophy is then to critique and unmask the general and particular structures of the ideological fiction of the 'force of the whole' in such a way as to open up the possibility of determinate alternatives. This possibility of determinate negation, says Adorno, is *utopia*, "the utopia of the whole truth [*der ganzen Wahrheit*], which is still to be actualized."<sup>10</sup>

However, this reference to 'the utopia of the whole truth' brings with it its own set of problems: are we not replacing one fiction with another, one *telos* with another, and one *whole* with another that would supersede or somehow detach itself from the whole of which Hegel speaks? Adorno assures us that this is not the case. His utopianism "does not mean to suggest a second, secret world which is to be opened up through an analysis of appearances"<sup>11</sup>—*i.e.*, there is no 'other' world than this one, other than this untrue whole. On the other hand, if Adorno can invoke the idea of a 'utopia of the whole truth' in opposition to the Hegelian whole, then we clearly need to rethink how we conceive the whole of actuality itself. Certainly, this desire to reconceive actuality is a pillar of Adorno's thought insofar as it corresponds, for example, to an attempt "to imagine the whole as something that could be utterly different."<sup>12</sup> But this poses a particular problem of interpretation: there is no 'other' world than this one, yet we must imagine the "utterly different." What can this mean?

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<sup>10</sup> Adorno, "The Experiential Content of Hegel's Philosophy," 88; Adorno, *GS*, 5:325.

<sup>11</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, "The Actuality of Philosophy," in *The Adorno Reader*, ed. Brian O'Connor, trans. Benjamin Snow (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 31; Adorno, *GS*, 1:335.

<sup>12</sup> Rainer Traub and Harald Wieser, eds., *Gespräche mit Ernst Bloch* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1975), 61.

### 3 | Adorno's Modal Utopianism

One possibility is that this difference is inscribed in thought itself, in the methods and practices by which we come to grips with actuality. One way to put this would be to suggest that Adorno's dialectic is not as 'closed' as Hegel's. In any case, this is how Max Horkheimer handles the teleological question in Hegel. In an essay whose main theses are taken as read by Adorno, Horkheimer will say that the dialectic is to be understood, *contra* Hegel, as fundamentally *unclosed* (*unabgeschlossen*).<sup>13</sup> He writes: "An isolated and conclusive [*abschlußhafte*] theory of actuality [*Wirklichkeit*] is completely unthinkable."<sup>14</sup> That is, actuality cannot be seen as an internally self-justifying system of beliefs and practices—a world complete unto itself. But how exactly are we to understand this 'open' actuality to which Horkheimer seems to refer? Or to put it another way, if the dialectic is unclosed, then what exactly is it open *to*, or what does it open *onto*? Here, Horkheimer's answer is less provocative than Adorno's will be. The dialectic aims at objective truth, says Horkheimer, where this truth is not that to which a proposition *corresponds*, but that which "real events and human activity"<sup>15</sup> produce: "to the degree that the knowledge gained from perception and inference, methodical inquiry and historical events, daily work and political struggle, meets the test of the available means of cognition, it is the truth."<sup>16</sup> This claim is the basis of

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<sup>13</sup> Max Horkheimer, "On the Problem of Truth," in *Between Philosophy and Social Sciences: Selected Early Writings*, ed. G. Frederick Hunter, Matthew S. Kramer, and John Torpey, trans. Maurice Goldbloom and G. Frederick Hunter (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1993), 189; Max Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 19 vols. (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer Verlag, 1988), 3:295, for example.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 189 / 3:392.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 190 / 3:293.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 192 / 3:295.

Horkheimer's historicism, whose participative structure ensures its commonness and bindingness for all. Horkheimer's dialectic is thereby 'unclosed' in the specific sense of being open to truths different than those we now know, just because truth is not located in static actuality, but in the historically variable requirements and determinations of the nexus of activity that defines it. Not only must thought think thought's own historicity and finitude, but we must understand actuality itself as an active and self-defining network of beliefs and practices that includes both the hypotheses to be tested and the criterion of testing—all of which is encapsulated by what Horkheimer calls human activity.<sup>17</sup> It is through the constant revision of truth on the basis of historically informed theory and practice that actuality's more repressive currents can be overcome. There is no 'other world' than this one, but its defects can instruct us on how to transform it for the betterment of all.

Similarly, Adorno's 'whole truth' does not correspond to some ignorant, static ideal to which thinking will one day do justice. In this, Adorno's view concurs with Horkheimer's. If the whole is untrue, it is because thinking cannot 'close' the circle of the real once and for all. The real must rather instruct

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<sup>17</sup> In this sense, Horkheimer's view is consistent with that of Hegel in the introduction to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, while remaining true to Marx's second thesis on Feuerbach: "The question whether human thinking can reach objective truth—is not a question of theory but a *practical* question. In practice man must prove the truth, that is, actuality and power [*Wirklichkeit und Macht*], this-sidedness of his thinking. The dispute about the actuality or non-actuality of thinking—thinking isolated from practice—is a purely *scholastic* question." (Karl Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach," in *Writings of the Young Marx on Philosophy and Society*, edited and translated by Loyd D. Easton and Kurt H. Guddat (Garden City: Doubleday, 1967; reprint, with corrections, Hackett, 1997), 401; Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Werke*, 43 vols. (Berlin: Dietz-Verlag, 1956), 3:5, cf. 3:533.)

## 4 | Adorno's Modal Utopianism

thought as to where to invest its creative powers. However, for Adorno, the whole is false not merely because truth is the result of the historically changing nature of real events and human activity (in Horkheimer's sense); it is also because the *world is not everything that is the case*.<sup>18</sup> As Adorno puts it in one of several similar passages: "Undeniably, being is not simply the epitome of what is, of what is the case. With this anti-positivistic insight we do justice to the concept's surplus over facticity. No concept would be thinkable, indeed none would be possible without the 'more' [*das Mehr*] that makes a language of language."<sup>19</sup>

It is this 'more' that will help us to determine and clarify the nature of the opposition that Adorno sets up between his own utopianism and the false Hegelian whole. In a word, the Adornian dialectic is open not simply because it is somehow more historical or less teleological than Hegel's or because it refuses to be a closed system of totality. The Adornian dialectic is open because it is marked by an irreducible 'more,' by a surplus that prevents the whole from closing and the Hegelian circle from returning into itself. This 'more' is *possibility*—but not just *any* possibility: it is a type of possibility that Hegel's philosophy does not and cannot admit. The question arises, then, as to how Adorno's notions of actuality and possibility differ from Hegel's.

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<sup>18</sup> Adorno's many critical references to the first line of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*—"The world is everything that is the case" (*Die Welt ist alles, was der Fall ist*)—are meant precisely to adumbrate the openness of the dialectical view that he defends. See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. C. K. Ogden, Bilingual (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983), proposition 1.

<sup>19</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 106; Adorno, *GS*, 6:112.

## Hegel's Theory of Actuality

For Hegel, actuality and possibility are moments of the absolute—the whole—understood as pure self-manifestation. Or, to put it another way, the absolute's self-manifestation (*i.e.*, in the occurrence of real events in history) is nothing other than the self-movement of actuality as returning to itself through its self-determination as possibility. In fact, according to Hegel, the dialectical identity of possibility and actuality gives rise to a concept of *absolute* actuality that contains (*in sich enthält*) all possibility: "whether this or that is possible or impossible depends on the content," says Hegel, "*i.e.*, on the totality of the moments of actuality, an actuality which, in the unfolding of its moments, proves to be necessity."<sup>20</sup>

This unfolding and its necessity are described in greatest detail in the *Science of Logic*, with some interesting and critical points added in the corresponding passages of the *Encyclopædia*. But in every passage and on every level, the traditional priority of actuality over possibility is reaffirmed, though the detail and the terminology are thoroughly modern. The core definition of actuality is succinctly given in the greater *Logic*: "what is actual *can act* [*was wirklich ist, kann wirken*]; something announces its actuality *by what it produces*."<sup>21</sup> What this means, first and foremost, is not that actuality is the mere sum of what is immediately present, but

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<sup>20</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *The Encyclopædia Logic: Part I of the Encyclopædia of Philosophical Sciences, with the Zusätze*, trans. T. F. Geraets, W. A. Suchting, and H. S. Harris (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1991), §143, Zusatz, 217; Hegel, *Werke*, 8:284.

<sup>21</sup> Hegel, *Science of Logic*, 482; Hegel, *Werke*, 6:208.

## 5 | Adorno's Modal Utopianism

rather that it is *self-producing* because it is always “full of content.”<sup>22</sup> In other words, *real* actuality is always a *determinate* actuality that contains equally real possibilities that in turn become actual in their own right, just because they are the true content, the in-itself, of this actuality. But this content, which is the condition of possibility of a nascent but not yet existing new actuality, is thereby none other than the *selfsame* actuality seen as a totality expressive of a “complete circle of conditions”<sup>23</sup>—a living whole that drives its own development and external, historical transformation. Real possibility is therefore only formally distinct from actuality; or, as Hegel puts it, “it is real in so far as it is itself also actuality.”<sup>24</sup>

The dialectical sleight of hand that establishes the identity of actuality and possibility and, more importantly, their self-enclosed, self-reproducing totality, is an admittedly attractive presentation of the internal, logical relation of what *is* and what *can be*. On this view, everything depends upon the definition of existing actuality as a “complete circle of conditions” that implicitly defines an *other* actuality not yet existing. That is, the complete circle of conditions is the middle term in the analysis. Actuality is a complete circle of circumstances; but these are nothing other than conditions for another actuality, which is to be seen as really possible in relation to real actuality. Therefore, in respect of this complete circle of conditions, actuality and possibility are one:

as [actuality's] *immediate concrete existence, the circle of conditions*, sublates itself, it makes itself into the *in-itselfness* [Ansichsein] which it already is, namely the *in-itself* of an

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 482 / 6:208.

<sup>23</sup> Hegel, *Encyclopedia Logic*, §148, 224; Hegel, *Werke*, 8:292.

<sup>24</sup> Hegel, *Science of Logic*, 484; Hegel, *Werke*, 6:210.

other. And conversely, since its moment of in-itselfness thereby sublates itself at the same time, it becomes actuality, hence the moment which it likewise already is.<sup>25</sup>

In this movement, there is evidently a kind of vanishing (*Verschwinden*), using up (*Verzehren*), or collapsing (*Zusammenfallen*) of possibility, but with neither gain nor loss because real possibility is just latent actuality, *i.e.*, the existing conditions of a nascent actuality that will in turn be the real possibility of yet another expression of actuality.

On a higher level of analysis, this dialectical movement of actuality and possibility, or the counterstroke (*Gegenstoß*) of the one in the other, is also considered utterly *necessary*. Hegel's reasoning on this point is deceptively simple: the circle of conditions is always such that it will give rise to the determinate actuality to which it corresponds: “Hence what is really possible can no longer be otherwise; under the given conditions and circumstances, nothing else can follow. Real possibility and necessity are, therefore, only apparently distinguished.”<sup>26</sup> Of course, in terms of *content*, the dialectic is bound to contingency, in the sense that the actuality from which possibility proceeds always has its ground in another, *i.e.*, in a former actuality that provided the conditions of its emergence. Real necessity therefore appears only as *relative necessity*—*i.e.*, relative to given conditions and open to unforeseen and unforeseeable circumstances. But this openness too is an illusion of history, because the ultimate movement of contingency, in its very becoming in time, blindly obeys the dialectical law of actuality. The stroke and counterstroke of actuality and possibility make up the very

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 484 / 6:210-11.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 484 / 6:211.

## 6 | Adorno's Modal Utopianism

form of historical determinateness and contingency. All existence, in spite of its infinite diversity, dependency, and seeming irrationality, unfolds following the same movement. The “*absolute restlessness of the becoming* [of actuality and possibility] is *contingency*,”<sup>27</sup> as Hegel says at the beginning of the analysis.<sup>28</sup> At the end, the claim is firmer: “It is necessity itself, therefore, that determines itself as *contingency*: in its being it repels itself from itself [*sich von sich abstößt*], in this very repelling [*Abstoßen*] has only returned to itself, and in this turning back which is its being has repelled itself from itself.”<sup>29</sup> Something possible becomes actual; yet while that specific actualization may not be necessary (it may be contingent, *i.e.*, dependent upon some circumstance), it is nevertheless determining and shapes what is now possible. The contingent event takes the form of the *actual* as the circle of conditions, and of the *possible* as what actuality contains within itself. And so, once again, inner becomes outer; and outer, inner. The dialectical identity of possibility and actuality is reaffirmed.

But what then of possibilities that do not become actual, such as suppressed or blocked possibilities? Or actualities that appear not to conform to their prior circle of conditions (‘surprise’ actualities)? On Hegel’s view, the first are merely formal, impotent possibilities, or the monstrosity of an essence to which no being corresponds.<sup>30</sup> As for the second, ‘surprise’ actualities are simply a confirmation of the most

basic truth about necessity: that we are often blindly subject to it. The fact that we often mistake what history ‘ought’ to produce is just “the one-sided form of reflection-into-another,”<sup>31</sup> or, in other words, it is the unfortunate result of the narrowness that marks individual consciousness.

### Adorno and the ‘Ought’

It is Adorno’s opposition to this definition of actuality as a self-enclosed, self-reproducing totality that allows us to grasp the real meaning of his own ‘unclosed’ dialectic. In a word, if the world is not all that is the case in a positivistic sense, nor even self-enclosed, self-manifesting actuality in a Hegelian sense, it is because “what is, is more than it is”<sup>32</sup> in the sense of being marked by a type of possibility that corresponds neither to mere formal possibility, nor to Hegelian real possibility. Or, to phrase it differently, Adorno seems to claim that there is a kind of ‘middle’ possibility that lies between the possibilities that actuality sanctions, and those that are abstract, formal, or absurd.<sup>33</sup>

In Hegel’s thought, the category of formal possibility comprises the ‘unreal’ possibilities of the ‘merely’ possible (*e.g.*, the sultan may become the pope or the moon may fall to earth<sup>34</sup>). However, along with absurd possibilities, it is also in this category that Hegel places those possibilities that merely ‘ought’ to be but that are too impotent, with regard to the circle of conditions, to become actual: such a possibility is “*only*

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 481 / 6:206.

<sup>28</sup> Whereas in the previous section of the greater *Logic* contingency is defined merely as that which may or may not be, it is here defined as dependence upon another, *i.e.*, non-self-sufficiency or dependence upon circumstances.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 481 / 6:214.

<sup>30</sup> “Essence itself is only a moment and ... has no truth without being.” Ibid., 479 / 6:204.

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<sup>31</sup> Hegel, *Encyclopaedia Logic*, §145, Zusatz, 218; Hegel, *Werke*, 8:285.

<sup>32</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 161; Adorno, *GS*, 6:164.

<sup>33</sup> Compare Bernstein, *Adorno*, 418.

<sup>34</sup> Hegel, *Encyclopaedia Logic*, §143, Zusatz, 216; Hegel, *Werke*, 8:283.

## 7 | Adorno's Modal Utopianism

a possible and the *ought-to-be* [*das Sollen*] of the totality of form.”<sup>35</sup> As such, the ‘ought’ cannot rightly be said to be part of the living whole, which *qua* whole is fulfilled in and as actuality. In other words, according to Hegel, what *merely ought to be* but *is not*, is not a true (*i.e.*, real) possibility at all but rather an illusion—not the real in-itself of something not yet actual, but in truth a straightforward *impossibility*, for otherwise it would be actual. As Hegel puts it: “possibility [in the form of the bare ‘ought’] is contradiction, or it is *impossibility*.”<sup>36</sup> In this way, actuality stands higher than possibility, which it either *contains* and actualizes or *condemns* as an irrational ‘ought.’

Hegel’s critique of the ‘ought’ (*das Sollen*) is well known. Less well known, however, is Adorno’s defence of it. The root of the matter is that there are two kinds of ‘ought’ that need to be distinguished: the ‘ought’ of formal possibility—the fantastic wish that Hegel rightly ridicules—and the ‘ought’ that society suppresses in order to maintain itself and the illusion of wholeness, *i.e.*, of its completeness as regards the possible. This distinction appears most clearly when the false reality of a socially necessary illusion *blocks* emancipatory transformation, which is then written off as a vain fantasy, just because actuality does not produce the transformation. On this point, Adorno has the following to say (special attention should be paid to the juxtaposition of the two uses of the modal verb *sollen*):

[the conformist tendency to deny the possibility of what ought to be] stems from the fact that people are only capable of dealing with the contradiction between the

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<sup>35</sup> Hegel, *Science of Logic*, 479; Hegel, *Werke*, 6:204.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 479 / 6:204.

obvious possibility of fulfilment and its equally obvious impossibility by identifying with the impossibility, by appropriating it. To use [Anna] Freud’s terminology, they “identify with the aggressor” and say that something *cannot* be [*nicht sein soll*], when they know full well that it *ought* to be [*daß es gerade ja sein sollte*], though it is withheld from them through a bewitchment of the world.<sup>37</sup>

For some, the denial of what merely ought to be and its apparent metaphysical legitimacy may seem readily comprehensible—but this comprehension depends upon an acceptance of the notions of real and formal possibility as Hegel (and much of the metaphysical tradition) understands them. On this view, the denial of what ought to be is just real actuality manifesting itself as an absolute rational norm by which possibilities can be judged. In other words, if real possibility is reduced to what is always already contained within real actuality, then whatever does not fit the norm will inevitably appear to be ‘impossible.’ But there is an untenable presupposition at work in the apparent innocence of the simple distinction between formal and real possibility: that the mere reproduction of actuality (if that is what actuality produces) is necessary, just because real actuality is always the expression of what is really possible, understood as an actual and complete circle of conditions that formerly existed.

It is precisely this presupposition that Adorno implicitly refuses in the passages just cited. For him, the distinction between the ‘mere’ ought and what ‘really’ ought to be, but *nevertheless is not*, is a critical one. It is this ‘emphatic’ ought (a ‘real’ ought that complements ‘real’ possibility) that has no place in traditional theories of possibility, least of all

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<sup>37</sup> Traub and Wieser, eds., *Gespräche mit Ernst Bloch*, 61.

## 8 | Adorno's Modal Utopianism

Hegel's. As Adorno puts it: "Negative dialectics penetrates its hardened objects via possibility—the possibility of which the objects' actuality has cheated them, but which is nevertheless visible in each one."<sup>38</sup> For Hegel, such a notion of 'negative' possibility—*i.e.*, a possibility of which we are "cheated" or "deprived"—is utterly unthinkable or sheer nonsense.

Adorno's counter-claim is that our vision of possibility is structured in such a way as to *block* possibilities other than those sanctioned by circumstance, *i.e.*, possibilities whose reality is sabotaged precisely by the metaphysical dogma of actuality as a self-enclosed, self-confirming totality. A few more examples will bring out the alternative view of modality that Adorno has in mind. First, the well-known and apparently contradictory final lines of the introduction to *Negative Dialectic*, where Adorno writes:

[Utopia], the consciousness of possibility, clings to both the concrete and the undisfigured. Utopia is blocked by what is possible, never by immediate actuality; that is why what is possible seems abstract in the midst of what exists. Inextinguishable colour comes from non-being. Thought, a piece of existence, serves non-being, which thought reaches, however negatively.<sup>39</sup>

The apparent contradiction lies in the way utopia, which is supposed to be the consciousness of possibility, is also

*blocked* by possibility. However, if we admit the 'middle' possibility or the emphatic 'ought' that we have been discussing, then the contradiction disappears. The passage can then be understood as follows: "[Utopia], the consciousness of [emphatic] possibility, ... is blocked by [so-called real possibility], never by immediate actuality [which is contingent]; that is why [what ought to be] seems abstract in the midst of what exists." In other words, the real possibilities of the existing order are seen as total and exhaustive only because we are accustomed to regarding self-reproducing actuality as an absolute norm. But if we refuse this metaphysical prejudice and admit the category of *blocked* possibility situated between familiar real possibility and the formal possibility, then actuality opens itself up to the different, and thereby frees itself from the tyranny of the same, of self-reproducing actuality.

A similar problem of interpretation arises at the end of Lecture 17 of *Einführung in die Dialektik*:

It is also part and parcel of the historical dialectic that what appears anachronistic may in some circumstances have greater actuality [*Aktualität*] than what may seem, on the surface of things, entitled to lay claim to greater actuality, in the sense of functioning within existing structures.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 52; Adorno, *GS*, 6:62.

<sup>39</sup> "[Utopie], das Bewußtsein der Möglichkeit, haftet am Konkreten als dem Unentstellten. Es ist das Mögliche, nie das unmittelbar Wirkliche, das der Utopie den Platz versperrt; inmitten des Bestehenden erscheint es darum als abstrakt. Die unauslöschliche Farbe kommt aus dem Nichtseienden. Ihm dient Denken, ein Stück Dasein, das, wie immer negativ, ans Nichtseiende heranreicht." Ibid., 56-57 / *GS* 6:66.

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<sup>40</sup> "Aber ich glaube, daß es zur geschichtlichen Dialektik auch hinzugehört, daß unter Umständen gerade das Anachronistische eine größere Aktualität hat als das, was seiner eigenen Oberfläche nach, nämlich im Sinn des Funktionierens innerhalb der gegebenen Apparaturen, die größere Aktualität beanspruchen darf." Theodor W. Adorno, *Einführung in die Dialektik* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2010), 261.



## 9 | Adorno's Modal Utopianism

This passage, like the previous one, at first seems convoluted and perhaps even confused. But the appearance of confusion is utterly dispelled just as soon as we see that there is a double modal structure in play, hinging on a special kind of “anachronism” (which Marx was probably the first to diagnose in the introduction to his critique of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*<sup>41</sup>). Actuality is not reducible to what merely *appears* to have actuality, namely, the administered world and its inherent, self-reproducing real possibilities; it can also be the manifestation of the *blocked possibility* of an *other* actuality, of another future, that has “greater actuality.” In other words, actuality here again expresses an emphatic ought that is suppressed by what so-called real actuality makes possible. “Anachronism” names this difference or this gap: the time of actuality and its self-reproduction *versus* the time of blocked possibility and of an other future.

Other examples include Adorno’s critique of popular psychology, which, he says, standardizes normal and abnormal behaviour and so reduces human possibility to schemata, thereby sacrificing the process of dialectical experience to “ready-made enlightenment,”<sup>42</sup> *i.e.*, illusory or reductive ‘real’ possibilities of health and illness. A more substantial example would be the running critique of crass political Marxism in

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<sup>41</sup> As Marx writes: “If we were to begin with the German *status quo* itself, even in the only appropriate way, which is negatively, the result would still be an anachronism. For even the negation of our political present is already a dusty fact in the historical junkroom of modern nations. If I negate powdered wigs, I still have unpowdered wigs.” Germany in 1843 is thus considered to be “beneath the level of history,” *i.e.*, anachronistic, in the specific sense that its actuality and attendant possibilities of reform still leave it lagging behind the true actuality of world history. Karl Marx, *Critique of Hegel’s ‘Philosophy of Right’*, trans. Annette Jolin and Joseph O’Malley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 132, 133.

<sup>42</sup> Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, §40, 65; Adorno, *GS*, 4:72.

Adorno’s writings, a critique which takes aim at the metaphysical prejudice to which Marxism’s emphasis on determinate praxis often blinded it: the prejudice according to which present and future actuality form a closed whole defined by the economically determined possibilities of the present (*e.g.*, the apparently necessitarian character of the *Communist Manifesto*’s ‘grave-digger’ argument).<sup>43</sup> At root, this prejudice is just the social and political manifestation of what is taken to be the metaphysical nature of actuality, which Hegel’s theory of possibility defines and defends.

Adorno, on the other hand, offers us an implicit philosophy of possibility that challenges the prevailing view. The possible is to be measured not merely positively in terms of what already exists, but also negatively—in terms of the *difference* from actuality that actuality itself emphatically suggests in the form of an ‘ought’ that is not reducible to formal possibility. Perhaps the simplest example in Adorno’s writings would be the demand “that no-one should [*soll*] go hungry anymore.”<sup>44</sup> The technical means to eliminate hunger are available here and now, but at the same time the current arrangement of productive forces makes the demand seem impossible.

### Response to an Objection and Concluding Remarks

Naturally, there is a Hegelian rejoinder to this Adornian line of reasoning. The problem seems to be that our

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<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, §22, 43–45 / 4:48–49. Cf. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 3; Adorno, *GS*, 6:15. See too Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, trans. Samuel Moore (Harmondsworth: Penguin (Pelican), 1967), p. 94; Marx and Engels, *MEW*, vol. 4, p. 474.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, §100, 156 / *GS* 4:178.

## 10 | Adorno's Modal Utopianism

vision of possibility—what we merely *take to be* possible—is structured in such a way as to rule out certain possibilities as unreal, whereas these same possibilities are, in fact, actualisable. However, that some epistemic confusion should arise between the metaphysical priority of actuality and the reactionary defence of the status quo is of almost certainly devoid of philosophical interest, for what mere *individual* consciousness takes to be the case or takes to be possible has little bearing on the structure of actuality and the real possibilities it contains. In fact, individual consciousness often finds itself on the wrong side of actuality:

It may certainly happen that the ideals of individuals are not realized. Individuals often have their own peculiar opinions of themselves, of their lofty intentions, of the splendid deeds they hope to perform, and of their own supposed importance from which the world, as they think, must assuredly benefit. Be that as it may, such ideas merit no further attention.<sup>45</sup>

The point is this: individual consciousness may be mistaken in what it takes to be really possible, in what it takes to be the true content of actuality. But such opinions—and the conservatism that they may sometimes inform—nearly inevitably remain disconnected from dynamic historical actuality and world spirit, which plays itself out in history in spite of our beliefs. (Of course, exceptional errors of judgement may be instructive and philosophically interesting—*e.g.*, *Antigone* or *Macbeth*—, but only as instances of the power of spirit over individual beliefs.) In fact, it is utterly unsurprising

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<sup>45</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History: Introduction*, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 30; G. W. F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Weltgeschichte*, 4 vols. (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1955), 1:76.

that we should sometimes find ourselves in a situation where we misrecognize what is possible (or actual or necessary). That is just the nature of individual consciousness's one-sidedness (*Einseitigkeit*).

There is no question that individuals are prone to misjudging possibility. However, from an Adornian perspective, the questions we should be asking are the following: why do such misjudgements occur and how is it that actuality itself seems currently to be organized so as to perpetuate these errors? The 'real web of illusion' that Adorno seeks everywhere to undo is for him nothing other than this actuality's global tendency to promote the misrecognition of unsanctioned possibilities of emancipation as impossibilities. In this regard, the Hegelian objection does not reach the core of the problem, which is that our society as a whole seems burdened by the metaphysical prejudice concerning the priority of actuality over possibility—a prejudice that cannot but affect our vision of the possible. Philosophically, and specifically, the fault lies with the extension of the formal relation of actuality to possibility into a critique of the 'ought' that treats systematically unrealized possibilities of emancipation as vain. For Adorno, in at least some cases, if the 'ought' remains unrealized, it is on account of ideologies that depend, implicitly or explicitly, upon the claim that actuality is a totality exhaustive of possibility and complete in itself. Of course, Adorno accepts the claim that actuality is productive of possibility and that it is, in this way, self-productive. He is not a fantasist. But the Hegelian critique of the 'ought' cuts too much away; consequently, only those possibilities that become actual are considered real. Yet among those which do not become real are some whose unreality is in fact the sign of a sham totality. There is, of course, a gap separating Hegel's view

## 11 | Adorno's Modal Utopianism

from the ideological affirmation that the reproduction of existing conditions is right and good because that is in fact what actuality produces. However, bizarrely, it is made smaller by the relegation of the 'ought' to the status of mere formal possibility. Against this relegation, Adorno effectively pleads for an intermediate category unrecognized by Hegel: an 'ought' that reduces neither to the pre-sanctioned real possibilities of the status quo, nor to the fantastic unreal possibilities of the imagination gone wild.

Adorno's heterogeneous 'more,' or the 'middle' possibility situated between Hegelian formal and real possibilities, is not utopian in the sense of demanding the impossible. It is utopian in the sense of demanding that the social whole *not refuse as impossible* what does not already exist and agree with actuality. He is not asking us to consider possibilities *outside* the social whole, but rather those *within* it that are systematically occluded by metaphysical (as well as other kinds of) prejudice. This is the meaning of Adorno's "utopia of the whole truth."

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