

Through a Glass Darkly: Adorno's Inverse Theology

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Abstract

Keywords

KARL Marx claims that society and the state produce religion as a “reversed world-consciousness, because they are a reversed world.” In the face of immense human suffering, religion offers individuals the consoling belief that there is a world beyond this one where their suffering will be redeemed. But if Marx called religion the opiate of the people, he also valued religion, arguing that religion retains the idea of a world that is other, and better, than this one. An expression of real distress, religion also protests against such distress.¹

¹ Karl Marx, “Introduction to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right,” cited in *Reader in Marxist Philosophy: From the Writings of Marx, Engels, and Lenin*, tr. unknown, eds. Howard Selsam and Harry Martel, (New York: International Publishers, 1963), 227.

Surprisingly, perhaps, Theodor W. Adorno agrees with Marx about the need to retain the idea of a world transcending this one. He warns that, “if the possibility, however feeble and distant, of redemption in existence were cut off altogether, the human spirit would become an illusion, and the finite, conditioned, merely existing subject would eventually be deified as carrier of the spirit.”² In this context, Adorno approves of Rimbaud’s idea of the deity as humanity freed from oppression.

Hope for redemption, for a humanity free from oppression, is based on wresting truth from reality by negating it.³ Adorno calls this inversion of our already inverted world “inverse theology.” In an excellent article, Elizabeth Pritchard observes that Adorno first described his work as inverse theology in a 1934 letter to Walter Benjamin. Depicting life under capitalism as irrational, distorted, often hellish, Adorno used determinate negation to convey the idea of a world that is more rational than our own.⁴ According to Pritchard, Adorno underscored “the features of damaged life that preempt redemption” in order to “indicate something determinate about that redemption, without thereby presuming its immanent arrival.”⁵

Against influential misreadings of Adorno’s ban on

² Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, tr. E. B. Ashton, (New York: Continuum Books, 1973), 400; tr. mod. Hereafter *ND*.

³ Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, tr. E. F. N. Jephcott, (London: New Left Books, 1974), 98. Hereafter *MM*.

⁴ Elizabeth A. Pritchard, “Bilderverbot meets Body in Adorno’s Inverse Theology,” *Theodor W. Adorno*, Vol. I: *Philosophy, Ethics and Critical Theory* (London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2004), 194-5.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 193.

images, which confuse it with negative theology, Pritchard contends that determinate negation neither yields a fully positive image of redemption—a positive theology—nor bans such images completely.⁶ I plan to expand on Pritchard’s argument here; I shall explain how Adorno foreshadows a world where religion is no longer needed as consolation when he negates the negative conditions that give rise to religion. I shall also argue that determinate negation provides Adorno with the normative basis for his social criticism precisely because it enables him to envisage, albeit only indirectly, an improved state of affairs against which existing conditions can be judged. To paraphrase Marx, critique—in the form of determinate negation—offers a glimpse of earthly conditions that promise earthly happiness; it bears the historical burden of establishing the truth of this world against the untruth of the other one.⁷

Damaged Life

Adorno paints a nightmarish vision of a world in which we have become the perpetrators of our own destruction. Condemned by history to be mere tools of capitalism, individuals are now “dragged along, dead, neutralized, and impotent” (*MM*, 135). Emphasizing the lifelessness of the lives that individuals lead today, Adorno claims that the optimal organization of relations of production demands the coordination of people from whom all vestiges of life have been drained. Ironically, we subordinate ourselves to exchange

⁶ *Ibid.*, 193.

⁷ I am taking some liberties with a passage in “Introduction to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right,” *Reader in Marxist Philosophy*, p. 227, where Marx writes: “The task of history, therefore, once the world beyond the truth has disappeared, is to establish the truth of this world.”

relations, which drain us of life by reducing us to so many commensurable units of value, just to stay alive. According to Adorno, then, “[t]he will to live finds itself dependent on the denial of the will to live: self-preservation annuls all life in subjectivity” (MM, 229).

Since individuals are subsumed almost completely under exchange relations today, Adorno grants an element of truth to Hegel’s idea of world spirit: it offers a “distorted sense of the real predominance of the whole” over largely powerless individuals (ND, 304). Monopoly capitalism not only arrests the process of individuation, it physically damages individuals by disregarding their vital needs in its relentless and ruthless pursuit of profit. Simply to survive, individuals must submit to a production process that is steered by the inherently unpredictable financial transactions of the owners of the means of production who falsely declare their interests are identical with the interests of society as a whole. In fact, Adorno also declares that the continued primacy of the capitalist production process over individuals “has its vanishing point in the death of all” (ND, 320).

But the ‘death of all’ will have a related cause. For, if the lives of individuals have become lifeless, the natural world has also been severely damaged under capitalism. Indeed, Adorno argues that “the complete reification of the world . . . is indistinguishable from an additional catastrophic event caused by human beings, in which nature has been wiped out and after which nothing grows any more.” Under monopoly conditions, “[l]ife’s sole remaining content is that there shall be nothing living. Everything that exists is to be made identical

to a life that is itself death, abstract domination.”⁸ Whether the annihilation of life that we now call “progress” is caused by a nuclear war waged in self-defence, or by plundering the earth in pursuit of profit, is irrelevant. Both are equally possible, but the latter is becoming increasingly likely. The relative indifference of the owners of the means of production to these eventualities, along with our voluntary servitude to capital, make the death of all an all too plausible prospect.

To be sure, Adorno is describing the worse case scenario. Critics have often objected that his description of damaged life is overblown. However, Adorno claims that social criticism actually requires “an element of exaggeration, of overshooting the object, of self-detachment from the weight of the factual, so that instead of merely reproducing being it can, at once rigorous and free, determine it” (MM, 126-7). Casting a harsh light on current conditions by stressing their negative traits, Adorno wants to show that these conditions fail to make good on the better potential which they also contain. By exaggerating the negative, then, Adorno tries to respond to the ethical demand that damaged reality ought to change. Knowing the worst is a necessary condition for altering a situation where things are already very bad.⁹

What prompts this ethical demand for change is the horror that was Germany under the Third Reich. In Nazi Germany, the faint glimmer of transcendence was completely

⁸ Theodor W. Adorno, “Trying to Understand *Endgame*,” *Notes to Literature*, Vol. 1, tr. Shierry Weber Nicholsen, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 245.

⁹ I am paraphrasing Adorno’s citation of F. H. Bradley in his epigraph to Part Two of *Minima Moralia*: “Where everything is bad it must be good to know the worst.”

extinguished. By highlighting the worse case scenario, Adorno wants us to recognize just how bad things can become in order to satisfy the new categorical imperative that nothing like Auschwitz should happen again (ND, 365). To cite J. M. Bernstein: “Nowhere else in history has the terrifying proximity of spiritual death and physical death been so emphatically realized.”¹⁰ Before physically exterminating millions of people in concentration camps, the Nazis succeeded in systematically eradicating their humanity while leaving their bodies alive: “what occurred was hence the most elaborate and extreme literal process of reification.”¹¹

Adorno is not just making the point that unspeakable atrocities occurred in Nazi Germany. Rather, he believes that the economic conditions that led to the emergence of Nazi Germany obtain even today in the West. What occurred in Germany may be, and arguably is being,¹² repeated elsewhere. It is this bleak assessment of our current predicament that animates Adorno’s exaggerations. Reification, the suppression of difference in the name of identity,¹³ not only persists, it continues to grow, deforming both human and nonhuman life. Given their submission to the homogenizing and levelling power of exchange in the interest of survival, individuals have become objects to be manipulated and controlled by interests that are as irrational as they are inescapable.

¹⁰ J. M. Bernstein, *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 381.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 380.

¹² Robert Hullot-Kentor argued recently that Adorno’s work “must now be of vital concern in the United States . . . for what precisely can be learned from it in a nation that has so palpably entered primitive times.” See *Resemblance Beyond Recollection: Collected Essays on Theodor W. Adorno* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006) pp. 3-4.

¹³ See Martin Jay, *Adorno* (London: Fontana, 1984), 68.

To preserve ourselves, we must “negate precisely that autonomous subjectivity to which the idea of democracy appeals.” Individuals “can preserve themselves only if they renounce their self.”¹⁴ Here too, Adorno admits that he has “exaggerated the somber side.” But he explicitly justifies this hyperbole by appealing to “the maxim that only exaggeration per se today can be the medium of truth.” By exaggerating the negative aspects of late capitalist society, Adorno tries to reveal objective historical tendencies¹⁵ in the West where “the immense concentration of economical and administrative power leaves the individual no more room to maneuver,” that is, where society “tends toward totalitarian forms of domination.”¹⁶ He wants to remind us, not just that the conditions that gave rise to the Holocaust persist and may even have intensified, but that they could well lead to a resurgence of that horror.

Determinate Negation

Still, there is a positive dimension to Adorno’s exaggerated judgements. For they enable him to evoke conditions in which redemption faintly glimmers. To repeat an earlier point, Adorno insists that truth appears only when we recognize and condemn the falsity of the whole. As he explains in “Individuum und Organisation:” “we may not know what people are and what the correct arrangement of human affairs should be but we do know what they should not be and what

¹⁴ Theodor W. Adorno, “The Meaning of Working through the Past,” *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, tr. Henry W. Pickford, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 98.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 99.

¹⁶ Henry W. Pickford, “Discussion of Professor Adorno’s Lecture ‘The Meaning of Working Through the Past,’” *Critical Models*, 298.

arrangement of human affairs is false.” Only in this critical understanding of the negative aspects of the human predicament is “the other, positive, one open to us.”¹⁷ Indeed, Pritchard argues that, far from ‘banning’ all ideas of a world that transcends this one, Adorno wants “to reveal . . . the precise features of damaged life, as well as our proximity to redemption.” Exaggerating the negative, he attempts to arrive at ideas about improved conditions in the form of inverted images of damaged life.¹⁸

Like Marx, who (to cite Moishe Postone) also rejected the ‘abstract’ negation of existing conditions, maintaining instead that radical social change is “rooted in the possibility of a determinate historical negation”¹⁹ of them, Adorno thinks that the “possibility of wresting free” of late capitalism is “effectuated by the pressure of negativity.”²⁰ In the first instance, however, determinate negation takes the form of critique. To initiate change, critique must first show that everything individuals “call culture consists in the suppression of nature and any uncontrolled traces of nature.”²¹ Critique has the task of revealing that what currently counts as progress is just the unbridled instinct to control and exploit all forms of life, to the point of destroying life altogether. By negating the negative through critical reflection on our compulsive attempts to dominate both human and nonhuman nature,

Adorno hopes that individuals will eventually be able to direct their survival instincts towards more emancipatory ends. Here, reason will invert “into its other,” into a form of rationality that no longer pits itself antagonistically against nature. Indeed, Adorno insists that reason is the ‘organon’ of progress; reason alone can abolish domination (P, 152).

The determinate negation of the negative conditions in which we find ourselves provides a glimpse of “the only permissible figure of the Other.”²² Amending Spinoza in his essay “Critique,” Adorno argues that “the false, once determinately known and precisely expressed, is already an index of what is right and better.”²³ Echoing this remark in his lectures on *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno again rejects Spinoza’s proposition “that *verum index sui et falsi*, or that the true and the false can both be read directly ... from the truth.” Here Adorno contends that “the false, that which should not be the case, is *in fact* the standard of itself: . . . the false, namely that which is not itself in the first instance—i.e. not itself in the sense that it is not what it claims to be—that this falseness proclaims itself in what we might call a certain immediacy, and this immediacy of the false, this *falsum*, is the *index sui atque veri*. So here then, . . . is a certain pointer to what I consider ‘right thinking’.”²⁴

¹⁷ Theodor W. Adorno, “Individuum und Organisation,” *Soziologische Schriften I* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1972), 456.

¹⁸ Pritchard, “*Bilderverbot* meets Body,” *Theodor W. Adorno*, 193.

¹⁹ Moishe Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx’s Critical Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 372.

²⁰ Theodor W. Adorno, “Progress,” *Critical Models*, 152. Hereafter P.

²¹ Theodor W. Adorno, *Metaphysics: Concept and Problems*, tr. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 118.

²² Theodor W. Adorno, “Toward a Portrait of Thomas Mann,” *Notes to Literature*, Vol. 2, tr. Shierry Weber Nicholsen, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992) p. 18. Cited in Pritchard, “*Bilderverbot* meets Body in Adorno’s Inverse Theology,” *Theodor W. Adorno*, 193.

²³ Theodor W. Adorno “Critique,” *Critical Models*, 288.

²⁴ Theodor W. Adorno *Lectures on Negative Dialectics: Fragments of a Lecture Course 1965/1966*, tr. Rodney Livingstone, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008), 28-9; tr. mod.

The ‘false’ is an index of truth because it points dialectically to its own reversal. Adorno calls this reversal of fortune, which is outlined by means of determinate negation, the dialectics of progress. Progress is dialectical because “historical setbacks, which themselves are instigated by the principle of progress . . . also provide the condition needed for humanity to find the means to avert them in the future” (P, 154). In “Progress,” moreover, Adorno traces this idea back to Kant who taught that “the entanglement of progress in myth, in nature’s hold upon the domination of nature, in short, in the realm of unfreedom, tends by means of its own law toward the realm of freedom.”²⁵ To Kant, reconciliation is “immanent” in the antagonisms that afflict society. Here, Adorno contends that Hegel himself modelled his idea of progress—the cunning of reason—on Kant’s idea that “the conditions of the possibility of reconciliation are its contradiction, and . . . the conditions for the possibility of freedom are unfreedom” (P, 149).

Calling determinate negation a methodological principle,²⁶ Adorno employs it throughout his work. In *Negative Dialectics*, for example, he shows how the negation of unfree conditions gives rise to the counterconcept of freedom. Here he reiterates a claim he already made in “Progress:” the shape of freedom “can only be grasped in determinate negation [*bestimmte Negation*] in accordance with the concrete form of a specific unfreedom” (ND, 231; tr. mod.). Our ideas about freedom arise in oppressive situations “as resistance to

repression” (ND, 265). Although they have changed over the course of human history, our concepts of freedom have always recoiled “against dominion as freedom’s model” (ND, 221). Consequently, freedom invariably offers “a polemical counter-image to the suffering brought on by social coercion.” Since freedom emerges in the negation of the negative—unfreedom—unfreedom is both “an impediment to freedom” and “a premise of its concept” (ND, 223).

When he insists that the universal should never “completely submerge the moment of something particular, something opaque,” Adorno also suggests that individuals would play a far more active role in a rational society than they currently do in our irrational one (ND, 328). For Adorno, there is “no available model of freedom save one: that consciousness as it intervenes in the total social constitution [*Gesamtverfassung*] will through that constitution intervene in the complexion of the individual” (ND, 265). A more rational society—the inverted image of a society in which individuals are mere pawns of monopoly capital—would leave individuals free to shape the institutions that in turn shape them. Such a society would accommodate individuals *qua* particular, while ensuring the satisfaction of all their needs—whether of the stomach or the imagination. Only in this way would reconciliation—“the communication of what is differentiated”²⁷—be achieved.

Yet, just as a free society would not “agree with the present concept of collectivity” (which historically took such forms as fascism and Stalinism), so individuals would no longer “be frantically guarding the old particularity” (ND, 283-

²⁵ See Kant’s fourth proposition in “Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose,” *Kant’s Political Writings*, tr. H. B. Nisbet, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), p. 44: “*The means which nature employs to bring about the development of innate capacities is that of antagonism within society, in so far as this antagonism becomes in the long run the cause of a law-governed social order.*”

²⁶ Theodor W. Adorno, *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*, 28.

²⁷ Theodor W. Adorno, “On Subject and Object,” *Critical Models*, 247.

4). Given the damaging effects of reification and narcissism on individuals today, the ‘old particularity’ is largely a sham. Like Hegel, Adorno rejects the equation of individuality with self-seeking when he maintains that happiness will elude us “until the category of the individual ceases to be self-seclusive” (ND, 352). He also endorses Kant’s *Metaphysics of Morals*: contained in the idea that “everyone’s freedom need be curtailed only insofar as it impairs someone else’s is a reconciled condition” that transcends both “the bad universal, the coercive social mechanism” and “the obdurate individual who is a microcosmic copy of that mechanism” (ND, 283).

Adorno also uses determinate negation to outline a new form of social solidarity. Since the superego consists in internalized societal norms, our so-called ‘moral conscience’ is derived from the “objectivity of society, . . . the objectivity in and by which human beings live and which extends to the core of their individualization.” However, these norms are also riven with antagonisms: in this case, they contain the contradictory moments of both “heteronomous coercion and the idea of a solidarity transcending divergent individual interests.” A more rational idea of solidarity can be gleaned by inverting the adaptation and conformity, which now result in damaged forms of collectivity. Again, “it takes the repressive form of conscience to develop the form of solidarity in which the repressive one will be voided” (ND, 282).

Adorno applies determinate negation to exchange relations under capitalism as well. The exchange principle on which capitalism rests has always been a lie: its “doctrine of like-for-like” is contradicted by the fact that “the societally more powerful contracting party receives more than the other.” The “repeatedly broken exchange contract” will be

redeemed only when it finally makes good on the promise contained in the very idea of an exchange of equivalents, that is, only when “truly equal things” are exchanged (P, 159). To become more rational, then, particular acts of exchange must satisfy the emphatic notion of “free and just exchange” (ND, 147). Since the abstract negation of exchange would merely serve as an apology “for recidivism into ancient injustice” (ND, 146), genuine progress is not “merely an Other in relation to exchange, but rather exchange that has been brought to itself” (P, 159). Moreover, once exchange becomes free and fair, society will “transcend exchange” because workers will receive their full share in the production process. No part of their labour will be withheld from them any longer (ND, 147).

For its part, self-preservation may become more fully rational by serving the end to which it is implicitly directed: the preservation of the species as a whole. Citing Max Weber, Adorno contends that, when emancipated from “the contingency of individually posed ends,” the “subject of *ratio*, pursuing its self-preservation is itself an actual universal, society—in its full logic, humanity.” What is “inexorably inscribed within the meaning of rationality,” then, is just the “preservation of humanity.”²⁸ Emphatically conceived, reason “should not be anything less than self-preservation, namely that of the species, upon which the survival of each individual literally depends.” Here Adorno also endorses the determinate negation of the current, unbridled form of self-preservation. Only by reflecting critically on self-preservation today will the species acquire “the potential for that self-reflection that could finally transcend the self-preservation to which it was reduced

²⁸ Theodor W. Adorno, “Marginalia to Theory and Praxis,” *Critical Models*, 272 *passim*.

by being restricted simply to a means.”²⁹

Materialism itself may be superseded in an emancipatory inversion similar to those which may liberate self-preserving reason from its thralldom to nature, exchange from its reifying abstractions, solidarity from rank conformity, freedom from unfreedom. The supersession of materialism—and, by extension, of a history that has been more or less blindly impelled by the instinct for self-preservation—will occur when human beings are emancipated from pressing material needs (ND, 207). In his secular interpretation of the resurrection of the flesh, Adorno believes that the flesh will be successfully “resurrected” only when individuals are no longer forced to devote their entire lives to securing their material survival. For Adorno, the “realization of materialism would mean today the end of materialism, of the blind and degrading dependence of human beings upon material conditions.”³⁰

The Limits to Determinate Negation

Adorno declares that the negation of existing conditions is “the only form in which metaphysical experience

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 273. Yet Adorno warns against hypostasizing the species. If it is “part of the logic of the self-preservation of the individual that it should . . . embrace the conception of the preservation of the species,” there is also “an intrinsic temptation for this universality to emancipate itself from the individuals it comprises.” Should “species reason” eventually liberate itself “from the particularity of obdurate particular interest,” it may nonetheless “fail to free itself from the no less obdurate particular interest of the totality.” Since this pressing “conundrum” has not yet been resolved, it remains “a problem of the greatest possible gravity.” See *History and Freedom: Lectures 1964-65*, tr. Rodney Livingstone, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006), 45-6.

³⁰ Theodor W. Adorno, “Why Still Philosophy,” *Critical Models*, 15.

survives today.”³¹ However, despite his attempts to derive a sense of what is right and better from his sustained critique of the false totality, Adorno “concurs with the theological ban on images” to the extent that his materialism does not permit a positive depiction of a reconciled state (ND, 207). Having sketched some of his attempts to negate the negative, it should already be clear that Adorno does not, in fact, claim to provide a fully positive account of the redemption of damaged life. Even as he negates the negative conditions in which we live to acquire ideas about an improved state of affairs, he acknowledges the difficulties with this procedure. To conclude, I shall consider both Adorno’s own caveats regarding determinate negation, along with some objections that have been levelled against it.

Transcendence, says Adorno, “feeds on nothing but the experiences we have in immanence” (ND, 398). But while he endorses an idea of transcendence that is evoked by concepts derived from the negation of determinate aspects of damaged life, he also admits that thinkers who attempt to “nail down transcendence can rightly be charged . . . with . . . a betrayal of transcendence.” Since no individual can completely transcend existing conditions, any attempt to provide a fully positive image of redemption is illusory (ND, 17). As Adorno eloquently states in his lectures on moral philosophy: “no one can promise that . . . reflections . . . in the realm of moral philosophy can be used to establish a canonical plan for the good life because life itself is so deformed and distorted that no one is able to live the good life in it or to fulfil his destiny as a human being.”³²

³¹ Theodor W. Adorno *Metaphysics*, 144.

³² Theodor W. Adorno, *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, 167.

Since our ideas about the good life are rooted in damaged life, they are also tainted by that negativity. Even if we could “imagine all things radically altered,” our images would remain chained to ourselves and “to our present time as static points of reference, and everything would be askew” (ND, 352). The critique of damaged life may indicate what is right and better, but it does so only obliquely. The negation of the negative ‘remains negative’ because positivity is only indirectly outlined by critique. Negating existing states of affairs, determinate negation discloses something equally negative: namely that what exists is not yet what it ought to be, and that what ought to be does not yet exist. In other words, the negation of the negation only yields more negativity.

Negative dialectics is a dialectics of both immanence and transcendence. Although philosophy should immerse itself in “things that are heterogeneous to it without placing those things in prefabricated categories” (ND, 13), Adorno cautions that, as long as philosophers simply mirror the objects they are trying to think, they will fail to grasp them, because the object “only opens itself up to the subjective surplus in thought” (ND, 205). His negative dialectics involves both the concerted effort to understand particulars *qua* particular through immersion in them—and a more active determination of these particulars, the speculative transcendence of objects using concepts that point to their unrealized potentials.

Fotini Vaki claims that Adorno retains only the “first dimension of Hegel’s determinate negation” when he sets “the object against its own internal tensions, contradictions and inconsistencies, manifesting thereby the object’s failure to fulfill its own concept,” while rejecting the second dimension,

namely that determinate negation will lead to “more coherent and complete forms of life and consciousness.”³³ Against this, I would argue that what Adorno rejects in Hegel is his view that determinate negation *necessarily* leads to more coherent and complete forms of life. While Adorno hopes the real will become rational, he denies that the real will become rational of necessity. In fact, Adorno again denies that determinate negation yields something entirely positive when he argues that to “equate the negation of negation with positivity is the quintessence of identification” (ND, 158).

Vaki also questions how far Adorno can go “by relying only on the recognition of contradictions.”³⁴ She objects that his normative standpoint “is only glimpsed indirectly in a completely unspecified way.” Furthermore, Adorno never clarifies the conditions under which ideas derived from determinate negation would become “a concrete possibility.”³⁵ Yet, *pace* Vaki, Adorno would readily concede both points. Adorno explicitly admits that his materialism gives the ban on images a secular form “by not permitting Utopia to be pictured.” Indeed, “this is the substance of its negativity” (ND, 207). Determinate negation offers only an indirect glimpse of improved conditions.

To the related charge that Adorno lacks a firm basis for his social criticism, Adorno would counter that no more secure standpoint for critique exists. We can only start from where we are: our ideas about improved conditions arise historically in our lived experiences of existing ones. Society’s rational

³³ Fotini Vaki, “Adorno *contra* Habermas and the Claims of Critical Theory as Immanent Critique,” *Historical Materialism* 13, no. 4 (2005), 111.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 114.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 116.

potential discloses itself only to those who resist its irrationality: the good life can be glimpsed today only “in resistance to the forms of the bad life that have been seen through and critically dissected.” This negative prescription is the sole form of guidance that Adorno can provide.³⁶ Indeed, Adorno not only problematizes his own critique, he exacts humility from those who might otherwise claim to occupy a morally superior standpoint. Critics must scrutinize their critical concepts carefully: even the most uncompromising critic is not authorized to put herself in the right because the concepts she wields are derived from, and sullied by, the very world she wants to change (ND, 352).

As I remarked earlier, the “perspective vanishing point” of Adorno’s materialism is “the spirit’s liberation from the primacy of material needs in their state of fulfillment” (ND, 207). Citing this passage, Pritchard notes that Adorno retains the “traditional negativity” of the *Bilderverbot*, even as he connects it “with materialism, and more specifically, with that conspicuous image of material limitation and longing: bodily resurrection.”³⁷ Furthermore, Pritchard contends, Adorno rejects a complete ban on images because such a ban would risk leaving the status quo unchallenged.³⁸

Adorno makes this point in a discussion with Ernst Bloch (which Pritchard does not cite):

If the question of utopia is so complex, it is because we are forbidden to generate images of it. But this has another disturbing consequence: the more it becomes possible to

talk only negatively about the things that should exist, the less one can imagine anything definite about them. But, even more disturbing, this prohibition on giving concrete expression to utopia tends to discredit and absorb the utopian consciousness on which the will that things should be different depends. [...] I am certainly not competent to say ... what is possible given the current status of humanity’s productive powers, but I am certain that this can be said concretely, simply, and without arbitrariness. If it is not said, if this image does not appear—I almost want to say ‘in a tangible way’—then basically one does not know what the goal of the whole thing is, why whole structure has been set in motion. Forgive me if I adopt the unexpected role of advocate for the positive, but I believe that, without this, no phenomenology of utopian consciousness is possible.³⁹

However, since it targets specific conditions at particular points in time, determinate negation can do no more than evoke varying and historically conditioned ideas about a better, because more rational, society. Fashioning “entirely from felt contact” with the world, perspectives that “displace and estrange it,” criticism attempts to reveal the world to be “as indigent and distorted as it will appear one day in the messianic light.” On the one hand, estrangement is “the simplest of things” because “consummate negativity, once squarely faced, delineates the mirror-image of its opposite. On the other hand, estrangement is difficult to achieve because

³⁹ Ernst Bloch and Adorno, “*Etwas fehlt . . . Über die Widersprüche der utopischen Sehnsucht*,” *Tendenz-Latenz-Utopie, Werkausgabe, Ergänzungsband* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1985), p. 362ff. Quoted in Gerhard Schweppenhäuser, *Theodor W. Adorno zur Einführung* (Hamburg: Junius Verlag, 1996), p.181n124. English translation: “Something’s Missing: A Discussion with Ernst Bloch and Theodor W. Adorno on the Contradictions in Utopian Longing,” *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature: Selected Essays*, tr. Jack Zipes and Frank Mecklenburg, (Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 1988) 12-3.

³⁶ Theodor W. Adorno, *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, 167-8.

³⁷ Pritchard, “*Bilderverbot* meets Body in Theodor W. Adorno’s Inverse Theology,” *Theodor W. Adorno*, 184-5.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 187.

our ideas about the “opposite” of negativity are marred by “the same distortion and indigence” that we are trying to escape” (MM, 247).

This estranging critique of consummate negativity has often been forged in the crucible of painful experiences of damaged life. Pain and negativity are “the moving forces of dialectical thinking” because, through them, we have historically gleaned reality’s better potential (ND, 202). Max Horkheimer said something similar in *Eclipse of Reason* when he wrote: “At all times, the good has shown the traces of the oppression in which it originated.”⁴⁰ As Herbert Marcuse also remarks, the emphatic concepts derived from determinate negation “conceptualize the stuff of which the experienced world consists, and they conceptualize it with a view of its possibilities, in light of their actual limitation, suppression and denial.”⁴¹

These claims about the powers of inverting our already inverted world help to explain why Adorno thinks that truth wrested from reality by negating it offers the only legitimate grounds for hope. Even as he acknowledges the limits to his ‘inverse theology,’ Adorno suggests that there are fragments of good in the world, but that these only appear through a glass darkly; they are glimpsed by those who resist (in thought,

⁴⁰ Max Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1974), 177.

⁴¹ Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), 215. See also p. 222: “To the degree which consciousness is determined by the exigencies and interests of the established society, it is ‘unfree;’ to the degree to which the established society is irrational, the consciousness becomes free for the higher historical rationality only in the struggle *against* the established society.”

action, or both) injustice, unfreedom, intolerance, and oppression. Society’s rational potential manifests itself wherever individuals confront and contest the limits to their freedom, in their struggles against their status as mere cogs in the wheels of the economic machinery, or in their challenges to multifarious forms of state oppression.⁴² With determinate negation, Adorno follows the lead of those who have resisted, and continue to resist, oppressive social and economic conditions in the West—conditions that now threaten all the living. To borrow a striking phrase that he uses to describe Kafka, Adorno attempts “to beat the world at its own game,” by turning “the moribund” into “the harbinger of Sabbath rest.”⁴³

⁴² The last two sentences appear in my “Response to Finlayson,” *Historical Materialism* 11, no. 2 (2003), 192.

⁴³ Theodor W. Adorno, “Notes on Kafka,” *Prisms*, tr. Samuel and Shierry Weber, (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1967), 270.

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