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THE DANGEROUS PERHAPS: LINGUISTIC MEANING, POLITICAL THEORY, AND THE
QUESTION OF TRUTH IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY CONTINENTAL THOUGHT

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*To my parents,
for never giving up on me
even when I had given up on myself.*

Perhaps! – But who is willing to concern himself with such dangerous perhapses!
For that we have to await the arrival of a new species of philosopher, one which
possesses tastes and inclinations opposite to and different from those of its
predecessors – philosophers of the dangerous 'perhaps' in every sense. – And to
speak in all seriousness: I see such new philosophers arising.

Friedrich Nietzsche,
Beyond Good and Evil

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Introduction

Insofar as political systems claim legitimacy on grounds other than the exercise of naked power or the self-interest of the powerful, they avail themselves of claims of truth and normative correctness. In making such claims, proponents of various political systems enter into that expansive discourse known as philosophy, with its long history and innumerably variegated threads. On any level beyond that of *Realpolitik*, then, political questions invariably raise and resolve into philosophical problems, however earnestly partisans of any given political stance may wish to avoid acknowledging and confronting such problems. Questions of truth and rightness can only rarely be avoided in political discourse and are often central to it. Plato accepted as much when he began his most famous political treatise with the question “What is justice?”¹

Such questions can be abridged by appealing to a common mythos or divine mandate. To the question, “How do we know that the powers that be are just?”, the powers that be can simply reply “Because the deity or deities says so.” Though there were many exceptions and nuances to the general state of affairs, such a situation seems to have broadly characterized Medieval Europe. Even when the Christian faith’s grip on political justification loosened with the fracturing of that faith and the emergence of secular thought, the marriage of political theory and religious faith continued to impose a cohesive worldview that legitimized the authority of the first two estates over the third in early modern Europe.

The situation changed radically during the Enlightenment, culminating in the Abbé de Siéyes’ wholly secular call for revolution against the putatively divine order and the emergent

¹ Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Desmond Lee, 2nd ed. (New York: Penguin, 2007).

French nation's largely secular response. Certainly by 1789, but perhaps as early as 1776 or 1688, the justification of political authority had been opened to scrutiny to a degree previously unimaginable in Europe. "Liberty" and its derivatives became watchwords of European political discourse as new possibilities for progress burst forth from the aperture rent by human reason in the bastion of divinely sanctioned authority.

By the end of the nineteenth century, however, this aperture in the intellectual universe of the old order threatened more and more to widen endlessly into a void. In an age of counter-Enlightenment as much as in an age of Enlightenment, all things had to submit to criticism. With this proliferation of objects of criticism, the boundaries and very grounds of criticism themselves began to appear suspect. The likes of Charles Darwin, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Sigmund Freud left few substantial metaphysical and ethical doctrines intact.² Their trail of victims include the notions of the unified subject, the eternal soul, the natural goodness of human beings, the orderliness and beneficence of nature, the consistency and meaning of rationality, and God himself. The surging tide of modern science and scientism swept away many of those vestiges of higher meaning and wonder that remained after the hermeneutics of suspicion had done their work.

All of this contributed to what Max Weber deemed the *disenchantment of the world* (*Entzauberung der Welt*).³ Weber described rationalization's stripping away of the wonder and beauty of life through its dis-integrating analysis and categorization. What results, so the thinking goes, is the destruction of the organic whole, the fragmentation of life into an endless

² Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species* (London: John Murray, 1859); Friedrich Nietzsche, *Jenseits von Gut und Böse. Vorspiel einer Philosophie der Zukunft* (Leipzig: CG Naumann, 1886); Sigmund Freud, *Die Traumdeutung* (Leipzig and Vienna: Franz Deuticke, 1900).

³ Max Weber, *The Methodology of the Social Sciences*, ed. and trans. Edward A Shils and A Finch (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1949); Max Weber, "Religious Rejections of the World and Their Directions," in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. and trans. HH Gerth and C Wright Mills (New York: Oxford, 1946); Max Weber, "Science as a Vocation," in *From Max Weber*.

array of essentially meaningless and unconnected phenomena and individuals, lacking any sort of unifying ground or telos. Edmund Burke had already anticipated and lamented the coming of such a state of affairs in *Reflections on the Revolution in France*:

But now all is to be changed. All the pleasing illusions which made power gentle and obedience liberal, which harmonized the different shades of life, and which, by a bland assimilation, incorporated into politics the sentiments which beautify and soften private society, are to be dissolved by this new conquering empire of light and reason. All the decent drapery of life is to be rudely torn off. All the super-added ideas, furnished from the wardrobe of a moral imagination, which the heart owns and the understanding ratifies as necessary to cover the defects of our naked, shivering nature, and to raise it to dignity in our own estimation, are to be exploded as a ridiculous, absurd, and antiquated fashion.⁴

As the life of the mind seemed to be disintegrating under the corrosive influence of reason, so, too, was political life. For over a century, European politics and society had been struggling with the combustible forces of industrialization, nationalism, imperialism, democratization, socialism, and liberalism. Whatever his misdiagnoses of the causes of this phantasmagoria of often violent, disorienting change, Marx was indeed prescient in describing it as a process in which “all that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life and his relations with his kind.”⁵ The problem, pace Marx, is that it proved to be rather difficult to determine exactly what these conditions and relations were and are. The hemoclysm of the First World War did nothing to clarify the picture as the political order of Europe collapsed under its shock.

This dissertation explores some of the more prominent attempts by German and French intellectuals to cope with the disorientation of a disenchanting world and to navigate an intellectual horizon in which no lodestar of meaning, order, and sense readily presented itself. The approach is primarily philosophical, but the stakes are nothing less than the possibility of a

⁴ Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (London: J Dodsley, 1791), 114.

⁵ Karl Marx, "Manifesto of the Communist Party," in *The Portable Marx*, ed. and trans. Eugene Kamenka (New York: Penguin, 1983).

compelling and universal political justification. The goal is not to critique any particular political theory in great detail or to engage deeply with political theory “on its own terms.” Rather, my aim is to engage critically with some of the epistemological, ontological, hermeneutic, and semiological claims upon which various thinkers have grounded their political thought in the supposedly post-metaphysical twentieth century, an age putatively without recourse to theological or Platonic foundations.

My geographic focus falls primarily on interwar Weimar Germany and the postwar Federal Republic of Germany. Nowhere were the shifting grounds of modernity’s political and intellectual fortunes more evident than in Germany. This land has produced the most influential continental philosophers of the modern age. From Kant’s Copernican Revolution, through Hegel’s dialectical idealism, Nietzsche’s radical critiques, and Marx’s attempts to transpose the absolute nature of Hegel’s thought into a “scientifically” plausible form, no other modern national tradition of thought placed so much emphasis on basic questions of knowledge, meaning, existence and truth. Recognition of this prompted a young Friedrich Engels to place the “philosophical revolution” of German idealism on par with the “political revolution” of France and the “industrial revolution” of England.⁶

Such properly philosophical thought distinguishes the most prominent aspects of nineteenth-century German intellectual life from their French, British, and American counterparts. Despite the current unfashionability of the *Sonderweg* argument, it remains true that nineteenth-century German thought occupied itself with *Geist* and transcendence in contrast to the more mundane questions of ethics and politics proper for which the Anglosphere and Francophone world are better known...indeed, perhaps even to the detriment of ethical and

⁶ Friedrich Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (New York: Oxford, 2009), 28-9.

political thought. Yet, clearly, the heritage of German idealism was strongly politically charged, even if not politically framed or geared towards matters of practicality, ethics, or efficacy. Germany produced no seminal German thinker of liberalism or republicanism on the order of a John Locke, Benjamin Constant, John Stuart Mill, Thomas Payne, Thomas Jefferson, Adam Smith, or James Madison. By contrast, when Germany's most influential thinkers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries did address political matters, they evinced a decided comfort with authoritarianism. Immanuel Kant famously called for freedom of speech and an international order ruled by law but also rejected the prospect of violent revolution, feared mob rule, and praised Frederick II's capacity to keep the peace and maintain order.⁷ Johann Gottlieb Fichte's hyper-Rousseauian notion of the nation and general will led him to devise a system of education so stringent that it anticipated contemporary theories of totalitarianism in calling for the imposition of a language on students and citizens that would not even allow them the vocabulary to question Fichte's longed-for political and social order.⁸ Hegel, arguably the most politically oriented of the German idealists, celebrated the rule of law in principle but simultaneously called for an absolute monarchy that was to be above and before all law and infamously endorsed the principle of liberty as obedience to reason. Kant had done the same, viewing freedom as the capacity—believed and/or real—to override one's animal instincts in favor of the idea of reason (*Vernunft*), which Kant identified with one's noumenal self. Hegel essentially adopted this formula but viewed the state as the highest manifestation of reason in social life and, thus, the higher or true self of the individual, rendering "freedom" synonymous with obedience to the state.⁹ Leonard Krieger and others have correctly identified such an

⁷ Immanuel Kant, *Toward Perpetual Peace and Other Writings on Politics, Peace, and History*, trans. David L. Colclasure, ed. Pauline Kleingeld (New Haven, CT: Yale, 2006).

⁸ Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *Addresses to the German Nation*, ed. Gregory Moore (New York: Cambridge, 2008).

⁹ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Outlines of the Philosophy of Right*, trans. TM Knox (New York: Oxford, 2008).

inverted notion of freedom as characteristic of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century German bourgeois mentalities.¹⁰

It is hardly surprising that authoritarian politics accompanied authoritarian thought in Germany. Though Germany had known manhood suffrage and practiced democracy since its inception as a nation-state, it had little experience with liberalism.¹¹ Throughout the era of the *Kaiserreich*, Germany's emperor—Prussia's king—had served as the state's chief executive. This hereditary monarch enjoyed a *de facto* veto over domestic legislation through his effective control of the *Bundesrat*; nearly complete power over foreign affairs; the right to summon, prorogue, and dismiss parliament; and no executive responsibility to that same body. The *Kaiserreich* did enshrine basic civil rights in law, but these were not included in its constitution, and so did not enter into its core identity as a state. In short, the *Kaiserreich* was a hybrid regime, neither predominantly liberal nor predominantly authoritarian but certainly far more authoritarian than would have been acceptable to Frenchmen, Englishmen, or Americans of the same era.¹² One need not accept Marxist theories of history or sociological typologies to acknowledge that an enormous divide existed in liberality among the six great powers at century's turn, with the US, France, and Britain on the one side and Germany, Austria-Hungary, Japan, and Russia on the other.¹³ Germany's path to modernity may not have been as special as some hold but it certainly deviated widely from liberal norms.

¹⁰ Leonard Krieger, *The German Idea of Freedom: History of a Political Tradition, from the Reformation to 1871* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1973).

¹¹ For an emphasis on democratization in imperial Germany, see Margaret Lavinia Anderson, *Practicing Democracy: Elections and Political Culture in Imperial Germany* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton, 2000).

¹² Volker R Berghahn, *Imperial Germany: Economy, Society, Culture, and Politics, 1871-1918* (New York: Berghahn, 2005); Gordon A Craig, *Germany, 1866-1945* (New York: Oxford, 1978).

¹³ For a rebuttal of Marxist sociological typology and its application in the *Sonderweg* argument, see Geoff Eley's contribution to David Blackbourn and Geoff Eley, *The Peculiarities of German History: Bourgeois Society and Politics in Nineteenth-Century Germany* (New York: Oxford, 1984). For a revised *Sonderweg* argument that jettisons many outdated assumptions while retaining the core insight that the bulk of the German bourgeoisie was, in fact, unusually amenable to authoritarianism throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, see the

When Germany did finally experience a liberal revolution of its own in 1918, the effort was half-hearted and succeeded more as a result of the existing order's weakness than of active and widespread support for the revolutionary cause. The era was one of radical intellectual experimentation at a point in history at which it seemed to many that intellectuals could and should determine the shape of social and political life. It is in Weimar Germany that this dissertation begins. Its first chapter, "German Interwar Political Theologies: Disenchantment and the Legacy of Weimar," examines the responses of three leading and still relevant intellectuals to the predicaments of their age: the philosopher and sociologist Max Horkheimer, the philosopher Martin Heidegger, and the jurist Carl Schmitt. Horkheimer was the head of the Institute for Social Research during its most influential years. Despite Horkheimer's conflicts with the student-movement of the 1960s and with some of his own proteges, his influence on West Germany's postwar left can hardly be exaggerated. As the founder of Critical Theory, Horkheimer developed the paradigm in which the dominant part of left intellectuals in the Federal Republic labored throughout the greater part of its duration. Despite his tainted legacy, Heidegger's influence has been no less substantial. From his student Hans-Georg Gadamer to his outspoken but not unappreciative critic Jürgen Habermas, Heidegger's is the shadow from which postwar German theorists were long unable to escape. Such an ineluctable status is not surprising in that Heidegger was at once Germany's greatest twentieth-century philosopher and one of its most notoriously unapologetic Nazis. Much the same applies to Carl Schmitt, the jurist whose theories of dictatorship, sovereignty, and political legitimacy helped to discredit the

excellent David Blackbourn, *History of Germany: The Long Nineteenth Century, 1780-1918*, 2nd ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003).

Weimar Republic and to lionize its National Socialist successor. After 1945, Schmitt's influence was understated but expansive, embracing a wide range of public intellectuals.¹⁴

Horkheimer, Heidegger, and Schmitt stand out not only for their effects on the subsequent development of thought in Germany but also as prominent representatives of the crisis of modernity that dominated much of German thought from the late nineteenth century to the Second World War.¹⁵ All three were reacting in large measure to the aforementioned disenchanting tendencies of modernity. The political and sociological correlate of this disenchantment might be described as an "iron cage of rationality," a "totally administered society" without room for spontaneity or originality, a technological dystopia in which beings are divorced from Being and reduced to their "usefulness," or a vapid epoch of endless discourse in which all life-affirming existential decisions are eternally deferred.¹⁶

Each of the three thinkers treated in the opening chapter initially responded to this crisis of meaning in a similar manner. Each sought to reenchant the world, to recreate meaning through a faith at least partially disguised as a rational system. Nietzsche had described such processes as attempts to salvage morality in the wake of the "death of God" through the creation of "worlds-behind" (*Hinterwelten*): worlds imagined as stable and saturated with meaning behind the flux of phenomena.¹⁷ Schmitt himself describes a similar process of the

¹⁴ Dirk van Laak, *Gespräche in der Sicherheit des Schweigens*, 2nd ed. (Berlin: Akademie, 2002).

¹⁵ For the classic treatments of this crisis, see George L. Mosse, *The Crisis of German Ideology: Intellectual Origins of the Third Reich* (New York: Schocken, 1964); Fritz Stern, *The Politics of Cultural Despair: A Study in the Rise of Germanic Ideology* (Berkeley: University of California, 1989).

¹⁶ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2003); Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Beacon, 1991); Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology."; Carl Schmitt, *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, trans. Ellen Kennedy, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1988).

¹⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1974); Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. Graham Parkes (New York: Oxford, 2005).

secularization of religious concepts as applied to political theory in his famous work *Political Theology* (*Politische Theologie*, 1923):

All significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts not only because of their historical development—in which they were transferred from theology to the theory of the state, whereby, for example, the omnipotent God became the omnipotent lawgiver—but also because of their systematic structure.¹⁸

As the title of this dissertation and epigraph at its beginning suggest, Nietzsche had urged his readers to embrace the uncertainty of rational inquiry and to brave the void of disenchantment in pursuing the “dangerous perhaps.” I argue that Horkheimer, Heidegger, and Schmitt, rejected Nietzsche’s injunction. Rather, in constructing their philosophical and political theologies, these thinkers sought to secure themselves and their cherished ideals from the disenchantment of the modern world. Their insights, failings, and frustrations in this endeavor form the backdrop against which the intellectual dramas of the Federal Republic played themselves out.

The second chapter, “Humanism and Its Discontents in Mid-Century France: Phenomenology and Structuralism,” looks at French intellectual life in the years between the wars and the first decades after the Second World War. The first part of this chapter explores the French reception of some of the foremost German thinkers shaping contemporaneous discourse in Germany: GWF Hegel, Heidegger’s teacher Edmund Husserl, and Heidegger himself. Important figures in this reception include Jean Wahl and Jean-Paul Sartre. These thinkers grasped on Heidegger’s emphasis on *Geworfenheit* (*thrownness*), which can loosely be understood as the individual’s discovery of her forlornness in a world without ready-made

¹⁸ Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2005), 36. “Alle prägnanten Begriffe der modernen Staatslehre sind säkularisierte theologische Begriffe. Nicht nur ihrer historischen Entwicklung nach, weil sie aus der Theologie auf die Staatslehre übertragen wurden, indem zum Beispiel der allmächtige Gott zum omnipotenten Gesetzgeber wurde, sondern auch in ihrer systematischen Struktur.” Carl Schmitt, *Politische Theologie: Vier Kapitel zur Lehre von der Souveränität*, 2nd ed. (Munich and Leipzig: Duncker & Humblot, 1934), 49.

meaning or orientation. From this starting point, Sartre developed an existential humanism, which proposed an ardent affirmation of humanity itself—as understood by Sartre—as an antidote to the absurdity of existence in a disenchanted world. Yet, despite Sartre’s prominence, it is Maurice Merleau-Ponty who stands out most as an innovative thinker in this chapter, capable of reworking some of Husserl’s and Heidegger’s more compelling insights into a shape that did not so much seek to reenchant the world as to complicate the very binary of enchantment-disenchantment and many of the oppositions on which it rests.

The second part of chapter two treats the backlash directed against existential humanism by a group of thinkers, led by the likes of Claude Lévi-Strauss and Roland Barthes, who associated themselves with another part of Heidegger’s legacy: his understanding of language as encompassing and constructive of human meaning. Heidegger’s French structuralists inheritors thought that meaning could be reduced to linguistic structures: objective, bearing something like a logical relation to one another, and devoid of properly “human” input. I argue that, for all of its apparent boldness and novelty, structuralism is best understood as a means of reenchanting the world and escaping Nietzsche’s “perhaps.”

The recognition of this tendency of structuralism gave rise to the radical interrogative processes of post-structuralism, or so I argue in chapter three, “The Elusiveness of the Sign: Post-Structuralism, Postmodernism, and Deconstruction.” Here, I cast post-structuralism as a break with and corrective to structuralism, argue for the continued relevance of the terms “postmodernism” and “postmodernity,” and seek to differentiate what I identify as “rationalism” as an ideology from “rationality” as a devotion to argumentation. The focus of this chapter ultimately settles on the figure of Jacques Derrida, founder of the textual practice of deconstruction. I exposit my understanding of Derrida as an heir more to Nietzsche’s free-form,

open-ended, and reflexive practice of critique than to Heidegger's dogmatic fundamental ontology. Due to the unique circumstances of French postwar thought—which saw a reassessment of modern German thought unburdened by the legacy of guilt that the Third Reich wreaked upon postwar West Germany—Derrida was able to embrace Nietzschean uncertainty without appearing to align himself with the radical right politics of many of Nietzsche's German followers. The result was an approach to philosophical problems that does not aim at definitive answers. Accordingly, Derrida's politics throughout his early career were remarkably unradical when contrasted with those of his contemporary structuralists and post-structuralists. Deconstruction's openness to ambiguity foreclosed any radical political stances that lay claim to incontestable truths.

Chapter four, "Hans-Georg Gadamer and Renewal through Continuity," examines the hermeneutics of Heidegger's student, Hans-Georg Gadamer, in the context of postwar German liberalization and democratization. Unlike his erstwhile teacher and lifelong friend, Gadamer did not have his sights set on any final end to uncertainty and source of meaning. Instead, like his younger French contemporary and fellow Heidegger-interpreter, Derrida, Gadamer developed a philosophy of language that remains ever open to new developments, profound ambiguity, and the flux of interpretation. I argue that both hermeneutics and deconstruction do justice to Nietzsche's dangerous perhaps, though in different ways, with the former stressing language's capacity for new integrations of ideas and experiences and the latter focusing on language's disintegrative tendencies and shortfall of total coherence. Gadamer's openness to the novel and the unknown, I suggest, reflected a broader shift in West German sensibilities away from the totalizing ideologies of the Nazi era and interwar years and towards the relative tolerance and pluralism of postwar liberal democracies.

By contrast, in chapter five, “Jürgen Habermas and Renewal through Rationalization,” I present Habermas’ Critical Theory as a renewal of Horkheimer’s absolutist Hegelian ambitions. Contrary to the criticisms from the left that attack Habermas for his putative lack of radicalism, I argue that foundationalist, Platonic, and potentially radical threads run through and deeply imbue Habermas’ mature Critical Theory, reflecting a popular strain of thought that remains unreconciled to the ambiguity that pervades a disenchanted and postmodern world.

Most of this dissertation occupies itself with matters of an explicitly epistemological, ontological, phenomenological, hermeneutic, and semiological nature. Nevertheless and despite the heavy emphasis on abstruse philosophical matters, what is centrally at stake in this dissertation is the matter of whether, how, and to what extent partisans can justify their politics. The figure of Carl Schmitt, the nihilistic Nazi jurist of brute force, makes an appearance in the first chapter, but his specter hovers over the entire work, challenging all claims to the sovereign legitimacy of political claims with the implicit questions, “Who decides? Under whose authorization? With what warrant and what force?”

Similarly, though there is more textual analysis, criticism, and philosophizing in this dissertation than in standard histories, this dissertation can be correctly understood as a work treating the postwar intellectual history of the Federal Republic and the question of German normality. I hope to show that this question takes on a certain level of redundancy when viewed against the backdrop of progressive disenchantment, postmodernism, postmodernity. Hence, the two chapters devoted to twentieth-century French thought serve as something of a counter-example to the German case and a rejoinder to German exceptionalism.

One major line of argument in this dissertation is that method in the human sciences is often somewhat misplaced. What is frequently called “method” in the social sciences is often

little more than a set of assumptions with which an author begins a work. Typically, the author attempts either to justify these assumptions in the work or to avoid justifying them by tacitly marking them off as beyond question. In the first case, a statement of “method” seems superfluous; in the second, it seems somewhat disingenuous.¹⁹ Thus, this dissertation proceeds from the premise that a method must be seen as part of the work and as what is at stake in the work, rather than as that which grounds the work. Nothing as autonomous, inscrutable, and aspirational as a method can be found in this work. However, there are some orientations, background beliefs, and premises that may be noteworthy and that recur throughout this work and help to shape it. Hopefully, they will be convincingly unfolded and justified in the chapters to follow but they merit mention at the outset. There are also some contested terms that call for at least tentative definitions here.

“Liberalism” seems a good place to start. I avail myself of no unified, cohesive theory of liberalism. But, as will become clear, it is my claim that this open-endedness of liberalism is what makes it so appealing and functional. In general, with the term “liberal democracy,” I understand a system of government based on representative democracy and rule of law and equality before the law, instituting a separation of powers, with a wide array of civil rights—particularly freedom of speech and opinion—accruing to individuals and voluntary organizations of individuals, maintaining relatively open markets, enshrining a public-private distinction, however difficult it may be to precisely define the boundaries between the two, and relying on social norms of civility, integrity, and relative tolerance – however problematic defining these norms may be. Such systems tend to rest upon an ethos and logos that is very much consonant with that put forth by John Stuart Mill in his classic work *On Liberty*. There, Mill argues

¹⁹ For some theoretical considerations along these lines, see Paul Feyerabend, *Against Method* (New York: Verso, 2010); Thomas S Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 4th ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2012).

convincingly that truth and rightness are not obvious, no party is infallible, and definitive proofs are few and far between. Consequently, open discourse is not only to be guaranteed by the state but also encouraged by society as the only reliable means of increasing knowledge, improving understanding, and enacting good policies in light of the manifest limitations of human judgement and rationality.²⁰

Historically, liberalism is closely related to doctrines of humanism, another loose and flexible term. It calls to mind broad notions of “human dignity,” the supposedly unified traditions of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, the Revolution, and the Rights of Man. On a more abstract level, it signifies the philosophy of the subject; that is, the doctrine that all knowledge begins with the affirmation of the cogito and all claims to knowledge must pass muster with an epistemology grounded thereon to be accepted as valid.²¹ Finally, there is the closely related sense of the word “humanism” as a doctrine that all members of the species share a common human nature.²² Thus, humanism often implies cosmopolitanism.²³ Humanists understand themselves as especially concerned for the welfare and dignity of human beings but this commitment to humanity does not by any means necessarily preclude concern for non-human life.²⁴ Nor does identification as a humanist require one to possess a *narrow* view of human nature and to value a high degree of conformity; rather, many humanists appreciate the diversity of human culture and personality.²⁵

²⁰ John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1863).

²¹ See for example, Rene Descartes, *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. Donald A Cross, 4th ed. (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1999).

²² Steven Pinker, *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature* (New York: Penguin, 2016).

²³ See for example, Immanuel Kant, *Political Writings*, trans. HB Nisbet, ed. Hans Reiss (New York: Cambridge, 1991).

²⁴ See for example, Peter Singer, "Taking Humanism beyond Speciesism," *Free Inquiry*, 2004.

²⁵ Mill, *On Liberty*.

The diversity in which human being can express itself gives rise to a key distinction between *rationalism* and *rationality*. The latter signifies a readiness to partake in the difficult but necessary work of argument, which involves the exchange and weighing of reasons and perspectives and a willingness to let theories be constrained by what are called facts or by the lack thereof, even if the establishment of such facts is always provisional and imperfect.²⁶ Rationalism, on the other hand, signifies a faith that the processes of argumentation will lead to an apodictically clear picture of the world, typically founded on an unproblematic epistemology of representation. It involves the defense—declared or described—of foundationalism, teleology, and totality. One can be highly skeptical of all such posits and, hence, of rationalism yet remain committed to rationality.

Closely related to the rationalism-rationality distinction is that between moral realism and moral unrealism – particularly as involves interests, ethical rules, or ethical laws, on the one hand, and values, on the other. Many Marxists derive their ethics, such as they are, from the concept of *interests*. From this standpoint, one ought to behave according to the interests of humanity, which Marxists take to be vested in the proletariat.²⁷ For neo-, post-, and quasi-Marxists, the bearers of human interest are less clear, but they nonetheless frequently take the reality, cohesiveness, and ethical primacy of such interests for granted. Whoever acts against her interests, does so because she is suffering from some type of manipulation, false-consciousness, or “manufactured consent”; she does not know what is good for her.²⁸ Deontologists, by contrast, view ethical rules as akin to natural laws. They somehow see ethical laws as binding or

²⁶ See for example, David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (New York: Penguin, 1969); Charles Sanders Peirce, *Philosophical Writings*, ed. Justus Buchler (New York: Dover, 2011).

²⁷ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 1998).

²⁸ Edward S Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (New York: Pantheon, 1988); Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Boston: Beacon, 1964).

obligatory in a sense that exceeds the merely taboo and is woven into the fabric of human existence or of nature.²⁹ For those who take their ethical orientations from interests, rules, or laws, there is something *true* about ethical life; to act unethically is to judge and act *falsely*.

By contrast, a values-based approach to ethics sees ethics essentially as a matter of personal preference. Perhaps these preferences are conditioned or reinforced by evolutionarily instilled instincts, by social sanction and cultural normativity, or by philosophical orientation, but they remain preferences. This position should not be confused with moral relativism. If a value is strong enough, if one cares enough about something, someone, or a group of people, one might—in extreme cases—be willing to kill and/or die to enforce, advance, or defend that thing, that person, or those persons. This is done without hypocrisy, because she who acts on values does not posit any sanction for those values beyond preference and—if her values are what might be called “humane”—the wellbeing of others or a preference therefor. For the value-ethicist, there is nothing false or untrue about acting in a manner deemed “unethical.”³⁰

Because they cannot appeal to any extra-personal mandate, value-ethicists must appeal to other human beings who share their values. Those with broadly compatible values must be willing to form and able to maintain communities that sanction, defend, and advance those values. This is no easy task, as conflicts of value, interest, and interpretation are sure to arise even within groups. Groups must successfully navigate these conflicts if they are to survive. If they do survive, such communities may gather converts from and strike compromises with other groups through various means, but they must also be prepared for the possibility of violence.

²⁹ Immanuel Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Lewis White Beck, 2nd ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1997).

³⁰ Nietzsche, *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*.

And this is a possibility and reality that, though thankfully diminishing, is very far from anomalous in human affairs.

The processes involved in these rather simple formulas are, in fact, myriad and frequently baffling. Efforts to understand such processes, which may be deemed “political,” intersect at innumerable points with processes of understanding mind, human subjectivity, and language. One finds oneself spinning in a hermeneutical circle just as surely in matters of politics as in any other field of theory or action. No epistemic ground offers itself as a point from which one can definitively understand the entire affair. No single proposition or set thereof can impose a final word. No method provides a way out. The ubiquity of interpretation permeates and forms us. The best we can do is to approach the task of understanding with an appreciation for its openness.

1. German Interwar Political Theologies: Disenchantment and the Legacy of Weimar

It is difficult to say precisely what “Critical Theory” is and what it meant to its preeminent articulator, Max Horkheimer. In his massive study of the Frankfurt School, Rolf Wiggershaus notes that, throughout the 1930s and early 1940s, Horkheimer and his circle frequently referred to “critical theory” and to “the theory,” without having offered any clear articulation of exactly what the content of this theory was.¹ This changed, to some extent, with Horkheimer’s and Theodor Adorno’s 1944 completion of their long-planned project on dialectics, *Philosophical Fragments (Philosophische Fragmente)*.² With this manifesto, Horkheimer and Adorno staked out a very distinct position within the field of social theory, breaking with Marxism in claiming that rationalization *per se*, and not just its capitalist form, is at the heart of oppression in the modern world. However, though *Philosophical Fragments* certainly evolved from the Frankfurt School’s work of the 1930s, it also signaled Horkheimer’s and Adorno’s departure from that work in some significant ways, which will be treated below. It would, therefore, be inaccurate and anachronistic to treat *Philosophical Fragments* as the summa of Critical Theory.

Wiggershaus finally settles on an understanding of Critical Theory that “should be taken in a broader sense distinct from the focus of Horkheimer, Adorno and the Institute of Social Research to refer to a form of thought that is committed to the abolition of domination and

¹ Rolf Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School: Its History, Theory, and Political Significance*, trans. Michael Robertson (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1995), 6-7.

² Horkheimer and Adorno initially had the manuscript published as a mimeograph and circulated to a small group of friends. But it formed the basis of their famous *Dialektik der Aufklärung*: Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialektik der Aufklärung*. Translated into English as Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr (Stanford: Stanford, 2002).

that stands in a Marxist tradition open to a wide variety of associations.”³ But in the narrower sense of what Horkheimer believed about dialectics and society during the period of the Frankfurt School’s initial articulation of “Critical Theory” through its *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* (ZfS, 1932-1941) a more specific understanding is necessary.⁴

Ever since the renowned intellectual historian Martin Jay published his groundbreaking study of the Frankfurt School, *The Dialectical Imagination*, the notion that Horkheimer and company broke free of a Marxist framework at an early date has characterized the Frankfurt School’s reception.⁵ But this was not the case. For most, if not all, of the run of the ZfS, Horkheimer and most of his circle accepted and endorsed the basic premises of orthodox Marxism that capitalism—and not rationalization—was the primary source of alienation, suffering, and oppression in the world and that the work of theory should be to overcome capital and usher in a socialist society. The “theory” to which Horkheimer so frequently referred was, as far as its basic content went, little more than Marx’s theory of capitalism and dialectical materialism. The Frankfurt School’s work prior to *Philosophical Fragments* consisted mainly of developing the existential, aesthetic, epistemological, literary, economic, political, psychoanalytic, and onto-historical implications of Marx’s theory as the school understood them.⁶

³ Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School: Its History, Theory, and Political Significance*, 658.

⁴ In 1939, Horkheimer had the journal’s name changed to *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science* (SPSS). ZfS had been published in Paris at Felix Alcan, but this location was no longer tenable after the outbreak of war in Europe. From 1939 to the end of SPSS’s run in 1941, the Institute for Social Research self-published the journal in New York, with most of its content now in English rather than German. Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School: Its History, Theory, and Political Significance*, 235, 65. Conventionally, issues of *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science* are treated under the rubric of the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, and I will follow this convention.

⁵ Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute for Social Research, 1923-1950* (Berkeley: University of California, 1996). For a rejoinder to Jay’s view, see Douglas Kellner, “The Frankfurt School Revisited,” *New German Critique* 4 (Winter 1975).

⁶ Such, at least, is true in the main. Benjamin was on a somewhat different track throughout the Thirties.

Horkheimer affirms Critical Theory's basically Marxist nature in those few passages of his programmatic statements of Critical Theory in which he writes of the content of the theory, rather than of its onto-historical and epistemological form.⁷ Prior to Horkheimer's introduction of the term "Critical Theory," he typically referred to his type of theorizing simply as "materialism." In "Materialism and Metaphysics" ("Materialismus und Metaphysik"), Horkheimer writes pithily, "Contemporary materialism is not principally characterized by the formal traits which oppose it to idealism. It is characterized rather by its content: the economic theory of society."⁸ It is quite clear that *the* economic theory of society to which Horkheimer refers is Marx's.

In "On the Problem of Truth" ("Zum Problem der Wahrheit"), Horkheimer's most sustained engagement with truth-theory, he proposes that Marx's theory has been fully corroborated by the movement of history and, thus, forms the overarching context for any and all truth claims:

The concept of corroboration also plays a role in the materialistic way of thinking [...] Yet as much as theory and practice are linked to history, there is no preestablished harmony between them. What is seen as theoretically correct is not therefore simultaneously realized. Human activity is no unambiguous function of insight, but rather a process which at every moment is likewise determined by other factors and resistances. This clearly follows from the present state of the theory of history. A number of social tendencies in their reciprocal action are described there theoretically: the agglomeration of great amounts of capital as against the declining share of the average individual in relation to the wealth of society as a whole, the increase of unemployment interrupted by ever shorter periods of a relative prosperity, the growing discrepancy between the apportionment of social labor to the various types of goods and the general needs, the diversion of productivity from constructive to destructive purposes, the sharpening of contradictions within states and among them. All these processes were shown by Marx to be necessary at a time when they could only be studied in a few advanced countries and in embryo [...] But *from the beginning*, this view of history, now in fact *confirmed*,

⁷ With the term "onto-historical," I refer to any theory, such as those of Hegel and Heidegger, that posits being as evolving, in some manner or another, over the course of history. Admittedly, this distinction between form and content in Critical Theory is a troublesome one, but I will return to it below.

⁸ Max Horkheimer, "Materialism and Metaphysics," in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays* (New York: Continuum, 2002), 45.

understood these developments in a particular way, that is, as tendencies which could be prevented from leading to a relapse into barbarism by the effort of people guided by this theory. This theory, *confirmed* by the course of history, was thought of not only as theory but as a moment of a liberating practice, bound up with the whole impatience of threatened humanity. The *corroboration* of the unswerving belief involved in this struggle is closely connected with the *confirmation* of the predicted tendencies that has already taken place.⁹

To be sure, this is a long and extremely complex passage in an extremely complex essay. But what matters for the present purpose is to emphasize 1) that Horkheimer very clearly posits Marx's economic and historical theory as that against which all truth claims are to be judged and 2) that he sees Marx's theory as having been confirmed in some or other unquestionable manner.¹⁰ At the very least, this passage indicates that Horkheimer viewed Marxism as the guiding star of some as-yet-unrealized universal truth, if not as that universal truth itself.

⁹ Max Horkheimer, "On the Problem of Truth," in *Between Philosophy and Social Science: Selected Early Writings* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1995), 198-9. Translation modified. My emphasis. "Der Begriff der Bewährung spielt auch in der materialistischen Denkart eine Rolle [...] So sehr jedoch Theorie und Praxis in der Geschichte verknüpft sind, so wenig waltet zwischen ihnen eine prästabilierte Harmonie. Was sich theoretisch als richtig einsehen lässt, ist darum nicht zugleich schon verwirklicht. Die menschliche Tätigkeit ist keine eindeutige Funktion der Einsicht, sondern ein Prozess, der in jedem Augenblick ebenso von anderen Faktoren und Widerständen bestimmt wird. Aus dem heutigen Zustand der Geschichtstheorie geht dies klar hervor. Eine Reihe von Tendenzen der Gesellschaft sind in ihrer Wechselwirkung theoretisch dargestellt : die Zusammenballung grosser Kapitalien gegenüber dem sinkenden Anteil des durchschnittlichen Individuums im Verhältnis zum Reichtum der Gesamtgesellschaft, die durch immer kürzere Perioden eines relativen Aufschwungs unterbrochene Vermehrung der Arbeitslosigkeit, die steigende Diskrepanz zwischen der Verteilung der gesellschaftlichen Arbeit auf die verschiedenen Warenarten und dem Bedürfnis der Allgemeinheit, die Ablenkung der Produktivität von konstruktiven auf destruktive Ziele, die Zuspitzung der Gegensätze im Innern und Äussern der Staaten, alle diese Prozesse wurden von Marx als notwendig nachgewiesen, als sie sich nur in wenigen fortgeschrittenen Ländern und im Keim studieren liessen [...] Die heute in der Tat bestätigte Ansicht der Geschichte, von der diese Dynamik nicht bloss überhaupt vorausgesagt, sondern zugleich als notwendig erwiesen worden ist, hat diese Verläufe jedoch von Anfang an in ganz bestimmtem Sinne aufgefasst, nämlich als Tendenzen, die durch den Einsatz der von dieser Theorie geleiteten Menschen daran verhindert werden könnten, zum Rückfall der Gesellschaft in Barbarei zu führen. Die durch den historischen Verlauf bewährte Theorie war nicht bloss als Theorie, sondern als Moment einer befreienden Praxis gedacht und mit der ganzen Ungeduld der bedrohten Menschheit verknüpft. Die Bewährung des unbeirrbaren Glaubens, der in diesem Kampf enthalten ist, hängt mit der schon eingetretenen Bestätigung jener vorausgesagten Tendenzen eng zusammen [...]" Max Horkheimer, "Zum Problem der Wahrheit," *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* 4, no. 3 (1935): 343-4.

¹⁰ See below for the convoluted relationship between theory, praxis, and belief (Glauben) that Horkheimer posits in this essay and for problems of confirmation and falsification relating thereto.

In “Traditional and Critical Theory,” arguably the founding text of Critical Theory, Horkheimer identifies Critical Theory with Marx’s thought, adopting the latter’s categories without alteration:

The concerns of critical thought [...] are those of most men, but they are not recognized to be such. The concepts which emerge under its influence are critical of the present. Class, exploitation, surplus value, profit, pauperization, and breakdown are elements in a conceptual whole, and the meaning of this whole is to be sought not in the preservation of contemporary society but in its transformation into the right kind of society. Consequently, although critical theory at no point proceeds arbitrarily and in chance fashion, it appears, to prevailing modes of thought, to be subjective and speculative, one-sided and useless.¹¹

There could be no clearer indication that Horkheimer accepts the Marxist categories of class, exploitation, surplus value, profit, and pauperization as the elements of the “conceptual whole” that is “critical thought” and “critical theory.” If the theorists in Horkheimer’s circle rarely openly declared “We are Marxists!”, this was likely due to a combination of their taking Marx for granted, as in the above passages, and a sustained effort to avoid alienating their decidedly non-Marxist patrons.¹²

It is true that Horkheimer looked dubiously on some of Marx’s prognoses and prescriptions. From an early date, Horkheimer rejected the inevitability of socialist revolution and the centrality of the proletariat in bringing it about.¹³ And, of course, the institute was interested in applying Marxist suppositions to fields well beyond economics. But, for the duration of the 1930s, such departures and innovations must be seen as variations within

¹¹ Horkheimer, “Traditional and Critical Theory,” 218. Translation modified. “Die Interessen des kritischen Denkens sind allgemein, aber nicht allgemein anerkannt. Die Begriffe, die unter ihrem Einfluss entstehen, sind kritisch im Hinblick auf die Gegenwart. Klasse, Ausbeutung, Mehrwert, Profit, Verelendung, Zusammenbruch sind Momente des begrifflichen Ganzen, dessen Sinn nicht in der Reproduktion der gegenwärtigen Gesellschaft, sondern in ihrer Veränderung zu suchen ist. Wenngleich die kritische Theorie nirgends willkürlich und zufällig verfährt, erscheint sie der herrschenden Urteilsweise daher subjektiv und spekulativ, einseitig und nutzlos.“ Max Horkheimer, “Traditionelle und kritische Theorie,” *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* 6, no. 2 (1937): 271.

¹² Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination*, 44; Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School*, 5.

¹³ Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School*, 49.

Marxism and not as constitutive of a fundamental break with, advance beyond, or loss of faith in Marxism.

The most important of these innovations include Horkheimer's radically Hegelian articulations of praxis, the nature of the dialectic, and the "self-reflexive" nature of Critical Theory. Much of his theorizing from the 1930s was devoted to articulating the relationship between theory and praxis in historical developments as an attempt to fully justify Critical Theory's claimed self-reflexiveness and surpassing of philosophy. The same essays cited above to demonstrate the Frankfurt School's basic adherence to Marxism also outline its most important reimaginings and novel points of emphasis in Marxism. Two essays, in particular, reflect the development of Horkheimer's view in the 1930s of what a Critical Theory is and must be: "Materialism and Metaphysics" and "On the Problem of Truth." In the short span of time between these two essays, Horkheimer moves from an open-ended, almost pragmatic epistemology to an onto-historical one that seeks to be self-grounding.

1933's "Materialism and Metaphysics" (MM) was the first article in the second volume of ZfS and Horkheimer's first attempt to systematically define the theoretical outlook of what would shortly come to be known as "Critical Theory," which Horkheimer simply called "materialism" at the time. He begins the essay with a critique of Wilhelm Dilthey's *Lebensphilosophie*. Horkheimer praises Dilthey for orienting himself to problems of lived experience but claims that Dilthey inadequately divorces himself from the metaphysical tradition of seeking apodictic certainty of an all-encompassing reality or truth:

[Dilthey's] own efforts, too, are marked by the three traits he regards as characteristic of the philosophical (really, the metaphysical) mind: self-reflection, that is the consistent and radical questioning of subjective and objective data; the integration of all knowable

reality into a unified whole; and the attempt to provide an ultimate and intrinsic foundation for the universal validity of knowledge.¹⁴

Instead of troubling itself with the problems of certainty, apodictic knowledge, and ontology, writes Horkheimer, materialism carries through *Lebensphilosophie's* avowed program in a more consistent manner, occupying itself only with problems of life and living. For Horkheimer, materialism is not—or, at least, not primarily—a doctrine that posits the existence of matter and movement and nothing else. This, he claims, is an idealist and lebensphilosophical misunderstanding of materialism.¹⁵ Instead, materialism stands opposed to all types of metaphysics and to the latter's demand that one "make his personal life dependent at every point on insight into the ultimate ground of things."¹⁶ Quoting Dilthey, Horkheimer adds, "Metaphysics usually has its gaze fixed on 'the structural unity of this one, great, unknown reality to whose questions we have no answer,' but for the materialist such a unity is habitually neither starting point *nor goal* [*Ziel*]."¹⁷ Later in the essay, he is even more explicit on this point, quoting Marx and Engels:

If men change not only nature but themselves and all their relationships, then philosophical ontology and anthropology are replaced by "a summing-up of the most general results, abstractions which arise from the observation of the historical development of men." The possibility of using these results in order to grasp developmental tendencies which point beyond the immediate present *does not justify transposing that summing-up into the future.*¹⁸

¹⁴ Horkheimer, "Materialism and Metaphysics," 10-11. "Die drei von ihm aufgestellten Kennzeichen des philosophischen, in Wahrheit metaphysischen Geistes: Selbstbesinnung, d. h. die konsequente und radikale Frage gegenüber den subjektiven und objektiven Gegebenheiten; Einordnung alles Erkennbaren in einen einheitlichen Zusammenhang; Streben nach Begründung der Allgemeingültigkeit der Erkenntnis durch den Rückgang auf ihre letzten Rechtsgründe, treffen auf seine [Diltheys] eigenen Bestrebungen zu." Max Horkheimer, "Materialismus und Metaphysik," *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* 2, no. 1 (1933): 1-2.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 13-15.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 18.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 21. My emphasis.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 25. My emphasis. "Wenn die Menschen mit der Natur auch sich selbst und alle ihre Verhältnisse verändern, dann tritt an die Stelle der philosophischen Ontologie und Anthropologie, 'eine Zusammenfassung der allgemeinsten Resultate, die sich aus der Betrachtung der historischen Entwicklung der Menschen abstrahieren lassen'. Die Möglichkeit, mit Hilfe dieser Resultate Entwicklungstendenzen, welche über die unmittelbare Gegenwart hinausweisen, zu erkennen, berechtigt nicht dazu, die Zusammenfassung einfach auf die Zukunft zu übertragen." Horkheimer, "Materialismus und Metaphysik," 14-5.

Thus, the materialist orients himself neither by ontological grounds nor by telos; the latter can no more be taken for granted than can the former.

To be sure, Horkheimer is not indifferent to metaphysics and certainly not to historical processes in MM. He repeatedly stresses the need to grasp the latter, so as to better understand the conditions under which life is lived and change is possible in a given social constellation. But what is important is that, at this stage of his intellectual development, Horkheimer did not seek *justification* for ethical values or actions in any sort of metaphysical scheme, including a Hegelian onto-historical one. Rather, compassion, love, kindness, and revulsion at human suffering and degradation were all the grounds Horkheimer required to orient his thought and actions:

The materialist tries to replace the justification of action with an explanation of it through an historical understanding of the agent. He regards the justification as an illusion. Most men down to the present day feel a very strong need for such justification; in important decisions they are not content to rely on their feelings of indignation, compassion, love, solidarity, and so on, but must relate their feelings to an absolute world order by calling them "ethical." But this widespread need does not prove that there is a reasonable fulfillment of it.¹⁹

Horkheimer begins this passage with an allusion to the "historical understanding of the agent." It is not entirely clear what he means by that in this context, but it is entirely clear that he does not view "historical understanding" as justification. Horkheimer does not treat it here as offering any theory, ethical or epistemic, by which a correct or true course of action could be determined or affirmed.

¹⁹ Ibid., 23. Translation modified. "Jedenfalls versucht der Materialismus, an die Stelle der Rechtfertigung des Handelns die Erklärung durch das geschichtliche Verständnis der Handelnden zu setzen. Er sieht in dieser Rechtfertigung immer eine Illusion. Wenn die Mehrzahl der Menschen bis jetzt auch ein sehr starkes Bedürfnis danach hegt, wenn sie sich bei wichtigen Entscheidungen nicht bloß auf die Gefühle der Empörung, des Mitleids, der Liebe, der Solidarität berufen mag, sondern ihre Triebkräfte durch die Kennzeichnung als ‚sittliche‘ zu einer absoluten Weltordnung in Beziehung setzt, so ist damit noch keineswegs die vernünftige Erfüllbarkeit dieses Bedürfnisses erwiesen." Horkheimer, "Materialismus und Metaphysik," 13. *It must be noted that it is not the Kantian "Moralität" that Horkheimer here decries as false but rather the Hegelian "Sittlichkeit."*

Horkheimer even articulates the kernel of a doctrine of fallibilism in this essay:

The claim that there is an absolute order and an absolute demand made upon man always supposes a claim to know the whole, the totality of things, the infinite. But if our knowledge is in fact not final, if there is an irreducible tension between concept and being, then no proposition can claim the dignity of perfect knowledge.²⁰

Here, the “Whole” is neither the true nor the false but, rather, that which cannot be taken for granted and which may never even exist.

MM is a thoroughly pragmatic work.²¹ According to Horkheimer, “the materialist’s views are essentially determined by the tasks to be mastered at the moment.”²² He even (mis)quotes no less an instrumentalist than Thomas Hobbes on the matter: “The greatest significance of philosophy is that we can use foreseen effects to our advantage and—on the basis of our knowledge and in accords with our strengths and proficiency—we can bring about the advancement of human life.”²³ Throughout the essay, Horkheimer freely acknowledges that his

²⁰ Ibid., 27. Translation modified. “Die Behauptung einer absoluten Ordnung und einer absoluten Forderung setzt immer den Anspruch auf Wissen vom Ganzen, von der Totalität, vom Unendlichen voraus. Ist unser Wissen wirklich unabgeschlossen, besteht eine unaufhebbare Spannung zwischen Begriff und Sein, so darf kein Satz die Würde vollendeter Erkenntnis in Anspruch nehmen.” Horkheimer, “Materialismus und Metaphysik,” 16.

²¹ This is true on a number of different understandings of “pragmatism.” See Cheryl Misak, *The American Pragmatists* (New York: Oxford, 2013). Personally, I favor an understanding of pragmatism wherein values and desires impel inquiry from behind and set the general parameters in reference to which facts can come to *mean* anything at all. But wherein also values and desire *determine* inquiry’s path only insofar as they can present inquiry with logical responses to the resistances of experience. Should an inquiry lead to a point at which a given set of values and desired outcomes can no longer allow for logical paths along which the inquiry can proceed, this does not mean that the values and desires in question are false. By their very nature, values and desires do not admit of truth or falsity. It simply means that an impasse has been reached and that an honest inquirer must acknowledge that the descriptions amenable to his values may not be factual, the prescriptions put forth on the basis of his values may go unfilled, and his desires may go unrealized. If the resistance is strong enough, the honest inquirer will concede the point – at least temporarily and in a qualified manner. But Conceding the point does not logically necessitate that one must abandon one’s values, though it may be wise to adjust them. The fact-value distinction is maintained in that values are seen to motivate and steer the search for facts and to provide the bearings and relations wherein facts take on meaning but nonetheless to be incapable of *determining* facts when faced with stalwart experiential impediments.

²² Horkheimer, “Materialism and Metaphysics,” 24.

²³ “Die größte Bedeutung der Philosophie liegt darin, daß wir die vorausgeschauten Wirkungen zu unserem Vorteil nutzen und auf Grund unserer Erkenntnis nach Maß unserer Kräfte und Tüchtigkeit absichtlich zur Förderung des menschlichen Lebens herbeiführen können.” Thomas Hobbes, *Grundzüge der Philosophie*, trans. Max Frischeisen-Köhler (Leipzig, 1915), 31. Quoted in Horkheimer, “Materialismus und Metaphysik,” 14. Here, I use my own translation, as O’Connell’s translation gravely mistranslates the German. O’Connell seems to have used Hobbes’ original English-language quote.

values guide his inquiry but does not preordain that the inquiry will yield knowledge resulting in the ontologizing of his values or in the realization of any of those values' possible ethical, political, or economic prescriptions. He does not claim that theory will transmogrify his values or desires into universal truths. Theory's only task in this essay is to understand the dynamics of social life so as to find the best means of implementing the political and economic reforms consonant with Horkheimer's humane and eudaemonistic values.²⁴

Unfortunately, Horkheimer could not leave the matter at that. In "Materialism and Morality," Horkheimer's follow-up in the next issue of ZfS to "Materialism and Metaphysics," Horkheimer wrote, "Materialism sees in morality an expression of life of determinate individuals [*Lebensäusserung bestimmter Menschen*] and seeks to understand it in terms of the conditions of its emergence and passing, not for the sake of truth but rather in connection with determinate historical forces [*bestimmten geschichtlichen Antrieben*]." ²⁵ 1935's "On the Problem of Truth," which appeared in the third issue of the fourth volume of ZfS, represents Horkheimer's effort to develop a truth-theory on the basis of his certainty that he had firmly grasped the relevant determinate historical forces *in toto*. What resulted was a radically incoherent truth-theory that fundamentally undermines the claimed self-reflexiveness of Critical Theory.²⁶

In PT, Horkheimer rejects all theories that hold truth to be plural or relative, regardless of whether that relativity is psychological, cultural, or even historical in nature. But Horkheimer

²⁴ Horkheimer, "Materialism and Metaphysics," 24.

²⁵ Max Horkheimer, "Materialism and Morality," in *Between Philosophy and Social Science* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1995), 32.

²⁶ Interestingly and despite Horkheimer's contempt for William James and pragmatism, "The Problem of Truth" bears some affinity to William James' "The Will to Believe." However, whereas James claim only *reason* to believe in certain ideas and propositions despite a lack of evidence, Horkheimer claims to pronounce Truth itself and will not consistently acknowledge an evidentiary lack. Another difference is that James is far more transparent about his definition of truth as what is useful, whereas Horkheimer very much describes this view while declaiming against it. See William James, *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (New York: Longman, Greens, and Company, 1912).

also rejects those theories that hold truth to be absolute and independent of the senses and of human experience. He associates the latter sort of theory with Descartes, Kant, and, most acridly, the logical positivists and scienticists of his times. He dismisses both relativism and absolutism as “naïve” and “bourgeois,” justifying these descriptions with a rough-hewn psychological theory:

Fundamental analysis of the fallacious bourgeois self-perception, which preserves the ideology of complete inner freedom in the face of the dependence and insecurity of its bearers, could show that the liberal validation of alien ideas (the mark of relativism) has a common root with the fear of making one's own decisions, which leads to belief in a rigid absolute truth.²⁷

Both relativism and absolutism, writes Horkheimer, are divorced from “the Whole” (*Die Ganze*).²⁸

Naturally, Horkheimer sees Hegelian dialectics as the answer to these fractious approaches to truth. The dialectical method both traces and advances the onto-historical reconciliation of the myriad one-sided truths of relativism with one another, forming them into a many-sided but nonetheless determinate Whole:

While the concrete content is perceived as conditional and dependent and every "final" truth is just as decisively "negated" as in Kant, it does not for Hegel simply fall through the sieve in the sifting out of pure knowledge. Recognition of the conditional character of every isolated view and rejection of its absolute claim to truth does not destroy this conditional knowledge; rather, it is incorporated into the system of truth at any given time as a conditional, one-sided, and isolated view. Through nothing but this continuous delimitation and correction of partial truths, the process itself evolves its proper content as knowledge of limited insights in their limits and connection.²⁹

²⁷ Horkheimer, "On the Problem of Truth," 183. "Eine gründliche Analyse des falschen bürgerlichen Selbstbewusstseins, das angesichts der Abhängigkeit und Unsicherheit seiner Träger die Ideologie der vollkommenen inneren Freiheit aufrechterhielt, könnte zeigen, dass jenes liberale Geltenlassen der fremden Meinung, das dem Relativismus eigen ist, und die Angst vor eigener Entscheidung, die zum Glauben an die starre absolute Wahrheit führt, eine gemeinsame Wurzel haben." Horkheimer, "Zum Problem der Wahrheit," 327-8.

²⁸ Horkheimer, "Zum Problem der Wahrheit," 181.

²⁹ Horkheimer, "On the Problem of Truth," 184. "Indem der konkrete Inhalt als bedingt und abhängig erkannt, indem jede ‚endliche‘ Wahrheit ebenso entschieden ‚negiert‘ wird wie bei Kant, soll sie nach Hegel nicht einfach beim Aussondern des reinen Wissens durch das Sieb fallen. Durch die Erkenntnis der Bedingtheit jeder isolierten Ansicht, durch die Ablehnung ihres unbeschränkten Wahrheitsanspruchs wird dieses bedingte Wissen nicht

The key to this process is *Aufhebung*, wherein conflicting one-sided truths simultaneously negate and elevate each other. Through *Aufhebung*, the meaning of each particular truth survives but transforms as it is incorporated into the evolving Whole:

This critique of every concept and every complex of concepts by progressive incorporation into the more complete picture of the whole does not eliminate the individual aspects, nor does it leave them undisturbed in subsequent thought, but every negated insight is preserved as a moment of truth in the progress of cognition, forms a determining factor in it, and is further defined and transformed with every new step [...] Hegel does not end up with the bare assurance that all definite knowledge is transitory and unreal, that what we know is only appearance in contrast to an unknowable thing in itself or an intuitively perceived essence. If for Hegel the true is the whole, the whole is not something distinct from the parts in its determinate structure, but is the entire pattern of thought which at a given time embraces in itself all limited conceptions in the consciousness of their limitation.³⁰

Whereas Hegel, at times, portrayed this process of reconciliation occurring purely on the plane of ideas, and Marx portrayed it as occurring essentially on a techno-economic basis, Horkheimer sees it as comprised of both and inclusive also of human agency.³¹ The result is an onto-historical Whole, which constitutes Horkheimer's criterion for evaluating all truth claims by way of the latter's correspondence to the former. In particular, Horkheimer's grasp of this Whole justifies his claims of the fundamental truth of utopia and need for capital's overthrow.

überhaupt zerstört, sondern jeweils als bedingte, einseitige, isolierte Ansicht in das System der Wahrheit aufgenommen. Durch nichts anderes als dieses fortwährende kritische Beschränken und Korrigieren von Teilwahrheiten kommt dieses selbst als ihr richtiger Begriff, als Wissen von begrenzten Einsichten in ihren Grenzen und ihrem Zusammenhang zustande.“ Horkheimer, "Zum Problem der Wahrheit," 328.

³⁰ Ibid., 184. “Diese Kritik jedes Begriffs und Begriffskomplexes durch die fortschreitende Eingliederung in das vollständiger Bild des Ganzen eliminiert keineswegs die einzelnen Aspekte oder lässt sie auch nur im weiteren Denken unberührt, sondern jede negierte Einsicht wird im Fortgang der Erkenntnis als Moment der Wahrheit aufbewahrt, bildet einen bestimmenden Faktor in ihr und erfährt mit jedem neuen Schritt weitere Bestimmung und Veränderung [...] Am Ende kommt bei Hegel nicht die nackte Versicherung heraus, alles bestimmte Wissen sei vergänglich und nichtig, was wir erkennen, seien nur Erscheinungen im Gegensatz zu einem unerkennbaren Ding an sich oder einem intuitiv zu erschauenden Wesen. Wenn das Wahre nach Hegel das Ganze ist, so ist das Ganze nicht etwas von den Teilen in ihrer bestimmten Struktur Verschiedenes, sondern der gesamte Gedankengang, der alle beschränkten Vorstellungen jeweils im Bewusstsein ihrer Beschränktheit in sich schliesst.“ Horkheimer, "Zum Problem der Wahrheit," 328-9.

³¹ Ibid., 185-9.

There are several commonly posed and interrelated objections to this picture of dialectical holism, all of which plagued Hegel and Marx, neither of whom ever provided a satisfactory answer to them.³² The first is the question of whether the many particular experiences or truth-claims of individuals and cultures do, in fact, combine to form a *single* and *determinate* Whole. Does the apparent fractiousness of history, lived experience, thought, and discourse actually follow a single logic? The second is the question of how the dialectical holist can be certain that, if there is such a whole, he has, in fact, grasped it. The third is the question of whether the supposed Whole, as it exists at any given time, is constrained to follow a single trajectory that can justify claims of either a single determinate future or a narrow range of possible determinate futures. Finally, there is the question of the relationship between the *is*, *will*, *could*, and *ought* in dialectical holism. How can dialectical holists justify ethical claims and prescriptions on the basis of what the Whole is, what it will become, or what it could become? If dialectical holists do not derive their ethical claims and prescriptions from the nature of the Whole, whence do they derive them?

Horkheimer does not explicitly acknowledge these objections but he does spend the remainder of PT trying to answer them. Unfortunately, the answers he gives not only beg their respective questions, they also sharply and irreconcilably contradict one another. On the one hand, Horkheimer repeatedly declares that truth is independent of individuals' acceptance of it and that it rests on a correspondence of thought with "reality" (*Realität*):

Materialism [...] insists that objective reality is not identical with man's thought and can never be merged into it.³³

³² Leszek Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism: The Founders, the Golden Age, the Breakdown*, trans. P.S. Falla (New York: W.W. Norton, 2005).

³³ *Ibid.*, 189. "Der Materialismus behauptet [...], dass die objektive Realität nicht mit dem Denken der Menschen identisch ist und niemals in ihm aufgehen kann." Horkheimer, "Zum Problem der Wahrheit," 334.

If it is true that a person has tuberculosis, this concept may indeed be transformed in the development of medicine or lose its meaning entirely. But whoever makes a contrary diagnosis today with the same concept, not in terms of a higher insight which includes identifying this man's tuberculosis but simply denying the finding from the same medical standpoint, is wrong. The truth is also valid for whomever contradicts it, ignores it, or declares it unimportant. Truth is decided not by individuals' beliefs and opinions, not by the subject in itself, but by the relation of the propositions to reality.³⁴

Accordingly, Horkheimer insists that theory must be verified or corroborated by reality. But Horkheimer's understanding of verification is extremely peculiar in that it takes the reality by which the theory is to be verified as that "reality" posited by the theory itself. Moreover, this "reality" has not yet come to be but instead will, could, or ought to be realized in the future – Horkheimer is deeply unclear on which mood is the appropriate one throughout his essay.

Despite this lack of clarity, Horkheimer claims certainty regarding the "truth" of this future.

This future also somehow grounds ethical claims, which Horkheimer collapses into truth claims.

To the question of what justifies this positing of the theory's proposed future as the reality by which the theory is to be verified, Horkheimer responds that it is nothing other than the collective human agency which will bring about the proposed future:

At the same time as [the theory] nevertheless necessarily remains inconclusive and to that extent "relative," it is also absolute, since later correction does not mean that a former truth was formerly untrue. In the progress of knowledge, to be sure, much incorrectly regarded as true will prove wrong. Nevertheless, the overturning of categories stems from the fact that the relationship of concept and reality is affected and altered as a whole and in all its parts by the historical changes in forces and tasks. To a large extent the direction and outcome of the historical struggle depends on the decisiveness with which people draw the consequences of what they know, their readiness to test their theories against reality and refine them, in short by the uncompromising application of the insight recognized as true [...] The truth is advanced because the human beings who possess it

³⁴ Ibid., 193-4. "Wenn es wahr ist, dass einer die Schwindsucht hat, so mag zwar dieser Begriff in der Entwicklung der Medizin umgewandelt werden oder ganz seine Bedeutung verlieren ; wer aber heute mit dem gleichen Begriff die entgegengesetzte Diagnose stellt, und zwar nicht in der Richtung einer höheren Einsicht, welche die Feststellung der Schwindsucht bei diesem Mann miteinschliesst, sondern auf demselben Stande der Medizin den Befund verneint, hat unrecht. Die Wahrheit gilt auch für den, der ihr widerspricht, sie ignoriert oder für belanglos erklärt. Nicht was der Einzelne glaubt und von sich denkt, nicht das Subjekt an sich selbst, sondern das Verhältnis der Vorstellungen zur Realität entscheidet über die Wahrheit." Horkheimer, "Zum Problem der Wahrheit," 339.

stand by it unbendingly, apply it and carry it through, act according to it, and bring it to power against the resistance of reactionary, narrow, one-sided points of view.³⁵

And to the question of how this collective human agency can be taken for granted, given that it is empirically lacking, Horkheimer responds that the correctness of the theory guarantees it, could guarantee it, or ought to guarantee it. He is, again, deeply unclear on which mood should be used here. Nevertheless, this is Horkheimer's theory of "practice as corroboration" (*Praxis als Bewährung*), which is the key to Critical Theory's supposed self-reflexiveness:

From the beginning, this view of history, now in fact confirmed, understood these developments in a particular way, that is, as tendencies which could be prevented from leading to a relapse into barbarism by the effort of people guided by this theory. This theory, confirmed by the course of history, was thought of not only as theory but as a moment of a liberating practice, bound up with the whole impatience of threatened humanity. The corroboration of the unswerving *faith* involved in this struggle is closely connected with the confirmation of the predicted tendencies that has already taken place.³⁶

Horkheimer uses the noun "*Glauben*" eleven times in this essay. This word is ambiguous. It is here translated as "faith" but may also be translated as "belief." Certainly, the verb "glauben" is generally translated as "to believe." In any case, in ten of eleven instances in which Horkheimer uses the noun, he does so disapprovingly, wielding it to express sentimental and unfounded

³⁵ Ibid., 192-3. "Soweit [die Theorie] jedoch notwendig unabgeschlossen und insofern ‚relativ‘ bleibt, ist sie zugleich absolut, denn die spätere Korrektur bedeutet nicht, dass ein früher Wahres früher unwahr gewesen sei. Im Fortgang der Erkenntnis wird zwar vieles fälschlich für wahr Gehaltene als verkehrt erwiesen; die Umwälzung der Kategorien rührt jedoch daher, dass von den Kräften, Aufgaben, historischen Veränderungen das Verhältnis von Begriff und Realität im ganzen und in allen Teilen betroffen und verändert wird. Von der Entschiedenheit, mit der die Menschen aus ihren Erkenntnissen Konsequenzen ziehen, von der Aufgeschlossenheit, mit der sie ihre Theorien der Wirklichkeit anpassen und verfeinern, kurz von der kompromisslosen Anwendung der als wahr erkannten Einsicht hängt zum grossen Teil Richtung und Ausgang der geschichtlichen Kämpfe ab [...] die Wahrheit wird vorwärtsgetrieben, indem die Menschen, die sie haben, unbeugsam zu ihr stehen, sie anwenden und durchsetzen, ihr gemäss handeln, sie gegen alle Widerstände aus zurückgebliebenen, beschränkten, einseitigen Standpunkten zur Macht bringen." Horkheimer, "Zum Problem der Wahrheit," 337-8.

³⁶ Ibid., 198-9. My emphasis. "Die heute in der Tat bestätigte Ansicht der Geschichte [...] hat diese Verläufe jedoch von Anfang an in ganz bestimmtem Sinne auf gefasst, nämlich als Tendenzen, die durch den Einsatz der von dieser Theorie geleiteten Menschen daran verhindert werden könnten, zum Rückfall der Gesellschaft in Barbarei zu führen. Die durch den historischen Verlauf bewährte Theorie war nicht bloss als Theorie, sondern als Moment einer befreienden Praxis gedacht und mit der ganzen Ungeduld der bedrohten Menschheit verknüpft. Die Bewährung des unbeirrbaren Glaubens, der in diesem Kampf enthalten ist, hängt mit der schon eingetretenen Bestätigung jener vorausgesagten Tendenzen eng zusammen." Horkheimer, "Zum Problem der Wahrheit," 344.

belief and often attaching such adjectives as “mere” (*bloß*), “naïve” (*naiv*), and “blind” (*blind*) to it. Only in this passage, the unique case in which he applies “*Glauben*” to his own theory, is his use of the word approving.

In numerous other passages, too, Horkheimer leaves no doubt that the fundamental correctness of this theory cannot be doubted.³⁷ He openly states his overweening confirmation bias without recognizing it as such or as a problem. Horkheimer closes himself off from empirical feedback by way of confirmation bias, then declares that his confirmation bias is justified because his theory has been “proven” empirically sound. Any possible doubts about that will, could, or ought to be laid to rest in the future. And whether the future tense, conditional mood, or deontic mood is used somehow makes no difference to the “truth” of the theory. But no doubts should be raised in the first place because “the unswerving faith involved in this struggle” will not permit such doubts.

All of this leads to the sobering conclusion that “practice as corroboration” is just a fancy way of saying “faith.” Horkheimer’s Critical Theory fails the truth-test by all known and plausible criteria: logical consistency, explanatory power, parsimony, predictive validity, communal acceptance, phenomenological insight, openness to and withstanding of falsification, necessity, and universality. The only truth-theory by which Critical Theory could count as “true,” is one that posits Horkheimer’s outlook, values, and desires as truth-criteria. Such a “truth theory” simply does not deserve the name.

Had Horkheimer continued to maintain his stance in MM, had he continued to express something along the lines of the sentiment, “I wish to create a more humane world and need no reason to do so other than my concern and that of like-minded people for the wellbeing of

³⁷ Ibid., 192, 99, 200.

sentient beings,” he would have been far more consistent, lucid, perspicacious, and precise than he was in all of his grand theorizing, and Critical Theory would not merit the epithet of “political theology.” That Horkheimer could not take such a tack was due, in all likelihood and despite his many protests to the contrary, to precisely the “very strong need for [...] justification” that he had so eloquently denounced in MM.

Unfortunately, the cantankerous style and all-or-nothing logic of PT came more and more to characterize the thought of Horkheimer and his increasingly close collaborator, Adorno. It is clearly on display in “Traditional and Critical Theory,” “Philosophy and Critical Theory,” and *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, among many other works.³⁸ The result was tragic. Feeling that the *whole* of rationality and the modern world had betrayed them in failing to materialize in the expected and longed-for form, Horkheimer and Adorno declared it and its many diverse aspects and moments to be simply false – not aporetic, antinomic, amorphous, multifaceted, imperfect, incomplete, or even indecent but simply and wholly false. Unfortunately, it was this way of thinking, and not Horkheimer’s earlier and more pragmatic thought, that has conditioned the entire subsequent history of Critical Theory, with Horkheimer’s heirs oscillating between reifying and revising the supposition of actuality’s falseness.

Martin Heidegger’s early philosophy and much of his later work can perhaps most aptly be described as a soteriology in the form of a collective, *völkisch* existentialism, shaped in part by a philosophical anthropology of disjuncture and incompleteness, constructed on the unfulfilled promise of a fundamental ontology. It is true that, at times, Heidegger displays a

³⁸ Horkheimer, "Traditionelle und kritische Theorie."; Max Horkheimer and Herbert Marcuse, "Philosophie und kritische Theorie," *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* 6, no. 3 (1937); Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialektik der Aufklärung*. It is also very much on display in Marcuse’s independent work. See Herbert Marcuse, "Zum Begriff des Wesens," *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* 5, no. 1 (1936). For translations, see Horkheimer, "Traditional and Critical Theory."; Herbert Marcuse, "Philosophy and Critical Theory," in *Negations: Essays in Critical Theory* (London: MayFly, 2009); Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*; Marcuse, "The Concept of Essence."

meditative side, writing of all of Dasein's and Being's vicissitudes as merely phases of an indifferent process and as all equally valid ontologically. But, at other times, there are clear value-judgments and prescriptions in his philosophy. Overall, the latter tendency clearly dominates.

If nothing of the above seems to offer even a basic grip on Heidegger's thought, this is, unfortunately, far from accidental. Formulating preliminary remarks on Heidegger's philosophy may be a vain task. His thought is simply too dense, self-referential, and inconsistent to offer a ready point of access. The best approach to an understanding of Heidegger's thought is probably to leap into his hermeneutic circle, detailing its contours as one travels along them.

In *Being and Time (Sein und Zeit)*, Heidegger attempts a prolegomenon to a study of Being through an examination of *Dasein*. This examination of *Dasein* constitutes Heidegger's existential philosophy but he claims to have intended it merely as a prelude to his "fundamental ontology" (*Fundamentalontologie*). His starting claim is that all metaphysics after the pre-Socratics and prior to his own work has lost sight of the question of Being (*Seinsfrage*), thus losing its path. This metaphysics of presence, as he calls it, is based on "presence-at-hand" (*Vorhandenheit*), which is the state or quality of being present in a simple, objective manner. Such a metaphysics forgets *Dasein*'s temporal existence, wherein nothing is ever wholly and simply present – at least, not in an objective sense. "Dasein" is the term Heidegger uses to replace or advance on the concept of the subject as he understands it to have been formulated in the Western philosophical tradition: i.e., as a substance – extended, enduring, and self-identical. The "Dasein" of everyday German typically translates into English as "existence." The word is composed of two parts: the adverb *da* (there) and the noun *Sein* (being), with *sein* also being the infinitive "to be." Heidegger uses the term *Dasein* to stress the insubstantial nature of human

being, which is not a solid subject but, rather, an elusive “being-there,” a site for the ontological structures and dynamics that Heidegger will ascribe to it and an openness to its own potentiality and to Being itself.

In this task of approaching Being through an understanding of Dasein, Heidegger declares himself to be adopting the phenomenological method, pioneered by his mentor, Edmund Husserl. But Heidegger’s phenomenology is strikingly different than Husserl’s. Husserl—or, at least, the Husserl of Heidegger’s understanding—accepted Kant’s distinction between phenomena and noumena, with only the former being accessible to the subject. Husserl’s phenomenology, thus, examines the transcendental ego’s intentional relationship to phenomena and brackets the question of a mind-independent world of noumena. By way of contrast, Heidegger maintains that things or beings *show themselves*. According to Heidegger’s understanding of phenomenology, Dasein is not the creating or synthesizing subject, rendering phenomena distinct and meaningful according to its *a priori* mechanisms and molds, but, rather, the recipient of beings’ “self-showing” (*Scheinen*). For Heidegger, “Phenomenology means [...] to let what shows itself be seen from itself, just as it shows itself from itself.”³⁹

The notion of self-showing lies at the center of Heidegger’s theory of truth. He insists that truth is not fundamentally a matter of propositions corresponding to things, facts, or states of affairs in the world. Such a notion of truth is derivative, according to Heidegger. Rather, truth is essentially a matter of “unconcealment” (*aletheia*, Greek; *Unverborgenheit*, German). Humans do not discover the truth of beings, certainly not through a process of analysis; beings “disclose” (*erschließen*) themselves to Dasein. For Heidegger, truth (*Wahrheit*) does not pertain to

³⁹ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time: A Translation of Sein und Zeit*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany, NY: SUNY, 1996), 35. I use the traditional German pagination in my citations of *Sein und Zeit*. This pagination is included in the margins of Stambaugh’s translation and of the edition contained in Heidegger’s *Gesamtausgabe*.

knowledge but to things themselves: “What does ‘inquiring into “truth”’ mean here, the science of ‘truth’? Is ‘truth’ made thematic in this inquiry in the sense of a theory of knowledge or of judgment? Obviously not, for ‘truth’ means the same thing as ‘matter’ [...], ‘what shows itself’”⁴⁰ By contrast, falsehood or untruth is essentially a matter of the obscuring or distorting of beings.

Heidegger also sees himself very much as a hermeneuticist. Indeed, Dasein’s uniqueness comes in its being the being that seeks to understand its own being and, hence, to understand Being itself. In its essential activity, Dasein is interpretation and is thoroughly interpreted.

As the whole of *Being and Time* is a prelude to a proper treatment of Being, Heidegger cannot yet define Being but gestures enigmatically towards it: “What remains *concealed* in an exceptional sense, or what falls back and is *covered up* again, or shows itself only in a *distorted* way, is not this or that being but rather [...] the *being* of beings.”⁴¹ Part One of *Being and Time* occupies itself with developing a nomenclature that reinterprets the whole of Western metaphysics, pulling it out of the orbit of the subject and presence and into that of Dasein and Being. Simultaneously, Heidegger’s nomenclature outlines his existential philosophy and lays the groundwork for the prescriptivism of Part Two of *Being and Time*. The development of this self-referential terminology is a monumental task and probably represents Heidegger’s greatest claim to fame.

In line with his declared hermeneutic approach, Heidegger declares himself to begin not with the positing of abstract propositions of mind but, rather, with an interpretation of “average everydayness” (*durchschnittliche Alltäglichkeit*). In this average everydayness, as, indeed, in all of its “modes” (*Modi*) and “attunements” (*Gestimmtheiten*), Dasein’s being is defined by “care”

⁴⁰ Ibid., 213.

⁴¹ Ibid., 35. Emphasis in original.

(*Sorge*). This is to say that Dasein is not a self-contained mind thoroughly distinct in principle from a world but is, rather, always already engaged in its world, one which is meaningful to it and which exists not as a set of propositions but as a collective of entities and relations. Dasein cares about itself and its world, and its attitude is one of “circumspection” (*Umsicht*). Heidegger calls this way of Being, which is intrinsic to Dasein, “being-in-the-world” (*in-der-Welt-sein*).

Though Heidegger always writes of Dasein in the singular and never in the plural and never of multiple Daseinde, he does acknowledge that there exist other beings *like* Dasein; that is, other beings whose being involves questioning their being. In simple, non-Heideggerian terms, Heidegger is referring to other people. Just as Dasein is always already in the world, so is it always already with others. Heidegger calls Dasein’s basic attunement towards these others “concern” (*Fürsorge*) and its relations with these on the basis of concern “being-with” (*Mitsein*). Indifference is the negative mode of concern, though this is a different kind of indifference than that which we feel towards things. Heidegger writes, rather cryptically, that in its positive modes, there are two extreme possibilities for concern. One such mode is “leaping-in” (*Einspringen*), in which one Dasein, openly or surreptitiously, leaps into the place of another, taking over its care and dominating it. The other such mode is “leaping-ahead” (*Vorspringen* or *Vorausspringen*), in which one Dasein gives another the latter’s care “back to him as such,” helping “the other to become transparent to himself in his care and *free for it*.”⁴² Heidegger tells us that this leaping ahead is authentic care, the kind that pertains to another being like Dasein rather than to a what.

From this brief sketch of Dasein’s most fundamental existential condition, one can begin to discern the contours of Heidegger’s critique of theoreticism, another of his great claims to

⁴² Ibid., 122. Emphasis in original.

fame. Some aspects of this critique have already appeared above: i.e., Heidegger's rejection of the philosophy of the subject and of the metaphysics of presence. Another and related key component of this critique is the detached attitude that Heidegger ascribes to traditional theory, whose emphasis on abstraction and analysis does not *take care* of the subjects of its investigations but instead treats them in isolation, as inherently self-contained and without reference to Dasein or to the whole that is Dasein's world. By contrast to Descartes' and Kant's purported views of the subject as disinterested, Heidegger stresses Dasein's lack of objectivity—indeed, the meaningless of “objectivity” to such a being as Dasein—by emphasizing that Dasein's understanding of its world is always thoroughly conditioned by its modes and “moods” (*Stimmungen*), as well as by its culture as developed historically. Heidegger calls this historically developed dimension of Dasein its “historicity” (*Geschichtlichkeit*). Dasein is, thus, always “attuned” (*gestimmt*) in some way or another in a manner that exceeds pure cognition. Mood is “a primordial kind of being of Dasein in which it is disclosed to itself *before* all cognition and willing and *beyond* their scope of disclosure.”⁴³ Heidegger continues,

Even when Dasein is “sure” of its “whither” in faith or thinks it knows about its whence in rational enlightenment, all of this makes no difference in the face of the phenomenal fact that moods bring Dasein before the That of its There, which stares at it with the inexorability of an enigma.⁴⁴

Dasein is a fundamentally affective being whose self-understanding must be a hermeneutical and culturally specific undertaking. At best, one mood can be exchanged for another, but Dasein cannot simply step out of mood or of its cultural condition, its “thrownness” (*Geworfenheit*), to take stock of an affect- and supposition-free truth.

⁴³ Ibid., 136. Emphasis in original. Translation modified.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 136. Translation modified. “Auch wenn Dasein im Glauben seines „Wohin“ „sicher“ ist oder um das Woher zu wissen meint in rationaler Aufklärung, so verschlägt das alles nichts gegen den phänomenalen Tatbestand, daß die Stimmung das Dasein vor das Daß seines Da bringt, als welches es ihm in unerbittlicher Rätselhaftigkeit entgegenstarrt.“

Of course, Heidegger's critique of theoreticism also directs itself against the notion of objectivity as applied to beings unlike Dasein (i.e., objects or entities). By contrast to metaphysics' historical preoccupation with presence-at-hand, Heidegger's approach revolves around "readiness-to-hand" (*Zuhandenheit*). This way of being is not wholly amenable to the principle of identity, be it expressed qualitatively or quantitatively. Here, entities, or useful things, morph as our relations to them change. A hammer's weight is not precisely two and a half pounds; its weight is rather "too heavy for," "not heavy enough for," "just right for"... Both Dasein and the useful thing (*Zeug*) that is ready-to-hand are absorbed in their relation to one another—that is, their activity and its "in-order-to" (*das Um-Zu, Worum*)—without a clear distinction between them:

Association geared to useful things which show themselves genuinely only in this association, that is, hammering with the hammer, neither *grasps* these being thematically as occurring things nor does it even know of using or the structure of useful things as such. Hammering does not just have a knowledge of the useful character of the hammer; rather, it has appropriated this useful thing in the most adequate way possible. When we take care of things, we are subordinate to the in-order-to constitutive for the actual useful thing in our association with it.⁴⁵

The final aspect of Heidegger's critique of theoreticism flows from his aforementioned understanding of truth and involves his understanding of language and reason. A proper explication of this aspect of Heidegger's critique of theory requires a more thorough treatment of Dasein and its condition and so will have to wait for the moment. Suffice it to say for now that Heidegger believes that theory only comes into play when the "referential totality"

⁴⁵ Ibid., 69. Emphasis in original. "Der je auf das Zeug zugeschnittene Umgang, darin es sich einzig genuin in seinem Sein zeigen kann, z.B., das Hämmern mit dem Hammer, *erfaßt* weder dieses Seiende thematisch als vorkommendes Ding, noch weiß etwa gar das Gebrauchen um die Zeugstruktur als solche. Das Hämmern hat nicht lediglich noch ein Wissen um den Zeugcharakter des Hammers, sondern es hat sich dieses Zeug so zugeeignet, wie es angemessener nicht möglich ist. In Solchem gebrauchenden Umgang unterstellt sich das Besorgen dem für das jeweilige Zeug konstitutiven Um-zu." The final sentence may or may not be better translated as "In such an association of use, taking care subordinates itself to the in-order-to that is constitutive of the actual useful thing."

(*Verweisungsganzheit*) of being-in-the-world and handiness breaks down.⁴⁶ He takes such breakdowns as exceptional and deviant.

Nevertheless, Dasein and its world are not as consistent as Heidegger's holistic approach might at first suggest. "Facticity" (*Faktizität*) is the word that Heidegger uses to describe the actual being-in-the-world of Dasein, as distinct from the principle of being-in-the-world.

Heidegger's facticity has only so much to do with the word in its typical usage. It is decidedly not presence. Rather, it is the relational existence of Dasein in the world and its being "bound up in its 'destiny' with the Being of those beings which it encounters within its own world."⁴⁷

Dasein is not concentrated but diffused throughout its relations: "With its facticity, the being-in-the-world of Dasein is already dispersed in definite ways of being-in, perhaps even split up."⁴⁸

Heidegger stresses that facticity cannot be objectively described. It seems that it can only be experienced: "*Facticity is not the factuality of the factum brutum of something objectively present, but it is a characteristic of the being of Dasein taken on in its existence, although initially thrust aside. The that of facticity is never to be found by looking.*"⁴⁹

Heidegger undertakes to demonstrate that abstract time and space derive from and do not precede Dasein's factual existence, an existence defined by care, concern, readiness-to-hand, and Dasein's relations to itself. As the title of Heidegger's work suggests, time is a particularly important dimension/constituent of Dasein's being. Dasein is never simply present, it never simply endures across a given time, as a substance would. Instead, it exists simultaneously in the dimensions of past and future, understanding itself as a project moving between the two in a fluid present. Heidegger calls Dasein's excursions into the past, future, and present its

⁴⁶ Ibid., 76.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 56. Translation modified.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 56.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 135. Emphasis in original. Translation modified.

“ecstasies” (*Ekstasen*). As will be seen, the term as Heidegger uses it can bear the meaning of transcendence of the mundane but it initially should be understood in its literal sense as a departure from stasis or from an assigned place. For Heidegger, existence (*Existenz*) is not object constancy but consists, rather, of these departures of Dasein from itself, from its place, from its abstract present:

Understanding is always a present that “has-been.” [...] Attunement temporalizes itself as a future that “makes present.” [...] The present “arises” from or is held by a future that has-been. From this it becomes evident that *temporality temporalizes itself completely in every ecstasy, that is, in the ecstatic unity of the actual, complete, temporalizing of temporality is grounded the totality of the structural whole of existence, facticity, and falling prey, that is, the unity of the structure of care.*⁵⁰

Despite the simultaneity—if such a word can be used—of past, present, and future in Dasein, Heidegger sees Dasein’s future as being particularly constitutive of and essential to its being. In this respect, Dasein is a project and, perhaps, an openness to the possibilities of the future.⁵¹

Heidegger calls this essential aspect of Dasein “being-ahead-of-itself” (*Sich-vorweg-sein*).

Another, nearly ubiquitous facet of Dasein’s facticity is “the they” (*das Man*). The they is the anonymous purveyor of received opinions, fads, attitudes, and worldviews. In its assignation of acceptable descriptions and prescriptions, the they alienates Dasein from its essential “mineness” (*Jemeinigkeit*), from its mysterious and as yet undefined “ownmost potentiality-of-being” (*das eigenste Seinkönnen*). Heidegger writes, “Because the they presents every judgment and decision as its own, it takes the responsibility of Dasein away from it.” He continues, “Everyone is the other, and no one is himself. The *they*, which supplies the answer to

⁵⁰ Ibid., 350. Emphasis in original. “Ist das Verstehen je ‚gewesende‘ Gegenwart. [...] Zeitigt sich die Befindlichkeit als ‚gegenwärtigende‘ Zukunft. [...] ‚Entspringt‘ die Gegenwart aus, bzw. ist gehalten von einer gewesenden Zukunft. Daran wird sichtbar: *Die Zeitlichkeit zeitigt sich in jeder Ekstase ganz, das heißt in der ekstatischen Einheit der jeweiligen vollen Zeitigung der Zeitlichkeit gründet die Ganzheit des Strukturganzen von Existenz, Faktizität und Verfallen, das ist die Einheit der Sorgestruktur.*“

⁵¹ Ibid., 317-33.

the who of everyday Dasein, is the *nobody* to whom every Dasein has always already surrendered itself.”⁵² This denunciation of the they is clearly also a denunciation of democracy, mass society, and publicness (*Öffentlichkeit*):

We have shown earlier how the public “surrounding world” is always already at hand and taken care of in the surrounding world nearest to us. In utilizing public transportation, in the use of information services such as the newspaper, every other is like the next. This being-with-one-another dissolves one’s own Dasein completely into the kind of being of “the others” in such a way that the others, as distinguishable and explicit, disappear more and more. In this inconspicuousness and unascertainability, the they unfolds its true dictatorship.⁵³

Heidegger insists again and again that he is not passing any kind of value-judgment on the they and that he does not ascribe less reality to the “they-self” (*das Man-selbst*) than he does to Dasein’s ownmost potentiality-of-being. Indeed, he describes Dasein’s basic existential structures and modes as “equiprimordial” (*gleichursprünglich*).⁵⁴ Yet, Heidegger also describes the they-self as “inauthentic” (*uneigentlich*, lit. unown) and deems Dasein’s alienation in the they “falling prey” (*Verfallen*, lit. miss-falling, decaying, lapsing) and “entanglement” (*Verfängnis*, lit. wrongful capturing). He even goes so far as to call this state of dispersal in the they “nonbeing” (*Nicht-sein*).⁵⁵

At this point, a return to Heidegger’s critique of theory is apropos. This final aspect of Heidegger’s critique of theory flows from his truth-theory and involves his understanding of language, reason, and discourse. For Heidegger, *logos* is not representation in the sense of

⁵² Ibid., 127-8. Translation modified.

⁵³ Ibid., 127. Translation modified. “Früher wurde gezeigt, wie je schon in der nächsten Umwelt die öffentliche ‚Umwelt‘ zuhanden und mitbesorgt ist. In der Benutzung öffentlicher Verkehrsmittel, in der Verwendung des Nachrichtenwesens (Zeitung) ist jeder Andere wie die Andere. Dieses Miteinandersein löst das eigene Dasein völlig in die Seinsart ‚der Anderen‘ auf, so zwar, daß die Anderen in ihrer Unterschiedlichkeit und Ausdrücklichkeit noch mehr verschwinden.“

⁵⁴ Equiprimordiality is a lynchpin of Heidegger’s description of Dasein. Without it, Heidegger would be stuck with the task of explaining exactly how Dasein’s various existential structures are ordered temporally and causally with regards to one another and to the development of Dasein as a project.

⁵⁵ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 176.

symbolically depicting or semiotically referencing something that is fundamentally other than the depiction or the reference. Rather, because truth is essentially unconcealment, logos is a revealing or showing through words. It does not represent but, rather, evokes, reveals, or allows to experience. Logos “lets something be seen *as* something”; that is, logos infuses meaning in what would otherwise be a mere “sensation.”⁵⁶ Consequently, “signs” (*Zeichen*) “are not things which stand in an indicating relationship to another thing but are useful things which explicitly bring a totality of useful things to circumspection so that the worldly character of what is at hand makes itself known at the same time.”⁵⁷ Signs are not primarily logical marks for Heidegger. Rather, they direct Dasein to possible actions and attitudes. We understand signs primarily in responding to them. It is by way of these useful things that Dasein understands itself and its world: “[Dasein] primordially gives itself to understand its being and potentiality-of-being with regard to its being-in-the-world.”⁵⁸ That is to say, Dasein understands itself relationally, through a process of “reference” (*Bedeutung*). It is this relational understanding that gives “significance” (*Bedeutsamkeit*) to the world.

Significance is the dimension of Dasein’s “interpretation” (*Auslegung*, lit. laying-out). Interpretation is thoroughly conditioned by Dasein’s having-been (its historicity) and guided by its in-order-to and being-ahead-of-itself; that is, Dasein interprets within the confines of a historically developed culture and a futural project defined by its aims. It takes place against the backdrop of a “totality of relevance” (*Bewandtnisganzheit*), and this totality of relevance is familiar to Dasein beforehand through “fore-having” (*Vorhaben*). Interpretation may follow this presentation of fore-having, but the latter does not depend on the former, and it may be that the

⁵⁶ Ibid., 33.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 80.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 87.

former is never capable of doing justice to the latter. There is no understanding or interpretation outside of culture and destination. Interpretation assigns meaning to the beings Dasein encounters in the world, to others, and to Dasein itself. It provides the “as” (*als*) that infuses and appropriates what would otherwise be empty sensations. It names. The as relates the being encountered to Dasein, disclosing to Dasein how the being relates to Dasein’s past and future and, *hence*, what the being *is*. The very identity of each being we encounter is formed only in the nexus of culture and purpose:

Interpretation is never a presuppositionless grasping of something previously given. When the particular concretion of the interpretation in the sense of exact text interpretation likes to appeal to what “is there,” what is initially “there” is nothing else than the self-evident, undisputed prejudice of the interpreter, which is necessarily there in each point of departure of the interpretation as what is already “posited” with interpretation as such, that is, pre-given with fore-having, fore-sight, fore-conception.⁵⁹

This cultural and purposive relativism is the final and overarching aspect of Heidegger’s critique of theoreticism. Cut off from the totality of relevance, the abstract “statements” (*Aussagen*) of theory forget the primordially of interpretation, granting priority to presence, self-identity, logic, and grammar. Heidegger deems such a desiccated approach “the idolatry of the word” (*Wortgötzen*)⁶⁰

There is a way out of the state of decay of this idolatry and of the they. For Heidegger, the philosopher’s task (i.e., Heidegger’s task) is to disclose the true world and the rule of the they, paving the way for “authentic” (*eigentliches*) Dasein’s emergence:

Initially, Dasein is the they and for the most part it remains so. If Dasein explicitly discovers the world and brings it near, if it discloses its authentic being to itself, this discovering of “world” and disclosing of Dasein always comes about by clearing away

⁵⁹ Ibid., 150. “Auslegung ist nie ein voraussetzungsloses Erfassen eines Vorgegeben. Wenn sich die besondere Konkrete der Auslegung im Sinne der exakten Textinterpretation gern auf das beruft, was ‚dasteht‘, so ist das, was zunächst ‚dasteht‘, nichts anderes als die selbstverständliche, undiskutierte Vormeinung des Auslegers, die notwendig in jedem Auslegungsansatz liegt als das, was mit Auslegung überhaupt schon ‚gesetzt‘, das heißt in Vorhabe, Vorsicht, Vorgriff vorgegeben ist.“

⁶⁰ Ibid., 156.

coverings and obscurities, by breaking up the disguises with which Dasein cuts itself off from itself.⁶¹

A prescription for how this liberation is to be accomplished constitutes Part Two of *Being and Time*. It begins with death, or, more properly, with “being-toward-death” (*Sein-zum-Tode*). It is in the anticipation of dying, Heidegger writes, that Dasein comes face to face with the inevitability of its mineness and, with this, its potential-for-being-a-whole (*Ganzseinkönnen*), recuperated from its dispersion in time and resurrected from its nonbeing in the they: “In dying, it becomes evident that death is ontologically constituted by mineness and existence.”⁶² The anticipation of its own end forces Dasein to confront its essential mineness, whose diffusion in the they cannot outlive Dasein, cannot evade death.

This realization evokes the mood of anxiety (*Angst*) in Dasein. Heidegger tells us that anxiety is primordial in Dasein, perhaps its most originary mood. In its most primal form, anxiety has no definite object. It is an uneasiness about being-in-the-world *per se*: “What oppresses us is not this or that, nor is it everything objectively present together as a sum, but the *possibility* of things at hand in general, that is, the world itself.”⁶³ For Heidegger, anxiety seems to revolve around possibility itself, the very openness and indetermination of the world and Dasein’s possibilities for self-realization within it. *Angst* confronts Dasein with fact of its freedom and forces it to ask itself what it chooses to make of itself and of its world:

Angst individualizes and thus discloses Dasein as “solus ipse.” This existential “solipsism,” however, is so far from transposing an isolated subject-thing into the harmless vacuum of a worldless occurrence that it brings Dasein in an extreme sense precisely before its world as world, and thus itself before itself as being-in-the-world.⁶⁴

⁶¹ Ibid., 129. Translation modified. “Zunächst ist das Dasein Man und zumeist bleibt es so. Wenn das Dasein die Welt eigens entdeckt und sich nahebringt, wenn es ihm selbst sein eigentliches Sein erschließt, dann vollzieht sich dieses Entdecken von ‚Welt‘ und Erschließen von Dasein immer als Wegräumen der Verdeckungen und Verdunkelungen, als Zerbrechen der Verstellungen, mit denen sich das Dasein gegen es selbst abriegelt.“

⁶² Ibid., 240.

⁶³ Ibid., 187. Emphasis in original.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 188. Emphasis in original. Translation modified. “Die Angst vereinzelt und erschließt so das Dasein als ‚solus ipse‘. Dieser existenziale ‚Solipsismus‘ versetzt aber so wenig ein isoliertes Subjekt in die harmlose

The feeling of uncanniness thereby produced is why Dasein flees from itself into the they, leaving anxiety dormant within Dasein's being. However, being-toward-death can reanimate this primal anxiety: "*Authentic* being-toward-death *cannot evade* its ownmost non-relational possibility or *cover it over* in its flight and *reinterpret* it for the common sense of the they."⁶⁵

In this state of anxiety, Dasein first becomes open to hearing the "call of conscience" (*Gewissensruf/Ruf des Gewissens*). The call presents Dasein with its own insubstantiality and openness to potential, imploring Dasein to seize this potential, rather than flee from it: "The call of conscience has the character of *summoning* Dasein to its ownmost potentiality-of-being-a-self, by summoning it to its ownmost quality of being a lack."⁶⁶ Heidegger calls this lacking nature Dasein's "guilt" (*Schuld*). Heidegger claims that, though the call is always authentic, it can be misunderstood and distorted by the they-self.⁶⁷ For instance, Heidegger assures his readers that the call should not be understood as emanating from or summoning to a general conscience or world-conscience (*Weltgewissen*).⁶⁸ It is not a call to a cosmopolitan morality. Nor does *Schuld* represent guilt in the ethical sense of the word or the notion of indebtedness, both of which, Heidegger maintains, are derivative of the primal, existential *Schuld* and not vice-versa.

When understood and heeded properly, the call gives rise to "resoluteness" (*Entschlossenheit*). Resoluteness results in Dasein's becoming what it is: "Now, in resoluteness

Leere eines weltlosen Vorkommens, daß er das Dasein gerade in einem extremen Sinne vor seine Welt als Welt und damit es selbst vor sich selbst als In-der-Welt-sein bringt."

⁶⁵ Ibid., 260. Emphasis in original.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 269. Emphasis in original.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 274.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 278.

the most primordial truth [*Wahrheit*] of Dasein has been reached, because it is *authentic*.”⁶⁹ This accomplishment fundamentally changes Dasein’s orientation to its world and to others:

Authentic disclosedness then modifies equiprimordially the discoveredness of the “world” grounded in it and the disclosedness of being-with with others. The “world” at hand does not become different as far as “content,” the circle of the others is not exchanged for a new one, and yet the being toward things at hand which understands and takes care of things, and the concerned being-with with the others is now defined in terms of their ownmost potentiality-of-being-a-self.⁷⁰

But for what does the call call and in what undertaking is Dasein resolute? Heidegger is content to leave these obvious questions unanswered for most of his analysis but finally provides an answer deep into his treatment of resoluteness. In truth, Heidegger has already prepared the way for this answer in his treatment of falling prey. For it was in his initial treatment of falling prey that Heidegger made one of his first overtly *völkisch* moves in *Being and Time*, rejecting what might be called multiculturalism or cultural borrowing as inauthentic and calling instead for cultural renewal and insularism:

Tempting tranquillization aggravates entanglement. With special regard to the interpretation of Dasein, the opinion may now arise that understanding the most foreign cultures and “synthesizing” them with our own may lead to the thorough and first genuine enlightenment of Dasein about itself. Versatile curiosity and restlessly knowing it all masquerade as a universal understanding of Dasein. But fundamentally it remains undetermined and unasked *what* is then really to be understood [...] When Dasein, tranquillized and “understanding” everything, thus compares itself with everything, it drifts toward an alienation in which its ownmost potentiality for being-in-the-world is concealed. Entangled being-in-the-world is not only tempting and tranquillizing, it is at the same time *alienating*.⁷¹

⁶⁹ Ibid., 297. Translation modified. Emphasis in original.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 297-8. Emphasis in original. “*Eigentliche* Entschlossenheit modifiziert aber dann gleichursprünglich die in ihr fundierte Entdecktheit der ‚Welt‘ und die Erschlossenheit des Mitdaseins der Anderen. Die zuhandene ‚Welt‘ wird nicht ‚inhaltlich‘ eine andere, der Kreis der Anderen wird nicht ausgewechselt, und doch ist das verstehende besorgende Sein zum Zuhandenen und das fürsorgende Mitsein mit den Anderen jetzt aus deren eigenstem Selbstseinkönnen heraus bestimmt.“

⁷¹ Ibid., 177-8. Translation modified. Emphasis in original. “Die versucherische Beruhigung *steigert* das Verfallen. In der besonderen Rücksicht auf die Daseinsauslegung kann jetzt die Meinung aufkommen, das Verstehen der fremdesten Kulturen und die ‚Synthese‘ dieser mit der eigenen führe zur restlosen und erst echten Aufklärung des Daseins über sich selbst. Vielgewandte Neugier und ruhe-los Alles-kennen täuschen ein universalis Daseinsverständnis vor. Im Grunde bleibt aber unbestimmt und ungefragt, *was* denn eigentlich zu verstehen sei [...] In diesem beruhigten, alles ‚verstehenden‘ Sich-vergleichen mit allem treibt das Dasein einer Entfremdung zu, in der

Dasein's salvation involves not an escape from the they but an authentic appropriation and renewal of the they. Rather than falling prey to the temptations of "novelty" (*Neugier*), the "uncertainty" of the they's "idle talk" (*Die Zweideutigkeit des Geredes*), and exchange with other cultures, Dasein must modify the they and its relationship to the they from the accidental to the essential: "*Authentic being one's self* is not based on an exceptional state of the subject, a state detached from the they, *but is an existentiell modification of the they as an essential existential.*"⁷²

Only resoluteness can achieve such a modification. Resolute Dasein becomes the conscience for others, pulling them all into an authentic way of being-with shaped by a common project, a for-the-sake-of-which. Here Heidegger reveals what he means by "leaping-ahead," clearly referring to his own philosophizing:

In the light of the for-the-sake-of-which of the potentiality-of-being which it has chosen, resolute Dasein frees itself for its world. The resoluteness toward itself first brings Dasein to the possibility of letting the others who are with it "be" in their ownmost potentiality-of-being, and also discloses that potentiality in concern which leaps ahead and frees. Resolute Dasein can become the "conscience" of others. It is from the authentic being a self of resoluteness that authentic being-with-one-another first arises, not from ambiguous and jealous stipulations and talkative fraternizing in the they and in what they want to undertake.⁷³

Heidegger maintains that the "what" of Dasein's resoluteness is immaterial to the existential analysis of Dasein. What matters is the "whence."⁷⁴ And this is provided by Dasein's

sich ihm das eigenste Seinkönnen verbirgt. Das verfallende in-der-Welt-sein ist als versuchend-beruhigendes zugleich *entfremdend*."

⁷² Ibid., 130. Emphasis in original.

⁷³ Ibid., 298. Translation modified. "Aus dem Worumwillen des selbstgewählten Seinkönnens gibt sich das entschlossene Dasein frei für seine Welt. Die Entschlossenheit zu sich selbst bringt das Dasein erst in die Möglichkeit, die mitseienden anderen ‚sein‘ zu lassen in ihrem eigensten Seinkönnen und dieses in der vorspringendbefreienden Fürsorge mitzuerschließen. Das entschlossene Dasein kann zum ‚Gewissen‘ der anderen werden. Aus dem eigentlichen Selbstsein der Entschlossenheit entspringt allererst das eigentliche Miteinander, nicht aber aus den zweideutigen und eifersüchtigen Verabredungen und den redseligen Verbrüderungen im Man und dem, was man unternehmen will."

⁷⁴ Ibid., 383.

historicity. Steadfastly facing its death, Dasein must resolve to be what it is. It must resolve to take up the possibilities bequeathed to it by history in a radical manner, single-mindedly casting aside all novelty and ambiguity, all inauthentic possibilities of being in favor of a glorious resurrection of the past:

Authentic [...] understanding is so far from extricating itself from traditional interpretedness that it always grasps its chosen possibility in resolution from that interpretation and in opposition to it, and yet again for it. The resoluteness in which Dasein comes back to itself discloses the actual factual possibilities of authentic existing *in terms of the heritage* which that resoluteness *takes over* as thrown. Resolute coming back to thrownness involves *handing oneself over* to traditional possibilities, although not necessarily *as* traditional ones.⁷⁵

This turns out to be Heidegger's vaunted ownmost potentiality-of-being: a renewal of the past, a völkisch rebirth, an unwavering projection of the past into the future. Only in such a way can Dasein collect itself from its dispersal in the inauthentic they and temporal fracture. Only thus can Dasein experience itself as complete in the undivided "moment" (*Augenblick*), constituted and constitutive of past, present, and future *without any disjunction*. Only in affirming its past and projecting it into the future can Dasein accept its "fate" (*Schicksal*):

*Only a being that is essentially futural in its being so that it can let itself be thrown back upon its factual There, free for its death and shattering itself on it, that is, only a being that, as futural, is equiprimordially having-been, can hand down to itself its inherited possibility, take over its own thrownness and be in the Moment for "its time." Only authentic temporality that is at the same time finite makes something like fate, that is, authentic historicity, possible.*⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Ibid., 383. Translation modified. Emphasis in original. "Das eigentliche [...] Verstehen entzieht sich der überkommenen Ausgelegtheit so wenig, daß es je aus ihr und gegen sie und doch wieder für sie die gewählte Möglichkeit im Entschluß ergreift. Die Entschlossenheit, in der das Dasein auf sich selbst zurückkommt, erschließt die jeweiligen faktischen Möglichkeiten eigentlichen Existierens *aus dem Erbe*, das sie als geworfene übernimmt. Das entschlossene Zurückkommen auf die Geworfenheit birgt ein Sichüberliefern überkommener Möglichkeiten in sich, obzwar nicht notwendig *als* überkommener."

⁷⁶ Ibid., 385. Emphasis in original.

Cryptically but ominously, Heidegger tells us that it is “in communication and in battle” that this “power of destiny first becomes free.”⁷⁷ The result is a community of silence, in which nothing need be said, nothing need be argued, because everything is understood by all in advance, leaving no room for dissent:

Communication is never anything like a conveying of experiences, for example, opinions and wishes, from the inside of one subject to the inside of another. Mitdasein is essentially already manifest in attunement-with and understanding-with. Being-with is “explicitly” *shared* in discourse, that is, it already *is*, only unshared as something not grasped and appropriated.⁷⁸

In talking with one another the person who is silent can “let something be understood,” that is, he can develop an understanding more authentically than the person who never runs out of words [...] Authentic silence is possible only in genuine discourse. In order to be silent, Dasein must have something to say, that is, must be in command of an authentic and rich disclosedness of itself. Then reticence makes manifest and puts down “idle talk” [of the they]. As a mode of discourse, reticence articulates the intelligibility of Dasein so primordially that it gives rise to a genuine potentiality for hearing and to a being-with-one-another that is transparent.⁷⁹

Such is the Heidegger of *Being and Time*, his seminal and best-known work. In the 1930s, in a process he self-consciously described as “the turning” (*die Kehre*), Heidegger largely abandoned his philosophical quasi-anthropology and focus on Dasein in favor of an emphasis on an even more abstruse “history of being” (*Seinsgeschichte*). But he retained his essential outlook

⁷⁷ Ibid., 384-5. “Nur Seindes, das wesenhaft in seinem Sein zukünftig ist, so daß es frei für seinen Tod an ihm zerschellend auf sein faktisches Da sich zurückwerfen lassen kann, das heißt nur Seindes, das als zukünftiges gleichursprünglich gewesen ist, kann, sich selbst die ererbte Möglichkeit überliefernd, die eigene Geworfenheit übernehmen und augenblicklich sein für ‚seine Zeit‘. Nur eigentliche Zeitlichkeit, die zugleich endlich ist, macht so etwas wie Schicksal, das heißt eigentliche Geschichtlichkeit möglich.“

⁷⁸ Ibid., 162. Translation modified. Emphasis in original. “Mitteilung ist nie so etwas wie ein Transport von Erlebnissen, zum Beispiel Meinungen und Wünschen aus dem Inneren des einen Subjekts in das Innere des anderen. Mitdasein ist wesenhaft schon offenbar in der Mitbefindlichkeit und im Mitverstehen. Das Mitsein wird in der Rede »ausdrücklich « *geteilt*, das heißt es *ist* schon, nur ungeteilt als nicht ergriffenes und zugeeignetes.”

⁷⁹ Ibid., 164-5. “Wer im Miteinanderreden schweigt, kann eigentlicher »zu verstehen geben«, das heißt das Verständnis ausbilden, als der, dem das Wort nicht ausgeht [...] Nur im echten Reden ist eigentliches Schweigen möglich. Um schweigen zu können, muß das Dasein etwas zu sagen haben, das heißt über eine eigentliche und reiche Erschlossenheit seiner selbst verfügen. Dann macht Verschwiegenheit offenbar und schlägt das »Gerede« nieder. Verschwiegenheit artikuliert als Modus des Redens die Verständlichkeit des Daseins so ursprünglich, daß ihr das echte Hören können und durchsichtige Miteinandersein entstammt.“

throughout his career until, arguably, the very end. Overwhelmingly, Heidegger stayed true to his core concepts and outlooks from *Being and Time*: the question of Being, the casual dismissal of all other philosophies, humanity as merely a clearing for Being, truth as aletheia, one notion or another of all-consuming ontological imperilment, and the call for salvation through cultural renewal.

And this last point is crucial. One would have to be willfully blind to not see clear predilections towards National Socialism in *Being and Time*. Heidegger's call for Dasein to affirm its historical thrownness by leaping into a bold new future that revivifies the past is an exact existential analogue of the political theory of conservative revolution. While not all conservative revolutionaries became Nazis, the overwhelming majority did, and Heidegger was among them. With hindsight, it is clear that he saw in Hitler a fellow *Vorausspringer* and that the notion of *Vorausspringen* proved to be very much compatible with the *Führerprinzip*. And though race *per se* plays no part in Heidegger's thinking, his metaphysical conception of historical communities proved to be nearly as totalizing as biological racism. In any case and by all appearances, Heidegger seems to have been content to leave the Jews to their "fate" with the same malignant indifference that characterized so many of his less erudite countrymen. At the very time that Heidegger was in the midst of his vaunted turning, he was smearing the Jews as the "worldless" (*Weltlos*) purveyors of the "machinational" (*machenschaftlich*) thinking that had sundered humanity from Being. He might as well have used Hitler's terminology and deemed them *Kulturzerstörer*. Even after the war, there is no indication that Heidegger ever reformed in a meaningful way. For the embittered sage of Freiburg, the great tragedy of National Socialism was its failure to become the event (*Ereignis*) that disclosed a new stage of Being. There is scant reason to believe that he ever shifted his views on this matter.

But what in Heidegger is tainted and what can be salvaged? There is no denying the power of Heidegger's approach to philosophy from the perspective of average everydayness. The contrast to the cloistering tendencies of Descartes, Kant, and Husserl could not be greater. Heidegger's thought in this regard remains the most powerful and articulated iteration of the thesis that the human cannot be thought apart from its involvement in its world. His reconceptualization of the subject as a clearing opened by temporal disjuncture is uncanny, bold, and brilliant. His cultural holism heavily influenced structuralism and any number of other important philosophical movements in the latter half of the twentieth century and beyond. His increasingly enigmatic approaches to Being as the radical other of human categories still fascinates and inspires.

For all of that, Heidegger's detractors are basically right to characterize him as a prophet, pronouncing the nature of things from on high, without feeling any need to justify his pontifications. Though Heidegger tries hard to avoid the term, he too has an epistemology. Along with his truth-theory, it is fundamentally unsound. A number of philosophers and their followers have an overwhelming tendency to confuse compelling, interesting, novel, and apparently plausible insights with self-evident universal truths. The desire to skirt evidence-giving and perspective-taking has accompanied and partially constituted philosophy from its beginnings. But Heidegger takes this dynamic to another level. "Unconcealment," "disclosure," and "aletheia" all quite literally mean "revelation." In all of the above, something greater than the recipient of the act is revealing itself to the recipient, who is a mere vessel, at most, of that revealing. This might not be a problem as far as truth, honesty, accuracy, and practicality are concerned except that different persons frequently have different—indeed contradictory—revelations. The fundamentalist Christian is as sure as his revealed truth as the fundamentalist

Muslim is of his. The Bolshevik is as sure of his revealed truth as the Nazi is of his. Such a situation of mutually exclusive and all-embracing ideologies is untenable to say the least.

Hence, the necessity of evidence, logic, reason-giving, testing, and perspective-taking.

But such processes are doomed to fail, Heidegger suggests, because all interpretation is thoroughly determined by affect and cultural bias. There is no “there” there to universal philosophy; there is only the philosopher’s prejudice or fore-having. Yet, such considerations never prevented Heidegger from formulating and propagating his own universal assertions on the subjects of Dasein and Being. There is at the heart of Heidegger’s thought an unbridgeable abyss between Heidegger the ontologist and Heidegger the hermeneuticist, between the notion of *aletheia* or self-showing and the notion of fore-having, between the understanding that “frees” beings to be discovered in “*their own* possibilities” and the interpretation that reveals nothing but the “self-evident, undisputed prejudice of the interpreter.”⁸⁰ And it is Heidegger the ontologist who consistently wins out over Heidegger the hermeneuticist, succumbing to his very own idolatry of the word.

The prime example of this idolatry is Heidegger’s attachment to the word “Sein” or, in his later work, “Seyn.” The notion of Being does an incredible amount of work for Heidegger from the very beginning of his thought, without, however, Heidegger ever having defined it, grasped it, or disclosed it. Heidegger interprets all of what is normally called human life and history through the lens of Being without having provided himself or his reader any remotely clear sense of what this lens is. Perhaps one should not expect clarity from philosophy into the meaning of Being. It is, after all, “what remains concealed in an exceptional sense, or what falls back and is covered up again, or shows itself only in a distorted way.” Perhaps Heidegger is

⁸⁰ Ibid., 144, 50. Emphasis in original.

correct to assert that it is silence that knows better than the most reasoned discourses. Fair enough, but it might be best in that case not to build an aspiringly universal philosophical system on the foundation of such a shimmering and diaphanous foundation.

“Eigentlichkeit” is another fine example of Heidegger’s idolatry. It is never clear on what basis Heidegger assigns Eigentlichkeit. What makes Dasein’s “authentic” state anymore authentic than the they-self? What determines a possibility as Dasein’s “ownmost possibility of being”? This is an especially pressing question considering Heidegger’s constant insistence that the many moods and structures of Dasein are equiprimordial.

To be authentic is to be so engaged in one’s supposed authenticity that the very question of authenticity cannot even arise. This is Heidegger’s notion of the “moment,” in which no trace of ambivalence or uncertainty remains. Such engagement requires absolute unthinking commitment to precisely *one* ideal, *one* goal. Any more than one would invoke conflict between or among the ideals. And with conflict would come doubt and ambiguity. One needs a single Absolute. But when one thing alone is needful, the murder of millions becomes unessential.

Even “Dasein” bears many of the marks of idolatry. As Heidegger describes it, Dasein is far from just a clearing, far from simply a being-there; it is overloaded with structures. Heidegger declares that these structures are of an existential nature and that Dasein is only incidentally or derivatively human, only secondarily existentiell. But it is the existentiell that motivates and determines the existential in Heidegger. His evident desire to escape the burdens of subjectivity—i.e., mundane decision, ambiguity, alienation, and disenchantment—determine the shape of his ontology. Heidegger—whatever else he may have been—was clearly human, all too human. And his treatment of Dasein as extra-human and of Being in general clearly bear the marks of human longing, anxiety, and frustration, all of which exist as merely human feelings

and impulses prior to and far more surely than as the ontological and existential structures Heidegger takes them to be. They are shaped by the fore-having of his anxiety, not by the universal condition of humanity.

It should be no surprise that Heidegger's approach leads to a confusion between the personal and specific, on the one hand, and the universal, on the other. Heidegger's holism calls attention to the manner in which the identities of beings subtly shade into one another in the processes of life and thought. But, in its circumvention of both subject and object, Heidegger's holism also has the effect of removing any measure for the accuracy of his insights and propositions, any means of gauging or testing them. Such imagined freedom from the resistance of experience can easily lead one to believe that whatever one posits, whatever insight resonates with one, is universally and necessarily trans-subjectively true, that one's frustrations, anxieties, and desires constitute universally compelling predicates or structures. In this light, it is no wonder that Heidegger never writes of Dasein in the plural or of multiple Daseiende. There is only one proper Dasein: Heidegger in his all-consuming introspection. In such ways can holism shade into solipsism. The abuse of holism is a telling point of contact between Heidegger and the Frankfurt School.

Another such point of contact is their shared rejection of "traditional theory." Heidegger is radically inconsistent on this point, but he typically gives the impression that theory does not operate on the basis of care and concern. In fact, it does. Indeed, care and concern can foster a theoretical attitude. The discovery, by way of observation and testing in argument and experimentation, of which predicates apply under which sets of conditions directly bears strongly on people's relations to their worlds. This process of discovery is called "theory." It has improved greatly upon the experience of human life and has still more much more potential to do

so. True, many strains of theory have exceeded their scope. They have posited their claims as universally applicable; cast experience as fundamentally self-present, self-identical, as thoroughly qualifiable or quantifiable; and attempted to reduce amorphous percepts into clear and distinct phenomena. But none of this negates the deep usefulness—indeed, the readiness-to-hand—of theory for shaping and improving life and for helping to establish which predicates apply in which situations, an endeavor that constitutes so much of life and of what Heidegger calls being-in-the-world.

In his introduction to the *Cambridge Companion to Heidegger*, the philosopher Charles Guignon writes,

The goal of [Heidegger's] inquiry [in *Being and Time*] is to identify the “essential structures” that make up the “formal scaffolding” of any Dasein whatsoever. For this reason the phenomenology of everydayness is coupled with a hermeneutic or interpretation designed to bring to light the hidden basis for the unity and intelligibility of the practical life-world.⁸¹

Guignon is precisely right, and this is precisely why Heidegger is a theorist in the traditional sense of the word. Heidegger, too, makes universal claims, asserting the definite qualities of things and massively abstracting from everyday life in his “exploration” of it. Yes, his theory takes everydayness as its starting point but it treats everydayness entirely in a theoretical manner. Heidegger does not claim an Archimedean point to describe a detached subject and disinterested world. Ironically and even more improbably, he claims an Archimedean point to describe an engaged subject and an interpreted world. Far from being a self-disclosing fundamental ontology, Heidegger's philosophy is an outgrowth of a specific theoretical mood and project, executed in a specific manner, with specific insights and biases.

⁸¹ Charles B Guignon, ed., *Cambridge Companion to Heidegger*, 2nd ed. (New York: Cambridge, 2006), 6.

To close the hermeneutic circle, let us return to Heidegger's extreme relativism. Even setting aside the overriding conflict between Heidegger's ontology and hermeneutics, this relativism remains woefully untenable. In the first place, nowhere in *Being and Time* does he argue for this relativism; he simply asserts its truth in evocative fashion. Because Heidegger is correct that human beings really are affective and imaginative creatures and not merely logical, this method of evocation is indispensable to all philosophizing and to all communication of any type. But, as noted above, it is far from sufficient. Theses as controversial, totalizing, and counterintuitive as the complete incommensurability of cultures and the thoroughly particular and constructed nature of facthood must be argued. One need not appeal to "objectivity" to suggest that any number of the interpretations or percepts that we typically deem "facts" are so general among human beings as to be *nearly* universal in *practice*, even if universality is impossible in *principle*. In the same vein, one need not posit a simple, monolithic human nature to maintain that there exist a great number of critically important commonalities among human beings and cultures. Nor has Heidegger successfully closed off the possibilities that even in cases in which facts are different from culture to another, argument and aesthetic exchange can sometimes lead to consensus, compromise, or an acceptance of the validity of others' points of views. Nor need one avail oneself of "objectivity," "unbiasedness," or "indifference," to argue that the cultivation of empathy, emotional restraint, and intellectual honesty are critical to productive conversation and argument across cultural and intellectual divides. One can, as Aristotle argued and Tom Rockmore reiterates in his critique of Heidegger, be attuned to or emotionally biased in favor of the truth in one's dealings with others. Finally, truth itself need not be understood as a given nor as an end but can be thought rather as something like the relational non-totality of always incomplete stipulations of which predicates apply under which

conditions. Such a notion of truth is probably incompatible with the profound desire for salvation that is the guiding concern of Heidegger's existential philosophy. But perhaps this notion of truth also dispenses with the need for salvation.

Clearly, to be a Heideggerian is not *per force* to be a Nazi. One need not accept Heidegger's *völkisch* proclivities and stereotyped understanding of history to appreciate the greater part of his methodology and existential ontology, nor need one go to his extremes of discursive insularity. But to be a Heideggerian is to be strongly predisposed to totalizing, quasi-religious thinking of a type that is not so different from the revelatory thinking that supported Hitler's own worldview and is characteristic of fanatics of all stripes. To be a Heideggerian is to accept uncritically and without regard to intersubjectivity one's ownmost (*eigenste*) anxieties and longings as guideposts to the Truth.

Carl Schmitt is one of the most powerful and enigmatic thinkers of the twentieth century. Schmitt defies ready categorization. It is impossible to treat Schmitt solely as a legal theorist. Such treatment would defy Schmitt's own maxim that the law cannot contain the strangeness and violence of real life. It might, then, seem appropriate to treat Schmitt as a political theorist of a realist persuasion, and Schmitt frequently gives the impression that he sees himself as such. But this reading is not tenable, either. Schmitt's tone is too impassioned and romantic to allow him to be counted as a realist – his love of paradox too great, his strange homilizing too pronounced, and his preference for absolutes all too clear.

This preference for absolutes runs sometimes covertly but always strongly throughout Schmitt's three most famous works: *Political theology* (*Politische Theologie*, 1922/1934), *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy* (*Die geistesgeschichtliche Lage des heutigen Parlamentarismus*, 1923/1926), and *The Concept of the Political* (*Der Begriff des Politischen*,

1932).⁸² Yet, these same works contain stinging critiques of the supposedly ineffectual idealism of Schmitt's liberal and legal-positivist opponents, whose thought Schmitt rousingly portrays as hopelessly abstract and out of touch with the struggles of real life. The contradiction between Schmitt's scathing critiques of political idealism and his own propensity for it catalyzes a dialectic that drives Schmitt's thought and constitutes one of the enduring sources of his appeal, potency, and menace.

Schmitt argues against the liberal-democratism and legal positivism of his contemporary Hans Kelsen in favor of an in-principle absolute sovereign to vouchsafe and unify the state. Schmitt formulates his best-known maxim on the very first page of *Political Theology*: "Sovereign is he who decides on the exception."⁸³ According to this formula, the true sovereign knows no restraint, brooks no opposition, and, most importantly, *requires no legal or institutional sanction*. In the final analysis for Schmitt, sovereign is *whoever* decides the exception – whoever, *in fact*, has the strength to declare a crisis and determine its outcome. Nowhere in this work or in the theoretical works that followed does Schmitt add any qualifications to this understanding of sovereignty, which embodies Hobbes' axiom that *auctoritas, non veritas, facit legem*. For Schmitt insists that,

The decision on the exception is a decision in the true sense of the word. Because a general norm, as represented by an ordinary legal prescription, can never encompass a total exception, the decision that a real exception exists cannot therefore be entirely derived from this norm.⁸⁴

⁸² Schmitt, *Politische Theologie*; Schmitt, *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*; Carl Schmitt, *Der Begriff des Politischen* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1932). The latter was originally published as Carl Schmitt, "Der Begriff des Politischen" *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik* 58, no. 1 (1927).

⁸³ Schmitt, *Political Theology*. "Souverän ist, wer über den Ausnahmezustand entscheidet."

⁸⁴ *Ibid.* "Die Entscheidung über die Ausnahme ist nämlich im eminenten Sinne Entscheidung. Denn eine generelle Norm, wie sie der normal geltende Rechtssatz darstellt, kann eine absolute Ausnahme niemals erfassen und daher auch die Entscheidung, daß ein echter Ausnahmefall gegeben ist, nicht restlos begründen." Schmitt, *Politische Theologie*, 11.

Though the qualifier “entirely” (*restlos*) might lead one to believe that Schmitt will offer some criteria by which the exception can be determined, he does not. Indeed, he continues: “The exception cannot be circumscribed factually and made to conform to a preformed law.”⁸⁵ All Schmitt offers by way of moderation is his stipulation that “the *most* [*höchstens*] guidance the constitution can offer is to indicate who can act in such a case,” but this stops well short of an endorsement for the constitution to offer such a candidate or a requirement that the sovereign be constitutionally named. Because the question of “whether the extreme exception can be vanished from the world is not a juristic question” but is fundamentally a question of power, there remains a thoroughly valid question of “who is competent to act when the legal system fails to answer the question of competence.”⁸⁶

Further, Schmitt follows Jean Bodin, or his understanding of Bodin, in insisting on the indivisibility of sovereignty, on its concentration in one sovereign person.⁸⁷ This is crucial. Because sovereignty is ultimately a matter of will—the will to decide when the exception has occurred, how to confront it, and what order to institute in its wake—the will must be undivided. Such considerations ultimately lead Schmitt to identify the sovereign with the state itself:

Everyone agrees that whenever antagonisms appear within a state, every party wants the general good – therein resides after all the *bellum omnium contra omnes*. But sovereignty (*and thus the state itself*) resides in deciding this controversy, that is, in determining definitively what constitutes public order and security, in determining when they are disturbed, and so on.⁸⁸

And it is from this absolute decision of the undivided sovereign that each political order springs, only later to be formalized in norms and laws:

⁸⁵ Ibid., 6.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 7, 11. My emphasis.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 8.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 9. My emphasis. “Alle sind darüber einig, daß, wenn innerhalb eines Staates Gegensätze auftreten, jede Partei natürlich nur das allgemeine Beste will—darin besteht ja das *bellum omnium contra omnes*—, daß aber die Souveränität, und damit der Staat selbst, darin besteht, diesen Streit zu entscheiden, also definitive zu bestimmen, was öffentlich Ordnung und Sicherheit ist, wann sie gestört wird usw.” Schmitt, *Politische Theologie*, 15.

After all, every legal order is based on a decision, and also the concept of the legal order, which is applied as something self-evident, contains within it the contrast of the two distinct elements of the juristic – norm and decision. Like every other order, the legal order rests on a decision and not a norm.⁸⁹

Thus, in the “absolute purity” (*absolute Reinheit*) of the decision on the exception, “the state remains, whereas the law recedes” and “the norm is destroyed.”⁹⁰ This decision ultimately takes the form of a declaration of friends and enemies. It is the friend-enemy binary, Schmitt proclaims, that constitutes the very essence of the political. The political is an autonomous sphere for Schmitt, fundamentally distinct from and independent of the moral or the aesthetic. In fact, the political subsumes these categories because, as Schmitt writes, “We have come to recognize that the political is the total, and as a result we know that any decision about whether something is *unpolitical* is always a *political* decision, irrespective of who decides and what reasons are advanced.”⁹¹ For Schmitt, the political, like the sovereign and the decision, is an intellectually autonomous and pure category. In fact, it is the only pure category, the norm of norms:

The political enemy need not be morally evil or aesthetically ugly; he need not appear as an economic competitor, and it may even be advantageous to engage with him in business transactions. But he is, nevertheless, the other, the stranger; and it is sufficient for his nature that he is, in a specially intense way, existentially something different and alien, so that in the extreme case conflicts with him are possible. These can neither be decided by a previously determined general norm nor by the judgment of a “disinterested” and therefore “neutral” third party.⁹²

⁸⁹ Ibid., 11. “Denn jede Ordnung beruht auf einer Entscheidung, und auch der Begriff der Rechtsordnung, der gedankenlos als etwas selbstverständliches angewandt wird, enthält der Gegensatz der zwei verschiedenen Elemente des Juristischen in sich. Auch die Rechtsordnung, wie Jede Ordnung, beruht auf einer Entscheidung und nicht auf einer Norm.“ Schmitt, *Politische Theologie*, 16. There is an interesting parallel between Schmitt’s notion of a political order springing from a decision in reaction to a crisis, only later being formalized in civil and criminal law, and Thomas Kuhn’s notion of a scientific paradigm springing from an answer to a problem, only later being formalized in scientific laws. To some degree and in some way, both Schmitt and Kuhn see an emphasis on law “itself” as emblematic of an order’s breakdown. See Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*.

⁹⁰ Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 12-13.

⁹¹ Ibid., 2.

⁹² Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, trans. George Schwab, Expanded ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2007), 27. Translation modified. “Der politische Feind braucht nicht moralisch böse, er braucht nicht ästhetisch häßlich zu sein; er muß nicht als wirtschaftlicher Konkurrent auftreten, und es kann vielleicht sogar vorteilhaft: scheinen, mit ihm geschäftlich zu machen. Er ist eben der andere, der Fremde, und es genügt zu seinem Wesen, daß

The real friend-enemy grouping is ontologically so strong and decisive that the nonpolitical antagonism, in the very moment that it effects this grouping, sets aside its hitherto “purely” religious, “purely” economic, “purely” cultural criteria and motives, and is subjected to the entirely new, peculiar, and—viewed from the “purely” religious or “purely” economical and other “pure” points of departure—often very inconsequential and “irrational” conditions and consequences of the henceforth politicized situation.⁹³

Schmitt does, however, seem to take for granted that a people has a true enemy and that the choice of enemy is not entirely arbitrary. But the only criterion that he cites for deciding upon the enemy is that the enemy must intend to “negate his opponent’s way of life,” emphasizing once again that only the actual participants in the political arena can decide this.⁹⁴ It is critical to note that the “threat” posed by the enemy need not be mortal or even physical; it is enough that the enemy pose a cultural threat to one’s way of life (*eigener Art Existenz*). In this way, Schmitt subordinates not only any given ethical conflict to the political but ethics itself. The ought *per se* somehow passes over from the ethical to the political. This is demonstrated in the extreme case of war, the taking and sacrificing of human life:

War, the readiness of combatants to die, the physical killing of human beings who belong on the side of the enemy – all this has no normative meaning, but an existential meaning only, particularly in a real combat situation with a real enemy. There exists no rational purpose, no norm no matter how true, no program no matter how exemplary, no social ideal no matter how beautiful, no legitimacy or legality which could justify men in killing each other for this reason. If such physical destruction of human life is not motivated by an existential threat to one’s own way of life, then it cannot be justified. Just as little can war be justified by ethical and juristic norms. If there really are enemies in the existential

er in einem besonders intensiven Sinne existenziell etwas anderes und Fremdes ist, so daß im extremen Fall Konflikte mit ihm möglich sind, die weder durch eine im voraus getroffene generelle Normierung, noch durch den Spruch eines ‘unbeteiligten’ und daher ‘unparteiischen’ Dritten entscheiden werden können.” Schmitt, *Der Begriff des Politischen*, 27.

⁹³ Schmitt, *Der Begriff des Politischen*, 38-9. My translation. “Die reale Freund-Feindgruppierung ist seinsmäßig so stark und ausschlaggebend, daß der nichtpolitische Gegensatz in demselben Augenblick, in dem er diese Gruppierung bewirkt, seine bisherigen ‚rein‘ religiösen ‚rein‘ wirtschaftlichen ‚rein‘ kulturellen Kriterien und Motive zurückstellt und den völlig neuen, eigenartigen und, von jenem ‚rein‘ religiösen oder ‚rein‘ wirtschaftlichen und andern ‚reinen‘ Ausgangspunkt gesehen, oft sehr inkonsequenten und ‚irrationalen‘ Bedingungen und Folgerungen der nunmehr politisierten Situation unterworfen wird.”

⁹⁴ Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 27.

sense as meant here, then it is justified, but only politically, to repel and fight them physically.⁹⁵

The political, then, grounds “justice” in Schmitt’s world. Liberalism refuses to recognize the priority of the political and instead “has attempted only to tie the political to the ethical and to subjugate it to economics.”⁹⁶

The political can never be surpassed or rendered obsolete. For Schmitt, there can be no possibility of a world-state that regulates political and social life in the name of universalist values. Such a notion is intrinsically contradictory because the concept of a state presupposes that of an enemy.⁹⁷ If there is no external enemy, there must be an internal enemy, which puts the lie to the notion of a truly universal state, in which all of humanity falls under the category of “friend.” Instead of advancing human progress, Schmitt proclaims, the marriage of universalism and politics, often in the guise of legal positivism, drives the most brutal imperialist expansion and domination. According to Schmitt, such imperialism is particularly destructive because it casts the enemy as an enemy of humanity itself. It lacks the honesty and restraint of the interstate system as developed in Europe from the time of the Peace of Westphalia, in which, Schmitt claims, wars were limited, non-ideological affairs, with clear-cut rules and boundaries – far removed from the total wars of the age of ideology that began with the French Revolution.⁹⁸

⁹⁵ Ibid., 49. “Der Krieg, die Todesbereitschaft kämpfender Menschen, die physische Tötung von andern Menschen, die auf der Seite des Feindes stehen, alles das hat keinen normativen, sondern nur einen existenziellen Sinn, und zwar in der Realität einer Situation des wirklichen Kampfes gegen einen wirklichen Feind, nicht in irgendwelchen Idealen, Programmen oder Normativitäten. Es gibt keinen rationalen Zweck, keine noch so richtige Norm, kein noch so vorbildliches Programm, kein noch so schönes soziales Ideal, keine Legitimität oder Legalität, die es rechtfertigen könnte, daß Menschen sich gegenseitig dafür toten. Wenn eine solche physische Vernichtung menschlichen Lebens nicht aus der seinsmäßigen Behauptung der eigenen Existenzform gegenüber einer ebenso seinsmäßigen Verneinung dieser Form geschieht, so läßt sie sich eben nicht rechtfertigen. Auch mit ethischen und juristischen Normen kann man keinen Krieg begründen. Gibt es wirklich Feinde in der seinsmäßigen Bedeutung, wie es hier gemeint ist, so ist es sinnvoll, aber nur politisch sinnvoll, sie nötigenfalls physisch abzuwehren und mit ihnen zu kämpfen.“ Schmitt, *Der Begriff des Politischen*, 49-50.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 61.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 53.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 54, 66-76. See also Carl Schmitt, “The Age of Neutralizations and Depoliticizations,” in *The Concept of the Political* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2007). There is a clear affinity between Schmitt and some of the more

Even as an ideal, the notion of a world-state is distinctly unappealing to Schmitt, conjuring images of a soulless technocracy:

If, in fact, all humanity and the entire world were to become a unified entity based exclusively on economics and on technically regulating traffic, then it would still be no more a “social entity” than tenants in a tenement house, customers purchasing gas from the same utility company, or passengers on the same bus are a social “entity.” An interest group concerned exclusively with economics or traffic cannot become more than that in the absence of an adversary.⁹⁹

Moreover, Schmitt suggests that such a quasi-world-state could go terribly awry, resulting in some unnamed but frightful infringement of liberties or degradation of humanity.

Prognostications as to the ultimate fate of such a non-state and its citizens cannot be justified and are merely “optimistic or pessimistic conjectures, all of which finally lead to an anthropological confession of faith [*Glaubensbekenntnis*].”¹⁰⁰

Ultimately, Schmitt’s political formula is existential in the sense that it revolves around the subject’s self-determination. The sovereign realizes himself as the state in his act of deciding, which simultaneously realizes a people as a political community and denominates another people as its enemy, in the overcoming of which the state realizes itself.¹⁰¹ Individuals realize themselves as members of the state or as its enemies. The law merely formalizes and

politically radical structuralists and post-structuralists on the issue of universalism. It underlies Schmitt’s enthusiastic reception among some influential elements of the contemporary left.

⁹⁹ Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 57. Translation modified. “Würde tatsächlich auf der Grundlage einer nur wirtschaftlichen und verkehrstechnischen Einheit die ganze Menschheit und die ganze Erde geeint, so wäre das zunächst noch nicht mehr ‚soziale Einheit‘ wie die Bewohner einer Mietskaserne oder die an dasselbe Gaswerk angeschlossenen Gasbezieher oder die Reisenden des gleichen Autobus eine soziale ‚Einheit‘ sind. Solange diese Einheit nur wirtschaftlich oder verkehrstechnisch bliebe, könnte sie sich mangels eines Gegners nicht einmal zu einer Wirtschafts- und Verkehrspartei erheben.“ Schmitt, *Der Begriff des Politischen*, 58. See also Schmitt, “The Age of Neutralizations and Depoliticizations.”

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 57-8.

¹⁰¹ There are very strong parallels here with Mussolini’s “Doctrine of Fascism,” which also echoes, and perhaps misconstrues, Fichtean and Hegelian themes of self-realization through overcoming an adversary. See Benito Mussolini, “The Doctrine of Fascism,” in *Readings in Western Civilization: Twentieth-Century Europe*, ed. John W Boyer and Jan Goldstein (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1987) 219-32; JG Fichte, *Introductions to the Wissenschaftslehre and other Writings*, trans. Daniel Breazeale, Daniel Breazeale ed. (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1994); GWF Hegel, *Outlines of the Philosophy of Right*, ed. and trans. Stephen Houlgate (New York: Oxford, 2008).

regulates this state and community but can never contain, ground, or vouchsafe it; only the authentic decision and the will to see it through can do this. In this way, “the exception confounds the unity and order of the rationalist scheme.”¹⁰²

In none of this does Schmitt cast his thinking as mythological, religious, or theological. Indeed, he seems at times to distance himself from such thinking, not only in the muscular realism on display above but also in statements more or less expressly denouncing metaphysical or theological thinking, such as any “anthropological confession of faith.” Further, he insists on the “scientific” (*wissenschaftlich*) and “radically systematic” (*radikal systematische*) nature of his exploration of sovereignty.¹⁰³ Yet, he attacks Kelsen’s liberal-democratism and legal positivism precisely for its lack of religious content:

When Kelsen gives the reasons for opting for democracy, he openly reveals the mathematical and natural-scientific character of his thinking: Democracy is the expression of a political relativism and a scientific orientation that are liberated from miracles and dogmas based on human understanding and critical doubt.¹⁰⁴

Why would a realist like Schmitt have a problem with a way of thinking that eschews miracles and dogmas in favor of a scientific orientation? The answer is that for Schmitt theory ultimately shares the same intellectual groundlessness characteristic of politics. There is the mythologizing and theologizing that comes from mere laziness or formalism and then there is that which comes from the recognition of intellectual impotence and the potency of real life. Myth is the quasi-intellectual expression of this overpowering real life because it is myth and, in its more developed form, theology that go back to “ultimate problems” and give “a decisive

¹⁰² Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 14.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 45-6.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 42. “In der Begründung, die Kelsen seinem Bekenntnis zur Demokratie gibt, spricht sich die konstitutionell mathematisch-naturwissenschaftliche Art seines Denkens offen aus: die Demokratie ist der Ausdruck eines politischen Relativismus und einer Wunder- und dogmenbefreiten, auf den menschlichen Verstand und den Zweifel der Kritik gegründeten Wissenschaftlichkeit.“ Schmitt, *Politische Theologie*, 55.

answer to radical questions.”¹⁰⁵ For Schmitt, mythology and theology ground intellectual and political reality – not vice versa. Thus, realism is in no way incompatible with mythologizing; political realism, at least, demands mythologizing.

The alternative to such mythologizing is not an objective understanding of the world but, rather, annihilation at the hands of those who are unafraid of mythologizing, whose myths give them the strength to pull themselves out of the abyss of meaninglessness and cast others into the abyss of death. As Schmitt puts it, “If a people no longer possesses the energy or the will to maintain itself in the sphere of politics, the latter will not thereby vanish from the world. Only a weak people will disappear.”¹⁰⁶ The liberal tendency is to discuss endlessly without ever coming to a decision, to carry on *ad infinitum* with the disenchanting scientific categorization of the world, which seeks an entirely neutral ground on which the political can be evaded or whither into meaninglessness. But such discussion and such putative neutrality are ultimately impotent before the implacable demands of reality: “The essence of liberalism is negotiation, a cautious half measure, in the hope that the definitive dispute, the decisive bloody battle, can be transformed into a parliamentary debate and permit the decision to be suspended forever in an everlasting discussion.”¹⁰⁷ Liberals believe such discussion to be benign because they accept the inherent goodness and rationality of humanity, its non-dangerousness. Schmitt, by contrast, holds no such beliefs about the basically good nature of humanity, taking human beings to be ineluctably dangerous and in need of containment.¹⁰⁸ It is myth that provides meaning where the ostensibly existentially “neutral” discussion and the “anti-religion of technicity” either annihilate

¹⁰⁵ Schmitt, *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, 70.

¹⁰⁶ Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 53.

¹⁰⁷ Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 63.

¹⁰⁸ Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 58-68.

it or coopt it and render it impotent.¹⁰⁹ It is myth that is impetus and ground for the only true means of shaping reality: action. In the extreme case, action is violence: the imposition of one's will on another. Dictatorship is the appropriate political form for such action and violence because the sovereign decision brooks no discussion: "dictatorship is the opposite of discussion."¹¹⁰

The answer to the question of what kind of thinker Schmitt is, then, is that he is a mythmaker and theologian – not merely the jurist of Nazism but one of its intellectual high priests. It is his attachment to myth and to violence as self-realization that causes Schmitt so richly to admire what he takes to be the violent and vitalist mythologizing of anarchists and Bolsheviks. He enthusiastically summarizes George Sorel's *Réflexions sur la violence*:

The ability to act and the capacity for heroism, all world-historical activities reside, according to Sorel, in the power of myth. Examples of such myths are the Greeks' conception of fame and of a great name, the expectation of the Last Judgment in ancient Christianity, the belief in 'vertu' and in revolutionary freedom during the French Revolution, and the national enthusiasm of the German war of liberation in 1813. Only in myth can the criterion be found for deciding whether one nation or a social group has a historical mission and has reached its historical moment. Out of the depths of a genuine life instinct, not out of reason or pragmatism, spring the great enthusiasm, the great moral decision and the great myth [...] Wherever this is lacking, no social and political power can remain standing, and no mechanical apparatus can build a dam if a new storm of historical life has broken loose. Accordingly, it is all a matter of seeing correctly where this capacity for myth and vital strength are really alive today. In the modern bourgeoisie, which has collapsed into anxiety about money and property, in this social class morally ruined by skepticism, relativism, and parliamentarism, it is not to be found.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹ Schmitt, "The Age of Neutralizations and Depoliticizations," 81.

¹¹⁰ Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 63.

¹¹¹ Schmitt, *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, 68. "Die Fähigkeit zum Handeln und zum Heroismus, alle weltgeschichtliche Aktivität, liegt für Sorel in der Kraft zum Mythos. Beispiele solcher Mythen sind: die Vorstellung von Ruhm und großem Namen bei den Griechen, oder die Erwartung des jüngsten Gerichts im alten Christentum, der Glaube an die 'vertu' und an die revolutionäre Freiheit während der großen französischen Revolution, die nationale Begeisterung der deutschen Freiheitskriege von 1813. Nur im Mythos liegt das Kriterium dafür, ob ein Volk oder eine andere soziale Gruppe eine historische Mission hat und sein historischer Moment gekommen ist. Aus den Tiefen echter Lebensinstinkte, nicht aus einem Räsonnement oder eine Zweckmäßigkeitserwägung, entspringt der große Enthusiasmus, die große moralische Deziision und der große Mythos [...] Wo das fehlt, läßt sich keine soziale und politische Macht aufrethalten, und kein mechanischer Apparat kann einen Damm bilden, wenn ein neuer Strom geschichtlichen Lebens losbricht. Demnach kommt alles darauf an, richtig zu sehen, wo heute diese Fähigkeit zum Mythos und diese vitale Kraft wirklich lebt. Bei der

Despite his enthusiasm for left vitalism, Schmitt sees fascism as preferable to Communism as a form of dictatorship because, “The more naturalistic conceptions of race and descent, the apparently more typical *terrisme* of the celtic [*sic*] and romance peoples, the speech, tradition, and consciousness of a shared culture and education, the awareness of belonging to a community with a common fate or destiny [*Schicksalsgemeinschaft*], a sensibility of being different from all other nations – all that tends toward national rather than class antagonisms today.”¹¹² For these reasons, Schmitt pithily notes, “Just as in the sixteenth century, an Italian has once again given expression to the principle of political realism,” respectively referring to Machiavelli and Mussolini.¹¹³

Schmitt’s choice of the *Volk* as the core of his myth of community provides a distinct basis for his further mythologizing. The myth of a metaphysically unified *Volk* allows Schmitt to cast himself as a democrat, even as he eschews the rule of law, universal political rights, parliamentarism, and even majority-rule. With Rousseau, Schmitt asserts that what is essential in democracy is not majority-rule but the identity of the governed and the governing.¹¹⁴ Even if the populace is, in fact, fissiparous, the *Volk* is united in essence.¹¹⁵ Through the fractiousness of

modernen Bourgeoisie, dieser im Angst um Geld und Besitz verkommenen, durch Skeptizismus, Relativismus und Parlamentarismus moralisch zerrütteten Gesellschaftsschicht, wird man sie gewiß nicht finden.“ Carl Schmitt, *Die geistesgeschichtliche Lage des heutigen Parlamentarismus*, 2nd ed. (Munich and Leipzig: Duncker & Humblot, 1926), 80-1. See also Schmitt, “The Age of Neutralizations and Depoliticizations.”

¹¹² Ibid., 75. Translation modified. “Die mehr naturhaften Vorstellungen von Rasse und Abstammung, ein anscheinend mehr für kelto-romanische [*sic*] Stämme typische ‚terrisme‘; dann Sprache, Tradition, Bewußtsein gemeinsamer Kultur und Bildung, Bewußtsein einer Schicksalsgemeinschaft, eine Empfindlichkeit für das Verschiedensein an sich – alles das bewegt sich heute eher in der Richtung zu nationalen als zu Klassengegensätzen.“ Schmitt, *Die geistesgeschichtliche Lage des heutigen Parlamentarismus*, 88. Schmitt’s use of the word *Rasse* (race) here is interesting. Frequently considered not to be a racialist per se, Schmitt’s völkischness and anti-Semitism, like Heidegger’s, are of a nature encompassing enough to overlap with racist anti-Semitism to such an extent as to justify the total exclusion of Jews from the national community and to allow Schmitt to look without a hint of disapproval on their mass murder.

¹¹³ Ibid., 76.

¹¹⁴ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, trans. Maurice Cranston (New York: Penguin, 1968).

¹¹⁵ Schmitt, *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, 8-17.

group and individual interests and party-politics, liberalism and parliamentarism constrain this essential identity rather than expressing it, Schmitt argues:

The crisis of the parliamentary system and of parliamentary institutions in fact springs from the circumstances of modern mass democracy. These lead first of all to a crisis of democracy itself, because the problem of a substantial equality and homogeneity, which is necessary to democracy, cannot be resolved by the general equality of mankind. It leads further to a crisis of parliamentarism that must certainly be distinguished from the crisis of democracy. Both crises have appeared today at the same time and each one aggravates the other, but they are conceptually and in reality different. As democracy, modern mass democracy attempts to realize an identity of governed and governing, and thus it confronts parliament as an inconceivable and outmoded institution. If democratic identity is taken seriously, then in an emergency, no other constitutional institution can withstand the sole criterion of the people's will, *however it is expressed*.¹¹⁶

In the limit case, then, the decision of the sovereign constitutes not only the state but also the people.¹¹⁷ Thus, in Schmitt's eyes, *true* democracy, in which the governed and governing are identical, can only take the form of totalitarianism:

The equation state = politics becomes erroneous and deceptive at exactly the moment when state and society penetrate each other. What had been up to that point affairs of state become thereby social matters, and, vice versa, what had been purely social matters become affairs of state – as must necessarily occur in a democratically organized unit. Heretofore ostensibly neutral domains—religion, culture, education, the economy—then cease to be neutral in the sense that they do not pertain to state and to politics. As a polemical concept against such neutralizations and depoliticizations of important domains appears the *total* state, which potentially embraces every domain. This results in the identity of state and society. In such a state, therefore, *everything* is at least potentially political, and in referring to the state it is no longer possible to assert for it a specifically political characteristic.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 15. Emphasis added. “Die Schwierigkeiten des parlamentarischen Betriebes und der parlamentarischen Einrichtungen erwachsen in Wahrheit aus den Zuständen der modernen Massendemokratie. Diese führt zunächst zu einer Krisis der Demokratie selbst, weil mit der allgemeinen Menschengleichheit das Problem der zu einer Demokratie notwendigen substanziellen Gleichheit und Homogenität nicht gelöst werden kann. Sie führt ferner zu einer von der Krisis der Demokratie wohl zu unterscheidenden Krisis des Parlamentarismus. Beide Krisen sind heute gleichzeitig aufgetreten und verschärfen sich gegenseitig, sind aber begrifflich und tatsächlich verschieden. Als Demokratie sucht die moderne Massendemokratie eine Identität von Regierenden und Regierten zu verwirklichen und begegnet auf diesem Wege dem Parlament als eine nicht mehr begreiflich, veralteten Institution. Wenn mit der demokratischen Identität Ernst gemacht wird, kann nämlich im Ernstfall keine andere verfassungsmäßige Einrichtung vor der alleinigen Maßgeblichkeit des irgendwie geäußerten, unwidersprechlichen Willens des Volkes standhalten.“ Schmitt, *Die geistesgeschichtliche Lage des heutigen Parlamentarismus*, 21.

¹¹⁷ Presumably, those people over whom the sovereign claims authority but do not recognize his authority become the enemy.

¹¹⁸ Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 22. Emphasis added to match the original German-language passage. ““Wird die Gleichung staatlich = politisch in demselben Maße unrichtig und irreführend, in welchem Staat und

In actuality it is the total state which no longer knows anything nonpolitical, the state which must do away with the depoliticalizations [*sic*] of the nineteenth century and which in particular puts an end to the principle that the apolitical economy is independent of the state and that the state is apart from the economy.¹¹⁹

The parallels with Heidegger are obvious, and it is clear why Schmitt felt compelled to write and introduce himself to Heidegger upon the publication of *Being and Time*. For both thinkers, only resolute grounding in a *Schicksalsgemeinschaft* can stave off the disorientation and dispersion wrought by the modern world's hollow abstractions and retrieve an identity strong enough to fill the semantic void of modern discourse with an existential meaning that is free of the relativity and indetermination characteristic of this epoch's idle talk. Both thinkers are intent on just such a meaning: unassailable, pure, absolute. It is this fixation with the absolute that leads Schmitt and Heidegger to overlook the manifold and potent distinctions of life, political and otherwise, and to *unreservedly* affirm a unity beyond them. Perhaps this would not be a problem, practically speaking, except that, for all of its amalgamating force, this Schmittian and Heideggerian unity grounds itself on the most violent exclusion.

Philosophically, Schmitt's and Heidegger's wholehearted embrace of myth is simply premature. Heidegger did not dive into the depths of angst-ridden senselessness and emerge

Gesellschaft sich gegenseitig durchdringen, alle bisher staatlichen Angelegenheiten gesellschaftlich und umgekehrt all bisher ‚nur‘ gesellschaftlichen Angelegenheiten staatlich werden, wie das in einem demokratisch organisierten Gemeinwesen notwendigerweise eintritt. Dann hören die bisher ‚neutralen‘ Gebiete— Religion, Kultur, Bildung, Wirtschaft—auf, ‚neutral‘ im Sinne von nicht-staatlich und nicht-politisch zu sein. Als polemischer Gegenbegriff gegen solche Neutralisierungen und Entpolitisierungen wichtiger Sachgebiete erscheint der gegenüber keinem Sachgebiet desinteressierte, potentiell jedes Gebiet ergreifende *totale* Staat der Identität von Staat und Gesellschaft. In ihm ist infolgedessen *alles* wenigstens der Möglichkeit nach politisch, und die Bezugnahme auf den Staat ist nicht mehr imstande, ein spezifisches Unterscheidungsmerkmal des ‚Politischen‘ zu begründen.“ Schmitt, *Der Begriff des Politischen*, 24.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 25. “In Wirklichkeit ist es der totale Staat, der nichts absolut Unpolitisches mehr kennt, der die Entpolitisierungen des 19. Jahrhunderts beseitigen muß und namentlich dem Axiom der staatsfreien (unpolitischen) Wirtschaft und des Wirtschaftsfreien Staates ein Ende macht.“ Schmitt, *Der Begriff des Politischen*, 26. Schmitt occasionally halfheartedly distances himself from totalitarianism and fascism with a brief exculpatory sentence or two (Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 38-9), but such half-hearted, *post hoc* qualifications can hardly resist or channel the violent torrent of Schmitt's totalizing rhetoric and logic.

from the other end into a brave new world of meaning; Schmitt did not exhaust the possibilities of rational political thought before dismissing it. When faced with anomaly, resistance, and the threat of disorder in a defamiliarized and rapidly changing world, both men availed themselves of a worldview whose parochialism was so absurdly exaggerated that it would have been farcical had it not been horrific. What is most characteristic of both Heidegger's and Schmitt's thinking is not a keen appreciation of the limits of rationality. Both men articulated powerful critiques of rationality, but these critiques function in their thought as preludes to an affirmation of integral German nationalism that is as dogmatic as their critiques of rationality are penetrating. What lies at the root of their thinking and what roots them in the *völkisch* tradition is simple prejudice.

Hence, Schmitt's insistence on purity, systematicity, and indivisibility – hardly the mark of a realist. There is no reason to insist, as Schmitt does from the very beginning of his analyses, that the political, the decision, or even the sovereign must be self-grounding concepts. This insistence precedes Schmitt's justification of mythology. Indeed, one of Schmitt's criticisms of liberalism is that its internal logic supposedly no longer cohered, and Schmitt rejected the argument that liberalism was worth preserving simply because it worked. What mattered to him was the principle. Pragmatic concerns were of no consequence for Schmitt: "Certainly no one would be so undemanding that he regarded an intellectual foundation or a moral truth as proven by the question, What else?"¹²⁰ Schmitt announces here, in the preface to the second edition of *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, what he is really after: an intellectual foundation and moral truth. He posits the political as just such a foundation and truth, which is why he can totally subsume the ethical under the political. If Schmitt had truly been a realist, he would have seen the justification of war as unnecessary; the waging of war would solely be a matter of

¹²⁰ Schmitt, *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, 3.

expedience. That Schmitt goes to the trouble to claim not only that war can be justified but that it is the political, and not the ethical, that effects such a justification, reveals quite clearly that Schmitt has not abandoned the search for an Archimedean point; he has merely relocated that point from more traditional spaces to the realm he calls the political.

Is Schmitt justified in his positing of the political as the foundational? There is no reason to believe that he is. Were it to be convincing, such a positing would entail an entire truth-theory and a comprehensive confrontation with ethics. It would involve a thorough reckoning with the whole of philosophical thought. Schmitt, needless to say, does not undertake such a task. Instead, at bottom, he simply insists that the political is the sole meaning-emanating truth of human existence. But such an assertion is just as ungrounded and unjustified as any ethical claim could be.

Nor is the truth revealed in the exception, as Schmitt claims. For Schmitt, the limit case is the sole touchstone for truth because it is at the limit that the nothingness of intellectual reality reveals itself and myth emerges as the basis for a new reality. Schmitt's method is to let the exception disprove the rule or even to create a new rule. Exceptions, events, and liminal experiences of anxiety and ecstasy can, indeed, be revelatory. A sudden shift of perspective or circumstances can render the world disarmingly unfamiliar and engender the formation of new schemas with which to understand it. Schmitt is right to claim that the exception can even go so far as to call into question the very meaningfulness and potency of reason and understanding themselves. But most of us do not typically inhabit such extreme states of exception, anxiety, or ecstasy, and these states can obscure as much as they reveal. They obscure life and politics as we experience them on a quotidian basis, with their myriad and all too relevant distinctions and disunities. They obscure the indecipherable but intimate relationship between norm and

decision, in which the former is inapplicable without the latter and the latter altogether unmotivated and meaningless without the former.¹²¹ It is an act of reification and a subjective judgment, not a self-evident truth, that removes the decision from its interchange with norms and assigns the exception greater or more ordinary ontological status than the norm.¹²² On an onto-epistemological level, then, the exception need not obliterate the norm unless those who experience norms become transfixed or enthralled by the exception. This is a cognitive act, not a quasi-ethical or -ontological law, and Schmitt's insistence that the ethical, cultural, economic, etc. simply and totally transform into the "political" at the moment of conflict is nothing more than alchemy.

Exceptions also exist on a practical/political level. Radically unexpected situations do, at times, arise and fundamentally challenge the juridic-political order. These may be situations for which the law cannot offer a clear resolution, such as a fundamental constitutional crisis, or which are simply indifferent to the rule of law as it stands, such as a revolution, a coup, or an invasion. Indeed, every juridical decision involves a moment of decision, as norms do not apply themselves and are never entirely clear in their meanings.¹²³ But, again, these exceptions need not be taken to be the fundamental truth of political life or to necessarily destroy the norm. Rather, such situations can serve as occasions for reestablishing or renegotiating norms. True, if these efforts fail, a violent contest will take place. But these violent clashes need not be cast as the apocalyptic moments at which an indivisible sovereign, whose will is somehow identical to that of "the people," magically reveals himself. If one party in a struggle is strong enough to impose its will on other parties, this has nothing to do with a metaphysical general will or

¹²¹ Jacques Derrida, "Force of Law: 'The Mystical Foundation of Authority'," in *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar (New York: Routledge, 2002).

¹²² Such a reification may be termed "madness."

¹²³ Derrida, "Force of Law."

primordial sovereign. It is simply an instantiation of Hobbes' maxim that "authority, not truth, makes law." Rather than take Hobbes at his unadorned word, Schmitt builds an elaborate theology around him. Such a move is as unjustified as it is superfluous.

But is this theology really superfluous? Does not Schmitt show that extra-rational beliefs are necessary to hold a society together and for a polity to remain strong in its dealings with others? Is not the belief of adherents indispensable to authority, is it not that which makes authority authority? The answer is twofold. On the level of theory, it is only Schmitt's totalizing impulse that leads him to embrace mythologizing even prior to positing a practical need for it. Because he seeks absolutes, he is ill content with anything less. But how typical is Schmitt's longing for the absolute in politics? Are not these sentiments so widely shared, as Schmitt claims, as to demand satisfaction and to doom any order that does not provide its people with a mythology or theology? And do not political groups implacably demand an enemy against which to define themselves in struggle?

Unfortunately, these empirical questions remain open. Unless history comes to a final resolution, they will always have to be revisited. But preliminary responses to Schmitt's empirical claim can be ventured. First, the societies that have accepted less than perfect uniformity of belief and a relatively high degree of intellectual and moral diversity have so far outlasted and outdone those that demand total allegiance to a single myth, Schmitt's Nazi Germany being a prime example of the latter. Second, though Schmitt may yet be correct in claiming that myths of race and ethnicity hold more appeal than other types of unifying myths, this cannot be taken for granted. In principle, at least, it is possible to draw a friend-enemy distinction based on ethical values and to embrace myths that reinforce ethical distinctions rather

than racial, ethnic, or national ones. In a sense, this is the hope and project of cosmopolitanism. It is not yet a forlorn hope.

But cosmopolitanism is not and cannot be universalism. All politics does involve a friend-enemy distinction, even if only sadistic psychopaths and violent fanatics are counted among the enemies. No polity or society can hope to survive and flourish if the values, interests, and voices of such actors are counted as legitimate. Schmitt was undoubtedly right, then, in his insistence that no politics is truly universal and that all politics involves exclusion. Similarly, Schmitt was also right to emphasize that in a true state of exception, and even in the everyday workings of law and order, all juridic-political orders must avail themselves of violence if they are to survive. Such violence is no less violent, no less domineering, and no less an imposition for being enshrined in generally (i.e., not universally) sanctioned laws or institutions. The individual lawbreaker will experience the force of law as coercion even if his fellow citizens are unanimous in their application of it to him and even if posterity sanctions such applications.¹²⁴ This is not at all to say that the state and the law can be reduced to violence or to a fully autonomous friend-enemy distinction, as Schmitt claims. But it is to say that there can be no order, no effective law, and no state without violence and the plausible threat thereof. Schmitt's powerful articulation of these basic truths constitutes the core of his lasting relevance and his one claim to the mantle of "realism."

Horkheimer, Heidegger, and Schmitt were all reacting to the disenchantment of the world and the fear of an administered society – one devoid of freedom, spontaneity, and originality. Yet, ironically, none of them had the stomach for the ambiguity, ambivalence, or disorder of a free society. They all craved a world administered on their terms. Heidegger and Schmitt,

¹²⁴ For the contrary view and Schmitt's continued cogency in answering it, see Jürgen Habermas, "Bestialität und Humanität: Ein Krieg an der Grenze zwischen Recht und Moral," *Die Zeit*, 1999.

exaggerating their potential to influence the movement, threw their lots in with National Socialism to this end. No such option was open to Horkheimer, a Jew and a socialist, nor would it have been attractive to him as he was a fundamentally humane and decent man. In any case, all three men eventually found their cherished hopes dashed and embraced a type of defeatism. Politics is not the realm for transcendence. The liminal does not reveal universal truth. Disenchantment, as it has proceeded thus far, has by no means closed off all possibilities for a meaningful life. Modern life has much more to offer than merely alienation. Such should have been the lessons of Weimar's intellectual history. But subsequent generations learned these lessons only so well.

2. Humanism and Its Discontents in Mid-Century France: Phenomenology and Structuralism

Reading the spiritualist and idealist philosophers of the Third Republic today, one can understand how the generation of Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty was dissatisfied with its predecessors. It is not that the thought of Félix Ravaisson, Jules Lachelier, Émile Boutroux, Léon Brunschvicg, and their contemporaries lacks rigor, subtlety, or depth.¹ Nor is it that the themes on which these philosophers wrote were inaccessible to the interwar generation. Indeed, concern with freedom and individuality is one of the links connecting the thought of the *Belle Époque* to that of the interwar period. But the thinkers of the former easily give the impression of a placid bourgeois detachment from the world of lived experience. It is as though idealist and spiritualist thought floated tranquilly above the world, unconcerned with its strife and the struggles of its denizens.² Perhaps such buoyancy suited the generations that came of age in the relative calm and security of the years after the *Blitzkrieg* of 1870 but it was thoroughly unsuited to that generation whose childhood was defined by the trauma of the First World War and that reached maturity in the heady days of interwar Europe.

¹ Émile Boutroux, *De la Contingence des lois de la nature*, 3rd ed. (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1898); Léon Brunschvicg, *Introduction à la vie de l'esprit*, 3rd ed. (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1920); Jules Lachelier, *Du Fondement de l'induction* 5th ed. (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1907); Félix Ravaisson, *La Philosophie en France au XIX^e Siècle*, 5th ed. (Paris: Hachette, 1904).

² Henri Bergson is an exception to all of this. It was reading Bergson that convinced the *lycéen* Sartre to switch his focus from literature to philosophy. Nevertheless, the interwar generation gave Bergson short shrift. As Merleau-Ponty noted in an oft quoted observation from 1959: "If we had been careful readers of Bergson, and if more thought had been given to him, we would have been drawn to a much more concrete philosophy, a philosophy much less reflexive than Brunschvicg's. But since Bergson was hardly read by my contemporaries, it is certain that we had to wait for the philosophies of existence in order to learn much of what he would have been able to teach us. It is quite certain—as we realize more and more today—that Bergson, had we read him carefully, would have taught us things that ten or fifteen years later we believed to be discoveries made by the philosophy of existence itself." Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Texts and Dialogues*, trans. Michael Smith, ed. Hugh J. Silverman and James Barry Jr. (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities, 1992), 132. Quoted in Gary Gutting, *French Philosophy in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Cambridge, 2001), 114.

The upheavals of these latter days intruded onto the intellectual landscape of Sartre's generation in a manner and with a force that demanded a reformulation of philosophical thought to more adequately grasp what would shortly come to be called *la réalité humaine* in all its concreteness and entanglements.³ The philosopher Jean Wahl sounded the clarion call for this reformulation in his 1932 book, *Vers le Concret (Toward the concrete)*. Taking the side of the realist and arguing against a *pure* idealism, Wahl writes,

Some will ask, 'what is this concrete that the realist claims to grasp?' They will ask this question especially if we empty the concrete of the determinations that the intelligence has woven and coiled together, determinations that are the web and very texture of the supposed concrete. If we do this, nothing remains of the concrete. But, without denying the contribution that intelligence makes, the realist will respond that it is necessary to admit that there is something to this thing to which intelligence makes the contribution. Whether one calls it the thing-in-itself or a kind of impact, the idealists are forced to grant it. [...] [The realist] will ask whether this impact and this occasion are not realities, and he will ask whether, at the same time that they race to link up with the intellectual whole under the impulse of the scientific spirit, they are not composed with other occasions and other impacts in order to form this picture that is the sensible world. Science shows us the underside of the tapestry, an underside that appears first as a continuity or a quasi-continuity of assembled weaves. But the topside also has a reality, and it is even this reality of the topside that at times, at least in a sense, explains the underside.⁴

³ Vincent Descombes, *Modern French Philosophy*, trans. L. Scott-Fox and J.M. Harding (New York: Cambridge, 1980), 16-20; Gutting, *French Philosophy in the Twentieth Century*, 102-18; Alan D Schrift, *Twentieth-Century French Philosophy: Key Themes and Thinkers* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), 16-18.

⁴ Jean Wahl, "Preface to *Toward the Concrete*," in *Transcendence and the Concrete: Selected Writings*, ed. Alan D Schrift and Ian Alexander Moore (New York: Fordham, 2017), 35. For the original French, see Jean Wahl, *Vers le concret* (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J Vrin, 2004), 29-30. "Cependant, dira-t-on, ce concret que le réaliste prétend saisir, si on le vide des déterminations tissées, tressées par l'intelligence, et qui sont la trame et la contexture même du prétendu concret, qu'est-il ? De lui, il ne reste rien. Mais, répondre le réaliste, sans nier l'apport de l'intelligence, il faut admettre qu'il y a quelque chose à quoi elle apporte ; qu'on l'appelle chose en soi ou choc, les idéalistes sont forcés de l'admettre. [...] [le réaliste] se demandera si ce choc, cette occasion ne sont pas des réalités, et si en même temps qu'ils courent, sous l'impulsion d'esprit scientifique, rejoindre l'ensemble intellectuels, ils ne se composent pas avec d'autres occasions et d'autres chocs pour former ce tableau qu'est le monde sensible. La science nous montre l'envers de la tapisserie, envers qui apparaît d'abord comme une continuité ou une quasi-continuité de grains assemblés ; mais l'endroit a aussi une réalité et même c'est elle qui parfois, tout au moins en un sens, explique l'envers." Wahl uses the term "realist" (réaliste) here in an idiosyncratic manner that might better accord with the word "holist," as Wahl goes on to reject a simple analysis as surely as he rejects a simple synthesis: "We have spoken of the immediate. It is necessary to add immediately that this immediacy is not atomic. To reduce the things to atoms, to elements, to space understood through points, is inevitably to give an inadequate idea. All of what tends to destroy a real value is partial. Not only what tends to destroy the person, but also and perhaps especially what tends to destroy the things is partial. At every degree of the scale, the beings tend to become spherical and form themselves into totalities. And this is one of the most fruitful teachings of phenomenology, a teaching that James has already given us, the teaching that instructs us to grasp the things with all their richness, 'at their face value,' in the very way in which they are known." Wahl, "Preface to *Toward the Concrete*," 37.

For Wahl, then, the new task of philosophy was not just to effect intellectual syntheses but to grasp and maintain the concrete and experiential “*endroit*” (topside) as an integral and inalienable layer in all syntheses.

This intellectual shift towards the concrete bears some resemblance to Marx’s denunciation of the Young Hegelians as excessively esoteric, indifferent to the supposed concreteness of materiality, man, and history. And it is not coincidental that this shift came in the wake of the Russian Revolutions and the successive advents of the Parti Radical, the Section Française de l’Internationale ouvrière, and the Parti Communiste Français. Indeed, the publication of the *Ökonomisch-philosophische Manuskripte (Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts)* and the *deutsche Ideologie (German Ideology)* came in the same year, 1932, as Wahl’s publication of *Vers le concret*.⁵ With the social fabric rent asunder by the First World War and the movement of human liberation apparently afoot abroad and at home, the philosophers of Sartre’s generation were intent on enunciating a new philosophical program to meet the demands of the time. Such a philosophy would grasp man in all his concreteness, including his relationships with other men and institutions and his potentialities for freedom. It was also in 1932 that Paul Nizan, a young Marxist philosopher and friend of Sartre, both alluded to such a program and excoriated the academically entrenched idealists and spiritualists, whom he saw as obstructing it, in his book, *Les chiens de garde (The Watchdogs)*:

At the very same time that the philosophers interest themselves only in the incarnations of philosophy and not in men, these awkward fellows busy themselves with philosophy. There is a scandalous lack of reciprocity. None of them would know how to look upon philosophy with detachment when he meets it, although the philosophers regard him with precisely such detachment. These simple human heads are not at ease in the glacial heavens of ideas. They are not at all fashioned in such a way as to be able to breathe freely there. They have the impudence not to devote themselves exclusively to the elegance of an argument, to the subtlety of technique of a solution, to the craft of such

⁵ Norbert Guterman and Henri Lefebvre translated the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* from German and published them in the journal *Avant-Poste* in 1933.

juggling. They request that one explains to them what such philosophy means for them, what would really be the result for them of the implementation, of the definite success of such a philosophical assertion on the destiny of men.⁶

None of this is to suggest that Marxism was the prime mover in the intellectual shift toward the concrete, only that it forms a vital part of the background. The highly centralized French academic system, capped by the *agrégation*, militated against a simple or wholesale adoption of Marxism among left philosophers. But Marxism made its impact even so, as did the introduction of the so-called three Hs—Hegel, Husserl, and Heidegger—into French academic life. As vague a term as *le concret* may have been, it inevitably involved the perceptions and experiences of real individuals in the world. And this was the principle source of appeal of German phenomenology to Sartre’s generation; it was a conduit to the concrete.

In the hands of Wahl and especially of the Russian émigré Alexandre Kojève, even that master of the abstruse, Hegel, became a philosopher of the concrete *par excellence*. Wahl’s *Le Malheur de la conscience dans la philosophie de Hegel* (*The unhappy consciousness in the philosophy of Hegel*, 1929) emphasized Hegel’s relevance to the lived experience of the subject’s unfulfilled longing for the Absolute.⁷ From 1927 to his retirement in 1964, with an interlude

⁶Paul Nizan, *Les chiens de garde*, new ed. (Paris: Maspero, 1965). My translation. In the original French: “Alors même que les philosophes ne s’intéressent qu’aux incarnations de la Philosophie et non aux hommes, ces mauvais coucheurs s’occupent de la Philosophie. Il y a un manque scandaleux de réciprocité. Aucun d’eux ne saurait regarder la Philosophie avec détachement, lorsqu’il la rencontre, bien que les philosophes le regardent lui-même ainsi. Les simples têtes humaines ne sont pas à l’aise dans le ciel glacial des Idées. Les Lieux Intelligibles ne sont point ainsi fait qu’ils y respirent librement. Ils ont l’impudence de ne point exclusivement s’attacher à l’élégance d’un argument, à la subtilité technique d’une solution, à l’habileté de telle jonglerie : ils demandent qu’on leur explique ce que telle philosophie signifie pour eux, ce qui résulterait réellement pour eux de la mise en vigueur, du succès définitif de telle affirmation philosophique sur le destin des hommes.” True to his political commitments, Nizan died fighting Nazism at Dunkirk.

⁷Jean Wahl, *Le malheur de la conscience dans la philosophie de Hegel*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1951). For a partial English translation, see Jean Wahl, *Transcendence and the Concrete: Selected Writings*, ed. Alan D Schrift and Ian Alexander Moore (New York: Fordham, 2017). Wahl went on to popularize Soren Kierkegaard in France, a philosopher who had famously attacked Hegel precisely for his supposed lack of relevance to the vicissitudes and travails of life: Jean Wahl, *Études Kierkegaardiennes* (Paris: Aubier, 1938).

during the war years, Wahl disseminated his views on Hegel at the Sorbonne.⁸ At the invitation of Alexandre Koyré, a fellow Russian émigré who was leaving Paris to teach in Cairo, Kojève took over Koyré's course on Hegel at the École Pratique des Hautes Études. Both Koyré and Kojève had studied philosophy in Germany, Koyré with Husserl at Göttingen, and Kojève with Jaspers at Heidelberg. Kojève's seminar on Hegel ran from 1933 to 1936 and became extremely popular, attracting the regular attendance of Raymond Aron, Georges Bataille, André Breton, Jacques Lacan, and Merleau-Ponty. Kojève's Hegel is an appendage to something resembling a very humanistic Marxism. The focus lies intensely on the master-slave dialectic. The origin of this relationship is a "fight to the death," driven by a *desire* for recognition, between the soon-to-be master and slave. In the fullness of time, the slave overcomes and assimilates the master, not through or as a manifestation of *Vernunft* or the *Idee* but rather through toil and violence. In 1947, Kojève's lectures appeared in book form, edited by his former student, the surrealist writer Raymond Queneau.⁹ In 1939 and 1941, Jean Hyppolite published his two-volume translation of *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (*Phenomenology of Spirit*).¹⁰ He completed his famous commentary on the *Phenomenology* in 1946.¹¹ Hyppolite went on to hold professorships at the Sorbonne, the École Normale Supérieure in Paris, and the Collège de France. Though Hyppolite, too, was influenced by the Marxism and existentialism of his time, he presented a far more

⁸ Gutting, *French Philosophy in the Twentieth Century*, 109-13; Schrift, *Twentieth-Century French Philosophy*, 23-4, 184-5.

⁹ Descombes, *Modern French Philosophy*, 9-16; Gutting, *French Philosophy in the Twentieth Century*, 110-12; Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel: Lectures on the Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. James H. Nichols Jr., ed. Raymond Queneau and Allan Bloom (Ithaca, NY: Cornell, 1980); Schrift, *Twentieth-Century French Philosophy*, 23-5, 145-6.

¹⁰ Georg Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel, *La phénoménologie de l'esprit*, trans. Jean Hyppolite (Paris: Aubier, 1939, 1941).

¹¹ Jean Hyppolite, *Genèse et structure de la Phénoménologie de l'esprit de Hegel* (Paris: Aubier, 1946).

comprehensive picture of a systematic, idealist, and transcendental Hegel than had Wahl or Kojève.¹²

Phenomenology in the contemporary sense of the word made its first appearance in France in the person of Max Scheler, who was then professor of philosophy at the University of Cologne. In 1924, Scheler attended Paul Desjardins' annual meeting of intellectuals, the *Décades de Pontigny*, at Desjardins' home at the former Abbey of Pontigny. This visit was a success, and Scheler returned two years later. In 1928, the year of Scheler's untimely death at the age of 53, his book *Wesen und Formen der Sympathie* (*The Nature of Sympathy*) became the first work of contemporary phenomenology translated into French.¹³ It was not until the following year that Husserl debuted on the Parisian intellectual scene when he delivered two lectures at the Sorbonne in February. In 1931, Emmanuel Levinas, a Lithuanian émigré who had studied with Husserl at Freiburg, coedited and co-translated these lectures into French, the first translation of Husserl into that language.¹⁴

Though Husserl's lectures made little impact on France's more established philosophers, the up-and-coming agrégés greeted them eagerly, but this eagerness paled in comparison to their enthusiasm for Heidegger. It is probably impossible to determine with precision exactly why Heidegger's impact on French thought is deeper than is Husserl's, but it is likely for the same reasons that Heidegger's fame has outstripped his teacher's elsewhere: the inflated boldness and

¹² Gary Gutting, *Thinking the Impossible: French Philosophy since 1960* (New York: Oxford, 2011), 113; Schrift, *Twentieth-Century French Philosophy*, 23-4, 137-9.

¹³ Max Scheler, *Nature et formes de la sympathie: Contribution à l'étude des lois de la vie émotionnelle*, trans. M Lefebvre (Paris: Payot, 1928).

¹⁴ Edmund Husserl, *Méditations cartésiennes: Introduction à la phénoménologie*, ed. and trans. Gabrielle Peiffer and Emmanuel Levinas (Paris: Armand Colin, 1931). This was considerably different from the German *Cartesianische Meditationen*, which was not published until sometime after Husserl's death: Edmund Husserl, *Husserliana I: Cartesianische Meditationen und Pariser Vorträge*, ed. Stephen Strasser (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1950). For Husserl's early reception in France, see Gutting, *French Philosophy in the Twentieth Century*, 105-6; Schrift, *Twentieth-Century French Philosophy*, 21-3.

novelty of Heidegger's enterprise, the promise of a return to something infinitely profound that has been long hidden and forgotten, the open rebellion against philosophical traditions, the sense of contact with arcana and initiation into a mystery that comes with learning Heideggerian nomenclature, the anguished romance and prophetic danger of *Dasein*, and the radically new method of thinking, unthinking, or circum-thinking humanity that it offers. This last point, in particular, proved to be of the greatest significance for French intellectual life for decades to come.

Translations of Heidegger's "Was ist Metaphysik?" ("What is Metaphysics?") and "Vom Wesen des Grundes" ("The Essence of Reason") first appeared in French in 1931, as "Qu'est-ce que la métaphysique?" and "De la nature de la cause," respectively.¹⁵ The latter appeared in a journal cofounded by Koyré, who wrote a preface to the former, in which he cast Heidegger as a great new thinker of human existence. This appropriation of Heidegger as a humanist characterized his early reception in France.¹⁶ In 1938, Henry Corbin, the translator of "Was ist Metaphysik" into "Qu'est-ce que la métaphysique?" and a student of Kojève, completed a collection of translations of Heidegger also collectively titled *Qu'est-ce que la métaphysique?*, to which Heidegger himself wrote an introduction.¹⁷ In his original translation of 1931, Corbin had translated *Dasein* as *l'existence*; in his 1938 collection of translations, he translated it as *la*

¹⁵ Martin Heidegger, "De la nature de la cause," *Recherches philosophiques* (1931-2); Martin Heidegger, "Qu'est-ce que la métaphysique?," *Bifur* (June 1931). It was not until 1985 that a complete French translation of *Sein und Zeit* appeared, helping to set the stage for the Heidegger Affair.

¹⁶ Gutting, *French Philosophy in the Twentieth Century*, 106-7; Tom Rockmore, *Heidegger and French Philosophy: Humanism, Antihumanism and being* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 69-75; Schrift, *Twentieth-Century French Philosophy*, 26-7. The early French reception of Heidegger as humanist was tendentious but not nearly as ungrounded as Heidegger himself portrayed it in his *Letter on Humanism* or as Rockmore portrays it in his work. See chapter 1.

¹⁷ Martin Heidegger, *Qu'est-ce que la métaphysique?*, ed. and trans. Henry Corbin (Paris: Gallimard, 1938). This volume contained translations of excerpts from *Sein und Zeit*.

réalité-humaine.¹⁸ *La réalité-humaine* became the standard translation of *Dasein* in the first phase of Heidegger's French reception, eventually assimilating into the core concept of Sartre's *L'être et le néant* (*Being and Nothingness*), as *l'humanisme* came to dominate discourse in French philosophical thought.¹⁹

Humanism was a particularly apt watchword for the postwar era. The early twentieth century had been a time of intense ideological competition, accelerated after the First World War and the collapse of the dynastic empires that had held much of Europe together for the past several centuries.²⁰ With its apotheosis of the state and ontology of violence, fascism was decidedly anti-humanistic in nearly all understandings of the word "humanity" and senses of the term "humanism."²¹ Similarly, Nazism can be called "humanist" only if the most radical parochialism is introduced into the understanding of the latter.²² Because religious appeals alone no longer held binding authority among intellectuals or even the general public, those doctrines that opposed fascism and Nazism did so in the name of "humanity." Marxism, of course, was one such doctrine, but so too was the Christian humanism of Emmanuel Mounier and the rational humanism of Raymond Aron.²³ Humanism had become something of an ethical lodestar of left and liberal European thought.

Given France's national tradition of humanistic thought and the epochal condition of the competition between ideologies of human advancement, it is not surprising that humanism became the dominant motif in French intellectual life at this time. So much was this the case

¹⁸ Rockmore, *Heidegger and French Philosophy*, 73-5. Rockmore traces Corbin's translation of the term to Kojève's influence.

¹⁹ Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'être et le néant: Essai d'ontologie phénoménologique* (Paris: Gallimard, 2017).

²⁰ Mark Mazower, *Dark Continent: Europe's Twentieth Century* (New York: Random House, 1998).

²¹ Benito Mussolini, "The Doctrine of Fascism," in *Readings in Western Civilization: Twentieth Century Europe*, ed. John W. Boyer and Jan Goldstein (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1987).

²² For the best known characterization of Nazism as a humanism, see Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Heidegger, Art, and Politics: The Fiction of the Political*, trans. Chris Turner (New York: Blackwell, 1990).

²³ It is telling that the principal organ of the PCF was *l'humanité* and that of the Christian humanists *l'esprit*.

that, at the war's end, any doctrine hoping to gain or maintain traction with the educated public had to present itself as humanistic. It was for this reason that Sartre, on the brink of becoming France's premier public intellectual, felt compelled to defend his doctrine of phenomenological existentialism as a humanism at the Salle des Centraux, before the literary group the Club Maintenant, on 29 October 1945.

As a *lycéen*, Sartre had switched his focus from literature to philosophy upon reading Bergson's *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience* (*Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Date of Consciousness*). He had attended the ENS in Paris from 1924 to 1928, with the likes of Nizan, Aron, Georges Canguilhem, Simone de Beauvoir, Hyppolite, and Merleau-Ponty as classmates. It was during these years that Aron, upon returning from an academic sojourn in Berlin, introduced Sartre to Husserl's phenomenology. From 1933 to 1935, Sartre studied in Germany at Berlin and Freiburg, where he deepened his acquaintance with the works of Husserl and Heidegger. While serving in the army, Sartre was captured by the Germans at the outset of the war, spent a few months in a POW camp, and then resumed teaching philosophy at the Lycée Condorcet from 1941 to 1944. It was in these years, 1943 to be precise, that Sartre completed and had published his magnum opus of existential phenomenology *L'être et le néant*. Soon thereafter, he left the academy to focus full-time on his role as a public intellectual, founding the left-wing political and theoretical journal *Les Temps modernes* with his lover de Beauvoir and friend Merleau-Ponty in 1946.

L'être et le néant is a massive work of massive ambition, aiming to give an account of no less than the nature, structure, and functions of consciousness, freedom, and human being in general. Its philosophical import is the subject of much debate, but it is open to readings of real relevance and complexity and it displays flashes of the type of literary merit that one would

expect from a winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature.²⁴ Not without some justification, Sartre believed himself to be picking up in *L'être et le néant* where Heidegger had left off in *Sein und Zeit* (*Being and Time*) and "Was ist Metaphysik?" The latter was available in a French translation, while the former was not. Given Sartre's relatively poor German, it seems that "Was ist Metaphysik," with its emphasis on nothingness as the condition of possibility for Dasein's being, seems to have particularly influenced Sartre. There are also clear traces of both Kojève's and Bergson's influence. For Sartre the *réalité-humaine*, human being, is nothingness; that is, what constitutes the core of human being is a negativity. Sartre calls this negativity for-itself (*pour-soi*) and distinguishes it from the simple, inexperienceable being of the in-itself (*en-soi*). As pure negation, for-itself is utterly undetermined and unconditioned by in-itself. Yet, for-itself, insofar as it determines *itself* and insofar as it can even be attributed a *self* or described as a *self* to determine, does so with reference to in-itself; that is, for-itself must choose to affirm and launch itself into projects contoured by in-itself. Further, for-itself must accept total responsibility for the success and failure of these projects because failure can only be due to the bad faith (*mauvaise foi*) or the lack of self-honesty and commitment of for-itself. On the primary level of existential ontology, for-itself's choice of projects is utterly arbitrary. This arbitrariness is altogether necessary for for-itself to be a pure negation and, thus, *absolutely free*. Though for-itself may and will choose a project and then make subsequent decisions with reference to the always and necessarily deferred fulfillment of this project, no considerations of value, ease, right or wrong, heritage, or anything else can have any weight or impact in determining for-itself's choice of project and no such considerations can be decisive or even compelling in subsequent

²⁴ For some excellent treatments of *Being and Nothingness*, see Gary Gutting, "Sartre," in *French Philosophy in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Cambridge, 2001); Christina Howells, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Sartre* (New York: Cambridge, 1992).

choices as to the course of this project.²⁵ Such compulsion would impinge on for-itself's freedom. For all of this, in the course of this project, in the course of living life, for-itself does inevitably determine itself in positive manifestations that must be formulated in terms of in-itself. Human reality is both indetermination itself, absolutely negative and free, and its successive determinations. This is why Sartre repeats over and over again, like a mantra or an incantation, throughout the 700 pages of *L'être et le néant*, "Human reality is what it is not and is not what it is."²⁶

Returning to Salle des Centraux and October 1945, Sartre made the case that this highly abstract existential phenomenology resulted in a humanistic doctrine. The lecture was eloquent and even tender at times. In the person of a former student who was undecided as to whether he should join the Resistance or care for his ailing mother, Sartre vividly illustrated the inability of guiding principles or moral intuitions to formulate a solution to such quandaries and the consequent role of freedom in decisively but ungratifyingly cutting the Gordian Knot of existential dilemmas.²⁷ The lecture was a rousing success, launching Sartre into the heights of celebrity.

Despite this poignant appeal and its popularity, Sartre was unable to square his commitment to existentialism with his commitment to Marxism. It is the *non sequitur* of *non sequiturs* to proclaim, as Sartre did on this occasion, that the putatively absolutely free and unbound for-itself must, in choosing, affirm an ethical path that befits all of humanity (and not simply its own, arbitrary choice). By the same token—i.e., the unbridgeable gap between for-

²⁵ Fulfillment of the project is always and necessarily deferred because fulfillment would mean for-itself's final transformation into in-itself, which would be the end of for-itself.

²⁶ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Pocket Books, 1956). In the original French, "la réalité humaine est ce qu'elle n'est pas et ce n'est pas ce qu'elle est": Sartre, *L'être et le néant*.

²⁷ Jean-Paul Sartre, "L'existentialisme est un humanisme" (Salle des Centraux, Paris, 1945). Subsequently published as Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'existentialisme est un humanisme* (Paris: Nagel, 1946).

itself's unrestricted freedom, on the one hand, and any kind of *ought* or even *is*, on the other—Sartre did not succeed in convincingly portraying the existentialism of *L'être et le néant* as a humanism in anything other than the strict Cartesian sense of the word. Sartre's emphasis on the pure negativity of for-itself and its sole imperative of freedom leaves scant room for the importance of such eminently human experiences and qualities as love, hate, suffering, beauty, impotence, or even anguish (*angoisse*) because where there are no human stakes there can be no human anguish.

Arguably, Sartre's friend and fellow fighter at *Les Temps modernes*, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, offered a subtler, softer, and more experientially resonant phenomenology in his own magnum opus, *Phénoménologie de la perception* (*Phenomenology of Perception*), published in 1945, two years after *L'être et le néant*.²⁸ Like Wahl, Merleau-Ponty was satisfied neither with the abstractions of scientism nor with what he termed "intellectualism." The latter signifies not idealism, in the sense of the belief that all reality is mind- or experience-dependent, but, rather, the ontological privileging of the intellect or understanding over the senses and perception: "[analytical] reflection is carried off by itself and installs itself in an impregnable subjectivity, as yet untouched by being and time. But this is very ingenuous, or at least it is an incomplete form of reflection which loses sight of its own beginning."²⁹ Instead, experience is an integrated whole:

My field of perception is constantly filled with a play of colours, noises and fleeting tactile sensations which I cannot relate precisely to the context of my clearly perceived world, yet which I nevertheless immediately 'place' in the world, without ever confusing them with my daydreams. Equally constantly I weave dreams round things. I imagine people and things whose presence is not incompatible with the context, yet who are not in fact involved in it: they are ahead of reality, in the realm of the imaginary [...] The real is a closely woven fabric. It does not await our judgement before incorporating the most

²⁸ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945).

²⁹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (New York: Routledge, 2002), xi.

surprising phenomena, or before rejecting the most plausible figments of our imagination.³⁰

While affirming the cogito, Merleau-Ponty sought a more original and seamless experience than that allowed for by Husserl's noetic-noematic pole, one in which perceiver and perceived were perhaps mutually constitutive rather than originally or even conceptually distinct:

The world, which I distinguished from myself as the totality of things or of processes linked by causal relationships, I rediscover 'in me' as the permanent horizon of all my cogitationes [sic] and as a dimension in relation to which I am constantly situating myself. The true Cogito does not define the subject's existence in terms of the thought he has of existing, and furthermore does not convert the indubitability of the world into the indubitability of thought about the world, nor finally does it replace the world itself by the world as meaning.³¹

For exactly the same reason, Merleau-Ponty rejected Sartre's absolute reification of the individual. For Merleau-Ponty, the self is never wholly distinct from the other or vice versa; indeed, conceptualization of the self or the other would be impossible were the cleavage original:

I must be the exterior that I present to others, and the body of the other must be the other himself. This paradox and the dialectic of the Ego and the Alter are possible only provided that the Ego and the Alter Ego are defined by their situation and are not freed from all inherence; that is, provided that philosophy does not culminate in a return to the self, and that I discover by reflection not only my presence to myself, but also the possibility of an 'outside spectator'; that is, again, provided that at the very moment when I experience my existence—at the ultimate extremity of reflection—I fall short of the ultimate density which would place me outside time, and that I discover within myself a kind of internal weakness standing in the way of my being totally individualized: a weakness which exposes me to the gaze of others as a man among men or at least as a

³⁰ Ibid., xi. Original: "A chaque moment mon champ perceptif est rempli de reflets, de craquements, d'impressions tactiles fugaces que je suis hors d'état de relier précisément au contexte perçu et que cependant je place d'emblée dans le monde, sans les confondre jamais avec mes rêveries. A chaque instant aussi je rêve autour des choses, j'imagine des objets ou des personnes dont la présence ici n'est pas incompatible avec le contexte, et pourtant ils ne se mêlent pas au monde, ils sont en avant du monde, sur le théâtre de l'imaginaire [...] Le réel est un tissu solide, il n'attend pas nos jugements pour s'annexer les phénomènes les plus surprenants ni pour rejeter nos imaginations les plus vraisemblables." Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, iv-v.

³¹ Ibid., xiv. Original: "Le monde que je distinguais de moi comme somme des choses ou de processus liés par des rapports de causalité, je le redécouvre « en moi » comme l'horizon permanent de toutes mes cogitationes [sic] et comme une dimension par rapport à laquelle je ne cesse de me situer. Le véritable *Cogito* ne définit pas l'existence du sujet par la pensée qu'il a d'exister, ne convertit pas la certitude du monde en certitude de la pensée du monde, et enfin ne remplace pas le monde même par la signification monde." Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, vii-viii.

consciousness among consciousness. Hitherto the Cogito depreciated the perception of others, teaching me as it did that the I is accessible only to itself.³²

If, as Merleau-Ponty wrote, all phenomenology aims at “re-achieving a direct and primitive contact with the world, and endowing that contact with a philosophical status,” Merleau-Ponty himself may have achieved something like a culmination of the phenomenological project in *Phénoménologie de la perception*.³³ This was, perhaps, the most concrete realization of Wahl’s envisioned philosophy of the concrete. But therein lies the rub, for Merleau-Ponty’s masterpiece may have exposed the limits of phenomenology. More than that of any other phenomenologist, Merleau-Ponty’s work casts doubt on the prospect of a *single* or *simple* coherent “primitive contact with the world,” of a single valid philosophical interpretation of that contact, of the necessity of such a link between experience and interpretation, of the completeness of any distinction between experience and interpretation, and of a unified subject whence all of the preceding springs. As he was forced to concede at the very outset of his great work, “there is no thought which embraces all our thought.”³⁴

But it was not Merleau-Pontian ambiguity that brought the reign of existential phenomenology and the philosophy of the concrete to an end among the Parisian intelligentsia. To the contrary, the movement that usurped Sartre and the existentialists as the accepted intellectual avant-garde of the 1950s promised to bring the outmost clarity and precision to the

³² Ibid., xiii-xiv. Original: “Il faut que je sois mon extérieur, et que le corps d’autrui soit lui-même. Ce paradoxe et cette dialectique de l’Ego et de l’Alter ne sont possible que si l’Ego et l’Alter Ego sont définis par leur situation et non pas libérés de toute inhérence, c’est-à-dire si la philosophie ne s’achève pas avec le retour au moi, et si je découvre par la réflexion non seulement ma présence à moi-même mais encore la possibilité d’un « spectateur étranger » c’est-à-dire encore si, au moment même où j’éprouve mon existence, et jusqu’à cette pointe extrême de la réflexion, je manque encore de cette densité absolue qui me ferait sortir du temps et je découvre en moi une sorte de faiblesse interne qui m’empêche d’être absolument individu et m’expose au regard des autres comme un homme parmi les hommes ou au moins une conscience parmi les consciences. Le *Cogito* jusqu’à présent dévalorisait la perception d’autrui, il m’enseignait que Je n’est accessible qu’à lui-même.” Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, vii.

³³ Ibid., vii.

³⁴ Ibid., xv.

human sciences, in large part by means of bypassing the human—or, at least, the individual—altogether.

Structuralism emerged as a force in French intellectual life with the publication of the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss' *Les Structures élémentaires de la parenté* (*Elementary Structures of Kinship*) in 1949. Lévi-Strauss was a close friend of Merleau-Ponty. He had passed the agrégation in philosophy in 1931 but was not passionate about the discipline. Instead of pursuing a career in philosophy, he took up sociology, teaching the subject at the University of São Paulo from 1935 to 1939 and taking the opportunity to do field work with indigenous peoples of the Amazon. He returned to France to carry out wartime duties. After the German victory, Lévi-Strauss, who was of Jewish ancestry, fled to New York to teach at the *École Libre des Hautes Études*, the French university in-exile associated with the New School for Social Research. It was in New York that Lévi-Strauss met the Russian linguist Roman Jakobson, through whom he became acquainted with the work of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. This encounter induced Lévi-Strauss to develop his structural anthropology, which he introduced to France and the world in *Les Structures élémentaires de la parenté*. This work made an immediate mark, deeply influencing the likes of the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan and the literary theorist Roland Barthes.

The success of Lévi-Strauss and structuralism is rather counter-intuitive in some ways. Just a few short years after Sartre felt it necessary to defend existentialism's credibility by depicting it as a humanism, the new movement of structuralism gained widespread popularity while eschewing the philosophy of the subject, reducing the scope for human agency, and generally demeaning the roles of consciousness and intentionality in life, history, and society.

Surprising though its emergence was, this anti-humanism could claim well-established precedents in French thought. In this regard, the legacies of positivism and of what Foucault called the “philosophy of the concept” are crucial.³⁵ For the positivism of Auguste Comte and his successors was the third major school of philosophical thought, alongside idealism and spiritualism, that held sway in nineteenth-century France. It would not occur to most to label Comte’s thought overtly “anti-humanistic” because Comte did not explicitly oppose his system to an avowedly humanistic system, as Lévi-Strauss opposed his to Sartre’s humanism.³⁶ Nevertheless, Comtian positivism laid out an analytic of human progress in which individuals were not so much agents as vessels for an autonomous process of a vague and generalized “mind” (*esprit*) that manifested itself in positive structures of knowledge, method, and social relations.³⁷ Comte’s use of the term “mind” very much resembles Lévi-Strauss’ use of that term. Neither seems to understand by it a Hegelian *Absoluter Geist*, with a being, volition, and consciousness that might be called its “own.” They certainly did not consider themselves to be idealists. Yet, both Comte and Strauss grant priority to mind over individual human beings and both view it as operating generally and anonymously and as shaping human societies and the course of events therein. It is something between an aggregate of individual minds and a meta-mind. This vague concept is at the very core of both Comte’s Lévi-Strauss’ thought.³⁸ Through this mind that is not a mind, they bypass the human individual and even the collective.

³⁵ August Comte, *Auguste Comte and Positivism: The Essential Writings*, ed. Gertrud Lenzer (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1998); Michel Foucault, *Introduction to The Normal and the Pathological*, by Georges Canguilhem, trans. Carolyn R. Fawcett and Robert S. Cohen (New York: Zone, 1991).

³⁶ See especially Claude Lévi-Strauss, “History and the Dialectic,” in *The Savage Mind* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1966).

³⁷ Comte, *Auguste Comte and Positivism*.

³⁸ *Ibid.*; Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, trans. Claire Jacobson and Brooke Grundfest Schoepf (New York: Basic Books, 1963).

To some extent, the Comtian tradition was carried forth into twentieth-century France through the work of the philosophers Gaston Bachelard and Georges Canguilhem, Bachelard's student and successor as the director of the Institut d'Histoire des Science at the Sorbonne and a classmate of Sartre at the ENS. Unlike Comte, Bachelard and Canguilhem stressed the discontinuities in the development of science and the sciences. In this sense, they seem anti-positivist. But, like Comtian positivism, Bachelard's and Canguilhem's "philosophy of the concept" is certainly apersonal if not fully anti-humanistic. Its focus is on the life of the concept *per se*, with individual human beings as ancillary characters in this story. The characteristically humanistic concerns for individuality and freedom are simply absent from the epistemologies of Bachelard and Canguilhem.³⁹

More generally, Western Europe's postwar era was one of popular scientism and technocracy. If the interwar period was the age of clashing ideologies, the first two decades of the postwar period brought a general and often salutary cooling of intellectual passions, accompanied by the reign of a faith in welfare-capitalism and better living through science.⁴⁰ The popular scientism that had incubated Comte's positivism and Marx's scientific socialism in the nineteenth century reemerged in the 1950s to usher in the new "science" of structuralism.

And what exactly was this new science? The first approximation of an answer comes from Saussure's foundational text, *Cours de linguistique générale* (*General Course in Linguistics*). Three of Saussure's students, Charles Bally, Albert Riedlinger, and Albert Sechehaye, compiled this text from their notes of lectures Saussure had given at the University of Geneva from 1906 to 1911 and published it in 1916, three years after Saussure's death.

³⁹ See, for example, Gaston Bachelard, *The New Scientific Spirit*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Boston: Beacon, 1985); Georges Canguilhem, *A Vital Rationalist: Selected Writings from Georges Canguilhem*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer, ed. François Delaporte (New York: Zone, 2000).

⁴⁰ Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe since 1945* (New York: Penguin, 2005); Mazower, *Dark Continent*.

Saussure's aim was to establish linguistics on a firmly "scientific" basis, which involved thoroughly defining its domain. As Saussure defined linguistics—differentiating it from philology and grammar—it essentially consists of articulating the "general laws" (*lois générales*) behind the development of all languages and tracing the historical developments of specific languages and language families.⁴¹ For Saussure, everything in language is "psychological" or conceptual, even "its material and mechanical manifestations, such as sound changes."⁴² This insight led to Saussure's famous distinction between *parole* (speech) and *langue* (language). In fact, the distinction is not so clear or distinct as it seems, as it is not entirely clear where *parole* ends and *langue* begins, and even a third term, *langage* (language in a less abstract sense than *langue*), does little to clarify the difference. Indeed, some translations use "speech" for both *parole* and *langage*, or "speaking" for the one and "speech" for the other. In general, though, one can describe *langage* and *parole* as socially and individually variable, volitional, empirical, highly mutable, and inflected with materiality (sounds and, secondarily, written marks) and *langue* as general, avolitional, consisting of forms, highly immutable, and purely mental.⁴³

Saussure puts it so:

Taken as a whole, speech [langage] is many-sided and heterogeneous; straddling several areas simultaneously—physical, physiological, and psychological—it belongs both to the individual and to society; we cannot put it into any category of human facts, for we cannot discover its unity. Language [langue], on the contrary, is a self-contained whole and a principle of classification. As soon as we give language first place among the facts of speech, we introduce a natural order into a mass that lends itself to no other classification.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Ferdinand de Saussure, *Cours de linguistique générale*, ed. Charles Bally, Albert Sechehaye, and Albert Riedlinger (Paris: Payot, 1973), 19-21.

⁴² Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Wade Baskin, ed. Charles Bally, Albert Sechehaye, and Albert Riedlinger (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966), 6.

⁴³ In fact, whether language is mental, cerebral, or some odd combination of the two is unclear in Saussure. Nevertheless, Saussure does often refer, both explicitly and implicitly, to "collective mind." See below.

⁴⁴ Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, 9. Original: "Pris dans sa tout, le langage est multiforme et hétéroclite ; à cheval sur plusieurs domaines, à la fois physique, physiologique et psychique, il appartient encore au domaine individuel et au domaine social ; il ne se laisse classer dans aucune catégorie des faits humains, parce qu'on ne sait comment dégager son unité. La langue, au contraire, est un tout en soi et un principe de classification. Dès que nous

It should be noted that Saussure, like Comte before him and Lévi-Strauss after him, sometimes attributes the agency behind human development, specifically with regards to language, to an ill-defined “collective mind” (*l’esprit collectif*).⁴⁵

If there is a basic unit of Saussurean linguistics, it is the sign. The sign is a purely mental or “psychological” phenomenon. It consists of two parts, which are only separable by way of abstraction: the concept and the sound-image, or, in Saussurean terminology, the signified and the signifier, respectively.⁴⁶ In a sense, the two terms inhere in one another. Of this relationship, Saussure writes, “in language (*langue*), a concept is a quality of its phonic substance just as a particular slice of sound is a quality of the concept.”⁴⁷ The signified is not the thing in the world but the concept that ostensibly represents that thing or constitutes a classification for things. Though the sign seems to be contaminated with materiality in the form of the sound-image or signifier, which one might mistake for the simple “material sound” associated with a spoken word, Saussure makes it clear that the sound that is associated with a signifier is not the same thing as the sound-image. The latter is the “psychological imprint of the sound,” which one can “hear,” so to speak, in one’s mind.⁴⁸

One reason, then, that there may not be a basic unit of Saussurean linguistics is that the sign, insofar as it exists, is made up of elements—the signifier and signified—that either do not fully exist or do not fully exist without each other. As Saussure writes, “Without language (*langue*), thought is a vague, uncharted nebula. There are no pre-existing ideas, and nothing is

lui donnons la première place parmi les faits de langage, nous introduisons un ordre naturel dans un ensemble qui ne se prête à aucune autre classification.” Saussure, *Cours de linguistique générale*, 25.

⁴⁵ Saussure, *Cours de linguistique générale*, 19, 29-32. Saussure cryptically writes that “the distinguishing characteristic of the sign—but the one that is least apparent at first sight—is that in some way it always eludes the individual or social will (la volonté individuelle ou sociale).” Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, 17.

⁴⁶ Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, 15.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 103.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 11, 65-6.

distinct before the appearance of language (*langue*).” The inverse is also true: “Phonic substance is neither more fixed nor more rigid than thought; it is not a mold into which thought must of necessity fit but a plastic substance divided in turn into distinct parts to furnish the signifiers needed by thought.”⁴⁹ Thus, there is something spectral about language, an uncanniness that one might, though Saussure did not quite, describe as a lack of presence: “Linguistics then works in the borderland where the elements of sound and thought combine; *their combination produces a form, not a substance.*”⁵⁰

There is another reason that there may not be a basic unit of Saussurean linguistics. For Saussure, linguistic meaning, or the identity of signs, results from a *system* of differences between signs. It is only through distinction that each term can acquire a positive value and, hence, a fixed identity. There are a number of avenues by which one can attempt to grasp this idea, none of which is fully satisfactory.⁵¹ For starters, imagine that one occupies a world in which everything is the same shade of blue. In such a world, the word “blue” would have no meaning, nor, probably, would the word “color.” It is only with the introduction of *other* colors, *different* colors that one can say “blue,” or any equivalent sign, or speak *of* blue at all. One might even venture to say that it is only with the introduction of other colors that blue the concept or even the quality itself, and not simply “blue” the sign or signifier, comes into existence. Saussure gives another, perhaps less ambitious example:

We speak of the identity of two "8:25 p.m. Geneva-to-Paris" trains that leave at twenty-four hour intervals. We feel that it is the same train each day, yet everything—the locomotive, coaches, personnel—is probably different. Or if a street is demolished, then rebuilt, we say that it is the same street even though in a material sense, perhaps nothing of the old one remains. Why can a street be completely rebuilt and still be the same? Because it does not constitute a purely material entity; it is based on certain conditions

⁴⁹ Ibid., 112.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 113. Emphasis in original.

⁵¹ The matter is complicated considerably by the questions of whether there is and whether we can conceptualize a reality beyond language. I will allude to this question here but leave it unthematized for the time being.

that are distinct from the materials that fit the conditions, e.g. its location with respect to other streets. Similarly, what makes the express is its hour of departure, its route, and in general every circumstance that sets it apart from other trains. Whenever the same conditions are fulfilled, the same entities are obtained.⁵²

But, though Saussure treats signs as constituted by and within a system of differential values, he also, at times, writes of them as positive and discrete.⁵³ Moreover, one may ask, what is it about individual signs that allow for distinction in the first place? How could the sign *t* ever be confused with the sign *d*? Does not *t* have essential characteristics, variable though they may be in their particulars, that allow for a distinction from *d* in the first place, as it were? Does not blue have some innate characteristic that allows for its distinction from red, that makes that distinction meaningful? Does not the same hold for the conceptual side of signs? These two apparently countervailing tendencies—the formal distinctness of signs and their mutually constituting nature—institute a paradox at the heart of Saussurean linguistics, of which he writes, “Language (*langue*) then has the strange, striking characteristic of not having entities that are perceptible at the outset and yet of not permitting us to doubt that they exist and that their functioning (*leur jeu*) constitutes it.”⁵⁴ Though he tries, Saussure never quite manages to square this circle.⁵⁵

Be that as it may, such were the basics of Saussure’s semiotics. But Saussure also called for a more general science of the sign beyond linguistics, one that would study sign-systems in all domains of human life. He called this prospective science semiology, from the Greek

⁵² Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, 108-9. Original: “Nous parlons d’identité à propos de deux express « Genève-Paris 8 h. 45 du soir » qui partent à vingt-quatre heures d’intervalle. A nos yeux, c’est le même express, et pourtant probablement locomotive, wagons, personnel, tout est différent. Ou bien si une rue est démolie, puis rebâtie, nous disons que c’est la même rue, alors que matériellement il ne subsiste peut-être rien de l’ancienne. Pourquoi peut-on reconstruire une rue de fond en comble sans qu’elle cesse d’être la même ? Parce que l’entité qu’elle constitue n’est pas purement matérielle ; elle est fondée sur certaines conditions auxquelles sa matière occasionnelle et étrangère, par exemple, sa situation relativement aux autres ; pareillement, ce qui fait l’express, c’est l’heure de son départ, son itinéraire et en générale toutes les circonstances qui le distinguent des autres express. Toutes les fois que les mêmes conditions sont réalisées, on obtient les mêmes entités.” Saussure, *Cours de linguistique générale*, 151.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 107.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 119-21.

semefon for “sign.”⁵⁶ In 1950s and 1960s France, Lévi-Strauss, Lacan, and Barthes tried not so much to establish a unified science of semiology as to introduce semiological methods into their respective disciplines, with the avowed aim of setting each on a scientific footing. This involved transposing semiotic concepts across the human sciences. Thus, was born the movement of structuralism, deriving its name from the structures or networks of relations that are taken to determine meaning in any given system.

But this transposition of Saussurean concepts was a rather rough one. To begin, nowhere in Lévi-Strauss is there a clear counterpart to the Saussurean sign. One does encounter a consistent presentation of a coherent social meaning lying beneath apparently unrelated social practices. In some sense, then, one could view the social practices as the signifiers and the meaning as the signified, but this parallel is vague, unevenly represented, and ill-warranted in much of Lévi-Strauss. To begin, there is the question of how “meaning” is to be understood in the anthropological context, as meaning is not explicitly articulated in social institutions and practices, while it is generally taken to be in language. What, exactly, is the anthropological equivalent of the “sound-image”? Are the actors aware of the meaning in their social acts and institutions? If not, in what sense can any given putative meaning of any given act or institution be described as that act’s or institution’s “meaning” and not as an extraneous import of the anthropologist? If so, why do the actors themselves not represent their acts’ and institutions’ meanings as such? Perhaps such a representation would be superfluous to the actors, who enact meaning in their daily lives and are, thus, in a sort of implicit contact with it. But, then again, would not the anthropologist’s representation of the meaning in question be a fundamental distortion of a signified that must remain silent and simply lived? Moreover, if it is the case that

⁵⁶ Ibid., 15.

the meaning of an act or institution must be interpreted by the observer, how does the anthropologist—or the psychoanalyst, or the literary theorist, or the historian—know that he has correctly interpreted the meaning, that he has grasped the signified and understood the sign? One encounters this problem of the interpretation of meaning in structuralism again and again.⁵⁷ Indeed, it may be the fundamental problem not only of semiology but of all the human sciences. It may help to consider some examples.

In *Les Structures élémentaires de la parenté*, his breakout work of structural anthropology, Lévi-Strauss argues that the incest prohibition signifies not any sort of regard for the genetic or psychological health of the family but rather the necessity of making alliances with other families by preserving daughters for alliances between families. The elementary *structure* of kinship is formed by the unit of father-mother-son-maternal uncle.⁵⁸ What relation does Lévi-Strauss' analysis bear to the Saussurean model? Very little. One finds the notion that the signifier of the incest prohibition represents the signified of the necessity for marriage alliances, but calling these terms “signifier” and “signified,” respectively, fundamentally misrepresents Saussure's notion of the concepts. In fact, there is nothing new about this method, if such it can be called, of tracing deeper or more universal meanings to observable phenomena. Indeed, such an understanding seems to be intrinsic in the very concepts of meaning and thought, which are nearly always understood as going beyond appearances, phenomena, existence, or the ontic to reality, noumena, essence, or ontology. One also finds a “structure” in *Les Structures élémentaires de la parenté*, that of the basic kinship unit, whose terms do define one another, with broad social implications. But that the terms “mother,” “father,” “son,” and “maternal

⁵⁷ Or perhaps it is not a problem of interpretation but one of knowledge, i.e., of the knowledge that one has correctly interpreted.

⁵⁸ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, trans. James Harle Bell, John Richard von Sturmer, and Rodney Needham, ed. Rodney Needham (Boston: Beacon, 1969).

uncle” exist in and through relation to one another is not a particularly penetrating, novel, or significant insight. Lévi-Strauss makes a great deal of it in the conclusion to *Les Structures élémentaires de la parenté* but more as a programmatic statement of principles than as a means of thoroughly explicating the nature or significance of his insights in the preceding 500 pages of this work.⁵⁹

Perhaps a closer look at a more explicitly “structuralist” and “methodological” text of Lévi-Strauss is in order. “The Structural Study of Myth” from *Structural Anthropology* is such a text.⁶⁰ Here, Lévi-Strauss attempts to make sense of the underlying similarities among myths across cultures. He does so by treating myth as a language and, specifically, as a language that functions diachronically and synchronically simultaneously; that is myth, though referring to events supposed to have taken place in the distant past, nevertheless carries a timeless meaning.⁶¹ From myth’s specific linguistic nature it follows that “(1) Myth, like the rest of language, is made up of constituent units. (2) These constituent units presuppose the constituent units present in language when analyzed on other levels— namely, phonemes, morphemes, and sememes— but they, nevertheless, differ from the latter in the same way as the latter differ among themselves; they belong to a higher and more complex order.” Lévi-Strauss calls these units “mythemes.”⁶² He find these mythemes at the sentence level and proposes to analyze them by arranging individual myths into their most basic narratives and these into their “shortest possible sentences” and assigning a number to each sentence based on its sequence in the story of the myth. In such a way, he will distill each sentence into a function or mytheme. But, because

⁵⁹ None of this is meant to be dismissive of *Les Structures élémentaires de la parenté* as a work of anthropology or of theorizing about the boundaries of nature and culture. My interest is solely on this work as paradigmatic of structuralism.

⁶⁰ Lévi-Strauss, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 209.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 210-11.

myths are both synchronic and diachronic, these mythemes must be arranged into “bundles,” which can be organized both synchronically and diachronically. What this means in practice is that Lévi-Strauss will organize the sentences of the myth into a table, which is to be deciphered with reference to its columns and not its rows. The columns consist of “several relations belonging to the same bundle” or category, which Lévi-Strauss has determined. When treating the myth of Oedipus, for instance, he determines one column to be organized under the category “overrating of blood relations.”⁶³ From “examining” these columns and their relations to one another, Lévi-Strauss somehow deciphers the myth in question. He does not detail his method of examination. Nor does he detail a method of choosing categories under which to construct the columns. Nor does he detail a method for breaking down each myth into its simplest possible rendering and breaking down this rendering into the simplest possible sentences. Lévi-Strauss does consistently refer to and expand on Saussurean jargon and the notion of the importance of relations throughout the text but does not succeed in animating this jargon or demonstrating this principle. The amount of arbitrariness and lack of structure and logic in Lévi-Strauss’ “method” of analyzing myths overwhelms the reader.

Roland Barthes’ *Mythologies* will serve as a final example.⁶⁴ It may be in Barthes’ ideology-critique that the ideal of semiology comes closest to realization. Barthes argues that mythology is a “second-order semiological system,” in which the first-order linguistic sign becomes the mythological signifier.⁶⁵ His famous example is a photograph on the cover of an issue of the magazine *Paris-Match*. The photograph shows a young, saluting black soldier in a French uniform, with his eyes uplifted, fixed—so Barthes presumes—on the French flag. The

⁶³ Ibid., 214-5.

⁶⁴ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, ed. and trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1972).

⁶⁵ Ibid., 113.

myth makes of this simple image a meaning that is foreign to it on the primary level of semiology. The myth distorts the young black soldier into a signifier whose signified is the French Empire's greatness and generous embrace of all its subjects, regardless of color.

Of course, Barthes, the anti-capitalist and anti-colonialist, regards this myth as a lie. But the myth presents this lie with such quasi-naturalness, fusing second-order signifier and signified so neatly that not only do most readers or viewers not experience the myth as a lie, they actually experience the myth as so obviously true that they cannot easily make a distinction between the explicit and implicit content of the myth; the latter wholly predominates.⁶⁶ In this sense, myth is “depoliticized” speech in that it falsely presents itself as simply true and unmotivated by interest.⁶⁷ It is up to the mythologist to differentiate sign, signifier, and signified and to present each as it actually is.

For all its brilliance and subtlety, Barthes' analysis leads inevitably back to the fundamental problem of structuralism: the question of interpretation. Barthes writes,

Since Saussure himself, and sometimes independently of him, a whole section of contemporary research has constantly been referred to the problem of meaning: psychoanalysis, structuralism, eidetic psychology, some new types of literary criticism of which Bachelard has given the first examples, are no longer concerned with facts except inasmuch as they are endowed with significance [...] They are not content with meeting the facts: they define and explore them as tokens for something else...⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Ibid., 115-23.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 142-5. By contrast, Barthes makes the rather extravagant claim that the true left, before it is politicized, cannot perpetrate or perpetuate its own myths. This is so because, as the representatives of the workers, who are in material contact with the world, the left does not speak *about* the world but rather *speaks it*, just as the worker, according to Barthes, does not speak *about* the object of his labor but *speaks it* and is intimately connected to it by his labor. Barthes, *Mythologies*, 146-9.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 110. Original: “Depuis Saussure même et parfois indépendamment de lui, toute une partie de la recherche contemporaine revient sans cesse au problème de la signification : la psychanalyse, le structuralisme, la psychologie eidétique, certaines tentatives nouvelles de critique littéraire dont Bachelard a donné l'exemple, ne veulent plus étudier le fait qu'en tant qu'il signifie [...] elles ne se contentent pas de rencontrer le fait : elles le définissent et l'explorent comme un *valant-pour*.” Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (Paris: Seuil, 1957), 217-8.

But the questions remain: Who determines which facts are significant and what this significance is? Who has the privilege of saying what this “something else” is? How is this determined? What qualifies one to be a mythologist? And how does the mythologist know that he has gotten it right and exhausted the meaning of the signifier?

If, on the secondary level of myth, the *Paris-Match* cover is meant to signify the French Empire’s grandeur, if the mythological sign is this pseudo-natural union of signifier and signified, what is the primary signifier? Where is the visual equivalent of the “sound-image”? Barthes tells us that the primary signifier is the soldier *himself*, with the entirety of his personal life history and that the myth obscures this history by appropriating the soldier’s self, being, essence, or narrative for its own ends. But is this so? Is a photograph of a person that person? René Magritte would correctly object. Is the primary signifier, then, a generic black soldier of the French Empire? Well, what is a generic black soldier of the French Empire? Is this not an abstraction through and through? Is the primary signifier an arrangement of colors and shapes? Is it a retinal or cerebral pattern? Is it the photographer’s “intention” or the myriad networks of connotations which any given viewer might see in it? Is it its use or function within a language game? The answer is open to interpretation and this is true, also, of the second-order signifier, which may not be so easily separated from the primary signifier or signified after all.

In fact, what is called “structuralism” does not dispense with or solve the problem of interpretation but simply displaces it from the level of the individual to those of language, society, psyche, myth, and so forth. In this sense, it has much in common with a number of other modern intellectual movements that have vaunted systematicity and formalism as means of

escaping the ambiguity of interpretation, vainly seeking to elide problems of ontology and epistemology through the prioritization of methodology.⁶⁹

Thus, outside of linguistics, structuralism was a proposed method and the idea of a movement more than it was the actual development and application of that method and realization of a movement. It gained credibility and the appearance of greater coherence than it actually possessed through its very self-consciousness as a movement and a challenge to phenomenological existentialism. While structuralist texts often explicitly endorse the idea that all meaning is relational, they rarely provide demonstrations of this principle or treat their subjects accordingly. Structuralism's greatest gift to posterity is an awareness that certain modes, forms, assumptions, or structures underlie and shape individuals and individual beliefs within a given society. To be sure, this insight was not new, but structuralism articulated the matter with force. Nevertheless, the science of the sign never materialized. And there are compelling reasons for why it did not

⁶⁹ See, for example, Aaron Preston, *Analytic Philosophy: History of an Illusion* (New York: Continuum, 2007).

3. The Elusiveness of the Sign: Post-Structuralism, Postmodernism, and Deconstruction

What is poststructuralism? Does it even exist? The term is not popular in France, the supposed home of poststructuralism, and key thinkers associated with the movement have rejected its label.¹ For a number of commentators, these facts are decisive in their decision to likewise reject the term.² Such criticisms overestimate the importance of national origins in international intellectual movements and assume that intellectual movements must be formally organized and intentionally authored. If, on the other hand, intellectual movements are reconsidered as simply the treatment of similar ideas, exploration of similar themes, and espousal of similar views among a group of thinkers who gain traction at roughly the same time and in roughly the same the space and milieu, it makes overwhelming sense to speak of poststructuralism as a movement and to associate it with such names as Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, and Jean-François Lyotard.

Put simply, poststructuralism is a body of thought that took shape in France around notable and provocative philosophers beginning in the late 1960s. This thought revolves around themes of flux, difference, anti-foundationalism, anti-teleology, plurality, problems of representability, and knowledge's lack of coherence – which, to be sure, is a far cry from total incoherence. It generally did *not* take the form of an explicit challenge to, much less rejection of,

¹ For poststructuralism's and postmodernism's lack of currency in France, see Johannes Angermuller, *Why There Is no Poststructuralism in France: The Making of an Intellectual Generation* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015). Derrida himself, later in his career, emphatically rejected any identification of his work with poststructuralism or postmodernism, though it is far from clear what he understood by those terms, as he was responding to detractors who used the labels against him. See Jacques Derrida, "Marx & Sons," in *Ghostly Demarcations: A Symposium on Jacques Derrida's Specters of Marx*, ed. Michael Sprinker (New York: Verso, 1999).

² Christopher Norris is particularly outspoken in rejecting the labels "poststructural" and "postmodern" for Derrida. See Christopher Norris, *Derrida* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1987).

structuralism—as structuralism had taken the form of a rejection of existential phenomenology—but it is correctly deemed “post-structuralist” because of its radical interrogation of key structuralist tenets and premises. These tenets and premises include the notion of collective mind; the presence and representability of meaning; closed, static, and fully coherent structures of language, mind, and/or culture; and the unity of the Saussurean sign. Poststructuralism involves a return to problems of knowledge and interpretation and a return to the subject, not as a given or absolute source but as a problem. If structuralism was an attempt of non-philosophers to bypass the problems of philosophy, poststructuralism was a group of philosophers’ return to those problems, a return whose course sometimes went straight through structuralist themes and texts.³

Yes, poststructuralist thinkers found a bigger audience in the United States than in France. Yes, American theorists more readily and in greater numbers took up and amplified their themes than did French theorists.⁴ But neither of these realities does anything to erase the affinities of the French thinkers deemed “poststructuralist” with one another or to erase the national origins of poststructuralism. And they certainly do nothing to lessen the potency and relevance of poststructuralist thought.

For all the differences between poststructuralism and structuralism, there is one salient trait frequently ascribed to both: anti-humanism. Many commentators take both movements to be hostile to the subject, denying or effacing it.⁵ If the anti-humanism of structuralism emerged

³ For a similar view, see Schrift, *Twentieth-Century French Philosophy*; Alan D Schrift, “Le Nietzscheisme comme épistémologie: La réception Française de Nietzsche dans le moment Philosophique des années 1960,” in *Le Moment philosophique des années 1960 en France*, ed. Patrice Maniglier (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2011).

⁴ For the reception of poststructuralist thought in America, see François Cusset, *French Theory: How Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, & Co. Transformed the Intellectual Life of the United States*, trans. Jeff Fort, Josephine Berganza, and Marlon Jones (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2008).

⁵ For an early programmatic articulation of this view, see Luc Ferry and Alain Renaut, *French Philosophy in the Sixties: An Essay on Antihumanism*, trans. Mary H.S. Cattani (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts, 1990).

from the influence of positivism, scientism, the history of the concept, and Saussure, one figure stands out above all others in the anti-humanistic and reputed anti-humanistic tendencies of poststructuralism: Martin Heidegger.

Following Sartre's delivery of his lecture, "L'existentialisme est un humanisme," Heidegger saw fit to inform his growing French public that his own phenomenology was not such a humanism – at least, not in any standard sense of the term. He did so through his famous *Brief über den Humanismus (Letter on Humanism)*. In this work, Heidegger was responding to a letter from Jean Beaufret, an agrégé from Paris' ENS and ardent Heideggerian who was teaching at Lycée Henry-IV at the time. Beaufret went on to teach at the Lycée Condorcet and lecture at the ENS as France's foremost orthodox Heideggerian. Beaufret had written to Heidegger in the days following the Second World War's end, asking him to explain his understanding of the word "humanism" (*Humanismus*). At the time, Heidegger was living the life of a disgraced Nazi philosopher, barred from teaching and facing an uncertain future under French occupation in Freiburg. He likely saw this as an opportunity to extend his influence into a new domain before his connections to Nazism poisoned it there. Heidegger initially answered with a relatively brief letter, in which he denounced Corbin's translation of *Dasein* as *la réalité-humaine*. Heidegger answered more expansively, in a letter of December 1946, taking the opportunity to distance himself from Sartre and the latter's existential philosophy in the process. In truth, this letter also represents a point in Heidegger's distancing from the quasi existential philosophy that he had espoused in *Sein und Zeit*.⁶ Heidegger revised the letter and had it published in German in 1947.⁷ A partial translation of the original letter appeared in French in that same year, and a full

⁶ See chapter 1.

⁷ Martin Heidegger, *Platons Lehre von der Wahrheit mit einem Brief über den "Humanismus"* (Bern: A. Francke, 1947).

translation of the revised letter in 1953. With *Sein und Zeit* untranslated in its totality until 1985, *La Lettre sur l'humanisme* became, along with *Qu'est-ce que la métaphysique*, the chief representative of Heidegger's thought in the French language for the next thirty odd years.⁸

Heidegger begins his letter with a declaration that Sartre's emphasis on action is misplaced; for it is thinking that "accomplishes the relation of Being to the essence of man."⁹ He next denounces Sartre's affirmation of subject (*pour-soi*) and object (*en-soi*) as inadequate to Being. Being is beyond grammar.¹⁰ Further, in contrast to Sartre's declaration of existence preceding essence, Heidegger maintains that "Being has fatefully embraced its essence (*je geschicklich seines Wesens angenommen*)" and thinking, in its original sense, is the bestowal of "essence as a gift (*Wesenschenken*)."¹¹ Sartre has fatefully misunderstood Heidegger's *Existenz* as "existence" in the ordinary sense of the word, missing its character as a transcendence toward Being.¹² If there is to be a humanism at all, it should be a return to man's essence as the being that transcends its own being towards Being. As Heidegger writes, "This is humanism: meditating and caring, that man be human (*menschlich*) and not inhumane (*un-menschlich*), that is outside his essence."¹³ All other senses of the word "humanism" derive from an understanding of the human as "*animal rationale*" that is out of touch with Being.¹⁴ The overall message is clear and could not be more of a repudiation of Sartre: human being is not an end in itself but a means of accessing Being, and the task of thinking is not to articulate the specifically

⁸ Rockmore, *Heidegger and French Philosophy*, 88-95, 95n103.

⁹ Martin Heidegger, "Letter on Humanism," in *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (Toronto: Harper Perennial, 2008), 217.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 218.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 220.

¹² *Ibid.*, 228-30.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 224.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 226.

human but to create Being's abode by speaking a language of authenticity and, at times, remaining silent to better appreciate Being.

This is not "humanism" in any recognizable sense of the word; for Heidegger, the human is a mere appendage to Being: "The point is that in the determination of the humanity of man as *ek-sistence* what is essential is not man but Being."¹⁵ And this is Being in the Heideggerian understanding, with all its nationalistic, mystical, and quasi-theological baggage.

The *La Lettre sur l'humanisme* helped set the tone for poststructuralism's interrogations of the subject, humanness, and humanism. Yet, nowhere in poststructuralism does one find anything like a simple endorsement or reiteration of Heidegger's enthusiasm for that which he calls Being or of his call to see in humanity only a channel to this Being. Heidegger helped to inspire the poststructuralists to think beyond humanity but not in the name of Being. He was the first academic philosopher of fame to attempt *to think* the radically other beyond nearly all known categories, including man and the human. This attempt to come to terms with the radically other, rather than any specific doctrine, was his great contribution to French poststructuralist thought. He inspired followers in this task and cleared the way for radical reinterpretations of the manifold of intuition. But none of the greatest figures of poststructuralism—Derrida, Deleuze, Foucault, Kristeva, Cixous, Lyotard, the late Barthes, Irigaray—undertook this venture for the sake of Being or posited the radically other as Being.

Heidegger, then, is not the "master thinker" of French philosophy or of poststructuralism.¹⁶ There is no such thing. It is impossible to fully trace influence and reductivist to trace the whole of a thinker's, school's, or movement's articulations to one key

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 237.

¹⁶ For Heidegger as such a "master thinker," see Ferry and Renaut, *French Philosophy in the Sixties*; Rockmore, *Heidegger and French Philosophy*.

influence. In the first place, this would mean demonstrating that the articulations or thought of the latter share the essential nature of the former. It is not necessary here to rehearse all the compelling and convincing critiques of such an essentialism that render the notion of a key influence implausible. In the second, assigning a key influence would mean marginalizing all other influences. Given the nebulousness of the notions of influence and of thought itself, how could such an attribution of singular influence be warranted?

Indeed, strong cases have been made that if there was a seminal German influence on poststructuralism, it was not Heidegger but Nietzsche. Foucault's identification with the latter is well known. Nietzsche's most systematic and least radical work, *Genealogy of Morals*, provided Foucault with a template for his own historical method of interrogating discourses in terms of power.¹⁷ But just as influential on the likes of Derrida and Deleuze was the Heraclitian flux, the assault on binaries, the suspicion of language, and the interminable perspectivism found in works such as "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense," *The Gay Science*, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, and *Beyond Good and Evil*. There is no privileged term in Nietzsche, as Being is in Heidegger; there is only the phantasmagoric welter of experience and language, striving to make sense of itself and of its other(s) and succeeding only in the form of an ongoing and overlapping succession of perspectives.¹⁸ Even the *Übermensch*, which represents Nietzsche at his most antihumanistic, is a thoroughly ambiguous figure.

In fact, a fair treatment of structuralism and poststructuralism cannot regard them as simply anti-humanist and leave the matter at that. It is true that what was taken to be the Cartesian subject—substantial, self-transparent, rational—came under interrogation. But there

¹⁷ Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon, 1984).

¹⁸ For interpretations of poststructuralism as a Nietzschean enterprise, see Gutting, *Thinking the Impossible*; Alan D. Schrift, *Nietzsche's French Legacy: A Genealogy of Post-Structuralism* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

was no simple or universal rejection of it, denunciation of humanistic traditions, or denial of human nature. The landscape was much more complex than this and encompassed diverse views. Strict Heideggerians refused to deal with mind, *Geist*, or *esprit* as a category and overlooked life and individuality for Being; Lévi-Strauss subordinated the individual to cultural codes but still insisted on the priority of collective mind; Lacan transformed the individual mind into a never entirely clear system or quasi-system of the symbolic, imaginary, and real, giving the symbolic priority; early Foucault had no problem leaving man as object or body intact as a domain of the human sciences but placed man as subject under an absolute interdict; Derrida maintained the cogito as the locus of language, itself constituted through language.¹⁹ It would, then, be more accurate to speak plurally of a-, anti-, para-, and neo-humanisms in this context than to speak singularly of anti-humanism. This is a pluralism appropriate to the postmodern condition.

As contested and maligned a term as “poststructuralism” is, “postmodernism” is all the more so. Once eminently fashionable on the left, the label “postmodern” is now one of derision among those who consider themselves at the forefront of critical theory, condemnable not so much for lack of rigor or clarity as for simply being *passé* and vulgar. By contrast, the right and the Marxist left continue to view the term as relevant and damning, associating it with nihilism (whatever that may mean), hatred for the West, political correctness or wokeness, intellectual laziness, and—depending on whether the critic is a Marxist or conservative—class-appeasement or class-warfare.

Even in postmodernism’s halcyon days, the precise meaning of the term was highly contested. Everybody knew postmodernism was important, many saw it as epoch-defining, and

¹⁹ For Derrida and Foucault on the subject, see below.

many feted it, but even the latter frequently disagreed about what it was. Jean-François Lyotard, one of the foremost postmodernists, viewed it as the collapse of grand narratives of human liberation, specifically those of capitalism and communism, and as characteristic of an age of rapidly proliferating and possibly incommensurable language games, driven in large part by the advent of electronic media.²⁰ Frederic Jameson, an admiring critic, opposed a comprehensive cultural modernism to a comprehensive cultural postmodernism, both of them supposedly present and dominant in all the arts of their respective eras. For Jameson, modernism is marked by depth hermeneutics, the alienation of the subject, class politics, originality or attempts thereat, and streamlined space; postmodernism by various forms of superficiality (most notably discursive), the fragmentation of the subject, identity politics, pastiche, and a disorienting “hyperspace.” Jameson saw the cultural condition of postmodernism as appropriate to the economic and social dislocations of what Ernst Mandel deemed late capitalism, marked by hyper-commodification and the rapid flow of capital.²¹ John Frow represents the view that postmodernism is merely so much talk, a fashionable label invested with radically different meanings by different actors.²²

Postmodernism is not so nebulous a concept as all the disagreement around its meaning would suggest. In fact, a number of the above interpretations and many others beside have much in common. Like “poststructuralism,” the term “postmodernism” bears a perfectly cogent meaning if one examines the works of those thinkers most frequently labeled “postmodern,”

²⁰ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota 1984). Lyotard’s analysis of the situation bears certain affinities to that of Marshall McLuhan: Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1994).

²¹ Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke, 1991); Ernst Mandel, *Late Capitalism*, trans. Joris De Bres (New York: Verso, 1999).

²² John Frow, *Time and Commodity Culture: Essays in Cultural Theory and Postmodernity* (New York: Oxford, 1997).

extracts commonalities from among them (without effacing their differences), and situates these commonalities within the overall arc of the modern world and modern thought. The last of these steps, needless to say, is probably the most difficult and contestable. But such risks are intrinsic to all models and hermeneutics.

All that said, “postmodernism” may be a misnomer after all. It might be better to speak of “post-rationalism.” Rationalism is only one aspect of modernity and modernism, so “post-rationalism” is not per force entirely identical with “postmodernism.” Further, rationalism predates modernity, with its most ambitious articulation still being that of Plato. Another problem with the term “postmodernism” is the prefix *post-*. Despite much wishful thinking, Western societies have not yet moved beyond rationalism. But no signifier perfectly accords with the signified. As a term of convenience, historical import, and evocation, “postmodernism” is apt enough.

It would be a huge mistake to posit postmodernism as a unified cultural form, opposing it to modernism as a unified cultural form. The cultural trends of the twentieth and nineteenth centuries are far too diverse for such an overarching categorization, as are those of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Any attempt to characterize either with a simple epitaph is bound to provoke so many well-founded objections and counter-examples as to fail in its simplifying purpose.

It would also be a mistake to think that the general human (or transhuman) condition of postmodernity—as distinct from the cultural and intellectual trend of postmodernism—must be comprehensively opposed to that of modernity. Biologically, culturally, psychologically, economically, politically, and technologically...much remains the same between these two eras.

Rather, postmodernity is an era in which the rationalism characteristic of some very prominent strands of modern thought has fallen out of favor with very large segments of the public and the intellectuals, specifically those intellectuals who designate themselves as “critical” and do not view class as the sole legitimate source of social identity. Postmodernism, then, is the intellectual movement that both proclaims and champions this anti-rationalism or skepticism of rationalism – taking care, once again, not to confuse rationalism with rationality or reasonableness.

Of course, on the above understanding of “postmodernism,” any thinker who expresses anti-rationalist sentiments qualifies as postmodern. But if one wishes to limit postmodernism to the historical era of postmodernity, one may do so by pointing to certain historical processes and events and adding these to the above understanding of “postmodernism.”

But why even call this way of thinking “postmodernism” if it is not unique to recent decades? The answer is that this way of thinking is the antithesis (in a non-Hegelian sense) of one very important and characteristically *modern* form of thinking that affirms the autonomy and fundamental coherence of the subject (Descartes, the dominant reading of Kant), the possibilities of clear representation and apodictic knowledge from either first principles (Descartes, Hegel) or empiricism (a number of the *philosophes*, Comte, Marx, logical positivists, and adherents of scientism), moral realism (Descartes, certain readings of Kant, a number of the *philosophes*, certain readings of Hegel and Marx), and the possibility—if not inevitability—of a rational ethics and politics resulting in action by consensus or by what might be called a universal logos (certain *philosophes*, certain readings of Hegel, certain readings of Marx). As noted above, these principles did not first emerge with Descartes at the outset of modernity. Nevertheless, they have characterized modernity more than they have any other era in the West’s history and they

have deeply informed modern secular and semi-secular worldviews and attitudes. It is in its opposition to or interrogation of these tenets that poststructuralism is or aims to be emphatically postmodern.²³

Postmodernism, then, is, for many intents and purposes, poststructuralism. Postmodernity is something else. It is or was an intellectual-cultural epoch, though, perhaps, only a short-lived one. It helped to foster postmodernism and is one of the prerequisites for its popularity but it is also partially constituted by postmodernism. If one were to assign postmodernity a date of origin, it might be 1968 or 1973. Its onset corresponds with the end of the postwar boom, the rise of post-industrialism, and the loss of confidence thereby engendered. It directly follows the trauma of the Sixties and the collapse of post-war political consensus in both the capitalist and Communist worlds. Postmodernity signals the end of these consensuses and a markedly widespread—though certainly not universal—loss of the modern faith of achieving utopia through reason.

At the same time, and not without irony, postmodernity is the consummation of another aspect of modernity: Weberian disenchantment. Postmodernity is the point at which the demystifying processes of reason have done their work so completely as to call into question the very possibility of coherent knowledge, meaning, and reason itself. The last victim of rationality's disenchanting process is faith in reason, the faith known as "rationalism." A denizen of postmodernity may not just doubt whether this or that truth-claim is correct but whether the very notion of truth is or ever could be definitively established as correct. The result is not so much a new sort of mysticism *per se* but, rather, a new stupefaction and a new

²³ It must be added that poststructuralism also rejects the extra-modern concept of arriving at truth through mysticism.

intoxication. The stupefied are struck dumb by the unmasterable cosmos of possibilities and boundless uncertainty, and the intoxicated are sotted upon it.

Lyotard was insightful but only partially correct to describe postmodernity as the end of the grand narratives (or grand analytics) of communism and capitalism. The Western right lost faith not in capitalism *per se* but, rather, in welfare-capitalism, embracing a Miltonesque neo-liberalism instead. The Western left lost faith in Marxism and, for a time at least, in revolution but not in all variants of socialism. Postmodernity birthed a putatively more pluralistic and diffuse politics, marked by new social movements, political correctness, and an increasingly ostentatious concern for the supposed “others” of Western societies.

A closer look at the thought of poststructuralism’s two most frequently cited representatives will allow for a better understanding of its traits and tensions. The lives of Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault were infamously interconnected. The two first met in 1952, when Derrida, then aged twenty-two, started attending a class on experimental psychology offered by the twenty-six-year old Foucault at the ENS. The student and slightly older instructor became friends, remaining cordial for some years to come. The friendship persisted even after Derrida, in one of his first major papers-given, thoroughly criticized Foucault’s reading in *Folie et Déraison (History of Madness)* of Descartes’ understanding of madness in the *First Meditation*.²⁴ Privately, Foucault responded positively to Derrida’s lecture, “Cogito et histoire de la folie” (Cogito and the History of Madness). Foucault went as far as to inform Derrida of his basic agreement with the latter’s criticisms. Somewhere in the course of the next ten years, however, Foucault evidently came to feel wounded at Derrida’s treatment of him. Foucault

²⁴ Jacques Derrida, "Cogito et histoire de la folie" (Collège Philosophique, 1963). Later published as Jacques Derrida, "Cogito et histoire de la folie," *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* 68, no. 3-4 (October-December 1963) and subsequently as Jacques Derrida, "Cogito et histoire de la folie," in *L'écriture et la différence* (Paris: Seuil, 1967). Michel Foucault, *Folie et Déraison: Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique* (Paris: Plon, 1961).

availed himself of the opportunity of the release of a second edition of *Folie et Dérison* to respond to Derrida. In an essay appended to the second edition entitled “Mon corps, ce papier, ce feu” (“My Body, This Paper, This Fire”) Foucault answered Derrida’s criticism in scathing tones, dismissing Derrida’s manner of text-based philosophizing as a “little pedagogy” that gives “unlimited sovereignty” to the “voice of the masters” by ignoring non-textual events, processes, and institutions.²⁵ After these words, and any others that may have been exchanged in private, Derrida and Foucault stopped speaking to each other for a number of years. They only resumed contact in 1982 after Foucault came to Derrida’s aid during a crisis.²⁶ Foucault’s premature death in 1984 cut short a deeper renewal of their friendship.

Intellectually, Foucault and Derrida were, indeed, quite distant. And, like their friendship, Foucault’s death curtailed what might have been a greater conciliation of intellectual approaches. If a sensitivity to the tensions, loose ends, and changing natures of *all* structures of meaning is the mark of poststructuralism, Foucault may never quite qualify as a poststructuralist. Foucault’s *épistémès* are rigidly structural: universal in their respective ages and places, coherent and unambiguous, determining of all possible discourses and subjectivities, entirely extra-personal.²⁷ His concept of power-knowledge is foundationalist and totalizing. It renders meaningless all empirical diversity, all qualitative texture, and all human ambivalence and ambiguity in reducing discourses and the intentions of their participants to a simple dynamic of domination and oppression. Even if he theoretically allows for some exceptions, one finds a

²⁵ Michel Foucault, "My Body, This Paper, This Fire," in *History of Madness*, ed. Jean Khalfa (New York: Routledge, 2006).

²⁶ Czech police arrested Derrida in Prague on New Year’s Day 1982 on charges of drug-smuggling. In reality, Derrida’s crime was supporting non-violent resistance to Communist rule. Foucault immediately called for Derrida’s release in a radio address. Initially unaware of Derrida’s celebrity and faced with an onslaught of such demands, the Czech authorities quickly relented. For this and other details of the relationship, see Benoit Peeters, *Derrida: A Biography*, trans. Andrew Brown (Malden, MA: Polity, 2013).

²⁷ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Random House, 1970).

thorough refusal in Foucault to take discourses seriously on their own terms.²⁸ One finds a similar refusal to take mind or subjectivity at all seriously and a corollary privileging of the body as *the* ontological locus of human experience. Whatever his protestations to the contrary, this is the overwhelming tack Foucault takes in his early work. In his later work, Foucault complicated this picture, allowing some degree of self-determination with what he called ‘ethics’ and painting a more complex and fluid picture of power and its diffusion throughout society.²⁹ He also hinted at the possibility of a discourse that, if not domination-free, was at least more than a vehicle for power’s exercise.³⁰ But these developments came within the overall context of Foucault’s still basically structuralist thought, representing alterations rather than a fundamental shift. As Merleau-Ponty was to the movement of French phenomenology, so Foucault was to the structuralist movement: its last and greatest paragon.³¹

Derrida is another case entirely. His famous lecture “La structure, le signe et le jeu dans le discours des sciences humaines” (Structures, Sign, and Free Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences) more or less inaugurated the era of poststructuralism and outlined its agenda when he delivered it on 23 October 1966 at the conference entitled The Language of Criticism and the Sciences of Man at John Hopkins University. It was a direct engagement with structuralism and Lévi-Strauss. The sign, Derrida argued, is not the full unity of signifier and signified but, rather, the aspiration for such a unity and assumption of it. But the very movement

²⁸ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Random House, 1979).

²⁹ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley, vol. 1 of *The History of Sexuality* (New York: Random House, 1990); Michel Foucault, *The Care of the Self*, trans. Robert Hurley, vol. 3 of *The History of Sexuality* (New York: Random House, 1986).

³⁰ Foucault, “What Is Enlightenment?,” trans. Catherine Porter, in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 32-50.

³¹ The analogy is not altogether apt, as phenomenology is now only of interest to specialists, whereas Foucauldian discourse analysis, though no longer strongly identified with structuralism, has become the dominant language of nearly all intellectuals who consider themselves “critical.”

of discourse attests to a difference between these terms that cannot be overcome. Were there such a unity of signifier and signified, discourse would be an impossibility because this originary and simple accord would render explication and argument impossible and superfluous. There would simply be nothing about which to disagree. Rather, discourse *is* the play of the signifier in a never-ending search of itself—of its full determination or meaning—and, consequently, in search of its signified, which is (or would be) the only thing that could vouchsafe this determination or meaning. For all its claims to bypass the variability of lived experience and subjective judgment in favor of direct access to structures of meaning, structuralism does not evade this dynamic, and the structures it proposes are also subject to the play of signifiers that is interpretation. This play can never be arrested because there is no center, no origin, and no foundation to the structure that could act as an ultimate reference, a “transcendental signified,” to impose a final order on it. Derrida’s peroration is a stunning recognition of the postmodern condition, which he elsewhere calls the “closure of metaphysics”:

There are thus two interpretations of interpretation, of structure, of sign, of freeplay. The one seeks to decipher, dreams of deciphering, a truth or an origin which is free from freeplay and from the order of the sign, and lives like an exile the necessity of interpretation. The other, which is no longer turned toward the origin, affirms freeplay and tries to pass beyond man and humanism, the name man being the name of that being who, throughout the history of metaphysics or of ontotheology—in other words, through the history of all of his history—has dreamed of full presence, the reassuring foundation, the origin and the end of the game.³²

³²Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1978), 292-3. Original: “Il y a donc deux interprétations de l’interprétation, de la structure, du signe et du jeu. L’une cherche à déchiffrer, rêve de déchiffrer une vérité ou une origine échappant au jeu et à l’ordre du signe, et vit comme un exil la nécessité de l’interprétation. L’autre, qui n’est plus tournée vers l’origine, affirme le jeu et tente de passer au-delà de l’homme et de l’humanisme, le nom de l’homme, étant le nom de cet être qui, à travers l’histoire de la métaphysique ou de l’onto-théologie, c’est-à-dire du tout de son histoire, a rêvé la présence pleine, le fondement rassurant, l’origine et la fin du jeu.” Derrida, “La structure, le signe et le jeu dans le discours des sciences humaines,” 426. Originally delivered as Jacques Derrida, “La structure, le signe et le jeu dans le discours des sciences humaines” (*The Language of Criticism and the Sciences of Man*, John Hopkins University, Baltimore, MD, 1966).

The early works of Derrida nearly all elaborate on this seminal lecture's theme of the structural indetermination and theaporetic nature of meaning, with its very incompleteness as the condition of its possibility.³³ Though Derrida did not use the term in the lecture, what he was describing is *différance*. *Différance* is one of the core concepts in Derrida's oeuvre, although Derrida would, for good reasons, deny its conceptual status, its core status, and its very existence. *Différance* is the gap between the signifier and the signified. It is also the gap between signifiers, as they try vainly to reach the transcendental signified by consummating themselves through reference to each other. To take a simple example, if Socrates believes that he has reached the signified of "justice" with the concept of "each man doing his duty," Derrida would point out that the signifier "justice" is complete, or self-present, only if those of "man" and "duty" are themselves entirely self-present, entirely understood by all auditors without any residue of ambiguity or disagreement. This, of course, is not the case. If one tries to solve the problem by defining "man" and "duty," one does so by, again, referencing other signifiers, which are also underdetermined. The process continues *ad infinitum*. What results is not an infinite regress but an endless play of signifiers, forming an ever-expanding, involuting, and overlapping hermeneutic moebius strip, striving always for the transcendental signified that will arrest their play.

In this play, the signified is never reached. It is never fully present. Hence, Derrida's confrontation with what he, following Heidegger, calls the "metaphysics of presence." Yet, the signified is never simply absent, either. If that were so, all of what is now speech and writing

³³ What follows is all gleaned from these early works. Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1981); Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1982); Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins, 1997); Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, trans. David B Allison (Evanston, IL: Northwestern, 1973); Derrida, *Writing and Difference*.

would be nonsense at best. Though “justice” is never fully defined, its meaning never fully present, the word continues to signify a certain I-know-not-what; that is, an I-know-not-what that remains distinct from other I-know-not-whats. To signify this absence of pure absence, Derrida supplements *différance* with the concept of *trace*. If there were moments of determination in the play of signifiers, moments of sheer representability, it would be the trace that referred to these moments. If there is something beyond language, it is the trace that points to this. The trace is the allure of the transcendental signified – that which distinguishes *différance* from chaos and meaninglessness. At the same time, *différance* is the trace; they are the same movement viewed from different angles. With *différance* and trace, Derrida tries to think a category beyond presence and absence. But a supplement is not a complement, and if this attempt is bound to fail, or, at least, remain incomplete, Derrida accepts as much. To misquote a near contemporary, *différance* is what it is not and is not what it is.³⁴

But *différance* is not so recondite a dynamic as it may first appear. Anyone who has ever paused to ask herself who she is, or why this ice cream tastes so good, or why pain is painful, or why blue is blue has thematized the experience of *différance*. *Différance* functions not only on the semiological level but also on the phenomenological. Indeed, as much of Derrida’s early work demonstrates, neither logos can escape the other. What is deferred in *différance* is not just the unity of signifier and signified but the unity of phenomenon and sense or of sense and concept. What is deferred is the arrest of thought and doubt, the total clarification of the ambiguity of lived experience, and the *Aufhebung* of subject and object in a pure self-knowing self-presence. *Différance* is the temporal spacing that separates what is called the experience

³⁴ For unexpected affinities between the thought of Sartre and that of Derrida, see Christina Howells, "Conclusion: Sartre and the Deconstruction of the Subject," in *The Cambridge Companion to Sartre*, ed. Christina Howells (New York: Cambridge, 1992).

from its anticipated meaning, its anticipated form. It is the deferral of this meaning indefinitely into a future that is always to-come or a past that never-was. Yearning and nostalgia both are possible because of *différance*. If there were an answer to the Merleau-Pontian question of why experience does not lend itself to precision and always yields a residue of ambiguity and uncertainty in attempts to make sense of it, the answer would be *différance*. In this sense, Derrida represents something like phenomenology's revenge on structuralism – perhaps a pyrrhic revenge by the standards of both Husserl and Heidegger.

Methodologically, *différance* takes the form of deconstruction. This method involves exposing the metaphysical assumptions at work in a text by revealing the tension between what the author declares and what he describes followed by a demonstration that what is suppressed, denied, or elided in the described always already pervades and grounds the declared. That is to say, all philosophical declarations must ultimately either assume an unwarranted metaphysical foundation, thus belying any authorial claims of systemic autonomy or self-justification, or must confess themselves to be ungrounded and subject to *différance*. Deconstruction is both the deconstructionist's double reading (declaration vs. description) of a text and the play of *différance* within that text that prevents its self-presence, creates its textuality and intertextuality, and allows for its deconstruction via said double reading. Derrida consistently applies this method to his own texts, never claiming to escape metaphysics but always to move through the closure of metaphysics, the era in which *différance* and its decentering consequences have been gaining increased recognition.

Deconstruction is not necessarily more fundamental or universal than any other theory. Rather, it is a hermeneutic that accounts for the lack of fundamentality and universality of every theory and of thought itself. Similarly, deconstruction need not claim to be the ground of all

experience. Deconstruction and *différance* account for experience's inability to either ground or transcend itself, to capture or exceed every experience in a single experience. It is an explanation for and a demonstration of why there can be no philosophical theory of everything or fundamental experience of life. Deconstruction posits an endless hermeneutics, to which it is itself subject, from which it is constituted, and which it helps to constitute.

Thus, Derrida's historical importance lies first in recognizing as fully as possible what the structuralist and the phenomenologist never allowed themselves to recognize: even the structuralist cannot fully arrest and grasp the movement of the signifier and even the phenomenologist cannot arrest or grasp the flux of time, of phenomena, and of intentional processes – in short, of perception and interpretation. Lévi-Strauss, Lacan, Merleau-Ponty, and even Sartre all flirted with this recognition but ultimately wavered before it. Derrida, by contrast, foregrounds his repeated passages through it, in a convoluted eternal return. Derrida tells us the simple truth that the problem of interpretation will always remain; indeed, it is the very possibility of discourse.

It was this sensitivity to and enthusiasm for aporia that made Derrida the epitome of the postmodern. Derrida did not surreptitiously replace one determined ontology or ethics with another. Instead, he described indetermination *per se* as ~~fundamental~~ ontology and ontology as indetermination.³⁵ His core and elementary concepts—*différance* and trace—are intentionally flux-ridden, unclear, and indistinct, thereby challenging Descartes' foundational imperative that all philosophically valid concepts be clear and distinct. For these reasons, Derrida's critique of rationalism is more comprehensive and more penetrating than those of his contemporaries. He criticizes not only institutions, historical and discursive modalities, or economic systems but also

³⁵ If I borrow Derrida's habit of writing under erasure here, I do so only because it is necessary to do justice to his thought.

the very complex of language, reason, and experience that philosophers and laypersons across eras have taken as either constituting reality or as providing access to it. Derrida undertook this critique not by assigning a positive sham nature to this “reality” but rather by questioning the integral coherence of this complex, to which Derrida acknowledges his own thought and writing belong. More than any other philosopher, except possibly Nietzsche, Derrida thematized and propounded the truth—anathema to the rationalist—that reality is not of a nature that allows itself to be *thoroughly* divided into and articulated in *altogether* clear and distinct propositions, on which one can take either a yay or nay position. This does not mean that all interpretations have equal explanatory power or plausibility, but it does mean that any attempt to fully measure explanatory power or to fully explain its source and meaning will be forever incomplete.

For all of that, the early Derrida can be aptly described as a “humanist,” not only in the sense of his regard for political liberalism but also in his regard for the philosophy of the subject, ambivalent as both may have been. And this is of great importance in the encounters between Derrida and German thought. Just as Heidegger submerged, dismantled, or destructed the self in(to) the field of Being, so Derrida is taken to have wholly dispersed the self into the play of signifiers.³⁶ In fact, Derrida’s assessment of the relationship between the self and the semantic field is more complex than that. Derrida certainly rejected the notion of a static and thoroughly present self. But he makes it clear in numerous places that the fact of subjectivity (the cogito) cannot be escaped and should not be denied.³⁷ The subject is that which disappears or slips away into the play of signifiers and the disjunctions of time when one tries to grasp it but the subject is

³⁶ M.C. Dillon, *Semiological Reductionism: A Critique of the Deconstructionist Movement in Postmodern Thought* (Albany, NY: SUNY, 1995); Ferry and Renaut, *French Philosophy in the Sixties*.

³⁷ See below. See also Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Nancy, "'Eating Well,' or the Calculation of the Subject: An Interview with Jacques Derrida," in *Who Comes after the Subject?*, ed. Eduardo Cadava, Peter Connor, and Jean-Luc Nancy (New York and London: Routledge, 1991).

also and necessarily that through which the semantic field is constituted, even as it (the subject) is constituted as ephemerality within that field. And it is the subject that tries vainly to arrest the play of signifiers and to coordinate the disjunctions of time, so as to transform its ephemerality into pure presence and determination. This understanding of the subject marks one of Derrida's signal advancements on Heidegger and marks him out from some other structuralists and poststructuralists who view the subject as ontologically incidental. Heidegger sought to transform the self into Dasein, a pure vessel for arriving at the truth of Being.³⁸ Derrida, by contrast, had no false illusions as to the final arrival of Being or of anything else.

Two early texts of Derrida shed light on this aspect of his thought: the aforementioned "Cogito et histoire de la folie" from 1963 and his critique of Emmanuel Levinas' *Totalité et Infini (Totality and Infinity)*, "Violence et Métaphysique: Essai sur la pensée d'Emmanuel Levinas" (Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas), of 1964.³⁹ "Cogito et histoire de la folie" may be the most remarkable text in Derrida's entire oeuvre. It was his first major paper delivered and it was unlike any other that followed in that it is the closest Derrida ever comes to a straightforward approach to the philosophy of the subject. Broadly, it is a deconstruction of Foucault's archeology of knowledge. More specifically, it is an extended objection to Foucault's treatment of Descartes' first and second *Meditations*. Foucault had argued in *Folie et Déraison* that Descartes helped to create the classical discourse of madness by banishing madness from any rational treatment or consideration in these texts. According to Foucault, Descartes was willing to consider dreams as subject to rational engagement and something like falsification but did not grant madness the same status. In order

³⁸ See chapter 1.

³⁹ Jacques Derrida, "Violence et Métaphysique: Essai sur la pensée d'Emmanuel Levinas," *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* 69, no. 3-4 (1964). Republished as Derrida, "Violence et Métaphysique: Essai sur la pensée d'Emmanuel Levinas."

for the cogito to be achieved, Foucault argued, Descartes had to banish madness from consideration because he could not make sense of it.⁴⁰ Derrida correctly points out that this reading is not supported by Descartes' text, in which, in fact, Descartes accords madness and dreams the exact same epistemological status and ability to deceive. What Foucault took for Descartes' views on madness was merely Descartes' paraphrasing of the layman's view, which Descartes does not endorse but, rather, challenges through the device of dreams. In fact, it is through the confrontation with the possibility of a hyper-madness visited upon him by the device of the evil demon that Descartes achieves the cogito because, as radical as any form of experience may be, including madness, one cannot doubt that one is experiencing.⁴¹ For this reason, Derrida argues, Foucault's interpretation of history, of historical structures, was at least partially mistaken. The classical discourse of reason and madness could not have been as exclusionary or oppositional as Foucault claimed because Descartes did, in fact, allow the possibility of madness to engage with reason. At the same time, Derrida notes, to the great extent that reason does exclude that which Foucault calls madness, this exclusion far predates Descartes and the classical age, going at least as far back as Socrates.

But Derrida goes much farther than making these editorial corrections and drawing their historical implications. The essay outlines a semiological epistemology that sharply distinguishes Derrida's approach from Foucault's. According to Derrida, Foucault had tried to write a history of madness itself with *Folie et Dérison*. Foucault had attempted to voice the ineffable, to make sense of the senseless. This cannot be done, Derrida argues, not because there is no such thing as madness or because it is ontologically or socially inferior to reason but

⁴⁰ Michel Foucault, *History of Madness*, trans. Jonathan Murphy and Jean Khalfa, ed. Jean Khalfa (New York: Routledge, 2006), 44-7.

⁴¹ Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 48-59.

because, if there is such a thing as madness, it lies perforce outside the order of language. Any attempt to communicate it or to speak in its name would be a pure fiction, and Foucault's archeology is no exception:

But, first of all, is there a history of silence? Further, is not an archaeology, even of silence, a logic, that is, an organized language, a project, an order, a sentence, a syntax, a work? Would not the archaeology of silence be the most efficacious and subtle restoration, the *repetition*, in the most irreducibly ambiguous meaning of the word, of the act perpetrated against madness – and be so at the very moment when this act is denounced?⁴²

If there is anything beyond language, the historian, like the philosopher, can anticipate it, poke at its edges, try to open passages to it but cannot speak it and cannot speak for it. This is due not to any particular historical instantiation of logos but to logos itself: “The unsurpassable, unique, and imperial grandeur of the order of reason, that which makes it not just another actual order or structure (a determined historical structure, one structure among other possible ones), is that one cannot speak out against it except by being for it, that one can protest it only from within it.”⁴³

Silence does not speak. Whatever may be beyond language most assuredly does not speak.

Consequently, to quote another enigmatic philosopher of language, “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.”

Further, it is not only outside the order of language that madness lies but outside that of the cogito. In this sense, Descartes did not exclude what is called madness from the cogito but, rather, assimilated madness into it. Be the madman ever so mad—be he even in doubt as to whether he really sits next to this fire and his hands and his body are really his—he cannot cease

⁴² Ibid., 35. Emphasis in the original. Original: “Mais d’abord, le silence lui-même, a-t-il une histoire ? Ensuite l’archéologie, fût-elle du silence, n’est-elle pas une logique, c’est-à-dire un langage organisé, un projet, un ordre, une phrase, une syntaxe, une « œuvre » Est-ce que l’archéologie du silence ne sera pas le recommencement le plus efficace, le plus subtil, la *répétition*, au sens le plus irréductiblement ambigu de ce mot, de l’acte perpétré contre la folie, et ce dans le moment même où il est dénoncé ?” Jacques Derrida, *L’écriture et la différence* (Paris: Seuil, 1967), 57.

⁴³ Ibid., 36.

to exist for as long as he experiences himself as thinking, doubting, feeling... And the cogito is an experience for Descartes and for Derrida. It is an utterly unique experience in that for once, signifier and signified seem to coincide. The experience of the cogito, the act of the cogito, creates the possibility of subjectivity, which is the possibility of all (effable) possibility. The experience is the I's enunciation of itself. Even if this enunciation can take on no more content than its form, and that only ever so fleetingly, it is enough to set the play of signifiers in motion:

It can no longer literally be said that the Cogito would escape madness because it keeps itself beyond the grasp of madness, or because, as Foucault says, 'I who think, I cannot be mad'; the Cogito escapes madness only because at its own moment, under its own authority, it is valid *even if I am mad*, even if my thoughts are completely mad.⁴⁴

If there is a madness or anything else beyond the cogito, it is like no madness of which we can speak. It is of an altogether different order than that which Foucault treats, and there could be no thought of the cogito or logos excluding it but only of mutual and total exclusion – probably total unawareness. Such a madness would be utterly inconceivable to those subjects defined by the cogito because there is no speech (or writing) without a subject of some sort:

Any philosopher or speaking subject (and the philosopher is but the speaking subject par excellence) who must evoke madness from the *interior* of thought (and not only from within the body or some other extrinsic agency), can do so only in the realm of the *possible* and in the language of fiction or the fiction of language. Thereby, through his own language, he reassures himself against any actual madness—which may sometimes appear quite talkative, another problem—and can keep his distance, the distance indispensable for continuing to speak and to live. But this is not a weakness or a search for security proper to a given historical language (for example, the search for certainty in the Cartesian style), but is rather inherent in the essence and very project of all language in general.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Ibid., 55. Emphasis in original. Original: "On ne peut plus dire à la lettre que le Cogito échappe à la folie parce qu'il se tiendrait hors de sa prise, ou parce que, comme le dit Foucault « *moi* qui pense, je ne peux pas être fou », mais bien parce que dans son instant, dans son instance propre, l'acte du Cogito vaut *même si je suis fou, même si* ma pensée est folle de part en part." Derrida, *L'écriture et la différence*, 85.

⁴⁵ Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 54. Emphasis in original. Original: "Tout philosophe ou tout sujet parlant (et le philosophe n'est que *le sujet parlant* par excellence) devant évoquer la folie à *l'intérieur* de la pensée (et non seulement du corps ou de quelque instance extrinsèque), ne peut le faire que dans la dimension de la *possibilité* et dans le langage de la fiction ou dans la fiction du langage. Par là même, il se rassure en son langage contre la folie de fait—qui peut parfois paraître très bavarde, c'est un autre problème—il prend ses distances, la distance indispensable pour pouvoir continuer à parler et à vivre. Mais il n'y a pas là une défaillance ou une recherche de

Here, we see that it is not only the subject that needs language, as is clear from many of Derrida's writings, but also language that needs the subject because the cogito is "inherent in the essence and very project of all language in general."⁴⁶

The early Derrida took the philosophy of the subject seriously. He refused to speak for the radically other. Moreover, he refused to portray other human beings as radically other or to admit the radically other into human affairs. If Derrida's deconstruction of Levinas was less confrontational and more tremulous than was his onslaught against Foucault, it was no less resolute. Derrida shows that each of Levinas' attempts to think the radically other, especially as the face and the voice, either resorts to the metaphysical and humanistic suppositions that Levinas is denouncing or fails to withstand their criticisms. In refusing to acknowledge the other on the common basis of ego—i.e., the speaking or writing subject—Levinas apotheosized the other, placing it beyond dialogue and criticism, thereby laying the groundwork for the very totalizing, discourse- and plurality-suppressing violence that he sought to overcome through alterity:

There is war only after the opening of discourse. Peace, like silence, is the strange vocation of a language called outside itself by itself. But since finite silence is also the medium of violence, language can only indefinitely tend toward justice by acknowledging and practicing the violence with itself. Violence against violence. Economy of violence. An economy irreducible to what Levinas envisions in the word. If light is the element of violence, one must combat light with a certain other light, in order to avoid the worst violence, the violence of the night which precedes or represses discourse. [...] The philosopher (man) must speak and write within this war of light, a war in which he always already knows himself to be engaged; a war which he knows is inescapable, except by denying discourse, that is, by risking the worst violence.⁴⁷

sécurité propre à tel ou tel langage historique (par exemple, la recherche de la « certitude » dans le style cartésien) mais à l'essence et au projet même de tout langage en général." Derrida, *L'écriture et la différence*, 84.

⁴⁶ For the subject and sense requiring signification to exist, see especially Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*.

⁴⁷ Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 117. Original: "Il n'y a pas de guerre qu'après l'ouverture du discours et la guerre ne s'éteint qu'avec la fin du discours. La paix, comme le silence, est la vocation étrange d'un langage appelé hors de soi par soi. Mais comme le silence *fini* est aussi l'élément de la violence, le langage ne peut jamais que tendre indéfiniment vers la justice ne reconnaissant et en pratiquant la guerre en soi. Violence contre violence.

Thus, Derrida refuses to countenance a mysticism or an absolute other, the invocation of which could silence all dissent. If there is violence in speech, in disagreement, in dissension, it is necessary to prevent a far greater violence: the violence of total suppression of thought and language. As Derrida correctly notes, “The infinitely other and the infinitely same, if these words have a meaning for a finite being, is the same”: totalitarianism.⁴⁸

There is no other without a same—or, at least, the trace of a same—to which it can be contrasted and no alter without an ego to recognize it. Recognition invariably involves commonality and mutuality. If there is an absolute other, we are simply not capable of recognizing or engaging it in any way, anymore than it is us. It could have no face or voice, imploring us, on the Levinasian model, not to kill it. It would be beyond the categories of “to kill” and “to die.” It is utterly beyond us. But, as regards the other we can engage, both other and same, ego and alter, must be thought on the basis of non-identity, *différance*, of experiencing and interpreting the world, rather than simply being in it. It is *différance* that provides mutuality. Whatever *différance* may be, it is not absolute alterity; it is the antithesis of any absolute. The recognition of the other as alter ego “is the most peaceful gesture possible. *We do not say absolutely peaceful. We say economical.*”⁴⁹ Such a tack, rather than fetishizing the other, approaches the other as what he is: “my fellow man as foreigner.”⁵⁰

If then, Derrida in his earlier years embraced a sort of anti-humanism, this was of a type directed not against humanism as philosophy of the subject, or as a declaration of human dignity,

Économie de violence. Économie qui ne peut se réduire à ce que Levinas vise sous ce mot. Si la lumière est élément de la violence, il faut se battre contre la lumière avec une certaine autre lumière pour éviter la pire violence, celle du silence et de la nuit précédant ou réprimant le discours. [...] Le philosophe (l’homme) *doit* parler et écrire dans cette guerre de la lumière en laquelle il se sait toujours déjà engagé et dont il sait qu’il ne pourrait s’échapper qu’en reniant le discours, c’est-à-dire en risquant la pire violence.” Derrida, *L’écriture et la différence*, 172-3.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 129.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 128.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 127.

or as a doctrine of some degree of human commonality (biological, mental, and semiological) but against a humanism that would make a pure presence of humanity and human beings and place them outside the play of interpretation, reducing all significant difference and *différance* within humanity. Derrida's anti-humanism was precisely an anti-totalitarianism, an anti-reductivism, an anti-essentialism. It was as anti-Heideggerian as it was anti-Levinasian, as Heidegger's *Dasein* promises yet another end to man in the form of a higher unity and not a continual play of pluralities.⁵¹ As such, Derrida's so-called "anti-humanism" was entirely compatible with the three senses of humanism given above and with individualism. What Derrida was anxious to avoid was the total collapse of the I, with all of its aporias and non-identities, into the We of totalizing philosophical schools and political movements because such a We brooks no significant difference.

In Derrida one encounters the aporetic. He was rational in the extreme but anti-rationalist. A Jewish French-Algerian left-liberal interpreter of the likes of the putatively anti-Semitic, anti-liberal, and anti-rational Nietzsche and the actually anti-Semitic, anti-liberal, and anti-rational Heidegger. A humanist as committed pluralist, against the twin tyrannies of the absolutely same and the absolutely other.

⁵¹ Jacques Derrida, "The Ends of Man," in *Margins of Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1982). Derrida explicitly opts for a Nietzschean non-solution to the problem of humanism over a Heideggerian pseudo-solution qua Being at the end of this essay.

4. Hans-Georg Gadamer and Renewal through Continuity

The task with which West German intellectuals found themselves confronted in the immediate postwar years was formidable. The situation was far from *Stunde null*. West Germany was not a blank slate but a rubble-laden palimpsest, and little that was written thereupon seemed to augur well for liberalism's prospects. In such a situation, left and liberal intellectuals took up their pens as theorist-partisans, theorizing democracy as a means of advancing it. This would prove a fraught process, not only because of the tension between liberalism and democracy that had plagued the Kaiserreich and Weimar but also because the matter of exactly from whom democracy needed defending turned out to be one of the cruxes of the matter.

Before tracing this process, however, it may be useful to examine some of the changed conditions prevailing in the postwar years that affected democracy's prospects in the FRG. The first is Germany's total defeat in the Second World War and subsequent occupation by the Allied powers. This contrasted sharply with the situation after the First World War, wherein nationalists and fanatics could propagate the stab-in-the-back myth due to the apparently intact state of the German army. With Allied troops having fought their way to Berlin, rounded up millions of German POWs, established military governments, and carved up the country into zones of occupation, no myths of the Wehrmacht's continued potency were credible even to the most hardened anti-Semites and nationalists in the 1940s and 1950s.¹

For the same reasons, any readiness or desire for war among the Germans had faded. Total defeat had taken place not only in the field but also on the home front. Hundreds of

¹ For an account of the comprehensiveness of this defeat, see Ian Kershaw, *The End: The Defiance and Destruction of Hitler's Germany, 1944-1945* (New York: Penguin, 2012).

thousands of Germans had lost their lives in Allied air raids, and hundreds of thousands others in the Soviet advance into eastern Germany. Millions of women and girls had suffered rape and sexual violence at the hands of Soviet troops. Those Germans who survived the bombardments and advances of allied forces did so only to see their once beloved *Führer* and his party-state essentially declare war upon them, imposing the most draconian sanctions on any it deemed to be shirkers and forcing the population to fight to the bitter end. After the war, the once vaunted German fighting spirit was dead, along with four to five million war-dead and up to two million more ethnic Germans who died in forced expulsions from conquered eastern territories. With the onset of famine in the years immediately following war's end, survival became a full-time occupation. Following these lean years, West Germans wished for little more than to rebuild their lives quietly in the private sphere and enjoy the benefits of peace, prosperity, and consumption. In this, West Germany proved itself to be no different than the rest of the Western World.²

Nor was it any different from the rest of the Western world in fearing Communist aggression, except perhaps in the intensity of that fear. If, as Carl Schmitt claimed, politics is defined by the friend-enemy distinction, the Federal Republic could look to ready-made friends and patrons in the United States of America and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and to ready-made enemies in the USSR and the Warsaw Pact, along with the party-state of the German Democratic Republic. Critical intellectuals tended to see “anti-Communism” as the binding ideology of the early FRG, and there may be much to that, as the Adenauer chancellery was all too eager to welcome former Nazis *cum* cold-warriors into the fold. After all, it was largely out

² For an account of the rapidity with which this shift occurred and the readiness of West Germans to abandon their links to East Germany, see Edith Sheffer, *Burned Bridge: How East and West Germans Made the Iron Curtain* (New York: Oxford, 2014).

of fear of “Bolshevik barbarism” that the Germany Army had fought so ferociously on the Eastern Front long after any realistic prospect of victory had vanished. Nevertheless, even peace-loving anti-Nazis, such as Adenauer himself, had reason to fear the ambitions of the Soviet bloc, with its forcible occupation of Eastern Europe and avowed belief in worldwide revolution. In the standoff that ensued after the war, the FRG happily filled its niche in the Western bloc, discovering the benefits of collective security and obviating any appeal of a fascist national or racial resurgence.

For their parts, the Western Allies coalesced relatively quickly around a course of tutoring West-German society in liberal-democratic norms and integrating it fully into the Western cultural sphere. The armies of the Western Allies conducted themselves with the very minimum of violence and depredations that generally accompany conquering armies, especially after years of bitter fighting. This was a truly remarkable achievement, one that is curiously overlooked. The Marshall Plan set a new pattern for European economic integration that secured Western Europe against a repeat of the interwar debt-reparations crisis.

Under the aegis of the United States and the Western Allies, West Germany achieved economic stability and the foundation for prosperity with Economic Minister Ludwig Erhard’s 1948 currency reform and subsequent efforts in forming the famed social market economy. Prosperity certainly had its discontents, but financial security, access to affordable goods, and deflation of class-conflict quelled much of the social unrest that had facilitated the rise of extremism in the previous generation.

By the early 1950s, then, West Germans enjoyed collective security, growing economic prosperity, social security and the reduction of class conflict through the social-market economy, and the solidly liberal constitutional order laid out in the Basic Law. In extra-intellectual

matters, therefore, many of the preconditions of liberal democracy's success were established in the prehistory and very early history of the FRG. There was significant carryover, too, in the cultural and intellectual spheres, as the Allies fostered a plethora of institutions and programs to promote cultural exchange and Westernization.

In intellectual life itself, a seismic shift had taken place. Twelve years of the markedly anti-intellectual Third Reich and the experience of total defeat had largely defanged German conservatism, which had evinced a strong penchant for revolutionary conservatism since even the days of the Kaiserreich. Jerry Z Muller illuminates this process in his excellent study of the sociologist Hans Freyer.³ Muller contends, with a great deal of justification, that Freyer's biography is emblematic of those of many fellow conservative revolutionaries. Born in 1887 into a comfortable bourgeois family, Freyer came of age during the *Jugendbewegung* of the later Kaiserreich, whose heady mixture of romanticism, popularized Nietzscheanism, and *Völkisch* ideology convinced Freyer that true life and Germanness lay outside the strictures of bourgeois civility and enlightened universalism. In the *Kampferlebnis* of the First World War, through whose entire four-year duration he served, Freyer saw the vital forces of life and death at work and discovered a model of *Sittlichkeit* (historically conditioned communal ethical life). He transmitted this understanding to the public in his popular and well-reviewed book, *Antäus: Foundations of an Ethic of Conscious Life*. Freyer published prolifically in the 1920s in support of revolutionary conservatism both before and after his appointment to a chair of sociology at Leipzig in 1924. Despite a somewhat reserved attitude towards biologism, Freyer emerged as a relatively early and quite forceful proponent of National Socialism. His 1931 pamphlet, *Revolution from the Right*, more or less unreservedly identified the NSDAP with the

³ Jerry Z Muller, *The Other God that Failed: Hans Freyer and the Deradicalization of German Conservatism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton, 1988).

conservative revolution and Adolf Hitler with the messianic *Führer* for whom conservative revolutionaries had been yearning. When the Nazis came to power in 1933, Freyer threw himself unreservedly behind the *Gleichschaltung* of the academy, casting aside whatever reservations he may have felt about betraying Jewish colleagues. He prospered as a result, receiving several important academic appointments.

But Freyer's relationship to the regime began to sour soon thereafter. Following their seizure of power, the Nazis had little use for academic theorizing or advising, which should not have been surprising from a movement that touted iron, blood, and soil. Party officials unceremoniously cast aside Martin Heidegger and Carl Schmitt after they had played their short-lived roles in legitimizing the regime. Similarly, Freyer found that the NSDAP was not a trustworthy ally or partner. A journal that Freyer co-edited, *Der Volksspiegel*, came under suspicion from the party, with the result that Freyer lost his editorship. The regime began reading Freyer's mail, as young, more ideologically committed faculty outmaneuvered Freyer and his relatively independent colleagues for leading positions and honors. The degree to which Freyer became disenchanted with the regime and the timeline of this alienation cannot be established with certainty. Muller sees signs of a growing rift between Freyer and the regime from the Night of the Long Knives in June 1934, but Muller's only evidence for this is that Freyer did not defend the regime strongly *enough*. Throughout the rest of the 1930s, Freyer's cheerleading for the regime slackened and he wrote works that could be interpreted as defending legality and denouncing *realpolitik*. Nevertheless, in 1938, Freyer took a visiting professorship at the University of Budapest. He was also head of the German Scientific Institute there from 1941 to 1944. Both the chair and the institute were creations of the German Foreign Office, indicating that Freyer could not have fallen too far out of favor with the NSDAP. Further, in his

capacity as head of Budapest's GSI, Freyer was responsible for tracing the ethnic heritage and political leanings of Hungarian scholars. Freyer's reports on these matters quite possibly resulted in the regime's murder of a number of these scholars.

Despite this woeful transgression and the blood on Freyer's hands, it is clear from Muller's account that Freyer was fairly disaffected with both the Nazi regime and revolutionary conservatism by war's end. The conflagration that had engulfed Europe and Germany had burnt out the firebrand of the 1920s; the *völkisch* revolution had been discredited in the most dramatic and comprehensive way possible, both militarily and morally; and the regime onto which Freyer and his fellow conservative revolutionaries had projected their desires had shown itself to be largely indifferent to their aspirations, contemptuous of their obsequiousness, and dismissive of their airs of leadership.

Almost by default, then, a very large portion of Germany's extreme right, drifted into the camp of liberal democracy. Here they found a home in the (all too readily) forgiving Christian Democratic Union and continuity with a national past in the form of Weimar humanism and the humanistic Protestantism that they had reviled as tepid and stultifying in their youths. Some remained recalcitrant, but denazification measures stripped those who were openly so of their rights to teach and publish. And the reserved silence about the very recent past that reigned in the official culture and polite society of the first years of the FRG—a sort of perverse tactfulness that likely masked a deeper shame and cognitive dissonance—provided a blanket cover under which embittered rumblings and recriminations could be furtively muttered without much impact. To be sure, some unreformed Nazis and conservative revolutionaries exercised a

widespread and profound subterranean influence. But, even in these cases, a new generation of students received these teachings not as acolytes but as critical appropriators and interpreters.⁴

This defanging of the extreme intellectual right removed one of the factors most responsible for Weimar's downfall, clearing away what would have otherwise been a similarly significant roadblock to the development of liberal democracy in the FRG. It was an absolute prerequisite for the latter's success and a sea-change in German intellectual culture. As Muller writes, "As a result of disenchantment with the other god that failed, for the first time in German history the political culture of the right was dominated by a conservatism reconciled in principle with liberal democracy."

Nevertheless, German intellectuals and the German public alike had little experience with liberal democracy and the great majority of West Germans remained indifferent or even somewhat hostile to it, acquiescing in the democratic experiment rather than embracing it.⁵ The academy was staffed not with avowed anti-Nazis and persecuted opponents of the regime but with those conservatives, fellow travelers, and lip-biting liberals who had been tepid enough in their support for the regime to salvage some respectability in its aftermath or muted enough in their opposition to it to have survived its days unscathed. Much the same was true of government and politics. Though he had faced a measure of Nazi persecution, Conrad Adenauer's anti-Nazi *bona fides* were hardly impeccable, and his administration and his party welcomed even some hardened Nazis into their ranks.

⁴ Jens Hacke, *Philosophie der Bürgerlichkeit: Die liberalkonservative Begründung der Bundesrepublik* (Göttingen, DE: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008); Dirk van Laak, *Gespräche in der Sicherheit des Schweigens*, 2nd ed. (Berlin: Akademie, 2002).

⁵ Anna J Merritt and Richard L Merritt, eds., *Public Opinion in Semisovereign Germany: The HICOG Surveys, 1949-1955* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois, 1980).

For these reasons, combined with the CDU's unchallenged dominance in the 1950s and Adenauer's strong conception of executive power, left-wing critics of the FRG deemed the 1950s to be a "Restoration." They alleged that many of the structures and attitudes responsible for Germany's embrace of authoritarianism and National Socialism remained in place in the FRG. The left was rightly outraged at the willingness, indeed the eagerness, of state and society to move into the postwar era without a deep moral and intellectual confrontation with the very recent Nazi past.⁶ With remarkably few exceptions, Germans under the Third Reich had either endorsed or silently accepted their government's destruction of civil rights and legality, waging of world war, and implementation of mass murder on a scale previously unmatched. With minimal protest, they had watched the state abduct their disabled and politically dissenting neighbors to a fate that was not known with certainty but could be easily guessed; almost without protest, they had watched the state do the same to their Jewish neighbors.⁷ German soldiers had committed atrocities on all fronts of the European Theatre and had waged a racial war of annihilation on its Eastern Front, with few notable abstentions in the army and even fewer objections. Uncoerced, ordinary Germans had slaughtered Jewish and Slavic non-combatants and starved whole cities.⁸ Following the Twentieth July Plot of 1944, the German public and officialdom, even at this late date, had rallied around their beloved *Führer* and cursed the perpetrators. And even after their embittered *Führer* had lost all faith in them and his regime had imposed the most capriciously brutal measures on society in the final months of the war, the German people, whatever their rumblings, by and large remained loyal to the regime, doing its

⁶ A Dirk Moses, *German Intellectuals and the Nazi Past*; Müller (New York: Cambridge, 2007); Jan-Werner Müller, ed., *German Ideologies since 1945: Studies in the Political Thought and Culture of the Bonn Republic* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2003); Stefan Müller-Doohm, *Jürgen Habermas: Eine Biographie* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2014).

⁷ Ian Kershaw, *Hitler, the Germans, and the Final Solution* (New Haven, CT: Yale, 2009).

⁸ Christopher Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*, Revised ed. (New York: Harper Perennial, 2017).

bidding and rarely showing opposition.⁹ Now these very same people could not be bothered to reflect on their actions and inactions but insisted that they, too, were victims of the regime and that they had every right to live their lives without any troublesome reflections on their pasts. Their government seemed to endorse this view. It is no wonder, then, that leftist intellectuals in the 1950s looked askance at such a people and such a state, loath to entrust them with the future of democracy, and demanded a reckoning with the past and a moral and intellectual renewal of the nation.

Such a reckoning and renewal would be a long time coming. Yet, in hindsight, it is clear that the interpretation of the 1950s as restoration was woefully reductive. The understandable outrage of critical intellectuals over the establishment's continuities with the far-right and Nazi past blinded them to its many and significant breaks with it. The left fundamentally misunderstood many Christian Democrats and liberals, who, despite their lack of heroic resistance against the overwhelming force of the Third Reich and their refusal to hold their fellow citizens fully to account, were genuinely committed to liberalism and to a decent society. Further, the utopian standards of critical intellectuals, who cherished the dream of a domination-free (*Herrschaftsfrei*) society, jaundiced their view of actual existing liberalism in the FRG, which quickly yielded enormous benefits to West-German society. As Jan-Werner Müller writes,

What left-liberal intellectuals could not – or did not want to – see was that the 1950s were not a simple “restoration,” but a much more paradoxical modernization under “conservative auspices.” Since the focus was so firmly on continuities, and since the standard for a successful break with the past was nothing less than an all-German anti-fascist revolution, these critics often failed to see that even the “conservative democracy” of Adenauer was in fact promoting a revolution.¹⁰

⁹ Kershaw, *The End*.

¹⁰ Jan-Werner Müller, *Another Country: German Intellectuals, Unification, and National Identity* (New Haven, CT: Yale, 2000).

Critical intellectuals also underestimated the strength of the Bundesrepublik's institutions. Unlike Weimar, the FRG enjoyed propitious economic, diplomatic, political, and even intellectual conditions almost from its inception, making for institutions that actually worked. Whereas Weimar's governing coalitions had been short-lived, fractious, and ineffective, the CDU's dominance of federal politics throughout the 1950s provided the basic political stability that had been so sorely lacking in the 1920s. By the first years of the 1960s, the Federal Constitutional Court had clearly signaled its commitment to maintaining the cornerstones of liberal democracy against legal challenges, thereby sharply distinguishing itself from the infamously collaborationist Weimar judiciary. Likewise, *Der Spiegel* Affair displayed the robustness of the FRG's free press and its broad support in the public. It also revealed that no one was above the law or liberal-democratic norms in the West German state, not even its popular chancellor. This is hardly the outcome one would expect of a restorative period.

It is not fair to allege, then, that the CDU's era of dominance in the 1950s was essentially a period of restoration of German nineteenth- and early twentieth-century bourgeois politics and norms, stabilized only by the superficial pacifying effects of the *Wirtschaftswunder*. Such norms had been amenable to authoritarianism to a degree and in a manner that was quite clearly no longer the case by the time the FRG had reached its tenth birthday.

Nor is it fair to allege that West-German intellectual life was *altogether* quiescent during this period. Again, such an allegation sprang from the extremely high standards of critical intellectuals, whose ideals contrasted so sharply with political reality as to transform the latter into a night in which all cows were latent fascists. In fact, recent work has drawn attention to the importance of the founding generation of intellectuals in securing the liberal-democratic

foundations of the Federal Republic.¹¹ True, many such intellectuals spoke and wrote in largely impersonal, institutional terms, devoid of the soul-searching and personal engagement for which critical intellectuals were calling. The practical political discourses in which such figures took part may be staid compared to the dialectical acrobatics of contemporaneous neo-Marxists and Hegelians but they nevertheless evince a commitment to liberal democracy and fervent desire to break with Germany's past. And while the leading conception of democracy in the CDU, that of *wehrhafte Demokratie* (militant democracy), only fanned the suspicions of critical intellectuals, this was likely due more to the latter's mistaken reading of fascism as an outgrowth of capitalism than to the actual content of the doctrine.

But even beyond political theory, a discourse of guilt and responsibility did, indeed, circulate among intellectuals of the Western zones of occupation and in the early FRG. In the years following Germany's defeat and prior to the establishment of the FRG and GDR, German academics tended to cast the Third Reich as a barbaric atavism or, contrarily, as the offshoot of a perverse, lopsidedly materialistic and domineering modernization. The solution lay in a return to the best traditions of Germany and of Europe. In a word, this meant humanism. The existential philosopher Karl Jaspers played the leading role here, serving as the conscious of Germany until his emigration to Basel in 1948. Nor was Jaspers' humanism a fatuous call for a return to pre-Nazi bourgeois norms. It was, rather, a call to build upon these traditions in advancing towards a broader, more inclusive, more radical humanism of the future.¹² But the immediate postwar revival of humanism remained an affair of elites and had little chance to percolate throughout

¹¹ Mark W Clark, *Beyond Catastrophe: German Intellectuals and Cultural Renewal After World War II, 1945-1955* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2006); Sean Forner, *The Challenge of Democratic Renewal: Culture and Politics after 1945* (New York: Cambridge, 2014); Greenberg, *The Weimar Century: German Émigrés and the Ideological Foundations of the Cold War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton, 2015).

¹² See Clark, *Beyond Catastrophe*.

society before the exigencies of the burgeoning Cold War saturated public consciousness, occupying the small amount of mental and media space that was not already taken up by grief and matters of day-to-day survival.

It is easy to pooh-pooh this return to Humanism as essentially conservative, sanguine, or inadequate to the ethical and existential problems facing the FRG: collective responsibility, the peculiarities of German history, modernity's unique capacity for destruction.¹³ Many of these criticisms do, indeed, find their mark. An unproblematic return to humanism and decency could only do so much to help West Germans understand why they had been susceptible to National Socialism and whether such susceptibility was unique to them as Germans or was simply a particularly violent manifestation of a broader feature of modernity. Nor could it provide a comprehensive roadmap to those Germans seeking a clear route to dealing with their personal guilt. But the answers to such queries remain elusive even several generations after these questions were first posed. Though the West-German postwar rediscovery of humanism made no serious attempts to provide answers to these vital questions, it did strongly affirm the desirability of a decent, humane society. From the first four and a half decades of Central Europe in the twentieth century, it is clear that such affirmations ought not to be taken for granted. Humanism may, at times, have been a facile legitimating doctrine in the early FRG, but much can be said for facility. Humanism offered a rubric for the self-understanding of West-German society that was broad and familiar enough to enjoy a substantial degree of appeal among elites yet bold enough to signal a clear break with the Nazi and authoritarian pasts. This was no mean feat.

¹³ For such a critique, see Anson Rabinbach, "Restoring the German Spirit: Humanism and Guilt in Post-War Germany," in *German Ideologies since 1945: Studies in the Political Thought and Culture of the Bonn Republic*, ed. Jan-Werner Müller.

Moreover, humanism has played a lasting role in the intellectual life of the FRG. Critical intellectuals never adopted humanism per se as *the* solution to the problems of the FRG or of the modern world. In that sense, the term never reached the heights that it enjoyed in contemporaneous France. But nor did West-German critical intellectuals come to reject the term and its associations, as the French structuralists and post-structuralists of the 1950s and 1960s did.

There are obvious reasons for the rejection of anti-humanism among German critical intellectuals. The two German thinkers most responsible for the rise of anti-humanism in France were not accessible to the Germans in the same way that they were to the French. The French could ponder Nietzsche and Heidegger at some remove from the two thinkers' most obvious political implications, but this was impossible for the Germans. The *völkisch* and Nazi appropriations of Nietzsche—which, though thoroughly one-sided, were far from simple perversions—ensured that his name remained under suspicion in postwar West Germany. Heidegger's theory exercised a powerful influence on the postwar West-German left, particularly in its rejection of scientism and technocracy, but German critical intellectuals could not openly identify with the thought of an avowed and unapologetic Nazi.¹⁴

More broadly, particularism and anti-humanism had already played themselves out in German intellectual life. They had flourished in Germany as in arguably no other place throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. They had helped to spawn the most violent and radically chauvinistic regime imaginable and facilitated, to one degree or another, two world

¹⁴ For outstanding examples of the left's ambivalence towards Heidegger, see Jürgen Habermas, "Mit Heidegger gegen Heidegger denken: Zur Veröffentlichung von Vorlesungen aus dem Jahre 1935," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, July 27, 1953; Martin Heidegger and Herbert Marcuse, "Correspondence with Martin Heidegger, 1947-48," Marcuse.org, page created May 27, 2005, last updated August 24, 2016, <https://www.marcuse.org/herbert/pubs/40spubs/47MarcuseHeidegger.htm> (accessed April 20, 2022).

wars and mass murder on an unparalleled scale. At the Second World War's end, then, leftwing German intellectuals had had enough of particularism and could not afford the ontological adventurism of their French counterparts. In the land that had so recently been the purveyor of industrial murder and the dehumanizing ideology of absolute racism, the "radical other" of humanity and of reason seemed far too closely to resemble the absolute negation of humanity and reason to hold any appeal on the left. Auschwitz was anti-humanism for Germans. The camp, as Primo Levi famously described it, was the negation of humanity.¹⁵ Thus, some degree of identification as a humanist remained more or less the rule for critical intellectuals in West Germany until at least the late 1970s, and it is ultimately in the name of "humanity" that these intellectuals still tend to lodge their critiques.¹⁶

This, then, was the situation in West Germany circa 1960. Disinterested observers might have seen a great deal of reason to believe that liberal democracy would thrive in the coming decades, but interested actors on the left could also reasonably suspect that liberal democratic change was superficial at best. It was in this climate of understated reform and renewal that Hans Georg Gadamer published his masterwork *Wahrheit und Methode (Truth and Method)*, a work that was subtly adequate to its time and place.¹⁷

Gadamer begins with a question. He asks what kind of knowledge it is that hermeneutics provides us. Clearly, it is a knowledge incapable of the type of verification (or falsification) that

¹⁵ Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

¹⁶ For the persistent humanism of leading critical intellectuals, see Jürgen Habermas, "Bestialität und Humanität. Ein Krieg an der Grenze zwischen Recht und Moral," *Die Zeit*, April 29, 1999, 1-8. For emergent anti-humanism, see Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, trans. Michael Eldred (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, 1987); Peter Sloterdijk, *Regeln für den Menschenpark. Ein Antwortschreiben zu Heideggers Brief über den Humanismus* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1999).

¹⁷ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode: Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik* (Tübingen: JCB Mohr, 1960). For the English translation, see Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G Marshall, 2nd ed. (New York: Continuum, 2004).

distinguishes scientific knowledge.¹⁸ Gadamer identifies hermeneutical knowledge with what he calls the “truth of experience” and agrees with Heidegger that hermeneutics is not merely a matter of interpreting written texts *per se* but is the condition of all human life; to live is to interpret. What Gadamer wishes to establish is the manner in which truth-claims grounded in experience can be “philosophically legitimated”; that is, how they can be justified or shown to be correct.¹⁹ He claims that, in answering this question, he will strip away the “methodological self-consciousness of the human sciences [*Geisteswissenschaften*]” to discover what they “truly are” and “what connects them with the totality of our experience of world.”²⁰

For Gadamer, then, any approach to textual interpretation that limits itself to a given method is far too narrow. It is divorced from “the truth that speaks to us from tradition [*Überlieferung*]” and would, thus, “arrogate to itself a false superiority.”²¹ What Gadamer is really seeking is closer to a universal theory of communication and interpretation. He wants to know what makes communication, understanding, meaning, and the experience of truth possible for everyone everywhere. He carries out this endeavor with reference to but also in contradistinction to widely accepted quasi-scientific (i.e., rationalist) notions: e.g., the correspondence theory of truth, the principle of unchanging identity, and all methodologies that stringently separate observer from observed, perceiver from perceived, and author and reader from text.

Not surprisingly, the great nineteenth-century hermeneuticist Wilhelm Dilthey serves as one of Gadamer’s key inspirations and foils. Dilthey, as is well-known, set out in the Kantian tradition to ground history as a science, essentially attempting to write a fourth Kantian critique,

¹⁸ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, xx.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, xxi.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, xxii.

²¹ *Ibid.*, xxii.

one of historical reason.²² This approach led Dilthey to posit a common flow of *life (Leben)* as the inevitable medium of historical understanding. Just as subjectivity forms the limiting and defining nexus of the static natural sciences for Kant, so does life constitute the basis and substance of all phenomena that the study of history seeks to understand. These phenomena flow and return to the ongoing process that is life. What life is, cannot ultimately be defined; nor is it necessary to do so for any living, interpreting being because it is life that precedes and grounds all definition, endowing definitions with meaning. Dilthey asserted that this process of living is too amorphous, too fluid, and too all-encompassing to be grasped by the static and segmented abstractions typical of scientific and rationalist thought. Nevertheless, Gadamer argues, Dilthey ultimately wavered before the attempt to develop a notion of understanding appropriate to the omni-phenomenon of life. Dilthey attempted to gain a critical distance from life and tried to subject it to just those scientific criteria of understanding that he initially eschewed:

Dilthey let himself be profoundly influenced by the model of the natural sciences, even when he was endeavoring to justify precisely the methodological independence of the human sciences [...] For Dilthey scientific knowledge obliges one to sever one's bond with life, to attain distance from one's own history, which alone makes it possible for that history to become an object.²³

If Dilthey consistently recognized that all historical phenomena *derive* from life, he was not as consistent in his recognition that all such phenomena *return* to life and, indeed, can never be fully separated from it in the first place. Thus, Dilthey attempted to establish the historian as a point outside of the flux of life, capable of definitively sectioning it into distinct persons, eras,

²² Wilhelm Dilthey, *Introduction to the Human Sciences: An Attempt to Lay a Foundation for the Study of Society and History* (Detroit: Wayne State, 1988).

²³ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 6. Original: "Gleichwohl hat sich Dilthey von dem Vorbild der Naturwissenschaften zutiefst bestimmen lassen, auch wenn er gerade die methodische Selbständigkeit der Geisteswissenschaften rechtfertigen wollte [...] Für Dilthey gehört zur wissenschaftlichen Erkenntnis die Auflösung der Lebensbindung, die Gewinnung einer Distanz zur eigenen Geschichte, die allein ermöglicht, sie zum Objekte zu machen." Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, 5-6.

and cultures, all of which the historian could examine as, to borrow a Heideggerian expression, objects at-hand, more or less fixed and clearly differentiated from each other and from the historian. It then became the historian's task to recreate in his mind such persons, eras, and cultures through the method of empathy: i.e., reconstructing and adopting the worldview, mentality, and sensibilities of the person, time, and place in question via clues left in the written record.

For Gadamer, such a method is unacceptable because it seeks to arrest the flow of life and to order it into hypostatized units via largely impermeable barriers. In fact, Gadamer argues, no such analytical dams and levees can stem the tide of life. The ideas, linguistic articulations, associations, and varieties of experience that flowed through and shaped historical figures, eras, and cultures transfuse and permeate the historian as well, who lives, writes, and interprets himself, his world, and his past in their continual wake and in the common medium of life. This dynamic, Gadamer deems "historically effected consciousness" (*Wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstsein*). Because the historian is not separate from the past but is constituted by it, he cannot understand the past in a manner marked by the analytical precision and relatively stable boundaries that are characteristic of the modern science to which Dilthey aspires.

The argument that the historian is not fully separate from history and, thus, cannot seek to grasp it in a scientific manner has become a familiar one. In formulating this argument, Gadamer drew a great deal of inspiration from his erstwhile teacher and lifelong friend Martin Heidegger, who, in *Being and Time*, claimed to understand *Dasein* as a temporal structure, thoroughly historically determined.²⁴ However, Gadamer is most assuredly not Heidegger, and

²⁴ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany, NY: SUNY, 1996).

there is much more to Gadamer and to his notion of historically effected consciousness than this by now commonplace historiographical conviction.

Yet, it is difficult to know exactly where to begin unfolding Gadamer's broader significance. *Truth and Method* takes the form of a series of critiques of various thinkers in the fields of aesthetics, hermeneutics, literature, and historiography. Through these critiques, Gadamer slowly unfurls his own view on these matters. But these critiques are not particularly technically precise. At times, they read and function more as longwinded koans than as philosophical treatises. They do not so much build an argument as slowly prepare their readers' minds for a radical rethinking of human reality, expositing what ultimately seems to be a single dynamic that applies not only in hermeneutics, narrowly defined, but across the human sciences, binding them together as the human experience more generally is bound together. One could, perhaps, briefly iterate the central claim of Gadamer's text without retracing the contours by which Gadamer slowly draws out its features. One could get to the point. But, in doing so, one would risk missing the point. It may be worthwhile, then, to spend a little time meandering with Gadamer, rather than getting straight to the point.

First, though, it must be noted that Gadamer describes his project in emphatically humanistic terms.²⁵ This may seem strange for a student of Heidegger and a thinker who so insistently rejects the notion that textual interpretation is a matter of reconstructing authorial intention. No one would ever mistake Gadamer for a proponent of Cartesian individualism, but he articulates a type of humanism that, though never dispensing with the individual, does not devolve upon it, either.

²⁵ Here, it must be noted that I have followed Gadamer's translators in rendering *Geisteswissenschaften* (lit. "sciences of the mind" or "sciences of the soul") as "human sciences." The many references to the "human sciences," thus, may be taken to be misleading as to the question of Gadamer's humanism. On the other hand, the terms "mind" and "soul" clearly bear close relations to humanism.

In fact, Gadamer sees himself, among other things, as a critical continuator of the German neo-humanistic tradition, which is why he begins *Truth and Method* with a section titled “The Significance of the Humanist Tradition for the Human Sciences” (*Bedeutung der humanistischen Tradition für die Geisteswissenschaften*). In this tradition of German humanism (or ‘classicism’), Gadamer describes an approach to the human sciences that “maintained a humanistic heritage that distinguishes them from all other kinds of modern research and brings them close to other, quite different, extra-scientific experiences, especially those peculiar to art.”²⁶

At the heart of German classicism lies the concept of *Bildung*. “Education” serves as the primary English-language translation of “Bildung” in a narrow sense. The words “refinement” and “self-cultivation” may translate aspects of “Bildung,” but none of these words bear the connotative richness of the original. “Bildung” describes an idealized maturation through a process of give-and-take with the world, one involving wonderment at the possibilities of the world, the projection of ideals and of ideal notions of the self, successive disappointment of these ideals, and, finally, a negotiated conciliation with the realities of life and of one’s self as they have evolved in the encounter between I and world. The process involves intention, resolve, and struggle but also failure, defeat, loss, acknowledgment of one’s limitations, and openness to ever-new experiences. It takes place as much behind one’s back as before one’s eyes and under one’s agency, gradually shaping us into who and what we are.

One of the qualities that the process of *Bildung* dialectically strengthens in an individual is a certain sensitivity to life, a certain receptiveness to experience, which Gadamer calls *tact* (*Takt*). It is through *tact*, Gadamer suggests, and not through formal learning that we gradually

²⁶ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, xxvi.

come to terms with life. One acquires experience and appropriates it in a thoughtful and honest manner by employing tact, and the experience thus acquired affords one the opportunity to develop more tact. Tact requires humility, a willingness to bracket one's claims to knowledge and to swallow one's pride. It embodies an openness to the other and to uncertainty as the inevitable prelude to and product of learning. The knowledge that tact yields is not that of measurable quantities, ironclad equations, universal laws and categories, or even of altogether distinctive qualities. Nor is it that of a substance divided, in accord with the classical model, into essence and accident. The knowledge that tact provides is that of a substance in which essence and accident are mutually constitutive and of qualities that blur together at their edges, imbuing one another with their varying hues and taking on new shapes as they pass through each other. Tact yields the knowledge of life. And it is this type of knowledge that Gadamer recognizes at the heart of the human sciences and of the human experience.

Gadamer masterfully reveals the imbrication of *Bildung* and Hegel's *Aufhebung*, seeing them both as exemplifying "the basic character of the historical spirit: to reconcile itself with itself, to reconcile oneself in other being."²⁷ As the individual makes her way through the world, she encounters the strange and initially unintelligible. She must come to terms with these encounters, appropriating them in her experience and imbuing them with meaning – but a meaning that cannot be arbitrary or altogether alien to the encounters themselves or to that which is encountered. In this way, through an often agonistic, always generative process of encounter, appropriation, and interpretation, a structure of meaning is formed in, through, and for the individual. This structure is her life. She does not leave her experiences behind her; she incorporates them into her being. The process is essentially that of Hegel's dialectic, though

²⁷ Ibid., 12.

played out on the level of an individual life rather than in the lives of nations, peoples, cultures, or institutions. Meanings are not lost but transformed. Gadamer describes this process in typically evocative but gentle language:

To recognize one's own in the alien, to become at home in it, is the basic movement of spirit, whose being consists only in returning to itself from what is other. Hence all theoretical Bildung, even acquiring foreign languages and conceptual worlds, is merely the continuation of a process of Bildung that begins much earlier. Every single individual who raises himself out of his natural being to the spiritual finds in the language, customs, and institutions of his people a pre-given body of material which, as in learning to speak, he has to make his own.²⁸

But Gadamer cannot be reduced or wholly assimilated to Hegel. Perhaps the central difference between the two is that the process of Bildung is open-ended for Gadamer, apparently undetermined by a teleological logic, and incapable of being summarized at any single point in its development. Hegel sought to encapsulate the whole of history in a single structure of thought. Gadamer, with characteristic humility and generosity, acknowledges far more autonomy and immensity in the historical and life processes:

This universality [that of life and history] is by no means a universality of the concept or understanding. This is not a case of a particular being determined by a universal; nothing is proved conclusively. The universal viewpoints to which the cultivated man keeps himself open are not a fixed applicable yardstick, but are present to him only as the viewpoints of possible others.²⁹

Bildung and tact, as cultivated in German neo-humanism, hearken back to the older notion of *sensus communis* (Ger. *Gemeinschaftlicher Sinn*, Eng. *Common sense*). Gadamer

²⁸ Ibid., 13. Original: "Im Fremden das Eigene zu erkennen, in ihm heimisch zu werden, ist die Grundbewegung des Geistes, dessen Sein nur Rückkehr zu sich selbst aus dem Andersein ist. Insofern ist alle theoretische Bildung, auch die Erarbeitung fremder Sprachen und Vorstellungswelten, die bloße Fortsetzung eines Bildungsvorganges, der viel früher einsetzt. Jedes einzelne Individuum, das sich aus seinem Naturwesen ins Geistige erhebt, findet in Sprache, Sitte, Einrichtungen seines Volkes eine vorgegebene Substanz, die es, wie im Sprechenlernen, zur seinigen zu machen hat." Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, 11.

²⁹ Ibid., 15-16. Original: "Diese Allgemeinheit ist gewiß nicht eine Allgemeinheit des Begriffes oder des Verstandes. Es wird nicht aus Allgemeinem ein Besonderes bestimmt, es wird nichts zwingend bewiesen. Die allgemeinen Gesichtspunkte, für die sich der Gebildete offenhält, sind ihm nicht ein fester Maßstab, der gilt, sondern sind ihm nur als die Gesichtspunkte möglicher Anderer gegenwärtig." Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, 14.

adopts this notion from Aristotle via the Italian *philosophe* Giambattista Vico. Of common sense, Gadamer writes that it is not “nourished on the true,” as understood in a scientific sense, “but on the probable, the verisimilar (*das Wahrscheinliches*).”³⁰ For Gadamer, common sense seems to be what makes all communication and understanding possible.³¹ It is not *just* a matter of commonly held propositional knowledge or of the ability to categorize the particular under general concepts or categories. It is more a matter of *sense* proper, “an element of social and moral *being*.”³² It embraces a sense of meaning, of what constitutes knowledge, of what constitutes reality, and of what constitutes each and all of us as human beings. It is only within the horizon of common sense that any communication or understanding is possible. This horizon can be widened and reinterpreted but cannot be transcended or discarded. Thus, Gadamer holds any theory that claims to have definitively exceeded or escaped common sense in deep suspicion. Regnant propositions supported by common sense can be critiqued and rejected or modified, but escaping common sense, as Gadamer understands the term, would mean abandoning one’s humanity, one’s ability to interact with and learn from other human beings.

Common sense is closely related to a notion of “taste” (*Geschmack*) that precedes that outlined by Kant in his *Critique of Judgment* and exceeds the Kantian notion in that it applies not just to the aesthetic but also to the moral and even the speculative, treating them as outgrowths of a common activity. Kant’s very strange notion of taste holds that judgements of beauty bear a feeling of universality and purposiveness with them but that such feelings are not conceptually or rationally warranted. For Kant, aesthetics can have little to do with rational argumentation.³³

³⁰ Ibid., 19.

³¹ I write “seems” here because there is a problem of voice in this section, as in much of Gadamer’s writing. It is difficult to determine distinctly which view he is defending and which he is criticizing. But there are also problems of inconsistency in the use of terms and even propositional content. Perhaps this is to be expected from a philosopher as expansive and unsystematic as Gadamer.

³² Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 29. My emphasis.

³³ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. James Creed Meredith (New York: Oxford, 2007).

Gadamer is anxious to defend common sense and taste in the expansive senses that he uses them against a narrower understanding of the terms that Gadamer attributes to Enlightenment thought. He particularly associates this misinterpretation with Kant's notion of judgment. Indeed, Kant is the major villain of Part I of Gadamer's work, "The Question of Truth as it Emerges in the Experience of Art," as it was Kant who sundered aesthetic judgment from speculative and practical (i.e., ethical) judgment, depriving aesthetic judgments of their status of knowledge and their claims to truth. Thus, Gadamer argues, Kant was the decisive figure in cutting the human sciences off from common sense and taste, forcing them into the mold of the natural sciences.³⁴ Such, after all, was Kant's avowed intention.

Gadamer, by contrast, wishes to reunite the speculative, the practical, and the aesthetic in the fold of common sense. He agrees with Kant that aesthetics are not subject to invariable rules and laws but rejects the assertion that they therefore must lie outside the realm of knowledge and the conceptual. If Kant sundered aesthetics from speculative and moral theory to subject the latter two to scientific methods and place them firmly in the realm of "knowledge," Gadamer employs a reworked understanding of aesthetics to reconceptualize knowledge and to tow speculative and ethical theory back into a realm of knowledge defined more by common sense than by scientific method. It is not, as Kant claims, that there is no accounting for taste, with the corollary that one can account for moral and speculative judgment through strict laws and categories. It is, rather, that one can account for taste, though not through strict laws and categories and that taste applies also to the moral and the speculative. Gadamer sees judgments as flowing from principles but also views these principles as incomplete. They are not laws but are always in a process of articulation via their application in judgments. And it is not merely, or

³⁴ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 36.

primarily, a methodically guided weighing of rules and laws that renders these judgments. It is, rather, taste or tact, rooted in common sense and open to the feedback of judgments advancing and evolving the very principles from which they flow:

Taste is in no way limited to what is beautiful in nature and art, judging it in respect to its decorative quality, but embraces the whole realm of morality and manners. Even moral concepts are never given as a whole or determined in a normatively univocal way. Rather, the ordering of life by the rules of law and morality is incomplete and needs productive supplementation. Judgment is necessary in order to make a correct evaluation of the concrete instance. We are familiar with this function of judgment especially from jurisprudence, where the supplementary function of “hermeneutics” consists in concretizing the law. At issue is always something more than the correct application of general principles. Our knowledge of law and morality too is always supplemented by the individual case, even productively determined by it. The judge not only applies the law in concrete, but contributes through his very judgment to developing the law (“judge-made law”).³⁵

Good judgement for Gadamer is highly variable, responding to the context which it helped to form and which continually forms it.

Gadamer views the aesthetics of Friedrich Schiller as improving upon those of Kant in that Schiller affirmed the importance of the work of art itself—and not *just* the mental machinery of the transcendental subject—in aesthetic judgment. Hence, “Art becomes a standpoint of its own and establishes its own autonomous claims to supremacy.”³⁶ For Schiller and the Romantics, the role of art was not to imitate reality, not to mirror being but to extend and advance it in the aesthetic realm, to affirm the aesthetic as a genuine and coequal dimension of

³⁵ Ibid., 34. Original: “Beschränkt sich der Geschmack keineswegs auf das Schöne in Natur und Kunst, es auf seine dekorative Qualität hin beurteilend, sondern umfaßt den ganzen Bereich von Sitte und Anstand. Auch die Begriffe der Sitte sind ja nie als ein Ganzes gegeben oder normativ eindeutig bestimmt. Vielmehr ist die Durchordnung des Lebens durch die Regeln des Rechts und der Sitte eine unvollständige, der produktiven Ergänzung bedürftige. Es bedarf der Urteilskraft, die konkreten Fälle richtig einzuschätzen. Wir kennen diese Funktion der Urteilskraft besonders aus der Jurisprudenz, wo die rechtsergänzende Leistung der ‚Hermeneutik‘ eben darin besteht, die Konkrektion des Rechts zu bewirken. Immer handelt es sich dabei um mehr als um die rechte Anwendung allgemeiner Prinzipien. Immer wird auch unser Wissen um Recht und Sitte vom Einzelfall her ergänzt, ja geradezu produktiv bestimmt. Der Richter wendet nicht nur das Gesetz in concreto an, sondern trägt durch seinen Richtspruch selber zur Entfaltung des Rechtes bei (‚Richterrecht‘).” Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, 35.

³⁶ Ibid., 71.

being, alongside the moral and the speculative.³⁷ Because art is a reality onto itself, aesthetics can again lay claim to truth.

For Schiller, “aesthetic consciousness” (*ästhetische Bewußtsein*) is the type of awareness adequate to the being and truth of art. And just as art must be autonomous, so too must aesthetic consciousness not allow itself to be bound by speculative and practical considerations. It must not be sullied by mundane considerations but must preserve itself as pure form: “It distinguishes the aesthetic quality of a work from all the elements of content that induce us to take up a moral or religious stance towards it, and presents it solely by itself in its aesthetic being.”³⁸

While Gadamer appreciates Schiller’s insistence on the inherent worth of the work of art, he rejects Schiller’s insulation of art and aesthetic consciousness from the outside world and common sense. Schiller’s valorization of the work of art does nothing to bridge the gap between the aesthetic and the speculative and moral but only deepens it. Likewise, the Romantic notion of the artist as the autonomous and spontaneously generating genius detaches the artist from all connection to the broader world. This, too, involves an unnatural limiting of the *sensus communis* and the human experience. Just as surely as Kant did, Schiller misses the rootedness of the three modes of being and knowing in the common ground of human meaning and sense. There can be no purely aesthetic consciousness, no pure seeing or pure hearing, because it is impossible to fully separate perception from interpretation. Perceiving always means interpreting, and *meaning* is the common resource of both enterprises:

Seeing means articulating. While we are still trying various ways of organizing what we see or hesitating between them, as with certain trick pictures, we don’t yet see what is there. The trick picture is, as it were, the artificial perpetuation of this hesitation, the “agony” of seeing. The same is true of the literary work. Only when we understand a text—that is, are at least in command of its language—can it be a work of literary art for us. Even in listening to absolute music we must “understand” it. And only when we

³⁷ Ibid., 72.

³⁸ Ibid., 74.

understand it, when it is 'clear' to us, does it exist as an artistic creation for us [...] [Thus] Pure seeing and pure hearing are dogmatic abstractions that artificially reduce phenomena. Perception always includes meaning. Thus to seek the unity of the work of art solely in its form as opposed to its content is a perverse formalism.³⁹

Aesthetic consciousness is, then, self-defeating because "abstracting down to the 'purely aesthetic' obviously eliminates it."⁴⁰

Thus, the idea of art purely for art's sake is untenable for Gadamer. Adrift from meaning in general, art would simply have nothing to say to us. Gadamer, then, rejects the notion of the work of art as entirely autonomous and timeless, possessed of a fully determined meaning that stands aloof from subjective interpretation and investment, accessible only through a passive aesthetic consciousness. He also remains unconvinced by the only apparently antithetical notion of the work of art as an empty form to be invested with whatever meaning the artist or the audience brings to it, as this would mean reducing art to individual subjectivities and overlooking those subjectivities' relations to one another, to the positive content of the work of art, and to the cultural and historical milieus in which artist, audience, and work of art all take shape together. All such one-sided approaches to the aesthetic assume a fully formed and hermetically sealed entity, bearing all meaning within itself, be it artist, artwork, or audience. For Gadamer, meaning and being cannot be so easily arrested, separated from their historical development or from their instantiations and co-evolutions in persons, cultures, and works of art:

The pantheon of art is not a timeless present that presents itself to a pure aesthetic consciousness, but the act of a mind and spirit that has collected and gathered itself historically. Our experience of the aesthetic too is a mode of self-understanding. Self-

³⁹ Ibid., 79-80. Original: "Sehen heißt aufgliedern. Solange wir noch variable Gliederungsformen probieren oder zwischen solchen schwanken, wie bei gewissen Vexierbildern, sehen wir noch nicht, was ist. Das Vexierbild ist gleichsam die künstliche Verewigung solchen Schwankens, die ‚Qual‘ des Sehens. Ähnlich steht es mit dem sprachlichen Kunstwerk. Nur wenn wir einen Text verstehen — also mindestens die Sprache beherrschen, um die es sich handelt —, kann er ein sprachliches Kunstwerk für uns sein. Das bloße Sehen, das bloße Hören sind dogmatische Abstraktionen, die die Phänomene künstlich reduzieren. Wahrnehmung erfaßt immer Bedeutung. Es ist daher ein verkehrter Formalismus, [...] die Einheit des ästhetischen Gebildes im Gegensatz zu seinem Inhalt allein in seiner Form zu suchen." Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, 87.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 77.

understanding always occurs through understanding something other than the self, and includes the unity and integrity of the other. Since we meet the artwork in the world and encounter a world in the individual artwork, the work of art is not some alien universe into which we are magically transported for a time. Rather, we learn to understand ourselves in and through it, and this means that we sublimate [*aufheben*] the discontinuity and atomism of isolated experiences in the continuity of our own existence. For this reason, we must adopt a standpoint in relation to art and the beautiful that does not pretend to immediacy but corresponds to the historical nature of the human condition. The appeal to immediacy, to the instantaneous flash of genius, to the significance of “experiences” [*Erlebnisse*] cannot withstand the claim of human existence to continuity and unity of self-understanding. The binding quality of the experience [*Erfahrung*] of art must not be disintegrated by aesthetic consciousness.⁴¹

In his aesthetics, Gadamer wishes to navigate between two formalisms: the abstraction of the work of art as a timeless, unchanging entity or form, on the one hand, and the abstraction of the work of art as an empty form to be determined in its content entirely by the whims of distinct audiences (i.e., subjects). The concept of “play,” (*Spiel*), which Gadamer critically appropriates from Schiller, allows him to avoid these formalisms and to posit, instead, a polylectical understanding of aesthetics that integrates all of the actors and dimensions that his interlocutors separate: the subject as artist and audience, the work of art itself, and their broader semantic milieus.⁴² By play, Gadamer understands the seamless fusing of these elements in the act of

⁴¹ Ibid., 83-4. Original: “Das Pantheon der Kunst ist nicht eine zeitlose Gegenwärtigkeit, die sich dem reinen ästhetischen Bewußtsein darstellt, sondern die Tat eines geschichtlich sich sammelnden und versammelnden Geistes. Auch die ästhetische Erfahrung ist eine Weise des Sichverstehens. Alles Sichverstehen vollzieht sich aber an etwas anderem, das da verstanden wird, und schließt die Einheit und Selbigkeit dieses anderen ein. Sofern wir in der Welt dem Kunstwerk und in dem einzelnen Kunstwerk einer Welt begegnen, bleibt dieses nicht ein fremdes Universum, in das wir auf Zeit und Augenblick hineinverzaubert sind. Vielmehr lernen wir uns in ihm verstehen, und das heißt, wir heben die Diskontinuität und Punktualität des Erlebnisses in der Kontinuität unseres Daseins auf. Es gilt daher, dem Schönen und der Kunst gegenüber einen Standpunkt zu gewinnen, der nicht Unmittelbarkeit prätendiert, sondern der geschichtlichen Wirklichkeit des Menschen entspricht. Die Berufung auf die Unmittelbarkeit, auf das Geniale des Augenblicks, auf die Bedeutung des ‚Erlebnisses‘ kann vor dem Anspruch der menschlichen Existenz auf Kontinuität und Einheit des Selbstverständnisses nicht bestehen. Die Erfahrung der Kunst darf nicht in die Unverbindlichkeit des ästhetischen Bewußtseins abgedrängt werden.” Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, 92.

⁴² I use the term “polylectic” here in a manner akin to the use of the term “dialectic.” Whereas the latter denotes a relationship between two terms, the former can accommodate relationships of many terms. “Polylectic” is not quite a neologism. Entomologists use it to refer to insects that gather pollen from multiple species of plants. I had considered using the term “eclectic” but did not wish to relate Gadamer’s aesthetics and hermeneutics to the ancient school of eclecticism or to associate it with the quotidian use of the word. “Polylectic,” therefore, seems a more fitting choice of words.

playing or the game. The game cannot exist without its players and without being played. But the game is not an empty form. It has a distinct character and distinct specifications, which separate it from other games. Each playing of the game is unique, yet each is the *same* game. The relationship between game and each act of playing is not a case of essence and accident because the game *per se* can no more exist without the act of playing than can play take place without some kind of game. One could separate the two for analytical purposes but doing so would deprive them of their essential truth, which consists in their unity.

In the same way, the work of art itself is inseparable from its performances, and each *is* an interpretation. This interpretation is not simply the audience's interpretation of the work, as though the positive content of the work played no role in guiding or informing the audience. Nor is it merely the artist's interpretation, as though the mentality of the artist spontaneously arose from the void and transposed itself into the work without any contribution from the artist's culture, from the give-and-take of the creative process, or from the mentalities and understandings of the audience. Nor, finally, is this interpretation that of the work of art as a timeless, enduring entity. There is something timeless about the work of art, open to all who would look upon it or listen to it, but it cannot fully become itself except by being looked upon, listened to, and understood (i.e., interpreted). With the performance, viewing, or hearing of a work, no matter how remote that work's origin, the work becomes *fully* then and there, fully contemporary to its spectators. It enters into and informs their world. It is not a relic of a totally alien past, even if it bears a number of oddities. For the spectator is not merely a spectator but a participant in the play that is the work of art:

“contemporaneity” belongs to the being of the work of art. It constitutes the essence of “being there” [*Dabeiseins*]. This is not the simultaneity of aesthetic consciousness, for that simply means that several objects of aesthetic experience are all held in consciousness at the same time—all indifferently, with the same claim to validity

“Contemporaneity,” on the other hand, means that in its presentation this particular thing that presents itself to us achieves full presence, however remote its origin may be. Thus contemporaneity is not a mode of givenness in consciousness, but a task for consciousness and an achievement that is demanded of it.⁴³

In this sense, the spectator is both a subject for himself and a moment in the work of art:

“The absolute moment [*Wesensmoment*] in which a spectator stands is both one of self-forgetfulness and of mediation with himself. What rends him from himself at the same time gives him back the whole of his being.”⁴⁴ Gadamer continues, “It is not an experience of an adventure producing a temporary intoxication from which one reawakens to one’s true being; instead, the elevation and strong emotion that seize the spectator in fact deepen his continuity with himself.”⁴⁵

Much the same applies to the artist. He fashions the work but does not create it from whole cloth. He shapes it from aspects of his psyche, which develops not just under the conditions of his personal life history but in common with the broader mental and cultural life of his time and place, which itself flows from innumerable historical sources: “The player, sculptor, or viewer is never simply swept away into a strange world of magic, of intoxication, of dream; rather, it is always his own world, and he comes to belong to it more fully by recognizing himself more profoundly in it.”⁴⁶

⁴³ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 123-4. Translation modified. I have rid the translation of the offensive word “present” and replaced it with “being there” for “*Dabeiseins*.” This is somewhat silly, in many ways, but it may reflect a desire of Gadamer’s to follow Heidegger in avoiding the hated metaphysics of presence (*Metaphysik der Anwesenheit*) and to recall to memory Heidegger’s notion of *Dasein*. I treat the issue of presence in Gadamer’s philosophy below, in the section on Derrida and Gadamer. Original: “Kommt dem Sein des Kunstwerks ‚Gleichzeitigkeit‘ zu. Sie macht das Wesen des ‚Dabeiseins‘ aus. Sie ist nicht die Simultaneität des ästhetischen Bewußtseins. Denn diese Simultaneität meint das Zugleichsein und die Gleich-Gültigkeit verschiedener ästhetischer Erlebnisgegenstände in einem Bewußtsein. ‚Gleichzeitigkeit‘ dagegen will hier sagen, daß ein Einziges, das sich uns darstellt, so fernen Ursprungs es auch sei, in seiner Darstellung volle Gegenwart gewinnt. Gleichzeitigkeit ist also nicht eine Gegebenheitsweise im Bewußtsein, sondern eine Aufgabe für das Bewußtsein und eine Leistung, die von ihm verlangt wird.” Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, 121.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 125.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 128.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 129.

In its whole, then, Aesthetic interpretation is the mutually constitutive act of artist, audience, work, and the world that has shaped them all. It is an act not only of interpretation of the other but of self-interpretation. Because artistic being and human being exist in their realizations through activity in time (i.e., in their play), because they exist as essences but not as *unvarying* essences, this self-interpretation turns out to be self-constitution. For Gadamer, presentation and representation increase the being of a thing, because each presentation is a chance for new interpretations of the thing to arise. Each representation is a *unique* recreation, each new understanding a nascence of being:

That the picture has its own reality means the reverse for what is pictured, namely that it comes to presentation in the representation. It presents itself there. It does not follow that it is dependent on this particular presentation in order to appear. It can also present itself as what it is in other ways. But if it presents itself in this way, this is no longer any incidental event but belongs to its own being. Every such presentation is an ontological event and occupies the same ontological level as what is represented. By being presented it experiences, as it were, an *increase in being*.⁴⁷

And because this interpretation-constitution cannot take place in isolation but only through interaction with others, self-interpretation-constitution and interpretation-constitution of the other turn out to be mutual interpretation-constitution:

My thesis, then, is that the being of art cannot be defined as an object of an aesthetic consciousness because, on the contrary, the aesthetic attitude is more than it knows of itself. It is a part of the *event of being that occurs in presentation*, and belongs essentially to play as play.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Ibid., 135. Original: "Daß das Bild eine eigene Wirklichkeit hat, bedeutet nun umgekehrt für das Urbild, daß es in der Darstellung zur Darstellung kommt. Es stellt sich selbst darin dar. Das braucht nicht zu heißen, daß es gerade auf diese Darstellung angewiesen ist, um zu erscheinen. Es kann sich als das, was es ist, auch anders darstellen. Aber wenn es sich so darstellt, ist dies kein beiläufiger Vorgang mehr, sondern gehört zu seinem eigenen Sein. Jede solche Darstellung ist ein Seinsvorgang und macht den Seinsrang des Dargestellten mit aus. Durch die Darstellung erfährt es gleichsam einen Zuwachs an Sein." Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, 133.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 115. Original: "Die These ist also, daß das Sein der Kunst nicht als Gegenstand eines ästhetischen Bewußtseins bestimmt werden kann, weil umgekehrt das ästhetische Verhalten mehr ist, als es von sich weiß. Es ist ein Teil des Seinsvorganges der Darstellung und gehört dem Spiel als Spiel wesentlich zu." Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, 111.

One might call this process of self-interpretation-constitution through interpretation-constitution of the other *reflexive hermeneutic constitution* or simply *hermegensis*.⁴⁹ It is, in fact, the central theme of Gadamer's great work, which encompasses a number of variations on and elaborations of this theme. It quickly becomes clear that Gadamer sees aesthetics not so much as a model for hermeneutics but as one of its more accessible branches: "Every work of art, not only literature, must be understood like any other text that requires understanding, and this kind of understanding has to be acquired. This gives hermeneutical consciousness a comprehensiveness that surpasses even that of aesthetic consciousness. *Aesthetics has to be absorbed into hermeneutics.*"⁵⁰

From his exploration of aesthetics, Gadamer climbs further. It would be misleading to say that he climbs "higher" because the structure he encounters in these peregrinations is decidedly not that of a hierarchy but, unsurprisingly, of a circle. This circularity is what makes the structure of *Truth and Method* so deceptively perplexing. One finds oneself carried along by the gentle currents of this circle without realizing precisely when or where one entered into it or at what point one section gives way to another. Loosely, one could say that it follows a contour from aesthetics through textual interpretation, *Lebensphilosophie*, historical understanding, jurisprudence, theology, and everyday communication to ontology and semantics. But, of course, this scheme cannot be sufficient because all of these logoi transfuse, interpenetrate, and constitute one another. All of them enact and constitute the hermeneutic process, which is the human condition and the essential activity that makes us human. And this is the overarching

⁴⁹ The device of hyphenating "interpretation" with "constitution" is my own and not Gadamer's, as are the terms "reflexive hermeneutic constitution" and "hermegensis." But I believe they accurately and succinctly convey Gadamer's meaning. The presumptuousness of a non-Greek-speaker coining neologisms and quasi neologisms from Greek is not lost on me, and I am more than happy to take corrections or suggestions from any Greek-speakers.

⁵⁰ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 157.

point of Gadamer's text; indeed, it is more an arc than a point. Nevertheless, a number of more discrete points do emerge from the contours of Gadamer's text, and some of them are of critical bearing on the conflicts of his time and place and the themes of twentieth-century continental philosophical and political thought. They merit significant consideration.

Holism without a Whole

It will be recalled that Dilthey sought to subject history and the movement of life to scientific categorization, assigning the historian and the epoch she studies specific and fundamentally distinct places in history, and that Gadamer rejected such a method as hypostatizing. Gadamer finds an answer to Dilthey's static and overly analytical method in Husserl and Heidegger, beginning with the former's understanding of lifeworld and horizon. In short, the lifeworld (*Lebenswelt*) is the world of unthematized cultural knowledge and attitudes that constitute the worldviews and norms of actors within the lifeworld. This knowledge and these attitudes are not and probably cannot *in full* become the stuff of scientific investigation because to subject them to scientific investigation would be to alter their nature. Gadamer calls the lifeworld the "anti-thesis of all objectivism."⁵¹ Each lifeworld is bounded by a horizon (*Horizont*), which can expand or alter as traditions change and lifeworlds come into contact with one another. Of course, these are vague concepts without clear boundaries or content. Gadamer intends this, as relative assuredness without scientific clarity is characteristic of life and human experience. In these concepts of lifeworld and horizon, Gadamer discovers a holism of trans-subjectivity, one that is open, active, and self-determining:

The principle of "radical" idealism—namely of always going back to the constitutive acts of transcendental subjectivity—must obviously illuminate the universal horizon of consciousness that is the "world" and, above all, the intersubjectivity of this world—

⁵¹ Ibid., 239.

although what is constituted in this way, the world as what is common to many individuals, itself includes subjectivity. Though it is supposed to bracket all the validity of the world and all the pregivenness of anything else, transcendental reflection must regard itself too as included in the life-world. The reflective “I” sees itself as living in the context of ends for which the life-world is the basis. Thus, constituting the life-world (as well as intersubjectivity) is a paradoxical task. But Husserl regards all these as only apparent paradoxes. He is convinced that they are resolved if we consistently maintain the transcendental meaning of the phenomenological reduction and don’t fear the bogey of a transcendental solipsism [...] Transcendental subjectivity is the Ur-Ich (‘the primal I’) and not “an I.” For it the basis of the pregiven world is superseded. It is the absolute irrelative to which all relativity, including that of the inquiring “I,” is related.⁵²

This Ur-Ich seems to be another name for what Gadamer elsewhere refers to as common sense. It is subjectivity as an active force, an active medium of experience and the basis for historically effected consciousness, in which lifeworlds are constituted as outgrowths of other lifeworlds in the course of events, without clear and comprehensive boundaries among them. For Gadamer, the commonality of this transsubjectivity that is the Ur-Ich precedes and unifies subjectivity and intersubjectivity, neither of which can transcend lifeworlds or breach horizons to take outside views on them because it is the transcendental subjectivity of the Ur-Ich that ultimately forms the locus for all sense, meaning, and understanding. To escape its bounds in an attempt to thoroughly segment and categorize the lifeworlds in which it manifests, to understand it without being in its grasp, would render all meaning meaningless and all sense senseless. The

⁵² Ibid., 239-40. Original: “Der Grundsatz des ‚radikalen‘ Idealismus, überall auf die konstituierenden Akte der transzendentalen Subjektivität zurückzugehen, muß offenbar das universale Horizontbewußtsein ‚Welt‘ und vor allem die Intersubjektivität dieser Welt aufklären - obwohl das so Konstituierte, die Welt als die vielen Individuen gemeinsame, ihrerseits die Subjektivität umfaßt. Die transzendente Reflexion, die alle Weltgeltung und alle Vorgegebenheit von anderem aufheben soll, muß sich ihrerseits als von der Lebenswelt umfassen denken. Das reflektierende Ich weiß sich selber als in Zweckbestimmungen lebendes, für die die Lebenswelt den Boden darstellt. So ist die Aufgabe einer Konstitution der Lebenswelt (wie die der Intersubjektivität) eine paradoxe. Aber Husserl hält das alles für scheinbare Paradoxien. Sie lösen sich nach seiner Überzeugung auf, wenn man den transzendentalen Sinn der phänomenologischen Reduktion mit wirklicher Konsequenz festhält und sich vor dem Kinderschreck eines transzendentalen Solipsismus nicht fürchtet [...] Die transzendente Subjektivität ist das ‚Ur-Ich‘ und nicht ‚ein Ich‘. Für sie ist der Boden der vorgegebenen Welt aufgehoben. Sie ist das Irrelative schlechthin, auf das alle Relativität, auch die des forschenden Ich, bezogen ist.”Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, 234.

most that can be hoped for, then, is a fusion of horizons, a blending of traditions and senses of the real – not a transcendence of them because the transcendental cannot be transcended.

What Gadamer values in Heidegger is the latter's deep insistence on Dasein's historicity, which Gadamer understands as humanity's outgrowths and returns to its lifeworlds:

That we study history only insofar as we are ourselves “historical” means that the historicity of human Dasein in its expectancy and its forgetting is the condition of our being able to re-present the past. What first seemed simply a barrier, according to the traditional concept of science and method, or a subjective condition of access to historical knowledge, now becomes the center of a fundamental inquiry [...] Belonging to traditions belongs just as originally and essentially to the historical finitude of Dasein as does its projectedness toward future possibilities of itself [...] Thus there is no understanding or interpretation in which the totality of this existential structure does not function, even if the intention of the knower is simply to read “what is there” and to discover from his sources “how it really was.”⁵³

In such passages, Gadamer skates perilously close to orthodox Heideggerianism, apparently viewing the individual as passively determined by tradition. But Gadamer parts decisively from Heidegger over the issue of *Vorhaben*. *Vorhaben* is typically translated into English as the noun “intention” or the verb “to intend,” and this translation is a more or less exact analogue of the word's use in quotidian German. But *Vorhaben* literally means “fore-having” or “having/holding in advance.” In *Being and Time*, Heidegger claims that all understanding—or, at least, authentic understanding—results from a historically determined *Vorhaben*.⁵⁴ Such understanding, obviously, cannot be challenged by evidence or reason.

⁵³ Ibid., 252. Original: “Daß wir nur Historie treiben, sofern wir selber ‚geschichtlich‘ sind, bedeutet, daß die Geschichtlichkeit des menschlichen Daseins in ihrer ganzen Bewegtheit des Gewärtigens und des Vergessens die Bedingung dafür ist, daß wir Gewesenes überhaupt vergegenwärtigen. Was zunächst nur wie eine Schranke, die den herkömmlichen Begriff von Wissenschaft und Methode beeinträchtigte, oder als eine subjektive Zugangsbedingung der geschichtlichen Erkenntnis erschien, rückt nun in den Mittelpunkt einer grundsätzlichen Fragestellung [...] Zugehörigkeit zu Traditionen gehört genau so ursprünglich und wesentlich zu der geschichtlichen Endlichkeit des Daseins [...] wie sein Entworfensein auf zukünftige Möglichkeiten seiner selbst [...] So gibt es auch kein Verstehen und Auslegen, in dem nicht die Totalität dieser existenzialen Struktur in Funktion wäre — auch wenn die Intention des Erkennenden keine andere ist, als zu lesen, ‚was da steht, und den Quellen — zu entnehmen, ‚wie es eigentlich gewesen ist‘.” Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, 247-8.

⁵⁴ See chapter 1.

Heidegger's Vorhaben, then, is an absolute defense of absolute prejudice. For Heidegger, there really is nothing to understanding but Vorhaben.

Gadamer, too, avails himself of the notion of Vorhaben but in a very different manner from that of Heidegger. For Gadamer, one's approach to a text, a question, or an alien lifeworld—be it the past or a present-day foreign culture—is inevitably determined by Vorhaben. But the matter does not end there, because Vorhaben never survives any encounter with an other intact, and no honest person seeks preserve it unchanged:

A person trying to understand something will not resign himself from the start to relying on his own accidental fore-meanings, ignoring as consistently and stubbornly as possible the actual meaning of the text until the latter becomes so persistently audible that it breaks through what the interpreter imagines it to be. Rather, a person trying to understand a text is prepared for it to tell him something. That is why a hermeneutically trained consciousness must be, from the start, sensitive to the text's alterity. But this kind of sensitivity involves neither "neutrality" with respect to content nor the extinction of one's self, but the foregrounding and appropriation of one's own fore-meanings and prejudices.⁵⁵

Interpretation begins with fore-conceptions that are replaced by more suitable ones. This constant process of new projection constitutes the movement of understanding and interpretation [...] Working out appropriate projections, anticipatory in nature, to be confirmed 'by the things' themselves is the constant task of understanding.⁵⁶

At this point, Gadamer finally offers a criterion for "philosophical legitimation" or "correct understanding," but it is a highly problematic one: "The harmony of all the details with the whole is the criterion of correct understanding. The failure to achieve this harmony means

⁵⁵ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 271. Original: "Wer verstehen will, wird sich von vornherein nicht der Zufälligkeit der eigenen Vormeinung überlassen dürfen, um an der Meinung des Textes so konsequent und hartnäckig wie möglich vorbeizuhören — bis etwa diese unüberhörbar wird und das vermeintliche Verständnis umstößt. Wer einen Text verstehen will, ist vielmehr bereit, sich von ihm etwas sagen zu lassen. Daher muß ein hermeneutisch geschultes Bewußtsein für die Andersheit des Textes von vornherein empfänglich sein. Solche Empfänglichkeit setzt aber weder sachliche ‚Neutralität‘ noch gar Selbstauslöschung voraus, sondern schließt die abhebende Aneignung der eigenen Vormeinungen und Vorurteile ein." Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, 253.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 269-70. Original: "Die Auslegung [setzt] mit Vorbegriffen [ein], die durch angemessenere Begriffe ersetzt werden: eben dieses ständige Neu-Entwerfen [macht] die Sinnbewegung des Verstehens und Auslegens [aus] [...] Die Ausarbeitung der rechten, sachangemessenen Entwürfe, die als Entwürfe Vorwegnahmen sind, die sich ‚an den Sachen‘ erst bestätigen sollen, ist die ständige Aufgabe des Verstehens." Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, 251-2.

that understanding has failed.”⁵⁷ The question, of course, is how one can know the whole and, so, verify that one’s understanding is in harmony with it. The answer that Gadamer seems to offer is that the anticipation of Vorhaben determines the whole, even as it changes to adapt to the whole.⁵⁸ Understanding is not static but neither is the whole to which it seeks to conform itself, and the two (understanding and the whole) are not just two but are also one. Interpretation must constantly change if it is to conform to the changing whole:

The anticipation of meaning that governs our understanding of a text is not an act of subjectivity, but proceeds from the commonality that binds us to the tradition. But this commonality is constantly being formed in our relation to tradition. Tradition is not simply a permanent precondition; rather, we produce it ourselves inasmuch as we understand, participate in the evolution of tradition, and hence further determine it ourselves. Thus the circle understanding is not a “methodological” circle, but describes an element of the *ontological structure of understanding*.⁵⁹

Further, Gadamer makes clear that no understanding of a text is definitive:

Not just occasionally but always, the meaning of a text goes beyond its author. That is why understanding is not merely a reproductive but always a productive activity as well [...] Understanding is not, in fact, understanding better [than the author understands], either in the sense of superior knowledge of the subject because of clearer ideas or in the sense of fundamental superiority of conscious over unconscious production. It is enough to say that we understand in *a different way, if we understand at all*.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Ibid., 291.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 293.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 293-4. My emphasis. It will be noted here that Gadamer opens this passage by denying the importance of subjectivity and possibility of agency but ends it by affirming subjectivity and agency, albeit, in modified form. Original: “Die Antizipation von Sinn, die unser Verständnis eines Textes leitet, ist nicht eine Handlung der Subjektivität, sondern bestimmt sich aus der Gemeinsamkeit, die uns mit der Überlieferung verbindet. Diese Gemeinsamkeit aber ist in unserem Verhältnis zur Überlieferung in beständiger Bildung begriffen. Sie ist nicht einfach eine Voraussetzung, unter der wir schon immer stehen, sondern wir erstellen sie selbst, sofern wir verstehen, am Überlieferungsgeschehen teilhaben und es dadurch selber weiter bestimmen. Der Zirkel des Verstehens ist also überhaupt nicht ein ‚methodischer‘ Zirkel, sondern beschreibt ein ontologisches Strukturmoment des Verstehens.” Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, 277.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 296. Original: “Nicht nur gelegentlich, sondern immer übertrifft der Sinn eines Textes seinen Autor. Daher ist Verstehen kein nur reproduktives, sondern stets auch ein produktives Verhalten. Verstehen ist in Wahrheit kein Besserverstehen, weder im Sinne des sachlichen Besserwissens durch deutlichere Begriffe, noch im Sinne der grundsätzlichen Überlegenheit, die das Bewußte über das Unbewußte der Produktion besitzt. Es genügt zu sagen, daß man anders versteht, wenn man überhaupt versteht.” Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, 280.

The “ontological structure of understanding” is hermeneutic, and hermeneutic is creative the struggle of the subject to understand the text, drawing from the context(s) of both. And it is a struggle. In the hermeneutic process that is life—which inevitably involves trying to come to terms with life—one encounters disappointment after disappointment, dashed expectation after dashed expectation, and endless confirmations of one’s own finitude. The subject does not realize that the text of life is ever in the making and that she is making the text just as surely as it makes her. There is no escaping the struggle of interpretation through the idol of method because hermeneutic is not (ever solely or completely) an abstract that can be grasped and dissected; hermeneutic is experience. And it is not just the reassuring presence of the familiar and fixed answers that give rise to experience but encounters with the unfamiliar and the questions these engender:

Foregrounding [*zur Abhebung bringen*] a prejudice clearly requires suspending its validity for us. For as long as our mind is influenced by a prejudice, we do not consider it a judgment. How then can we foreground it? It is impossible to make ourselves aware of a prejudice while it is constantly operating unnoticed, but only when it is, so to speak, provoked. The encounter with a traditional text can invoke this provocation. For what leads to understanding must be something that has already asserted itself in its own separate validity. Understanding begins [...] when something addresses us. This is the first condition of hermeneutics. We know what this requires, namely the fundamental suspension of our own prejudices. But all suspension of judgments and hence, a fortiori, of prejudices, has the logical structure of a *question*. The essence of the question is to open up possibilities and keep them open.⁶¹

⁶¹ Ibid., 298. Original: “Ein Vorurteil als solches zur Abhebung bringen, verlangt offenbar, es in seiner Geltung zu suspendieren. Denn solange ein Vorurteil uns bestimmt, wissen und bedenken wir es nicht als Urteil. Wie soll es als solches zur Abhebung kommen? Ein Vorurteil gleichsam vor sich zu bringen, kann nicht gelingen, solange dies Vorurteil beständig und unbemerkt im Spiele ist, sondern nur dann, wenn es sozusagen gereizt wird. Was so zu reizen vermag, ist eben die Begegnung mit der Überlieferung. Denn was zum Verstehen verlockt, muß sich selber schon zuvor in seinem Anderssein zur Geltung gebracht haben. Das erste, womit das Verstehen beginnt, ist [...] daß etwas uns anspricht. Das ist die oberste aller hermeneutischen Bedingungen. Wir wissen jetzt, was damit gefordert ist: eine grundsätzliche Suspension der eigenen Vorurteile. Alle Suspension von Urteilen aber, mithin und erst recht die von Vorurteilen, hat, logisch gesehen, die Struktur der Frage. Das Wesen der Frage ist das Offenlegen und Offenhalten von Möglichkeiten.” Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, 283.

Experience as the Ongoing Parousia of Being

Like Derrida, Gadamer clearly recognized and thematized the impossibility of grounding knowledge on an extra-theoretical foundation. Perhaps to a greater extent than any other twentieth-century philosophers, Derrida and Gadamer forcefully affirmed this impossibility. Every category on which thinkers have attempted to ground knowledge is itself a hermeneutic.⁶² This is a paradox with implications that far exceed the bounds of academic thought. It is the chasm from which springs existential anxiety. It gives rise to the most desperate and extreme ideologies. From its depths emerge all the delusional attempts to impose panaceas for humanity's sufferings and finitude through such means as purportedly "scientific" doctrines of history, idealizations of a past that never was, and attempts to fuse with the infinite through a triumph of the will.⁶³

Gadamer's answer to the existential dilemma of finitude and hermeneutic captivity is a type of submission – not to irrationality but to *experience*. For Gadamer, the essential point about experience is that it is not productive of the firm, unchanging knowledge sought by science and rationalism. It ought not to be viewed as a means to an end (knowledge). Experience is an affirmation of self, other, and the irresolvable mutual constitution of the two in mediation.⁶⁴ Recognition of the other inevitably entails recognition of oneself and enriches both self and other. Whereas this self-knowing is ultimately arrested and fully articulated in Hegel, the process is ongoing in Gadamer because experience always surpasses itself in new experiences. And this is Gadamer's decisive step in separating "truth" not only from method but from knowledge understood scientifically or apodictically:

⁶² Ibid., 339.

⁶³ See chapter 1.

⁶⁴ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 349.

Experience stands in an ineluctable [*unaufhebar*] opposition to knowledge and to the kind of instruction that follows from general theoretical or technical knowledge. The truth of experience always implies an orientation toward new experience. That is why a person who is called experienced has become so not only *through* experiences but is also open to new experiences. The consummation of his experience, the perfection that we call “being experienced,” does not consist in the fact that someone already knows everything and knows better than anyone else. Rather, the experienced person proves to be, on the contrary, someone who is radically undogmatic; who, because of the many experiences he has had and the knowledge he has drawn from them, is particularly well equipped to have new experiences and to learn from them. The dialectic of experience has its proper fulfillment not in definitive knowledge but in the openness to experience that is made possible by experience.⁶⁵

At this point in Gadamer’s text, theory passes over into wisdom. One tends to think of ontology as wonkish and abstruse, offering little by which to orient oneself in life. But, in Gadamer’s capable hands, ontology becomes a guide to life, a compass to navigate sorrow and finitude:

What a man has to learn through suffering is not this or that particular thing, but insight into the limitations of humanity, into the absoluteness of the barrier that separates man from the divine. It is ultimately a religious insight—the kind of insight that gave birth to Greek tragedy. Thus experience is experience of human finitude. The truly experienced person is one who has taken this to heart, who knows that he is master neither of time nor the future. The experienced man knows that all foresight is limited and all plans uncertain. In him is realized the truth value of experience [...] It does not mean that experience has ceased and a higher form of knowledge is reached (Hegel), but that for the first time experience fully and truly is. In it all dogmatism, which proceeds from the soaring desires of the human heart, reaches an absolute barrier. Experience teaches us to acknowledge the real. The genuine result of experience, then—as of all desire to know—is to know what is. But “what is,” here, is not this or that thing, but “what cannot be destroyed” (Ranke).⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Ibid., 350. Original: “Denn Erfahrung selber kann nie Wissenschaft sein. Sie steht in einem unaufhebbaren Gegensatz zum Wissen und zu derjenigen Belehrung, die aus theoretischem oder technischem Allgemeinwissen fließt. Die Wahrheit der Erfahrung enthält stets den Bezug auf neue Erfahrung. Daher ist derjenige, den man erfahren nennt, nicht nur *durch* Erfahrungen zu einem solchen geworden, sondern auch *für* Erfahrungen offen. Die Vollendung seiner Erfahrung, das vollendete Sein dessen, den wir erfahren nennen, besteht nicht darin, daß einer schon alles kennt und alles schon besser weiß. Vielmehr zeigt sich der Erfahrene im Gegenteil als der radikal Undogmatische, der, weil er so viele Erfahrungen gemacht und aus Erfahrungen gelernt hat, gerade besonders befähigt ist, aufs neue Erfahrungen zu machen und aus Erfahrungen zu lernen. Die Dialektik der Erfahrung hat ihre eigene Vollendung nicht in einem Wissen, sondern in jener Offenheit für Erfahrung, die durch die Erfahrung selbst freigespielt wird.” Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, 338.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 351. Original: “Was der Mensch durch Leiden lernen soll, ist nicht dieses oder jenes, sondern ist die Einsicht in die Grenzen des Menschseins, die Einsicht in die Unaufhebbarkeit der Grenze zum Göttlichen hin. Es ist am Ende eine religiöse Erkenntnis — diejenige Erkenntnis, aus der die Geburt der griechischen Tragödie erfolgt ist. Erfahrung ist also Erfahrung der menschlichen Endlichkeit. Erfahren im eigentlichen Sinne ist, wer ihrer inne ist,

The upshot of Gadamer's concept of experience, then, for any theory of knowledge or any theory of being is a very human reconciliation with unknowability, with submission to one's finitude and delight in it. Once one has effected this reconciliation, one finds oneself in a position to appreciate the validity of the type of knowledge that experience does yield. This is never a final, perfect knowledge. It is a continuous expansion of the horizon of human being, an evolving whole, a living infinity whose irreducible condition of possibility is human finitude – mine and yours.

The Ramifying Thing-in-Itself

One of the concepts that Gadamer picks up from Dilthey and fellow nineteenth-century philosopher of history Johann Gustave Droysen is that of *expression* (*Ausdruck*). One might say that expresser and expressed are to the human sciences as cause and effect are to the natural sciences. The key difference is that there is a far greater continuity—a continuity of meaning—in the relationship of expresser and expressed than in that of cause and effect. The expresser is actually present in the expressed; they form a structure of meaning that continually grows in historical development. Of Dilthey's understanding of this dynamic, Gadamer writes,

An example will make this clear: a psychic structure, say an individual, acquires his individuality by developing his talents and at the same time experiencing the conditioning effect of circumstances. What emerges, the actual 'individuality'—i.e., the character of the individual—is not a mere consequence of the causal factors nor to be understood only in terms of these causes, but it constitutes a unity that is intelligible in itself, a unity of

wer weiß, daß er der Zeit und der Zukunft nicht Herr ist. Der Erfahrene nämlich kennt die Grenze alles Voraussehens und die Unsicherheit aller Pläne. In ihm vollendet sich der Wahrheitswert der Erfahrung [...] In ihr ist nicht die Erfahrung zu Ende und eine höhere Gestalt des Wissens erreicht (Hegel), sondern in ihr ist Erfahrung erst ganz und eigentlich da. In ihr ist aller Dogmatismus, wie er aus der überfliegenden Wunschbesessenheit des menschlichen Gemütes entspringt, an eine schlechthinnige Grenze gelangt. Die Erfahrung lehrt, Wirkliches anzuerkennen. Erkennen, was ist, ist so das eigentliche Ergebnis aller Erfahrung, wie alles Wissenwollens überhaupt. Aber was ist, ist hier nicht dieses oder jenes, sondern das, ‚was nicht mehr umzustoßen ist‘ (Ranke).” Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, 338-9.

life that is expressed in every one of its manifestations and hence can be understood in each of them.⁶⁷

Meaning and structures of meaning, thus, cannot be conceived in an atomistic or elemental manner but must be conceived as a *varying* unity. The result, as Gadamer puts it, is that “Life interprets itself. Life has a hermeneutical structure.”⁶⁸ And the individual is not the romantic genius who creates *ex nihilo* but, rather, is a current within the flow of life who “becomes what it is by carrying itself out.”⁶⁹

This unity of expression applies not just to persons but to all artifacts of human existence, all that is capable of being understood by human beings: works of art, written texts, historical epochs, etc. For Gadamer, the text is not a phenomenon that conceals a noumenon, not an enduring Platonic ideal, not a nomological placeholder that awaits theoretical justification, and not the trace of a transcendental signified that is always out of reach. For Gadamer, the text is the *thing itself*, but he understands the thing itself as involving also its myriad and ever-increasing interpretations. These interpretations take part in the thing itself. They are inseparable from it: “Dialectic, this expression of the logos, was not for the Greeks a movement performed by thought; what thought experiences is the movement of the thing itself.”⁷⁰ The thing itself *is*, thus, very much in our reach – at least, in many of its manifestations.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 220. Original: “Am Beispiel wird es deutlich: eine psychische Struktur, etwa ein Individuum, bildet seine Individualität aus, indem es seine Anlage entfaltet und dabei zugleich die bedingende Wirkung der Umstände erfährt. Was dabei herauskommt, die eigentliche ‚Individualität‘, d.h. der Charakter des Individuums, ist nicht eine bloße Folge der verursachenden Faktoren und ist nicht nur aus dieser Verursachung zu verstehen, sondern es stellt eine in sich verständliche Einheit dar, eine Lebenseinheit, die in jeder ihrer Äußerungen zum Ausdruck kommt und daher aus einer jeden verstanden werden kann.” Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, 212.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 221.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 221.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 456.

Gadamer's greatest contribution to philosophy may be this reconceptualization of the thing in-itself. For Gadamer, it is not that the thing in-itself is unreal, non-existent, unknowable, or ineffable. The thing in-itself is determined or codetermined in and as discourse:

The infinite perfectibility of the human experience of the world means that, whatever language we use, we never succeed in seeing anything but an ever more extended aspect, a "view" of the world. Those views of the world are not relative in the sense that one could oppose them to the "world in itself," as if the right view from some possible position outside the human, linguistic world could discover it in its being-in-itself [...] Seen phenomenologically, the "thing-in-itself" is [...] nothing but the continuity with which the various perceptual perspectives on objects shade into one another. A person who opposes "being-in-itself" to these 'aspects' must think either theologically—in which case the "being-in-itself" is not for him but only for God—or he will think like Lucifer, like one who wants to prove his own divinity by the fact that the whole world has to obey him.⁷¹

Gadamer's is one of the more compelling and plausible solutions to the subject-object divide and the problem of the many and the one that one is likely to encounter. What is more remarkable is that Gadamer does this without simply conflating subject and object, reducing either term to the other, or rejecting the need for careful study and "correct" understanding. Only by carefully engaging with the text, Gadamer assures us, can one contribute to its growth; conversely, only by being interpreted or "performed" does the text acquire its being.⁷²

⁷¹ Ibid., 444-5. Original: "Bedeutet die unendliche Perfektibilität der menschlichen Welterfahrung, daß mein, in welcher Sprache immer man sich bewegt, nie zu etwas anderem gelangt als zu einem immer mehr erweiterten Aspekt, einer ‚Ansicht‘ der Welt. Solche Weltansichten sind nicht in dem Sinne relativ, daß man ihnen die ‚Welt an sich‘ entgegenstellen könnte, als ob die richtige Ansicht von einem möglichen Standorte außerhalb der menschlich-sprachlichen Welt aus sie in ihrem Ansichsein anzutreffen vermöchte [...] Phänomenologisch gesehen besteht das ‚Ding an sich‘ in nichts anderem als in der Kontinuität, mit der sich die perspektivischen Abschattungen der Dingwahrnehmung ineinander überführen, wie Husserl gezeigt hat. Wer das ‚Ansichsein‘ diesen ‚Ansichten‘ entgegenstellt, muß entweder theologisch denken — dann ist das Ansichsein nicht für ihn, sondern allein für Gott-; oder er wird luziferisch denken, als einer, der sich seine eigene Göttlichkeit dadurch beweisen möchte, daß ihm die ganze Welt zu gehorchen hat." Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, 423-4.

⁷² Such, at least, is Gadamer's claim. But are not the sloppiest readers sometimes the most influential?

The Place of Gadamer's Thought in the Federal Republic

Gadamer is not known as a political thinker. He was never politically active. He did not involve himself in the fractiousness of Weimar politics. Little is known about his political inclinations at this time, but he seems to have been a typical bourgeois liberal of the day: only tepidly liberal, fearful of mob-rule and disorder, anti-Communist and -Socialist, nationalistic, wary of but not staunchly opposed to the Nazis. He never joined the Nazi Party but did take all the vows of loyalty required for him to keep his job. In 1935, probably to advance his career, he voluntarily attended a Nazi political indoctrination course at Weichselmünde, near Danzig. Moreover, like all other German academics who retained their jobs, Gadamer profited from the expulsion of Jews and dissenters from the academy, as their vacant posts accrued to conforming academics. The *Privatdozent* in his late-thirties became a hot commodity, receiving offers of professorships from Leipzig and Marburg, joining the faculty of the former in 1938. Gadamer sympathized with his Jewish friends who suffered under the regime but lodged no protest on their behalf. He had some friends in resistance-circles but kept his distance from any activity that would have interrupted his research and teaching or put him in harm's ways. After the war, Gadamer left his post as rector of the University of Leipzig in the Soviet occupation zone to take up an appointment at Frankfurt and, subsequently, at Heidelberg. Though supportive in a general sense of the liberalization and democratization of West Germany and celebrated as one of the country's greatest thinkers, Gadamer, a consistent FDP-voter, never took up a major role in the FRG's public sphere.⁷³

Precisely this lack of political engagement constitutes one of the principal reasons for Gadamer's relevance to the intellectual history of the Federal Republic, both as an emblem and

⁷³ Jean Grondin, *Hans-Georg Gadamer: A Biography*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer (New Haven, CT: Yale, 2003).

as a contributor. With the vast majority of West Germans, Gadamer shared some degree of complicity for the Third Reich and its horrendous crimes. Like most of his countrymen and -women, Gadamer had offered neither heroic resistance to the regime nor full-fledged support. Though Gadamer occupied a *relatively* benign position on the spectrum of German culpability in that his crimes were overwhelmingly anonymous ones of omission, those of an uninvolved private citizen eager to remain such, he could not lay claim to any exceptional ethical or epistemic status for himself. Nor, to his credit, did he attempt to do so. Of course, Gadamer's lack of interest in a sustained engagement with his and his compatriots' culpability was not at all to his credit. But it certainly brought Gadamer closer to the attitudes and mentalities of the average West German than leftist critics and it must be emphasized that this reticence was only relative. Gadamer offered far less in the way of soul-searching and avowals of guilt than left-wing critics understandably desired but far more than the determinedly and unrepentantly silent likes of Heidegger and Schmitt. More importantly, Gadamer's relative neglect of the recent past may have facilitated a renewed relationship with those aspects of the more distant German past that were not only salvageable but were arguably necessary to provide West Germany with the liberal foundations upon which no other previous German state or society had been able to base itself. More broadly, Gadamer's fundamental orientation towards continuities rather than caesuras may have been the precondition for his development of an approach to past that maintained the existential buoyancy of an "*eigentlich*" connection to tradition but dispensed with any trace of chauvinistic particularism or historicizing totalitarianism.

Gadamer's eschewal of the notion of redemption through a *simple and total* identification with a historically constituted community is critical to understanding his political significance. His rejection of such a notion distinguishes him decisively from the conservative revolutionaries

of the Weimar era, among the foremost of whom stood his mentor, Heidegger.

Characteristically, Gadamer chose to affirm his links with Heidegger rather than focus on their differences, but these differences are profound. As noted above, the two thinkers' divergence on the role of *Vorhaben* in understanding is crucial. But it is, in part, symptomatic of an even bigger gulf between the two.

Heidegger's theory was born of anxiety over human finitude in a disenchanted world. It ultimately functioned as a means to overcoming individual despair at a lifeworld's lack of cohesion by dissolving the individual into a historically constituted community and dissolving that community into Being. It was a leap of faith born of a desperation that overlooked all of life's abundance of diversity in its single-minded focus on coherence. Only by eliding himself in the ostensibly historically constructed structures of an authentically experienced *Dasein* called back to itself could the individual escape the anxiety wrought by the dispersion and disjunction of modern life and find meaning in the oneness of what was ultimately a *Schicksalsgemeinschaft*.

Gadamer was a fundamentally less anxious, broader-minded, and more secure man than was Heidegger. If he felt the crush of existential despair and dread, he responded to it not by tightening his grip on that which was ready-made and putatively saturated with the meaning of an *intact* tradition but by opening himself to the many dimensions of life and history as works in progress. Doubtless, many facets of this work are familiar and comforting. Some strange and puzzling. Some truly terrifying. Others wonderful. Gadamer's is an understanding that politely and interestedly discourses with them all, like an urbane gentleman, respecting his heritage but always eager to learn from others.

This tactfulness allows Gadamer to avoid the hazard upon which Heidegger and all manner of historicizers and holists typically founder: contempt for justification through

argumentation. Gadamer never succinctly defines what he means by “truth,” but its core characteristics gradually emerge through the course of his writing. Truth for Gadamer is not inscrutable, entirely extra-human, monolithic, or despotic. It is not an idol before which one tremulously kneels, whose arrival one zealously awaits, whose path one reverently prepares, or whose bidding one unquestioningly does. Gadamer’s truth is articulated, transsubjective, and *intersubjectively responsible* – an honest conversation, not an imperious monologue.⁷⁴

Gadamer’s hermeneutics leaves behind the insularism of the type of integral nationalism dear to traditional historicizers, opening possibilities for deep cultural exchange - not multiculturalism *per se* but an integration of cultures and fusion of horizons. This facet of Gadamer’s theory constitutes another unheralded break with Heidegger. For Heidegger, languages are ultimately subject to the same historical determinants and boundaries as Dasein. Indeed, Dasein takes shape within the medium of its particular language, which speaks through Dasein and determines its character. In both *Being and Time* and his later works, Heidegger focuses not on the possibilities of language in general but on the determinations of the specific language of Dasein’s development. For Heidegger, this always means the German language. This language may clear the way for the arrival of Being but it also confines Dasein to its particular cultural clearing. There can be translation from one language to another, but these translations will always be imperfect, obscuring the truth of Being rather than revealing it.

Gadamer does not share this understanding of language with Heidegger. It is not the case for Gadamer that each translation is a profound mistranslation. Rather, Gadamer views good translation as an act of creation born of the lifeworlds and understandings of both author and translator. Translation is a fusion of horizons. Such a fusion does not put an end to

⁷⁴ Much of this has already been outlined above, but much also has to do with Gadamer’s notion of language. See below.

misunderstandings. If a “perfect translation” means a static, total understanding of the text, obviously no such translation is possible. But, equally obviously, no such reading of the text is possible either, even in the text’s original language by a native-speaker. Every reading of a text is a unique experience, a continuation of the creative process that is the text, and this applies whether the reading is undertaken in the text’s original language or in translation. Translation, then, is not a special method or inauthentic mode of understanding, it is simply an extension of hermeneutic undertaking – albeit, one facing special obstacles.

Gadamer’s belief in the hermeneutic and ontological validity of translation stems from his understanding of the relationship between language and tradition. In contrast to Heidegger, Gadamer’s emphasis lies on the creative and integrative nature of language in general, not just on any one of its manifestations in any given language and not as subject to any ontological barriers of uncertain origin. For Gadamer, language conveys tradition to the native- and non-native-speaker alike, and tradition is enriched in the encounter. What ultimately makes the fusion of transcultural horizons possible for Gadamer is language’s inseparability from *mind* and from human being. This is why he calls his last chapter, “Language as Horizon of a Hermeneutic Ontology” (*Sprache als Horizont einer hermeneutischen Ontologie*) and approvingly cites Wilhelm von Humboldt on the matter: “[Humboldt] starts from the position that languages are the products of man’s ‘mental power’ (*Geisteskraft*) Wherever there is language, the originary verbal power of the *human mind* [*menschlicher Geist*] is at work, and every language is capable of attaining the general goal toward which this natural power of man is directed.”⁷⁵ Gadamer’s speaker is not the obeisant, *stereotypically* historical Dasein but an active human being. And what makes a human human is not its belonging to an onto-traditional community but its

⁷⁵ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 436.

belonging to the onto-linguistic community of human being, in which traditions arise, mingle, multiply, differentiate, and fuse together in a process that is inseparable from human activity and human experience. In shifting the emphasis of hermeneutics from the closed linguistic community to an open and evolving one, Gadamer performs a final exorcism of blood-and-soil ideology from German hermeneutics.

Contrasting the political and cultural implications of Gadamer's hermeneutics to Heidegger's draws out the fundamental intellectual differences between the Federal Republic in its first fifteen years of existence and the Weimar Republic, whose entire existence amounted only to fifteen years. Catastrophic defeat in a total war had broken the fever of anxiety-induced utopian attempts to reenchanted the world. German intellectuals had, by and large, discovered that there are worse fates than disenchantment, that uncertainty need not give rise to all-consuming anxiety, and that a political community need not be monological or, as some would have it, monomythical to be viable and worthwhile. In fact, Gadamer achieves what Heidegger did not: a holistic and non-rationalistic hermeneutics that is, nevertheless, intersubjectively and rationally responsible.⁷⁶ Gadamer does effect something of a reenchanted of the world. Hermeneutic genesis is an ongoing miracle, giving rise to ever-new wonders. But Gadamer's reenchanted of the world leaves room for private life and for the values and practices upon which liberalism thrives: an appreciation for ambiguity, epistemic modesty, freedom of speech and expression, civility, tolerance of dissenting views, and rational accountability.

Admittedly, such a generous and open-ended philosophy as Gadamer's will not suffice under all political circumstances. It is highly doubtful that Gadamer's passivity under the Third

⁷⁶ Here I must reemphasize my distinction between *rationality* and *rationalism*. See chapter 3. The claim is not that Gadamer's theory is irrational—it is not—but that it does not accept the comprehensive claims of a rationalistic worldview: i.e., the quantifiability and qualifiability of existence, an unproblematic principle of identity, an unproblematic correspondence theory of truth...

Reich produced any significant negative outcomes for anyone and just as doubtful that his resistance would have produced any significant positive results. But, at least, such resistance would have demonstrated solidarity with the victims of the regime and kept the faith with the better angels of human nature and better traditions of the human community. But no person and no philosophy is capable of everything. If Gadamer did not quite manage to be a man for all seasons, he proved very well suited to the Federal Republic's long postwar season of renewal.

Gadamer and Derrida

In April 1981, Hans-Georg Gadamer and Jacques Derrida took part in a conference at the Goethe Institute of Paris. Titled "Text and Interpretation," the conference was heralded as an opportunity for Gadamer's hermeneutics and Derrida's deconstruction to enter into dialogue with each other.⁷⁷ Given that Derrida and Gadamer were two of the preeminent theorists in the world, leading figures in the linguistic turn, and celebrated interpreters of Heidegger, the overdue encounter promised to be a rich and fruitful engagement. But this promise was not fulfilled.

Gadamer's paper, also titled "Text and Interpretation" (*Text und Interpretation*) directly engaged Derrida.⁷⁸ He takes up the task of defending Heidegger from what he views as Derrida's charge of logocentrism and metaphysical thinking. But this defense was by no means an uncompromising or close-minded one. Gadamer's tone was placid, and he appeared eager to enter into prolonged exchange with his younger French contemporaries. The text reads as a gentle overture to Derrida and his generation of French thinkers. It was a rambling text. To be

⁷⁷ Contributions from this conference were later published in German. See Philippe Forget, ed., *Text und Interpretation: Deutsch-französische Debatte* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 1984).

⁷⁸ Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Text und Interpretation," in *Text und Interpretation: Deutsch-französische Debatte*, ed. Philippe Forget (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 1984). For the English translation, see Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Text and Interpretation," in *Dialogue and Deconstruction: The Gadamer-Derrida Encounter*, ed. Diane P Michelfelder and Richard E Palmer (Albany, NY: SUNY, 1989).

sure, it was not one of Gadamer's more remarkable works. It was a gentle invitation for dialogue, in which Gadamer openly avowed his goodwill: "For a written conversation basically the same fundamental condition obtains as for an oral exchange. Both partners must have the good will to try to understand one another."⁷⁹

In one of the less flattering episodes of his career, Derrida abruptly rebuffed this invitation. His response to Gadamer was a two-page, apparently hastily composed dispatch, though it might be more accurate to call it an "affront." The title of this response, "Bonnes Volontés de Puissance" (Good Will to Power), suggests that Gadamer's "good will" was really nothing more than a will to power—a will to stifle dissent—through a Nietzschean maneuver of resentment. Without any hint of niceties or engagement with Gadamer's text in any depth, Derrida essentially accused Gadamer of propagating metaphysical humanism—i.e., the self-presence of the subject—through his notion of "good will." He then denied ever having experienced understanding between himself and another person, claiming that Gadamer took such understanding for granted.⁸⁰

Gadamer's initial response registered his befuddlement and dismay. It ended with another declaration of Gadamer's hermeneutics' essential closeness to deconstruction and a call for more dialogue. Derrida never responded. Nevertheless, Gadamer, always respectful and circumspect, continued to engage with deconstruction in his own work.⁸¹

⁷⁹ Gadamer, "Text and Interpretation," 33.

⁸⁰ Jacques Derrida, "Guter Wille zur Macht. Drei Fragen an Hans-Georg Gadamer," in *Text und Interpretation: Deutsch-französische Debatte*, ed. Philippe Forget (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 1984); Jacques Derrida, "Three Questions to Hans-Georg Gadamer," in *Dialogue and Deconstruction: The Gadamer-Derrida Encounter*, ed. Diane P. Michelfelder and Richard E. Palmer (Albany, NY: SUNY, 1989).

⁸¹ Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Und dennoch: Macht des Guten Willens," in *Text und Interpretation*, ed. Philippe Forget (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 1984); Gadamer, "Reply to Jacques Derrida."; Gadamer, "Destruktion and Deconstruction."; Gadamer, "Hermeneutics and Logocentrism."

Perhaps it was a difference of style. Quite simply, Derrida was cool. The handsome, athletic Jackie came of age in the postwar world of relative abundance and ease, at the center of global intellectual and cultural life in glamorous Paris. His rise coincided with those of French New Wave cinema, rock and roll, American style, and global youth culture. He zealously guarded his image as philosophy's edgy interloper and encouraged an almost cult-like devotion among a number of his followers. A figure of the avant-garde, who carefully cultivated an air of mystery, Derrida delighted in paradox and complexity. "Thou shalt not make *too* much sense," was the unwritten maxim of much of Derrida's oeuvre, particularly in the middle decades of his career. Contrary to the often willfully uninformed allegations of his critics, Derrida had excellent reasons for adopting such an attitude. But it is only fair to acknowledge that this philosophical attitude hardened into something of a doctrine and imperative as Derrida's career progressed. It became the *sine qua non* of his thought in much the same way that maxims of identity and coherence constitute the unquestionable basis of his rationalist nemeses' thought.⁸²

Gadamer was a simpler man, at peace in the highly cultured but nonetheless provincial halls and hills of Heidelberg. Modest and unpretentious, he enjoyed the esteem of his colleagues and occupied a position of respectability in the academy for many decades but did not produce a work of true originality or greatness until his sixtieth year. He was an amiable and unassuming *Bürger*, not the type who might be mistaken for the darling of the avant-garde. Thus, Gadamer could remain attuned to what was lacking in language and understanding without making this lack the hallmark of his style or reifying it into his philosophical idol. To Derrida—who, unfortunately, came more and more to stake his reputation on transgressiveness—perhaps there

⁸² For Derrida's cultivation of his image and following, see Peeters, *Derrida: A Biography*.

was something dangerous about the Gadamer's altogether wholesome affirmation of life, language, and (human) Being.⁸³

Whatever the reason for the failure of the Gadamer-Derrida dialogues, there are many reasons to wish it had succeeded, as there are a number of productive points of overlap and tension in the thought of the two men.

As for Derrida so for Gadamer, language and human thought are inseparable. In Gadamer's view, it is language that transmits historically effected consciousness and effects the fusion of horizons. Whatever else it may be, the life of the mind is the life of language.⁸⁴ If Gadamer more consistently stresses the first term of this nexus than Derrida does in his early work, they, nevertheless, share a humanism that incorporates and is constituted on the creative power of language.

As students of Heidegger, both Gadamer and Derrida take issue with the metaphysics of presence: i.e., the classic notion of unchanging substances, identities, and essences. Just as Derrida does in *Speech and Phenomena*, Gadamer criticizes Husserl for his positing of an internal monologue of the transcendental ego as either beyond language or possessed of a purely transparent language.⁸⁵ Gadamer views language as a more supple and graceful being than one that simply reflects pre-given concepts or perceptions in the manner supposed by Husserl and most logicians.⁸⁶

Both thinkers avail themselves of the term *play* (Fr. *le jeu*, Ger. *Spiel*) to account for this suppleness of language. For Derrida and Gadamer alike, "play" connotes a process of to-and-fro

⁸³ Grondin, *Hans-Georg Gadamer: A Biography*.

⁸⁴ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 370-1.

⁸⁵ Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*; Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 342-4.

⁸⁶ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 427-8.

movement, of exchange between words and other words and between text and reader. But the common use of this term obscures important differences. For Derrida, the movement of language takes place under the compulsion of the signifiers to consummate themselves through reference to each other and, eventually, to the elusive transcendental signified.⁸⁷ For Gadamer, finitude is also the condition of possibility for language's existence and productive power, but the finitude that Gadamer describes is primarily that of mind and not of words:

Unlike the divine word, the human word is essentially incomplete. No human word can express our mind completely. But as the image of the mirror shows, this does not mean that the word as such is incomplete. The word reflects completely what the mind is thinking. Rather, the imperfection of the human mind consists in its never being completely present to itself but in being dispersed into thinking this or that. From this essential imperfection it follows that the human word is not one, like the divine word, but must necessarily be many words. Hence the variety of words does not in any way mean that the individual word has some remediable deficiency, in that it did not completely express what the mind is thinking; but because our intellect is imperfect—i.e., is not completely present to itself in what it knows—it needs the multiplicity of words. It does not really know what it knows.⁸⁸

Regardless of the origin of language's finitude, Derrida and Gadamer agree that, just as mind and reality cannot be separated from language primally, so also is it impossible to achieve this separation through theorizing and, thus, to understand anything beyond language. Both are insistent on this point. And because of their mutual rejection of foundationalism,

⁸⁷ See chapter 3.

⁸⁸ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 424. Original: "Im Unterschied zum göttlichen Wort ist das menschliche Wort wesensmäßig unvollkommen. Kein menschliches Wort kann in vollkommener Weise unseren Geist ausdrücken. Aber wie das Bild des Spiegels schon sagte, ist das nicht eigentlich die Unvollkommenheit des Wortes als solche. Das Wort gibt ja vollständig wieder, was der Geist meint. Vielmehr ist es die Unvollkommenheit des menschlichen Geistes, daß er nie die vollständige Selbstgegenwart besitzt, sondern ins Meinen von Diesem oder Jenem zerstreut ist. Aus dieser seiner wesensmäßigen Unvollkommenheit folgt, daß das menschliche Wort nicht wie das göttliche Wort ein einziges ist, sondern notwendigerweise viele Worte sein muß. Die Vielheit der Worte bedeutet also keineswegs, daß an dem einzelnen Wort ein Mangel wäre, den man beheben könnte, sofern es nicht vollkommen ausspräche, was der Geist meint, sondern weil unser Intellekt unvollkommen ist, d.h. sich nicht vollkommen in dem, was er weiß, gegenwärtig ist, bedarf es der Vielheit der Worte. Er weiß gar nicht wirklich, was er weiß." Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, 402.

transcendentalism, and teleology, Derrida and Gadamer evince a deep suspicion towards any holism that lays claim to unchanging knowledge.

Yet, there are critical differences, here too, regarding the outside or other of language. These differences resound from the question of Being. Derrida either dispenses with the thing in-itself or places it decidedly outside of human and linguistic reach. One might equate the thing in-itself with the absolute “other” or “transcendental signified,” but Derrida leaves the existence of these in question and places any description of their characteristics under an interdict or erasure. Derrida breaks with Heidegger in that he wants to treat Being as a non-issue. True to his style of hauntology, Derrida treats Being as a specter that pervades his work without really being there.⁸⁹ Gadamer stays much closer to Heidegger on this matter. Gadamer preserves the thing in-itself, placing it not under an interdict nor dissolving it in the play of signifiers but constituting/discerning it within that play. And the characteristics of the thing in-itself for Gadamer are none other than those they take on within this play.

It is hermeneutics that justifies Gadamer’s willingness to speak of Being and the thing in-itself. Derrida writes passionately of the creative, constructive nature of language but steers well clear of associating the texts that emerge from language as ontological, treating them as semiological instead. In that the generative work of language flows from *différance*, Derrida’s understanding of language could perhaps be characterized as an infinity within a nothingness. For Gadamer, on the other hand, language is an ever-expanding expression of Being. Being is not outside the text but *is* the text. Thus, understanding Being does not require one to pass beyond the human into the totally other; understanding of Being is self-understanding. This is

⁸⁹ For Derrida’s notion of hauntology, see Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, The Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994).

why Gadamer writes that “*Being that can be understood is language.*”⁹⁰ And if Being has expressions other than language, expressions that are unknowable to humanity, this in no way diminishes the ontological status of language for Gadamer.

Being is present in humanity and in language in much the same way that Christian theology holds God to be present in humanity. But it must be understood that the “presence” of Being in humanity is not the presence of substance, identity, or essence; it is an active presence, a presence of change, a presence that does not rule out the coming of more presence. Hence, Gadamer’s use of the language of *incarnation* (*Inkarnation*):

*When the Greek idea of logic is penetrated by Christian theology, something new is born: the medium of language, in which the mediation of the incarnation event achieves its full truth. Christology prepares the way for a new philosophy of man, which mediates in a new way between the mind of man in its finitude and the divine infinity. Here what we have called the hermeneutical experience finds its own, special ground.*⁹¹

For Gadamer, there is something generative to language that cannot be encompassed even by a perfect Being if that perfect Being is conceived as something static or as something fully consistent with itself. The being of language is evolution. This is not accidental but essential, and it introduces a new dimension into Being per se, a dimension of constant generation through explication. This explication ontologically exceeds the conceptualism that logicians typically think of as limiting explication and imbuing it with meaning. Rather, Gadamer suggests, explication contributes to concept formation as much as vice versa. Linguistic articulation is an event of Being.⁹²

⁹⁰ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 470.

⁹¹ Ibid., 427. Original: “In der Mitte der Durchdringung der christlichen Theologie durch den griechischen Gedanken der Logik keimt vielmehr etwas Neues auf: Die Mitte der Sprache, in der sich das Mittelalter des Inkarnationsgeschehens erst zu seiner vollen Wahrheit bringt. Die Christologie wird zum Wegbereiter einer neuen Anthropologie, die den Geist des Menschen in seiner Endlichkeit mit der göttlichen Unendlichkeit auf eine neue Weise vermittelt. Hier wird das, was wir die hermeneutische Erfahrung genannt haben, seinen eigentlichen Grund finden.” Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, 405.

⁹² Ibid., 426-7.

Quite unexpectedly, then, Gadamer may be less of a transcendentalist than Derrida and more of an immanentist. Derrida places the absolute other and the transcendental signified on the other side of discourse; Gadamer sees Being and the thing in-itself in discourse – indeed, as discourse.

Moreover, Gadamer infuses discourse with the flow of life and experience, of *sensus communis*. He really is something of a *Lebensphilosoph*. Discourse draws on life for meaning in Gadamer's scheme. Thus, Gadamer is willing to speak of mental concepts, such as "concepts" and "perceptions," rather than of purely linguistic concepts, in an effort to better understand the nexus of mind-language.⁹³

Derrida never took such a step outside of discourse – or, perhaps to put it more correctly, never fused the horizons of discourse and life. For Derrida, a theory that formed itself upon the basis or within the confines of the apparently non-discursive was a contradiction in terms because the non-discursive cannot be described even to describe it as such (i.e., as the non-discursive).

And perhaps it is this difference that separates Gadamer from Derrida more than any other. For Gadamer, it would have been absurd to deny life in favor of discourse because there is no discourse without human life and meaning and no human life and meaning without discourse. For Derrida, it would have been absurd to describe what he would have seen as the extra-discursive ~~life~~ in discursive terms—the only terms available—or to lay claim to a meaning outside of discourse. Gadamer's understanding of discourse and life may be closer to the experience of everyday life, but Derrida's may be truer in a technical sense.⁹⁴ And this is where

⁹³ Ibid., 427.

⁹⁴ Perhaps and rather surprisingly, then, Derrida might be guilty of a type of scientism on Gadamer's reading, in that the former seems to sacrifice the fulness of lived experience and evocative description to technical correctness.

the matter comes back to style, to emphasis, to decision. One cannot untangle the Gordian knot of discursive aporia by philosophizing. One must cut it by living.

Gadamer and Habermas

Jürgen Habermas held significant reservations regarding Gadamer's hermeneutics. He voiced these in a special 1967 edition of *Philosophische Rundschau*, a journal that Gadamer had cofounded in 1953, entitled *On the Logic of the Social Sciences (Zur Logik der Sozialwissenschaften)*, subsequently expanded and published in book-form.⁹⁵ Habermas finds much to praise in *Truth and Method*. He lauds Gadamer's critique of scientism, approach to hermeneutics through ordinary language rather than metalanguage, revitalization of Husserl's concept of the lifeworld as the context of human understanding, and understanding of hermeneutics as integral to *Bildung*. But Habermas criticizes Gadamer for what he views as Gadamer's uncritical affirmation of tradition and authority. For obvious reasons, Habermas was bound to object to any theory that adopted an unquestioning reverence for the past. Habermas also took issue with Gadamer's rejection of the Enlightenment's methodical scrutiny of the lifeworld. Habermas claims that this methodical scrutiny, which he deems *reflection (Reflexion)*, is the means by which actors vet tradition and he faults Gadamer for failing to recognize reflection's rationalizing effects and emancipatory potential:

Hegel, of course, had more right to speak of thought than Gadamer does. It is difficult to fix the moment of cognition in hermeneutic understanding independently of the *absolute* movement of reflection. When the context of tradition as a whole is no longer thought of as a production of reason's self-apprehension, the further development of tradition, where hermeneutic understanding sees itself as being, cannot in itself be considered rational.⁹⁶

⁹⁵ Jürgen Habermas, "Zur Logik der Sozialwissenschaften," *Philosophische Rundschau* 14, 5 (1967); Jürgen Habermas, *Zur Logik der Sozialwissenschaften* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1970). For the English translation, see Jürgen Habermas, *On the Logic of the Social Sciences* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1988).

⁹⁶ Habermas, *On the Logic of the Social Sciences*, location 3474. My emphasis. Original: "Hegel freilich konnte [...] von Denken mit größerem Recht sprechen als Gadamer. Unabhängig von der absoluten Bewegung der

Unsurprisingly, Habermas claims that Gadamer's reverence for tradition and inability to grasp reflection leads Gadamer to a concerning level of comfort with authoritarianism.

Habermas describes reflection as an "emancipatory cognitive interest" and cites Hegel's outline of reflection in *Phenomenology of Spirit*, repeatedly availing himself of Hegel's notion of *Reason (Vernunft)*, though he makes it clear throughout the text that he does not accept Hegel's idealistic premises.⁹⁷ Habermas also approvingly cites Freud's psychoanalysis as a science that employs reflection and renders it possible for the subject of psychoanalysis to reflect on his circumstances and himself:

The general interpretive framework is confirmed, of course, through the distribution of clinical successes and failures. But the criteria of success cannot be operationalized. Successes and failures cannot be established intersubjectively, as, for instance, the removal of symptoms can be. The experience of reflection is confirmed only by the completion of the reflection; through it, the *objective* power of an unconscious motive is broken."⁹⁸

This same process of reflection, claims Habermas, can take place on the social level through critical social theory, with the critical intellectual playing the role of the analyst to society's patient. In this way, the critical intellectual can diagnose social pathologies and bring them before the eyes of the public, which can then acknowledge, confront, and overcome them.

Gadamer responded to Habermas' critique of his hermeneutics in an essay titled "Rhetoric, Hermeneutics, and Ideology-Critique" (*Rhetorik, Hermeneutik und Ideologiekritik*),

Reflexion ist es schwer, das Moment des Erkennens im hermeneutischen Verstehen festzumachen. Wenn der Traditionszusammenhang im ganzen nicht mehr als Produktion der sich selbst ergreifenden Vernunft erkannt wird, kann auch die Fortbildung der Tradition, als die sich das hermeneutische Verstehen Weiß nicht eo ipso als vernünftig gelten." Habermas, *Zur Logik der Sozialwissenschaften*, 299.

⁹⁷ Ibid., location 3931.

⁹⁸ Ibid., location 3853. My emphasis. Original: "Das allgemeine Interpretationsrahmen bewährt sich freilich an der Verteilung der klinischen Erfolge und Mißerfolge. Aber die Kriterien des Erfolgs lassen sich nicht operationalisieren; Erfolge und Mißerfolge sind nicht, wie etwa die Beseitigung von Symptomen, intersubjektiv feststellbar. Die Erfahrung der Reflexion bestätigt sich allein durch den Vollzug der Reflexion selber: durch ihn wird die objektive Gewalt eines unbewußten Motivs gebrochen." Habermas, *Zur Logik der Sozialwissenschaften*, 322.

published the very same year, in which he questions the meaning and very possibility of Habermas' notion of reflection.⁹⁹ Though Habermas had disavowed any foundationalist understanding of reflection, he had not acknowledged any questions of how it is possible to reflect on the lifeworld, tradition, the past, culture, or discourse without drawing on the resources these realms offer, without taking up a position within them, and without remaining subject to their limitations. Gadamer rejects the metaphor of reflection, as it seems to promise access to an undistorted image of reality. He maintains, instead, that *all* access to reality is mediated through language, which lacks the clarity of a pure reflection. For Gadamer, interpretation is inevitable even in critically evaluating tradition, and the critical concepts that one wields in effecting this evaluation are adaptations of traditions and not altogether novel introductions into it. He acknowledges that the conceptual machinery of criticism may be imported from foreign traditions or from less celebrated strands of one's own tradition but denies the possibility of a totally unprejudiced and unprecedented understanding of reality. For Gadamer, as for Derrida, there is no outside the text:

It would be true when Habermas asserts that "hermeneutics bangs helplessly, so to speak, from within against the walls of tradition," if we understand this "within" as opposite to an "outside" that *does not enter* our world—our to-be-understood, understandable, or nonunderstandable world—but remains the mere observation of external alterations (instead of human actions). With this area of what lies outside the realm of human understanding and human understandings (our world), hermeneutics is not concerned.¹⁰⁰

Gadamer correctly maintains that his hermeneutics, as laid out in *Truth and Method* and contrary to Habermas' claims, already allow for and encourage a critical approach to tradition without resorting to the notion of reflection. Indeed, Gadamer does strongly and repeatedly

⁹⁹ Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Rhetorik, Hermeneutik und Ideologiekritik," in *Hermeneutik und Ideologiekritik*, ed. Jürgen Habermas et al. (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1971). For the English translation, see Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Rhetoric, Hermeneutics, and Ideology-Critique," in *Rhetoric and Hermeneutics in Our Time: A Reader*, ed. Walter Jost and Michael J Hyde (New Haven, NJ: Yale, 1997).

¹⁰⁰ Gadamer, "Rhetoric, Hermeneutics, and Ideology-Critique," 323. "

emphasizes in *Truth and Method* that understanding is an active process, involving the revelation and examination of prejudices, honest engagement with texts, the continual renewal of tradition through adaptation, and the ceaseless generation of open questions. To be sure, Gadamer does occasionally come across as rather too trusting of authority, as when he claims in “Rhetoric, Hermeneutics, and Ideology-Critique” that “one need only study the processes of forfeiture and decline of authority (or its rise) to see what authority is and that out of which it lives and grows.”¹⁰¹ But he brackets that odd sentence with others like “Certainly, I would grant that authority exercises an essentially dogmatic power in innumerable forms of domination” and “It is an inadmissible imputation to hold that I somehow mean there is no decline of authority or no emancipating criticism of authority,” which clearly signal a more complex understanding of authority and criticism.¹⁰²

Gadamer evinces this wariness of authority in his critique of Habermas’ modelling of the relationship of the critical intellectual to society on that of the psychoanalyst to her patient. Ultimately, Gadamer asserts, psychoanalysis is also a matter of hermeneutics. The subconscious cannot directly present itself but must be understood through the medium of language and is, thus, open to interpretation. Though the psychoanalyst may be uniquely positioned and qualified to confront her patients with authoritatively compelling interpretations of their pathologies, the critical intellectual, Gadamer insinuates, holds no such qualifications to do the same for society’s putative pathologies. Nor has society sought the help of critical intellectuals and submitted itself to their guidance in the same way that (most) psychoanalytic patients seek out professional help. Thus, the critical intellectual must allow himself to be addressed by society and by members

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 325.

¹⁰² Ibid., 325. Translation modified.

thereof and not lay claim to an omniscient position outside of society, social discourse, and social or psychic pathologies.¹⁰³

Habermas shot back in “The Hermeneutic Claim to Universality” (*Die Universalitätsanspruch der Hermeneutik*), a contribution to the 1971’s *Hermeneutic and Ideology-Critique (Hermeneutik und Ideologiekritik)*, which also contained commentaries on the controversy from Gadamer and several other contributors.¹⁰⁴ Habermas asserts that a “philosophical hermeneutics” must differ from a hermeneutics of everyday language. The goal of the former, he insists, is “to clarify the conditions for the possibility to, as it were, step outside the dialogical structure of everyday language and to use language in a monological way for the formal construction of theories and for the organization of rational action.”¹⁰⁵ Habermas, thus, somewhat ironically appears to embrace the very metalinguistic approach that he had rejected in *On the Logic of the Social Sciences* and continued to reject thereafter. He maintains that “*reflexivity and objectivity [Objektivität] are fundamental traits of language*” (249).¹⁰⁶

Yet, again, Habermas fails to provide supporting evidence. He asserts, with some justification, that a monological approach has yielded fruit in the natural sciences.¹⁰⁷ But he does not demonstrate that such an approach can be extended to the so-called psychic or social sciences. The most he can offer on this front is a brief propaedeutic to a theory of such a “philosophical hermeneutics” as the one he had proposed. Eventually, this doctrine would take

¹⁰³ Ibid., 330-3.

¹⁰⁴ Jürgen Habermas, "Der Universalitätsanspruch der Hermeneutik," in *Hermeneutik und Ideologiekritik*, ed. Jürgen Habermas et al. (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1971). For the English translation, see Jürgen Habermas, "The Hermeneutic Claim to Universality," in *The Hermeneutic Tradition: From Ast to Ricoeur*, ed. Gayle L. Ormiston and Alan D. Schrift (Albany, NY: SUNY, 1989).

¹⁰⁵ Habermas, "The Hermeneutic Claim to Universality," 251.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 249.

¹⁰⁷ However, given that the manifest warrant for laws in the natural sciences is a stable scientific consensus and that scientists routinely argue with each other, offering varying interpretations of the data, even this claim of Habermas' is rather tenuous.

shape in Habermas' *Theory of Communicative Action (Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns)*, but Habermas was already rather liberally availing himself of what he apparently took to be the fundamental truth of his supposition with his assertion that "the idea of truth, which measures itself on a true consensus, implies the idea of the true life."¹⁰⁸

Gadamer replied to Habermas and other critics in his contribution to *Hermeneutics and Ideology-Critique*.¹⁰⁹ At this point, Gadamer went on the offensive, directly reproving Habermas, Karl-Otto Apel, Hans Joachim Giegel, and other leftist critics with practicing the very authoritarianism of which they accused him, likening them to "social engineers."¹¹⁰ Claiming an Archimedean point and refusing to acknowledge the possibility of their own prejudices, his critics, Gadamer claims, were the true ideologues. Of Habermas' claim that the idea of truth implies the idea of the true life, Gadamer writes,

This criterion of truth appears to me to be clearly recognizable as metaphysical in origin; it derives the idea of the true from the idea of the good, and Being from the concept of 'pure' intelligence. The concept of pure intelligence has its origin in the Middle Ages' doctrine of intelligence, and is incorporated in the angel, who has the decisive advantage of being able to see God in his essence. It is difficult for me not to charge Habermas with false ontological self-understanding.¹¹¹

Gadamer rejects Habermas' guiding interest of *emancipation (Emanzipation)* and his grounding of it in reflection as dogmatic, stemming not from an actual consensus of social actors nor from well-grounded and justified arguments but from Habermas' personal and *unexamined*

¹⁰⁸ Habermas, "The Hermeneutic Claim to Universality," 268.

¹⁰⁹ Gadamer, "Replik." For an English translation, see Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Reply to My Critics," in *The Hermeneutic Tradition: From Ast to Ricoeur*, ed. Gayle L Ormiston and Alan D Schrift (Albany, NY: SUNY, 1989).

¹¹⁰ Gadamer, "Reply to My Critics," 279.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 287. "Mir kommt dies Wahrheitskriterium, das aus der Idee des Guten die Idee des Wahren und aus dem Begriff der 'reinen' Intelligenz das Sein ableitet, aus der Metaphysik recht bekannt vor. Der Begriff der reinen Intelligenz stammt aus der mittelalterlichen Intelligenzlehre und ist dort im Engel verkörpert, der den entsprechenden Vorzug hat, Gott in seinem Wesen zu schauen. Es wird mir schwer, Habermas hier kein falsches ontologisches Selbstverständnis zu unterstellen." Gadamer, "Replik," 304.

prejudices and claim to know Reason as he is convinced it will (or ought) to manifest in the future:

Concerning the talk of emancipation, the situation is the same. The concept of reflection which is used in this context seems to me not undogmatic. It does not express the becoming of consciousness which belongs alone to *praxis*, but rests, as Habermas once expressed it, upon a 'counter-factual agreement'. Contained within is the claim to foreknowledge—before the practical confrontation—foreknowledge of that about which one does not agree.¹¹²

For the same reasons, Gadamer casts doubt on the critical left's concept of *manipulation* (*Manipulation*) and Habermas' conviction that communication was, in fact, systematically distorted in the FRG and the postwar West.

And that is where the matter stood, when Habermas published his *magnum opus*, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, almost a decade later.

¹¹² Ibid., 290. Original: "Nicht anders steht es mir der Rede von Emanzipation. Der Begriff der Reflexion, der in diesem Zusammenhang gebraucht wird, scheint mir nicht undogmatisch. Er drückt nicht die Bewußtmachung aus, die der Praxis eigen ist, sondern beruht, wie Habermas es einmal formuliert, auf einem ,kontrafaktischen Einverständnis'. Darin steckt der Anspruch vorherzuwissen—vor der praktischen Konfrontation—, womit man nicht einverstanden ist." Gadamer, "Replik," 311.

5. Jürgen Habermas and Renewal through Rationalization

By the time the Federal Republic of Germany had reached its tenth anniversary, it could boast of a strong basic consensus across its society. Society and state were committed to liberal democracy, the social-welfare economy, and alignment with the Western capitalist liberal democracies in opposition to the Communist Bloc. Championing these policies, the dominant CDU/CSU had increased its share of the vote in federal elections from 31% in the inaugural election of 1949 to an outright majority of 50.2% in 1957. Due to the decline of smaller parties, the SPD had also increased its share of the vote but rather unimpressively compared to its rival, going from 29.2% in 1949 to 31.8% in 1957.

Clearly, the SPD was going to have change if it was going to thrive. Led by Willy Brandt, the charismatic young mayor of West Berlin, and the Keynesian economist Karl Schiller, the SPD adopted the Godesberger Program in November 1959, named for the suburb of Bonn in which party representatives ratified it. The program abandoned the party's thitherto aim of nationalizing industry and signaled its commitment to NATO and the Western alliance, even if it meant renouncing the prospect reunification for the foreseeable future. In the fall of 1961, the party dissolved ties with its youth organization, the *Sozialistischer Deutscher Studentenbund* (*Socialist Student Union*, SDS), due to the latter's refusal to adopt the Godesberger Program and disavow Marxism. The party's mainstreaming efforts paid off at the polls. The SPD increased its share of the vote by nearly five points in the federal elections of 1961 and then won 39.3% of the vote against the CDU/CSU's 47.6% in 1965. In the midst of a minor economic downturn in 1966, Prime Minister Ludwig Erhard resigned. In December 1966, the SPD entered government for the first time, forming a grand coalition with its erstwhile rival, the CDU/CSU.

The consensus upon which the Grand Coalition was founded was to the liking of Jürgen Habermas. The thirty-seven-year-old former SDS-member was a rapidly rising star in the FRG's intellectual scene. Two years earlier, he had taken over Horkheimer's chair in philosophy and sociology at Frankfurt. This was ironic in light of Horkheimer's scorn for Habermas when the latter was working on his *Habilitationsschrift* at the Institute for Social Research under Horkheimer's and Adorno's supervision. Horkheimer, who had grown quiescent and skeptical of any and all attempts to rescue Critical Theory from the perceived dead-ends of modern culture, looked upon Habermas as a young radical and a threat to the institute's stability and funding. Tensions with Horkheimer induced Habermas to leave Frankfurt in 1959 for Marburg, where he completed his *Habilitation* under Wolfgang Abendroth, one of the few openly Marxist professors employed in West Germany. With the patronage of none other than Hans-Georg Gadamer, Habermas accepted a position at the University of Heidelberg in 1962. In that same year, his *Habilitationsschrift* was published as *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit*.

Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft (Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society).¹ Habermas, who had already received a great deal of acclaim for his regular contributions to the feuillets, now became one of the FRG's leading critical intellectuals. Two years later, with the support of Adorno, who had always championed him, Habermas returned to Frankfurt triumphantly.²

It is not surprising that a student of Adorno and Abendroth would disapprove of the grand coalition. Doubtless, a major reason for Habermas' disapproval was that a former Nazi-Party

¹ Jürgen Habermas, *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit. Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft* (Darmstadt and Neuwied, DE: Hermann Luchterhand, 1962). Translated as Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1989).

² Stefan Müller-Doohm, *Jürgen Habermas: Eine Biographie* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2014); Matthew G Specter, *Habermas: An Intellectual Biography* (New York: Cambridge, 2010).

member, Kurt Georg Kiesinger, sat at the coalition's head as prime minister. Another reason was Habermas' fear that the FRG might collapse into an authoritarian state with a government that included nine tenths of Bundestag representatives. But the underlying reason for Habermas' antipathy for the grand coalition was his aversion to the consensus it represented, a consensus that affirmed the existing order of the FRG. Habermas, a truly critical intellectual, was not reconciled to this order. Very much in line with Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse, Habermas viewed mass liberal democracy as a sham, a veil for corporate interests. Mass media and the manipulations of party-politics had reduced the public to a husk of its former self. Rather than promote society's self-understanding in an authentic manner and in line with universal principles, the public was now passive and acclamatory. At most, the public sphere was an arena for competing financial interests; at worst, it was little more than a rubber stamp for the powers that be. Such, at least, were the conclusions that Habermas drew in *Structural Transformation*.³ With the SPD having abandoned the opposition, there no longer remained a force in West-German society that could challenge this state of affairs.

This basic distrust not only of German society but of mass liberal democracy in general forms an important element of the backdrop against which the tumultuous political conflicts of the 1960s and 1970s played out in the FRG. With so little trust in the ability of their compatriots to decide right and wrong for themselves and to act and vote in their own interests, leftist critics tended to see an existential threat to democracy around every corner.

Dirk Moses has noted this tendency and attributes it to what he calls West-German intellectuals' "Weimar Syndrome." The other half of the equation in Moses' view was formed of the so-called liberal-conservatives, comprised of liberal public intellectuals who opposed the

³ Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*.

left's calls for a total overhaul of society and sometimes made common cause with conservatives.⁴ Moses sees Germany's left and liberal-conservatives as mirror-images in their *Feindbilder* (conception of one's enemy) of each other. Members of both camps held the example of Weimar's collapse in the forefront of their minds, fearing that the FRG would also fall victim to authoritarianism due either to an ideologically charged mass political movement or to a narrow cabal of state actors. Thus, left and liberals each made wild and unwarranted claims against the other.⁵

There is much to Moses' analysis. The shadow of Weimar and 1933 were impossible to escape in the early decades of postwar West Germany. But Moses' explanation for the divisiveness of these years obscures an important asymmetry between the left and liberal-conservatives. Liberal-conservatives viewed the Federal Republic of Germany, both politically and socially, as fundamentally legitimate; leftists frequently did not. As late as 1973, Habermas could publish a bestseller that more or less openly stated as much.⁶ To be sure, Habermas and the greater part of the left cherished ideals—of a sort—of democracy and personal autonomy. They also denounced violence and, at least grudgingly, recognized the FRG as an improvement over anything Germany had ever before experienced and a superior alternative to the GDR. But they were convinced that the popular mandate the laws, institutions, and government of the FRG seemed to enjoy was not really a mandate because, to their minds, it was the product not of truly

⁴ For treatments of the liberal-conservative or neoconservative movement, see Riccardo Bavaj, "Turning 'Liberal Critics' into 'Liberal-Conservatives': Kurt Sontheimer and the Re-Coding of the Political Culture in the Wake of the Student Revolt of '1968'," *German Politics and Society* 27, no. 1 (Spring 2009); Hacke, *Philosophie der Bürgerlichkeit: Die liberalkonservative Begründung der Bundesrepublik*; Stephan Schlak, *Wilhelm Hennis: Szenen einer Ideengeschichte der Bundesrepublik* (Munich: CH Beck, 2008).

⁵ A Dirk Moses, "The 'Weimar Syndrome' in the Federal Republic of Germany: The Carl Schmitt Reception by the Forty-Fiver Generation of Intellectuals," in *Leben, Tod und Entscheidung: Studien zur Geistesgeschichte der Weimarer Republik*, ed. Stephan Loos and Holger Zaborowski (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2003).

⁶ Jürgen Habermas, *Legitimationsprobleme im Spätkapitalismus* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1973). Translated as Jürgen Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon, 1975).

free and uncoerced persons acting according to their *ownmost* interests and judgements but, rather, of passive subjects acting according to the machinations of the parties and mass media. Thus, the West-German left's distrust of West German society was due not just to the peculiarities of German history but also to a worldview that held the postwar West to be less than legitimate. This worldview, and the philosophy of language that undergirds it, finds its fullest expressions in Habermas' two-volume *Theory of Communicative Action* (*Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*, *TCA* hereafter).

Habermas gives his motives for writing *TCA* as a desire to save the "heritage of occidental rationalism," which he says had been imperiled since the late 1960s, to provide a means of navigating the world through the grip of the two superpowers and the threat of destruction they posed, and to combat the philosophy of growth and the social conservatism of "neoconservatives." Unlike his more radical leftist contemporaries, Habermas does not wish to throw out the baby of reason with the bathwater of bureaucratic, commercial, and industrial rationalization. To the contrary, Habermas wishes to use reason in its ethical applications to tame what he views as the solely instrumental rationality of business and politics run amok.⁷

Habermas begins by putting forth his understanding of philosophy as a project that aims to explain the whole of the world solely by means of reason. Yet, he continues, the possibility of a philosophical worldview has become questionable. With the linguistic turn, philosophy's task has shifted to that of explaining philosophy itself; philosophy has become metaphilosophy. Accordingly, Habermas seeks to set forth a theory of argumentation and of rationality, so as to grasp the meaning of philosophy itself.

⁷ Jürgen Habermas, *Reason and the Rationalization of Society*, vol. 1 of *Critique of Communicative Action*, trans. Thomas McCarthy, (Boston, MA: Beacon, 1984), xli.

Sociology seems to Habermas the discipline most fit for undertaking the task of constructing a theory of argumentative rationality. Alone among the social sciences, writes Habermas, sociology has the potential to rationally ground itself. This is because sociology encompasses the entire range of human affairs, unlike political science and economics, which limit themselves to treating those subsystems of human experience in which instrumental rationality reigns. As Habermas writes, “sociology [can] not, as other disciplines [can], shove aside questions of rationalization, redefine them, or cut them down to small size.”⁸ Sociology—at least, as Habermas practices it—seeks to comprehend modern society from Max Weber’s standpoint of rationalization and to establish which aspects of society are rational and which irrational. Habermas’ sociology views modern society as rationalizing. Habermas wishes to evaluate the completeness and incompleteness of this process.

Of course, such a sociological undertaking entails access to a workable concept of “rationality,” and it is to defining “rationality” and related terms that Habermas next turns. He notes that two different types of subjects can be labeled “rational”: persons and symbolic or linguistic expressions. A rational person is one who characteristically makes rational expressions. The rationality of an expression is judged by the reliability of its fallible knowledge: i.e., by how far and how well such knowledge can be defended against criticism. Habermas takes expressions about the “objective” world as his first model for rational statements:

An expression satisfies the precondition for rationality if and insofar as it embodies fallible knowledge and therewith has a relation to the objective world (that is, a relation to the facts) and is open to objective judgment. A judgment can be objective if it is undertaken on the basis of a *transsubjective* validity claim that has the same meaning for observers and nonparticipants as it has for the acting subject himself. Truth and efficiency are claims of this kind. Thus assertions and goal-directed actions are the more rational the better the claim (to propositional truth or efficiency) that is connected with

⁸ Ibid., 5.

them can be defended against criticism. Correspondingly, we use the expression “rational” as a disposition predicate for persons from whom such expressions can be expected, especially in difficult situations.⁹

Yet Habermas goes on to acknowledge that his initial definition of rationality is inadequate because 1) it is too abstract, failing to capture important differentiations and 2) it does not yet apply to those validity claims that cannot be judged against the standards of truth and falsehood or effectiveness and ineffectiveness. Instead of sticking to the narrower approach of rationality that deals solely with truth- and effectiveness-claims, Habermas posits several sorts of rationality, each dealing with different claims. Specifically, at this point, he puts forth a claim for a *communicative rationality* (*kommunikative Rationalität*), which he distinguishes from the aforementioned *instrumental rationality* (*instrumentelle Rationalität*). In positing the former, he writes, “This concept of communicative rationality carries with it connotations based ultimately on the central experience of unconstrained, unifying, consensus-building force of argumentative speech, in which different participants overcome their merely subjective views and, owing to the mutuality of rationally motivated conviction, assure themselves of both the unity of the objective world and the intersubjectivity of their lifeworld.”¹⁰

Habermas explains further that the “telos inherent in rationality” can be *instrumental mastery* or *communicative understanding*. Instrumental mastery supposes an interpretation-

⁹ Ibid., 9-10. Habermas’ emphasis. Original: “Die bisherigen Überlegungen laufen darauf hinaus, die Rationalität einer Äußerung auf Kritisierbarkeit und Begründungsfähigkeit zurückzuführen. Eine Äußerung erfüllt die Voraussetzungen für Rationalität, wenn und soweit sie fehlbares Wissen verkörpert, damit einen Bezug zur objektiven Welt, d. h. einen Tatsachenbezug hat, und einer objektiven Beurteilung zugänglich ist. Objektiv kann eine Beurteilung dann sein, wenn sie anhand eines *transsubjektiven* Geltungsanspruches vorgenommen wird, der für beliebige Beobachter und Adressaten dieselbe Bedeutung hat wie für das jeweils handelnde Subjekt selbst. Wahrheit und Effizienz sind Ansprüche dieser Art. So gilt für Behauptungen und für zielgerichtete Handlungen, daß sie um so rationaler sind, je besser der mit ihnen verknüpfte Anspruch auf propositionale Wahrheit oder Effizienz begründet werden kann. Entsprechend verwenden wir den Ausdruck ‚rational‘ als Dispositionsprädikat für Personen, von denen solche Äußerungen, zumal in schwierigen Situationen, erwartet werden dürfen.” Jürgen Habermas, *Handlungsrationalität und gesellschaftliche Rationalisierung*, vol. 1 of *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*, 2nd ed. (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1982), 27.

¹⁰ Ibid., 10.

independent world as “the sum total of that which is the case” and, thus, avails itself of a concept of rationality aimed at manipulating that which is the case. Habermas calls this approach *realistic*. By contrast, communicative understanding deals not only with that which is the case but also with those beings who live and act within this world, *per force* communicating with one another in the process. Habermas calls this approach *phenomenological* and the type of action that occasions it—i.e., interactions between actors aimed at reaching understanding—*communicative action*.¹¹ He clarifies what it means to be “rational” in the context of communicative rationality:

In the context of communicative action, we call someone rational not only if he is able to put forward an assertion and, when criticized, to provide grounds for it by pointing to appropriate evidence, but also if he is following an established norm and is able, when criticized, to justify his action by explicating the given situation in light of legitimate expectations. We even call someone rational if he makes known a desire or an intention, expresses a feeling or a mood, shares a secret, confesses a deed, etc., and is then able to reassure critics in regard to the revealed experience by drawing practical consequences from it and behaving consistently thereafter.¹²

Habermas calls all assertions *validity claims* (*Geltungsansprüche*, sing. *Geltungsanspruch*), but there are different types of validity claims and different types of discourses associated with them. *Truth claims* (*Wahrheitsansprüche*, sing. *Wahrheitsanspruch*) are characteristic of instrumental rationality and refer directly to a contested state of affairs in the “objective” world. The type of discussion proper to truth claims is *theoretical discourse* (*theoretischer Diskurse*). *Rightness claims* (*Richtigkeitsansprüche*, sing. *Richtigkeitsanspruch*) are characteristic of

¹¹ Ibid., 11.

¹² Ibid., 15. Original: “In Zusammenhängen der Kommunikation nennen wir nicht nur denjenigen rational, der eine Behauptung aufstellt und diese gegenüber einem Kritiker begründen kann, indem er auf entsprechende Evidenzen hinweist. Rational nennen wir auch denjenigen, der eine bestehende Norm befolgt und sein Handeln gegenüber einem Kritiker rechtfertigen kann, indem er eine gegebene Situation im Lichte legitimer Verhaltenserwartungen erklärt. Rational nennen wir sogar denjenigen, der einen Wunsch, ein Gefühl oder eine Stimmung aufrichtig äußert, ein Geheimnis preisgibt, eine Tat eingesteht usw., und der dann einem Kritiker über das derart enthüllte Erlebnis Gewißheit verschaffen kann, indem er daraus praktische Konsequenzen zieht und sich in der Folge konsistent verhält.” Habermas, *Handlungsrationalität und gesellschaftliche Rationalisierung*, 34-5.

communicative rationality and refer to the contested *normative rightness* (*normative Richtigkeit*) of an action in the social or intersubjective sphere. Rightness claims arise in *practical discourse* (*praktischer Diskurse*). *Evaluative claims* (*Evaluativansprüche*, sing. *Evaluativanspruch*) lie in the sphere of the aesthetic and refer to the “adequacy of standards of value.” Habermas follows Kant in asserting that standards of value “neither have the generality of norms of action nor are they merely private.”¹³ One judges the worth of value claims by measuring them against social standards. For a value claim or preference to be rational, it must appeal to commonly accepted values: “Actors are behaving rationally so long as they use predicates such as ‘spicy,’ ‘attractive,’ ‘strange,’ ‘terrible,’ ‘disgusting,’ and so forth, in such a way that other members of their lifeworlds can recognize in these descriptions their own reactions to similar situations.”¹⁴ Because evaluative discussions do not bear the aspirations to universality that Habermas attributes to practical and theoretical discourse, Habermas does not include evaluative discussions under the moniker of “discourse” but rather calls the collective of such discussions *aesthetic criticism* (*ästhetische Kritik*). *Truthfulness or sincerity claims* relate to inner-life or authenticity, taking a stance on whether an actor is being honest with himself about his true feelings or real interests. To deceive one’s self about one’s sincerity is to behave irrationally: “Anyone who systematically deceives himself about himself behaves irrationally.”¹⁵ Such persons need to be “enlightened” (*aufklären lassen*) and cannot take part in true discourse (theoretical or moral-practical) until they are enlightened. Habermas calls this process of enlightenment *therapeutic critique* (*therapeutische Kritik*). The final domain in which validity

¹³ Ibid., 16.

¹⁴ Ibid., 17. Deviance from these standards is not always irrational; it may simply be idiosyncratic. The boundary between idiosyncrasy and irrationality is not clear, and Habermas does not devote much time to exploring it but does suggest that idiosyncrasies can multiply or expand to the point at which they become irrational and render the person possessing them “irrational.”

¹⁵ Ibid., 21.

claims can be asserted is that of language itself. Validity claims in this area address problems of language and the “comprehensibility or well-formedness of symbolic expressions.”¹⁶ Such validity claims belong to the realm of *explicative discourse* (*explikativer Diskurse*).

To summarize, Habermas divides rational discussion into five forms of argumentation: theoretical discourse, practical discourse, aesthetic criticism, therapeutic critique, and explicative discourse. A type of validity claim corresponds to each of these five forms of arguments. These might be deemed truth/efficiency/descriptive claims, normative claims, evaluative claims, expressive claims, and explicative claims. Each type of claim requires a different type of justification:

“Grounding” descriptive statements means establishing the existence of states of affairs; “grounding” normative statements, establishing the acceptability of actions or norms of actions; “grounding” evaluative statements, establishing the preferability of values; “grounding expressive” statements, establishing the transparency of self-presentations; and “grounding” explicative statements, establishing that symbolic expressions have been produced correctly.”¹⁷

Habermas firmly maintains that descriptive claims, normative claims, and explicative claims are universal and transcend local boundaries.¹⁸

Having distinguished the different types of validity claims from one another, Habermas returns to communicative action, which, he claims is present in all of our quotidian interactions. By referring to “an unclarified *systematic interconnection of universal validity claims [noch ungeklärten systematischen Zusammenhang universaler Geltungsansprüche]*,” communicative

¹⁶ Ibid., 21. Wherever possible, I will try to reconstruct Habermas’ typologies and nomenclature in detail, as in this passage. Like Heidegger, Habermas constructs an intricate nomenclature. I feel that it is necessary to reproduce this nomenclature here, so as to avoid confusion and charges of having misread Habermas.

¹⁷ Ibid., 39. Original: “Die Begründung deskriptiver Aussagen bedeutet den Nachweis der Existenz von Sachverhalten; die Begründung normativer Aussagen den Nachweis der Akzeptabilität von Handlungen bzw. Handlungsnormen; die Begründung evaluativer Aussagen den Nachweis der Präferierbarkeit von Werten; die Begründung expressiver Aussagen den Nachweis der Transparenz von Selbstdarstellungen; und die Begründung explikativer Aussagen den Nachweis, daß symbolische Ausdrücke regelrecht erzeugt worden sind.“ Habermas, *Handlungsrationalität und gesellschaftliche Rationalisierung*, 67.

¹⁸ Ibid., 42.

action can make sense of social life and resolve misunderstandings and conflicts among social actors, thereby obviating the need to resort to “direct or strategic use of force.”¹⁹ Adequately explicating how this is possible requires Habermas to develop a theory of *argumentation*

[*Argumentation*], as argument is the formal instantiation of communicative action:

We use the term *argumentation* for that type of speech in which participants thematize contested validity claims and attempt to vindicate or criticize them through arguments. An *argument* contains reasons or grounds that are connected in a systematic way with the *validity claim* of a problematic expression. The “strength” of an argument is measured in a given context by the soundness of the reasons; that can be seen in, among other things, whether or not an argument is able to convince the participants in a discourse, that is, to motivate them to accept the validity claim in question.²⁰

Habermas’ ambitions for communicative action are enormous. He argues that it should be capable of achieving understanding among “everyone” (*alle*) affected by the subject of argumentation:

Norms of action appear in their domains of validity with the claim to express, in relation to some matter requiring regulation, an interest *common to all* those affected and thus *deserve* general recognition. For this reason, valid norms must be capable in principle of meeting with the rationally motivated approval of everyone affected under conditions that neutralize all motives except that of cooperatively seeking the truth.²¹

¹⁹ Ibid., 18. My emphasis.

²⁰ Ibid., 18. Original: “Argumentation nennen wir den Typus von Rede, in dem die Teilnehmer strittige Geltungsansprüche thematisieren und versuchen, diese mit Argumenten einzulösen oder zu kritisieren. Ein Argument enthält Gründe, die in systematischer Weise mit dem Geltungsanspruch einer problematischen Äußerung verknüpft sind. Die »Stärke« eines Arguments bemißt sich, in einem gegebenen Kontext, an der Triftigkeit der Gründe; diese zeigt sich u. a. daran, ob ein Argument die Teilnehmer eines Diskurses überzeugen, d. h. zur Annahme des jeweiligen Geltungsanspruchs motivieren kann.“ Habermas, *Handlungsrationalität und gesellschaftliche Rationalisierung*, 38.

²¹ Ibid., 19. Habermas’ emphasis. Original: “Handlungsnormen treten für ihren Geltungsbereich mit dem Anspruch auf, im Hinblick auf eine jeweils regelungsbedürftige Materie ein allen Betroffenen gemeinsames Interesse auszudrücken und darum allgemeine Anerkennung zu verdienen; deshalb müssen gültige Normen unter Bedingungen, die alle Motive außer dem der kooperativen Wahrheitssuche neutralisieren, grundsätzlich auch die rational motivierte Zustimmung aller Betroffenen finden können.“ Habermas, *Handlungsrationalität und gesellschaftliche Rationalisierung*, 1, 39-40. Habermas remains insistent on the total inclusiveness of this claim in *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action* when writing of his principle of universalization there: “All affected can accept the consequences and the side effects its *general* observance can be anticipated to have for the satisfaction of *everyone’s* interests (and these consequences are preferred to those of known alternative possibilities for regulation)” Jürgen Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, trans. Christian Lenhardt and Shierry Weber Nicholsen (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1990), 65.

Habermas begins constructing his theory of argumentation by referencing the psycholinguist Wolfgang Klein.²² He quotes Klein's basic criterion for argumentation: "In argumentation there is an attempt to transform something collectively problematic into something collectively valid [*geltend*] by drawing upon what is already collectively valid."²³ This understanding of argumentation is insufficient for Habermas, who deems Klein's criterion an "empiricist truncation of the sense of argumentation" on the grounds that "[Klein] understands only those views that are actually shared by specific groups at specific times; he screens out all internal relations between what is *de facto* accepted as valid [*geltend*] and what should have validity [*Gültigkeit*] in the sense of a claim transcending local, temporal, and social limitations."²⁴ Habermas, by contrast, calls for an "internal perspective from which [the social theorist] could adopt his own standard of judgment."²⁵ At this point, however, Habermas provides no criteria for what constitutes the validity [*Gültigkeit*] that he claims transcends local, temporal, and social limitations.

Instead of further outlining his theory of argumentation, Habermas returns to the question of rationality's meaning, now as it applies to societies rather than to persons or statements. This entails comparing and contrasting premodern societies with modern ones. Habermas claims that the key distinction between the worldviews of archaic societies and those of modern societies is that myth thoroughly infuses and determines the former, in "sharpest" contrast to the latter.²⁶ Habermas asserts that the rationality or irrationality of a worldview is not determined by

²² I should say here that I am either unfamiliar or only familiar in passing with many of Habermas' interlocutors and, thus, cannot vouch for his readings of them. I will, therefore, limit myself to reiterating Habermas' readings of his interlocutors, without endorsing or criticizing them.

²³ Wolfgang Klein, "Argumentation und Argument," *Zeitschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Linguistik* 38/39 (1980). Quoted in Habermas, *Reason and the Rationalization of Society*, 27.

²⁴ Habermas, *Reason and the Rationalization of Society*, 28.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 28.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 44.

differing logic or semantic properties but by different basic formal-pragmatic concepts: i.e., different ontological understandings of the world. Habermas, citing Lévi-Strauss, characterizes the “savage mind” as operating at surface level and constructing a closed order of symbols, which relate to one another by way of homology and heterogeneity, as in the medieval Book of Nature. One fundamental aspect of the savage mind is the feeling of being delivered up to surrounding forces beyond human control. Idolatry attempts to navigate these dangers through a “concretistic and analogical mode of thought.”²⁷ Such a mode of thinking does not recognize a distinction between the realms of nature and culture. This conflation gives rise to one of the major sources of irrationality in archaic societies: the inability to distinguish instrumental action from communicative action and to fully develop either. Similarly, Habermas ascribes to tribal societies a failure to distinguish world and language, or signifier and signified, which is why “the word” is so often treated as possessing mythic power in primitive societies. Such an outlook prevents criticism of interpretations because it takes any given interpretation to be the independently existing thing itself: “A linguistically constituted worldview can be identified with the world order to such an extent that it cannot be perceived *as* an interpretation of the world that is subject to error and open to criticism.”²⁸ Primitive societies, according to Habermas, project subjective inner-worlds onto the outer world.

Thus, Habermas ascribes an irrationality to the worldviews of archaic societies because they do not, in the anthropologist Edward Evans-Pritchard’s words, “accord with objective reality,” as do modern worldviews supposedly do.²⁹ To the objection that the concepts of “real” and “unreal” are themselves caught up in language games and forms of life, Habermas responds

²⁷ Ibid., 47.

²⁸ Ibid., 50.

²⁹ Quoted in Ibid., 56. Habermas does not cite Evans himself but, rather, cites him via Peter Winch, “Understanding a Primitive Society,” in *Rationality*, ed. Bryan R. Wilson (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1970).

by conceding that worldviews themselves do not admit of truth but claims instead that the statements they make possible do. The rationality of a worldview is, thus, measured by the number of true statements that such a view makes possible. To reinforce the distinction between rational and irrational societies, Habermas draws on Robin Horton, who himself drew on Karl Popper and his distinction between open and closed societies. According to Horton, a “rational” worldview is one that allows for learning, one that is not an all-encompassing dogma. By contrast, those worldviews that can maintain coherence only by suppressing contradiction must be labeled “irrational.”³⁰

Habermas draws on the structural psychologist Jean Piaget’s notion of developmental stages to explain how rational societies evolve from irrational ones. As the child grows, it is not just the contents of his thoughts but the structure of his thought that changes. With each advance into a new stage of thinking, the child devalues the previous structure. The same may be true, Habermas posits, for the development of societies in learning processes. When a society grows into a new worldview or lifeworld it devalues previous ones, in what Habermas deems *devaluative shifts*. These devaluative shifts seem to be accompanied by *decentralizations* of the world, which distance the inhabitants of a rationalizing society from their previous egoistic understandings of the world.³¹

In the midst of these devaluations and decentralizations, all order seems to verge on losing itself. But the epistemic resources of the *lifeworld* (*Lebenswelt*)—a concept which Habermas, like Gadamer, borrows from Husserl—prevents this from occurring:

³⁰ Habermas, *Reason and the Rationalization of Society*, 60-2. See also, Robin Horton, "African Traditional Thought and Western Science," in *Rationality*, ed. Bryan R Wilson (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1970); Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (New York: Routledge, 1945).

³¹ Habermas, *Reason and the Rationalization of Society*, 67-70; Jean Piaget, *The Principles of Genetic Epistemology*, trans. Wolfe Mays (New York: Routledge, 1972).

Subjects acting communicatively always come to an understanding in the horizon of a lifeworld. Their lifeworld is formed from more or less diffuse, always unproblematic, background convictions. This lifeworld background serves as a source of situation definitions that are presupposed by participants as unproblematic. In their interpretive accomplishments the members of a communication community demarcate the one objective world and their intersubjectively shared social world from the subjective worlds of individuals and (other) collectives.³²

The lifeworld guarantees order by storing the interpretive work of previous generations. A rational lifeworld allows for argumentation but also grounds argumentation by its stock of “unproblematic” (*unproblematisch*) background assumptions.

But what exactly is the “lifeworld” and how does it relate to “the world”? Habermas avails himself of Karl Popper’s “three-world thesis” to try to answer these questions.³³ The first world in Popper’s scheme is the world of physical objects or states. The second is the world of states of consciousness or mental states. And the third is the world of the objective content of thought, of subjectless (or, alternatively, “objective”) mind. Habermas stresses that there are actually existing structures or objects in the third world that have yet to be discovered by human endeavor. Essentially, Popper is positing the existence of a non-physical ontological realm. Habermas seconds Popper’s posit, referring to the third world as a “totality of entities” (*Gesamtheit von Entitäten*).³⁴

Habermas faults Popper only for focusing on scientific truths in the third world to the exclusion of ethical norms. Clearly, Habermas wants ethical norms to abide in an autonomous

³² Habermas, *Reason and the Rationalization of Society*, 70. Original: “Kommunikativ handelnde Subjekte verständigen sich stets im Horizont einer Lebenswelt. Ihre Lebenswelt baut sich aus mehr oder weniger diffusen, stets unproblematischen Hintergrundüberzeugungen auf. Dieser lebensweltliche Hintergrund dient als Quelle für Situationsdefinitionen, die von den Beteiligten als unproblematisch vorausgesetzt werden. Bei ihren Interpretationsleistungen grenzen die Angehörigen einer Kommunikationsgemeinschaft die eine objektive Welt und ihre intersubjektiv geteilte soziale Welt gegen die subjektiven Welten von Einzelnen und (anderen) Kollektiven ab.” Habermas, *Handlungsrationalität und gesellschaftliche Rationalisierung*, 107.

³³ See Karl Popper and John C Eccles, *The Self and Its Brain: An Argument for Interactionism* (New York: Routledge, 1977); Karl Popper, *Objective Knowledge: An Evolutionary Approach*, Revised ed. (New York: Oxford, 1972).

³⁴ Habermas, *Reason and the Rationalization of Society*, 79.

realm.³⁵ He, therefore, supplements Popper's three-world thesis with the concept of the lifeworld. It is clear that Habermas sees the lifeworld as containing norms, but he also sometimes gives the impression that such norms and, more importantly, their ideal grounds and relations reside in Popper's third world. It is also never clear whether and to what extent Habermas identifies the "lifeworld" with the "social world" (soziale Welt). He uses both terms, apparently interchangeably but never spells out the connection between the two.³⁶

Against the backdrop of the three-cum-four-or-five-world hypothesis, Habermas distinguishes several different types of action, defining "action" as "those symbolic expressions with which the actor takes up relation to at least one world (but always to the objective world *as well*)."³⁷ *Teleological action (teleologisches Handeln)* is geared towards achieving ends or bringing about desired states of affairs. Teleological action becomes *strategic action (strategisches Handeln)* when the actor has to reckon with the actions of at least one other actor in attempting to achieve his goals. *Normatively regulated action (normenreguliertes Handeln)* action is geared towards affirming, or consciously transgressing, norms. *Dramaturgical action (dramaturgisches Handeln)* aims at evoking an image of oneself in observers. *Communicative action (kommunikatives Handeln)* seeks to coordinate the actions of individuals through rationally-motivated agreement. It is based on joint *interpretation (Interpretation)* of a situation. All of these forms of actions, Habermas maintains, are capable of being rationalized.³⁸

The teleological and strategic models, Habermas contends, presuppose relations between an actor and the objective world, though the objective world here includes "decision-making

³⁵ Ibid., 81.

³⁶ Ibid., 82-94.

³⁷ Ibid., 96.

³⁸ Ibid., 84-7.

systems.” In assessing the rationality of statements involved in teleological or strategic action, one refers to *truth (Wahrheit)* and/or *efficacy (Wirksamkeit)*.³⁹

Normatively regulated action presupposes a relationship between the actor and two worlds: the objective and the social or lifeworld. There are multiple social worlds, but each actor, Habermas contends, acts within only one of these. Not truth or efficacy but *normative rightness (normative Richtigkeit)* or *validity (Gültigkeit)* is the yardstick for the rationality of normative actions. Moreover, norms can themselves be questioned as to whether they represent “generalizable interests” (*verallgemeinerungsfähige Interessen*).⁴⁰

Dramaturgical action sees the actor relate to the social world, the objective world, and the subjective world of others. *Encounter* and *Performance* are the key concepts in dramaturgical action.⁴¹ Something like authenticity is the gauge of dramaturgical action’s rationality, but Habermas is quite fuzzy on what this is and whether success here means simply convincing others of one’s authenticity or actually acting authentically. In any case, it is clear that *sometimes* success in dramaturgical action is defined by merely convincing others of one’s sincerity. This involves strategic action but cannot be reduced to it, as mere strategic action is naked in its aim at efficacy, whereas dramaturgical action veils it.

At the level of communicative action, the linguistic medium of rationality itself becomes problematic. The actor himself becomes something of a social scientist. Communicative action presupposes all four worlds. *At this point in the text*, Habermas’ proposed aims for communicative action are quite modest:

A definition of the situation by another party that prima facie diverges from one’s own presents a problem of a peculiar sort; for in cooperative processes of interpretation no participant has a monopoly on correct interpretation. For both parties the interpretive

³⁹ Ibid., 87-8.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 88-90.

⁴¹ Habermas actually uses the English “encounter” and “performance” in the original.

task consists in incorporating the other's interpretation of the situation into one's own in such a way that in the revised version "his" external world and "my" external world can—against the background of "our" lifeworld—be relativized in relation to "the" world, and the divergent situation definitions can be brought to coincide sufficiently. Naturally this does not mean that interpretation must lead in every case to a stable and unambiguously differentiated assignment. Stability and absence of ambiguity are rather the exception in the communicative practice of everyday life. A more realistic picture is that drawn by ethnomethodologists – of a diffuse, fragile, continuously revised and only momentarily successful communication in which participants rely on problematic and unclarified presuppositions and feel their way from one occasional commonality to the next.⁴²

From action, Habermas again turns to the problem of linguistic meaning. He starts with the hermeneutic tradition of Dilthey, Husserl, Heidegger, and Gadamer, in which "understanding [*Verstehen*] has been characterized ontologically [...] as a basic feature of human existence, and reaching understanding [*Verständigung*] [...] as a basic feature of historical life."⁴³ Habermas claims that he wants to dispense with the notion, common to many analytic philosophers, that understanding meaning is no more than a matter of understanding the detached content of symbolic expressions. One has to have actors, including the inner-life of actors, to have meaning. But Habermas is also concerned to somehow link what he calls "validity" to meaning itself. He wants to make "oughts" meaningful beyond the merely subjective or the narrowly social.

⁴² Habermas, *Reason and the Rationalization of Society*, 100. Original: "Eine Situationsdefinition stellt eine Ordnung her. Mit ihr ordnen die Kommunikationsteilnehmer die verschiedenen Elemente der Handlungssituation jeweils einer der drei Welten zu und inkorporieren damit die aktuelle Handlungssituation ihrer vorinterpretierten Lebenswelt. Die Situationsdefinition eines Gegenübers, die prima facie von der eigenen Situationsdefinition abweicht, stellt ein Problem eigener Art dar; denn in kooperativen Deutungsprozessen hat keiner der Beteiligten ein Interpretationsmonopol. Für beide Seiten besteht die Interpretationsaufgabe darin, die Situationsdeutung des anderen in die eigene Situationsdeutung derart einzubeziehen, daß in der revidierten Fassung »seine« Außenwelt und »meine« Außenwelt vor dem Hintergrund »unserer Lebenswelt« an »der Welt« relativiert und die voneinander abweichenden Situationsdefinitionen hinreichend zur Deckung gebracht werden können. Das bedeutet freilich nicht, daß Interpretationen in jedem Fall oder auch nur normalerweise zu einer stabilen und eindeutig differenzierten Zuordnung führen müßten. Stabilität und Eindeutigkeit sind in der kommunikativen Alltagspraxis eher die Ausnahme. Realistischer ist das von der Ethnomethodologie gezeichnete Bild einer diffusen, zerbrechlichen, dauernd revidierten, nur für Augenblicke gelingenden Kommunikation, in der sich die Beteiligten auf problematische und ungeklärte Präsuppositionen stützen und von einer okkasionellen Gemeinsamkeit zur nächsten tasten." Habermas, *Handlungsrationalität und gesellschaftliche Rationalisierung*, 150.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 107.

The problem of understanding meaning in the social sciences, Habermas writes, centers around the fact that meaning is not, unlike purely physical phenomena, simply observable. Nor can it be experimented on with all due controls, as can physical entities and forces. In order to understand meaning, a process of interpretation [*Sinnverstehen*] is necessary, so that the interpreter may gain access to the world(s) of the actor(s). For Habermas, as for Gadamer, this means that, to some extent at least, the interpreter must share the lifeworld of the actors he is examining from the outset of his examination. Habermas, again following Gadamer, claims that “this circumstance inhibits the interpreter from separating questions of meaning and questions of validity in such a way as to secure for the understanding of meaning a purely descriptive character.”⁴⁴ He adds that “the interpreter understands the meaning of a text only to the extent that he sees why the author felt himself entitled to put forward (as true) certain assertion, to recognize (as right) certain values and norms, to express (as sincere) certain experiences.”⁴⁵ But Habermas goes further. He claims that interpretation involves not only understanding or inhabiting the inner-life and the lifeworld of an actor but also passing judgment on the truth and falsehood and right or wrong of an actor’s decisions.⁴⁶ This moralizing process is the motor of communicative action.

Habermas’ agenda become clear when he posits “structures,” whose nature and substance he leaves unexplained, which allow social scientists to “transcend” individual paradigms and lifeworlds, in a gesture towards the universal:

The most general structures of communication that speaking and acting subjects have learned to master not only open up access to specific contexts; they not only make it possible to link up with and develop contexts which draw participants passively—so it may seem at first—under the spell of the merely particular. These same structures also simultaneously provide the critical means to penetrate a given context, to burst it open

⁴⁴ Ibid., 108.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 132.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 113.

from within and to transcend it; the means, if need be, to push beyond a de facto established consensus, to revise errors, correct misunderstandings, and the like. The same structures that make it possible to reach an understanding also provide for the possibility of a reflective self-control of this process. It is this potential for critique built into communicative action itself that the social scientist by entering into the contexts of everyday action as a virtual participant, can systematically exploit and bring into play outside these contexts and against their particularity.⁴⁷

From this point on, Habermas' ambitions for communicative action, and its vanguard of therapeutic critical social theory, no longer appear so modest. But Habermas does acknowledge that the possibility of the social sciences as he understands them—i.e., as centered on and advancing communicative action—has not yet been established. Doing so would mean demonstrating that communicative action and its premises are “*universally valid*” (*allgemeingültig*).⁴⁸ Habermas states that there are three ways of going about establishing such universal validity. The first is a transcendental deduction of the “universal rules and necessary presuppositions of speech actions oriented to reaching understanding.” Habermas eschews this route as laying outside the scope of his work.⁴⁹ The second option is to empirically deduct standards for “undisturbed communication.” But Habermas does not pursue this route. The third approach, which Habermas does adopt, is to further elaborate a sociological theory of

⁴⁷ Ibid., 120-1. Original: “Die allgemeinsten Kommunikationsstrukturen, die sprach und handlungsfähige Subjekte zu beherrschen gelernt haben, öffnen nun aber nicht nur den Zugang zu bestimmten Kontexten; sie ermöglichen nicht nur den Anschluß an und die Fortbildung von Kontexten, welche die Teilnehmer, wie es zunächst scheinen möchte, in den Bannkreis des bloß Partikularen hineinziehen. Diese selben Strukturen bieten zugleich die kritischen Mittel, um einen gegebenen Kontext zu durchdringen, von innen aufzusprengen und zu transzendieren, um nötigenfalls durch einen faktisch eingespielten Konsensus hindurchzugreifen, Irrtümer zu revidieren, Mißverständnisse zu korrigieren usw. Dieselben Strukturen, die Verständigung ermöglichen, sorgen auch für die Möglichkeiten einer reflexiven Selbstkontrolle des Verständigungsvorgangs. Es ist dieses im kommunikativen Handeln selbst angelegte Potential der Kritik, das der Sozialwissenschaftler, indem er sich als virtueller Teilnehmer auf die Kontexte des Alltagshandelns einläßt, systematisch nutzen und aus den Kontexten heraus gegen deren Partikularität zur Geltung bringen kann.” Habermas, *Handlungsrationalität und gesellschaftliche Rationalisierung*, 175-6.

⁴⁸ Habermas, Ibid., 137.

⁴⁹ Habermas, Ibid., 138. Habermas takes up this task in *Moralbewusstsein und kommunikatives Handeln*. Jürgen Habermas, *Moralbewusstsein und kommunikatives Handeln* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1983). Translated as Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, trans. Christian Lenhardt and Shierry Weber Nicholsen (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1990).

rationalization, allowing him to “lay out the problems that can be solved by means of a theory of rationalization developed in terms of the basic concept of communicative action.”⁵⁰

Habermas’ theory of rationalization takes its point of departure from that of Max Weber. According to Habermas, Weber’s understanding of rationalization focuses lopsidedly on *purposive rationality* (*Zweckrationalität*), conceiving of rationalization *primarily* in terms of the rise of the modern state and the capitalist economy and the continual articulation of each to increase its efficiency and better serve its ends. In culture, rationalization is exhibited in modern science and technology, autonomous art, and in a “religiously anchored ethic guided by principles.” “Rationalization” includes “every expansion of empirical knowledge, of predictive capacity, of instrumental and organizational mastery of empirical processes.”⁵¹ Essentially, then, Rationalization involves standardization and calculability. It is also a matter of each of the aforementioned spheres displaying and cultivating its own respective logic, so that, for example, the logic of religion does not impinge on the logic of art. Each sphere becomes “autonomous.” Similarly, law and morality also take on their own logics, separate from that of religion. At the level of personality, rationalization means methodical conduct of life.

This leads to Weber’s action theory. Actions that are effective in employing means to reach ends are called *purposive-rational* (*zweckrational*). Actions that are effective in establishing ends to accord with values are called *value-rational* (*wertrational*). When the conditions for both types of rationality are frequently met over time and across a variety of aspects of life, Weber speaks of a *methodical-rational conduct of life* (*methodisch-rationalen Lebensführung*), which can apply to either individuals or groups. A large part of this is the *rationalization of worldviews* (*Rationalisierung von Weltbildern*): “This is a matter of rendering

⁵⁰ Habermas, *Reason and the Rationalization of Society*, 139-40.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 159.

meanings precise, of explicating concepts, of systematizing thought motifs, of consistency among structures, of methodical construction, of simultaneously increasing the complexity and specificity of teachable knowledge.”⁵² This is basically about spinning out a nebula of values into a system of articulated principles that allows for a methodical-rational conduct of life. After a point, the rationalization of worldviews necessarily entails the *disenchantment of the world* (*Entzauberung der Welt*).

Such disenchantment results in Weber’s “iron-cage of rationality.” Purposive rational thinking and the logic of instrumentality come more and more to dominate social life with the ongoing rationalization of society, divesting relations between human beings of moral and emotional content. Moreover, Weber is skeptical as to the ultimate rationality of norms. Value-systems, he maintains, can be judged to be more rational than others only insofar as the consistency of the articulation of their principles and openness to scientific learning go, but norms themselves do not admit of a fully context-dependent justification.

In its focus on purposive rationality, Weber’s theory of rationalization resembles those of Marx and Horkheimer and Adorno. Marx views rationalization as occurring in the sphere of production with the expansion of scientific knowledge, technological applications, and organizational techniques. Horkheimer and Adorno, who drew inspiration from both Marx and Weber, focus a great deal of attention on economic and bureaucratic rationalization and their purported corruption of culture. Habermas faults all of these theorists for focusing primarily or exclusively on purposive rationality to the expense of communicative rationality, aesthetic or evaluative rationality, and dramaturgical or therapeutic rationality. There is more to rationalization, Habermas contends, than the rationalization of political and economic systems.

⁵² Ibid., 175.

Like Weber, Habermas views the rationalization of worldviews as bringing worldviews closer in line with the physical world, with physical truth. But, unlike Weber, Habermas seems to imply that rationalization also brings worldviews closer in line with the ideal and ethical entities residing either in Popper's third world or latently in the lifeworld (again, Habermas is unclear as to where exactly the structural grounding for norms resides). In Habermas' view, truth and context-independent rightness increase as a result of the rationalization of worldviews. He sees disenchantment as giving rise to a *post-traditional phase of moral consciousness* (*posttraditionelle Moralbewußtsein*), in which communicative action can fully come into its own to rationalize norms.

To justify his theory of rationalization, Habermas will have to develop his own action theory that will encompass communicative action and will place the individual in the context of society, or a group of actors sharing a lifeworld, a material world, and a normative world, in addition to their individual psychological or subjective worlds. Therefore, a theory of communicative action must ground itself on an understanding of linguistic meaning that starts from linguistic structures rather than from individual intentions.

Habermas finds a model for such a theory of meaning in the work of the psychologist and linguist Karl Bühler. According to Bühler, signs have three functions. These are 1) a cognitive function of representing a state of affairs, 2) an expressive function of making known experiences of the speaker, and 3) an appellative function of making requests to addressees. A sign is a *symbol* (*Symbol*) in the first instance, a *symptom* (*Symptom*) in the second, and a *signal* (*Signal*) in the third.⁵³ Habermas favors this model because he views it as assigning equal importance to the speaker and hearer in co-determining meaning and because it does not reduce

⁵³ Ibid., 245.

linguistic meaning to a primarily assertoric function. Thus, instead of writing solely of “truth conditions,” Habermas can avail himself of the term *validity conditions* (*Gültigkeitsbedingungen*) to express the concept of knowing under which conditions cognitive, expressive, and appellative statements are *valid* (*gültig*), with truth being merely the cognitive type of validity or that pertaining to assertoric sentences. He calls the comprehensive approach he adopts from Bühler *universal pragmatics* (*Universalpragmatik*) or *formal pragmatics*. As pragmatics is the branch of linguistics that deals with context’s impact on meaning, the terms “universal pragmatics” and “formal pragmatics” (*formale Pragmatik*) may seem paradoxical, but Habermas wishes to indicate with these that the context or conditions shaping rational discourse are universal, applying to all rational discourse and separating rational discourse from irrational discourse.

Against the background of his universal pragmatics, Habermas proffers the basic insight of his theory of action and communication. He defines *Instrumental action* (*instrumentelles Handeln*) as action that follows “technical rules” and intervenes in “a complex of circumstances and events.” Instrumental actions seem to aim primarily at bringing about changes in states of affairs. *Strategic action* (*strategisches Handeln*) is action that follows “rules of rational choice” and influences the “decisions of a rational opponent.” Strategic actions seem to aim at exercising power to effect a change in the social world. By contrast, communicative action involves the coordination of action among agents “not through egocentric calculations of success but through acts of reaching understanding.”⁵⁴ Habermas asserts that “with the illocutionary force of an utterance a speaker can motivate a hearer to accept the offer contained in his speech act and thereby to accede to a *rationally motivated binding* (*rational motivierte Bindung*) force.”⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Ibid., 285-6.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 278.

Communicative action aims at changing minds on matters of truth and/or rightness through *strictly* rational engagement. Its goal is to bring about an entirely uncoerced and rationally grounded understanding among social actors. Habermas elaborates on what he means or, rather, does not mean by understanding:

Reaching understanding is considered to be a process of reaching agreement among speaking and acting subjects. Naturally, a group of persons can feel at one in a mood which is so diffuse that it is difficult to identify the propositional content or the intentional object to which it is directed. Such a collective like-mindedness does not satisfy the conditions for the type of agreement in which attempts at reaching understanding terminate when they are successful. A communicatively achieved agreement, or one that is mutually presupposed in communicative action, is propositionally differentiated. Owing to this linguistic structure, it cannot be merely induced through outside influence; it has to be accepted or presupposed as valid by participants. To this extent it can be distinguished from merely *de facto* accord. Processes of reaching understanding aim at an agreement that meets the conditions of rationally motivated assent to the content of an utterance.⁵⁶

Thus, to qualify as a true understanding (*Verständigung*) for Habermas, an agreement [*Einigung*] cannot be based on unexamined mores and prejudices or on mood and intuition. To qualify as an agreement in the sense of one brought about by communicative action, an agreement must be “rationally motivated” by convincing reasons articulated in linguistic propositions.

To further explicate his understanding of communicative action, Habermas draws heavily on JL Austin’s speech-act theory. According to Habermas, Austin distinguishes between locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts. Locutionary acts are those expressing a state

⁵⁶ Ibid., 287. “Verständigung gilt als ein Prozeß der Einigung unter sprach- und handlungsfähigen Subjekten. Allerdings kann sich eine Gruppe von Personen in einer Stimmung eins fühlen, die so diffus ist, daß es schwerfällt, den propositionalen Gehalt bzw. einen intentionalen Gegenstand anzugeben, auf den diese sich richtet. Eine solche kollektive Gleichgestimmtheit erfüllt nicht die Bedingungen der Art von Einverständnis, in dem Verständigungsversuche, wenn sie gelingen, terminieren. Ein kommunikativ erzieltes, oder im kommunikativen Handeln gemeinsam vorausgesetztes, Einverständnis ist propositional differenziert. Dank dieser sprachlichen Struktur kann es nicht allein durch Einwirkung von außen induziert sein, es muß von den Beteiligten als gültig akzeptiert werden. Insofern unterscheidet es sich von einer bloß faktisch bestehenden Übereinstimmung. Verständigungsprozesse zielen auf ein Einverständnis, welches den Bedingungen einer rational motivierten Zustimmung zum Inhalt einer Äußerung genügt.“ Habermas, *Handlungsrationalität und gesellschaftliche Rationalisierung*, 386-7.

of affairs. In an illocutionary act, the speaker does something through speaking beyond expressing a state of affairs. He makes a promise, gives a command, voices an admonition, etc. In perlocutionary acts, a speaker produces an effect on the hearer(s), creating an effect in the world.⁵⁷

Habermas writes that the success or failure of an illocutionary act can be judged by whether or not the hearer has understood the “manifest meaning” (*manifeste Bedeutung*) of what is said. By contrast, because perlocutionary speech acts carry hidden intentions, success cannot be gauged in such a way. Perlocutionary acts involve lying or misleading. Lying or misleading, Habermas contends, is meaningful only in the context of truth-telling or attempting to achieve understanding. A lie is a perversion of an attempt to reach honest understanding and is, therefore, derivative of processes geared at understanding. Habermas outlines the difference between illocutionary acts and teleological or strategic action, which he seems to identify with perlocutionary action, claiming that meaning is transparent in illocution but obscured in strategic, teleological, or perlocutionary action:

The self-sufficiency of the speech act is to be understood in the sense that the communicative intent of the speaker and the illocutionary aim he is pursuing follow from the manifest meaning of what is said. It is otherwise with teleological actions. We identify their meaning only in connection with the intentions their authors are pursuing and the ends they want to realize. As *the meaning of what is said* is constitutive for illocutionary acts, *the intention of the agent* is constitutive for teleological actions.⁵⁸

For these reasons, Habermas feels justified in asserting that “Reaching understanding is the inherent telos of human speech (*Verständigung wohnt als Telos der menschlichen Sprache*

⁵⁷ Ibid., 288-91. See also JL Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (New York: Oxford, 1962).

⁵⁸ Habermas, *Reason and the Rationalization of Society*, 289. Original: “Die Selbstgenügsamkeit des illokutionären Aktes ist in dem Sinne zu verstehen, daß sich die kommunikative Absicht des Sprechers und das von ihm angestrebte illokutionäre Ziel aus der manifesten Bedeutung des Gesagten ergeben. Anders verhält es sich mit teleologischen Handlungen. Deren Sinn identifizieren wir allein anhand der Absichten, die der Autor verfolgt, und der Zwecke, die er realisieren möchte. Wie für illokutionäre Akte die *Bedeutung des Gesagten* konstitutiv ist, so für teleologische Handlungen die *Intention* des Handelnden.” Habermas, *Handlungsrationalität und gesellschaftliche Rationalisierung*, 389.

inne).”⁵⁹ He acknowledges that there are many uses of language that do not aim at achieving understanding. But he claims that such uses are “parasitic” (*parasitär*) on the more primal communicative action and thus do not represent a threat to his claim that language is inherently oriented towards understanding.⁶⁰

Having sketched his understanding of Austin’s speech-act theory, Habermas offers a more precise definition of communicative action: “I count as communicative action those linguistically mediated interactions in which all participants pursue illocutionary aims, and *only* illocutionary aims, with their mediating acts of communication.”⁶¹ Habermas writes that a hearer can refuse to consent to an illocutionary act under three aspects: the aspect of rightness or normative validity, the aspect of sincerity, and the aspect of facticity. That is, an auditor may reject an illocutionary act because she believes it to be unethical or non-normative, because she believes that the speaker is insincere in his proposition or acting on reasons other than those presented, or because she believes that the speaker is mistaken about the facts of the matter. The important thing is that, in every illocutionary act, speaker and hearer relate to three worlds at once: that of norms—though, again, it is unclear here whether Habermas is referring to the lifeworld or Popper’s universal world of ideational entities—that of subjectivity, and that of objective facts and states of affairs.

Unfortunately, Habermas eschews—or, at least, defers—the attempt to demonstrate that communicative action is either possible or plausible among human beings as they actually exist and behave, warts and all. He states, almost as an afterthought, that this problem lies outside of his work’s purview:

⁵⁹ Ibid., 287.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 288.

⁶¹ Ibid., 295.

In the framework of action theory, the conceptual analysis of the two attitudes [communicative and strategic] cannot be understood as a psychological task. It is not my aim to characterize behavioral dispositions empirically, but to grasp structural properties of processes of reaching understanding, from which we can derive general pragmatic presuppositions of communicative action.⁶²

Instead of pursuing the problem of communicative action as an *actual human activity*, Habermas turns his attention to a highly abstract theory of understanding in the hopes that such a theory will allow him to better articulate communicative action as a *linguistic principle*. Along these lines, Habermas writes that we understand a speech act when we know what makes the offer contained therein acceptable.⁶³ He is careful to stress that understanding does not entail full knowledge of the conditions under which a statement would be true, sincere, or normatively valid. It only means knowing that a speaker has grounds “through which the *claims* that [his proposition’s] truth conditions are satisfied *could be redeemed*.”⁶⁴ This consideration leads Habermas to reject a verificationist theory of meaning in favor of a falsificationist theory of meaning, predicated on the gamble that the warrant will not be falsified. This line of reasoning leads Habermas to another definition of understanding: “To understand an assertion is to know when a speaker has good grounds to undertake a warrant that the conditions for the truth of the asserted sentences are satisfied.”⁶⁵

Thus, understanding for Habermas now apparently involves much more than the putatively simple “manifest meaning” of a statement. This becomes all the more evident when Habermas writes that formal pragmatics has a greater appreciation of the “background

⁶² Habermas, *Ibid.*, 286. Original: “Im Rahmen einer Handlungstheorie kann das nicht als psychologische Aufgabe verstanden werden. Mein Ziel ist nicht die empirische Charakterisierung von Verhaltensdispositionen, sondern die Erfassung allgemeiner Strukturen von Verständigungsprozessen, aus denen sich formal zu charakterisierende Teilnahmebedingungen ableiten lassen.” Habermas, *Handlungsrationalität und gesellschaftliche Rationalisierung*, 386.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 297.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 317.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 318.

knowledge” (*Hintergrundwissen*) in which communication takes place than does empirical pragmatics. He contends that the meaning of statements is codetermined by their “literal meaning” (*wörtliche Bedeutung*) and by this background knowledge. Following the later Wittgenstein, Habermas notes several key features of this “background knowledge”:

It is an *implicit* knowledge that cannot be represented in a finite number of propositions; it is a *holistically structured* knowledge, the basic elements of which intrinsically define one another; and it is a knowledge that *does not stand at our disposition*, inasmuch as we cannot make it conscious and place it in doubt as we please. When philosophers nevertheless seek to do so, then that knowledge comes to light in the form of the commonsense certainties in which G.E. Moore, for instance, took an interest, and to which Wittgenstein referred in his reflections “On Certainty.” Wittgenstein call these certainties elements of a worldviews that are “anchored in all my questions and answers, so anchored that I cannot touch [them].” Beliefs that do not fit such convictions—convictions that are as beyond question as they are fundamental, appear to be absurd.⁶⁶

Such convictions are the stuff of the lifeworld. Communicative action, Habermas maintains, draws upon them to achieve understanding and agreement.

Based on all of the above, Habermas asserts that formal pragmatics allows one to recognize “systematically distorted communication” (*systematisch verzerrte Kommunikation*). This can include subconscious perlocutionary action, in which “at least one of the parties is deceiving himself about the fact that he is acting with an attitude oriented to success and is only keeping up the appearances of communicative action.”⁶⁷ Further, Habermas believes that the concept of communicative action can correct the imbalances of Weber’s action theory and theory of modernization, providing a model for rationalization that extends far beyond the instrumental,

⁶⁶ Ibid., 336. Original: “Es ist ein implizites Wissen, das nicht in endlich vielen Propositionen dargestellt werden kann; es ist ein holistisch strukturiertes Wissen, dessen Elemente aufeinander verweisen; und es ist ein Wissen, das uns insofern nicht zur Disposition steht, als wir es nicht nach Wunsch bewußt machen und in Zweifel ziehen können. Wenn Philosophen das dennoch versuchen, zeigt sich jenes Wissen in Gestalt von Common-sense-Gewißheiten, für die sich beispielsweise G. E. Moore interessiert hat, und auf die sich Wittgenstein in seinen Reflexionen »über Gewißheit« bezieht. Wittgenstein nennt diese Gewißheiten Bestandteile unseres Weltbildes, »die solchermaßen in allen meinen Fragen und Antworten verankert sind, daß ich nicht an sie rühren kann«. Als absurd erscheinen nur genau die Meinungen, die nicht zu solchen ebenso fraglosen wie fundamentalen Überzeugungen passen.” Habermas, *Handlungsrationalität und gesellschaftliche Rationalisierung*, 451.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 332.

deep into the content of normativity. Critical Theory can be salvaged from the dead ends against which Horkheimer and Adorno butted their heads in their later years.

For these reasons, Habermas contends that Critical Theory must abandon the philosophy of consciousness in favor of philosophy of language. The former, he argues, inevitably resolves into the self-defeating aporias found in Horkheimer and Adorno. Reconciliation of conflict is not possible on its basis because it is ultimately individualistic and, therefore, inevitably geared towards self-interest. Habermas, like Adorno and Horkheimer, rejects the strictly Marxist view of reification/alienation/solipsism as stemming from the relations of production. However, Habermas makes this move because he sees the Marxist view of alienation as grounded in the philosophy of consciousness. Consciousness' inevitable drive for "identifying thought,"—that is, the subsumation of the particular under the general and, in this case, the construction of the autonomous self *vis* its reification from nature—leads to an ethos of self-interest and, hence, to one of domination, resulting in the rampant development of instrumental reason at the expense of the good. Philosophy of consciousness is, thus, inherently solipsistic. It is, Habermas contends, the self-interest intrinsic to the philosophy of consciousness that is responsible for what he sees as the lopsided rationalization of modernity.

By contrast, language is, for Habermas, inherently social and capable of transcending self-interest. This feature of language makes reconciliation on a linguistic basis possible. Further, Habermas argues, the perspective of communicative action, or formal pragmatics, allows for a critique of philosophy of consciousness from the "outside," which provides the critical distance that Horkheimer and Adorno, still working from within the philosophy of consciousness, could never achieve.⁶⁸

⁶⁸ Ibid., 339-403.

It is expressly on resurrecting a Critical Theory of society that Habermas now focuses his attention, retracing social theory from the ground up, as it were, integrating communicative action into it at every stage. He begins with George Herbert Mead's theory of "social behaviorism." Using Mead, Habermas attempts to show that interacting with the other is vital in the construction of even a rudimentary self. The self originates not as an autonomous, inward-looking consciousness but rather as a hearer/speaker.⁶⁹

Following Mead, Habermas explains the rise of *meaning conventions*, as a result of the transition from gestures into symbols. Initially, gestures are merely the result of instinct. A primate might bare his teeth instinctually when he comes across a potential opponent. Eventually, that baring of teeth will become a symbol in-itself, meaning "back off," for instance. When this happens, the primate baring his teeth develops certain expectations of his interlocutor. The baring of the teeth *means* something to both of them by way of convention. The interlocutor may take a "yes" or "no" position on the threat of the teeth-bearer, but as long as he understands the threat, the communication has succeeded. If he does not, it has failed. In either case, the important thing is that there is an expectation on the part of the speaker that he should be understood.

The discussion of meaning conventions leads Habermas to embrace what he takes to be a Wittgensteinian understanding of the "rules" governing language games. Rules, Habermas claims are, by their very nature, open to criticism and consensus. Habermas seems to take it for granted that criticism will necessarily result in eventual consensus, which he seems to treat as the

⁶⁹ See George Herbert Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society: From the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist*, ed. Charles W. Morris (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1962).

norm. Competent subjects are those with the ability to follow linguistic rules because it is rules that allow for “sameness of meaning” (*Identität einer Bedeutung*).⁷⁰

Having established this understanding of rules in language games, Habermas returns to Mead, extrapolating some rather strong conclusions from his work. Habermas wants to argue that the shift from gesticulative interaction to symbolically mediated interaction totally replaced instinctual motivations with rule/norm-based motivations. He sees such a transition as socially necessary because “as long as the motivational bases and the repertoire of modes of behavior are not symbolically restructured, the symbolic coordination of action remains embedded in a regulation of behavior that functions prelinguistically and rests finally on residues of instinct.”⁷¹ Habermas wants to eliminate the irrationality of these instinctual residues.

Though it is difficult to follow Habermas’ prose in this section, it very much seems that what Habermas is proposing is that linguistically achieved understanding essentially replaces instinct in social interactions. He claims that, as language evolves from simple symbols into propositionally differentiated statements, individualization becomes *solely* a matter of socialization via linguistification, apparently without instinctual or dispositional elements at play:

The extralinguistic context of behavioral dispositions and schemes is in a certain sense [*gewissermaßen*] permeated by language, that is to say, symbolically restructured. Previously, only the instruments for reaching understanding were transformed into signals, into signs with conventionally fixed meanings; at the *stage of normatively guided action*, however, the symbolism penetrates even into the motivation and the behavioral repertoire. It creates both subjective orientations and suprasubjective orientation systems, socialized individuals, and social institutions.⁷²

⁷⁰ Jürgen Habermas, *Lifeworld and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason*, vol. 2 of *Critique of Communicative Action*, trans. Thomas McCarthy, (Boston, MA: Beacon, 1987), 17-18.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 24. Original: “Der außersprachliche Kontext der Verhaltensdispositionen und der Verhaltensschemata wird gewissermaßen sprachlich durchdrungen, d. h. symbolisch durchstrukturiert. Während bis dahin nur die Instrumente der Verständigung in Signale, in Zeichen mit konventionell festgelegten Bedeutungen umgearbeitet worden sind, durchdringt der Symbolismus auf der *Stufe normengeleiteten Handelns* auch die Motivationen und das Verhaltensrepertoire; er schafft gleichzeitig subjektive Orientierungen und übersubjektive Orientierungssysteme,

In this passage, Habermas' claim seems to be only that linguistically mediated norms become internalized in the subject at a certain point, penetrating to the level of instinct and blending with it. But, in the pages that follow, Habermas seems to augment this claim enormously, asserting that motivations stemming from instinctual dispositions simply cease to operate as language develops:

Signals remain tied to dispositions and schemes of behavior. It is because they are embedded in this way that signals have a binding power that is a functional equivalent for the triggering effects of gestures. *At the state of propositionally differentiated communication—of linguistic communication in the narrower sense—this kind of motivation [i.e., that tied to dispositions and schemes of behavior] gets lost.*⁷³

In the light of these passages and the overall arc of Habermas' theory in *TCA*, the human seems to be a *quite thoroughly* linguistified animal for Habermas. Here "linguistified" does not mean trapped within the bounds of language in the Derridean sense, incapable of expressing the passions and subconscious structures that could be said to lay "outside of" language in anything but linguistic terms. Nor does it indicate a Gadamerian fusion of the passions with language, in a new realm of Being. Rather, "linguistified" here means *reduced to* beings constituted grammatically and essentially lacking passions except as they can be constrained by grammar. In *TCA*, at least, Habermas understands human beings not as linguistically mediated or linguistically interpreting beings but *essentially* as bearers of language's dynamic and telos of

vergesellschaftete Individuen und gesellschaftliche Institutionen." Jürgen Habermas, *Zur Kritik der funktionalistischen Vernunft*, vol. 2 of *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*, (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1982), 42.
⁷³ Ibid., 30. My emphasis. Original: "Die Signale bleiben an Verhaltensdispositionen und Verhaltensschemata gebunden. Dieser Einbettung verdanken Signale eine bindende Kraft, die ein funktionales Äquivalent für die Auslöserwirkung von Gesten darstellt. Auf der Stufe propositional ausdifferenzierter, im engeren Sinne *sprachlicher* Kommunikation geht diese Art von Motivation verloren." Habermas, *Zur Kritik der funktionalistischen Vernunft*, 51.

understanding. For Habermas, it is from language's preeminent status in shaping self and society that norms derive their "binding" (*bindend*) power.⁷⁴

Incidentally but critically, in making this claim, Habermas spells out the connection between truth claims and normative validity claims, clearly asserting that interpretation-independent norms exist in the "social world" just as things (or facts or states of affairs) exist in the "objective world":

With the validity claims of subjective truthfulness and normative rightness, which are *analogous to the truth claim*, the binding/bonding effect of speech acts is expanded beyond the range of convictions with the descriptive content that is marked out by utterances admitting of truth. When participants in communication utter or understand experiential sentences or normative sentences, they have to be able to relate to something

⁷⁴ The passages quoted above are not outliers in *TCA*. Consider the following, rather astonishing passage, in which Habermas criticizes Durkheim for *not going far enough* in ascribing individuality to social control and origins: "Individuals owe their identities as persons exclusively to their identification with, or internalization of, features of collective identity; personal identity is a mirror image of collective identity. 'So it is not at all true that we are more personal as we are more individualized.' The only principle of individuation is the spatiotemporal location of the body and the desiring and feeling nature that is presented with the organism for the process of socialization – or, as Durkheim says, alluding to the classical tradition, "the passions." If one considers how strongly subjective experiences are shaped by culture, this thesis is implausible. Moreover, Durkheim himself discusses the phenomenon that Frazer had pointed to with the expression 'individual totemism.' In many Australian tribes there are totems not only for the clan as a whole but also for single individuals. They are represented as alter egos that function as protective patrons. Unlike collective totems, these individualized totems are not ascribed but acquired, normally by way of ritual initiation. In other cases, their acquisition is optional – the only ones who bother about a personal totem are those who want to stand out from the collective. Like the universal practice of giving names, this is a device for differentiating personal identities. It makes it possible to designate a multiplicity not only of bodies but of persons. Evidently, individuality too is a socially produced phenomenon that is a result of the socialization process itself and not an expression of residual, natural needs that escape that process." Habermas, *Lifeworld and System*, 58.

Original: "Das Individuum verdankt seine Identität als Person ausschließlich der Identifizierung mit, bzw. der Verinnerlichung von Merkmalen der kollektiven Identität; die persönliche Identität ist eine Spiegelung der kollektiven: »Es stimmt also nicht, wenn wir glauben, um so persönlicher zu sein, je individualistischer wir sind.« Einziges Prinzip der Individuierung sind die Raum-Zeit-Stellen des Leibes und die mit dem Organismus in den Vergesellschaftungsprozeß eingegebene Bedürfnisnatur - »die Leidenschaften«, wie Durkheim in Anspielung auf die klassische Tradition sagt. Wenn man bedenkt, wie stark die subjektiven Erlebnisse kulturell geprägt sind, ist diese These nicht plausibel. Im übrigen geht Durkheim selbst auf jene Phänomene ein, die Frazer mit dem Ausdruck »individueller Totemismus« belegt hat. In manchen australischen Stämmen finden sich Totems nicht nur für den Clan im ganzen, sondern auch für einzelne Individuen; sie werden als ein Alter Ego mit der Funktion eines Schutzpatrons vorgestellt. Diese individuellen Totems werden nicht, wie das kollektive, zugeschrieben, sondern normalerweise auf dem Wege der rituellen Imitation erworben. In anderen Fällen ist der Erwerb optativ - nur diejenigen bemühen sich um ein eigenes Totem, die sich aus dem Kollektiv herausheben möchten. Ähnlich wie bei der universell verbreiteten Namengebung handelt es sich um eine Einrichtung für die Differenzierung persönlicher Identitäten. Sie erlaubt es, eine Mannigfaltigkeit nicht nur von Körpern, sondern auch von Personen zu kennzeichnen. Offensichtlich ist auch Individualität ein gesellschaftlich erzeugtes Phänomen, das ein Ergebnis des Vergesellschaftungsprozesses selber ist und nicht Ausdruck einer residualen Bedürfnisnatur, die sich der Sozialisation entzieht." Habermas, *Zur Kritik der funktionalistischen Vernunft*, 91-2.

in a subjective world or in their common social world in a way similar to that in which they relate to something in the objective world with their constative speech acts.⁷⁵

But to return from that brief ontological excursion to Habermas' understanding of linguistified socialization, Habermas proposes that, as a child grows older, he learns to take the role not just of speaker or of hearer in any given situation but of an objective "neuter" (*Neuter*). In such a way, the child comes into contact with the "collective will" (*kollektive Wille*), coming to understand that this will is unaffected by any given individual will and that certain norms apply to *every* member of the community. This is a hugely important step in the internalization of norms, but the child still does not understand the "obligatory character" (*verpflichtende Charakter*) of norms.⁷⁶

At this point in the child's development, obedience rests on fear of sanctions. At the point of "internalization" however, this arbitrariness disappears, and the "general group will" (*allgemeiner Gruppenwille*) becomes intrinsically normatively binding.⁷⁷ This point is reached when the child comes to understand his will as an aspect of the general will, despite the general will not being the will of all but of the group. Now a norm acquires genuine binding force for the child: "In a system of internal, that is, moral, behavioral controls, generalized behavior patterns acquire for him the authority of a "thou shalt!"—no longer in an imperativist sense—and thus that kind of normative validity in virtue of which norms possess binding force."⁷⁸

⁷⁵ Habermas, *Lifeworld and System*, 27. Original: "Mit den wahrheitsanalogen Geltungsansprüchen der subjektiven Wahrhaftigkeit und der normativen Richtigkeit werden die Bindungseffekte von Sprechhandlungen über den durch wahrheitsfähige Äußerungen umschriebenen Bereich der Überzeugungen deskriptiven Gehalts hinaus erweitert. Freilich müssen sich die Kommunikationsteilnehmer, wenn sie Erlebnissätze oder normative Sätze äußern bzw. verstehen, auf etwas in einer subjektiven Welt oder in ihrer gemeinsamen sozialen Welt in ähnlicher Weise beziehen können, wie sie mit konstativen Sprechhandlungen auf etwas in der objektiven Welt Bezug nehmen." Habermas, *Zur Kritik der funktionalistischen Vernunft*, 45.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 38.

At this point, Habermas revises himself slightly. Following Durkheim he asserts that norms arise *in the first place* not from sanctions or as expediencies but as the sacral, a reflection of society itself. It is from this that norms gain their binding character. But Habermas tweaks Durkheim by positing that the reflection of society that is the sacred and the moral exists not in the medium of consciousness, as Durkheim proposed, but in that of language:

How can we at one and the same time belong wholly to ourselves and just as completely to others? How can we be simultaneously within ourselves and outside of ourselves? Religious symbols have *the same meaning* [*dieselbe Bedeutung*] for the members of the same group; on the basis of this uniform sacred semantics, they make possible a kind of intersubjectivity that is still this side of communicative roles of first, second, and third persons but is nevertheless beyond the threshold of sheer collective contagion by feelings.⁷⁹

Such, at least, is morality at the conventional stage of social development. As they rationalize, however, societies leave behind unexamined norms and traditions and enter a *post-conventional stage* (*postkonventionelle Stufe*). At the post-conventional stage of social development, Habermas claims, communication breaks free from the sacred and becomes wholly rational, as does the binding force of rationally achieved norms.⁸⁰ At this point, Habermas finally offers a criterion by which to judge the validity (i.e., rationality) of post-conventional norms, which extend past any given lifeworld and are fully universalizable. The criterion he offers is of rather astonishing ambition:

The authority of the sacred is converted over to the binding force of normative validity claims that can be redeemed only in discourse. The concept of normative validity is cleansed in this way of empirical admixtures; the validity of any norm means in the end only that it *could* be accepted with good reasons by *everyone* involved [...] The

⁷⁹ Ibid., 52. My emphasis. Original: “Wie können wir zur selben Zeit ganz uns selber gehören und ebenso vollständig anderen? Wie können wir gleichzeitig bei uns und außer uns sein? Die religiösen Symbole haben für alle Gruppenangehörigen dieselbe Bedeutung, und sie ermöglichen auf dieser Grundlage einer einheitlichen sakralen Semantik eine Art von Intersubjektivität, die noch diesseits der kommunikativen Rollen von erster, zweiter und dritter Person steht, aber die Schwelle einer kollektiven Gefühlsansteckung doch schon überschreitet.” Habermas, *Zur Kritik der funktionalistischen Vernunft*, 83.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 77.

universality of a moral norm can be a criterion of its validity only if by this is meant that universal norms express in a reasonable way the common will of all involved.⁸¹

Similarly, law sheds its mystical foundations at the post-conventional stage. According to Habermas, Hobbes and Weber argue that law is binding because 1) it expresses a voluntary agreement and 2) the state imposes sanctions on those who break it, sanctions which are then internalized into norms. By contrast, Habermas sides with Durkheim to assert that law is binding because it is *supposed to* work for the benefit of society as a whole and secure the interests of each and all of its members. With this in mind, Habermas approvingly quotes Durkheim on the essence of democracy, positing nothing less than a common will and the democratic state as the constitution of a single subject:

It is characteristic of the development of modern states that they change over from the sacred foundation of legitimation to foundation on a *common will* [*Gemeinwillen*] communicatively shaped and discursively clarified in the political public sphere: “Seen from this point, a democracy may, then, appear as the political system by which the society can achieve a consciousness of itself in its purest form. The more that deliberation and reflection and a critical spirit play a considerable part in the course of public affairs, the more democratic the nation. It is the less democratic when lack of consciousness, uncharted customs, the obscure sentiments and prejudices that evade investigation, predominate.”⁸²

⁸¹ Ibid., 93-4. Original: “Die Autorität des Heiligen in die bindende Kraft normativer Geltungsansprüche, die allein diskursiv eingelöst werden können, überführt. Der Begriff der Sollgeltung wird auf diesem Wege von empirischen Beimengungen gereinigt; die Gültigkeit einer Norm bedeutet am Ende nur noch, daß diese von *allen* Betroffenen mit guten Gründen akzeptiert werden *könnte* [...] Die Allgemeinheit einer moralischen Norm kann freilich für deren Gültigkeit nur dann ein Kriterium sein, wenn damit gemeint ist, daß allgemeine Normen in begründeter Weise den gemeinsamen Willen aller Betroffenen zum Ausdruck bringen.” Habermas, *Zur Kritik der funktionalistischen Vernunft*, 143.

⁸² Ibid., 81-2. My emphasis. Original: “Nun ist die Entwicklung moderner Staaten dadurch charakterisiert, daß diese sich von den sakralen Grundlagen der Legitimation auf die Grundlage eines in der politischen Öffentlichkeit kommunikativ gebildeten, diskursiv geklärten Gemeinwillens umstellen: »Unter diesem Gesichtspunkt erscheint uns die Demokratie somit als die politische Form, durch welche die Gesellschaft zum reinsten Bewußtsein ihrer selbst gelangt. Ein Volk ist um so demokratischer, als die Überlegung, die Reflexion, der kritische Geist im Gang der öffentlichen Angelegenheiten eine immer wichtigere Rolle spielen. Sie ist es hingegen um so weniger, als Bewußtlosigkeit, uneingestandene Gewohnheiten, dunkle Gefühle, mit einem Wort, die der Überprüfung entzogenen Vorurteile überwiegen.” Habermas, *Zur Kritik der funktionalistischen Vernunft*, 125.

In passages like the following, Habermas presents the ascendancy of communicative action almost as a self-moving historical inevitability, a Hegelian ontological dynamic *in linguistified form*:

The basic theoretical concept of the ethics of communication is “universal discourse,” the formal ideal of mutual understanding in language. Because the idea of coming to a rationally motivated, mutual understanding is to be found *in the very structure of language, it is no mere demand of practical reason but is built into the reproduction of social life*. The more communicative action takes over from religion the burdens of social integration, the more the ideal of an unlimited and undistorted communication community gains *empirical* influence in the real communication community.⁸³

In fact, such passages have more to do with the ontologization of language than the linguistification of ontology as per Gadamer. As should be evident by now, such passages are more the rule than the exception in TCA. These passages make it abundantly clear that, at this stage in his career, at least, Habermas viewed communicative action as an actually existing force—indeed, as the decisive force effecting human affairs—and decidedly *not* as a regulative principle.

It is the critical intellectual’s role to remove impediments to this process and facilitate the advance of history. Habermas approvingly quotes Mead’s assertion that the intellectual seer stands outside of and beyond the current norms and speaks with the voice of reason and the future:

In extreme cases a person can preserve his self-respect only when he acts in opposition to the moral judgment of all his contemporaries: “The only way in which we can react against the disapproval of the entire community is by setting up a higher sort of community which in a certain sense out-votes the one we find. A person may reach a point of going against the whole world about him; he may stand out by himself over against it. But to do that he has to speak the voice of reason to himself. He has to

⁸³ Ibid., 72. My emphasis. Original: “Der theoretische Grundbegriff der Kommunikationsethik ist der universelle Diskurs, das »formale Ideal sprachlicher Verständigung«. Weil diese Idee rational motivierter Verständigung in der Struktur der Sprache schon angelegt ist, ist sie keine bloße Forderung der praktischen Vernunft, sondern in die Reproduktion des gesellschaftlichen Lebens eingebaut. Je mehr das kommunikative Handeln von der Religion die Bürde sozialer Integration übernimmt, um so stärker muß auch das Ideal einer unbegrenzten und unverzerrten Kommunikationsgemeinschaft empirische Wirksamkeit in der realen Kommunikationsgemeinschaft gewinnen.” Habermas, *Zur Kritik der funktionalistischen Vernunft*, 147.

comprehend the voices of the past and the future...As a rule we assume that this general voice of the community is identical with the larger community of past and future.”⁸⁴

For all of the power of communicative action, Habermas maintains that something has gone awry. Communication is being “systematically distorted” in the modern world, with oblique, opaque strategic action impinging ever more on straightforward, transparent communicative action. Habermas, with Luhmann clearly in mind, explains this discrepancy by means of *the system* (*System*). As societies grow more complex and rational, conventional morality loses much of its integrating power and law becomes the primary force for rational integration in an increasingly post-conventional order. It is the institution best suited for the enactment of communicatively achieved norms in a complex, modern, mass society, in which direct communication between all participants involved is impossible. But the passing of the conventional phase also opens the door to the emergence of the non-normative *steering mechanisms* (*Steuerungsmechanismus*) of money and power, which are constitutive of the system. Habermas treats the system—namely, business and politics—as a “delinguistified” (*entsprachlicht*) and “norm free” (*normfrei*) zone of interaction.⁸⁵

Habermas references tribal societies to argue that the domination of the lifeworld and thorough subservience of an embryonic system to it is the norm in premodern societies. Where it does appear, power is really only a matter of prestige and a practical matter of organization, rather than one of domination and self-aggrandizement at the expense of the collective.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 98. Original: “So kann in extremen Fällen eine Person ihre Selbstachtung nur wahren, wenn sie dem moralischen Urteil aller Zeitgenossen entgegenhandelt: »Die einzige Methode, wie wir gegen die Mißbilligung der ganzen Gemeinschaft reagieren können, liegt darin, daß wir eine höhere Gemeinschaft in Ansatz bringen, die in gewissem Sinn die von uns vorgefundene Gemeinschaft überstimmt. Eine Person kann den Punkt erreichen, wo sie sich der ganzen Welt in den Weg stellt ... Dazu aber muß sie zu sich selbst mit der Stimme der Vernunft sprechen. Sie muß die Stimmen der Vergangenheit und der Zukunft umgreifen ... Im allgemeinen nehmen wir an, daß diese Stimme der Gemeinschaft mit der größeren Gemeinschaft der Vergangenheit und Zukunft übereinstimmt.« Habermas, *Zur Kritik der funktionalistischen Vernunft*, 149-50.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 153-99.

Habermas contrasts this supposedly almost exclusively normatively oriented lifeworld with the dominance of the system in modernity.

As the system becomes more powerful and autonomous, it *mediatizes* the lifeworld. It makes culture and society subservient to production, reversing what Habermas believes to be the natural order of things. It is impossible to perceive this mediatization of the lifeworld from within the lifeworld because it works through the structures of the lifeworld themselves.⁸⁶ Presumably, only the critical intellectual can attain the perspicacity of thought to become aware of the true situation. But for most of society, the *mediatization* (*Mediatisierung*) of the lifeworld continues apace, leading to “systemic distortion of communication,” “structural violence” (*strukturelle Gewalt*), and “objectively false consciousness” (*objektiv falsches Bewußtsein*), presumably in the forms of capitalism, mass consumption, mass media, and Cold-War politics.⁸⁷ Eventually, the mediatization progresses to such a point as to warrant, to Habermas’ mind, the title of *colonization* (*Kolonialisierung*) of the lifeworld by the system. Habermas wishes to renew the lifeworld through strengthening communicative action to reverse this ominous trend.

But what exactly is the lifeworld and how does it support the level of rationalization of norms that Habermas envisions? It will be remembered that Habermas originally drew on Popper’s three-world hypothesis. For Popper, the first world is that of physical objects or states. The second is the world of states of individual consciousness or mental states. And the third is the world of the objective content of thought or mind, which Habermas apparently conceives of as thoroughly open to articulation in linguistic propositions. But it will also be recalled that Habermas added another or perhaps two other worlds to this scheme: the “lifeworld” and the “social world,” and it is never clear in Habermas whether these worlds are identical to one

⁸⁶ Ibid., 186.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 187.

another and what their relationship to the third world is. The relationships among culture, history, language, and the lifeworld also remain unclarified? If culture and language compose the lifeworld, what, then, is the stuff of the social world?

The relationship between worlds is of critical importance to Habermas' ethical scheme and the possibility of the existence of something like communicative action. Habermas wishes to draw on resources and structures—i.e., metanorms—to thoroughly rationalize and universalize norms in the lifeworld through communicative action.⁸⁸ But he never makes clear exactly where these metanorms are to be found: the third world, the second world, some universal lifeworld that underwrites individual lifeworlds, or the social world.

For that matter, Habermas provides virtually no evidence to demonstrate that metanorms exist anywhere. He seems to take them for granted. This much is clear from the close analogy that Habermas repeatedly draws between normative rightness and factual correctness, treating norms as akin to putatively mind-, interpretation-, and language-independent objects or facts. One can point to the awesome predictive power of the natural sciences to argue with some plausibility—though by no means conclusively—that there are such independently existing facts and/or things. But the social sciences possess no parallel means of indicating the existence of metanorms, and Habermas does not fill this gap in TCA or elsewhere in his oeuvre.

Further, Habermas' notion of norms as analogous to truth claims does not eliminate the need for a truth-claim when asserting a norm; it only defers it. In order for the statement “One ought to do X” to be valid, an assertoric statement, such as “It is right that...” or “There is a metanorm stipulating that...” has to be true. Habermas' rightness claims are truth claims by

⁸⁸ Habermas writes of “resources” (*Ressourcen*) and “structures” (*Strukturen*). But I am interjecting the term metanorm, which seems a fair term for what Habermas describes.

another name, and they must bear the full ontological burden of referring to something that exists subject-independently and universally.

Habermas repeatedly refers to each world as a “totality” (*Gesamtheit*), implying that it is ultimately coherent and lends itself to systematic understanding, but, again, he offers virtually no evidence to support this claim.⁸⁹ To what extent is the lifeworld a “world” in the Habermasian sense—a stock of ordered, shared knowledge, organized in a coherent whole or one that admits of eventual coherence—and to what extent is it merely the strong but vaguely understood sense which each of us has that such a world does exist to underwrite the legitimacy our actions? The two are not identical. The feeling or sense that such coherence exists among actors does not, by any means, imply that it actually does exist to ground understanding and justify actions. It is beyond doubt that one can quite fruitfully and accurately speak of such things as “societies” and “cultures,” with peculiar attitudes and beliefs. But that there is ultimate coherence to such societies and cultures is very much in question. Indeed, most cultures beyond the tribal level, and certainly modern cultures, appear ridden with tensions, counter-cultures, and counter-norms. And even more questionable than the posit of coherent cultures is the assumption that there is a meta-, omni- or trans-cultural set of norms and psychic truths underlying all cultures and capable of incontrovertible linguistic articulation. Habermas is proposing, in classical rationalist fashion, that human beings can thoroughly make sense of the world (or worlds) through the use of reason alone. This is an extraordinary claim, requiring extraordinary evidence, and such evidence is not to be found in *TCA*.

⁸⁹ To be sure, the German *Gesamtheit* is a little more ambiguous in this sense than is the English *totality*. The former generally translates to “whole,” “totality,” or “entirety” but could also be translated as “collection” or “aggregate.” Habermas seems very much to use the term in the former sense, but an argument to the contrary could be made.

One sees the problems of holism that plagued Horkheimer and Adorno reappear for Habermas. How can Habermas be certain that each world is, in fact, a coherent whole? How can the “critical intellectual” position himself outside of each whole to have correctly understood it and to verify that he has understood it correctly? How can he be sure that each whole, each totality that is a world, is consistent with the others?

Lacking evidence for metanorms and thoroughly coherent worlds, Habermas offers little in the way of evidence that that which he calls communicative action can actually work: i.e., achieve rationally grounded agreement? What is there to preclude the rather intuitively plausible view that actors may find no ground for agreement even if they try indefinitely because their basic instincts and values are not, *pace* Habermas, thoroughly linguistified but are highly variable, subject to passion, and ultimately ir- or extra-rational? Habermas engages at length with theoretical psychology to argue that this is not the case but he totally ignores empirical psychology, evolutionary psychology, and simple observation of human behavior, all of which seem to speak strongly against his hypothesis on this matter.

Alongside problems with Habermas’ theory of norms, one encounters significant problems with his adaption of Austin’s theory of speech acts and his understanding of meaning. In the first place, it is far from clear that coercion and strategic action and illocution are mutually exclusive. If a mugger brandishes a knife and tells a passerby to give him his wallet, is this an illocutionary act or a perlocutionary act? It is true that the mugger’s action is goal-oriented; he wants the passerby’s wallet. On this ground, the action seems to be a perlocutionary one. But it is also true that the mugger’s action is oriented toward understanding; he wants the passerby to understand that he wants the passerby’s wallet and to accept the request, so as not to have to stab the passerby. As it is oriented towards understanding, the mugger’s action then seems to be an

illocutionary one. If this act is perlocution, it would mean that some perlocutionary acts can be judged by the “manifest meaning” of the speech act. In that case, illocutionary speech, as Habermas seems to understand it, would not be original, and perlocutionary speech would not be a perversion of speech. If the act is an instance of illocution, it would seem to indicate that speech acts oriented towards understanding can also be coercive and goal-oriented. In other words, it would mean that illocution is not necessarily and originally the pristine, non-coercive, disinterested form of speech that Habermas would have it be.

Even beyond the above example in less clear cases of coercion in speech, it seems difficult to deny that there is, so to speak, always a context beyond language, or beyond disinterested language, in which a speaker makes an illocutionary act and a hearer receives it. Emotions, values, perceptions, prejudices, and so forth enter into it the matter. Moreover, it is difficult to fully disentangle connotation and denotation except in the simplest of speech acts and speech situations. The “same” word can summon very different connotative and denotative networks to the minds of two different interlocutors. Is illocutionary success achieved if a hearer understands the “literal” meaning of an utterance but attaches different values and associations to it than the speaker does? Such considerations cast a great deal of doubt on whether a social actor can ever take on the role of “neuter,” as Habermas claims? Each actor is a person and not just a role, with all of the entanglements, prejudices, and subjectivity implied therein.

Habermas writes that we understand a speech act when we know what makes the recommendation, offer, or call to action contained therein acceptable.⁹⁰ But this seems quite a different criterion for understanding than is that of understanding “manifest meaning.” Surely, whether a given hearer finds the offer contained within a given speech act acceptable varies

⁹⁰ Habermas, *Reason and the Rationalization of Society*, 297.

extremely widely even within a “given” social context. What if A were to ask B to jump off of a building, and B were to decline, finding no possible reason to do as requested? Would this mean that B had not understood the speech act? Habermas is again taking it for granted that, in all but perlocutionary speech acts, a shared normative content underlies speech acts, but this is frequently not the case. What happens when and if speakers simply do not share each other’s norms and values? This is an extreme example, but there are many occasions on which we hear speech acts and completely fail to understand what the speaker is thinking. This is not unusual but is, in fact, quite normal. With this definition of “understanding,” Habermas opens the door wide to making misunderstandings entirely normal and, quite likely, inevitable in communication.

To some extent, Habermas amends his notion of understanding by introducing the concept of the warrant, asserting that even if a hearer does not understand the reasons for a speaker’s claim in the present, the hearer understands the claim if he can accept that the speaker might have good reasons for making it. Understanding no longer means full knowledge of the conditions under which a statement would be true, sincere, or normatively valid. It only means knowing that a speaker has grounds “through which the *claim* that its truth conditions are satisfied *could be redeemed*.”⁹¹ Now for Habermas, “to understand an assertion is to know when a speaker has good grounds to undertake a warrant that the conditions for the truth of the asserted sentences are satisfied.”⁹²

But the notion of the warrant does little to solve the problem. In the first place, because speaker and hearer may well disagree on what constitutes grounds for belief even in a warrant and whether these grounds do, in fact, exist or are, in fact, given. In the absence of strict,

⁹¹ Ibid., 317.

⁹² Ibid., 318.

rational, criteria for recognizing such grounds, understanding is no longer solely or even primarily a matter of structural linguistics but rather of trust. B believes A's claim to have a warrant because B trusts A. Conversely, B does not accept A's claim to have a warrant because B does not trust A. But even if the hearer is willing to trust that the speaker has a warrant, this acceptance in no way implies that the warrant could ever be argumentatively "redeemed." It is still necessary to actually work out the problem and come to an agreement about the validity of the claim in question. It is difficult, then, to accept that understanding in the sense of agreement is the telos of language because, even if considered "warranted," any number of claims may be subject to literally endless debate and Habermas' supposedly coherent lifeworld may transform into Derrida's centerless and flux-ridden structure. The conditional mood which Habermas uses in making these claims obscures the continuous deferrals of understanding and consensus that take place in real discourses among actual persons.⁹³

Many of these problems can be summarized with reference to the basic claim of *TCA*, which Habermas puts so:

With the illocutionary force of an utterance a speaker can motivate a hearer to accept the offer contained in his speech act and thereby to accede to a *rationally motivated binding force*. This conception presupposes that acting and speaking subjects can relate to more than only one world, and that when they come to an understanding with one another about something in one world, they base their communication on a commonly supposed system of worlds.⁹⁴

⁹³ Habermas' famous principle of D (discourse ethics) suffers from the same problem: "Only those norms can claim to be valid that meet (or could meet) with the approval of all affected in their capacity as *participants in a practical discourse*." Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, 65.

⁹⁴ Habermas, *Reason and the Rationalization of Society*, 278. Original: "Mit der illokutionären Kraft einer Äußerung kann ein Sprecher einen Hörer motivieren, sein Sprechangebot anzunehmen und damit eine rational motivierte Bindung einzugehen. Dieses Konzept setzt voraus, daß sprach- und handlungsfähige Subjekte auf mehr als nur eine Welt Bezug nehmen können, und daß sie, indem sie sich miteinander über etwas in einer Welt verständigen, ihrer Kommunikation ein gemeinsam unterstelltes System von Welten zugrunde legen." Habermas, *Handlungsrationalität und gesellschaftliche Rationalisierung*, 375.

This passage raises a number of questions that Habermas does not answer. What does it mean to speak of “rational motivation” (*rationale Motivation*) in this context? What does it mean for a reason or argument to be “binding” and “motivating”? What is the relationship between binding force and motivation? What constitutes a “sound” (*stichhaltig*) or convincing reason? Could a reason be “sound” but not “motivating”? Finally, do not the concepts of binding force and motivation breach the bounds of mere linguistic structures in which Habermas wishes to remain? Do they not enter into the realm of the ethical, the psychological, the philosophy of consciousness and subjectivity, and even the ontological? How can motivation, which certainly seems to involve affect and values, be treated purely within a linguistic framework?

The problem of “rational motivation” is a significant one that runs throughout Habermas’ theory. Habermas writes that communicative action involves the coordination of action among agents “not through egocentric calculations of success but through acts of reaching understanding.”⁹⁵ But could such action ever exist in a pure form? When two or more parties voice conflicting validity claims and they argue over which is the correct one, no party is simply seeking understanding. Even among people of good will and genuine interest in finding the “right” answer, each party advances and defends its own validity claim, at least initially. Each party attempts to convince the other party of the correctness of its claim. This is the result of the agonistic, point-counterpoint dynamic of argumentation. An honest interlocutor will concede certain points, accept pause from others, and sometimes be brought up short by others, but none of this very necessary and helpful intellectual honesty means that any party could ever take part in an argument *disinterestedly* or that argument could progress with disinterested interlocutors. It seems, then, that strategic or instrumental action is actually embedded in “communicative”

⁹⁵ Ibid., 285-6.

action and that there is often, perhaps always, a conflict of interest between reaching an impersonal understanding, on the one hand, and defending one's initial position or a variant thereof, on the other. It may, thus, not be right to draw a binary between strategic or goal-oriented action and communicative action.

But Habermas does display a pronounced tendency in *TCA* to reduce persons, with all of their complexities and aporias, to unambivalent roles: speaker, hearer, neuter. After initially having denied the passions any role in shaping individuality and even effacing the very importance of individuality, Habermas changes course slightly, tweaking Mead's understanding of the "I" and the "me." The "I," Habermas writes, is the expression of the passions. The "me" is the identity as formed through social rules and roles. The two aspects of self correspond to the id and the ego, respectively. But Habermas fails to recognize the implications of this posit for motivational systems and norm-formation. He never deals with a potential conflict between the "I" and the "me," or even between different aspects of one or the other. He seems simply to assume that communicative action inevitably forces an unproblematic "me" to the fore.⁹⁶

In this same subsection of *TCA*, Habermas spends a significant amount of time praising the modern emphasis on individuality but, having rejected the passions and dispositions as unimportant in individuation, Habermas does not say on what basis it is possible for individual personalities to develop out of the communicative roles of hearer, speaker, and neuter. He does not state upon what basis the subjective world takes shape and how expressive, therapeutic, and aesthetic discourse are possible.

Rather, the possibility of Habermas' very strong notion of communicative action seems to rest on a reification of language, an abstraction of language from subjective tendencies,

⁹⁶ Habermas, *Lifeworld and System*, 99-100.

moods, and inclinations. For Habermas, language is the new Geist: the medium of reconciliation and of subjectivity, that which contains and shapes individuals—but merely as parts of a whole—and which essentially advances its telos of unity through them, without receiving significant feedback from them. Thus, Habermas can assert that “reaching understanding is the inherent telos of human speech” and can explicitly denounce philosophies of consciousness as irrelevant to sociology.⁹⁷ But the reader will hopefully have been convinced by now that it is highly doubtful that language and consciousness can be so easily and thoroughly separated.

Further, even if one were to accept Habermas’ de-personalization of language and social life and idealization of language, it would still not be obvious that language necessarily or even tendentially leads to consensus. Habermas, after all, acknowledges that there are many uses of language that do not aim at achieving understanding, though he claims that such uses are parasitic on the originary communicative action and thus do not represent a threat to his claim that language is inherently oriented towards understanding.⁹⁸ But even if linguistic manipulation could not exist without the background of linguistic understanding, that would not mean that the former is somehow ontologically less real than the latter. Nor would it mean that understanding is necessarily achievable or could be achievable even without the “distortion” of language or communication. It would simply not matter as regards the practicability or achievability of communicative action. It matters to Habermas because he wants to ontologize language as essentially communicative action, to give it an existence independent of human beings as persons yet capable of steering their actions.

But the dynamics of communication become even more complicated and less cooperative once persons are reintroduced into them. So much is evident from the very reason why

⁹⁷ Habermas, *Reason and the Rationalization of Society*, 339-402.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 288.

Habermas saw fit to undertake the massive task of writing *TCA*. Habermas claims that money, power, and the culture industry are “systematically distorting communication” by spreading self-deception, resulting in “objectively false consciousness.” But what if the consumers of the culture industry do not believe that they are deceiving themselves or accept the charge of false consciousness when it is laid at their feet? What if they do not believe that their communications are distorted? How can Habermas be sure that he is not deceiving himself about one thing or another—the universality of norms, for example—and thus distorting his communications? Habermas radically limits the bounds of legitimate discourse *from the very beginning* of his theory of communicative action. Though Habermas claims, at times, that *TCA* provides tools for how people should argue but not the conclusions to which they should come, this is evidently not the case. In both his theory and his interventions in the public sphere, Habermas clearly mandates that persons must accept the premises that money, power, and the culture industry are distorting communication and that a universal system of norms exist to be clarified *or* they must accept therapeutic critique. Anyone who does not accept these premises, Habermas, argues, is deceiving himself and thus cannot take part in discourse. These premises are much closer to representing a maximal consensus than they are to representing a minimal consensus. Rather than open these premises to contestation, Habermas attempts a methodological end-around with his communicative action and discourse ethics. But, as Habermas himself writes, in the preface to *TCA*, “In good Hegelian terms, the formation of basic concepts and the treatment of substantive issues belong inseparably together.”⁹⁹

Such sentiments are not surprising. Habermas remains a left-wing Hegelian, a continuator and adapter of the *early* critical theory of Horkheimer and Adorno, with the goal of

⁹⁹ Ibid., xxxix.

diverting their emancipatory thrust from its aporetic dead ends. At least as far as the time of *TCA*'s publication, the implicit goal of Habermas' thought is still utopia. Habermas presents an interpretation of modernity—roughly the last five hundred years—that fulfills a logical pattern in a chronological manner. Rationalization took hold, initially due to the emergence of Protestantism and its ethic. It undermined convention and cleared room for the development, along rational lines, of society/lifeworld, autonomous art, ethics, law, politics, economics, and other spheres of life. But this potential for rationalization was only partly realized due to the failings of individualism and the philosophy of consciousness, the communicative overload in norm-consensus brought about by the undermining of conventions, and the manipulations and obstructions of power and money. These dynamics resulted in the lopsided development of the system (state politics and capitalist economics) and science and technology at the expense of ethics, culture, and ethically oriented law. Now, however, the advent of communicative action holds the potential to change all of this and to bring about the rationalization of the lifeworld and its reconciliation with the system on terms favorable to the former, resulting in the development of society and individuals along rational lines. This presentation of history and the future is clearly what Lyotard deemed a “grand narrative.” And, like all grand narratives, it can only maintain itself by marginalizing dissent.

It is no surprise, then, that Habermas approvingly quotes Durkheim's rather reified notion of “democracy”:

It is characteristic of the development of modern states that they change over from the sacred foundation of legitimation to foundation on a *common will* [*Gemeinwillen*] communicatively shaped and discursively clarified in the political public sphere: “Seen from this point, a democracy may, then, appear as the political system by which the society can achieve a consciousness of itself in its purest form. The more that deliberation and reflection and a critical spirit play a considerable part in the course of public affairs, the more democratic the nation. It is the less democratic when lack of

consciousness, uncharted customs, the obscure sentiments and prejudices that evade investigation, predominate.”¹⁰⁰

Moreover, in 1983’s *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, Habermas’ follow-up to TCA, Habermas explicitly rejects the notion that liberal democratic processes work because they lead to compromises that fully satisfy no party but keep the peace among them all. As Habermas writes, “Lumping together the dimension of the validity of norms, which proponents and opponents can argue about with reasons, and the dimension of the social currency of norms that are actually in effect *robs normative validity of its autonomous significance*.”¹⁰¹

Of Habermas’ fundamental humaneness and decency, there can be no doubt. Nor is it easy to deny that Habermas and the critical left have played a crucial role in the development of the FRG into one of the world’s most robust and stable liberal democracies. They held the feet of the powers-that-be to the fire by spreading awareness of the dangers of statism and complacency during the boom years. They have consistently defended the value of the welfare-state and social solidarity. Perhaps most importantly, it was Habermas’ generation of critical intellectuals and their student allies who finally forced the FRG into a sustained and ongoing confrontation with its Nazi past. The culture of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* that emerged may

¹⁰⁰ Habermas, *Lifeworld and System*, 81-2. My emphasis. Original: “Nun ist die Entwicklung moderner Staaten dadurch charakterisiert, daß diese sich von den sakralen Grundlagen der Legitimation auf die Grundlage eines in der politischen Öffentlichkeit kommunikativ gebildeten, diskursiv geklärten Gemeinwillens umstellen: »Unter diesem Gesichtspunkt erscheint uns die Demokratie somit als die politische Form, durch welche die Gesellschaft zum reinsten Bewußtsein ihrer selbst gelangt. Ein Volk ist um so demokratischer, als die Überlegung, die Reflexion, der kritische Geist im Gang der öffentlichen Angelegenheiten eine immer wichtigere Rolle spielen. Sie ist es hingegen um so weniger, als Bewußtlosigkeit, uneingestandene Gewohnheiten, dunkle Gefühle, mit einem Wort, die der Überprüfung entzogenen Vorurteile überwiegen. Das heißt, die Demokratie (...) ist der Charakterzug, den die Gesellschaften immer stärker annehmen.«” Habermas, *Zur Kritik der funktionalistischen Vernunft*, 124.

¹⁰¹ Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, 73. My emphasis. As the title suggests, this work marks a degree of repersonalization of actors after Habermas’ reduction of them to their social roles of speakers and hearers in TCA, noting that actors must empathize with each other for communicative action to work. But Habermas does very little to tame the ambitions of his strong linguistic idealizations in TCA or to explore the irrational, selfish, uncaring and antisocial aspects of human behavior in MCC. Nor is the distinction tenable that Habermas draws in MCC between “discourse ethics” and justice, on the one hand, and the ethics of the “good life,” on the other. It does not account for the possibility—indeed, probability—of incommensurate values.

not have been the comprehensive spiritual awakening for which the left of all nations has always longed but it was and is a genuinely moral phenomenon and one of real importance.

Nevertheless, the *underlying and active logic* of Habermas' *political theory* is less concerned with preserving and advancing human welfare and autonomy—as interpreted by actual persons—than with developing an ethical system to honor an abstract, ontologized, totalizing “ought.” Clearly, his sanctioning of a “common will” and “pure” society is woefully illiberal, connecting quite easily with the logic of left authoritarianism.¹⁰² Habermas would object and claim that no such outcome is possible because the aimed-at consensus has to be arrived at communicatively in the public sphere. But, without the outlet of compromise, what happens if “systematic distortion of communication” persists and the public chooses again and again to remain a so-called “acclamatory” public, largely comfortable with the status quo? Who/what represents the common will then? If there is no common will in such cases, two questions arise. First, does any person or institution have the right to establish a common will? Secondly, if communication has broken down so thoroughly, or was never established in the first place, or simply is impotent to overcome differences of values and interests, what then constitutes “legitimate government”? Just as importantly, who decides?

¹⁰² This is not the only passage or work in which Habermas employs the notion of general will. In *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, which will be treated in more detail below, Habermas writes: “The moral principle is so conceived as to exclude as invalid any norm that could not meet with the qualified assent of all who are or might be affected by it. This bridging principle, which makes consensus possible, ensures that only those norms are accepted as valid that express a *general will*.” Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, 63. Habermas repeats the claim of a general will several times thereafter. Original: “Das Moralprinzip wird so gefaßt, daß es die Normen als ungültig ausschließt, die nicht die qualifizierte Zustimmung aller möglicherweise Betroffenen finden könnten. Das konsensermöglichende Brückenprinzip soll also sicherstellen, daß nur die Normen als gültig akzeptiert werden, die einen *allgemeinen Willen* ausdrücken.” Habermas, *Moralbewusstsein und kommunikatives Handeln*, 69.

Habermas and Derrida

Habermas' first major confrontation with postmodernism came in 1979, with the publication of Jean-Francois' Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition*, which launched an attack against the nascent theory of communicative action that Habermas had already begun to develop in *Legitimation Crisis*.¹⁰³ In September 1980, as he neared the end of his work on *TCA*, Habermas struck back with a critique of postmodernism. The occasion was his reception of the Adorno Prize, a triennially bestowed award for outstanding achievement in the arts and humanities, in Frankfurt. Strangely, Habermas' target on this occasion was not Lyotard but Jacques Derrida.

By this time, Derrida was well known in the FRG. His name appeared with some frequency in the "culture" section of national publications. Frankfurt's *Suhrkamp Verlag*, the FRG's premier publishing house for theory and *belle-lettres*, had published translations of his first three books. This is particularly notable because Habermas was one of Suhrkamp's most prolific and influential authors, as well as a close friend and associate of Suhrkamp's president, Siegfried Unseld.¹⁰⁴

Derrida's growing influence in the FRG and Foucault's well-entrenched position there were obviously not to Habermas' liking. In his speech, "*Die Moderne – ein unvollendetes Projekt*" (*Modernity – An Unfinished Project*), Habermas set out to defend his notion of a modernity characterized by communicative action and a rationalizing lifeworld against what he identified as several different branches of conservatism (*Konservatismus*). He characterizes

¹⁰³ Jürgen Habermas, *Legitimationsprobleme im Spätkapitalismus* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1973), trans. Thomas McCarthy as *Legitimation Crisis* (Boston: Beacon, 1975); Jean-François Lyotard, *La Condition postmoderne: Rapport sur le Savoir* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1979), trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Brian Massumi as *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, 1984).

¹⁰⁴ Müller-Doohm, *Jürgen Habermas: Eine Biographie*.

“neoconservatism” (*Neokonservatismus*) basically as technocratic thinking, opposed to social and cultural innovation and rationalization, identifying it with the American sociologist Daniel Bell. “Old conservatives”—such as Leo Strauss and Habermas’ contemporary, the Catholic Philosopher Robert Spaemann—simply want to hold back rationalization in general and return to an earlier age, often drawing on Aristotle’s virtue ethics as a model. Habermas subsumes postmodernists—specifically Bataille, Foucault, and Derrida—under the moniker of “young conservatives” (*Jungkonservativen*). He attributes to them an excessive interest in aestheticizing life in a manner that understands aesthetics as entirely detached from normative and factual content. This lopsided focus on the aesthetic as subversion and play, Habermas contends, leads to political quietism. The appropriate answer to these brands of “conservatism,” Habermas suggests, is, of course, rationalization across all spheres of life.

Three years after his speech in Frankfurt and two after the publication of *TCA*, Habermas’ *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action* (*Moralbewusstsein und kommunikatives Handeln*, hereafter *MCCA*) appeared. One of the major thrusts of this work is a defense of the notion of truth (*Wahrheit*) and rationality (*Rationalität*) from poststructuralist and postmodernist critics, specifically those who practice a “deconstruction (*Dekonstruktion*) of Metaphysics.”¹⁰⁵ Thus, while Habermas does not cite Derrida in *MCCA* or name him, it seems clear that Habermas had Derrida, among others, in mind. Habermas argues that an ethics, which he calls *discourse ethics* (*Diskursethik*), emerges from nothing more than the universal suppositions that actors make when they enter into communication with one another. As the telos of discourse is understanding for Habermas, participants in discourse must recognize each other’s rights to free speech and expression. Beyond this, Habermas claims, they must accept a

¹⁰⁵ Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, 12. In fact, Habermas uses the participle (*dekonstruiert*) of the verb *dekonstruieren*, but the point stands.

raft of rights for all participants that allow them to contribute on equal terms in the discourse and that acknowledge what Habermas takes to be discourse's telos of understanding. Habermas does not enumerate these rights *per se* but points to his *principle of Universalization* (*Universalisierungsgrundsatz*, hereafter referred to as *U*) as setting the requirements.¹⁰⁶

According to U, every valid (*gültig*) norm must meet the conditions that “*all* affected can accept the consequences and the side effects its *general* observance can be anticipated to have for the satisfaction of *everyone*'s interests (and these consequences are preferred to those of known alternative possibilities for regulation).”¹⁰⁷

Habermas anticipates the objection that U itself must be rationally justified. His answer is that any participant who questions U commits a “performative contradiction” in doing so, undermining the very pragmatic ground on which he stands. Citing fellow discourse-ethicist Karl-Otto Apel, Habermas asserts that “A performative contradiction occurs when a constative speech act [...] rests on noncontingent presuppositions whose propositional content contradicts the asserted proposition.”¹⁰⁸ He continues:

The opponent will have involved himself in a performative contradiction if the proponent can show that in making his [the skeptic's] argument, he [the skeptic] has to make assumptions that are inevitable in *any* argumentation game aiming at critical examination and that the propositional content of those assumptions contradicts the principle of fallibilism. This is in fact the case, since in putting forward his objection, the opponent necessarily assumes the validity of at least those logical rules that are irreplaceable if we are to understand his argument as a refutation.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 86.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 65.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 80. Karl-Otto Apel, "The A Priori of the Communication Community and the Foundations of Ethics," in *Towards a Transformation of Philosophy* (London: 1980).

¹⁰⁹ Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, 80-1. Original: “Einen performativen Widerspruch begeht der Opponent aber dann, wenn ihm der Proponent nachweisen kann, daß er, indem er sich auf diese Argumentation einläßt, einige *in jedem* auf kritische Prüfung angelegten Argumentationsspiel unausweichliche Voraussetzungen machen muß, deren propositionaler Gehalt dem Grundsatz [Fallibilismus] widerspricht.” Habermas, *Moralbewusstsein und kommunikatives Handeln*, 87.

Despite Habermas' aversion to postmodernism, he invited Derrida to speak at Frankfurt in 1981.¹¹⁰ Whatever transpired on this occasion did not ease the tensions between the two men or reconcile their respective theories. The German deconstructionists Alexander Garcia Düttmann and Michael Wetzel both allege that Habermas was warning his students against Derrida in the strongest terms in the mid-1980s.¹¹¹ Wetzel and Derrida's biographer Benoît Peeters also claim that Habermas and Manfred Frank dissuaded Suhrkamp from continuing to publish Derrida's books.¹¹² In 1985, Habermas had his *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (*Der philosophische Diskurs der Moderne*) published, another defense of rationalism against the postmodern onslaught. It contained two chapters treating Derrida: "Beyond a Temporalized Philosophy of Origins: Jacques Derrida's Critique of Phonocentrism" (*Überbietung der temporalisierten Ursprungsphilosophie: Derridas Kritik am Phonozentrismus*) and "Excursus on Leveling the Genre Distinction between Philosophy and Literature" (*Exkurs zur Einebnung des Gattungsunterschiedes zwischen Philosophie und Literatur*).¹¹³

In "Beyond a Temporalized Philosophy of Origins," Habermas casts Derrida as the heir to Heidegger in terms of hostility to the Western tradition. He writes that Derrida is concerned to overcome the West and present it with its other in the forms of the Third World and of anti-humanistic irrationality. He conflates *Destruktion* with deconstruction, claiming that Derrida was attempting to escape, and possibly transcend, logos and logocentrism by positing writing as an ontologically independent and primary category:

Writing makes what is said independent from the mind of the author, from the breath of the audience, as well as from the presence of the objects under discussion. The medium

¹¹⁰ Lasse Thomassen, ed., *The Derrida-Habermas Reader* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2006).

¹¹¹ Jacques Derrida and Michael Wetzel, "Antwort an Apel/Erwiderungen," *Zeitmischrift* 3 (1987): 78; Peeters, *Derrida: A Biography*, 400.

¹¹² Derrida and Wetzel, "Antwort an Apel/Erwiderungen.;" Peeters, *Derrida: A Biography*, 501.

¹¹³ Jürgen Habermas, *Der Philosophische Diskurs der Moderne: Zwölf Vorlesungen* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1985); Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, trans. Frederick G Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1987).

of writing lends the text a stony autonomy in relation to all living contexts. It extinguishes the concrete connections with individual subjects and determinate situations, and yet the text still retains its readability. Writing guarantees that a text can always repeatedly be read in arbitrarily changing contexts. What fascinates Derrida is the thought of an *absolute readability*.¹¹⁴

In a later passage, Habermas continues, “Derrida wants to bring out the indissoluble interweave of the intelligible with the sign-substrate of its expression, one might even say: the transcendental primacy of the sign as against the meaning” and adds that, for Derrida, writing counts as the “absolute originary sign, abstracted from all pragmatic contexts of communication, independent of speaking and listening subjects.”¹¹⁵ In brief, Habermas argues that Derrida was doing exactly what he had accused the ontotheological tradition of doing: attempting to establish an ontology outside of and prior to any and all interpretation: “Even Derrida does not extricate himself from the constraints of the paradigm of the philosophy of the subject. His attempt to go beyond Heidegger does not escape the aporetic structure of a truth-occurrence eviscerated of all truth-as-validity.”¹¹⁶ For Habermas, then, Derrida was simply a semiological foundationalist, who sought to replace the subject and subjective experience with the structuralist/post-structuralist conceit of “writing.” Habermas ends the essay by hinting at the political implications of what he sees as “deconstruction,” stating that Derrida was more likely to inspire anarchist sentiment than to gravitate towards authoritarianism, as Heidegger had done.¹¹⁷

“Excursus on Leveling the Genre Distinction between Philosophy and Literature” faults Derrida for attempting to subsume philosophy under the category of literature. Overwhelmingly

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 165-6. Original: “Das Medium der Schrift verleiht dem Text eine steinerne Autonomie gegenüber allen lebendigen Kontexten. Sie löscht die konkreten Bezüge zu einzelnen Subjekten und bestimmten Situationen und erhält dem Text gleichwohl seine Lesbarkeit. Die Schrift garantiert, daß ein Text in beliebig wechselnden Kontexten immer wieder gelesen werden kann. Was Derrida fasziniert, ist die Vorstellung einer absoluten Lesbarkeit.” Habermas, *Der Philosophische Diskurs der Moderne: Zwölf Vorlesungen*, 192.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 171.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 166-7.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 181-2.

citing Jonathan Culler's *On Deconstruction* rather than Derrida himself—because, according to Habermas, Derrida was not one of “those philosophers who likes to argue”—Habermas alleged that “Derrida wants to expand the sovereignty of rhetoric over the realm of the logical in order to solve the problem confronting the totalizing critique of reason”; that is, the problem of how reason can deconstruct itself without performing a contradiction in doing so.¹¹⁸ For Habermas, this move is not allowable because it ignores what he claims is the defining trait of philosophical discourse: the attempt to establish a consensus between interlocutors, based on understanding and tied to truth- and validity-claims. In philosophical discourse, Habermas writes, interlocutors always understand each other as aiming at consensus, even if no consensus is immediately at hand. By contrast, he continues, fictive writing has no illocutionary force, and this lack of illocutionary meaning distinguishes it from real-life language. It creates different worlds in which pragmatic action and understanding are of little consequence.¹¹⁹

Strangely, though “Derrida” and “Habermas” camps quickly sprung up among theorists, Derrida himself published nothing in the immediate aftermath of the *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* to refute Habermas' claims. Derrida's earliest response came in a 1987 article co-written with Michael Wetzel for the obscure and short-lived German philosophy journal *Zeitmischrift*. Here Derrida did not address Habermas directly but rather his collaborator and fellow discourse-ethicist Karl-Otto Apel, rejecting the notion that he was Heidegger's heir as well as the charge of “anti-humanism.”¹²⁰ In his contribution to the article, Wetzel accused Habermas and discourse ethicists of sacrificing freedom of thought and productive philosophical

¹¹⁸ Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell, 2007); Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, 188, 93.

¹¹⁹ Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, 201.

¹²⁰ Derrida and Wetzel, "Antwort an Apel/Erwiderungen."

discourse to the “terrorism of consensus” and a supposedly omniscient “*Vermittlungsdenken*,” relegating to themselves the right, in a Hegelian manner, to speak on behalf of the Absolute.¹²¹

It was apparently not until the double blows of the Heidegger controversy and the De Man affair that Derrida felt compelled to address Habermas directly. The question of humanism and Derrida’s relationship with Heidegger again came to the fore in October 1987 with the publication of historian Victor Farias’ work *Heidegger and Nazism*, which quite conclusively demonstrated Heidegger’s fervor for Nazism.¹²² At around the same time, and purely coincidentally according to Derrida’s biographer Benoît Peeters, Derrida’s work *Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question* was published, which also treated Heidegger and his relationship with Nazism.¹²³ The simultaneous publications of the two works caused a major stir in France, with much of the press indicting Heidegger and his French interpreters.

Derrida took the opportunity to directly answer Habermas’ charges of ontologizing, irrationalism, and poeticism with a long endnote in 1988’s *Limited Inc.*, a November 1988 interview with the French review *Autrement*, and another long endnote in a revised 1989 edition of *Memoires for Paul de Man*.¹²⁴ With a great deal of justification, Derrida faulted Habermas for not carefully reading his works, for citing Culler rather than Derrida himself, and for incorrectly claiming that Derrida had tried to collapse philosophy into literature, adding that his exploration of the encounters between literature, philosophy, and other genres does not “reduce,” “level,” or

¹²¹ Ibid., 77.

¹²² Victor Farias, *Heidegger et le nazisme* (Paris: Verdier, 1987). Translated as Victor Farias, *Heidegger and Nazism*, trans. Paul Burrell, Gabriel R Ricci, and Dominic Di Bernardi (Philadelphia: Temple, 1989).

¹²³ Jacques Derrida, *De l'esprit: Heidegger et la question* (Paris: Galilée, 1987). Translated as Jacques Derrida, *Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question*, trans. Marian Hobson (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2003).

¹²⁴ Jacques Derrida, "Afterword," in *Limited Inc.* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern, 1988), 134n9; Jacques Derrida, "Like the Sound of the Sea Deep within a Shell: Paul de Man’s War," in *Memoires for Paul de Man* (New York: Columbia, 1989), 242n; Jacques Derrida, "A quoi pensent les philosophes?," *Autrement* 102 (November 1988). Translated as Jacques Derrida, "Is There a Philosophical Language?," in *Points...Interviews, 1974-1994*, ed. Elisabeth Weber (Stanford: Stanford, 1995).

“assimilate,” but rather “refines differences.”¹²⁵ He again rejected the notions that he was Heidegger’s heir, an “anti-humanist,” or a “nihilist,” pointing out that he had already described the differences between *Destruktion* and deconstruction in *Grammatology* and he echoed Wetzel’s charge that analytic philosophers and discourse ethicists were restricting philosophical discourse and dismissing the views of opponents in the name of a longed-for “clarity” and consensus.¹²⁶

By contrast, Derrida argued that “clarity” itself—along with all the other means and standards of philosophical validity and demonstration—is always-already at question in philosophical discourse. In “Is There a Philosophical Language,” Derrida writes candidly, “I have never assimilated a so-called philosophical text to a so-called literary text. The two types seem to me irreducibly different.” But he adds that the limits between the two types of texts are more complex than commonly thought. The two types of texts can form a single “corpus.” The project he had set himself throughout his entire philosophical career is to examine the limits and assumptions of the philosophical discourse. Thus, he asks pointedly, “Must one not be interested in the conventions, the institutions, the interpretations that produce or maintain this apparatus of limitations [which define the philosophical discourse], with all the norms and thus all the exclusions they imply?”¹²⁷

It is not hard to see why deconstruction appeared as a menace to Habermas.

Deconstruction poses a direct and implacable threat to Habermas’ critical theoretical project, which he describes as follows:

I want to maintain that the program of early critical theory foundered not on this or that contingent circumstances, but from the exhaustion of the paradigm of the philosophy of consciousness. I shall argue that a change of paradigm to the theory of communication

¹²⁵ See especially, Derrida, “Like the Sound of the Sea Deep within a Shell: Paul de Man’s War,” 242n.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 217.

makes it possible to return to the undertaking that was *interrupted* with the critique of instrumental reason; and this will permit us to take up once again the since neglected tasks of a critical theory of society.¹²⁸

For Habermas, language is an escape from confusion and conflict; for Derrida, it is the condition of possibility for confusion and conflict. Indeed, the signifier's unconsummated nature and the continual deferral of the transcendental signified's arrival constitute the engine of discourse for Derrida. From a Derridean perspective, then, few things can be more misguided than relying on language to usher in understanding and consensus. To Derrida's way of thinking, the extreme variant of consensus that Habermas demands—agreed upon by all persons whom it affects—can never be achieved. The most that is attainable is a cosmetic substitute that maintains itself by silencing dissent. And it is against just such a false consensus that Derrida directs the implicit political thrust of his early work. One need not accept the whole of Derrida's semiology to appreciate the force of this thrust, as it is rather difficult to reconcile Habermas' highly demanding ideals of *TCA* and *MCCA* with the divisiveness one encounters at all levels of social life.

Moreover, Habermas' criticism of Derrida as "irrational" founders on the distinction between "rationality" and "rationalism." Derrida is decidedly not a rationalist, but this does not mean that he denounces rationality or embraces irrationality. It simply means that he is not prepared to accept the deeply ambitious notion of rationality that Habermas champions in his rationalism. This distinction comes to the fore in Habermas' levelling a charge of *performative contradiction* against Derrida and other "young conservatives."

There are a number of objections that one can fairly raise against this charge. First, Habermas assumes that the point of argumentation for the deconstructionist is to convince or

¹²⁸ Habermas, *Reason and the Rationalization of Society*, 386.

“rationally motivate” his interlocutor and that the deconstructionist is thereby contradicting himself by arguing that ethical argument is groundless. But Habermas’ premise is not warranted. The deconstructionist may not be arguing with the purpose of convincing and may not accept the rules of the language game of convincing but may be arguing for any number of other reasons: to persuade aesthetically and rhetorically, to pass the time, to antagonize or troll his interlocutor because he enjoys doing so, to bolster his ego, to attempt (probably foolishly) to impress a female witness to the debate, to finally complete his PhD thesis, etc.

Secondly, Habermas has not, by any means, demonstrated that moral validity claims are analogous to truth claims. If “truth” is taken in a fallibilist sense, truth-claims allow for falsification and can lay claim to predictive validity, as well as something very closely approaching universality and necessity as far as human reality goes. But it simply has not been demonstrated that this is true of moral validity claims. Thus, the moral skeptic may well acknowledge that he is using logical and argumentative tools and making truth-claims to refute moral realism without, thereby, performing a contradiction because his use of those tools and of truth-claims is not dependent on his acceptance of the objectivity or universality of norms but rather of logical, epistemological, and/or ontological truth. Now, if the moral skeptic were arguing against the existence of these logical, epistemological, semiotic, or ontological truths, then he would be contradicting himself, but it is clear that his belief in these truths is not contingent on his acceptance of normative or ethical truths.

Finally, there is the post-structuralist objection. For Habermas, of course, fundamental logical contradictions which question the consistency, meaning, presence, being, or coherence of reason or reality themselves are not allowable and indicate not only the untruth of a proposition but seem to indicate the truth of its inverse: i.e., if it is not true that X is false, X must be true.

For Derrida and deconstructionists, by contrast, such contradictions only indicate the fundamental aporias of reason and existence themselves: différance, arche-writing, trace...

Deconstruction does not simply “refute” logical rules; it demonstrates their fundamental inconsistency and incompleteness. It accepts the presuppositions of argumentation as such, i.e., as necessary presuppositions of argument, but challenges the assumption that they have a telos or that they are self-consistent. In this matter, though with a somewhat different slant, Derrida would probably affirm the maxim of Habermas’ mentor Adorno: the whole, including the assumption thereof, is the false.

Conclusion

As long as we remain human beings, there is no escaping the human condition, which means there is no escaping the hermeneutic condition: the necessity and fact of interpretation without access to an Archimedean point beyond interpretation. No method or system of thought—no matter its claimed reflexivity, critical nature, fundamental ontology, or scientificity—has prevailed in its attempts to circumvent the necessity of interpretation or the uncertainty that comes with it. Methods that aim at such a neutralization of the open-endedness of discourse tend overwhelmingly to also deny or attempt to elide the reality, limits, and undesirable aspects of human reason, nature, finitude, and frailty. These methods are, thus, always somewhat anti-humanistic in that they deny the interpretive nature of human existence, which might, after all, be aptly deemed *la réalité humaine*.

Accordingly, methods aiming at certainty and/or holism tend to be hostile to liberalism as a political form that accepts human diversity and imperfection and all of the ambivalences and ambiguities that go along with it. Rather than attempt to engineer such imperfections out of human beings or excommunicate them by fiat, liberal democracies place the burden for overcoming them and working around them on human beings themselves. Under the auspices of a modernity marked by rationalization and disenchantment, such is the great strength of liberalism. It does not impose an all-pervasive meaning to fill the void of disenchantment; it allows those humans who live under its aegis to come to terms with meaning for themselves. In this sense, liberalism is the political form most adequate to postmodernity if the latter is understood as the apex of disenchantment, in which the condition of disenchantment and the

necessity of hermeneutics gain widespread recognition among intellectuals and the public at large.

For all of the interpretive latitude that liberalism allows, it is not value-neutral. If liberalism is to be understood in an ethical sense at all, as something other than purely a matter of self-interest—and this, actually, is not a given—then there is no avoiding that it must have recourse to values. No philosophical method or system—even Habermas’ exhaustive “post-metaphysical” discourse ethics—has succeeded in divorcing ethics or morality from the particularity and contingency of values. The values upon which liberalism is founded are the values of liberals themselves: i.e., humanistic values. These entail historically exceptional but still widely varying levels of respect for individual autonomy, human wellbeing, and humaneness in general. But the word “humanistic” in this sense is something of a misnomer, for it does not by any means indicate that these values are universal among human beings or even ought to be – if “ought” is understood in a sense that is not thoroughly conditioned by the very humanistic values that it seeks to ground.

Openness of discourse and acceptance of human finitude are what led a young Jacques Derrida to buck the trend of his time and eschew radical politics in favor of what appeared to many of his contemporaries and critics as a tepid liberalism. Derrida’s early texts evince an understanding of language as inevitably aporetic and unconsummated, a fitting philosophical corollary to the intellectual openness of liberalism. In this, Derrida parted ways decisively with one of his most famed progenitors, Martin Heidegger. Heidegger’s anxiety over the purported recession of Being—i.e., meaning—from a disenchanted world led him to embrace a totalizing system that promised an escape from the idle chatter of the they, the desiccation of scientific discourse, and the disorientation of modern thought. The total solution to disenchantment that

Heidegger proposed could not brook the uncertainty to which human discourse is subject and to which liberalism gives such freedom. Heidegger was not alone in touting extreme solutions to the intellectual and political fissiparousness of his day. He was part of a wave of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century thinkers, preeminently German, who refused to countenance anything less than total certainty or total commitment and that included the leftist Max Horkheimer. In postwar West Germany, Hans-Georg Gadamer paralleled Derrida to some extent in thinking with and against Heidegger, adapting the latter's notion of *Vorhaben* to allow for and even encourage open dialogue with others and reinterpreting the interminability of interpretation in language not as a distraction from Being but as a continual advance of it. By contrast, Gadamer's younger contemporary, Jürgen Habermas, continued Horkheimer's project of enouncing a basis for a utopian society – albeit, by profoundly different means and in a profoundly different manner than that of Horkheimer. In *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Habermas developed a theory of language that absorbs the synthetic power and teleology of Hegel's Geist, encouraging rational discourse but only under stringent conditions and with an at least partially predetermined end.

Fortunately, Habermas' story does not end with the deep idealism of *The Theory of Communicative Action*. In *Habermas: An Intellectual Biography*, Matthew Specter very adeptly traces Habermas' partial reconciliation with liberalism in general and the FRG in particular, during the *Tendenzwende* (change of course) of the 1980s. In 1982, the SPD-FDP coalition that had governed since 1969 broke up due to controversy over NATO's proposed stationing of mid-range nuclear missiles in West Germany. The new CDU/CSU-FDP coalition that formed under Helmut Kohl not only embraced President Ronald Reagan's policy of confrontation with the Communist Bloc but also some of the rhetoric of neo-liberalism that was becoming dominant in

the US and UK. Under these circumstances, the SPD, reinvigorated by opposition to nuclear armament, and the Federal Republic of the Sixties and Seventies began to look rather good by comparison to many leftist critics, as did the institutions of mass liberal democracy that the West had strengthened in the postwar era.

Accordingly, Habermas adopted notions of Western integration (*Westbindung*) and constitutional patriotism (*Verfassungspatriotismus*) that challenged Kohl and the conservatives on their own ground. Rather than Westernization being a matter of service in NATO and pronounced anti-Communism, it became a matter of cherishing the liberal-democratic institutions of the West. Rather than patriotism signaling chauvinistic pride, it meant loyalty to the constitutional order of the *Basic Law* (*Grundgesetz*) and the institutions that the FRG had developed since the war. To be sure, Habermas had long championed a sort of intellectual and cultural westernization of Germany but had simultaneously regarded the actually existing West and the actually existing institutions of the FRG with a high degree of suspicion. Faced with the prospect, plausible or not, of seeing these institutions lost or transformed due to a resurging conservatism, this suspicion ebbed somewhat in the 1980s, giving way more and more to affirmation – albeit a not uncritical affirmation. Thus, Habermas made clear in these years that he viewed as illegitimate any civil disobedience not undertaken in the name of the constitutional order itself. For this reason, he rejected the appellation of “resistance” (*Widerstand*) that many participants in the peace movement and other new social movements adopted. Even in the imperfect Federal Republic, resistance, Habermas implied, was not warranted.¹

It was against this background that Habermas conceived and began work on his second magnum opus, *Between Facts and Norms* (*Faktizität und Geltung*, *BFN* hereafter). Habermas set

¹ Specter, *Habermas: An Intellectual Biography*.

to work on this in 1985 with a grant from the German National Science Foundation and published it in 1992. *BFN* marks a significant step in Habermas' reconciliation with actually existing liberalism, rendered all the more noteworthy by the events of 1989 to 1992 in Germany. After the unexpected fall of the Berlin Wall, Kohl's CDU/CSU joined forces with ordinary East Germans to push for a rapid reunification of the territories of the GDR. The framers of the Basic Law had anticipated eventual reunification and had thus included Article 146, which essentially stipulated the replacement of the Basic Law by a constitution in the event of unification. As this would have entailed delays and potentially a significant strengthening of the welfare-state and possibly even concessions to socialism, the architects of rapid reunification opted instead to carry out the process under Article 23 of the Basic Law. This article stipulated that "other parts of Germany" not already incorporated into the FRG accede to the Basic Law upon joining the FRG. The framers of the Basic Law had hoped to incorporate West Berlin into the FRG by means of Article 23, but the Allied powers prevented them from doing so. But the Article did come into effect when the Saar Protectorate joined the FRG in 1957. With the rapid accession allowed under Article 23, the five states of the GDR formally joined the FRG on 3 October 1990, less than a year after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Though the deployment of Article 23 and the hasty and ill-considered push for reunification infuriated the left, Habermas' loyalty to the FRG did not waver, and the Hegel of the Bonn Republic made ready to take up that role in the Berlin Republic. The reconciliation with the FRG that Habermas had effected in *Between Facts and Norms* held.

In *BFN*, Habermas outlines a theory of liberal law and democracy founded on the notions of communicative action and discourse ethics. In doing so, he seeks to reconcile the emphasis on human rights and individual autonomy of a strong version of liberalism with the emphasis on

human wellbeing and the collectivist ethos of republicanism by way of his thesis of the *co-originality* (*Gleichursprünglichkeit*) of the two. According to this thesis, a community of actors tacitly agree to accord each other the basic rights demanded by the discourse principle *in the act of entering* a political community with one another. Thus, liberalism and republicanism, autonomy and welfare, freedom and (at least relative) equality, and ideal justice and substantial law are to be understood as simply two moments of the same founding act, played out indefinitely in the life of a liberal-democratic republic. In a very significant break with his earlier idealizations, and a concession to Niklas Luhmann's systems theory, Habermas recognizes the necessity of bureaucracy, markets, financial institutions, an extensively articulated body of law, complex parliamentary procedures, and mass media. He acknowledges that they are vital to alleviating the individual and even representative political institutions of a great deal of functional competence and responsibility and that they play an indispensable role in holding society together and producing and distributing goods and information. Habermas also gives due attention to the fissiparousness of a pluralist public sphere, in which interests are often at odds with one another and different ethics confront each other. However, Habermas maintains that citizens can still understand themselves as the authors of law and as the collective sovereign of the state in that the "communicative will" established in the public sphere—fractured and mediated as it may be—works its way into the form of law via the "sluices" in the political system: presumably elections, town halls, letter-writing campaigns, etc.²

Habermas' claims in *BFN* are far more modest and hermeneutically accessible than are those in *TCA*. This modesty and relatability extends beyond Habermas' overarching argument to encompass a number of supporting points, as well. In *BFN*, human beings must opt for

² Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*, trans. William Rehg (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1996).

communicative action, rather than simply being swept up by its illocutionary power. Moreover, Habermas acknowledges that communicative action has only a “weak” binding force and that laws must supplement this with their stronger binding force, constituted not only of respect for norms but also of self-interest. The discourse principle becomes the chief point of reference for grounding *basic* rights, largely supplanting *TCA*’s notion of undiscovered metanorms in the lifeworld or the world of objective mental realities. Habermas even recognizes the necessity for compromise and permits it some scope.

What emerges from Habermas’ efforts in *BFN* is—at least in its broader outlines—a political and juridic theory of liberal democracy that is largely consistent with liberal practice. Yet, if Habermas is to be taken at his word on some key points in the text, his epistemology and moral theory still cling to the unjustified holism and teleology of his left Hegelian roots, and this moral theory seeps into his political and juridic theory. This dynamic makes itself known in several facets of Habermas’ work.

In the first place, one encounters a methodological difficulty, a holism at the front end, so to speak. Habermas’ method of *rational reconstruction* (*rationale Rekonstruktion*) aims to explicate and systematize the often implicit assumptions and understandings upon which theorists and practitioners proceed when they theorize a topic or claim to be acting in accords with it or on its basis.³ In *BFN*, Habermas seeks to apply this method to law, liberalism, republicanism, democracy, and related topics. But rational reconstruction relies on the unwarranted and implausible assumption that there is, in fact, a coherent understanding of a field which all actors within it or theorists of it share. It does not take seriously the possibility that

³ Tempting as it is to believe that Habermas’ method of rational reconstruction (*Rekonstruktion*) negatively references Derrida’s deconstruction (*Dekonstruktion*), the two terms seem to have nothing to do with one another. Habermas adopted the term from the Hungarian philosopher of science Imre Lakatos.

diverse actors and theorists act and theorize with diverse and even conflicting notions of the topic at hand. If one does not accept the claimed holism of rational reconstruction, one finds in *BFN* much that is broadly convincing and appealing but little that is conclusive or compelling enough to win one over to fidelity to Habermas' understanding of liberal democracy.

For his part, Habermas seems to view his discourse theory of law and democracy as uniquely compelling in that he believes that it alone can account for and conduce to liberal democracy's *legitimacy* (*Legitimität*). There seem to be two or three basic criteria of "legitimacy" for Habermas: 1a) the *total* identity of the governed and governor, 1b) consequently, a domination- and coercion-free social order, and 2) a "functioning" public sphere. The "total" of 1a does not mean "unmediated"; Habermas' sluice theory of democratic will makes that much clear. Rather, "total" means that *all* members of society must be rationally able to understand themselves as abiding by laws that they themselves have created or approved as citizens. What "functioning" in reference to public spheres means is trickier. According to Habermas, a public sphere functions if it has "the capacities to ferret out, identify, and effectively thematize latent problems of social integration (which require political solutions)."⁴

Several major problems with such a strong notion of legitimacy immediately present themselves. All of these problems spring from the nexus of Habermas' exaggerated claims regarding communicative action, moral realism, the discourse principle, and the general will. Although he modifies and moderates his notion of the general will in many ways, deferring its final arrival for some unspecified point in the future, Habermas remains intent on preserving what is ultimately a strong notion of the general will in *BFN* and, hence, on a domination- and coercion-free society. He continues to stress throughout *BFN* that a legal order and even

⁴ Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, 358.

individual laws are only legitimate if *all* those whom they affect *could, in principle*, rationally assent to them. Though Habermas acknowledges that policy-makers and administrators must act even in the absence of a total consensus, he understands such actions not as decisions in the full sense of the word but only as pauses in the deliberative practice, whose telos remains full understanding and agreement.

Not only is such an understanding of the deliberative process inverted in that it reifies the general will and assesses reality against the standard of the ideal—and Habermas’ ideal, in particular—it also relies on Habermas’ implausibly strong notions of communicative action and morality. Though Habermas acknowledges in *BFN* that actors must opt for communicative action rather than strategic action, he continues to give the impression that, once actors do opt for communicative action, their motives are no longer mixed, argumentation becomes free of the detritus of contingency, perspective, and prejudice, and communicative action proceeds as a largely autonomous force. Further, though Habermas does accord compromise a place in *BFN*, he limits its role to those matters involving only interests and not norms, suggesting that compromise on normative matters is illegitimate. He also claims that compromises are legitimate only if power is equally distributed among *all* parties to the compromise. These two conditions do much to blunt the stabilizing power of compromise.

More broadly, if Habermas’ strong notion of communicative action is to actually work, there must be something to vouchsafe its efficacy. Habermas assigns the discourse principle this role. To repeat, this principle holds that “just those action norms are valid to which all possibly affected persons could agree as participants in rational discourses.”⁵ The discourse principle supports Habermas’ strong notions of *morality* and *justice*, which he distinguishes from *ethics*

⁵ Ibid., 107.

and *authenticity*. He sees the latter as truly universal and admitting of a single right answer, whereas the former pertain to questions of “the good life” and how a person or group of people want to understand herself or themselves. But the discourse principle is too vague and reliant on the conditional mood to underwrite the effectiveness of communicative action. What does it mean to say that all possibly affected actors *could* agree? Who decides whether they *could* agree or under which circumstances they *would* agree if not the actors themselves?

To be sure, Habermas does offer an attenuated version of the discourse principle in the democratic principle: “Only those statutes may claim legitimacy that can meet with the assent of all citizens in a discursive process of legislation that in turn has been legally constituted.”⁶ But this tweaking of the discourse principle does little to avoid the problems of the original. Though Habermas tones down the universality and dispenses with the conditional mood of the discourse principle, the verb “can” still fails to engage in a meaningful way with actually existing citizens and their actual preferences. What does it mean to say that laws *can* meet with the assent of all citizens if they, in fact, *do* not? The discourse principle and democratic principles, then, themselves need warranting. Though Habermas does not make explicit recourse to the multiple-worlds hypothesis or the existence of pre-existing metanorms in *BFN*, it is difficult to imagine what other than these suppositions could buttress communicative action, the discourse principle, and Habermas’ strong notion of morality. And we have already seen the problems with the supposition of metanormativity.

In addition to seeking a way out of the problem of interpretation, Habermas’ strong notions of communicative action and morality continue to attempt a circumvention of the problems posed by human imperfection, intractability, and inhumanity. Habermas does not

⁶ *Ibid.*, 110.

acknowledge the profound tension—indeed, often simple opposition—between what he calls “ethics” and what he calls “morality” or between “authenticity” and “justice.” To a great extent, Habermas’ understanding of morality will appeal to many, possibly even the overwhelming majority of humanists. But the simple fact remains that not all humans are humanists. Many prefer to identify “morality” and “justice” with an unquestionable deity, dogma, aesthetic, or even with their own nakedly egotistical preferences and whims. Such persons will not recognize themselves in the secular humanistic laws propagated by a political community of humanists. They will not understand themselves as part of the collective will formed therein.

On a lesser scale, Habermas’ penchant for idealizing humanity and rationality can be seen in his democratic principle and in his second criterion for legitimacy: i.e., the stipulation that a functioning public sphere must possess “the capacities to ferret out, identify, and effectively thematize latent problems of social integration (which require political solutions).” What happens if the public is so divided or wrongheaded that it cannot perform these functions? Does this mean that the governing order is illegitimate or simply that the governed—or some significant portion thereof—are unequal to the task of governing themselves and each other effectively, fairly, and humanely? Is this a matter of the core of the political system and mass media failing the periphery of the public sphere or of the human actors of the periphery failing themselves and each other? Of course, the two possibilities are by no means mutually exclusive, but the latter should not be collapsed into or blamed primarily upon the former, as critical theorists are so wont to do.

Habermas also fails to recognize the positive aspects of apathy. Despite his concessions to free choice, Habermas underestimates the value of acquiescence, apathy, and unreflective acceptance of the status quo in holding liberal democracies together. As is becoming ever more

apparent in the hyper-moralized, hyper-publicized liberal democracies of the present day, Habermas' old interlocutor Luhmann was right to suggest that an excessive moralization of society can produce massively destabilizing results and throw a wrench into the gears of a largely beneficent system. The live-and-let-live, go-along-to-get-along ethos has its limitations, to be sure, but a fairly widespread acceptance of its logic, to one extent or another, is a prerequisite for the stability of any society and polity, and certainly for mass liberal democracies. In this respect, there is something to be said for the much maligned *Deutsche-Mark-Nationalismus*.

One can easily discern a far more plausible version of the political and juridic theory in *BFN* than the one arrived at by taking Habermas at his word in all particulars, a version holding much appeal and argumentative force. The same is true for much of Habermas' work on argumentation. Habermas is right in his insistences that discourse cannot be reduced to power, that rationality and rational discourse are critically important, and that approximations of political and ethical consensuses are vital for holding societies together and advancing and defending human wellbeing. If one jettisons Habermas' persistently strong idealizations, one is left with much of obvious value. The problem is that Habermas, even in his later years, refuses not only to abandon his utopian impulse but insists also upon attempting to rationally justify it.

By way of partial contrast, Jacques Derrida in his middle and later years discovered his utopian impulse but never quite conceded to whatever urge he may have felt to ground it or translate it into a possibility. Unfortunately, it is not possible here to detail the shift in Derrida's notion of deconstruction from an apolitical form to a virtual synonym for the most stringent ethical imperative, an imperative so demanding and all-encompassing that it cannot even be articulated. It will have to suffice to note several key facets of this transvaluation.

The first of these is Derrida's compromise in toning down the technical correctness of his language, so as to allow himself to speak of a broader range of subjects and in a more evocative manner. Of course, this is all relative. Derrida remained extremely scrupulous in bracketing his full acceptance of terms and qualifying his use of them. Nevertheless, he wrote and spoke more and more of referents that might be thought of as lying outside of the text, sometimes almost taking them as givens: contexts, power differentials, technologies, polities, political regimes, and persons. In this sense, the elder Derrida moved closer to the younger Foucault, just as the aging Foucault had moved closer to the younger Derrida by the time of his death in 1984. The diminution of his terminological precision is the price Derrida paid for becoming an ethical and political thinker, as he sought words to describe the ineffable and to succinctly reference the mundane.

On a related note, as Habermas' theory moved towards his already avowed humanism, Derrida's moved away from humanism. Though Derrida's thought never fully left the orbit of humanism, its trajectory shifted more and more under the massive gravitational pull of the *absolute other*. At times, Derrida can almost be read as a disciple of Levinas in his adoption of a language that reifies the other *as such*, placing it almost beyond all criticism, all reciprocity, and all responsibility. At times, one can almost see Derrida grasping for the unconditioned, the impossible, as in this passage, where he calls for a hospitality that knows *no* bounds and places *no* restrictions on the guest's welcome, contrasting the *law* of this radical hospitality with the mundane *laws* of a lesser hospitality:

It is as though hospitality were the impossible: as though the law of hospitality defined this very impossibility, as if it were only possible to transgress it, as though *the* law of absolute, unconditional, hyperbolic hospitality, as though the categorical imperative of hospitality commanded that we transgress all the laws in the plural of hospitality.⁷

⁷ Jacques Derrida, *Of Hospitality*, trans. Rachel Bowlby (Stanford: Stanford, 2000), 75.

But Derrida never transformed the subjunctive of the “as though” into the indicative of “it is” or the imperative of “it must be.” Even in the midst his quasi-religious ethical-political turn, Derrida retained his customary ambivalence, his customary refusal to countenance an absolute *dictum*. The word “perhaps” appears nearly 700 times in the 308-page English-language translation of the *Politics of Friendship*.⁸ The only thing that is not ambivalent in the Derrida of this period is his *longing* for unambivalence, for the unconditional. But he never fully gives into this longing by recourse to a method or system that would enshrine it while simultaneously denying it and seeking to elide it. Instead, he understands radical hospitality, justice, and democracy as *non-regulative ideals*; that is, ideals that whisper to us always to do better but offer no definitive advice for how to go about that. In this, Derrida continued to abide in an openness to a being that is always *to-come* but will never have arrived.⁹

With Derrida’s ethical-political turn and Habermas’ easing of his idealizations, the stage was set for a renewed encounter of the two. In October 1999, Derrida and Habermas met at a party in Evanston, Illinois, where they were both lecturing at the time. The two men seem to have mellowed with age, and Derrida in particular seems to have been anxious to settle old feuds in a conciliatory manner. But it was Habermas who approached Derrida at the party and suggested that the two bury the hatchet and undertake a friendly dialogue. A short while later, the two met in Paris and agreed to hold a one-day seminar on problems in philosophy, law, ethics, and politics. This materialized in 2000, when Derrida traveled to Frankfurt at the invitation of Axel Honneth. Later that year, Habermas travelled to Paris and gave a lecture on

⁸ Jacques Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*, trans. George Collins (New York: Verso, 2005).

⁹ Derrida, *Of Hospitality*; Jacques Derrida; "Force of Law: The "Mystical Foundation of Authority"," in *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar (New York: Routledge, 2001); Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*.

Derrida's work at the conference entitled *Judéités: Questions pour Jacques Derrida*.¹⁰ In fall 2001, shortly after the September 11 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center, Derrida accepted the Adorno Award in Frankfurt, an occasion on which he again encountered Habermas and discussed current events with him.¹¹ Just a few short weeks later, the two found themselves in New York City, sharing a mutual discomfort with President George W. Bush's with-us-or-against-us declamation and a surge in American exceptionalism. The two philosophers faced common enemies in neo-liberalism, the neo-conservatism of the Bush II era, and the threat to Enlightenment thought posed by Islamic Jihadism. They gave separate interviews on the themes of the September 11 attacks, American foreign policy, and globalization under neo-liberalism for philosopher Giovanna Borradori's volume *Philosophy in a Time of Terror*.¹² Finally, in May 2003, the two collaborated on a famous article for the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, calling for a common European foreign policy, backed by a common state and military, as a response to the recent American invasion of Iraq.¹³

In terms of political policy, then, Habermas and Derrida were quite clearly aligned. Personally, the two also seem to have developed a real affection and respect for one another. Yet, there was nothing like a comprehensive philosophical reconciliation between Derrida and Habermas. Fundamentally, their views of language remained very much at odds. Nor is Derrida's notion of the *to-come* deeply compatible on a technical level with Habermas' teleology of illocution. Thus, their reconciliation took place not on the basis of a common rationally

¹⁰Jürgen Habermas, "How to Answer the Ethical Question: Derrida and Religion," in *Europe: The Faltering Project*, trans. Ciaran Cronin (Malden, MA: Polity, 2009), 17-36.

¹¹ Jacques Derrida, "Unsere Redlichkeit," *Frankfurter Rundschau*, trans. Ulrich Müller-Schöll, June 18, 2004; Peeters, *Derrida: A Biography*.

¹² Giovanna Borradori, *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Conversations with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida* (Chicago: Chicago, 2003).

¹³ Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida, "Nach Dem Krieg: Die Wiedergeburt Europas," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, June 31, 2003.

grounded worldview but on one of common values, which produced a shared emphasis on certain institutions which they saw (or hoped to see) as advancing these values: i.e., law and particularly international law, democracy, and human rights.

Their shared values and hopes for the future—Derrida called such hopes “faith,” whereas Habermas could never bring himself to be so blunt—produced not a synthesis of the two thinkers’ theories but, rather, an opening between them. Derrida and Habermas, each other’s personal *other* for so long, recognized something of fundamental ethical importance in one another that was the same: their common regard for human wellbeing and (relative) autonomy and, to a certain extent, for Europe as the guardian and champion of these values. *Crucially and at the same time*, this sameness took shape within and helped to define a system of differences. In the heady days of New York in the Autumn of 2001, Derrida and Habermas found themselves to be part of the same team, the same group, the same community, opposed by and opposed to both the religious fanaticism of Islamic Jihadism and the quasi-religious American chauvinism of the Bush administration. The reconciliation of Derrida and Habermas transpired not primarily as a result of rationally motivated agreement but, rather, by the logic of Carl Schmitt’s friend-enemy distinction and upon the basis of common values, a common way of life.

And here it must be stressed again that these founding values are extra-rational. Even the most advanced understandings of human rights fail to account for a value-independent *ought*. Derrida’s and Habermas’ commitments to human wellbeing and human rights were due not *primarily* to reason but to the passions, to compassion, and—as Gadamer once stressed to an unhearing Derrida—to goodwill. Reason can reinforce, cultivate, and articulate these basic inclinations, but the nature of these inclinations themselves is extra-rational. Nor is the resolve to act upon them a natural consequence of reason. It requires a decision. And the decisionistic

nature of this project is revealed in Habermas' and Derrida's joint call for a European military. The later Habermas and Derrida are pioneers among critical theorists in recognizing, however ambivalently, the vital importance of the state to human wellbeing. But Habermas in particular continued to shy away from recognizing the martial component of the state as what it is – an instrument not of discourse but of force to violently implement the policies founded upon discourse and the values and interests that these policies seek to protect or advance.

And it is here, on the questions of violence and decision, that one encounters an ongoing difference between Habermas and Derrida. Derrida's notion of the to-come never goes as far as Habermas' utopianism in heralding the possible or eventual arrival of a utopia or in speaking in its name. But if Derrida is less inclined than Habermas to speak for the unconditional, it is probably only because Derrida's notion of the unconditional is even more demanding and less mundane than is Habermas'. Both thinkers share the ideal of a domination-, coercion-, and violence-free society. The key difference is that Habermas is willing to lay out the conditions by which he thinks humanity can eventually arrive at such a society, whereas, for Derrida, such conditions are unacceptable because he sees them as violating the unconditionality of the absolute other and the unpredictability, invisibility, and ineffability of the to-come, which is not identical to any even halfway foreseeable future. Paradoxically, the later Derrida's obsession with the absolute other and very expansive notion of violence lead him to accept the necessity and reality of mundane violence much more readily than does Habermas, whose humanism refuses to countenance any thought of an *absolute* other.¹⁴ Because the other cannot be absolute for Habermas, it can appear to Habermas that it might someday actually be possible to deal with

¹⁴ Derrida, "Force of Law."

the other in an entirely rational and reciprocal manner, without violence – whose limits are much more circumscribed for Habermas than for Derrida.

But it is not clear that either Habermas or Derrida was right on the questions of decision and violence, Habermas in his belief that violence is ultimately avoidable and Derrida in his non-regulative ideal that it ought to be avoidable. Even on this side of radical alterity, there will always be a need for violence and coercion in the service of human wellbeing and the *relative* autonomy of *relatively* decent human beings. This is so and remains so because such traits as cruelty, avarice, and gross indifference to the suffering of others are not due *primarily* to systematic distortions of communication, capital and the fetish commodity, the iron cage of rationality, misplaced libidinal energies, or to any other intellectual boogeymen/whipping-boys. Rather, such traits are, to their very cores, human, all too human. They are found in all eras, across all cultures, and in tribes and civilizations alike. And while there is a wealth of *empirical* evidence to suggest that we human beings can and have cultivated the better angels of our nature to great effect—particularly when we organize ourselves into liberal democracies and form international organizations to keep the peace—there is virtually no evidence to suggest that this cultivation will ever amount to perfection.¹⁵ It is possible that aiming at perfection will produce excellence, that striving for total peace will produce near-total peace. But it is also possible that aiming for perfection and denying violence its due will lead to enervation and to the loss of will and nerve to employ violence in minor crises, so as to avoid major crises.

Humanists and liberal democracies, too, have their enemies – true enemies, in the Schmittian sense. If liberal-democratic republics are to maintain themselves, they must employ some level of coercion and violence to do so. *Pace* Habermas' metaphysical language, nothing

¹⁵ Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined* (New York: Penguin, 2012).

can “strip such power of its violent substance by rationalizing it.”¹⁶ Those subject to the state’s coercion and violence will experience it precisely as coercion and violence, metaphysical formulations notwithstanding. And for those humanists who do not yearn for perfection and are content to advance and protect the autonomy and wellbeing of *decent* human beings to as great a degree as is feasible, there is nothing particularly distressing about this unredeemed state of violence. One may shed tears for the wasted potential of the wantonly cruel and woefully indifferent—the murderers, rapists, slavers, and true sadists of the world—but tears do not absolve them of their responsibility for their actions.

Thus, for all of its many and grave flaws, Carl Schmitt’s critique of liberalism recognized a truth from which nearly all critical theorists shy away: the inevitability and unredeemed nature of violence. Such violence may be justified—and this term is always highly conditioned—under humane and humanistic ethics. It can be minimized. It can be exercised responsibly and even with compassion for those upon whom it is inflicted. But justification is not the same thing as erasure, elision, *Aufhebung*. Even if it is motivated by the greatest love and applied with the greatest judiciousness, violence will forever remain violent. And if there is a world in which this is not the case, it will have to await the arrival of God.

There is no such thing as an adequate theory of liberalism. “Liberalism,” too, is a hermeneutic, subject to all of the same dynamics of growth and indeterminacy outlined by Derrida and Gadamer. Indeed, all political forms and theories are subject to such dynamics. None can escape the pervasiveness of interpretation, which is why all involve truly decisionistic moments. Liberal democracies are no exception. They, too, are held together in large part by

¹⁶ Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, 188.

common values, have their enemies, and must employ coercion and violence to ward off these enemies and preserve equilibrium. However, Schmitt's claim that decision is the essence of politics is only half right. In the context of liberal democracies, the inevitability of decision is the corollary of the inevitability of interpretation. The open-endedness of discourse and the imperfections of human beings leave fissures in constitutional principles, legal thought, and social and political norms that must, as it were, be filled by decisions and the coercive power upon which they may call. Liberal democracy's great advantages consist not in avoiding decisions but in *hemming them in to the greatest extent possible by giving the freest rein possible to hermeneutics, consensus, and compromise, while protecting and advancing human wellbeing and individual autonomy to the greatest possible extent, thereby sheltering citizens in the plural and singular from the greatest violence of decisions*. To be sure, the foregoing formulation is imprecise, but imprecision is intrinsic to the nature of linguistic formulations. The strength of liberalism is to allow for such imprecisions, such perhaps, and for the individual variation they produce, without thereby slackening into anarchy.

Thus, any theory of liberalism that is to approach adequacy must embrace the epistemic modesty demanded by Derrida and Gadamer and the hermeneutic generosity and openness championed by Gadamer. Certainly, Habermas is correct to stress the desirability of wide-ranging consensuses and the absolute necessity of patient, rational dialogue, evidence-giving, and perspective-taking. But consensus is by no means guaranteed to result from such processes, and it must be stressed that these imperatives demand much of citizens' psychological, intellectual, and moral maturity. In the many cases in which social consensus is lacking, compromise—even on some substantive moral issues—and goodwill must be actively cultivated as political and social resources to ease tensions.

The goodwill and openness to compromise which form the glue that holds open societies together can be summed up in a single word: the easily taken for granted and much maligned “civility.”¹⁷ Civility does not signal a weak will, a lack of resolve, or any type of moral cowardice. Martin Luther King Jr. and Mahatma Gandhi were paragons of civility—and, not incidentally, effectiveness—even at their most defiant. Civility simply means conducting one’s quarrels with reason, liberality, and awareness one’s own fallibility rather than with uncontrolled passions, illiberality, and dogmatism. Put simply, civility is what allows people who strongly disagree with each other to live together without killing one another. Any society that abandons civility and bifurcates into camps that oppose each other with such vehemence as to conceive of the other as the enemy risks division into separate polities and civil war. Given their lack of total determinacy and their reliance on highly fallible human actors for implementation, laws and norms cannot *always* prevent the occurrence of such exceptional states. And, in very rare circumstances, when faced with massive illegality or incivility from the powers that be, people of goodwill and great patience may judge a redrawing of the friend-enemy boundary necessary. But until the point at which such a decision is taken, civility must reign.

Under the influence of an all-encompassing and all-demanding ideology that attempted to reenchant the world by recourse to blood, iron, and nonsense, Germany experienced such a break with civility in the years 1933 to 1945. Since that time, many of its leading intellectuals have been understandably obsessed with ensuring Germany’s “normality.” Proponents widely identify “normality” with liberalism, democracy, and alignment with the West. By the early 2010s, these goals seemed to have been reached. The victory of the Red-Green coalition after

¹⁷ During the Trump years, a virtual cottage industry of articles and books denouncing civility as a bourgeois, white-supremacist ideology appeared. For one of the most notable examples, see Sarah Leonard, “Against Civility,” *The Nation*, 2018.

the federal elections of 1998, Germany's participation in NATO's bombing campaign against Serbia of the following year to prevent a genocide in Kosovo, the success of German memorial culture, the country's role in counterbalancing the hawkishness of American foreign policy under the Bush II administration, and Chancellor Angela Merkel's steady leadership in the European Debt Crisis seemed to many to signify the firm entrenchment of a reunified Germany in the Western camp of liberal democracies and a functional—if not quite normal—relationship to its past. But the theme of German abnormality, indeed of pathology, has reemerged in recent years with the unexpected success of the far-right Alternative for Germany political party (*Alternative für Deutschland*, AfD).

The irony of the discourse of normality is that the strong idealizations that German leftists associate with the term are anything but normal. They transform “normality” into a byword for something like perfection, with anything less understood as a harbinger of a fascistic atavism.¹⁸ Such an equation was never tenable but is pointedly antiquated in an era marked by the collapse of grand narratives and an unprecedented degree of moral fragmentation. To some extent, a mass and pluralistic liberal democracy must be marked by a lack of normality, as surely as the signifier lacks the security of the transcendental signified. To be sure, such a lack can be easily exaggerated and fetishized to the point of unnecessarily destabilizing prosperous and largely benign polities and societies. For this reason, it may be better to follow Gadamer in reinterpreting this lack as an openness to a collective process of learning. But, however one understands it, a significant degree of fractional strife, social friction, intellectual disagreement, and a failure to live up to founding ideals—especially when they conflict with one another—are

¹⁸ Moses, "The 'Weimar Syndrome.'"

endemic to all societies. This holds especially for liberal societies since the cultural revolutions of the 1960s and the onset of what I have called postmodernity.

Under such conditions, “normality” must be understood in an attenuated sense. And, in this sense, the Federal Republic of Germany has been a relatively normal and successful liberal democracy for most of its lifespan. The Holocaust was unique in many ways, and the business of comparing crimes against humanity to establish their relative degrees of depravity strikes me as a rather perverse undertaking. Suffice it to say that the German nation-state is far from alone among Western nation-states in bearing responsibility for mass murder, enslavement, and genocide in recent centuries. This much has become ever clearer in recent years, with the advent of postcolonialism and the mass revisiting of past wrongs. What is unique in Germany’s case is the relative probity with which it has accepted responsibility for its predecessor state’s crimes and incorporated an understanding of and atonement for these crimes into its national consciousness. As for the FRG’s internecine struggles, they seem to be no more exceptional than those of other contemporary Western liberal democracies. It is by no means obvious that such episodes as the Spiegel Affair, disruption over the Emergency Laws, German Autumn, or xenophobic violence of the early 1990s are any different in kind or degree (except perhaps milder) than such phenomena as McCarthyism, Jim Crow and continued racial strife in the US, the Troubles, the terroristic activities of the *Front de libération du Québec*, Italy’s Years of Lead, the long years of authoritarianism in Spain and Portugal, the Watergate Scandal, the Iran-Contra Scandal, Brexit, or the many scandals of the Trump Presidency. Such departures from liberal-democratic ideals are, unfortunately, par for the course in all liberal democracies and western nation-states more broadly.¹⁹ And while, until 1990, Germany may have been somewhat unique

¹⁹ See the excellent Karrin Hanshew, *Terror and Democracy in West Germany* (New York: Cambridge, 2012).

in its capacity as a divided nation, the Irish could testify that unity of the nation and state has never been complete and has always had the aura of idealism about it. In terms of national guilt/responsibility, domestic terrorism, cultural disruptions, liberal-democratic deficits, and national division, then, there has never been anything particularly special or abnormal about the Federal Republic of Germany. To the contrary, it has fit rather neatly into postwar and postmodern Western trends.

And Germany continues to mesh with the broader pattern of the postmodern, even as the “postmodern” takes on a new and rather dubious meaning – not just in Germany but across the Western world. For a brief while, postmodernity and postmodernism, particularly in the form of Derrida’s deconstruction, held out the prospect of popularizing a thoroughgoing engagement with the aporias of thought, language, culture, history, and politics. That moment seems to have passed. In its stead, the regnant intellectual ideology of today draws on the most platitudinous aspects of postmodernism and eschews its challenging dimensions. It falsely appropriates to itself such laudable monikers as “anti-racism,” “intersectionalism,” “anti-colonialism,” “feminism,” and “queerness.” Drawing on the justified outrage over the spread of chauvinistic movements of the far right, this ideology proffers its own set of absolutes, apotheosizing a set of designated “others” and placing them atop an inverted and ontologized hierarchy of “privilege,” employing a Nietzschean *ressentiment* in the most cynical manner. Contemporary “critical” consciousness has committed itself to a woefully simplified Nietzsche of *The Genealogy of Morals* and an equally simplified Foucault, while studiously ignoring the Nietzsche of *Beyond Good and Evil* and Derrida. The result is an offshoot of postmodernism that possesses all of its excess and divisiveness without any of its Derridean rigor or Gadamerian generosity. It is a parody of postmodernism, one of reassuring certainties and a renewed grand narrative of

liberation from the West and Enlightenment, recognizing no distinction between rationalism and rationality. It demands a “yes” or a “no” and will countenance neither the danger nor the openness of the “perhaps.” If this perhaps is to be carried forth into the openness of the future, if people of goodwill and reason are to navigate between the perils of a resurgent radical right and an equally illiberal radical left, liberalism must reassert itself.

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