

Markku Nivalainen

Adorno's Tragic Vision



JYVÄSKYLÄ STUDIES IN EDUCATION, PSYCHOLOGY AND SOCIAL RESEARCH 600

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation deals with the tragic vision that motivates certain key aspects of Theodor W. Adorno's philosophy. While in the formative early work, the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, co-written with Max Horkheimer, the tragic views are clear, in later works, such as the *Aesthetic Theory* and the *Negative Dialectics*, they are only implicit. The study reconstructs the tragic vision found in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and uses it as a key to understand Adorno's mature philosophy.

A tragic vision is born when specific philosophical convictions regarding agency and morality coalesce with certain ethical and political conditions. A tragic vision forms the grounds for tragic views. For Adorno, the key convictions rise out of the failures of reason and culture to enable the eradication of unnecessary suffering by creating the kind of conditions in which human beings could flourish. These convictions give rise to a view of humanity as blind to its own shortcomings and thus doomed to perpetuate suffering in the name of progress and growth.

Adorno's persistent negativism prevents him from offering practical solutions for changing the world, but he does offer a scathing critique of the modern world that continues to resonate with new generations of readers. The analysis of the tragic vision presented in this dissertation will highlight the fundamental philosophical and ethical commitments underlying Adorno's views and will thus allow both situating his work into a larger cultural context and juxtaposing it with the work of other philosophers, as well as other writers, thereby opening new vistas for research not just on Adorno but on continental philosophy, social theory, and the domain of arts and letters at large.

Keywords: Theodor W. Adorno, philosophy, aesthetics, tragedy, critical theory, history of philosophy, history of ideas, ethics, world-views

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I dedicate this work to Nicola Blunden, my most important interlocutor.

Cardiff 27.11.2017
Markku Nivalainen

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ABSTRACT

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1 INTRODUCTION

“One solitary man cannot help or save an age; he can only express that it is foundering.”
—Søren Kierkegaard¹

In the autumn of 1964, the French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard gave a series of introductory lectures to the students of philosophy in Sorbonne under the title, “Why philosophise?”² In these lectures Lyotard argued that philosophy emerges in Ancient Greece once the ideological image offered by the polis does no longer mask the innately contradictory nature of social reality. Human beings desire unity, which they can never achieve, and the frustration of this desire is mirrored in philosophy, which can only reflect on its inability to reach complete understanding of the world. The role left for philosophy is to ease the human predicament by articulating concrete problems that have not yet been put into words and thereby to offer a reflective dimension for our action towards a more humane society.³ The problem, of which Lyotard is aware but for which he offers no clear-cut solution, is that the limitations of our knowledge make it difficult to offer the reflection needed to ensure that we direct our action towards reaching a better world. The moral demand for humanity and the lessening of suffering seems to need resolutions that are not within our reach. Donald Philip Verene has described eloquently the frustrations inherent to all critical enterprises:

We wander in the Dantean dark wood, sorting out truths from error, and then, because for every argument it is not beyond human wit to create a counter-argument,

¹ Quoted in Pérez-Álvarez 2009, 64.

² The lectures were published in the original French in 2012 and promptly translated into English. See Lyotard 2013.

³ As Lyotard (2013, 123) sums up his point: “So this is why we philosophize: because there is desire, because there is absence in presence, deadness in life; and also because there is our power that is not yet power; and also because there is alienation, the loss of what we thought we had acquired and the gap between the deed and doing, between the said and the saying; and finally because we cannot evade this: testifying to the presence of the lack with our speech. In truth, how can we not philosophize?”

resorting them. Critical thinking is driven by a fear of error. It is unable to complete its own process because there is always more to criticize, including the most recent conclusion that criticism has produced. As criticism, philosophy is always threatened by fatigue. Its reasonings offer no final illumination or relief.⁴

Fatigue and the fear of error pose the risk of resignation and dogmatism, which are, ironically, two sides of the same coin. It is tempting to stop criticising, since there is no final word on any given subject, and just accept the situation as it is. But it is equally tempting to deny that this is the case and accept something, anything as the ultimate truth and build a utopian vision on it.⁵

It seems to me that Lyotard and Verene touch upon something emblematic of the strand of modern philosophy discussed in this dissertation. First, they both assert that our knowledge of the world and of ourselves is always limited, although it can be difficult for us to accept that this is the case. Secondly, while Lyotard points towards the demand for philosophers to change the world, a notion most familiar from Marx's eleventh Feuerbach thesis, he acknowledges that philosophy is separate from the actual act of creating social change. This means, effectively, that we never know exactly what we are doing, even if we like to present ourselves as rational beings who are in control of our actions and, at least to an extent, of the world external to us. Such a view of rationality becomes problematic when theories or world-views are predicated on it. This brings us to the third key aspect, derivable from Lyotard's and Verene's view, of the modern condition: the separation of facts and values, a defining feature of secular modernity, risks nihilism and it is the duty of philosophy to fight this by helping us think anew our ethical and social commitments.

Following this line of thought, critical social awareness is revealed as an essential aspect of all human activity. The idea that philosophy is – at its best – an activity that is inherently moral, and consequently has social and political relevance, has been popular even among those who have shown little faith in traditional forms of philosophy or any other kind of institutional forms of thought.⁶ This kind of orientation has dominated the so-called post-war continental philosophy, especially its existential and phenomenological persuasions, and the literary and artistic schools associated with them.⁷ It has given rise to a way of approaching philosophical questions that eschews traditional forms of argumentation and presentation, forming in the process something akin to a canon of anti-philosophy, which defines itself as a critical corrective to what they consider as the overtly rational, or logical, mode of scientific academic inquiry.⁸ As a result, philosophers subscribing to such views have been eager to adopt not only literary devices and forms but also ideas more commonly found in literary fiction for discussing and disseminating their views on the modern

⁴ Verene 2009, ix. Instead of tragic, Verene finds the situation comical.

⁵ Simon Critchley (2007), following Nietzsche, calls these two dispositions passive and active nihilism. I shall return to this in Chapter One.

⁶ Thinkers such as Hannah Arendt (see Mack 2009) and Maurice Blanchot (see Hewson 2011, xi and *passim*) come to mind.

⁷ See Critchley 2001.

⁸ See Groys 2012. Anti-philosophy hardly forms a unified school of thought. The only thing the representatives of the canon have in common is their beloved enemy.

human condition.⁹ Prose, prosaic devices, and questions originally raised in prose works have often been used to expound what Christopher Hamilton calls a vision of life:

The great philosophers – Plato, Aristotle, Spinoza, Hume, Kant, Schopenhauer, Heidegger and so on – each express a possible vision of life, and the lesser philosophers seek protection and justification, knowingly or not, in such visions. Sometimes the technical arguments of such philosophers might seem to have no connection with such visions, but they lurk in the background, often unnoticed because they are widely accepted and thus pass unseen. And the vision itself is just that, a vision, and cannot, as a whole, be justified or refuted. This is one reason why, despite two and a half thousand years of Western philosophy, philosophers have not arrived at agreement on any of the major questions they discuss.¹⁰

The vision of life focused on by Hamilton and dealt with in this thesis is the tragic one. It is a vision that has its origins in Greek tragic theatre as well as in the 19th century German philosophical interpretations of tragedy and the tradition of thought it spawned.¹¹ While the Greeks invented tragedy, the Germans invented the tragic as something separate from the actual plays.¹² Once the relationship between the property, the tragic, and the tragedies was problematised, it became an attribute that could be transported to explain almost any kind of phenomena, even those that had nothing to do with drama. Hence, we have, for example, Hans Morgenthau's tragic theory of international relations and C. Fred Alford's tragic reading of postmodern subjectivity.¹³ And we have tragic visions of life that form the implicit background for the views of writers and philosophers alike.¹⁴

The principal claim of this thesis is that Theodor W. Adorno has a tragic vision of life, despite his avowed negative views towards modern attempts to resurrect tragic drama or tragic views on the human condition.¹⁵ Throughout

⁹ Not only has this resulted in accusations of conceptual ambiguity and theoretical murkiness in the more academic writing produced by members of the tradition, but literary ideas have also often seeped into philosophical texts – and caused philosophers to write clunky works of fiction.

¹⁰ Hamilton 2016, 29.

¹¹ Lambropoulos (2012) and Young (2013) have mapped the evolution of the philosophical concept of the tragic. For a more detailed analysis of the relationship between tragedy and German philosophy, see Billings 2014. All these works build on the seminal Szondi 2002. See also Beistegui & Sparks (2000) and Georgopoulos (1993).

¹² The distinction between tragedy and the attribute called the tragic is constitutive of our modern understanding of the phenomenon in question. 'Tragedy' refers to both the dramatic form and its individual manifestations, especially in the classical Greek plays, while 'the tragic' signifies both a philosophical dimension extrapolated from the tragedies and the vast theoretical corpus inspired by them.

¹³ See Klusmeyer 2009 and Alford 1992, respectively.

¹⁴ In this dissertation, I distinguish between the vision and the views of a person. I use the term "view" to refer to "opinions, ideas, or theories formed by reflection or study" (OED). Vision, on the other hand, refers to something like a schema – more in the sense of Piaget than Kant – an "unconscious coding or organization of incoming physiological or psychological stimuli, giving rise to a particular response or effect" (OED).

¹⁵ See Chapter Three. The most sustained readings of Adorno as a philosopher of the tragic have been presented by Samir Gandesha (1991) and Karoline Gritzner (2015, 163–181). Gandesha (2001) has also mapped the vestiges of a reading of Sophocles'

Adorno's oeuvre, one finds critical remarks on issues related to modern tragedies. Nevertheless, one also discovers philosophical convictions that bear striking similarities to those expressed in the large secondary literature on the tragic.¹⁶ The ostensible dislike is in sharp contrast with the clear affinity between the positions Adorno holds and those associated with tragic visions on the human condition. Hamilton identifies several positions that are inherent to a tragic vision.¹⁷ First, "we are born to suffer".¹⁸ In worst cases the suffering is physical, but even the luckiest of us in that regard find that our most fundamental desires are never met. That is partly because we cannot name them as "we are mysterious to ourselves, driven by forces we cannot understand, and exposed to contingency and chance".¹⁹ Because of the effect on our lives of contingency and chance, there is little we can do to achieve satisfaction, let alone happiness. In fact, "virtue is not rewarded with happiness" and "the wicked often flourish".²⁰ And finally, with the modern demise of religion and any possibility of a metaphysical notion of afterlife, there is no hope of either redemption or damnation, making it impossible to justify demands for virtuous conduct. These ideas relate to the notion of the tragic and exist, in one form or another, in ancient and modern tragedies as well as in the secondary literature on them. They also exist, so I claim, in the works of Adorno, especially in his analyses of modernity.

1.1 A Philosophy of Tragedy

"In each philosophy, there is a fundamental choice which is arbitrary, and everything else, system, reasoning, only serve to justify this choice - to prove that it responds to reality."

— Witold Gombrowicz²¹

The reader will not find on these pages a speculative reconstruction of Adorno's views on the tragic art. Instead, I want to advance the idea that Adorno's tragic

Oedipus Tyrannous in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. In addition, Christopher Rocco (1997, esp. Chapter Six) has read Horkheimer and Adorno in relation to tragedy, arguing that the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* shows us how to combine tragic and enlightened modes of thought. Christoph Menke (1999) has analysed Horkheimer's, and the Frankfurt School's, animosity toward "tragic knowledge".

¹⁶ The latter rings especially true in the case of his early collaborative work, the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, written with Max Horkheimer, which sets the scene for Adorno's later inquiries into the nature of modernity and the human condition.

¹⁷ Hamilton 2016, 142. Hamilton's (2001) tragic vision is already present in his earlier book on moral philosophy, *Living Philosophy*, which does not discuss tragedy.

¹⁸ Hamilton 2016, 142.

¹⁹ Hamilton 2016, 142. Martha Nussbaum (2001) has discussed the relationship of ethics and tragedy from the point of view of chance in her famous book, *The Fragility of Goodness*. Nussbaum's main concern is the extent to which reason may help us sustain good life, an area overlooked by traditional philosophical theories of ethics, which often ignore the effect that factors beyond our control have on our lives.

²⁰ Hamilton 2016, 142. Or at least, as Yeats (2008, 158) put it in *The Second Coming*: "the best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity".

²¹ Gombrowicz 2004, 106.

vision is an orientation towards a historical and political reality of the kind that calls for a tragic view of both human nature and the situation in which humanity has found itself in late modernity. Adorno's philosophy is philosophy of tragedy in that it deals with a genuine tragedy (Auschwitz and the post-Auschwitz condition) and furthers a tragic disposition on both modernity and the human condition.²² The idea of a disposition or a vision as something like a pre-philosophical context to the more rational formulations of one's views is related to Miguel de Unamuno's notion of a tragic sense of life.²³ For him, a sense of life is "more or less formulated, more or less conscious" and decides the way we organise the data gained through our lived experience.²⁴ In this sense, a tragic vision is more akin to a network of beliefs than a system of arguments. And as Hamilton writes, beliefs are not arrived at through reasoning alone, but they arise from "the philosopher's temperament; from his experience and lack of experience; from his deepest needs, fears and the like; from the social and cultural milieu in which he happens to have grown up; from what was inculcated – or not inculcated – in him as a child; and so on".²⁵ In other words, the tragic vision rises out of the dialectic of experience and the social setting within which the life of the individual is lived. In this thesis, however, I shall limit my focus on two aspects of the tragic dialectic. On a general level, the most important precondition for a tragic vision is set by the history of reason Adorno calls the dialectic of enlightenment. On a more particular level, the dialectic receives its tragic form in and through the socio-historical condition of modernity. Combined, these aspects create a tragic view of the modern human condition.

In what follows, I shall present an overview of modernity from the perspective offered by Adorno's tragic vision. I do this over the course of four main chapters, which are based on published essays written over an eight-year period.²⁶ In addition to having their own thematic integrity, the semi-autonomous parts of the whole will together develop the overall positions of the thesis through their explicit and implicit relations. The nature of the work necessitates

²² One should bear in mind that Adorno's pessimistic view on the role given to culture in late modernity is based on his ambiguous experiences of culture industry in New York and Los Angeles during the war and of West Germany's problematic attempts to come to terms with the past in the 1950s and 1960s. For an assessment on Adorno's American years, see Jenemann 2007. For the political and cultural situation in post-war Germany, see Adorno 2010 and Boos 2014.

²³ See Unamuno 1954. The idea of a vision is also espoused by William James (1909, 10): "Some thinkers follow suggestions from human life, and treat the universe as if it were essentially a place in which ideals are realized. Others are more struck by its lower features and for them, brute necessities express its character better. All follow one analogy or another; and all the analogies are with some one or other of the universe's subdivisions. Every one is nevertheless prone to claim that his conclusions are the only logical ones, that they are necessities of universal reason, they being all the while, at bottom, accidents more or less personal vision which had far better be avowed as such; for one man's vision may be much more valuable than another's, and our visions are usually not only our most interesting but our most respectable contributions to the world in which we play our part."

²⁴ Unamuno 1954, 17.

²⁵ Hamilton 2001, 7.

²⁶ Chapter Three is a revised version of Nivalainen 2016, while the other three chapters utilise material from Nivalainen 2012 and 2015.

some repetition, but as Verene points out, it is part of the dialectic: “With dialectic comes the sense of repetition. The speculative is like a song and no true song is sung only once.”²⁷ Additionally, because of the primarily recursive – rather than sequential – progression, I shall now provide rough outlines of the positions I seek to advance in the hope of making some of the essential implicit relations visible. This allows me to retain the situated use of the terms employed in the original essays.²⁸

The first chapter of the thesis outlines an overview of the modern condition and relates Adorno’s thought to certain key concepts presented by those of his predecessors I consider to be the most relevant. This will provide a background and a context for the sections that follow. The second chapter argues that in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and his co-author Max Horkheimer portray the human condition in tragic terms. Their view is carried over to Adorno’s mature works, principally the *Aesthetic Theory*, in the form of implicit metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical convictions. In the chapter, I discuss both the nature and the consequences of Adorno’s tragic predisposition from the perspective of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and the *Aesthetic Theory*.²⁹ The aim is to highlight the overarching principles guiding Adorno’s views and by doing so to offer a template for further analyses of his thought in relation to the vast existing secondary literature on tragedy and the tragic. The metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical categories are purposely kept undefined and the aspects they include tend to overlap, but they correspond with Adorno’s understanding of the relationship between humanity and nature; our possibility to gain knowledge of the given; and the ethical and political dimensions of these two categories. It is worth noting that Adorno makes no attempt to delineate his thought in terms of these or any other comparable categories, for that would risk reifying the domains they cover. Hence, it is best to consider them as heuristic tools only envisioned for advancing the overall thesis.

The two remaining chapters of the thesis consist of an analysis of the interplay of these tragic categories in relation to Adorno’s aesthetic theory. I use the term aesthetic theory to refer to the type of philosophical social criticism that seeks to ground its moral footing through aesthetic means and receives its most sustained development in the *Aesthetic Theory*. The general idea is that art plays an important role in critique as far as it can supplement philosophy by undermining its legitimacy as the sole vehicle of truth. Philosophy, on the other hand, needs art to subject itself to self-criticism, since authentic art is the only phenomenon that modernity has not managed to subject to the violence of reification. Only this critical dialectic of art and philosophy can reveal the truth

²⁷ Verene 2009, xiii.

²⁸ This paragraph is indebted to the preface to Francis Barker’s (1993, xiii–ix) *The Culture of Violence*, which eloquently describes the pros and cons of turning essays into a monograph.

²⁹ For the sake of convenience, I shall ignore the question of authorship regarding the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and will treat it as a part of Adorno’s oeuvre. Both authors discuss similar themes in other works written around the time of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*’s initial publication, making it difficult to try to trace the origin of any idea to either one of the authors. See Horkheimer 1974 and Theodor W. Adorno 2005.

about the prevailing socio-historical conditions. The fourth chapter seeks to analyse Adorno's philosophical positions in relation to modernism while the fifth and final chapter focuses on an overview of Adorno's view of tragic modernity.

Reification, for Adorno, is the key to unlocking modernity.³⁰ It could be defined as the form of alienation that dominates late capitalism. Social stratification has brought about human estrangement from the mode of existence typical to the species. Thus, cutting the organic ties between our being – as *homo faber* – and our thinking results in humanity forgetting its nature.³¹ Thought becomes a tool of domination and control as meanings disappear and signification turns out to be arbitrary. The form of reason that dominates modernity is instrumental and removed from the human nature, making our modern condition alienated.³² This is, in Adorno's view, at the root of all the major ethical problems modern humans face. It is important to note that both human estrangement and reification have their own histories that coalesce in late modernity. Estrangement enables the form of reason that gives rise to reification, which manifests as the alienation depicted in modern art. In this way, the human history of domination is crystallised in works of art, which give the starting point for developing the tools needed to understand both the universal history of reason – the dialectic of enlightenment – and the situation it has helped shape, the predicament in which we live. The structure of the thesis will mirror this dialectic. The general level analysis of the modern condition, outlined in the first chapter, presents the key aspects – and thereby the key concepts – needed for uncovering the tragic vision within Adorno's analysis of modernity. Together the first two chapters enable an analysis of modernism in chapter three that shows how the universal history of reason reveals itself in the aesthetic configuration of modernity. The last chapter returns to the general level analysis of our modern predicament, but from a more explicitly tragic point of view, thus showing how the tragic vision is embedded in conceptual configurations that are not necessarily tragic as such. Combined, however, they are symptomatic of a tragic vision, which explains how and why certain aspects of Adorno's thought combine into the specific constellation found in his works.³³

³⁰ See Jeffries 2016. See also Rose 2014.

³¹ Cf. Eco 1989, 132: "From the very beginning of time, the ability to extend one's corporeality (and therefore to alter one's own natural dimensions) has been the very condition of *homo faber*. To consider such a situation as a degradation of human nature implies that nature and man are not the same thing. It implies an inability to accept the idea that nature exists in relation to man, is defined, extended, and modified in and by man; just as man is one particular expression of nature, an active, modifying expression who distinguishes himself from his environment precisely because of his capacity to act upon it and to define it – a capacity that gives him the right to say 'I'."

³² With human nature, or species-being, I am referring to *Gattungswesen*, which is another Marxist term, along with reification, originating in the work of the unfairly neglected Ludwig Feuerbach. See Held 2009.

³³ How the interplay of Adorno's personal experiences and the historical context within which he worked begat the vision is interesting, but I have nevertheless chosen to ignore the question and only allude to it briefly in the Conclusion. Any speculation including Adorno's character, however, should refer to Müller-Doohm (2005) and Claussen (2008).

1.2 Theoretical Considerations

“Though this be madness, yet there is method in’t.”
 – Polonius in *Hamlet*³⁴

Adorno’s work presents difficulties for any attempts of academic appropriation, as many a commenter on his work has noted. First, the way Adorno understands both the constitution of the object of his enquiry and the method of criticism this leaves him with, means that his writing uses a variety of registers, dealing simultaneously with questions of aesthetics, ethics, history, sociology, and philosophy. His approaches to these questions may come across as eclectic, considering that the separate analyses, even within a single work, are often deliberately irreducible. This relates to his conviction that none of the registers should be considered as more important than the others, making it difficult to settle on a starting point. Additionally, Adorno is a dialectical thinker, meaning here that he does not believe in presenting his ideas in a propositional form, but strives instead to retain the movement of thought.³⁵ This has traditionally left sympathetic scholars in something of a stalemate: either one forgets the sympathies and does deliberate violence to Adorno’s thought by forging it into a more conventional academic form, or, one writes about something else instead. In this dissertation, I seek to find a third way while maintaining an awareness of the difficulties such an approach will face. The way I have chosen to approach Adorno’s aesthetic theory, in short, is by subjecting it to a reading that utilises a methodological thrust found in the aesthetic theory itself.

The aim is not to reconstruct Adorno’s method, because he was neither methodologically consistent nor willing to follow his own dictums to the letter. Yet there are several formulations found throughout his oeuvre, which form something like a credo.³⁶ In other words, while Adorno does not always obey the letter of the law, he does consistently obey its spirit. It is this spirit that I seek to do justice in my reading of Adorno, making this thesis an attempt to transcend Adorno with Adorno by showing aspects of his thought in new light and in relation to those phenomena with which he has implicit affinities.³⁷ In what follows, I am going to keep the discussion of the theoretical background of Adorno’s philosophy at the minimum and shall only engage with the vast amount of existing secondary literature when it is needed to either clarify

³⁴ Shakespeare 2003, 139.

³⁵ Bruns (2008, 225) explains Adorno’s dialectical thought by emphasising that “his practice was not to clarify concepts but to put them into play in a movement in which nothing is able to appear except in virtue of what it is not”.

³⁶ One key element of Adorno’s credo is the strong moral demand illustrated by his attempts to formulate new categorical imperatives for the post-Holocaust era and his insistence on the primacy of the object.

³⁷ Früchtel (2008, 148) notes that Adorno “simply hopes to formulate a general hypothesis that may prompt further investigation and independent reflection”.

Adorno's position or evidence my own.³⁸ I do not seek to provide critical analyses of the material pertaining to tragic theatre, but have opted instead to focus on the sources that have been most influential in the strictly philosophical readings of tragedy. Likewise, I shall keep the references to Greek tragedies to a minimum to emphasise the relevance of the tragic vision to our late modern age. I am also aware of the contested nature of the theories of, say, Jean-Pierre Vernant and Bruno Snell, but the popularity and the sheer attractiveness of their views act as further evidence that the cultural condition of modernity encourages a tragic vision.

My reading of Adorno is most heavily indebted to two works: *The Melancholy Science* (1978) by Gillian Rose and *Adorno's Aesthetic Theory* (1991) by Lambert Zuidervaart. It was Rose who first emphasised the importance of reification to Adorno's theory of modernity and Zuidervaart offered the means for understanding the *Aesthetic Theory* in a larger theoretical context. Additionally, J. M. Bernstein's *The Fate of Art* (1991) and his later *Adorno* (2001) revealed the ethical import prevalent in the seemingly quietist philosophy of Adorno. I have treated all the other Anglophone readings of Adorno, of which there are many, as elaborations to these key texts.³⁹ Of these texts, I want to mention the work of Andrew Bowie, the influence of which is present throughout the dissertation. There are also several other thinkers who have helped to shape the argument, even where their presence might not be explicit. My most important implicit influencers are, in alphabetical order, Giorgio Agamben; Simon Critchley; Fredric Jameson; Martin Jay; Gabriel Josipovici; Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe; and Jean-François Lyotard. As the list shows, my position is deeply indebted to the continental tradition and I hope that by situating Adorno's tragic vision into the larger cultural context of late modernity, the conflicts between the positions of these disparate thinkers appear as symptomatic of our tragic condition. A tragic philosophy that is not bound to the work of a single thinker, although it might take its cue from one, could then be brought to bear upon the ills of modernity, to help us navigate these dark times.

³⁸ Suffice it to say that I do not consider my interpretation to veer too far away from the general critical consensus, indebted as it is to Gillian Rose's *The Melancholy Science*.

³⁹ Although I touch upon themes that feature prominently in recent research on German idealism and romanticism, the position advanced in this dissertation does not require direct engagement with these discussions. On Adorno and the German tradition, see Bernstein 2004; Thornhill 2006; Dews 2008, 187–211; Stone 2014; and Vouros 2014. Instead, I am going to point out either overlooked or unacknowledged affinities between Adorno and other so-called continental thinkers, hoping that this might prompt further investigation. Several English-language monographs on Adorno have been published over the past quarter of a century and all of them are good. Buck-Morss 1977; Jay 1984; Jameson 2007; and Rose 2014 forged the path, with the last two offering particularly imaginative reinterpretations. For other good introductions to and overviews of Adorno's thought, see Jarvis 1998; Gibson and Rubin 2002; Huhn 2004; Hullot-Kentor 2006; Bowie 2013; and O'Connor 2013. For introductions and analyses to Adorno's aesthetics, see Zuidervaart 1991; Huhn and Zuidervaart 1997; Hohendahl 2013; and Hammer 2015. For reconstructions of Adorno's ethical views, see Bernstein 2001 and Freyenhagen 2013. On Adorno's social thought, see Zuidervaart 2007.

2 MIMESIS AND NIHILISM

“I am not a philosopher. I have insufficient belief in reason to believe in a system. What interests me is to know how to behave, when one believes neither in God nor in Reason.”

– Albert Camus⁴⁰

“Whatever one does, one cannot *think* outside of philosophy; keeping silent, turning one’s back on it, sidestepping it: this is still philosophizing. But one can reject this or that definition of philosophy. One can refuse to want to be a *professional* philosopher.”

– Benjamin Fondane⁴¹

In this chapter, I shall briefly explain the theoretical background of certain key conceptions that form the core framework of my interpretation of Adorno. The aim is to lay the foundation for the main argument – that Adorno founds his philosophical modernism on convictions predicated on a view of human condition that is tragic – by showing the meaning certain universal Hegelian-Marxist concepts receive when Adorno applies them to the problems inherent to a specific cultural condition. A reading of these concepts offers a general view of Adorno’s existential position regarding the relationship of ethics, art, and reason; the three cornerstones of Adorno’s philosophical modernism. I shall then move on to give a rough outline of the questions of nihilism and Auschwitz as a prelude to the tragic conception of subjectivity elaborated further in the next chapter. These are then considered in relation to modernism, which includes the multitude of aesthetic phenomena in relation to which Adorno develops his thought, especially his reinvention of dialectics as negative practice.

Adorno’s philosophy is an attempt to make sense of the human condition after all traditional means of sense-making have been exhausted and our very humanity has been fundamentally tainted by the horror of the Holocaust, which is epitomised by Auschwitz. For Adorno, understanding Auschwitz is

⁴⁰ Albert Camus. Quoted in Longstaffe 2007, 21.

⁴¹ Fondane 2016, 24.

the central “test of philosophy” since nothing in the post-Holocaust world seems to provide any kind of stable grounds for meaning.⁴² As he writes in the *Negative Dialektik*: “When a desperate man who wants to kill himself asks one who tries to talk him out of it about the point of living, the helpless helper will be at a loss to name one.”⁴³ This kind of hopelessness, accompanied with the nihilism it encourages, resurfaces time and again in modern art, hinting at the critical potential inherent to experience. This potential, the locus of the critical praxis, is grounded in the aporias of subject and object as well as concepts and what we take them to name. The role of philosophy as cultural criticism is to vindicate the contradictions and bring them to light. Philosophy must subject its object to an interdisciplinary dialectical critique, which “addresses the challenges and the prospects of society as a whole”.⁴⁴

Adorno belongs to a line of thinkers who advocate evaluating phenomena immanently, on their own terms.⁴⁵ A critique of society, for example, should be conducted on the basis of how well it succeeds in reaching the goals it sets for itself.⁴⁶ The problem in performing such an analysis in an improperly organised society, such as the late modern market democracies, is that the concepts with which the assessment is conducted are tainted by ideology, which enables the covering up of social failures in order to maximise the profit of the few and their power over the many. Since the concepts at our disposal are corrupt, as they are formed in relation to the distorted social conditions, Adorno needs a larger framework against which to measure them. This context is what he calls enlightenment: the development of instrumental reason and all the cultural formations it both needs and upholds. As mimetic activity art mirrors the social contradictions masked by ideology without falling prey to its distortions. Through its ability to give a voice to suffering, art – together with philosophical criticism – can provide us with the only true barometer of social success, or, in the case of modernity, its failure. The most important function of philosophical criticism is the cultural work that enables the eradication of unnecessary suffering. The practical act of eradication is a political task, which demands understanding the social and historical mechanisms that enable and perpetuate suffering.⁴⁷ Because of ideological distortion, the means through which critique may start must be conceived anew. This demands that we understand understanding itself in a novel manner, as grounded on a mimetic relationship to the other, which needs a method that can take this experiential relation into account. Adorno’s solution is to refashion the dialectic in an aesthetic form that can account for the content of late modernity through an incorporation of mimesis as one of its moments.

⁴² Rosenberg & Marcus 1988, 204.

⁴³ Adorno 2004, 376; 1966, 367.

⁴⁴ Zuidervaart 2007, 6.

⁴⁵ See Finlayson 2014.

⁴⁶ Jarvis 1998, 6.

⁴⁷ Hunger is a prime example. As Christopher Hamilton (2016, 161) remarks: “We live in world in which well over 800 million people do not have enough to eat. But there is enough food to feed them. Owing to the idiocies of how we organize our life, they are hungry.”

2.1 The Natural History of Suffering

“I am endeavoring to understand this accursed German philosophy.”
 – Sir James Mackintosh⁴⁸

Discussing the task and limits of philosophy, the starting point for Adorno was a critique of Immanuel Kant and G. W. F. Hegel. He further developed his thought in discussion with and under the influence of Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, Max Weber, Georg Lukács, Martin Heidegger, Edmund Husserl, and Walter Benjamin, in addition to a plethora of composers, novelists, and other cultural figures.⁴⁹ Adorno appropriates their often relatively abstract ideas and seeks to give them concrete content by forcing them to bear upon cultural phenomena, especially artworks. Moreover, he strives to show the interconnectedness of these ideas by mapping out the historical logic that underlies the disparate efforts to give form to the forces at play at different stages of modernity and the way these forces have overdetermined the human condition. Adorno’s key dialectical gesture is to historicise the specific analyses of modernity by relating them to the history of reason, which gives shape to cultural forms through the dialectic of subjectivity, knowledge, and power. These elements have their roots in the tradition of aesthetic criticism of modernity, which is traceable historically back to German idealism and its *bête noire*, Kant. The idealist tradition – together with its artistic counterpart, Romanticism – sought to reconcile the immediacy of lived experience with theoretical scrupulousness. Their method of choice was dialectics, which they considered to be the only way to embrace paradox.⁵⁰

Hegel, the father of modern dialectics, lived at a time when the French revolution sealed the destruction of the *ancien régime* and created the framework for the modern world order, although in Germany it took several decades for the actual effects of the revolution to become visible.⁵¹ At the time, Kant’s critical philosophy dominated European thought. The defenders of the system praised it for being the guarantor of objective scientific knowledge, while critics accused it of excluding from within the domain of reason the individual and singular experiences that science was supposed to explain.⁵² Kant defended his system in the name of the autonomy of reason and even claimed that the history of philosophy could be understood *a priori*, that is, without recourse to expe-

⁴⁸ Quoted in James 1909, 5.

⁴⁹ The list is by no means exhaustive. Adorno’s explicit and implicit influences are the subject of great many books and articles. Claussen (2008) and Müller-Doohm (2005) provide excellent overviews of his intellectual development. It is worth noting that he wrote hardly anything about Marx and only rarely mentions Nietzsche, although the influence of both is visible throughout his oeuvre. Also, Sigmund Freud and Søren Kierkegaard are only rarely mentioned in his later works, even though they are the topics of his first book-length studies (the one on Freud is a later retracted thesis while the one on Kierkegaard earned Adorno his doctorate).

⁵⁰ My formulation is indebted to Cohen 1994, 165.

⁵¹ Cole 2014, 65–67.

⁵² Thornhill 2006, 99–100.

rience.⁵³ Hegel considered this incompatible with our experience of the relationship between thought and reality. He claimed instead that history was connected to the constantly changing reality; just like the object of its knowledge, thinking is also historical.⁵⁴ As Hegel famously has it, philosophy “is its own time comprehended in thoughts”.⁵⁵ He implies that a contingent historical framework offers the content for which experience-based cognitive reflection gives, for example, an aesthetic or a religious form. The philosophical critique of these aesthetic and religious cultural products will then yield knowledge of the world. In other words, philosophy can transcend both the beliefs grounded in everyday experience and the disciplinary boundaries of special sciences, which makes it the only means to gain knowledge of the fundamental nature of reality.⁵⁶

Most representatives of the dialectical tradition, including Adorno, repeat the ideas of the inadequacy of science and the necessity of critique in one form or another. According to the classical Marxist notion, bourgeois science is as much a part of the so-called “false consciousness” as is religion or any political ideology kowtowing to the mercantile values of capitalism. All forms of thought that are either divorced from or ignorant of historical and social facts are complicit in enabling the status quo. The concept of false consciousness was popularised by Georg Lukács, who discovered it in a letter written by Friedrich Engels. Lukács included the idea in his theory of reification, which was to become important for the entire tradition of Western Marxism and quintessential to Adorno.⁵⁷ The theory claims that in market economy, individual things relate to each other as commodities, that is, in terms of their abstract exchange value, which leads to the negligence of their use-value. In capitalism, the relationships between human beings are defined in terms of the logic of the market just as are the relationships between artefacts. Thus, the singularity of individuals is forgotten and they become tools for upholding the market and the social power-relations. Additionally, false consciousness makes these relations permanent and seemingly natural.⁵⁸

The centrality of exchange value for late capitalism is essential to Adorno’s conception of ideology. Exchange value is something external to individual entities, as it cannot be retraced to their properties, but in market economy it becomes a factor defining them. According to Adorno, this forced commensurability follows the same logic as the identity-thinking that defines modern western rationality. I shall analyse this view in more detail in the next chapter, so I shall only present a preliminary summary of the notion here. Essentially, Adorno argues that identity-thinking equates phenomena with universal concepts and thereby with each other, violently forcing them into the same form.⁵⁹ Identity-

⁵³ McQuillan 2010, 40–41.

⁵⁴ Laitinen 2012, 391.

⁵⁵ Hegel 1991, 21.

⁵⁶ Laitinen 2012, 392.

⁵⁷ Çelik 2007. On reification and Adorno, see Rose 2014.

⁵⁸ Hawkes 2003, 108–109; Cook 2011, chapter 4.

⁵⁹ Adorno 2004, 4–6.

thinking is also an essential part of the explanation Max Horkheimer and Adorno provide to the task they set themselves at the beginning of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: “What we had set out to do was nothing less than to explain why humanity, instead of entering a truly human state, is sinking into a new kind of barbarism.”⁶⁰ The primary reason is man’s alienation, which is caused by the attempt to gain autonomy through the control of nature. The universal and abstract reason, which forces nature into its own image and turns it into a mere commodity, has turned out to be a powerful tool in this process.⁶¹

The image of nature produced by the abstract reason becomes a reality of its own, a false consciousness divorced from the entities it supposedly represents. Identity-thinking focuses on the general and the abstract. Adorno suggests that Kant took the formalisation of identity-thinking at the furthest by outlining a theory of knowledge based on the classification and regulation of individual perceptions using the universal concepts of understanding.⁶² Adorno thought that Kant was right as far as he believed that conceptual thought and the human capacity of knowledge have limits, but he made a mistake in considering these limits ahistorical. Hegel, on the other hand, understood that thought is dependent on contingent factors such as time and place, but he erred in believing that thought could eventually reach the truth about being.⁶³ The starting point for properly negative dialectics is the simultaneous acknowledgment of the limits of human knowledge and the aim to outline a way of thinking that both includes a historical dimension and avoids the pitfalls of identity-thinking. Adorno believes that instead of the universal, philosophy should direct its interest at the particular, which philosophy has traditionally ignored. This forgetting has sometimes been conscious and more often unconscious, brought about by the universal nature of concepts and their failure to exhaust the fickle singular phenomena.⁶⁴

Adorno calls the part of the object that the concept cannot identify the non-identical. The knowledge of it is “bodily, somatic, even mimetic” and cannot be conceptualised without an excess.⁶⁵ The non-identical should not be equated with subjective knowledge, nor does it refer to some sort of mystical otherness.⁶⁶ It simply refers to those properties of an entity that make it individual and that are therefore, by definition, beyond the reach of universal concepts.⁶⁷ Describing particular objects, one can provide an endless list of attributes, but the result is still nothing but a list of universal concepts that all refer to secondary properties of the object. Adorno states that conceptual constellations

⁶⁰ Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, xiv.

⁶¹ Bernstein 2004, 28.

⁶² See for example Adorno 2001, 66 and *passim*. Adorno also discusses the “Kantian block” in *Negative Dialectics*. See Adorno 2004, 384–390; 1966, 375–380. For a summary, see Thornhill 2006.

⁶³ Thornhill 2006; Kotkavirta 1999, 109.

⁶⁴ Adorno 2004, 8–10.

⁶⁵ Kotkavirta 1999, 101.

⁶⁶ “The nonidentity is a product of meaning itself, not a mystical alternative to predication.” (O’Connor 2004, 67.)

⁶⁷ Stone 2014, 1135–1137.

- a kind of methodological tool, which is explained in Chapter Five - make it possible to gain an increasing amount of knowledge about the object, but concepts cannot be transcended by recourse to concepts, although they can point outside themselves, towards the non-identical.⁶⁸ The perpetual change of people and the reality surrounding them also affects concepts that are, as Hegel has asserted, historically contingent.⁶⁹ As a result, the distinction between the identical and the non-identical is historically changing and it is the duty of philosophy to articulate this change. In Adorno's words: "The cognitive utopia would be to use concepts to unseal the nonconceptual with concepts, without making it their equal."⁷⁰ This paradox lies at the core of modern rationality and for Adorno, philosophy only becomes aware of it in its encounter with art. Art reveals the limits of conceptual thought by providing us with a more immediate and less reified relationship to the non-identical than that enabled by identity-thinking.⁷¹

The problem of thought becomes acute as Auschwitz reveals the dark underside of modernity. As Adorno insists throughout his work, the holocaust, although a singular phenomenon, was not a historical aberration but the culmination of the dialectic of enlightenment, that is, the logic of instrumentalisation and reification that defines the West. While testimonies of the reality of Auschwitz lay bare the violent tendencies inherent to our reason, art enables us to apprehend the extent to which these tendencies have distorted even the visceral aspects of our being. It is important to bear in mind that the defining characteristics of modernity are also at play at Auschwitz. The modern condition is made tragic by the complexity of the situation that enabled the holocaust, and by our unintended and unconscious complicity in maintaining its preconditions.

2.2 Modernity and Nihilism

Bruno Snell has famously argued that the tragic was born out of the encounter between the burgeoning human consciousness and the necessity to make decisions in an increasingly complex world.⁷² From this perspective, the birth of the polis connects to an enlightenment that disenchant the Homeric world and enables human beings to acknowledge their own culpability in generating suffering, the blame of which was traditionally laid on powers outside human con-

⁶⁸ Adorno 2004, 9-10.

⁶⁹ Kotkavirta 1999, 108.

⁷⁰ Adorno 2004, 10.

⁷¹ Reiners 1999a, 123, 125.

⁷² See Snell 1983 for a summary of the view. The complete argument is in Snell 1953. Snell's once influential view that Homeric characters lacked the depth needed for proper personhood has now been largely rejected. See, for example, chapter two of Williams 2008 and Long 2015, *passim*, for criticism of Snellian "progressivism". Instead of subjectivity or agency, however, I am more interested in the idea of tragedy as proto-philosophy that put the societal contradictions on public display through artistic means. I shall return to this idea in Chapter Three.

trol. Exposure to the tragic nature of decision-making yields self-awareness, which forces the Greeks to develop new models of reflection. That is, the obsolescence of tragedy paves way for the triumph of philosophy. There are obvious risks in drawing parallels between the transition which took place in Europe in and through the second world war and the transition the Greek society went through as it moved from the tribal, rural order to the world of poleis. However, I do not seek to make a historical claim but a philosophical one and on an abstract level, enough structural similarities seem to exist to merit defining both eras as tragic. First, Snell suggests that the grounds for the cultural transition in Athens were caused by disenchantment, that is, the collapse of the world order guaranteed by the imperceptible deities. In the narrative Adorno relies on, a similar transition happens with the advent of modernity: once the metaphysical guarantor – namely, Christianity – has lost its credibility, we are left with the demand to accept full responsibility for our actions. Only the tools we have at our disposal have brought about Auschwitz. As we have seen, Adorno argues that reason has betrayed us and the only way forward is to start from a moral standpoint, which we cannot ground upon our enlightened rationality.

In the modern era, the union of critical thought and practice, via the overcoming of capitalist conceptual mechanisms, might once have been possible. But the opportunity no longer exists. This brings us to the question of the possibility of living up to our ethical ideals after, in Adorno's words, the moment to realise philosophy has been missed.⁷³ Simon Critchley, whose view is unmistakably tragic, inaugurates his enquiry into ethics with the claim that philosophy begins in disappointment.⁷⁴ Critchley's focus is religious and political disappointment, which he considers endemic to modernity. The first results from "the breakdown of the order of meaning" and the second refers to "the realization that we inhabit a violently *unjust* world".⁷⁵ The lack of meaning risks nihilism, which in its passive form means effective surrender to the existing conditions and in the active one a violent attempt to transform them.⁷⁶ Political consciousness demands that we seek a way to conceive of justice in a meaningless world defined by perpetual violence and unnecessary suffering. Meaninglessness follows from what J. M. Bernstein has called modernity's "self-conscious differentiation of itself from the theological and metaphysical past".⁷⁷ Bernstein suggests that secular modernity consists of three co-constitutive categories: idealism, naturalism, and particularism.⁷⁸ Idealism refers to the human capability

⁷³ Adorno 2004, 3; 1966, 13.

⁷⁴ Critchley (2007, 1): "Philosophy does not begin in an experience of wonder, as ancient tradition contends, but rather, I think, with the indeterminate but palpable sense that something desired has not been fulfilled, that a fantastic effort has failed. Philosophy begins in disappointment. Although there might well be precursors, I see this as a specifically modern conception of philosophy."

⁷⁵ Critchley 2007, 2, 3. Christopher Hamilton (2015) also discusses both themes.

⁷⁶ Critchley models the definitions after the ruminations found in Book One of Nietzsche's (1968) *Will to Power*.

⁷⁷ Bernstein 2001, 235. This is not to imply that modernity as an entirely secular form of life has been achieved.

⁷⁸ Nowhere in his oeuvre does Adorno offer an explicit analysis of modernity that would provide his readers with a definition. Bernstein (2001, 236) has reconstructed

of autonomous self-legislation that becomes a problem after the death of god and the disenchantment of the world.⁷⁹ Naturalism means that we are aware of our simultaneous dependence and displacement from the material conditions of our existence as specific kind of animals.⁸⁰ And finally, particularism signifies the need to understand our “values, practices, and institutions” as resulting from the particular activity of human beings.⁸¹ During the first half of the twentieth century, the double-edged nature of these aspects was brought to the fore with unprecedented nihilistic force.

The question of active nihilism, and the demand to overcome it, is central to Adorno’s handling of the ethical and the political. The question of nihilism is also where Adorno’s view is most obviously tragic. As Christopher Hamilton has argued, the crime against humanity perpetrated by the Nazis was grounded on their denial of the intrinsic worth of the world, that is, the otherness consisting of our precarious social and material relations.⁸² For them, the world was merely an object of their actions, malleable according to their will. The Nazi world view sees the given as something that needs transforming into a non-human construction, following their aesthetic ideals. Doing so, as Hamilton points out, “the Nazis sought to be Gods”, albeit malevolent ones, ostensibly fully in control of the human and non-human beings which they considered as mere material left at their disposal.⁸³ From this point of view, the congruity between Adorno and the thinkers of the tragic is clear. The genealogical view of modern rationality presented in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* – which I shall discuss in more detail in the next chapter and briefly return to in Chapter Five – is founded on the idea of the enlightened subject’s estrangement from its own natural conditions. This gives rise to nihilism manifest in the denial of the value of the particular, and its violent oppression, which culminates in the horrors of Auschwitz. For Adorno, this is the logical end of our attempt to transgress all boundaries. The subject presupposed by scientific modernity is based on a hubristic notion of human domination like the one that enabled the Nazi myth. Hubris, as is well known, is the cause of the downfall of several famous tragic

the view presupposed in his work, arguing that Adorno’s “critical practice” contains “at least three logically distinct and irreducible fundamental orientations that can claim to constitute secular modernity: (1) no belief (action, norm, etc.) can be valid apart from our authorizing of it, self-legislating it; (2) that we must be capable of viewing and comprehending human practices as practices of animals of a certain kind who belong to or are parts of the natural world; (3) that we must conceive of significant human values, practices, and institutions as emerging historically as the intended or unintended consequence of particular human activities. We can think of (1) as ‘modernity as autonomous self-legislation’; (2) as some form of naturalism or vulgar materialism; and (3) could be titled ‘genealogical particularism’.”

⁷⁹ Max Weber (2009, 139) defines disenchantment as the notion “that one can, in principle, master all things by calculation.” In an essay on Beckett, for example, Adorno (1992b, 253) refers to this type of secular naturalism as “the complete disenchantment of the world”. See also Bernstein’s (2001, 4–21) brief account of Nietzschean and Weberian motifs in Adorno’s philosophy.

⁸⁰ See Bernstein 2000, 37n7.

⁸¹ Bernstein 2001, 236.

⁸² Hamilton 2016, 57–70.

⁸³ Hamilton 2016, 63–64.

protagonists, most famously Oedipus.⁸⁴ Believing that they are masters of their own destiny and fully in control of their lives and actions, hubristic tragic figures mistake themselves for gods.⁸⁵ In a way, they believe to have reached “the view from nowhere” through ignoring their humanity and the network of relations in which they are embedded.⁸⁶

To conceive of the good life, we need to think through the limitations set by the modern predicament for our ethical pursuits, while simultaneously considering the effects these limitations have on both our thinking and our ability to maintain a sense of responsibility for the other.⁸⁷ Adorno deals with this conundrum throughout his writing career, no matter what the topic at hand. In his thinking, he utilises a dialectical method grounded on immanent critique, meta-critique, and ethics. More specifically, Adorno seeks to unpick the ways theories are constituted and limited by their social and historical circumstances. The embedded nature of theories makes them complicit in upholding the status quo and perpetuating the violence inherent to our social organisation. This feedback loop of theorising generates more deeply enmeshed ideas, such as the hubristic notion of subjectivity. Philosophy must reveal the truth inadvertently masked by theory and by doing so lend a voice to suffering, which for Adorno is “a condition of all truth”.⁸⁸ History, as it is understood in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and the *Negative Dialectics*, is history of violence and suffering. Enlightened subjectivity gives the grounds for enlightened thought, which relies on the sharp division between the subject and the object of knowledge. Concepts – as instances of “the mind’s engagement at once with the world *and* (à la Hegel) with its own self-consciousness in that engagement” – get their legitimacy through the ability to identify their objects, by forging them into a form they as such do not have, but which originate from the work of conceptualisation itself.⁸⁹ There is, however, a non-conceptual element in every concept since they refer outside themselves, to the world from which they originate.⁹⁰ This non-conceptual world has to be given the possibility to speak without subjecting it to the straitjacket of abstraction.

Adorno’s worldly alternative to enlightened subjectivity is founded on the idea of a mimetic relationship with the given, which allows the subject and the object to co-constitute each other without the violence inherent to the distancing identification of traditional science. This sterile distance Adorno calls “the basic principle of bourgeois subjectivity, without which there could have been no

⁸⁴ See Gandesha 2001.

⁸⁵ In the words of Paul Tillich: “Hubris is the self-elevation of man into the sphere of the divine.” (Quoted in Bouchard 2010, 83.)

⁸⁶ See Newman 1994.

⁸⁷ Regarding the responsibility towards the other, Bowie (2013, 9) writes: “There is no simple way of matching philosophical contentions with the effects of those contentions in real historical contexts. There must, though, be an ethical dimension to philosophy, which sustains an awareness that making theoretical contentions is a form of practice which can involve ethical consequences.”

⁸⁸ Adorno 2004, 17.

⁸⁹ Helmling 2005.

⁹⁰ For a good summary of Adorno’s view, see Cook 2011, 62–64.

Auschwitz".⁹¹ Experience is essential to mimesis and, as Josef Früchtl has pointed out, Adorno's work "deliberately operates in a kind of indeterminate and intermediate space between scientific research and unregulated spontaneous experience."⁹² This space, which Nietzsche famously called that of the "dangerous Perhaps", forms the moral and aesthetic ground of our human existence, of the unattainable good life.⁹³ Therefore it also forms the ground for the meta-critique of modernity, that is, the cultural formations and normative commitments inherent to and formative of our damaged life. However, to inhabit such a space requires that we stand outside of the myriad conceptual formations of our modern predicament, and no such ground exists. The non-identical is not within direct conceptual reach. Any notion of life predicated on the non-identical posits the good life as a privative concept. In this sense, Adorno's negative view of the good life relates ironically to the loss of the sanctity of human life in Auschwitz.⁹⁴ For this value to become visible, humanity had to be violated through an act that tainted us permanently and made Auschwitz the quintessential problem of modern philosophy.

This aspect of modernity echoes the problematic on display in Attic tragedy. Take for example the above-mentioned Snell, who sees the key problem tragedy deals with as "the relationship of contemplation to action".⁹⁵ Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides represent in his view three different stages in the development of the Greek understanding of the question. Their works exhaust "the artistic possibilities of grappling with the problem of action" and both enable and necessitate philosophical contemplation, control of action, and its "norms and laws".⁹⁶ This move from tragedy to philosophy is, in Snell's terms, a move "from poetry to prose".⁹⁷ Perhaps Adorno's well-known poignant comment about the barbarity of writing poetry after Auschwitz should be considered in these terms.⁹⁸ After humanity is tainted at Auschwitz and our means of both understanding the human condition and realising our ethical and political ideals are spent, we find ourselves in a situation that is reminiscent of the one described by Snell. While we might consider ourselves well-equipped to depict the horrors of modernity, including the holocaust, and the futility of our attempts to change our lives – Adorno's favourite authors, especially Franz Kafka and Samuel Beckett, seem to deal with these questions single-mindedly – these depictions in themselves do not create change in the conditions. In the post-Auschwitz world, we must rethink our core assumptions about thought and action, that is, about subjectivity.⁹⁹ Both art and thought in their traditional

⁹¹ Adorno 2004, 363; 1966, 353–354.

⁹² Früchtl 2008, 148.

⁹³ Nietzsche 2002, 6. Terry Eagleton has repeatedly mentioned that "perhaps" was Samuel Beckett's favourite word, but on none of the occasions does he give a source. See, for example, Eagleton 2006, 70.

⁹⁴ See Adorno 1966, 352–354. See also Hamilton 2016, 65–66.

⁹⁵ Snell 1983, 404.

⁹⁶ Snell 1983, 405.

⁹⁷ Snell 1983, 404.

⁹⁸ Adorno 1981, 34.

⁹⁹ Or agency. See the first chapter of Shuster 2014.

form are exhausted, Adorno argues, and it is our moral duty to rethink the relationship of poetry and prose in the hope that somehow, someday we can realise philosophy.¹⁰⁰

2.3 Melancholy Modernism

For Adorno, artistic modernism is both symptomatic of the ills of modernity and the means of exposing the structural flaws that support them.¹⁰¹ The constituents of modernity – idealism, naturalism, and particularism – get an aesthetic form in art. Take for example Gabriel Josipovici’s view, presented in his book on the curious fate of modernism in late modernity. Josipovici’s main thesis is that mainstream Anglo-American literature and criticism has failed to understand modernity as a problem art should react to.¹⁰² Like Horkheimer and Adorno in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Josipovici also presents a genealogical argument and grounds his reading on the theory of modernisation as the disenchantment of the world.¹⁰³ According to Josipovici, the advent of modernity, and the collapse of the classical enchanted world picture, sees man become the subject who now needs to legitimise her position as the ultimate authority on worldly matters.¹⁰⁴ Artworks are no longer believed to reflect the eternal structure of the world, but they instead have to declare their own role as works of art, as artefacts. Josipovici mentions *Don Quixote* as an early example of a work which does exactly that.¹⁰⁵ Cervantes uses several literary methods, such as the famous fictive preface, to guide the reader into thinking that her relationship with the depicted reality is more “realistic” than that of the deluded knight. For this device to work, the reader must forget that they are evaluating fictive reality, which the novel portrays as if it were real. A novel, as any other kind of artwork, must present itself as an artefact, the artefactual nature of which the reader should ignore.

Adorno suggests that the special relationship between the subject and object of aesthetic experience is possible because artworks create an image of the world that appears as truthful to the subject.¹⁰⁶ This is what also happens with

¹⁰⁰ One reason for Adorno’s scepticism towards any attempt to resurrect tragedy connects to the inability of art, confined as authentic art is to the private sphere, to bring about social change. The convergence of theory and practice in anything resembling the Great Dionysia seems highly improbable in modernity. I shall return to this question throughout the thesis.

¹⁰¹ I discuss Adorno’s philosophical modernism in more detail in chapters Four and Five. On Adorno and aesthetic modernism, see Hammer 2015 and the seminal Lunn 1982.

¹⁰² Josipovici 2010a.

¹⁰³ Josipovici 2010b, 11–14; Adorno 2002, 54.

¹⁰⁴ Josipovici 2010b, 1–8. In other words, the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries saw the fall of the *auctoritas* of God. See Hill 2008, 263.

¹⁰⁵ Josipovici 2010b, 28–38.

¹⁰⁶ Adorno 2002, 1. In Freudian terms, important to Adorno and the Frankfurt School in general, art displays the collective unconscious, revealing the dreams and fantasies we are forced to repress – or sublimate. On this and other key themes found in the works of the prominent members of the school, see the very accessible Jeffries 2016.

conceptual thought: a concept can only appear as truthful and valid if it fits together with the larger network of concepts that forms the ideological representation of reality. Works of art are either heteronomous or autonomous. The image created by heteronomous works is compatible with the dominant ideology, while the relationship between autonomous works and the social reality is more complicated. Artworks can question their own autonomy. Thus, art can position itself against the socio-historical framework within which it is created, the transcendence of which it suggests, whilst nonetheless still being embedded within it.¹⁰⁷ In other words, autonomous artworks are ideological but not ideologically compromised. The task of philosophy and art is to raise into consciousness social contradictions, the concrete historical tensions that create dialectical change. That is to say, autonomous works of art point at the ideological distortions of society by referring to the non-identical without aiming to name it. This is the main difference between art and philosophy, which, like the special sciences, must use concepts that cannot help but identify their objects:

Inherently every artwork desires identity with itself, an identity that in empirical reality is violently forced on all objects as identity with the subject and thus travestied. Aesthetic identity seeks to aid the nonidentical, which is repressed by reality's compulsion to identify.¹⁰⁸

The unusual relationship between artwork and the surrounding reality explains its unique identity. This relationship is the basis for Adorno's conception of mimesis. Art, because of its mimetic relationship to reality, is "a refuge for mimetic comportment".¹⁰⁹ In mimesis, the division between subject and object collapses and they together co-constitute reality without the distance demanded by conceptual thought. The example Adorno and Horkheimer use to illustrate a mimetic relationship is the sense of smell: "When we see we remain who we are, when we smell we are absorbed entirely."¹¹⁰ This is, Adorno suggests, the only way we can relate to the object that is not violent. The relationship is grounded on experience and is therefore not conceptual, meaning that incorporating it as part of our thinking, or appropriating it as the grounds for new kind of – negative dialectical – thought, it must be subjected to the violence of concepts. As I mentioned above, to avoid replicating the violence, dialectical thinking must reinvent its methodological foundations. To do so, thought needs to model itself after autonomous art, bringing the constellatory method close to modernist collage, a theme I shall return to in Chapter Five.

Works of art are both cultural and natural objects. They are material artefacts and form and technique shape their content.¹¹¹ Adorno believes that artists utilise their own technical prowess in giving elements of nature a new form that has no equivalent outside the reality created by the artwork.¹¹² In this way,

¹⁰⁷ Zuidervaart 1991, 56–57.

¹⁰⁸ Adorno 2002, 4.

¹⁰⁹ Adorno 2002, 53.

¹¹⁰ Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 151.

¹¹¹ Beistegui 2010, 48.

¹¹² Adorno 2002, 4; Nivalainen 2012, 104.

works of art transform nature and set themselves against it as second nature. This creates the dialectical tension that enables art to reveal the limits of thought and to hint at the possibility of their transcendence: "Art completes knowledge with what is excluded from knowledge and thereby once again impairs its character as knowledge, its univocity."¹¹³ The attempt of thought to sublimate the reality of art and the reality of concepts fails because artworks are more than the sum of their parts and impossible to thoroughly explain. An encounter with art, like experiences of the sublime, reveals the limits of thought. A good example of the problems caused by the limited nature of our thinking is the question of morality. In Adorno's negativist view on ethics, we cannot know what the good life is like or how a just society should be organised. Every attempt to offer an alternative to the status quo, every genuine alternative that is not just a slight adjustment of the current situation, includes an assumption of the critic's ability to step outside history, and to escape the ideology distorting our thinking.¹¹⁴ Adorno's immanent critique seeks to utilise the contradictions and problems inherent to the object, in this case the whole of modernity. In other words, thought must turn against itself: the existing society needs evaluating against the way it presents itself and against the ideals to which it aspires. Since society does not exist as an object, social self-consciousness can only be reached indirectly through the material objects, the cultural artefacts, it produces.¹¹⁵

The critical analysis of cultural objects reveals ideological formations that define the prevailing conditions and through them, the possibilities and limits of our thinking. Genealogy, which I shall return to in Chapter Five, helps us understand how these ideological formations have come about and shows that they are contingent in nature. One of the ways the dominant ideology seeks to legitimise its position is by presenting the existing conditions as the pinnacle of a developmental historical narrative. This progressivist view is an essential aspect of capitalist ideology and it is used, so Adorno argues, to mask the process that guides the course of history: the aim to control nature, man, and humankind.¹¹⁶ As he writes in the *Negative Dialektik*: "History is the unity of continuity and discontinuity."¹¹⁷ Deeper awareness of the agenda guiding humanity would help us understand our dependency both on nature and on the nature within us. The driving force of humanity is the striving to dominate that nature, which creates discontinuity by continually undermining ethical and social progress. Humanity can never gain full independence from nature. Acknowledging this would enable us to recognise both the drives that guide us and all the other natural instincts and needs that affect us. In turn, this recognition would give us the opportunity to choose when to give in to our drives and when to use our unique human capability to resist them.¹¹⁸

¹¹³ Adorno 2002, 54.

¹¹⁴ Adorno 1981, 31; Freyenhagen 2013, 4–5.

¹¹⁵ O'Connor 2011, 548–549.

¹¹⁶ Adorno 2004, 319–320.

¹¹⁷ Adorno 2004, 320.

¹¹⁸ Stone 2014, 1128; Flodin 2011.

The minimalist guideline for our moral conduct should be to avoid things that prevent human beings from developing and realising themselves. Although it is impossible to live life rightly in a world that is wrong, as Adorno has it, we can still retain our ability to recognise suffering and evil.¹¹⁹ Our duty is to avoid adding to them and the task of philosophy is to help in this by unmasking and questioning the fundamental normative commitments our society and culture rest upon.¹²⁰ Adorno seems to think that if the acknowledgment of existing suffering is not enough to move us, there is not much theory can do to motivate change. Nevertheless, while change does not need reflectivity, self-awareness is the only thing that can prevent us from erring. In this regard, the function of art is to enhance our self-awareness. Art can neither change the existing conditions nor present concrete utopias. The most important imaginative element in every precarious artwork is the vestige of hope that our actions might bring about change for the better.¹²¹ This hope is the desire that incites us to philosophise, even if it means, in the end, little more than failing better.¹²² To put it in Adorno's melancholy terms: "Art is the ever broken promise of happiness."¹²³

One reason for this melancholy is that culture was unable to prevent Auschwitz. Similarly, as I noted above, Adorno considers the moment to realise philosophy as being missed. Yet there is little else on offer to us than the thin veneer of civilisation, burdened as we are by the historical, social, and cultural determinations of capitalist modernity. The whole of modernity needs to be subjected to a critique that can only be grounded on modernity itself. In other words, philosophy, through its relentless self-criticism, provides the whole socio-historical cultural constellation with a reflective dimension that doubles as the sole means to prevent a second Auschwitz. With all the traditional means philosophy has at its disposal exhausted, the only way forward is the thought that rises out of the ruthless self-critique of philosophy. In Adorno's case, this takes the form of negative dialectics, which pairs a modernist aesthetic sensibility with speculative rigour, in service to an all-encompassing moral demand that is still sensitive to the brokenness of our human condition. Adorno constructs his dialectics by adapting Kant and Hegel to the prevailing historical situation, as far as it is possible after Marx, Nietzsche, and two miserable centuries of barbarism and cruelty. While Hegel interpreted the French revolution as an essential step on humanity's path towards freedom, Adorno sees Auschwitz

¹¹⁹ Adorno 2005, 39.

¹²⁰ O'Connor 2011, 543.

¹²¹ In the words of Ryan Gunderson (2014, 10): "Social pessimism, at least the pessimism underpinning the Frankfurt School's treatises, serves two functions: (1) it provides meaningful and honest narratives for society to better understand the sources of its own ugliness (i.e. although pessimistic social theory cannot guide practical action, it can help raise the experiences and causes of injustice to consciousness) and (2) it preserves a radical, messianic hope." I return to this eschatological element of Adorno's thought briefly in Chapter Five.

¹²² To quote Samuel Beckett (1989, 101): "All of old. Nothing else ever. Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better." Freyenhagen (2013) echoes this sentiment in the subtitle of his book on Adorno's ethics: "Living less wrongly".

¹²³ Adorno 2002, 136.

as having revealed the fundamentally violent nature of modern rationality.¹²⁴ Like Hegel, Adorno seeks to analyse and criticise the mediations that produce and maintain culture, but he does so from a Marxist, materialist perspective. For Adorno, culture is not the whole of reality, but more like a dialectically constructed processual phenomenon shot through with ideological interests. It is created in and through the conflicting pressures of social relations and grounded on the material metabolism of society. Those interests are connected to the modern rationality that initially enabled them and have since continued to function as the justification for their position of power.¹²⁵

2.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that Adorno's negative dialectical attempt to adapt the philosophies of Kant and Hegel to the conditions of late modernity is predicated on a view of the human condition that is tragic. Adorno formulates his understanding of the particularities of late modernity in relation to a larger historical narrative, which depicts the triumph of instrumental rationality, the so-called dialectic of enlightenment, which reaches its macabre apogee at Auschwitz. The holocaust reveals the historical logic that sustains our reason – and thereby our fundamental normative commitments – and irrevocably taints humanity. As a result, we must re-evaluate our ethical positions and the rationale that has guided us in formulating and adopting them. Reason has become the sole means we have for protecting ourselves against the chaos and randomness that is nature, but it is complicit in creating the horror and suffering humanity has imposed upon itself. Therefore, we need to find new ways of reflecting upon the human condition. Adorno suggests that we need to do this by reassessing the relationship between art and philosophy, between aesthetics and reason.

Above, I have outlined the general tenets of Adorno's philosophy in relation to this interpretation of his key works. In what follows, I shall substantiate the tragic interpretation of Adorno with a closer reading of his seminal *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, co-written with Max Horkheimer soon after the Second World War. This early work already holds the key philosophical principles Adorno refined and developed further in his mature works. The next chapter will focus on the way the themes highlighted above are already defined in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and how they echo the interpretations of similar themes presented by philosophers and theorists of the tragic. Adorno often develops his understanding of ethical, epistemological, and metaphysical issues in dialogue with thinkers who were explicit about their interest in the tragic. Although Adorno argues, in passing, that tragedy became obsolete already in antiquity, he does not seem to rule out the possibility of a repetition of the conditions

¹²⁴ Bernstein 2004, 20.

¹²⁵ See Hawkes 2003, 130–135.

which made tragedy relevant for a brief period.¹²⁶ As I suggested above, referencing Bruno Snell, Adorno's understanding of modernity implies that Auschwitz revealed the modern condition to be tragic. This does not mean that the conditions for the revival of tragedy as a form of art have been renewed, but that we need to find a way to assess the tragic nature of our predicament and forge a theory, or an art, that would serve the purpose tragedy had for the Greeks.

¹²⁶ See Chapter 3.4 for a further elaboration on Adorno's explicit comments on tragedy.

3 THINKING THE TRAGIC¹²⁷

“Order imagined against fear is not order.
Saith man. Fear imagined against order
only negates or does not negate existing order.
Out of a rumbling of hollows an order is born
to negate another existing order of fear.”
—Christopher Middleton¹²⁸

In the previous chapter, I analysed the context of Adorno’s existential position – that is, his view of the human condition – along metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical planes. In this chapter, I continue the analysis in relation to the similarities between Adorno’s thought and that of the thinkers of the tragic.¹²⁹ As we have seen, a key factor in Adorno’s thinking is the notion of Auschwitz as a rupture in the historical narrative that reveals the price we have had to pay for the social and economic progress modernity prides itself upon. Most importantly, Auschwitz becomes a phenomenon whose preconditions are inherently present at the core of our rationality. Unless we subject thought to a critique that neutralises the threat of Auschwitz, a critique that makes us aware of the dangers intrinsic to the very act of thinking, we remain responsible for any unnecessary suffering that exists in the present and is likely to exist in the future. To expose the logic that plays out in our regression to barbarism, to use the terminology of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and Adorno trace the genealogy of the key conceptions connected to the problems with which they are concerned. As the dominant form of rationality, conceptualisation by its very nature limits our lives. The key to salvaging what is left of our humanity is in

¹²⁷ Parts of this chapter are adapted, with revisions, from Nivalainen 2016 with kind permission from the Taylor & Francis Group.

¹²⁸ Middleton 1989, 19.

¹²⁹ Adorno nowhere comments on tragic theories – except for a few brief remarks on Brecht and Lukács – which means that any influence they may have had on him must have been indirect. As I will show in this chapter, many thinkers who certainly influenced Adorno did write about tragedy and many of them even espoused explicitly tragic views.

art, and the moral demand created by Auschwitz forces us to do our best to fight for our humanity.

Horkheimer and Adorno base their view of the human condition on three tragic assumptions. First, the world we inhabit is horrifying in its hostility, an otherness that appears to be beyond our control.¹³⁰ This leads us to seek control and influence through the domination of nature and the attainment of knowledge, which power turns against us. Second, disenchantment has stripped the world of transcendental meanings, thereby putting us in a position where we must fashion our moral conduct and our ethical theories with little hope of understanding this predicament in terms that do not double as tools of domination. Without recourse to a concealed meaning, we are left with a bleak depiction of a world that is neither fully comprehensible to human agency nor under its control.¹³¹ And finally, this kind of world is not only something human beings act upon but also one that acts upon them, thereby rendering it unaccommodating to our rational and ethical ambitions.¹³² In Horkheimer and Adorno's narrative, the world is beset with fear, causing humans to seek safety in alienated subjectivity, accessed through the domination of human as well as non-human others. This has overturned human progress while displacing the main source of suffering from nature to society, thereby leaving us with the moral responsibility to organise social relations in ways that will prevent the re-emergence of barbarism.

In what follows, I shall propose a tragic reading of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, which will serve as a template for a similar reading of certain aspects of Adorno's mature philosophy, presented in the following two chapters. The chapter's three subsections discuss the themes of fear, knowledge, and morality, which I analyse in relation to existing philosophical theories of tragedy, some of which, I argue, resemble Adorno's formulations on related issues. The third subsection includes an analysis of Adorno's reading of *Hamlet*, which is his most sympathetic philosophical analysis of a tragic work of art.¹³³ I shall conclude with a summary of Adorno's scattered remarks on tragedy and the tragic, especially those found in his *Aesthetic Theory*, while echoing the tragic reading of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* laid out in the preceding sections.

¹³⁰ As Chris Thornhill (2001, 108) notes, Adorno focuses "on the limit of formal reason as a block, which holds back the uncontrollable contents of metaphysics and the contingent experiences of particular life".

¹³¹ The point of Adorno's negative dialectics is to maintain and think through contradictions without any kind of an assumption that they could be overcome. Since Adorno claims that all critique is immanent critique, his view of philosophy reflects his view on modernity, which thereby resembles secularised tragedy. This affects the way we can conceive of human autonomy and agency. For a reading of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in terms of agency, see Shuster 2014. For a reconstruction of Adorno's view of modernity, see Bernstein 2001, 236.

¹³² Williams 2008, 163–165.

¹³³ Whether *Hamlet* is a tragedy is an intricate question. Even those who, for whatever reason, think it is not, often choose to discuss it when they discuss tragedies. See, for example, Steiner 1963.

3.1 Advent of Reason

Horkheimer and Adorno begin their book by presenting a genealogy of modern reason from the perspective of our troubled relationship with nature.¹³⁴ This essentially hubristic relationship has all the elements of tragedy, as far as humanity is unable to understand nature other than as an object of domination; aims only to gain knowledge that aids in its control and domestication; and therefore prevents the formation of morally sustainable relationships between human beings with nature and one another.¹³⁵ This narrative provides the grounds for Adorno's tragic view of humanity and culture as determined by social forces beyond the control of the individual. This view persists in all of Adorno's later elaborations on culture and morality and is therefore worth exploring at length. The argument in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* could be summarised thus: human beings seek to curb their fear of nature by trying to control it, initially with magic and with science. These attempts fail as science reverts into myth, and external nature, subjected to control and domination, extends to overlap with human nature.

The authors argue that myth is already enlightenment, as far as it is an attempt to control nature, even when it is done in an unsystematic and non-rational way, such as through the utilisation of ritual magic.¹³⁶ In Homeric poetry, myths are systematised into a mythology, forming a primeval form of enlightenment, which gets transformed into the first systematic and comprehensive formalisation of the principles of reason in Plato. From this point of view, philosophy is about power and control and is defined as having a privative relation to literature, which for Plato meant tragic poetry.¹³⁷ This signature, characteristic of Platonic philosophy, is identified in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as the fear of a murky, undivided entity worshipped as the principle of *mana* in the earliest known stages of western civilisation. "Primal and undifferentiated, it is everything unknown and alien; it is that which transcends the bounds of experience, the part of things which is more than their immediately perceived existence."¹³⁸ This means that the move from magic to philosophy signifies an attempt to replace the intuitions of the particular with the principles of the universal as the source and guarantor of knowledge.¹³⁹ As a consequence, philoso-

¹³⁴ Many modern thinkers share this view. This is notably the case with Freud, who, together with Nietzsche, was one of Adorno's key influences. See especially Chapter 2 of Freud 2004.

¹³⁵ See Gandesha 2001.

¹³⁶ Unsystematic and irrational in the sense that the results of rituals remain unpredictable. See Horkheimer & Adorno 2002, xviii.

¹³⁷ On a related note, Horkheimer and Adorno (2002, 12, 13) assert that the "separation between science and poetry" is echoed in the "separation of sign and image," which philosophy sees as a chasm "between intuition and concept" and has desperately but unsuccessfully tried to bridge. Philosophy, they claim, is "defined by that attempt".

¹³⁸ Horkheimer & Adorno 2002, 10.

¹³⁹ In other words, the move from myth to philosophy is an attempt to replace transcendence (divine authority) with immanence (empirical inquiry). Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy (1990) have suggested that this did not remove the

phy can be seen as an attempt to colonise the principle of *mana* in order to curb the primeval fear that keeps humanity from fulfilling its emancipatory potential: "The doubling of nature into appearance and essence, effect and force, made possible by myth no less than by science, springs from human fear, the expression of which becomes its explanation."¹⁴⁰

The juxtaposition of myth and science is crucial to Horkheimer and Adorno's argument. They propose that enlightenment is not simply a modern ideological construction that seeks to justify the superiority of the natural sciences in eradicating myths. Instead, it is a complex process of control and domination that, paradoxically, also has a liberating effect and seems to be the only means we have for surpassing our animal nature. Only through enlightenment were people able to move from tribal and rural communities to the rationally organised democratic polis. Yet this emancipatory program is not as thoroughly rational as it seems to be, since the attempt to eradicate primal fear is never successful. In fact, enlightenment is blind to or neglectful of the fear around which it forms itself, and the attempts to overcome fear solely through rational means inadvertently radicalise it. Against the erratic "outside," reason posits unity to force everything into an all-encompassing rational system deduced from the subject: "Nothing is allowed to remain outside, since the mere idea of the 'outside' is the real source of fear."¹⁴¹ Such a system accepts no ambiguity and seeks total control of the image it creates, which serves as its justification. In other words, the primary function of science is ideological:

Through their claim to universal validity, the philosophical concepts with which Plato and Aristotle represented the world elevated the conditions, which those concepts justified to the status of true reality.¹⁴²

Thus, philosophy, the first science, is in its first formal instantiation the science of the polis, that is, moral and political philosophy. The key themes of Athenian philosophy deal with the ways we should live our lives and organise our societies while inadvertently trying to justify the existing order by utilising the concepts originating from "the marketplace of Athens".¹⁴³ As Adorno writes much later in the *Aesthetic Theory*:

Social struggles and the relations of classes are imprinted in the structure of art works; by contrast, the political positions deliberately adopted by artworks are epiphenomena and usually impinge on the elaboration of works and thus, ultimately, on their social truth content. Political opinions count for little. It is possible to argue over how much Attic tragedy, including those by Euripides, took part in the violent social conflicts of the epoch; however, the basic tendency of tragic form, in contrast to its mythical subjects, the dissolution of the spell of fate and the birth of subjectivity,

need for authority. For them, myth is about identification, which national socialism exploited in the attempt to fashion a new national myth for Germany.

¹⁴⁰ Horkheimer & Adorno 2002, 11.

¹⁴¹ Horkheimer & Adorno 2002, 11.

¹⁴² Horkheimer & Adorno 2002, 16.

¹⁴³ Plato's and Aristotle's concepts, Horkheimer and Adorno (2002, 16) argue, "originated, as Vico put it, in the marketplace of Athens; they reflected with the same fidelity the laws of physics, the equality of freeborn citizens, and the inferiority of women, children, and slaves".

bears witness as much to social emancipation from feudal familial ties as, in the collision between mythical law and subjectivity, to the antagonism between fateful domination and a humanity awakening to maturity. That this antagonism, as well as the historicophilosophical tendency, became an apriori of form rather than being treated simply as thematic material, endowed tragedy with its social substantiality: Society appears in it all the more authentically the less it is the intended object.¹⁴⁴

The complex relationship between literature and philosophy, morality and politics, the personal and the social, and ideology and experience are themes penetrating both philosophy and tragedy. They are both forms of discourse that strive to enable Athenian citizens to come to terms with the newly developed democratic form of urban living; the demands it sets on the organisation of life around the rules and laws that enable and uphold the state; and the persistent failure of reason in enabling human beings to fulfil their moral ambitions.¹⁴⁵

In the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno's criticism of reason and his attacks on the Platonic attempt to subject people to rational control of each other and of themselves are often presented as a criticism of myth.¹⁴⁶ A good example is the famous reading of *The Odyssey*, which for Horkheimer and Adorno tells the story of how Odysseus secularised the primeval world by measuring it out.¹⁴⁷ According to their reading, the way Odysseus resists the temptation of the Sirens by having his body bound to the mast while retaining the ability to listen to their song, effectively allows him to control nature by controlling the natural in him, by violently suppressing his animal nature. Odysseus's act both violates his own nature and establishes his domination over his fellow men in a process that has been neatly summarised by Paul Connerton: "He must forcibly restrain his instinctual drives (he is bound to the mast); and he must face obedience upon those who travel with him (they must row), which in turn is only possible because he deludes them (he plugs their ears)."¹⁴⁸ For Horkheimer and Adorno, *The Odyssey* depicts the founding act of the bourgeois self. This paradigmatic modern subject denies its natural grounds to gain autonomy. Yet its

¹⁴⁴ Adorno 2002, 232. One implication is that social truth content demands works of art to take a certain type of form. Therefore, and this is his main criticism of modern attempts to recreate tragedies, it is no longer possible to present tragic content in the form found in Attic tragedy. In as much as the transition from rural communities to the polis and the birth of subjectivity, for example, are outdated, so is the art form that was born out of a need to tackle these phenomena. Throughout his oeuvre, Adorno makes numerous remarks that repeat the idea of tragedy's obsolescence. A good example is the difference between the notion of subjectivity inherent to tragedy and the way subjectivity is actualised under the present conditions as little more than the locus of mere survival: "Tragedy evaporates because the claims of the subjectivity that was to have been tragic are so obviously inconsequential." (Adorno 1992b, 252.)

¹⁴⁵ See Bowie 1997, 176.

¹⁴⁶ This is in part because mythology is as ideologically compromised as science. Both necessitate a split between man and the world. Tragedy, then, deals with this split and the ensuing problematic power-relations: "The myths which the tragic dramatists drew on were already marked by the discipline and power which Bacon celebrated as the goal." (Horkheimer & Adorno 2002, 5.)

¹⁴⁷ Horkheimer & Adorno 2002, 38. This is but one aspect of their critique of myth. See Bernstein 2004b, 21-30. One should also bear in mind that Horkheimer and Adorno initially planned to illustrate their point with a reading of *Oedipus Tyrannus*. On this, see Gandesha 2001.

¹⁴⁸ Connerton 1980, 69.

knowledge is still limited, because the process of instrumentalisation that allows the repression of nature needs reason to lose its self-awareness; to become “hard enough to shatter myths”.¹⁴⁹ This loss of self-awareness leads to the denial of our dependence on nature and, thus, our inability to recognise and understand our instinctual animal drives.¹⁵⁰ Without taking these aspects of our being into account, we will fail in all our attempts to control our lives. This launches the fatal trajectory followed by many tragic protagonists from Oedipus to King Lear.

Horkheimer and Adorno want to remind us that while we like to think of ourselves as rational and autonomous individuals, human nature is much more complex, even horrific. Subjectivity is only gained through a violent act of repression. Before Odysseus sacrifices his true nature to gain bourgeois subjectivity, he is more akin to the complex protagonists of tragedies than the rational beings completely in control of their choices and destinies presupposed by enlightened systems of thought.¹⁵¹ As an autonomous and heroic individual cunningly overcoming the forces of nature, Odysseus becomes the *beau idéal* of an enlightened subject. As the harbinger of a rational order, he stands on the threshold between the world of myth and the world of the polis, a transitional period whose anxieties Attic tragedies illustrate. The tragic protagonists appear to inhabit a rationally organised society, but they fail in their attempt to organise their own actions through the same means that enabled social organisation to come about. On an individual level, the type of instrumental reason Plato relied on in his search for emancipatory potential was not enough to deliver humans from the power of those evils that prevented them from attaining the good life.

As Jean-Pierre Vernant reminds us, the tragic protagonist is no longer an idealised model, unlike the mythical characters that occasionally appear in tragedies, but a problem.¹⁵² The chorus, formed of amateur actors who represented the citizens of the polis, debated this problem.¹⁵³ According to Vernant, the very juxtaposition of the chorus and the tragic protagonist echoed the con-

¹⁴⁹ Horkheimer & Adorno 2002, 2.

¹⁵⁰ See Stone 2014.

¹⁵¹ “What is this being that tragedy describes as a *deinos*, an incomprehensible and baffling monster, both an agent and one acted upon, guilty and innocent, lucid and blind, whose industrious mind can dominate the whole of nature yet who is incapable of governing himself? What is the relationship of this man to the actions upon which we see him deliberate on the stage and for which he takes the initiative and responsibility but whose real meaning is beyond him and escapes him so that it is not so much the agent who explains the action but rather the action that, revealing its true significance after the event, recoils upon the agent and discloses what he is and what he has really, unwittingly, done? Finally, what is this man’s place in a world that is at once social, natural, divine, and ambiguous, rent by contradictions, in which no rule appears established, one god fights against another, one law against another and in which, even in the course of the play’s action, justice itself shifts, twists, and is transformed into its contrary?” (Vernant & Vidal-Naquet 1990, 32.)

¹⁵² “In the new framework of tragic interplay, then, the hero has ceased to be a model. He has become, both for himself and for others, a problem.” (Vernant & Vidal-Naquet 1990, 25.)

¹⁵³ Bowie 1997, 176.

flict between the community and the individual, or, the polis and the citizen. The former is “an anonymous and collective being whose role is to express, through its fears, hopes, and judgments, the feelings of the spectators who make up the civic community,” and it is opposed by “the individualized figure whose action forms the center of the drama and who is seen as a hero from another age, always more or less alien to the ordinary condition of a citizen.”¹⁵⁴ As individualised as the protagonist is, he is always bound to his community in a number of ways and it would be hubristic to think otherwise.¹⁵⁵

For a philosopher of the tragic, this has two important consequences. On the one hand, it represents the individual’s surrender to the rule of law, thereby legitimising the rationally oriented organisation of the polis.¹⁵⁶ The civic order of the polis is, after all, ostensibly a rational construct.¹⁵⁷ Its purpose is to provide citizens with a framework for acting responsibly, thereby surpassing the mythological order of the gods, whose unpredictability echoes that of an allegedly hostile nature.¹⁵⁸ As such, thought becomes the tool of control and domination of both nature and people. Nature effectively comes to mean everything excluded from the realm of the polis, and human beings become citizens once they are subjected to abstract rules and norms, implemented from without.¹⁵⁹ On the other hand, the emerging role of tragedy in Athenian society put the inherent contradictions of the polis on public display.¹⁶⁰ Since this was done through artistic means, it inspired later thinkers to see the polis as a singular unity of aesthetics, politics, and morality.¹⁶¹ As J. M. Bernstein has noted, in modernity we tend to see these concepts as three distinct domains and as a result of this strict separation, art has lost its social and political relevance.¹⁶² Several attempts have been made to counteract this aesthetic alienation by recouping art’s sociological significance. Some of these ventures did not gain the required momentum, as was the case with Richard Wagner’s ambitious

¹⁵⁴ Vernant & Vidal-Naquet 1990, 24.

¹⁵⁵ Aristotle (2008, 66) famously claims in his *Poetics* that tragedies arouse fear (*phobos*) and pity (*eleos*). The pity he refers to is a very specific kind of “amorphous fellow-feeling”, as Gloria Fisk (2008, 893) calls it, which occurs between equals. Paraphrasing Vernant and Vidal-Naquet, she continues that tragedy functioned to remind the citizen-spectators that they are equally susceptible to misfortune – a notion having to do with the special meaning of *eleos*.

¹⁵⁶ Andrew Bowie (1997, 176) notes that tragedy is “the revelation of the truth that constitutes the forming of the state in which it is performed, the truth that the institution of law inherently entails conflict and suffering in ways which cannot be rationalistically explained away.”

¹⁵⁷ As Fisk (2008, 894) points out, the *polis* is “a creation and manifestation of human logos.”

¹⁵⁸ Cf. Alford 1992, 159.

¹⁵⁹ For example, Bowie (1997, 176) has suggested that the tribunal at the end of Aeschylus’s *Oresteia* stands for the rule of law, thereby symbolising the imposition of the order of the polis onto a rural community and a transition from myth to reason. See also Klusmeyer 2009, 346.

¹⁶⁰ “It does in many ways make sense to see Athenian tragedy, not as a symbolic expression of what that society already was, but as an event in which it revealed to itself what it was and constituted itself as a public sphere.” (Bowie 1997, 176.)

¹⁶¹ See Berry 2004, 666–671.

¹⁶² Bernstein 1992, 1–16.

Gesamtkunstwerk, while others have turned out to be monstrous, such as the fascist aestheticising of politics.¹⁶³

Yet the need and aspiration of reclaiming the social function of art lives on in the aesthetic criticism of modernity, to which tradition Adorno belongs. In art, Horkheimer and Adorno argue, the whole appears in the particular.¹⁶⁴ The work of art thus reveals to us an image of society with its conflicting interrelations of power, thereby bringing within our reach the disconnected limitations imposed on our being by reason. This idea, first outlined in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, becomes even more clear in Adorno's later work. Throughout his writing, Adorno retains the hope that art can expose the inherent contradictions of modern culture. Whether this could ever help to liberate us from the repressive confines of the dialectic of enlightenment is unclear, but it is certainly an essential part of the process. This hope seems to have far-reaching implications not only for art and aesthetic theory but it also influences Adorno's understanding of the "good life". To discuss the ethical dimension of Adorno's thought, however, we must first understand what the curious interplay of art and reason can reveal about our ability to gain knowledge of and mastery over our lives. As far as the very reason we have accepted, on a cultural level, as the sole means for its assessment, denies the true nature of our humanity, we must find a new way of thinking: one that can transcend reason. This position is tragic in a basic sense: the theoretical attempts to understand our predicament will always fail since reason is implicated in causing it. Additionally, as we have seen, the modern rational subject is defined, like so many tragic heroes, by a lack of self-awareness.¹⁶⁵

3.2 The Aesthetic and the Tragic

In terms of social and cultural organisation, the transition from the rural world to that of the polis was effectively an attempt to move from a mythical order to an enlightened rational order.¹⁶⁶ And as classicists such as Jean-Pierre Vernant and philosophers such as Andrew Bowie have suggested, on the level of cultural self-understanding this transition was mediated through the theatre. As Bowie points out, art was the only cultural form that could combine "the affective, the ethical and the cognitive".¹⁶⁷ In this way tragedy served a civic purpose in the budding Greek polis in which what has since become known as the scien-

¹⁶³ "Aesthetic alienation" is Bernstein's term. As is well known, the German Fascist aim to grant aesthetics a role in the constitution of the political and the social included an ideological attempt to appropriate Wagner's revolutionary program as a part of their project. While Wagner's ambitions were both nationalist and socialist in nature, interpreting them as national socialist required violent revision of his ideas. See Berry 2004, 663–683. See also Cachopo 2014, 36–50.

¹⁶⁴ Horkheimer & Adorno 2002, 14.

¹⁶⁵ See Gandesha 2001.

¹⁶⁶ Bowie 1997, 176.

¹⁶⁷ Bowie 2003, 172.

tific, the aesthetic, the moral, and the political simultaneously kept each other in check. As these forms became increasingly institutionalised and the polis secured its role as the accepted mode of social organisation, this dynamic interrelationship stagnated and philosophy came to dominate the public discourse.¹⁶⁸

Plato, the best-known exponent of this new political and ideological order, sought in the *Republic* to cement the position of philosophy as the only legitimate mode of discourse on social and political issues.¹⁶⁹ Thus, in the course of his argument, he acknowledges that he is participating in “an ancient quarrel” between poetry and philosophy.¹⁷⁰ The mere existence of a quarrel implies that the two discourses share the same objective, that is, that the dispute has to do with a conflict between two competing modes of discourse regarding social, political, moral, and aesthetic matters. The presence of mythical figures and tropes in Attic tragedy signifies that it belongs to a phase of transition, or, as Adorno argues, tragedy becomes obsolete once this transition is complete and the polis becomes stable enough to discard the past.¹⁷¹ This lays the groundwork for the triumph of enlightenment that has come to dominate the trajectory of western cultural and political formations to the present day. The demise of tragedy is part of a rationalisation process, which allows purging everything that does not fit into an enlightened conception of knowledge from the domain of philosophy.¹⁷² This rationalisation entails the eradication of the concrete through “the determining negation of whatever is directly at hand” and the subsumption of the particular under the universal, “which subdues the abundance of qualities”.¹⁷³

In the new enlightened order, “the clean separation between science and poetry”, equates philosophy with reason and associates tragic poetry with myth.¹⁷⁴ This separation provides a starting point for the entire tradition of philosophy that shows a special interest in the aesthetic.¹⁷⁵ I referred to this tradition earlier as that of the aesthetic criticism of modernity, since it values the

¹⁶⁸ See Vernant & Vidal-Naquet 1990, 23–28.

¹⁶⁹ Plato wanted to banish the poets from the polis, but it is unclear what he sought to condemn and for what reason. Throughout the dialogues, he presents several contradictory arguments against the tragedians, all filtered through the ironic character of Socrates, and it is difficult to tell which were his actual views – or whether he even held any. See Young 2013, 3–20. Yet, the Plato accused of one-sided rational organisation of the city also considered as ideal a state where every citizen shared both the goods and ills of their peers. See Fisk 2008, 893.

¹⁷⁰ Plato 1997, X, 607b. For an interesting, and entertaining, summary of the classical debate between philosophy and poetry, see Peter Adamson (2014, chapter 3) on Xenophanes.

¹⁷¹ As Adorno writes in the *Aesthetic Theory* (2002, 35), “the pantheon of neutralized culture concealed” the “agon of Greek tragedy”.

¹⁷² Or the Apollonian “Socratic rationalism” condemned by Nietzsche who promoted the dark Dionysian side of existence, denied already by the Athenians. See Hohendahl 2013, chapter 3.

¹⁷³ Horkheimer & Adorno 2002, 20, 6.

¹⁷⁴ Horkheimer & Adorno 2002, 12–13. As Stathis Gourgouris (2003, 2) writes: “It is fair to say that since Plato’s famous decision there has been an implicit but consistent association of the poetic act with a peculiar, mysterious, and even dangerous sort of knowledge.”

¹⁷⁵ The tradition tends to orient itself against Kant, but as we have seen, the roots of the key arguments regarding the aesthetic go back to Plato. See Thornhill 2006, 99–100.

subversive potential of art against the rationalist and scientific ideology of western culture. Horkheimer and Adorno mention these tendencies with a reference to Schelling, whom they paraphrase as having said that “art begins where knowledge leaves humans in the lurch”.¹⁷⁶ The role of science is then to explain the unique ability of art to record and communicate. Yet this potential of art is grounded in the type of knowledge bourgeois culture seeks to dismiss as irrational and irrelevant. Thus, any concession regarding the power of reason has given more room to religious faith rather than to art.¹⁷⁷ The power of the aesthetic lies in its ostensible ability to bypass rational conceptualisation without setting itself into a privative relationship with reason.¹⁷⁸ One of the ways art does this is through ambiguity: that is, by pointing outside the representation of reality, which enlightened reason mistakes for reality itself. Later in his career, Adorno chose to call this projection “identity thinking,” and his criticism of it could be seen as an attempt to sublimate the division between philosophy and poetry.¹⁷⁹

Art, which, unlike reason, has no difficulty in dealing with particulars, needs reason for interpreting artworks, while reason needs art to reveal its limitations. This idea, I think, is central to Adorno’s aesthetic theory.¹⁸⁰ The dynamic of art and reason reiterates the complex relationship of myth and reason presented in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. As we have seen, Horkheimer and Adorno see the separation of myth and reason as misguided, as far as myths had already served a purpose akin to the one later ascribed to philosophy: “Myth sought to report, to name, to tell of origins but therefore also to narrate, record, explain. This tendency was reinforced by the recording and collecting of myths. From a record, they soon became a teaching.”¹⁸¹ Yet as a means of socio-cultural instruction, the collection of myths forms a whole that can be subjected to enlightened rational inquiry. Once their rationalisation has been carried out, in a process that turns myth into a rational account and reason into myth, myths need to justify their role as a teaching tool.¹⁸² This justification, however, can only be conducted within the domain of reason, using the strategies provided by philosophy. This sets philosophy apart from and against poetry and masks the mythic and poetic qualities of philosophical discourse. The tradition of aesthetic criticism sees this Platonic quarrel as prefiguring the rupture that

¹⁷⁶ Horkheimer & Adorno 2002, 14.

¹⁷⁷ “The bourgeois world was rarely amenable to such confidence in art. Where it restricted knowledge, it generally did so to make room for faith, not art.” (Horkheimer & Adorno 2002, 14.)

¹⁷⁸ Horkheimer & Adorno 2002, 14.

¹⁷⁹ The critique of identity thinking is an essential element of Adorno’s negative dialectics. His preferred philosophical method, the building of constellations, could be interpreted as an acknowledgment of the separation of an assumed earlier unity into the domains of aesthetics, politics, and morality. See Adorno 2004, 5.

¹⁸⁰ For more on the topic, see Zuidervaart 1991, 48–53.

¹⁸¹ Horkheimer & Adorno 2002, 5.

¹⁸² “Art had to demonstrate its usefulness.” (Horkheimer & Adorno 2002, 13.)

became constitutive of modernity, namely, the separation of the domains of philosophical inquiry into truth, morality, and the beautiful.¹⁸³

In modernity, the domain of truth becomes almost synonymous with philosophy, making it necessary for all inquiries into truth, morality, and art to be philosophically validated to be considered scientific.¹⁸⁴ The problem is that the dominant method of philosophical inquiry sets significant limitations on our capacity to understand our human condition: we are forced to conduct our inquiries by relying on a mode of thought that is fully complicit with the regressive socio-economic system known as capitalism. Since the myth of scientific impartiality dominates the discourses of knowledge and politics, the notion of beauty is associated with subjective taste. Subjective qualities are beyond the reach of universal categories and therefore beyond rational examination, for science does not recognise particulars. Still, the association of beauty with taste contains at least a grain of truth: since taste is a matter of individual preference, the association inadvertently hints at the presence of the particular in aesthetic experience.¹⁸⁵ The notion of the particular is pivotal to Adorno's thought.¹⁸⁶ In fact, one possible way of reformulating the core idea of Adorno's ethics is to consider it as a demand to respect the particular, which the enlightenment has sought to deny or even eradicate.¹⁸⁷ The category of the aesthetic, with its unique ability to communicate without recourse to the traditional corrupt means of communication, enables the bridging of truth and morality. This ethical dimension of Adorno's aesthetic theory conveys another aspect of his affinity with the philosophers of the tragic. Although disagreeing with their conclusions, Adorno seems to discuss some of the problems that troubled Arthur Schopenhauer and Friedrich Nietzsche, two notable thinkers of the tragic.¹⁸⁸

In this regard, the most important aspect of Schopenhauer's philosophy is the epistemological value he grants to art: "literature objectifies the Idea of humanity," he states, and tragedy is "the pinnacle of literature."¹⁸⁹ As Bowie ex-

¹⁸³ As is well known, Kant fashioned his three critiques along these lines. The strictness of this division for his philosophy, however, is a matter of dispute. See, Bernstein 1992, 2.

¹⁸⁴ Nevertheless, *quis custodiet ipsos custodes*, as Juvenal famously asked. The increasing amount of revelations regarding Heidegger's antisemitism, to name an obvious example, beg the question whether philosophy can ever be truly aware of its own limitations if its practitioners remain blind to their shortcomings. See Farin & Malpas 2016 and Trawny 2016.

¹⁸⁵ Cf. Bernstein 1992, 2.

¹⁸⁶ Gritzner (2015, 167) sees the prioritising of particularity as a part of Adorno's tragic sensibility: "An awareness of tragedy draws attention, on the one hand, to the fate of particularity in late-capitalist society (the erasure of differences between particular objects and individuals under reified formulas and schemata). On the other hand, the concept of tragedy may also permit us to make hidden social contradictions and antagonisms reappear."

¹⁸⁷ Over the past fifteen years, a lot has been written about Adorno's moral philosophy. J. M. Bernstein's (2001) exhaustive attempt to uncover the ethical program implicit in Adorno's oeuvre set the parameters for later enquiries. For a useful summary of his thesis and the key responses to it, see Smith 2003. See also Freyenhagen 2013.

¹⁸⁸ Adorno's debt to Nietzsche is often acknowledged. See Hohendahl 2013, chapter 3. For a book-length study, see Bauer 1999. On Adorno and Schopenhauer, see Peters 2014, esp. 166-167 and 199-202.

¹⁸⁹ Schopenhauer 2010, 279.

plains, tragedy depicts situations brought about by “the ‘excess’ of the world” that challenge our forms of knowledge.¹⁹⁰ Denying the failure of our reason to exhaust reality, we seek to maintain an illusion of true knowledge about and complete mastery of the natural other. This illusion forces us to adopt a nihilist world-view and to commit horrific acts that appear as rational and morally unquestionable. This is so because the true object of our actions, available to us as the excess, is not within our conceptual reach and we are therefore constantly at risk of ignoring its existence.¹⁹¹ For Schopenhauer tragedy, and tragedy alone, can reveal the world that lies beyond the level of representation, beyond ideology. This world is a world of perennial suffering, brought about by the metaphysical drive that moves it and is indifferent to our individual desires, the will. Having understood and accepted that suffering is an unavoidable dimension of our existence, we are better off abandoning our attempts to seek solace through futile attempts to make the world meet the subjective needs of the will. Doing away with subjectivity brings forth autonomy and objectivity. This happens in aesthetic experience, making art a condition for knowledge.¹⁹² Taking his cue from Schopenhauer, the young Nietzsche also saw tragedy as a way of contemplating the grounds of our very existence. He defined these grounds as a quasi-deterministic primal force guiding our actions.¹⁹³ This force resembles the principle of *mana* in that both are horrendous and unbearable when faced as such. Nietzsche saw the thin veneer of civilisation as a way of keeping the force at bay. This inability to embrace the totality of life, by denying its grounds, is a defining feature of our decadent and nihilist modern culture. Nietzsche thought that Greeks saw things differently. They allowed the aesthetic contemplation of the Dionysian horror by putting the force on public display in tragedy, thereby affirming the whole of life.¹⁹⁴

Adorno’s formulations regarding the function of art, the birth of philosophy, and the relationship of the identical and the non-identical appear to contain vestiges of Nietzschean and Schopenhauerian notions of the tragic. Both Schopenhauer and Nietzsche agree that there is something wrong with positivist attempts to uncover the truth about the human predicament. If anything, such attempts prevent us from reaching the truth, only allowing us to pursue a truncated form of existence. This view resembles the analysis of *The Odyssey* presented in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.¹⁹⁵ While Adorno rejects the Schopenhauerian ideas of the necessity of suffering and individual liberation as well as the Nietzschean attraction to irrationalism and his hope of aesthetic reconcilia-

¹⁹⁰ Bowie 2010, 71. The excess being anything that escapes conceptualisation or control.

¹⁹¹ See Peters 2014, 166–167.

¹⁹² See Trigg 2004, 171–172.

¹⁹³ Bowie 2003, 282. Nietzsche went on to develop this idea into a theory of the will to power, which Hans Morgenthau much later adopted as the grounds for his theory of international relations as a way of trying to come to terms with irreconcilable conflicts. See Shilliam 2007, 299–327.

¹⁹⁴ Bowie 2003, 281–282. See also Seaford 2004, xiii.

¹⁹⁵ The excess referred to by Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Adorno share uncanny similarities. Safranski (2003, 345) adds Heidegger to the equation, but omits Schopenhauer: “Nietzsche’s ‘Dionysus’, Heidegger’s ‘Being’, and Adorno and Horkheimer’s ‘nature’ are all designations for the colossal dimensions of existence.”

tion, he agrees with both on the ability of art to reveal something essential about ourselves, something modern bourgeois science is unable to grasp. Horkheimer and Adorno share the Schopenhauerian view that the grounds of our being cause a primal horror that magic and ritual seek to sublimate. The modern after-image of this sublimation is art. Additionally, they agree with Schopenhauer and Nietzsche that there is more to life than reason can grasp. Finally, they seem to share with Nietzsche, among other things, a belief in the necessity to supplement the enlightened conception of the world with an affirmation of the aesthetic.

Adorno believes, then, that works of art provide valid information about the world around us.¹⁹⁶ He argues that they do so by reflecting and reproducing the conditions of the socio-historical processes to which they belong while simultaneously managing to say something that applies to the entire human condition.¹⁹⁷ Art is mediated by history and society, which burdens the artwork with an internal tension that mirrors the tensions constitutive of modern societies.¹⁹⁸ Works of art thus communicate an epochal self-consciousness, which communicates the truth about the specific historical situation that affects us all within the sphere of western capitalism. Art can therefore serve a function like that served by tragedy in the polis. This enables the aesthetic to act as a corrective to the one-sidedness of enlightenment rationality, with art serving the moral function of reminding us of our duty to live responsibly and to ensure that all avoidable suffering, both human and non-human, is indeed avoidable. But Adorno, unlike his romantic predecessors Wagner and the young Nietzsche, does not advocate a unilateral aesthetic reconciliation of culture.¹⁹⁹ His negativism insinuates that we should abstain from utopian idealism and instead understand the convergence of the aesthetic and the epistemological as a moral demand.²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁶ This question of the truth content of art is an essential, and contested, part of Adorno's aesthetic theory. For a book-length assessment of the thesis, see Zuidervaart 1991. Schopenhauer does not think it possible for us to reach truth, but we may form adequate knowledge through aesthetic experience. See Trigg 2004, 171-172.

¹⁹⁷ Adorno famously describes this special ability of artworks by comparing them to monads. For a critical analysis of the artwork's ability to represent reality, see Hohendahl 2013, chapter 4.

¹⁹⁸ See Adorno 2002, 4-6.

¹⁹⁹ One way of putting it is to say that Adorno wants to avoid what Jean-Luc Nancy has analysed as nostalgia for a lost community. Nancy argues that the idea of a lost unity is prevalent in western political philosophy. It also tends to include the idea of a level of cultural self-reflection we are no longer capable of: "The lost, or broken, community can be exemplified in all kinds of ways, by all kinds of paradigms: the natural family, the Athenian city, the Roman Republic, the first Christian community, corporations, communes, or brotherhoods - always it is a matter of a lost age in which community was woven of tight, harmonious, and infrangible bonds and in which above all it played back to itself, through its institutions, its rituals, and its symbols, the representation, indeed the living offering, of its own immanent unity, intimacy, and autonomy." (Nancy 1991, 9.)

²⁰⁰ Fabien Freyenhagen (2013, 3-4) classifies Adorno as a methodological, epistemic, and substantive negativist.

3.3 Tragic Morality

“The bad end unhappily, the good unluckily. That is what tragedy means.”

—Player in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*²⁰¹

We have seen how the critique of reason and myth presented in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* reclaims the aesthetic in critiquing society from a moral standpoint.²⁰² The object of Horkheimer and Adorno’s criticism is modernity. However, their position is complicated by their tracing of the history of the dialectic (which functions as both the object and the starting point of the critique) all the way back to the primeval human condition, thereby emphasising an intricate relationship between past and present.²⁰³

Horkheimer and Adorno understand modernity as denoting a socio-historical formation in which an attempt to dominate nature and replace the myths of earlier eras becomes a myth of its own, enabling the logic of this process of control to permeate every part of life. The new mythology is that of reason and it appears to replace classical mythology, understood as superstitious and magical, with a scientific one that is more open, self-reflexive, and logical. There is no room in modernity for complex temporal and power-laden relationships, let alone personal failings, such as those found in the dialectical realm of tragedy. The mythology of reason is based on what Horkheimer has elsewhere called traditional science, a form of knowledge that “arrives at causal explanation that forms part of a system of universal propositions” on “the basis of empirical observation.”²⁰⁴ Through revision and deduction, universal propositions form an ever-expanding network of knowledge that covers all human and natural life. The ideal of deduction is the mathematical calculation echoed in modern bourgeois society, which Horkheimer and Adorno consider to be “ruled by equivalence”.²⁰⁵

Enlightenment makes individual things comparable by reducing them to abstract quantities, since modern scientific rationality does not recognise specific representation: “For the Enlightenment, anything which cannot be resolved into numbers, and ultimately into one, is illusion; modern positivism consigns it

²⁰¹ Stoppard 1967, 59.

²⁰² J. M. Bernstein (2012, 56–77) has suggested that Arendt, who also grounds her critique on the aesthetic, offers the most plausible theory available for the expansion of Adorno’s thought into the realm of the political.

²⁰³ As Hohendahl (2013, 96–97) notes, Adorno does not think that there is “a clear-cut distinction between modern and primitive culture”. This is a view that can also be found in Nietzsche: “To Nietzsche, ‘modern man’ in *The Birth of Tragedy* is not affiliated mainly with modern history since the Renaissance, but rather with the Socratic or Alexandrian cultures that have dominated Western history since before the Christian era. ‘Modernity’ in this sense therefore begins very early indeed.” (Burnham & Jesinghausen 2010, 117.)

²⁰⁴ Menke 1999, 59.

²⁰⁵ Horkheimer & Adorno 2002, 4.

to poetry.”²⁰⁶ Poetry, which here can stand for art in general, is associated with what is excluded from the domain of proper science. This equates the relationship between science and art with that between mythology and the principle of *mana*. It also hints at the “peculiar, mysterious, and even dangerous” nature of the aesthetic, which tragedy utilises by putting societal horrors into public display.²⁰⁷ On this view, modern life is fragmented and our traditional theoretical means to understand it and by extension the world are fundamentally limited. To make sense of the wrong life that cannot be lived rightly, we need to supplement our logical reasoning with the aesthetic apprehension of our catastrophic predicament.²⁰⁸

Through their theory of reification, Horkheimer and Adorno connect their critique of positivism with Marx’s analysis of capitalism. Theirs is an attempt to show the ideological underpinnings of modern science that seeks to present itself as value-free, as abstract and neutral. Marx had argued that exchange requires imposing an imaginary equivalence on materially different objects.²⁰⁹ In a society that organises its economy around exchange, the process in which the particular use-value of things is replaced with a universal exchange value comes to dominate people’s consciousness: “Not merely are qualities dissolved in thought, but human beings are forced into real conformity.”²¹⁰ This leads us to misrepresent things in ways that inadvertently reinforce the existing social order, and then to take this representation for reality, thereby making relations between human beings similar to those between things.²¹¹ In other words, the principle of exchange describes everything as identical with everything else, paralleling the way positivism sees everything in terms of the mathematical model. Capitalism and science, exchange and abstraction, are complementary, cementing the ideological organisation of society and making criticism impos-

²⁰⁶ Horkheimer & Adorno 2002, 4–5.

²⁰⁷ Gourgouris 2003, 2.

²⁰⁸ On life that cannot be lived rightly, see Adorno 2005, 39. “Catastrophe” is one of the terms used in secondary literature to signify the “historical caesura” that revealed the Janus-faced nature of Western rationality (Hammer 2015, vii, 133n5; see also Rabinbach 2003). In light of Adorno’s tragic vision and the notion of catastrophe, the human predicament can be considered as tragic in two ways. Firstly, Adorno (2005, 320) sees history as essentially chaotic, interspersed by catastrophes that, paradoxically, reveal its unity as an attempt to attain “the control of nature”. As long as our activity is controlled by fear and centred around the futile attempt to master nature, the human predicament is doomed to be tragic. Second, pre-war culture could not prevent the catastrophe and the post-war culture seems to be unable to deal with its aftermath. Hence the post-Apocalyptic landscape of Beckett’s *Endgame* is the perfect illustration of the cultural wasteland of late modernity, where art is not allowed to serve a social function akin to the one Greek tragedy had in the Attic poleis. (See Hammer 2015, 133–142; Holt 2004; Adorno 1992a, 241–275). In addition to Adorno’s fellow Frankfurt School members, the idea of the Nazi era as the defining catastrophe of modernity has also been held by, for example, Maurice Blanchot and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe. The latter links the historical “caesura” with Hölderlin’s and Heidegger’s readings of Sophoclean tragedy. See Blanchot 2014 on disaster and Lacoue-Labarthe 1990, esp. chapter 5, on caesura. Chapman 1992 is a useful analysis of the relationship of Lacoue-Labarthe and Hölderlin.

²⁰⁹ Hawkes 2003, 130.

²¹⁰ Horkheimer & Adorno 2002, 9.

²¹¹ Freyenhagen 2013, 15n23.

sible by monopolising the discourse on truth, as happened in the Athenian polis. Philosophy ends up being complicit in the advancement of capitalist ideology by resigning itself to interpreting the world and inadvertently covering up the tragic nature of reality. The exhaustion of all the possibilities to realise a rationally organised change for the better does not exempt us from the moral obligation to resist this ideology by pointing out its contradictions and excesses.²¹² This requires discourses that resist capitalist appropriation, such as critical philosophy and autonomous art, which complement each other in revealing the ideological underpinnings of thought and expression.²¹³

And this is as far as Adorno believes we can go, for we are no longer capable of articulating positive alternatives for our current condition. Given his negativist view on ethics, we cannot know what the good life entails or how a just society should be organised. The only understanding we can obtain from the right life is by experiencing the wrong one. That is, while we can recognise bad things and feel duty-bound to prevent them from happening, we are unable to define or depict good things. In our current condition, it would make little sense even were we able to define the good things by envisioning alternatives, since we only have always already ideologically compromised tools for their assessment. In terms of moral philosophy, the problem is how to combine an intuitive aesthetic truth with the corrupt conceptional rationality into a motivating ethical theory. Adorno's solution is, on the one hand, to envision a mode of dialectical thinking that is aware of the limits of conceptual thought – revealed through aesthetic experiences that communicate the non-conceptual – but strives to overcome them.²¹⁴ On the other hand, he presents us with a thoroughly negativist moral view summed up by the encouragement to “live less wrongly”.²¹⁵

This is well in line with the tragic view of morality found in classical Athenian drama. There are no – and can never be any – tragic ethical imperatives, because the consequences of actions cannot be fully predicted. This does not mean allowing everything, but that we are responsible for the effects of our actions even beyond our immediate sphere of influence. Many tragedies illustrate this through the cycle of violence that turns the sins of parents, and sometimes grandparents, into those of the children. In this way, our moral incentive clashes with our inability to make sense of the world and thereby of our own actions. This emphasises the split between the actor, who has the moral demand imposed upon her, and the world, the context and object of the action. Later in his career, Adorno uses *Hamlet*, a paradigmatic modern tragedy, to illustrate this predicament that simultaneously obliges us to act and prevents us from doing so.²¹⁶ As is well known, Hamlet feels obliged to take revenge for the murder of his father by his uncle, but finds multiple excuses not to carry out the

²¹² Cf. Adorno 2004, 3–4.

²¹³ Adorno's idea of autonomous and heteronomous art is reminiscent of Nietzsche's distinction between the Dionysian and the Apollonian. See Daniels 2013, 41–71.

²¹⁴ See Stone 2014.

²¹⁵ Cf. Freyenhagen 2013.

²¹⁶ Adorno 2006a, lecture 25.

act. When he eventually does murder his uncle, amid homicidal and suicidal mayhem, he seems to do so in spite of rational thought, not as a consequence of it.²¹⁷ Adorno's analysis of "the Hamlet syndrome" suggest that the rationalisation of society separates us from our will, that is, the impulse that allows us to break the cycle of deliberation and enter "the realm of objects" in an act that momentarily reconciles reason and nature.²¹⁸ Since this reconciliation brings death and violence, the play is an excellent metaphor for, to quote Ross Wilson, "the precariousness of a world with the potential either to establish peace and security for all its inhabitants, or to slide at any moment into unimaginable horror."²¹⁹ In order to avoid the horror, Adorno formulates the ultimate ethical guideline for human beings as a categorical demand "to arrange their thoughts and actions so that Auschwitz will not repeat itself, so that nothing similar will happen."²²⁰ And this has to be done in a way that acknowledges the limitations of reason and thereby of the only critical tools we have at our disposal. It also reminds us of the conceptual shift of modernity which displaced the locus of horror from nature to society.

This brings us back to the theme of the tragedy of enlightenment. As we have seen, Horkheimer and Adorno remind us that the autonomy of strong, enlightened subjects is an illusion, hypostasised as it is on the denial of our ties to nature. Modernity has been ideologically constructed as an abstract ahistorical context that legitimises the actions, both malevolent and benevolent, of purportedly modern individuals, who are conceived of as their own masters, fully in charge of their own destiny and accountable to no one.²²¹ This "enlightened" view obscures the fact that our history consists of a series of catastrophes that we have brought about.²²² Given that according to Adorno, *Hamlet* reveals the tragic nature of the modern situation, it seems difficult, if not impossible, to think of a way to change the world without inflicting suffering on people and nature. It is unlikely that Adorno would have found the post-war generations, such as ours, as having managed to organise their thoughts and actions based on his moral imperative.²²³

To follow this moral imperative, we need to act in a way that reconciles reason and nature without direct recourse or eventual regression to violence. This, again, is the kind of conundrum tragedies tend to depict. They present us with a picture of an unjust reality within which actions have unintended conse-

²¹⁷ "And the Prince's action at this point seems to be unconnected with the complex, elaborate and rational reflections that have preoccupied him throughout the drama hitherto." (Adorno 2006a, lecture 25.)

²¹⁸ Adorno 2006a, lecture 25.

²¹⁹ Wilson 2007, 1.

²²⁰ Adorno 2004, 365.

²²¹ See Gandesha 2001.

²²² Gritzner (2015, 170) has argued that Adorno's negative dialectical method functions in a way reminiscent of tragedy. Adorno seeks to reveal "the enigmatic and incommensurable substance of human existence" expressed by tragedy: "Tragedy brings about a suspension of the rational principle and there lies its paradoxical power to negate, whilst revealing, the instrumental rationalisation of the world."

²²³ The point is obviously not to deny the singularity of Auschwitz. On Adorno's synecdochic usage of "Auschwitz", see Webber 2011, 17–19.

quences, where actors find it difficult, if not impossible, to pursue moral goals without perishing in the attempt. “In tragic drama,” Karoline Gritzner writes, “the particular gestures of the individual subject become ethical claims in a universe of contradiction and injustice.”²²⁴ A central philosophical quality of tragedy is the possibility to tarry with moral questions without expecting a final ethical solution, which is one of the reasons Plato found tragedies so dangerous.²²⁵ They show the world, be it social or natural, to be either hostile or indifferent to human aspirations and reveals weaknesses and faults in humans and the reality they inhabit. The persistent theoretical and aesthetic interest in tragedies shows the importance of this peculiar kind of negativism for our attempt to make sense of the human condition.²²⁶ And as we have seen, Horkheimer and Adorno share this interest with the tragedians.

3.4 Adorno and the Tragic

Horkheimer and Adorno’s tragic view on the human condition is a central feature of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. It is therefore surprising that Adorno never dealt with tragedy or the tragic in a sustained way. The subject nonetheless seems to have preoccupied him at different stages of his writing career, as testified by his numerous remarks scattered throughout his work. The question of tragic art gained special importance in the works of Adorno’s fellow Marxists, Georg Lukács and Bertolt Brecht, yet even then Adorno’s criticism remained opaque and he did not consider the possibility and implications of holding a tragic view beyond the realm of the aesthetic.²²⁷

The most illuminating of Adorno’s comments on tragedy and the tragic are found in his *Aesthetic Theory*. While the comments are critical, they are by no means dismissive.²²⁸ First, Adorno mentions Attic tragedy as a possible origin of the idea of aesthetic autonomy, a notion Adorno held in high esteem. It is

²²⁴ Gritzner 2015, 167.

²²⁵ See Young 2013, 8–10.

²²⁶ Gloria Fisk (2008, 895) has suggested that the renewed interest in tragedy in the twenty-first century is due to the resemblance between our precarious political situation and that of the Greeks: “And it makes sense that tragedy works during the periods before and after modernity because our age resembles the ancients’ to the degree that the limits of our political communities are in flux. Just as the Greeks who sat in tragedy’s theaters tried to imagine that they belonged to the newly formed polis, the constituents of the ‘global community’ try to imagine that they belong to each other in some meaningful way.”

²²⁷ See Gandesha 1991.

²²⁸ In comparing influential views of tragedy and its fate in modernity, Terry Eagleton (2003, 87) notes the difficulty of pinning down Adorno’s position: “Theodor Adorno’s tone about tragedy is rather more ambiguous [than Lukács’s, Hegel’s, or George Steiner’s]: the form has died, so we are informed, because ‘nobility’ has fallen victim to cultural ‘vulgarity’. Yet Adorno, in typically dialectical style, also insists that though nobility in art must be preserved, its collusion with social privilege and political conservatism must be exposed.” Adorno’s (2002, 313–315) ambiguous view on nobility and vulgarity referred to by Eagleton is discussed in the “Paralipomena” section of the *Aesthetic Theory*.

unclear whether Adorno's hesitation – "may have been the origin of the idea of aesthetic autonomy" – is due to his reluctance to make a bold historical claim or his suspicion of tragedy as such.²²⁹ Elsewhere he does agree that there is a connection between the social role of tragedy and the autonomy of art:

Unquestionably, Attic tragedy was also the crystallization of no less a universal than the reconciliation of myth. Great autonomous art originated in agreement with the emancipation of spirit; it could no more be conceived without an element of universality than could the latter.²³⁰

On the other hand, he finds classical tragedy redundant. Even if it dealt with societal and cultural themes in a critical manner, it was thoroughly embedded in the society and culture that enabled it. Hence the idea of tragedy as "an after-image of cultic acts"²³¹ just as modern artworks are "afterimages of empirical life"²³². According to Adorno, no form of art has universal validity, and Attic tragedy cannot therefore be squarely transported to our present situation.²³³ Additionally, he believes that the best social criticism art can provide is through works that do not explicitly commit to criticism or to any other cause external to art, a view he repeats in a number of places throughout his work.²³⁴ In his criticism, Adorno distinguishes between tragedy as a form and the subject matter of particular plays, seeing the relevance of the form as dependent on a work's social truth content.²³⁵ Notably, the truth content is not dependent on the subject matter of the artwork. This means that individual elements form the phenomenon of tragic art in and through a dialectic: the tragic form, the tragic subject matter, and the social truth content. Each one of the elements forms a part of its own historical trajectory and takes shape within a specific historical situation from which it cannot be removed without being abstracted and generalised into an ahistorical idea.²³⁶ In other words, tragedy as a form is no longer possible, even though the tragic content of "evil and death" endures.

²²⁹ Adorno 2002, 6–7.

²³⁰ Adorno 2002, 200.

²³¹ Adorno 2002, 6.

²³² Adorno 2002, 4.

²³³ Adorno (2002, 28) mentions tragedy as an example of art that western culture has mistakenly believed to hold permanent value. For him, modernism has shown that artistic forms are born out of a battle between tradition and innovation. On this, see Cunningham 2003. Also, Steiner's (1963) influential analysis of the death of tragedy makes a similar point by arguing that the Greek worldview is incompatible with the Judaeo-Christian one.

²³⁴ Adorno (1992b, 77–94) writes dismissively of such socially conscious art in his famous essay "Commitment".

²³⁵ Artworks can be critical only as far as they communicate the truth, but the truth is not dependent on the form. Yet, no form as such is critical. The dialectic of form and content produce the artwork within a historical context. "The truth content of artworks is fused with their critical content." (Adorno 2002, 35.)

²³⁶ To put it in Adornian terms, without reifying and commodifying them.

In this regard, the category of tragedy should be considered. It seems to be the aesthetic imprint of evil and death and as enduring as they are. Nevertheless it is no longer possible.²³⁷

The subject matter of classical tragedies can no longer communicate a truth relevant to the modern social situation. It is therefore possible to negatively position Adorno along a line of thinkers who have argued that the tragic is something that can be extrapolated from the ancient tragedies and is therefore separate from them.²³⁸ While proponents of such a view tend to consider tragedies as having historical value only, as far as they cannot reveal the truth about modern times, they may still consider the tragic as a category that deals with our attitudes to fundamental aspects of the given: death and suffering. These aspects remain crucial to our existence and a critical response to them is vital for our cultural self-understanding if we are to forge a more ethical society from which unnecessary suffering is eradicated.²³⁹ To quote Adorno:

All that by which aesthetic pedants once zealously distinguished the tragic from the mournful – the affirmation of death, the idea that the infinite glimmers through the demise of the finite, the meaning of suffering – all this now returns to pass judgment on tragedy. Wholly negative artworks now parody the tragic. Rather than being tragic, all art is mournful, especially those works that appear cheerful and harmonious.²⁴⁰

Any hint of a hidden meaning beyond the chaos of everyday life risks giving us a false glimmer of hope.²⁴¹ Works of art have to somehow point beyond the level of ideological representation lest they affirm the ideologically constructed status quo.²⁴² Since death and suffering are an inevitable part of the human condition, we have every reason to retain a tragic sensibility, which can only be

²³⁷ Adorno 2002, 28.

²³⁸ The first substantial philosophical enquiry into the tragic as something separate from the tragedies themselves was made by Schelling. As Peter Szondi (2002, 1) opens his oft-quoted book on the topic: “Since Aristotle, there has been a poetics of tragedy. Only since Schelling has there been a philosophy of the tragic.”

²³⁹ The distinction between necessary and unnecessary suffering is a complex but important one. To crudely summarise, the proponents of the tragic view tend to hold that the Greeks saw human suffering as inevitable and meaningless, while the Christians saw it as likely but meaningful. See, for example, the first chapter of Steiner 1963. Philosophers, such as Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, sought to forge some sort of an amalgam of these positions with Schopenhauer deeming inevitable suffering as the meaning of life. Nietzsche considered suffering in a godless world as essentially meaningless but something we can overcome. Adorno, for his part, seems to think that some forms of suffering are inevitable (some of us fall ill and we all die), while others are not (poverty, wars, societal ills in general), and the tragic view should only pertain to the latter kind: avoidable suffering is meaningless and it is the duty of art and philosophy to remind us of that. On Schopenhauer and Nietzsche on tragedy, see Bowie 2010, 70–75.

²⁴⁰ Adorno 2002, 28.

²⁴¹ Terry Eagleton (2014, 172) writes that Adorno was suspicious of tragedy because it was at constant risk of making suffering appear as meaningful: “It seemed to him to impose too much sense on the senseless, and thus to diminish its horror. The very form of the art risks making its sordid content more palatable and coherent than it is.”

²⁴² As Gritzner (2015, 167) puts it, they “are designed to obscure and conceal contradictions and conflict on the level of culture”, providing us with “a false mimesis of the social reality which gives rise to them”.

done by understanding the tragic in terms that do not impose upon it a concealed meaning in the sense of redemption or closure.²⁴³ In order to save the tragic from the limits set to it by a redundant dramatic form, we must find the modern locus of the tragic outside the traditional forms of tragic art.²⁴⁴ I believe Adorno finds this locus in autonomous art and, most importantly, in philosophy.²⁴⁵

3.5 Conclusion

I have argued in this chapter that the existential position outlined in the seminal *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is tragic. Adorno advocates a view of the world as meaningless and hostile. The meaninglessness and hostility have encouraged humanity to adopt a relationship to the world grounded on a violent refusal to submit to the demands of reality. Attempts to control the given have given rise to a deepening cycle of violence, which has extended from nature to humanity itself, a trajectory that culminated in the cataclysmic events of the twentieth century, that Adorno refers to with the umbrella-term Auschwitz. These events were enabled, in part, by our lack of self-awareness. Humanity, through its instrumental notion of subjectivity and the self-imposed distance from nature, has differentiated itself from the world of which it is a part. The enlightened man has then created an image of the world that is coherent with his attempt to master the world. Supporting this ideological image of reality requires action that at worst risks recreating Auschwitz and at best creates systematic suffering through domination and exploitation of the weakest members of the society. Seen in this light, it seems obvious that we should try to do everything at our disposal to rid ourselves of the ideological predicament we have created. This would include embracing the tragic nature of the human condition and accepting the severe limitations that it sets on our ethical and epistemic pursuits.

²⁴³ Among modern commenters, this understanding of the tragic view of life seems more common than the one which assumes the hidden workings of the gods to provide life with reason and meaning. As George Steiner (1963, 9) writes: "Euripides' *Bacchae* stands in some special proximity to the ancient, no longer discernible spring of tragic feeling. At the end of the play, Dionysus condemns Cadmus, his royal house, and the entire city of Thebes to a savage doom. Cadmus protests: the sentence is far too harsh. It is utterly out of proportion with the guilt of those who fail to recognize or have insulted the god. Dionysus evades the question. He repeats petulantly that he has been greatly affronted; then he asserts that the doom of Thebes was predestined. There is no use asking for rational explanation or mercy. Things are as they are, unrelenting and absurd."

²⁴⁴ Suffering, Adorno (1992b, 88) argues, "demands the continued existence of the very art it forbids; hardly anywhere else does suffering still find its own voice, a consolation that does not immediately betray it." The risk of betrayal is, however, an essential part of even the most thoughtful and sensitive art: "The so-called artistic rendering of the naked physical pain of those who were beaten down with rifle butts contains, however distantly, the possibility that pleasure can be squeezed from it."

²⁴⁵ One reason for Adorno's philosophical negativity is his reluctance to affirm the nihilism of the regressive capitalist culture. Yet the negation of nihilism does not mean the assertion of positivity. See Gandesha 1991.

Although he traces the roots of our condition to the murky prehistory of humanity, Adorno is only willing to consider the limitations as endemic to modernity. We are bound to the historical situation, which must also be the primary object of our critique. As I have suggested above, this is to be done through a combination of aesthetic and philosophical means. The analysis of the tragic sense of negative dialectics in relation to tragedy as an art form enables us to see Adorno's philosophy as a part of a rich tradition of critical thinking that has sought to bridge the gap between philosophy and literature and has shed light on the rifts that constitute modernity while informing our cultural self-understanding. This tradition helps us understand the political implications of our moral predicament by exposing the web of relations that forms our subjectivity and distances us from our natural human selves. Since the preoccupation with tragedy and the tragic recurs throughout his mature philosophy, the approach presented in this chapter will serve as a model for a more detailed mapping and examination of the tragic dimension of Adorno's thought.

4 A MODERNIST PHILOSOPHY

“The philosopher, to begin his dialectic, must first sit in the poet’s chair.”
– Donald Phillip Verene²⁴⁶

As I have argued in the earlier chapters, Adorno’s vision regarding the human predicament is tragic and this vision informs his attempt to fashion a critical philosophy that remains true to his modernist sensibilities.²⁴⁷ In this chapter, I shall assess Adorno’s philosophical modernism, highlighting the way he seeks to maintain a materialist position while “inhabiting the gaps and absences of the modernist agenda”.²⁴⁸ The trajectories delineating these gaps converge in the cultural rupture brought about by the second world war and the moral chasm that was Auschwitz. Adorno’s views on these issues are summarised in his two formulations for a new categorical imperative for the post-Holocaust era. The more famous one, found in his philosophical magnum opus, *Negative Dialektik*, includes a demand for contemporary criticism:

A new categorical imperative has been imposed by Hitler upon unfree mankind: to arrange their thoughts and actions so that Auschwitz will not repeat itself, so that nothing similar will happen.²⁴⁹

In the second and much less often quoted imperative Adorno insists that we take art seriously. He had presented this maxim a couple of years before the publication of *Negative Dialektik* in a speech on Hessen Radio: “Rimbaud’s ‘*il faut être absolument moderne*’ is neither an aesthetic program nor a program for aesthetes: it is a categorical imperative of philosophy.”²⁵⁰ Both imperatives, then, include a demand for moral absoluteness and an acknowledgment of the lack of

²⁴⁶ Verene 2009, xiii.

²⁴⁷ On the modernism and Adorno’s philosophy, see Foster 2016. On modernism and post-Kantian philosophy in general, see Pippin 1999. Both Foster and Pippin are primarily concerned with the question of autonomy, whereas my focus is on aesthetic and existential questions.

²⁴⁸ Bernstein (1996). He writes about Gillian Rose, but it seems also to pertain to Adorno.

²⁴⁹ Adorno 2004, 365; 1966, 356.

²⁵⁰ Adorno 1998, 17.

self-evident grounds for philosophy. In my view, Adorno argues that a moral relationship to the given is to be understood in aesthetic terms. That is, our relationship to the given is experiential and this ever-changing relationship is rudimentary at best. This requires that we understand philosophy in terms that allow it to take the precariousness of the given into account. In the words of J. M. Bernstein:

If cultural modernity is the lapse of tradition, then every philosophical modernist must discover philosophy anew, re-invent it, transfigure it. The exacting nature of this endeavour is exacerbated by disenchantment, by the absence of any certainties, foundations, absolutes. But these sceptical conditions cannot be dissolved, only reformed.²⁵¹

I have argued that the renewal of philosophy, as Adorno understands it, is both an epistemic and ethical task. The ethical implications of the tragic understanding of human condition are connected to the epistemic questions a modernist philosophy needs to address. The re-evaluation of epistemic concerns is similarly bound to the moral demands the widespread suffering imposes on us. In what follows, I shall assess Adorno's methodological considerations in relation to his theory of art. On the one hand, I seek to show how the tragic view Adorno espouses affects his understanding of the relationship between aesthetic modernism and philosophy, while on the other hand, I map the way Adorno's modernist sensibilities affect his appropriation of the tragic view in the post-Auschwitz era.

4.1 The Possibility of Philosophy

One of Adorno's key theorems, "there is no philosophical first principle", is grounded on the premise that there is no basis of meaning.²⁵² Methodologically this means that "one cannot build an argumentative structure that follows the usual progressive succession of steps, but rather that one must assemble the whole out of a series of partial complexes that are, so to speak, of equal weight and concentrically arranged all on the same level; their constellation, not their succession, must yield the idea".²⁵³ This theorem, quoted in the "Editors' Afterword" to the *Aesthetic Theory*, contains what I believe to be Adorno's ethos summed up into a single sentence. First, there is the question of first principles. Since nothing is obviously primary, any theory starting from a first principle must first assert the primacy of what it chooses to elevate into that position. However, nothing postulated as primary can be such since the act of postulation (the deed) precedes that what is postulated (the object preceding the deed).

²⁵¹ Bernstein 1996.

²⁵² Adorno 2002, 364. Zuidervaart (1991, 47) considers this to be a break from the philosophical tradition, as it accepts that there is "no origin, no *arche* or Archimedean point from which philosophy may proceed".

²⁵³ Adorno 2002, 364.

Additionally, and this point is more important for Adorno, any attempt to ground philosophy always already entails the separation of subject and object, since the act implies something acting over something external to itself, which Adorno thinks amounts to an idealist fallacy.²⁵⁴

This forms something akin to a starting point for Adorno's immanent critique of European thought. Understood in the way described above, the act of grounding seems to presuppose an active subject and a passive object, which is the way we have traditionally understood our relationship to the world in the West.²⁵⁵ This notion of subjectivity, as abstract selfhood, is born in conjunction with and shaped by what Adorno calls identity thinking. The aim of such thinking is, to quote Peter Dews, "the conceptual regimentation of the given".²⁵⁶ This serves the self's drive to control everything that is external to it. In Adorno's terminology, this otherness is referred to as the non-identical and it is our moral duty to embrace it without violently identifying it with our concepts.²⁵⁷ Yet it is part of the natural history of humanity to do otherwise.²⁵⁸ The price of selfhood is the denial of nature in us, which turns everything perceived as external to humanity, like nature and even our bodies, into mere objects of domination. With this denial, humans also abandon mimesis, which in this context is best understood as an "empathically imitative" or co-constitutive relationship between subject and object.²⁵⁹ Mimesis is an essential part of the mythical explanations of the world, which contain primitive attempts to manipulate nature through magic. Myth acknowledges the power of nature and for the same reason the finite nature of humanity. A sign of this is the absence of a dream of universal method, which only comes up with the scientific worldview, grounded as it is on an abstract common denominator: the rational human being qua subject.²⁶⁰

Attempts to undo the subject-object division appear to necessitate the hypostatization of an ahistorical primary principle that is both independent from

²⁵⁴ Adorno constructs his entire philosophical project around the criticism of idealism, which he thinks dominates Western thought. See his introduction to the *Negative Dialectics* (Adorno 1973, 3-57). A concise exposition of Adorno's position regarding the question of subject and object is in his essay "Subject and Object" (Adorno 1998, 245-258).

²⁵⁵ The *Dialectic of Enlightenment* maps the repercussions of this position through a meticulous analysis of the birth of subjectivity out of man's alienation from nature. See Horkheimer & Adorno 2002, 1-62.

²⁵⁶ Dews 2008, 187.

²⁵⁷ Whether 'otherness' is interchangeable with 'non-identical' is a matter of dispute among Adorno scholars. For example, Dews (2008) thinks so, while O'Connor (2013) does not. Stone (2014) has made a lucid attempt to make sense of the concept of the non-identical.

²⁵⁸ See Chapter 2.2.

²⁵⁹ Dews 2008, 192. Dews defines mimesis as referring to the "styles of activity, such as magic, which express a sense of affinity with the object".

²⁶⁰ Mythologies consist of a variety of incommensurate myths through which humans have sought to explain the variety of phenomena they encounter. The attempts to control the phenomena are similarly multifarious and often somehow connected to the phenomenon in question. For example, different means are used to appeal to different deities. This changes when the relationship between humans and nature becomes instrumental. See Horkheimer & Adorno 2002, 1-34. See also Lacoue-Labarthe & Nancy 1990.

the subject and apprehensible without a method, a solution that appears as unsatisfactory from the kind of materialist point of view Adorno advocates.²⁶¹ It would have to be independent from the subject in order to be more than just a projection and it would have to be apprehensible without a method, something akin to a revelation, since method always already presupposes an appropriator of a method and an object on which it is used. This leaves us in a paradoxical situation where we cannot seem to overcome the division that brings forth violence without falling back to irrationality and myth. This is so because subject-object division is one of the key constitutive contradictions of modernity. One aspect of the simple question of presentation and method is that it conceals the problem of relativism, which points at the nihilist nature of idealism and thereby of our established patterns of thought. For Adorno, a key problem entailed in the separation is that it denies the historicity and mediations of subject and object.²⁶² Thus, we are left with nothing but abstractions that remain at a safe distance from the life and suffering of actual living beings. Therefore, we need to acknowledge that life includes contradictions, a fact that requires us to adopt a philosophical method that tolerates the irresolvable nature of such contradictions. That is, an acknowledgment of the fact that resolving them “is not a conceptual issue, but a political and social one”.²⁶³

As I stated in an earlier chapter, Adorno believed in 1966 that the moment philosophy could have been realised had been missed. We have no choice but to go on, although it is exactly what we should not do if we do not, or even cannot, know what we should do. By simply going on, we are always at risk of enabling the system that feeds on suffering.²⁶⁴ Instead we need to pull the emergency brake and think through the ideologically constructed present, equipped only with tools that have either brought it about or at least failed to stop its arrival.²⁶⁵ As the means to reflect on the wrong state of affairs, genuine philosophy is in Adorno’s words a melancholy science.²⁶⁶ What distinguishes genuine philosophy from those intellectual practises we often mistake for phi-

²⁶¹ Adorno criticises Husserl of this type of misunderstood mimetism in which subject and object become one in something like a mystical act. Adorno’s notion of a positive, dialectical, mimesis maintains a division between subject and object that co-constitute the reality. Adorno’s position is then that of anti-foundationalist materialism. See Rosen 1984, 153–178. One should also bear in mind that despite the anti-foundationalism, Adorno (2001, 116–117) sometimes formulated his arguments in a manner that appear to echo foundationalism: “If I say to you that the true basis of morality is to be found in bodily feeling, in identification with unbearable pain, I am showing you from a different side something which I earlier tried to indicate in a far more abstract form. It is that morality, that which can be called moral, i.e. the demand for right living, lives on in openly materialist motifs.”

²⁶² See Adorno 1973, 358–360.

²⁶³ Bowie 2013, viii.

²⁶⁴ This is reminiscent of the neoliberal austerity nostalgia epitomised in the “Keep calm and carry on” posters, a phenomenon astutely dissected by Owen Hatherley (2015) in a recent book.

²⁶⁵ The metaphor is from Walter Benjamin (2003, 402): “Marx says that revolutions are the locomotive of world history. But perhaps it is quite otherwise. Perhaps revolutions are an attempt by the passengers on this train – namely, the human race – to activate the emergency brake.”

²⁶⁶ Adorno 2005, 15.

philosophy is the way it positions itself in relation to the social and historical conditions for the existence of both the activity itself and its practitioners. As Jean-François Lyotard told his students in 1964: “For most people, for most of you, philosophy is absent from their preoccupations, their studies, their lives.”²⁶⁷ This results from the way philosophy is understood as an abstract enterprise removed from any concrete concern regarding the improvement of our lives. In other words, the status quo has appropriated philosophy and it has lost any moral and political role it might have had in the past, becoming just one special science among others.²⁶⁸

Adorno’s analysis of philosophy’s obsolescence echoes Marx’s well-known eleventh Feuerbach thesis, which states that philosophers have settled for interpreting the world instead of changing it, a theme also discussed by Lyotard.²⁶⁹ Both Adorno and Lyotard, writing in the years immediately preceding the student revolts of the 1960s, believe that there is an urgent need to philosophise, to make sense of the world in order to change it. Only through changing the world we are able to change our lives; the personal is political in so far as life cannot be lived rightly under corrupt conditions, as Adorno famously laments in the *Minima Moralia*.²⁷⁰ In this sense, Adorno also sought to turn Hegel on his feet, like Marx’s well-known adage has it.²⁷¹ Hegel had argued that the only way for philosophy to reach the truth is by systematically overcoming partial truths.²⁷² For Adorno, social critique is the systematic overturning of socio-historically embedded and produced cultural phenomena qua partial untruths.²⁷³ Hegel’s view is positive, whereas Adorno’s view is negative: in a curious reversal of Hegel’s famous formulation, “the True is the whole”, Adorno defines the totality as illusory by declaring: “The whole is the false.”²⁷⁴ The gist of the argument is that for Adorno, reality is contradictory by nature and will always ultimately elude our attempts to exhaust it. Reality only ever appears as a totality if the contradictions it includes are denied, that is, papered over with ideology.

Thought must settle for pointing out the effects of these contradictions since, as the argument goes, their philosophical overcoming would require that mind is the prime mover of history. As we have seen, Adorno argues that philosophy does not bring about change, not since the possibility of its coalescence

²⁶⁷ Lyotard 2013, 18.

²⁶⁸ See Adorno 1966, 13.

²⁶⁹ As was referred to in the introduction. See Lyotard 2013, 100–123.

²⁷⁰ Adorno 2005, 39.

²⁷¹ See for example O’Connor 2011 and Stone 2014 for concise summaries on Adorno’s relationship to Hegel. Jarvis 1998 and O’Connor 2004 are good book-length treatments on the intellectual context of Adorno’s philosophy with an emphasis on his complicated relationship to German idealism in general.

²⁷² Through a process called sublation, which means transformation through simultaneous preservation and cancellation. See Helmling 2007 and Vouros 2014.

²⁷³ Like Hegel, Adorno believes that philosophy captures the rational norms of a given historical period. Autonomous art also does this and it does so unconsciously. In a way, autonomy needs unconsciousness since the mimetic coalescence that can erase the separation of subject and object cannot be brought about cognitively. Cultural phenomena, such as works of art, have elements of self-unconscious historiography that point beyond the totally administered society.

²⁷⁴ Hegel 1977, 11; Adorno 2005, 50.

with action was missed, which effectively means that conceptual sublation amounts to little more than a conjuring trick. Purely theoretical solutions only cover up unpleasant social contradictions by making invisible the power relations that require and sustain them. The causes of these contradictions go far deeper than concepts can reach. The actual removal of these contradictions would create genuine historical change, as far as it would mean the end of their principal cause: capitalism. Adorno understands history in terms of the dialectic, an aspect of Hegel's thought Adorno retains while renouncing several others, such as the idea of totality.²⁷⁵ His conception of the dialectic is quite different from Hegel's, for the reason mentioned above. A similar aspect is related to the historicity of thought and similarly the historicity of truth, both of which are socially and politically mediated through human activity. As Lambert Zuidervaart writes in his book on the *Aesthetic Theory*:

Adorno's arguments are dialectical in the sense that they highlight unavoidable tensions between polar opposites whose opposition constitutes their unity and generates historical change. The dialectic is negative in the sense that it refuses to affirm any underlying identity or final synthesis of polar opposites, even though Adorno continually points to the possibility of reconciliation. The main oppositions occur between the particular and the universal and between culture in a narrow sense and society as a whole.²⁷⁶

A key tension, here, is the need to use universals, such as concepts or laws, to describe particulars. The relationship between universal concepts and singular phenomena hides a power structure that philosophy needs to bring to our attention.²⁷⁷ This power structure is akin to the power structure of the late capitalist society, which alienates human beings from reality. In the words of Susan Buck-Morss:

If in thinking about reality the (reified) object was allowed to dominate the subject, the result was the reification of consciousness and the passive acceptance of the status quo; if the Subject dominated the object, the result was domination of nature and the ideological justification of the status quo.²⁷⁸

The subordination of the object easily leads to excess in situations in which the subject is given the opportunity to control the object. Thus, those with the opportunity to control – in our societies the ruling and owning class – will do so and their action is ideologically justified since our thinking mirrors the societal conditions, making those choices appear as rational that advance the interests of the owning class and help uphold the conditions in which they flourish. This is

²⁷⁵ In the words of Peter Dews (2008, 189): "The refusal to treat moments of the social totality in isolation, the understanding of individual facets of society as mediated by the whole, and the emphasis on the profound historicity of supposed metaphysical constants such as freedom – all these Adorno owes to Hegel."

²⁷⁶ Zuidervaart 1991, 48–49.

²⁷⁷ In Adorno's (2004, 40; 1966, 48) words: "Ideology lies in the substruction of something primary, the content of which hardly matters; it lies in the implicit identity of concept and thing, an identity justified by the world even when a doctrine summarily teaches that consciousness depends on being."

²⁷⁸ Buck-Morss 1977, 186.

“automatically” accepted by rational people, who resign in an act of passive nihilism. To avoid falling into nihilism, a new kind of understanding of philosophy is needed.

4.2 Methodological Modernism

As is well known, the method employed in Walter Benjamin’s 1928 book *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* had a profound influence on Adorno.²⁷⁹ The book contains two different conceptions of experience, the first one of which is defined in Kantian terms as knowledge.²⁸⁰ Experience as knowledge is cognitive and has an affinity with the scientific method, as far as it divides the reality into parts to submit it to the concepts of comprehension, which originate from the subject. This type of experience dominates the idealist thought that begins with Kant and culminates in contemporary reductive naturalism.²⁸¹ To subvert the dominant mode of oppressive thought, which unwittingly supports the dominant ideology, Benjamin seeks for a way to save experience from the grip of idealism. Experience provides the space within which understanding occurs and within which subject and object coalesce.²⁸² As an alternative to the Kantian conception of experience, Benjamin proposes philosophical experience that does not seek to possess reality but focuses on the way truth is revealed to us. Not only is truth co-constituted by subject and object in and through experience, but it needs the former to actively organise sense data in a way that reveals the mediations of the particular objects, their objective inner logic.²⁸³

While Kantian knowledge consists of taking the world apart and subjecting it to cognitive domination through conceptual classification, philosophical experience allows the given to reveal itself to the subject in a manner that enables the objective relations of the elements to retain their nature. This kind of knowledge works through abstraction as homogenising universals subsume the particulars. Philosophical experience allows the particulars to survive as a “conceptual arrangement of their elements”, which allows truth to be expressed

²⁷⁹ Susan Buck-Morss (1977) has described this relationship in her book on the philosophical and historical context of Adorno’s dialectics. In his extensive analysis of the *Aesthetic Theory*, Lambert Zuidervaart (1991) downplays the role Benjamin played for Adorno’s intellectual development and perhaps slightly exaggerates the importance of György Lukács.

²⁸⁰ The following exposition follows Buck-Morss’s (1977, 91–92) analysis.

²⁸¹ In his study of the domination of reason over the sensuous in Kant and the ensuing “aesthetic alienation” in modernity, J. M. Bernstein (1992, 1–16) calls this type of experience the “truth-only cognition”. It gets carried over to the positivist natural sciences, which Adorno criticises throughout his oeuvre.

²⁸² Bowie (2013, 6) states that experience is contradictory and we can hold contradictory thoughts, although concepts, and therefore the traditional idealist sciences relying on them, are not: “Understanding therefore cannot be established in terms of clear, final definitions, as the basis of any such definition has to be constituted in experience itself, which is a complex weave of sometimes contradictory factors.”

²⁸³ Buck-Morss 1977, 91.

without being explicitly stated.²⁸⁴ Benjamin calls such conceptual arrangements constellations.²⁸⁵ Constellations are more than the sum of their parts, since they reveal phenomena as truth, or, more specifically, they can be defined as a means to uncover the socio-historical reality within which truth gets formed as far as they reveal the mediations that connect the particular elements found in reality to each other. Since in experience no concepts are imposed on the object, constellations allow its apprehension without its forcible identification with the subject and its categories. This means that they are more tolerant of contradictions than identifying concepts and more grounded on the experiential reality of living human beings.²⁸⁶

It seems to me that two of these ideas find their way into Adorno's aesthetic theory.²⁸⁷ First, Adorno seeks to find a mode of rationality compatible with the aim of retaining the primacy of the object, that is, to avoid its violent subsumption under the concepts originating from the subject, just as Benjamin did with his theory of philosophical experience. Such a form of rationality is neither simply conceptual nor linguistic and it therefore offers a genuine alternative to the oppressive and systematising logic of the totally administered society.²⁸⁸ The primacy of the object can also be seen, in the words of Martin Jay, as an imposition to "treat the other in a non-dominating, non-subsumptive, non-homogenizing manner", effectively making it a moral demand.²⁸⁹ The other aspect is the important role granted to experience in obtaining knowledge and the aforementioned methodological conundrums resulting from it. Adorno uses experience as the ground of knowledge, and constellation as a method, to subvert identity thinking on those areas of existence in which particularities matter, such as morality. The type of abstract reason described above is only able to provide us with a formalist ethics, which relies on impersonal laws instead of our experience of others as vulnerable and suffering human beings.²⁹⁰

Adorno maintains, however, that in modernity, not even experience is able to offer guaranteed refuge from reification, since society transforms and preforms the conditions of experience, effectively making it less subjective than

²⁸⁴ Buck-Morss 1977, 92.

²⁸⁵ Benjamin 1998, 34.

²⁸⁶ As Andrew Bowie (2013, 6) writes: "Think, however, of something as familiar as how one experiences another person: this can be distorted by the attempt to establish a fixed idea of the person, even though some degree of stability is also required in order to be able to engage with someone successfully. The experience of contradiction in the sense intended here, where opposed judgements coexist without being able to be resolved, is, then, very much part of everyday life, and is constitutive, for example, of the way characters become manifest in great novels. Most, if not all, of us live with contradictory stances on a whole swathe of issues and people, without ever being able to bring the contradictions to a definitive end." On a related note, Roger Foster (2007, 152) argues that Proust in his epic *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu* manages "to unseal the nonconceptual *with* concepts, without equating concepts to the nonconceptual", thereby effectively writing a negative dialectical critique of concepts.

²⁸⁷ See Hulatt 2016 for a lucid exploration of Adorno and truth.

²⁸⁸ See Nichol森 1999, 3.

²⁸⁹ Jay 2005, 356. This has obvious echoes of Benjamin's ideas of philosophical experience.

²⁹⁰ As far as I can tell, this is also Bernstein's (2001) main argument.

it may initially appear.²⁹¹ These conditions are part of the same process of formalisation and homogenisation inherent to capitalist reification and the idealism and instrumental form of rationality it endorses. Ethical formalism is therefore just another manifestation of the same development, since it requires a notion of a purely abstract rational subject that is expected to be motivated to act morally through deliberation on universal rules that it imposes upon itself.²⁹² One important result of this process is the destruction of experience and the truncation of our individuality, which follows from the erasure of temporal continuity; of historicity entailed in authentic experience.²⁹³ Adorno would argue that the thoroughly corrupted nature of the historical condition makes it possible to conceive of ethical subjectivity only in negative terms. Considering the criticism outlined above, it can be said to include a mode of relation to the other that retains the primacy of the object, instead of subjecting it to domination through abstraction and detachment. It must also recover the experiential to obtain knowledge and maintain historical awareness. Thus, it should demand recognition of other human beings as singular and vulnerable, for thought, like art, should express suffering without legitimising it.²⁹⁴

As we have seen, Benjamin saw knowledge and experience as linked, a view Adorno shares. Therefore, the primacy of the object cannot be retained without the recovery of experience – and this is where, in my view, art and the aesthetic get the special role they have in Adorno’s philosophy. Knowledge and experience coincide in what Adorno early on gave the oxymoronic-sounding name “exact fantasy”.²⁹⁵ It refers to a reformulation of Benjamin’s conception of philosophical experience, which Adorno develops further by reimagining the constellation-building as both a tool and function of philosophical interpretation. The role of true philosophy emerges for the young Adorno in “the demand to answer the questions of a pre-given reality each time, through a fantasy which rearranges the elements of the question without going beyond the circumference of the elements, the exactitude of which has its control in the disap-

²⁹¹ Adorno insists that ideology reaches all the way down to the heart of our being, meaning those aspects of our experience we hold to be the most personal and unique. Only by analysing the ideological powers are we able to understand our humanity, through its negation. As Adorno (2005, 15) writes on the opening pages of *Minima Moralia*: “He who wishes to know the truth about life in its immediacy must scrutinize its estranged form, the objective powers that determine individual existence even in its most hidden recesses.” And in the original German: “Wer die Wahrheit übers unmittelbare Leben erfahren will, muß dessen entfremdeter Gestalt nachforschen, den objektiven Mächten, die individuelle Existenz bis ins Verborgenste bestimmen.” (Adorno 1951, 7.)

²⁹² In the words of Ross Poole (1991, ix): “Modernity has called into play a dominant conception of what it is to have reason to act; this conception has the consequence that the dictates of morality have little purchase on the motivations of those to whom they are addressed. Modernity has constructed a conception of knowledge which excludes the possibility of moral knowledge; morality becomes, not a matter of rational belief, but subjective opinion.” The problem of morality and modernity is discussed in similar terms by, for example, Bernstein (2001) and Critchley (2007).

²⁹³ This refers to the late modern emphasis of *Erlebnis* over *Ehrfahrung*. On Adorno’s and Benjamin’s conceptions of experience, see Jay 2005, 312–360.

²⁹⁴ Jarvis 2004, paragraph 28.

²⁹⁵ Adorno 1977, 131.

pearance of the question”.²⁹⁶ In other words, exact fantasy provides a way to “answer” questions by doing away with them, thereby revealing the ideological nature of the problems they have brought about.²⁹⁷ In this sense, exact fantasy has the capability to reveal the impurities of experience.²⁹⁸ This is done through the formation of what Adorno calls “historical images” which “are legitimated in the last analysis alone by the fact that reality crystalizes about them in striking conclusiveness”.²⁹⁹ Philosophy should resemble art in that it forms historical images not unlike art forms aesthetic images. They are both vehicles for truth. The main difference between them is that philosophy contains a critical conceptual dimension, which art lacks. Thus, the truth content of aesthetic experience, as Jay reminds us, has “to be brought out by an accompanying philosophical *cum* social theoretical analysis that provided the critical discursive tools” not found in art.³⁰⁰

4.3 Art as Historiography

“Art, like morality, consists of drawing the line somewhere.”
—G. K. Chesterton³⁰¹

Adorno believes that works of art are burdened by history, which grants them with a unique ability to reproduce social contradictions in an aesthetic form. To quote Lambert Zuidervaart, “the arts derive from a larger social process, oppose it, and point beyond it, all the while remaining within that process”.³⁰² This ability is due to their nature as objects that are both part of the socio-historical reality and yet dislodged from it in a manner that is not available to any other types of artefacts. The primary reason for this is the potentially autonomous nature of art, which allows them to relate to reality in a dialectical manner.

Only by virtue of separation from empirical reality, which sanctions art to model the relation of the whole and the part according to the work’s own need, does the artwork achieve a heightened order of existence.³⁰³

Unlike all other artefacts, including some works of art, autonomous artworks do not serve any external purpose. They are driven by a need to articulate the

²⁹⁶ Adorno 1977, 131.

²⁹⁷ I return to the distinction between questions and problems in the next chapter.

²⁹⁸ Martin Jay (2005, 355) writes that for Adorno, aesthetic experience is “necessarily impure” since it is impaired by larger cultural transformations such as “modern warfare, the replacement of narrative by information, alienating technology, and capitalist industrialization”.

²⁹⁹ Adorno 1977, 131.

³⁰⁰ Jay 2005, 355.

³⁰¹ Quoted in Carrol 2014, 1.

³⁰² Zuidervaart 1991, 56–57.

³⁰³ Adorno 2002, 4.

non-identity of modernity and tradition, and to do so in an affirmative manner.³⁰⁴ For Adorno, art “is modern when, by its mode of experience and as the expression of the crisis of experience, it absorbs what industrialization has developed under the given relations of production”.³⁰⁵ Modern works “must show themselves to be the equal of high industrialism, not simply make it a topic”.³⁰⁶ In other words, the content of art originates from experiential reality, but the form artworks give to the experience doubles as the rejection of the social organisation of that reality, rendering art critical.³⁰⁷ Understood like this, modernism is the demand to embrace the ineluctable contradictions between tradition and modernity, the past and the present, and the universal and the particular. The modern “is not a chronological concept but the Rimbaudian postulate of an art of the most advanced consciousness, an art in which the most progressive and differentiated technical procedures are saturated with the most progressive and differentiated experiences”.³⁰⁸ For Adorno, experience is always already affected by social conditions, no matter what its cause. For example nature, the classic locus of the romantic sublime, is still experienced by a subject that is bound to the social conditions.³⁰⁹ In experiencing a cultural product, the subject faces a socially produced artefact that sets itself as an object against society, which is the object and starting point of philosophy and social criticism: “Artworks detach themselves from the empirical world and bring forth another world, one opposed to the empirical world as if this other world too were an autonomous entity.”³¹⁰ In order to do this, art must “posit totality out of itself”.³¹¹ This allows the world that enabled and surrounds the work of art to also appear as a totality.³¹² As Adorno famously writes:

The artwork is both the result of the process and the process itself at a standstill. It is what at its apogee rationalist metaphysics proclaimed as the principle of the universe, a monad: at once a force field and a thing.³¹³

In a work of art, like in Benjamin’s philosophical experience, universals do not subsume the sensuous particulars. Instead their arrangement reveals the process that they are embedded in and that has brought their relations about. Or, in

³⁰⁴ Cunningham 2003, 62.

³⁰⁵ Adorno 2002, 34.

³⁰⁶ Adorno 2002, 33. It is not enough for art to use as its material topics and issues that arise out of reality. For example, the crippled tramps in Beckett’s novels, wandering amidst confusion in hostile environments, are more honest descriptions of the effects of war and the crisis of culture than works explicitly seeking to deal with such.

³⁰⁷ Adorno 2002, 5: “Yet it is precisely as artifacts, as products of social labor, that they also communicate with the empirical experience that they reject and from which they draw their content.”

³⁰⁸ Adorno 2002, 33.

³⁰⁹ Adorno (2002, 68) states that “in every particular aesthetic experience of nature the social whole is lodged”.

³¹⁰ Adorno 2002, 1

³¹¹ Adorno 2002, 2.

³¹² Adorno 2002, 2: “By undertaking to posit totality out of itself, whole and self-encompassing, this image is transferred to the world in which art exists and that engenders it.”

³¹³ Adorno 2002, 179.

other words, the artwork expresses the truth about the particulars as particulars within their universal mediations. A work of art comprises particulars and their relations in a form that gives it the appearance of a self-contained totality within and in contrast with the totality of our social and historical relations. Adorno argues that the plurality condensed in the work of art paradoxically strengthens its unity, just like “the primacy of reality” gets sanctioned through art’s “rejection of the empirical world”.³¹⁴ A work of art is therefore a plural unity that reveals the reality it rejects. This rejection is the condition for art’s always imperfect detachment from the totally administered society – art can never be purely objective, which is why it is able to maintain a dialectical relationship to society and therefore mediate the subject and the object in a non-identifying way.³¹⁵ This dialectical movement between art and reality requires that art embraces the non-identity of modernity and tradition and submits itself to a ceaseless renewal of its own nature in relation to its surroundings. This is how modernist art can respond to the challenge set by modernity. One might say, then, that the art of a given moment is formed by the history of art in relation to its other, just like philosophical concepts are formed by the past, failed, attempts to exhaust them. As Adorno explains in *Aesthetic Theory*:

Because art is what it has become, its concept refers to what it does not contain. The tension between what motivates art and art’s past circumscribes the so-called questions of aesthetic constitution. Art can be understood only by its laws of movement, not according to any set of invariants. It is defined by its relation to what it is not. The specifically artistic in art must be derived concretely from its other; that alone would fulfill the demands of a materialist-dialectical aesthetics. Art acquires its specificity by separating itself from what it developed out of; its law of movement is its law of form. It exists only in relation to its other; it is the process that transpires with its other.³¹⁶

Works of art reorganise the cultural and social context around them. Since their status as works of art is dependent on what is other to them, art must constantly renew itself. The reorganisation included in artistic production tears the elements of society from their context, transforming them and their relations until they can form a coherent whole. Yet this new whole is autonomous, while the earlier coherence was heteronomous, forced upon the elements from the outside. Autonomous art imitates natural beauty, which is free. The relationship of art and natural beauty signifies the incommensurability of natural beauty and aesthetics. The object of art “is determined negatively, as indeterminable. It is for this reason that art requires philosophy, which interprets it in order to say what it is unable to say, whereas art is only able to say it by not saying it.”³¹⁷ Art communicates with the world by refusing communication altogether, making works of art “the self-unconscious historiography of their epoch”.³¹⁸ A trace of the socio-historical process remains in them: “The reciprocal relation of the uni-

³¹⁴ Adorno 2002, 2.

³¹⁵ Cf. Adorno’s (2002, 58) cryptic remark: “Art that is simply a thing is an oxymoron.”

³¹⁶ Adorno 2002, 3.

³¹⁷ Adorno 2002, 72.

³¹⁸ Adorno 2002, 182.

versal and the particular, which takes place unconsciously in artworks and which aesthetics must bring to consciousness, is what truly necessitates a dialectical approach.”³¹⁹ It is a matter of fighting alienation: as an artefact the work of art is situated where the subjective and the objective converge, simultaneously alienated from the subject and as opposed to society. In other words, as an artefact the work of art can comment on society immanently.

Yet if aesthetics is to amount to neither to art-alien prescriptions nor the inconsequential classification of what it happens upon, then it is only conceivable as dialectical aesthetics; dialectical method is not unsuitably defined as the refusal to rest content with the diremption of the deductive and inductive that dominates rigid, inductive thought, and this is expressly rejected by the earliest formulations of dialectics in German idealism, those of Fichte.³²⁰

The combination of “dialectical method” and “aesthetics” returns the artworks from within the realm of *l’art pour l’art* bourgeois theories into the sphere of critical social theory. This requires dialectical aesthetics, because deductive aesthetics, which relies on generalisation, amounts to a “theoretical straitjacket” and inductive aesthetics, which returns the particular to the universal, renders art into a “meaningless abstraction”.³²¹ The criticism of deductive aesthetics is motivated by the demand of constant renewal, which is part of the mission Adorno has for art. Definition would force the works of art that depict the non-identical into pre-existing forms, again subjecting the phenomena to ideas: “The concept of art is located in a historically changing constellation of elements; it refuses definition.”³²² That is to say, the social and cultural configuration both provides the content of the artwork and sets the context within which it can maintain its autonomy. James Martin Harding writes that “for Adorno the autonomy of art results from an aesthetic work’s inability to sublimate the socio-historical dimensions that it negates”.³²³ The precondition for autonomy consists of unresolved contradictions that society is unable to overcome.³²⁴ As a representative of these tensions, art renews itself together with larger historical changes and simultaneously sets itself against its own earlier manifestations.

4.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, we have seen how Adorno’s philosophy is predicated on the conviction that an adequate response to the moral and cognitive demands the modern world imposes upon us cannot be founded on either art or philosophy alone. To put it bluntly, philosophy is oblivious to its own shortcomings, be-

³¹⁹ Adorno 2002, 181.

³²⁰ Adorno 2002, 343.

³²¹ Zuidervaart 1991, 49.

³²² Adorno 2002, 2.

³²³ Harding 1997, 4.

³²⁴ For Adorno, the maintaining of these contradictions is also a precondition for social critique. See Vainikkala 1993.

cause concepts cannot transcend concepts without outside help. The limits of concepts cannot be conceptualised, but they can be experienced. Consequently, while their existence can be acknowledged and argued for in conventional form, true knowledge about them needs to be formed within the existential sphere of individuals. In other words, the limits to our reason need to be lived, not just named. This is done both in encounters with art and by subjecting these encounters, and the works of art included in them, to conceptual analyses. Only thought will enable us to understand what we have experienced, and can thereby reveal the truth about our socio-historical condition, and only experience can provide content for thought. In late modernity, the content is modern and the proper philosophical encounter with it needs to be modernist.

In the preceding chapters, I have presented a reading of Adorno that emphasises his tragic vision and his modernist sensibilities. In what follows, I shall bring these two argumentative strands together and outline an overall sketch of Adorno as a tragic philosopher of modernity. As I stated in the Introduction, following Christopher Hamilton, the key themes present in all tragic views on the human condition are the prevalence of suffering; the fact that good deeds do not automatically cause happiness; the prosperity of the immoral and amoral among us; our limited self-awareness and self-control; and the lack of redemption. Applied to the modern condition, these views take specific forms that are also present, in one form or another, in Adorno's thought. The most important of these are the notions of spiritual depression and the resulting overabundance of kitsch; the devaluation of ideas and human beings and their subsumption under the rules of the marketplace; bureaucratisation; the apparent absurdity of modern life; Auschwitz; and the nihilism disseminated through the spectacle of popular culture. The traditional mode of reason is complicit in all the cases where tragic ideas become tragic reality.

5 TRAGIC MODERNITY

“Philosophy triumphs easily over past and future ills; but present ills triumph over it.”

—François de La Rochefoucauld³²⁵

Discussing Adorno, it is difficult to keep the epistemological, metaphysical, and ethical planes separate, since they overlap in many ways. This seems to be especially the case in relation to his view on modernity. As Lambert Zuidervaart phrases it, philosophy as social critique “interacts with other disciplines to undertake a dialectical critique of society, and it necessarily crosses the boundaries of epistemology, ethics, and aesthetics, even as it addresses topics within each of these fields”.³²⁶ The focus of this chapter is on the question of knowledge, which, like ethics, penetrates all these planes. My emphasis is on the way Adorno’s tragic expectations influence his view on the possibility of attaining knowledge under social conditions that seem to make such pursuits impossible. The question becomes ethical when we realise that only the transformation of social conditions can make positive knowledge possible: if they remain as oppressive as they appear, we are forced to stick to negative, privative, knowledge. This means, effectively, that our ethical and epistemological pursuits are always found lacking – a symptom of the tragic nature of the human condition under modernity.

On an existential level, we incessantly encounter phenomena that present us with or impose upon us the need to choose. Yet on a societal level, we seem to be at the mercy of forces beyond our control. That is, as a culture we are unable to make sense of the choices we encounter since they do not appear as choices, but as necessities guiding the actions of the individuals in charge. We adjust to them, stubbornly maintaining the forms of organisation we take as a given and which only benefit a small minority of the people, while causing varying levels of suffering for the rest. Means of life could be secured for everyone, but since there are no shared meanings on which to ground our ethical beliefs,

³²⁵ La Rochefoucauld 2007, 9.

³²⁶ Zuidervaart 2007, 6–7.

we have no moral incentive for doing so. This is because we have neither economic nor political interest in changing the status quo, or because the capitalist system can function for the profit of the few whilst even eschewing equality. As we have seen, this leads into a messy reality, a conflicting system of interests and demands, that we need to navigate without adequate tools. This confusion is reminiscent of the chaos to which the Athenians were subject, which is why tragedies are replete with individuals who, through their decision-making, bear all the moral responsibility in an unjust system that they cannot make sense of on either personal or cultural level.

5.1 Life and Philosophy

“Life is tragedy, hurrah!”
– Eugene O’Neill³²⁷

Philosophy has often been seen as an intellectual enterprise that deals with questions arising out of everyday life.³²⁸ While questions concerning the overall meaning of life on either individual or universal level are bound to be general enough to appear as vacuous, it seems safe to say that the questions regarding the meanings we generate in our particular lives are considered important to the way we see ourselves, and our understanding of our relationships with others and the world around us – in short, our understanding of the good life.³²⁹ The questions prompted by our lives are related to our fundamental ethical commitments. Encountering such questions, we tend to turn to answers other people have come up with in situations resembling the ones we have found ourselves in. When we, for example, ask ourselves how we should live our lives or what we should do under any given circumstances, many of us have traditionally begun our search in philosophy and art.³³⁰ And we tend to privilege theories and artworks that are compatible with our vision.

While both philosophy and art are able to shed light on the human condition, it is a commonplace to think that the key difference between them lies in art’s inability to corroborate its insights with arguments.³³¹ In other words,

³²⁷ Quoted in Diggins 2007, 211.

³²⁸ In Lyotard’s (2013, 67) words, “The origin of philosophy is today.” Adorno (2005) and Heidegger (1994), for example, defend a similar view.

³²⁹ In the dedication to *Minima Moralia*, Adorno (2005, 15) famously calls his philosophy the “melancholy science” [die traurige Wissenschaft] and considers “the teaching of the good life” [die Lehre vom richtigen Leben] to be “the true field of philosophy”. Unfortunately, he adds, the question of the good life “has lapsed into intellectual neglect, sententious whimsy and finally oblivion”. See also Finlayson 2009.

³³⁰ In Alexander Nehamas’s (1998) terms, art and philosophy deal with the practical “art of living”. Ironically, Nehamas nowhere discusses life beyond the page.

³³¹ See Gourgouris 2003. Adorno writes in the *Aesthetic Theory*: “Although artworks are neither conceptual nor judgemental, they are logical.” This logic, however, differs from the extra-aesthetic logic: “What today seems absurd in art is the negative func-

while art may help us gain insight into the nature of our questions, for example, by showing that they have certain universal qualities, in so far as they have emerged repeatedly throughout history in various guises, it nonetheless does not provide us with definitive answers. On the contrary, art seems constantly to undermine the grounds of any settled answers we may have held.³³² It would be better to consider such answers as solutions while bearing in mind that for there to be a solution, there needs to be a problem. And while it is common for questions and problems to be considered as the same thing, there is an essential difference that will also help us understand the complicated relationship between art and philosophy. The difference is that questions arise out of our affective – that is, the bodily, somatic, and even mimetic – encounters in and with the world, while problems are cognitive by nature.³³³ Questions are part of our lived experience and they only become problems once we assume that they are conceived of as issues that can be solved by working them through with conceptual analysis. A prerequisite for this is the belief that the questions we began with have answers and, consequently, that they are concerned with truth. The problem with this notion is that it includes the conception of truth as an object, that is, as something that can be reached, held on to, and passed on to others.³³⁴

An objectifying notion of truth is at least as old as philosophy itself. In Plato's account, Socrates argues against this kind of view, characteristically supported by the sophists whom he modelled himself against, by showing us that upon closer scrutiny, no-one can possess the truth, no matter what they claim.³³⁵ The sophists reached what they promoted as the truth by forging the question into a problem and presenting the solution to it as an answer to the question. In other words, they rhetorically obfuscated the issue by mixing the universal and the particular.³³⁶ On the level of everyday life, the problem of figuring out what to do in a certain situation demands an ethical answer in the form of morally sustainable conduct, while on a rhetorical level it takes the form of a question of how we should live our lives. The form of the question implies that the answer should provide one with universal rules to live by, while the original problem only needs a particular response. The idiom of theory is that of legislation while that of experience is ethics.³³⁷ The analytical process that turns

tion of unbridled logical consistency. Art is thus made to pay for the fact that conclusions cannot be drawn without concept and judgement." (Adorno 2002, 136, 137.)

³³² To quote Leslie Hill (2012, 3): "According to Adorno, it is of course the very purpose of art not to reconcile opposing tendencies, but rather to articulate the impossibility of reconciliation."

³³³ See Kotkavirta 1999, 101. Cf. Marcel 1949, 100: "A problem is something met with which bars my passage. It is before me in its entirety. A mystery, on the other hand, is something in which I find myself caught up, and whose essence is therefore not to be before me in its entirety. It is as though in this province the distinction between *in me* and *before me* loses its meaning."

³³⁴ See Lyotard 2013, 17–43.

³³⁵ See Groys 2012, xv–xix.

³³⁶ The particular mediates the universal and the individual, which makes it the proper domain of the ethical. Cf. Caygill 1998, 25–26.

³³⁷ Terry Eagleton (2007, 1) has remarked that "philosophers have an infuriating habit of analysing questions rather than answering them". The question he has in mind is that of the meaning of life.

questions into problems operates on an abstract level of universality far removed from the situations that form the grounds for questions.

As I argued in Chapter Three, this impossibility to reach moral certainty is part of the view on the human condition that Adorno shares with tragedians. In tragedies, ethical conundrums rise out of situations that need ethical deliberation regarding one's action. These situations are often beyond the level of comprehension and control needed from the agent for them to act justly. Lack of knowledge brings forth the personal flaw defining the character, and acting upon this weakness will lead them on a course of action that will bring about their demise.³³⁸ It is difficult to believe that any tragic character would choose to act the way they do, if only they had full knowledge of the reasons for and consequences of their actions.³³⁹ One does not have to take it as far as Socrates, who held the view that virtue equals knowledge and vice is the result of an "intellectual error".³⁴⁰ The point is simply that knowledge and morality are connected through praxis. Tragedies always deal with action and in this regard, knowledge should be understood as a historical act that obliterates the distinction between facts (knowing that) and values (knowing how).³⁴¹ From a tragic point of view, the problem of knowledge is an ethical problem. And this is a view with which Adorno's ethical conviction certainly resonates as he sets out to interrogate the limits and possibilities capitalist modernity sets to our ability to think the questions of our fundamental ethical commitments.

5.2 Reification and the Tragic

"Tragedy is the highest expression of the infinite value of human life."
—G. K. Chesterton³⁴²

Previously, I quoted Hegel's famous formulation according to which philosophy "is its own time comprehended in thoughts".³⁴³ Adorno, who shares this view, supplemented the idea with the bleak declaration that it is impossible to live life rightly in a world that is wrong.³⁴⁴ In other words, only a critical analysis of our conceptual formations and practices is able to reveal the deepest cultural and societal normative commitments that guide and direct – even impede – our ultimately futile pursuits to live morally sustainable lives. The world is wrong, Adorno asserts, since the all-pervading reification that sustains and is

³³⁸ This is a simplistic reading of the tragic act. For a more nuanced view, see for example Snell 1983.

³³⁹ Which is one of the reasons why Raymond Williams (1966) has argued that tragedies can only be understood as tragic *ex post facto*.

³⁴⁰ Taylor 1951, 148–149.

³⁴¹ The simplicity of the point seems true from a Marxist perspective. See Eagleton 1997, 3–4.

³⁴² Chesterton 1909, 65.

³⁴³ Hegel 1991, 21.

³⁴⁴ That is, Adorno agrees that social context determines thought. Adorno 2005, 39.

enabled by the political and economic organisation of late modern Western societies compromises our fundamental normative commitments. Reification refers to the mistaking of abstract relations and properties as things, as concrete objects. On the political and economic (that is ideological) level, reification imposes an abstract exchange-value onto things that in themselves only have concrete use-value.³⁴⁵ In thought, it forces us to identify objects with concepts, subsuming their concrete particularity under abstract universality.³⁴⁶ “To think is to identify.”³⁴⁷ This symmetry between the mode of our social organisation and our way of thinking makes thought complicit in maintaining the status quo. In a world ridden with reification, such as the one organised around the capitalist mode of production, the objects of thought become commodities, and the concrete questions turn into abstract problems

Adorno argues, in my view, that it is our task to subvert the instrumental reason that is complicit with the pervasion of capitalism into the very core of our subjectivity and the degradation this causes. He claims that life, which is a necessary precondition for the good life, is no longer possible, but art, for example, carries vestiges of it. The role of philosophy is to find those traces of humanity and use them to fight the commodification of our existence. This does not mean that Adorno opposes technological and scientific development. Instead he opposes the spread of instrumental reason, which is necessary for technology and science, into the domains of life where it is not needed.³⁴⁸

This leads to confusion over goals, which is a theme tragic drama often touches upon – the fate of Iphigenia comes to mind³⁴⁹ – and is a common criticism levelled against late capitalist market democracies. On one level, needs are manufactured so that products can be sold to fulfil them. On another, the cycle of need and product manufacturing can be used to mask the systemic suffering that the economy both requires and produces. The capitalist system is born in the dialectical relationship of human reason and the material metabolism of human communities, in a space traditionally referred to with the concept of culture.³⁵⁰ In a dialectical process, the tensions between contradictory phenomena get resolved or displaced, creating change while remaining, as Adorno puts it, “the old in distress”.³⁵¹ Thus, as a result of the desire to master its own destiny, humanity seeks to gain rational control over nature in an attempt to subject it to

³⁴⁵ As a concept, ideology is notoriously opaque. Geuss (1981, 4–44) offers one of the best analyses on the topic I have encountered.

³⁴⁶ Reification is a contested concept that for Adorno refers both to ‘unlike things appearing as identical’ and to ‘the mode of thinking that sees them in this erroneous way’. Effectively, the idea ties together the capitalist market economy and traditional (scientific) thought. See Rose 2014, chapter 3.

³⁴⁷ Adorno 2004, 5; 1966, 15.

³⁴⁸ This is one of the themes that runs through Adorno’s (2005) *Minima Moralia*.

³⁴⁹ Accounts of her fate are diverse, but I have in mind Euripides’s *Iphigenia in Aulis*. In the play, Agamemnon, the leader of the Greeks, sacrifices his daughter Iphigenia to appease the goddess Artemis who has prevented the Greek troops from sailing to Troy to defend Greek honour. The honourability of filicide is questioned by Agamemnon’s wife Clytemnestra, who murders Agamemnon – only to end up dead at the hands of her son, Orestes. See Snell 1983.

³⁵⁰ See Eagleton 2000, 1–5.

³⁵¹ Adorno 2003, 95. See also Stone 2014, 1121–1125.

human needs and demands. This requires a strong subjectivity alienated from its own natural aspects and equipped with a mode of reason suitable for mastery. In the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and Adorno describe the development in bleak terms:

What human beings seek to learn from nature is how to use it to dominate wholly both it and human beings. Nothing else counts. Ruthless toward itself, the Enlightenment has eradicated the last remnant of its own self-awareness. Only thought which does violence to itself is hard enough to shatter myths.³⁵²

Later, with the societal organisation of labour, the subject finds in capitalism an economic formation that both serves its need for domination and needs dehumanised people to maintain its functionality. Modern humans are alienated from their humanity in a special way. They have become abstractions, not unlike things in a marketplace. Reification penetrates our consciousness, allowing ideology to represent reality as it needs to be represented in order to uphold and grant legitimacy to the status quo, which is best defined as an attempt to maintain the illusion of the system as mirroring a natural order. The chief way it resembles nature, however, is that instead of forming a coherent whole, the system is also riven with contradictions and conflicts. In modernity, the essential societal contradiction is that between the capitalist and the working classes, that is, those who buy labour power, and can make a profit, and those who sell it to survive. In other words, the society is divided into exploiters and the exploited:

The latest phase of class society is dominated by monopolies; it tends toward fascism, the form of political organization worthy of it. While it vindicates the doctrine of class struggle with its concentration and centralization, extreme power and extreme impotence directly confronting one another in total contradiction, it makes people forget the actual existence of hostile classes.³⁵³

The classes have separate interests and the frameworks within which they operate are incommensurable, perpetuating the conflict between them. Members of both classes hold completely different normative commitments. The only way to forge an illusory connection between them is through abstraction: the idea of a harmonious totality with universally applicable qualities is a socially necessary semblance.³⁵⁴ This ideological construction of reality is illustrated by the aforementioned abstract problems researchers in ethics often like to preoccupy themselves with.³⁵⁵ They do not deal with the diversity of human life, but depict the actors in an abstract form divorced from their socio-historically de-

³⁵² Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 2.

³⁵³ Adorno 2002, 96.

³⁵⁴ I am borrowing the formulation of “socially necessary semblance”, out of context, from Adorno 1998a, 249.

³⁵⁵ Adorno (2000, 19) criticises the traditional forms of ethical thought for dealing with mere abstractions in his lectures on moral philosophy: “Ethical conduct or moral and immoral conduct is always a social phenomenon – in other words, it makes absolutely no sense to talk about ethical and moral conduct separately from relations of human beings to each other, and an individual who exists purely for himself is an empty abstraction.”

terminated conditions.³⁵⁶ Again, this has to do with the possibility of knowledge regarding the subterranean web of mediations one is necessarily entangled in. Tragedies depict actors who are bound by familial relations and connected to the codes of conduct legitimised by tradition. The rural communities that preceded the poleis gave birth to the mores adhered to by the tragic protagonists. In this sense, two conflicting sets of norms mediate their reality: the custom and the law. Take for example Orestes, who is bound by filial duty to avenge the murder of his father by his mother and her lover, the succeeding king of Mycenae. The matricide violates filial piety, which unleashes the fury of the Erinyes, the chthonic deities of vengeance and protectors of the sanctity of family ties. Orestes seeks the help of Apollo, who had sanctioned his act, and ends up in front of a tribunal of gods, who acquit him through a judicial process that ushers in the era of the law.³⁵⁷ The conflicting duties, symbolised by the disagreeing gods, create a situation in which Orestes cannot act without violating at least one set of rules he is expected to obey. The function of the tribunal is to reveal the meaninglessness of tradition. Only reason could enable Orestes to understand the pointlessness of the cycle of cruelty that has tormented generations of his family.

Nevertheless, the tragic subject of *The Oresteia* might not be Orestes but the house of Atreus. It is the power of the throne of Mycenae that corrupts the family and leads them on a path of self-destruction that assumes Biblical proportions: "The father shall be divided against the son, and the son against the father; the mother against the daughter, and the daughter against the mother; the mother in law against her daughter in law, and the daughter in law against her mother in law."³⁵⁸ According to the myth, Atreus seals the fate of his posterity by transgressing both secular and divine laws. Curiously enough, the social context of *The Oresteia* seems to point at certain interesting similarities between Attic Greece and the modern era.³⁵⁹ Aeschylus wrote during turbulent times when the nascent polis and the teetering democracy needed legitimacy and public support. He fought in the Greco-Persian Wars and showed surprising sympathy for the vanquished in his plays. The entire adulthood of another tragedian, Euripides, was shadowed by the Peloponnesian War. Anne Carson has suggested that tragedy exists because the continuous cycles of violence cause

³⁵⁶ As Adorno (2005, 15) writes in *Minima Moralia*: "He who wishes to know the truth about life in its immediacy must scrutinize its estranged form, the objective powers that determine individual existence even in its most hidden recesses. -- Our perspective of life has passed into an ideology which conceals the fact that there is life no longer."

³⁵⁷ This crude summary of the finale of the complex story of the house of Atreus follows the version told by Aeschylus (2004).

³⁵⁸ Luke 12:52 (KJV).

³⁵⁹ As Terry Eagleton (1998) writes about the clichés related to our understanding of the modern era: "Historical textbooks always seem to make three claims about the era they are dealing with: it was a period of change; it was essentially a transitional epoch; and the middle classes went on rising." The first two aspects seem to ring true about any era.

grief and rage, which a culture needs to distance itself from.³⁶⁰ Whether this was an attempt to affirm the dark side of human nature and the dark times the Greeks lived through is a matter of debate, but the way the social contradictions were put on display certainly enabled the criticism of one-sided attempts to explain the human condition.

This is the tragic ethos we also find in Adorno, who wants thought to do justice to life, which reification seeks to truncate into mere existence. Philosophy needs to find a way to think through the mediations of reality and aim at things themselves. It needs to address the questions that we are accustomed to covering up with problems. "Though chained to the questions of traditional philosophical problematics, we certainly must negate that problematics."³⁶¹ The simple demand is to find an ethical way to think about the way we relate to each other and the world. This theoretical understanding will then, hopefully, reflect on our moral conduct.³⁶² The obvious paradox, in this line of thought, is that reification compromises our way of thinking, including the very nature of concepts, and we always find ourselves within the ideological constitution of societal reality. Ideological formations mask the class struggle that underlies modern societal structures. In Adorno's words: "The power of the status quo puts up the façades into which our consciousness crashes. It must seek to crash through them."³⁶³ This moral demand is simultaneously a political demand, since power and knowledge are two sides of the same coin: "Critique of society is critique of knowledge, and vice versa."³⁶⁴

5.3 Writing Modernity

The method Adorno utilises in his critical pursuit could be described as modernist genealogy, which seeks to refashion Nietzsche and Marx for late modernity. Bernard Williams has defined genealogy as follows: "Genealogy is a narra-

³⁶⁰ "Why does tragedy exist? Because you are full of rage. Why are you full of rage? Because you are full of grief." (Carson 2006, 7.)

³⁶¹ Adorno 2004, 17. In the German original: "Die überlieferte philosophische Problematik ist bestimmt zu negieren, gekettet freilich an deren Fragen." (Adorno 1966, 26.)

³⁶² While Adorno denies the notion of truth as a correspondence between concepts and reality, he nonetheless maintains that truth is central to philosophy. Instead, truth should be understood in terms of its practical utility. Truth undoes reification and enables emancipation. Or, in other words, it helps overturn capitalism. See 1966, 13–14. See also Eagleton 1997, 3–5.

³⁶³ Adorno 2004, 17; 1966, 27.

³⁶⁴ Adorno 1998a, 250. One should also note the way Horkheimer and Adorno (2002, 2) describe the intertwinement of knowledge, power, and technology in the opening pages of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: "Knowledge, which is power, knows no limits, either in its enslavement of creation or in its deference to worldly masters. Just as it serves all the purposes of the bourgeois economy both in factories and on the battlefield, it is at the disposal of entrepreneurs regardless of their origins. Kings control technology no more directly than do merchants: it is as democratic as the economic system with which it evolved. Technology is the essence of this knowledge. It aims to produce neither concepts nor images, nor the joy of understanding, but method, exploitation of the labor of others, capital."

tive that tries to explain a cultural phenomenon by describing a way in which it came about, or could have come about, or might be imagined to have come about.”³⁶⁵ In other words, ideologically tainted subterranean cultural processes are generally only visible as effects. Genealogy enables the apprehension and criticism of these processes through an interpretation of historical sources.³⁶⁶ For Adorno, the most important sources are art and philosophy. Just like works of art, works containing abstract conceptual knowledge provide “the self-unconscious historiography of their epoch”.³⁶⁷ Adorno does not differentiate between art and science as objects of critical enquiry and the carriers of historical meaning. More important than discourse is the ability of the objects to record self-unconscious historiography, the reliability of which is dependent on the level of their disinterestedness. Adorno calls disinterested works of art autonomous and he opposes them to heteronomous works created to serve ends that are not aesthetic.³⁶⁸ The same division applies to the assessment of philosophies. Heteronomous arguments are grounded on modern prevalent forms of thought and, consciously or unconsciously, serve ideological purposes. This can be contrasted with autonomous thought that could be described as “cognitive progressions” which proceed like musical variations, seeking to give voice to what can never be reached conceptually and the meaning of which the prevalent forms of thought seek to deny.³⁶⁹

Adorno’s modernism is negative in that it acknowledges its limited nature. Many authors have often considered this awareness as being constitutive of modernism. For example, Gabriel Josipovici, the writer and theorist discussed in Chapter Two, defines modernism as art that is aware of its own limits and responsibilities.³⁷⁰ Fredric Jameson also notes that modernism refers to the questions, set in either philosophical or aesthetic terms, regarding the possibility of knowledge and the nature of being and the multitude of scientific and artistic answers provided to them.³⁷¹ Adorno himself seeks to combine the philosophical and aesthetic conceptions in a way that adheres to a strict ethical program. Thus, the Adornian answer to the challenge of modernism, and the task of a philosopher, is to grasp the whole of culture while acknowledging that no totality exists beyond the individual theoretical formulations that present it in such form. The abstract universal only appears by way of concrete particulars,

³⁶⁵ Williams 2002, 20.

³⁶⁶ In the words of Michael Steinberg (2014, 1): “History writing is a political act; it either confirms or questions the present, and it is all the more necessary if it does the latter. The thought that the world might have become something different may clear the path for critique and action. That aside, tracing the currents that lead from the past to the present helps us see which of our problems may be soluble within our culture’s particular terms and which ones derive from the deep structures of thought and experience that tie a culture together and for just that reason are difficult to undo. Without this preparation we may well grant assumptions which in fact dictate the very practices and ideas which we want to criticize, abolish or transform.”

³⁶⁷ Adorno 2002, 182; 2004, 54.

³⁶⁸ Adorno 2002, 252–254.

³⁶⁹ Kotkavirta 1999, 98–99.

³⁷⁰ Josipovici 2010a.

³⁷¹ Jameson 2010, 279.

which belong to the domain of the aesthetic. Concrete particulars are grounded on “the needs and desires” of individual humans, as Terry Eagleton points out, and as such they open the ethical to the level of the political.³⁷² In this sense, ethics, aesthetics, and politics are one and the task of the critic is to maintain simultaneous dialectical awareness of all three planes. The needs and desires must be respected and fulfilled on both universal and particular levels, which is where individual aesthetics and collective politics overlap.³⁷³ Criticism of concrete particulars is a political act with an ethical dimension. Adorno proposes that we must approach phenomena in a way that allows them to talk for themselves, as far as that is possible, instead of repressing them with a conceptual straitjacket.³⁷⁴

According to Andrew Bowie, Adorno insists that philosophy “should build the sense of its own potentially repressive nature into the way in which it is presented”.³⁷⁵ In order to do so, thoughts should be set into formations in which each and every part holds a position of similar value, and what passes as a conclusion is revealed to us in and through their arrangement.³⁷⁶ This is why Adorno’s preferred form of presentation in a number of his works is the fragment.³⁷⁷ The question of presentation is quintessential for thinkers who want their philosophies to retain a modernist sensibility. In an interview with Georges Van Den Abbeele, Jean-François Lyotard responds to a question about his “practice of intellectual *bricolage*” and his rejection of “traditional forms of writing philosophy” by denying the existence of a specifically philosophical mode of presentation:

The proper of philosophy is not to have a proper genre. Tragedy, novel, tale, journal, dialogue, conversation, apology, report, theses, study, research, inquiry, essay, manual, treatise – all genres are good for it. This is because philosophical discourse is in quest of its rule and does not have it from the start. Philosophy borrows it from a genre, in order to insert into that genre the reflective judgment through which the genre’s rules are interrogated. And that suffices to turn the borrowed genre away from its generic purposiveness.³⁷⁸

This allows philosophy to pursue the undoing of reification in a plethora of registers. It also enables Adorno to construct his arguments in a way that defies academic conventions, making it difficult to represent them in a traditional

³⁷² Eagleton 1990, 413.

³⁷³ Beaumont 2009, xxi–xxii.

³⁷⁴ Adorno refers to this as retaining the primacy of the object. See Adorno 1998a, 245–258. Conceptual straitjacket is a term György Lukács (1971, 13) uses to describe his own method in a highly self-critical preface to *The Theory of the Novel*, written fifty years after the book was first published.

³⁷⁵ Bowie 2013, 181.

³⁷⁶ My exposition of the constellation as a methodological principle is indebted to the neat summary offered by Geuss 2014, 181–182. See also Helmling 2003 for a brief overview and Buck-Morss 1977 for an extensive analysis of the relationship between Adorno’s negative dialectics and Benjamin’s constellations.

³⁷⁷ See Hill 2012, 2–5. As Adorno (2006b, 183) writes in *Philosophy of New Music*: “The closed artwork is bourgeois, the mechanical artwork belongs to fascism, and the fragmentary work – in its complete negativity – belongs to Utopia.”

³⁷⁸ Lyotard & Van Den Abbeele 1984, 18, 19.

philosophical form.³⁷⁹ Each one of the texts is written from a certain angle, often with a specific audience in mind, and they are not intended as a coherent whole. Thus, Adorno often approaches the same phenomenon from different perspectives and within a specific context, leading sometimes into contradictory views. Contradictions are of course central to dialectics.³⁸⁰ For Hegel, tragedy depicts a conflict between two irreconcilable positions that are both justified, but fail to consider the opposing position. Only the demise of the protagonist can resolve the antagonism.³⁸¹ But as the example of *The Oresteia* shows, the fall of the protagonist does not solve anything. Only a resolution of the conflict in a way that stops the cycle of violence makes peaceful coexistence possible. If we cannot achieve a resolution, we must embrace the contradiction.³⁸²

Adorno's dialectical method combines metacritique and immanent critique. Basically this means that the objects of criticism have to be approached as if from within, in order to unmask the ideological, especially linguistic and cultural, formations that condition both the constitution of the object and the critical endeavour itself: "The thought movement that congealed in them must be reliquified, its validity traced, so to speak, in repetition."³⁸³ A good example of this is the way Adorno constructs his negative dialectics with the means of dialectics in an attempt to save philosophy from the ideological attack that seeks to make it meaningless.³⁸⁴ On a larger scale, the aim of Adorno's "ruthless critique of everything existing" is to undo reification by retracing the process through which it has come about and which sustains it.³⁸⁵ This is done with references to works belonging to a variety of genres, ranging from musical scores to the Los Angeles Times astrology column and classics of modern European philosophy and literature. Thus, the proper way to conduct a critique of a phenomenon in an Adornian key is, paradoxically, by refusing to limit the critique to that very phenomenon. In other words, to reveal what philosophy violently suppresses,

³⁷⁹ Adorno's oeuvre consists of, for example, aphorisms, a dream diary, lecture notes, radio speeches, reports, and aesthetic criticism and he sometimes seems to develop an argument over several different texts. He also utilises various stylistic devices in all his writing, which makes interpretation even more difficult. All this serves the purpose of writing philosophy that resists appropriation. As Martin Jay (2010, 44) writes: "Adorno was himself an outspoken opponent of mere synopsis, often arguing that genuine philosophy is precisely that which eludes paraphrase."

³⁸⁰ It is common for Adorno to argue against a certain position in one text and then against an opposing position in another while adamantly refusing to provide anywhere a description of a third position. In his works, omissions, gaps, and contradictions are as important for arriving at the truth as are positive statements. One should take seriously Adorno's (2005, 49) facetious remark on Freud: "In psycho-analysis nothing is true except the exaggerations."

³⁸¹ Roche 2006, 12.

³⁸² Perchance through the application of the Benjaminian emergency brake. See Löwy 2010.

³⁸³ Adorno 2004, 97. "Die in ihnen versteinerte Denkbewegung ist wiederum zu verflüssigen, wiederholend gleichsam ihrer Triftigkeit nachzugehen." (Adorno 1966, 102.)

³⁸⁴ This has led to accusations of a performative contradiction. See Habermas 1982; cf. Cook 2004, 112–123. These charges are unfounded since Adorno does not seek to do away with reason but to rescue it from its destructive tendencies.

³⁸⁵ In an essay titled simply "Critique", Adorno (1998a, 282–283) quotes this phrase originally found in Marx's letter to Arnold Ruge.

one must point out where that very thing may still thrive. In this, philosophy needs the help of art.

Since definite readings and theories would reify their objects, thought must be kept in motion. Also, no critique can produce permanent results, as the socio-historical conditions within which they are received are constantly changing, as we have seen Adorno argue regarding tragedy. To avoid ideological appropriation, a successful reliquification might soon require a revision. Thus, everything existing needs repeatedly to be interpreted and re-interpreted, ideally in a manner that does not turn the particular objects into final products of a thought process, as thinking naturally veers towards reification. Adorno's preferred tool for this purpose is the philosophical constellation. The concept of constellation, which originates in the work of Walter Benjamin, is a metaphor derived from astronomy.³⁸⁶ The idea is that we can gain intimate scientific knowledge of each star belonging to a specific constellation, but not of the constellation as such, since the meaning the stars get as a part of the constellation only exists for the observers of the whole. While constellations are of purely human origin, and as such arbitrary, they are not random: Sagittarius, for example, does resemble an abstract rendition of an archer on a horseback – but only for an observer who is aware of the whole out of which the stick-figure has been abstracted.³⁸⁷ An interpretation of an astronomical constellation is steeped in mythology and tradition, that is, the stories we tell to give meaning to the disconnected events that shape our lives. While we also interpret historical events by reading into them a larger, contextual meaning, it is important to note that in an astronomical constellation, none of the stars explains another star. Each of the stars have their own individual properties, the scientific knowledge of which is valuable as such, but unlike in historical narratives and logical argumentation, there is no progression from one step to another.

5.4 Modernist Sensibilities

In his writing, Adorno utilises a number of literary devices, such as ellipses, holophrases, and chiasmata, in order to avoid violently forcing objects into universal categories.³⁸⁸ Because of Adorno's methodological choices and the form of constellation as such, Steven Helmling has compared them to modernist artistic experiments, such as Sergei Eisenstein's montages and Ezra Pound's ideograms.³⁸⁹ Helmling also sees an affinity between Adorno's conception of truth and James Joyce's notion of epiphany, as far as the former is understood as a revelation summoned up with the construction of a constellation. All these

³⁸⁶ Benjamin (1998, 34–35) uses the metaphor in the “Epistemo-Critical Prologue” to *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*.

³⁸⁷ “Ideas are to objects as constellations are to stars.” (Benjamin 1998, 34.)

³⁸⁸ Kuorikoski 2006, 17–18. Walter Benjamin also appropriated several modernist devices in his writings. See Jeffries 2016, chapter one and *passim*.

³⁸⁹ Helmling 2003.

modernist devices are an attempt to liberate thought from the confines of abstract utilitarian formalism and scientism. In this sense, the theory behind constellations is also reminiscent of the ideas that led to the musical innovations of the so-called Second Viennese School, especially the atonal compositions of Arnold Schoenberg, whom Adorno greatly admired.³⁹⁰ Even in Schoenberg's late serialism, which utilises the formal constraints that inspired Adorno to call it "a kind of Bauhaus-music", the point is to create music in which no single note is emphasised but all twelve get repeated just as often.³⁹¹ By doing away with the tonal hierarchies of classical European music, the Second Viennese School effectively ushered in musical modernism. Similarly, modernism sought to liberate fine art and literature from the reified formal constraints that had come to dominate Western culture since the Renaissance.³⁹² The formal freedom grants modern art with control over the elements of reality that it uses as its material.³⁹³ While classical art reproduces the world as it is presented to us, by seeking to mirror the ideologically constructed structures that organise our experience, modern art is capable of creating an alternative image out of the same material, thereby hinting at its transcendence.³⁹⁴ The image art creates does not seek to present itself as true. Art has no argumentative power since it is not conceptual and it thereby does not identify the object the way thought does. Art requires philosophy to bring out its truth content:

The truth content of artworks is not what they mean but rather what decides whether the work in itself is true or false, and only this truth of the work in-itself is commensurable to philosophical interpretation and coincides – with regard to the idea, in any case – with the idea of philosophical truth. For contemporary consciousness, fixated on the tangible and the unmediated, the establishment of this relation to art obviously poses the greatest difficulties, yet without this relation art's truth content remains

³⁹⁰ Martin Jay (1984, 28) has described Adorno's thought as "an 'atonal' philosophy deeply indebted to the compositional techniques of the Schoenberg school". See also Cunningham 2003.

³⁹¹ Adorno 1981, 169. See also Adorno 2002, 140–143. Cf. Adorno 1998b, 269–322. On atonality and serialism in music, see Perle 1991, 1–2.

³⁹² Writing about Adorno's conception of modernist art, Gerald L. Bruns (2008) notes that "it is the breakup of unity, that is, the resistance of material to integration into a totality – the autonomy of parts with respect to the whole – that sets the modernist work apart from the classics of tradition".

³⁹³ Cf. Adorno's (2002, 221) criticism of the most extreme forms of modernism: "*Action painting, l'art informelle*, and aleatoric works may have carried the element of resignation to its extreme: The aesthetic subject exempts itself of the burden of giving form to the contingent material it encounters, despairing for the possibility of undergirding it, and instead shifts the responsibility for its organization back to the contingent material itself."

³⁹⁴ In Adorno's (2002, 138) words: "If Schopenhauer's thesis of art as an image of the world once over bears a kernel of truth, then it does so only insofar as this second world is composed out of elements that have been transposed out of the empirical world in accord with Jewish descriptions of the messianic order as an order just like the habitual order but changed in the slightest degree. This second world, however, is directed negatively against the first; it is the destruction of what is simulated by familiar senses rather than the assemblage of the *membra disjecta* of existence. There is nothing in art, not even in the most sublime, that does not derive from the world; nothing that remains untransformed."

inaccessible: Aesthetic experience is not genuine experience unless it becomes philosophy.³⁹⁵

Since art reorganises reality, ideology penetrates its material completely. All the while, proper art is an end in itself, in Kant's words it is purposive without purpose, and is as such able to transcend the meaning of its constituent parts.³⁹⁶ In this way, a work of art resembles a constellation: an aesthetic experience that reveals the limits of our reason, and of our conceptual capacity to exhaust the object, thereby conveys the true meaning of a work of art. Doing so, aesthetic experience gives us a glimpse of what Adorno calls the non-identical, that is, what escapes the identification inherent to conceptual thought.³⁹⁷ Aesthetic experience is negative, as far as it denies the appearance of reality by pointing beyond it.³⁹⁸ With its ability to embrace the non-identical without subsuming it to the violent identification that burdens conceptual thought, art serves for Adorno as both a model and a necessary supplement for philosophy.³⁹⁹ The negativity that is central to experience, especially to aesthetic experience, is an essential dimension of Adorno's thought. Since positive identification is effectively always violent and repressive, we can only conceive of the good in negative terms, for instance through experience.⁴⁰⁰ In other words, the source of questions, for example, could be defined as a domain of the non-identical, something beyond positive identification. In a similar vein, art lacks practical value; it is, as it were, of no use. To quote Adorno:

Art's purposiveness, free of any practical purpose, is its similarity to language; its being "without a purpose" is its nonconceptuality, that which distinguishes art from significative language.⁴⁰¹

Art becomes art because it takes up and refers to a position that the concepts established within "the socio-historical dimensions" cannot explain.⁴⁰² By ex-

³⁹⁵ Adorno 2002, 130–131.

³⁹⁶ See Kant 1987, 73. Adorno (2002, 139) writes: "For Kant artworks were purposive as dynamic totalities in which all particular elements exist for the sake of its purpose, the fulfillment or redemption through the negation of its elements. At the same time, artworks were purposeless because they had stepped out of the means-ends relation of empirical reality."

³⁹⁷ As Peter Hallward (2003, 193) notes, Adorno, and Lyotard, seek a recourse in the aesthetic apprehension of the object "as a means, precisely, of 'representing' the objectively unrepresentable reality of things. -- In ultimately antiphilosophical style, Lyotard and Adorno pick out and celebrate instances where conceptual thought breaks down in favor of an aesthetically accessible reality beyond the concept."

³⁹⁸ "As a musical composition compresses time, and as a painting folds spaces into one another, so the possibility is concretized that the world could be other than it is." (Adorno 2002, 138.)

³⁹⁹ According to Bruns (2008, 228), Adorno sees the artwork as "an allegory of critical theory, that is, a critique of a modernity for which integration into a totality gives the definition of order, rationality, and things as they are".

⁴⁰⁰ In Freyenhagen's (2013, 3–4) reading of Adorno, no flourishing human community exists nor can one be envisioned because of the lack of reliable criteria.

⁴⁰¹ Adorno 2002, 140.

⁴⁰² According to James Martin Harding (1997, 4), "for Adorno the autonomy of art results from an aesthetic work's inability to sublimate the socio-historical dimensions that

pressing the excluded, art reveals the oppressive and illusory nature of the unity of our conceptual formations.⁴⁰³ Unity is not achieved through sublation, as the Hegelian model of dialectics implies, but by quelling what is excluded. Concepts that were initially critical but have since become co-opted as an established part of language unwittingly help to sustain the illusion of both progress and the necessity of the prevailing socio-historical conditions. Thinking is identifying, as Adorno maintains, and philosophy that does not take this into account will always end up legitimising the status quo. As Boris Groys reminds us, the example of Socrates shows us that thought is defined by paradox.⁴⁰⁴ Every discourse contains contradictions that philosophy sets out to reveal, but the exposure produces a new discourse, which is no less free of contradictions. The denial of this self-contradiction is implicit in the denial of the contradictory nature of social reality.⁴⁰⁵ Since art does not shy away from paradox, it can shine a light on reality through this denial and thereby reveal its monstrous and cruel nature. In this way, art is a refuge for truth. The critical dimension of the work of art, its truth-content, is neither identifiable nor apprehensible except as a part and the result of a constellation. To name a specific element of a work of art 'critical' is to misunderstand the dynamic nature of art and to reify what is effectively a process. Criticism points at the social contradictions reflected in the aesthetic. The conceptualisation of contradictions transforms them into problems. In other words, once art is subjected to critique, any attempt to conceptualise its critical elements risks producing concepts that ideology will then appropriate as solutions to those social contradictions that remain unaffected. Concepts can capture the internal tension mediated by the artwork. Again, the conceptual dissolution of a tension in a synthesis is always an illusion that serves the status quo. Art is social yet it denies the social, and to do justice to its paradoxical nature, which is simultaneously the source of its critical strength, it must only ever be defined in negative terms. Adorno sums up his view on art at the beginning of the *Aesthetic Theory* as follows:

Because art is what it has become, its concept refers to what it does not contain. The tension between what motivates art and art's past circumscribes the so-called questions of aesthetic constitution. Art can be understood only by its laws of movement, not according to any set of invariants. It is defined by its relation to what it is not. The specifically artistic in art must be derived concretely from its other; that alone would fulfill the demands of a materialistic-dialectical aesthetics. Art acquires its specificity by separating itself from what it developed out of; its law of movement is its law of form. It exists only in relation to its other; it is the process that transpires with its other.⁴⁰⁶

it negates". In other words, the precondition for autonomy is unresolved contradictions that the society is unable to overcome. See Vainikkala 1993.

⁴⁰³ "Artworks are afterimages of empirical life insofar as they help the latter to what is denied them outside their own sphere and thereby free it from that to which they are condemned by reified external experience." (Adorno 2002, 4.)

⁴⁰⁴ Groys 2009, 7-8.

⁴⁰⁵ Espen Hammer (2015, 3) notes that "Adorno viewed modernist art as arising from a crisis in the very project of modernity itself".

⁴⁰⁶ Adorno 2002, 3.

The concept of art is shaped by the history of art, and “cultural phenomena cannot be interpreted without some translation of the new into the old”.⁴⁰⁷ A work of art is turned into a work of art by what it is necessarily grounded upon. This otherness, which comprises the dialectic of society and nature, is historical and totalising. The works of art that stand against the semblance of totality must “grasp the universal in the particular”.⁴⁰⁸ Yet even the universal is local, since art is historical: “Important artworks constantly divulge new layers; they age, grow cold, and die.”⁴⁰⁹

5.5 Materialist Eschatology

What we see when we encounter a work of art is always something more than just the self-identical aggregate of its components. An artwork is always incomplete, since it carries with itself an excess that calls for endless reinterpretation. This excess, what is non-identical to it, is caused by the paradoxical nature of the artwork as an object combining singular elements of the given into an illusory union, while nevertheless allowing them to retain their singularity. In other words, a work of art is a dialectical object since it is simultaneously particular and universal. No part of an artwork is only ever simply a part of an artwork and no other type of object can maintain this tension. This ability is enough for the work of art to oppose the oppressive social forces by standing for the particular against the universal. Doing so, art can sustain emancipatory hope by showing that even as totally administered a society as the one we live in cannot completely eradicate the particular. Nevertheless, as Adorno reminds us, even the non-identical element of art is socially mediated: “There is nothing in art, not even in the most sublime, that does not derive from the world; nothing that remains untransformed.”⁴¹⁰ Since the world, as it is for us, is socially mediated, a work of art effectively sets society against itself.⁴¹¹ This is because of the non-identical excess that mirrors the contradictions of the socio-historical conditions within which the work is both created and received. Through art society can communicate its promise of a resolution of the antagonisms it contains. Art mediates a possibility with which society must become identical for its contradictions to become resolved.⁴¹² In this way, the constitutive rupture of an authentic artwork reveals a unity, the potential of which is already present in the existing fragmented society.

⁴⁰⁷ Adorno 2002, 19.

⁴⁰⁸ Adorno 2002, 84.

⁴⁰⁹ Adorno 2002, 4.

⁴¹⁰ Adorno 2002, 138.

⁴¹¹ “Art is the social antithesis of society, not directly deducible from it.” (Adorno 2002, 8.)

⁴¹² “Artworks contain clues for resolving the tensions between dialectic and utopia, between an antagonistic society and the possibility of perpetual peace, but they remain antinomous so long as the tensions are not actually resolved.” (Zuidervaart 1991, 180.)

Adorno's conception of art has obvious affinities with Benjamin's messianic eschatology.⁴¹³ The *eschaton* is a break in the history of suffering, which is the only universal theme found in secular history, that leads "from the slingshot to the megaton bomb".⁴¹⁴ The establishment of the *eschaton* redeems humanity through the reconstruction of history in relation to the messianic qualities immanent in the dystopian present and the horrors of the past. But the Messiah, like Beckett's Godot, never arrives and the task of redemption is left to humanity, who thus has a duty towards the oppressed. This applies to injustice past and present, and it is thus the responsibility of philosophers to write the history of suffering. As Adorno writes in the *Minima Moralia*:

The only philosophy which can be responsibly practised in face of despair is the attempt to contemplate all things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption. Knowledge has no light but that shed on the world by redemption: all else is reconstruction, mere technique. Perspectives must be fashioned that displace and estrange the world, reveal it to be, with its rifts and crevices, as indigent and distorted as it will appear one day in the messianic light. To gain such perspectives without velleity or violence, entirely from the felt contact with its objects – this alone is the task of thought.⁴¹⁵

Knowledge, then, is knowledge of the messianic that is immanent to material reality. What appears utopian does so because it feels simultaneously as a part of the society and yet outside it: "What takes itself to be utopia remains the negation of what exists and is obedient to it."⁴¹⁶ Utopia is constructed from the elements of society that turn against their original context. Art thereby points at an alternative, it shows the way these elements could be organised – or at the very least reveals how they should not be organised. This highlights the paradox of utopia:

At the center of contemporary antinomies is that art must be and wants to be utopia, and the more utopia is blocked by the real functional order, the more this is true; yet at the same time art may not be utopia in order not to betray it by providing semblance and consolation.⁴¹⁷

Semblance and consolation amount to a denial of the messiness of reality, which is the flaw idealist philosophies are built upon.⁴¹⁸ A prime example of illusory redemption is the *bildungsroman*, in which the individual bears the sole responsibility for change. In such a setting, the protagonist has trouble fitting in to the faultless, or at least immutable, society.⁴¹⁹ This type of affirmative art denies the utopian dimension of the aesthetic and makes criticism impossible. Reality only ever appears as a smooth homogenous unity in the aesthetic juxtaposition of the universal and the particular. As Adorno repeatedly reminds us, reality itself is contradictory: "The unsolved antagonisms of reality return in

⁴¹³ See Eagleton 2015, 27–38.

⁴¹⁴ Adorno 2004, 320; 1966, 312.

⁴¹⁵ Adorno 2005, 247.

⁴¹⁶ Adorno 2002, 32.

⁴¹⁷ Adorno 2002, 32.

⁴¹⁸ See Jarvis 2004.

⁴¹⁹ See Vainikkala 1993.

artworks as immanent problems of form.”⁴²⁰ Smoothed out artworks succumb to an affirmative lie by representing an ideologically constructed version of reality. In such cases, the contradictions that constitute both the work of art and the socially constructed reality, are ignored or denied. This happens when the artefactual work of art, consisting of societal elements, settles for reproducing the illusory image of reality instead of communicating the truth interwoven into it. Another critical dimension of the work of art is purely technical: “There are good reasons to hold that in artworks technical failure is indicated by the metaphysically false.”⁴²¹ Technical failure is most likely when art offers affirmative consolation, such as is the case with the *bildungsroman*. That is, when it shows a reconciliation between the universal and the particular within a social context where no such reconciliation is possible. Technical success means the reproduction of reality, while technical failure amounts to the uncritical acceptance of the illusory unity. The problematising of form and of technical aspects is, according to Adorno, most honest in modern, abstract art, such as the works of Beckett, Schoenberg, and Kafka: “New art is as abstract as social relations have in truth become.”⁴²²

5.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that for Adorno, the grounds for philosophy are in the affective realm of experience. Experience is the key factor that allows us to rethink the relationship of subject and object, which is a requirement for breaking out of the tragic condition of modernity. The point is not, as Simon Jarvis emphasises, either to bridge the gap between the subject and the object or to pry them apart, but to rethink the ontology that allows the separation in the first place.⁴²³ At the core of this ontological view is the denial of reality, which gives rise to several cultural formations that prevent us from responding to the moral demand modernity sets upon us. In this sense, modernity is a tragic cultural constellation. Adorno’s tragic vision is born out of the acknowledgment of this tragic nature of modernity, which manifests itself primarily as political disappointment. We are unable to think of realistic positive alternatives to liberal capitalism and therefore to the modes of thought and social being that sustain suffering. However, the combination of art and philosophy can reveal the problems of modernity and the resulting absurdity of our situation.

I argued in the introduction that tragic ideas rise out of situations, which reveal our inability to gain knowledge or maintain control of either ourselves or the world at large and, thus, to act in a morally sustainable way towards human and non-human others. Whether art born out of such conditions is tragic in the art-historical sense is irrelevant. In line with Snell’s contested argument, trage-

⁴²⁰ Adorno 2002, 6.

⁴²¹ Adorno 2002, 129.

⁴²² Adorno 2002, 31.

⁴²³ Jarvis 2004, paragraph 24.

dy sought to answer questions it was ill-equipped to deal with and was therefore forced to give way to a more suitable form of reflection, philosophy. Many of these questions have long ago started a life of their own as problems, becoming removed from the immediacy of our lived experience in the process. This has also made questions regarding our autonomy and agency effectively harmless. Questions about our tragic predicament are absent from the academic discourse, except in the form of problems to which the academic tradition dictates the approaches.

In the next, concluding chapter, I analyse some of the reasons that may have given rise to Adorno's tragic vision. I believe that his philosophy was inspired by a deep political disappointment that grasped the all-pervasiveness of reification in society. While Nazism was overthrown, the logic that enabled its macabre form of rationalism thrives and is disseminated everywhere by the spectacle-driven culture industry. Whether it is tradition grounded in myth, as was the case of the poleis, or ideology perpetuating its own myths, as is the case with late modern capitalism, we are nevertheless in a situation in which there is a colossal mismatch between the way we experience the world and the way we are able to make sense of this experience. Art records and portrays our true collective – and unconscious – experience of the socially mediated reality. The experience of art is needed to adjust our cognitive depictions of the world, which on the other hand are needed to understand the experience. Just as philosophy made classic tragedy obsolete, our traditional modes of thought need to give way to a new kind of aesthetic philosophy.

6 CONCLUDING REMARKS

“Tragedy insults intelligence.”
—John Patrick Diggins⁴²⁴

In the preceding chapters, I have sought to identify the pivotal points around which Adorno’s key works operate, aiming to show that he holds a tragic view of the human condition. In this chapter, I shall first sum up the progression of the thesis and restate the key points of the argument. Then, I shall reflect on the conditions for Adorno’s tragic view and what this means for his critical and political aims. In this, I shall briefly refer to Lucien Goldmann’s theory of political pessimism as the cause of tragic mentality in Pascal, Racine, and Kant. I shall end with an analysis of the limits and possible objections to the thesis and put forward ideas regarding possible future research on the topic.

6.1 A tragic philosophy

“Bjørn Hansen was astonished by the doctor’s negative reaction, which suggested that he looked at it as ‘reality’ and not as an ‘idea’, the way it was intended on Bjørn Hansen’s part; but if an ‘idea’ is to be carried to its logical conclusion as an ‘idea’, I must be trumpeted as ‘reality’, something that Dr Schiøtz had not been willing to accept. Maybe the ‘idea’ was no good, Bjørn Hansen thought, trying to explain it further to the doctor. He did not feel he got it quite right. He vouched fully for the ‘idea’, or vision, but had difficulty putting it into words. Not what was going to happen, but why in the world he could take it into his head to think like that, even if only as a game. In the end he simply had to tell him: ‘I cannot explain why I think as I do,’ he said. ‘But that’s how I’m thinking, all right,’ he

⁴²⁴ Diggins 2007, 207.

added, laughing, slightly confused at himself. Shortly afterwards Dr Schiøtz said 'Good night' and left."

—Dag Solstad⁴²⁵

In the Introduction, I referenced Christopher Hamilton's notion of a vision as a framework informing the work of authors and philosophers alike. A vision, as I understand it, is something one does not need to have arguments for, but which influences the choices we are forced to make when we formulate our more intentionally thought-out views on the human condition or the cultural situation. The vision does not necessarily determine our preferences, but I do believe that we have arrived at our philosophical convictions through choices that we either have never needed to justify or cannot think through. Our world views and philosophical systems are not coherent and neither can they be, since the reality they seek to represent does not yield itself to conceptual appropriation.⁴²⁶

This idea of our knowledge as essentially limited is central to the tragic vision. Our worldviews, and the philosophies seeking to explain them, are not coherent because they rely on antinomies that reason alone cannot resolve. Facing an antinomy, we must make a choice, an executive decision, which can be either informed or ignorant, but which is nevertheless a matter of preference and as such, grounded on something other than ratiocinative processes. Antinomies are not problems to be solved but they pose themselves to us as questions that demand an answer. In other words, the world insists that we take a stand.

The problem we face is that we have no tools at our disposal for assessing either the situation we face or our own role in it. Both the object and the subject of our action remain opaque to us, except during certain specific instances in which we encounter them as they are. These experiences yield sensible knowledge that enables us to orient ourselves in the world. In this way, they form the grounds of our vision. Auschwitz has taught us that our fundamental ethical commitments have little to do with our theories of right, or wrong, behaviour. Likewise, it has shown us that our view of the world is subject to all kinds of influences of which we often remain blissfully unaware. For Adorno, these moral and ideological confusions are revealed in and through authentic art, that is, works of art that serve no function external to themselves. Inauthentic art serves a purpose and it is akin to science conducted within an institutional framework that is thoroughly dependent of the power-relations of capitalism.

An essential component of a tragic vision is the belief that there is something wrong in the world. For Adorno, like for many others, modernity is not simply a vehicle for progress and emancipation. It is important to note that this negative view of modernity does not follow *tout court* from the elements of the tragic vision described above. That there are limits to our knowledge; that we

⁴²⁵ Solstad 2008.

⁴²⁶ Of course, one does not need to accept this, nor does the acceptance of it necessarily entail the espousal of a tragic vision. However, it seems to me that a tragic vision does require the belief in and affirmation of a fundamentally unbridgeable gap between us and the world. George Hartley (2003) has called this gap the "abyss of representation".

are at the mercy of forces beyond our control; that we rarely have our desires met; and that good deeds are rarely rewarded does, however, imply that our social organisation is not taking these things into account in a way that would prevent them from turning into loci for suffering. Adorno seems to take this even further and instead of simply acknowledging these tragic elements, he suggests in the fragmented dystopian narratives dominating the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and the *Negative Dialectics* that our social systems wilfully exploit these human vulnerabilities.

A tension at the heart of these narratives pertains to the complicated relationship between art, or culture in general, reason, and socially generated suffering. To what extent are art and philosophy responsible for creating, or at least reinforcing, the ostensible object of their critique? Authentic art cannot fully depict the social context of its creation, but it can reveal the limitations set upon it and which it is unable to overcome, since change requires speculation and action, neither of which are within the remit of the aesthetic. And as I suggested in Chapter Three, modernity enforces the separation of the aesthetic from both the speculative and the practical while it seeks to maintain its unity by bolstering the status quo. And here, having come full circle, we face another fundamental tension in Adorno's thought: analysis is predicated on conditions that seem to also be the result of the analysis. In what follows, I shall illustrate this standstill through a summary of the key points made in the preceding chapters.

6.2 The tragic predicament

My interpretation of Adorno relies in large part on two of his key works, the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and the *Aesthetic Theory*. They mark significant points in Adorno's career, as the former was originally written during the war in 1944 – and revised in 1947 – while the latter was published posthumously in 1970, a year after Adorno's sudden death of a heart attack at the age of 65. It is tempting to see the works as reflecting the specific historical situations in which they were conceived. It is not always easy to see the element of hope that sustains *Aesthetic Theory*, and its philosophical counterpart, the *Negative Dialectics*, since these late works seem to show no sign of optimism. Nevertheless, compared to them, the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* seems even bleaker.

It is well-known that Adorno was reluctant to reconsider his positions, which means that the views presented in his early works, even those he illustrated with ostensible contradictions, are compatible with the ones presented in the late works. This makes the question of his view on tragedy and the tragic vision even more interesting. As I noted in Chapter Three (referring to the reading by Samir Gandesha), Horkheimer and Adorno initially planned to base their analysis of the truncated form of subjectivity typical of bourgeois moder-

nity on Oedipus instead of Odysseus.⁴²⁷ Although the chapter recounts the birth of *modern* subjectivity, the choice nevertheless implies acceptance of the idea that an allegory – whether in the form of epic or tragic poetry – can depict something ahistorical.⁴²⁸ When in the much later remarks on Brecht and in *Aesthetic Theory* Adorno insists that revival of tragedy is impossible, he does not do so to deny the value of Greek tragedies as depictions of the human condition under the specific historical conditions in which they were written. Instead, he states that historical conditions are key to understanding both the meaning of tragedies and the reason their revival is impossible. To take this claim seriously means that we should look at the conditions under which Adorno considered Oedipus as the ideal model of bourgeois subjectivity, and then contrast them with the conditions in which he rejected the possibility that tragedy could somehow transcend its historical conditions.

The *Dialectic of Enlightenment* was originally written at a time when the West seemed to be on the verge of collapse. Culture and civilisation had failed completely. As I suggested earlier, the cataclysm was, on a certain very abstract level, akin to the collapse of the world order that led the tribal Greeks to become citizens of poleis, where they would have to reinvent their social and economic organisation without recourse to the cultural meanings of the past. The endless wars and the burden of history left people with little hope of reconciliation, a theme repeatedly discussed in classical tragedies. In the case of Oedipus, his biggest flaw is ignorance, which makes him unable to see the results of his obviously erroneous actions. He believes that he is the sole master of his own destiny and needs no acceptance or approval of others: what he does is right, because whatever he does is right. Oedipus seems to believe that it is impossible to do wrong if he simply does what it takes to serve his cause, never mind whether the cause is justified or what the pursuit may necessitate.

Structurally, *Oedipus Tyrannous* is a model tragedy and as such lends itself to philosophical interpretation. It describes a series of events, or a story, and explains why they happened the way they happened, revealing a plot.⁴²⁹ I mentioned earlier that Adorno worried about the ability of tragedy to grant suffering with meaning. One way to understand this worry is by seeing the plot as something that is imposed on the world of Oedipus from without. The story of the rise and fall of the king is only a series of events, but the plot of the play reveals the causal connections between those events. Those connections determine the story, making it impossible for Oedipus to escape his fate. In this sense, the meaning and the impasse of the tragic protagonist are connected. The suf-

⁴²⁷ See Gandesha 2001.

⁴²⁸ Or, to be exact, something that can transcend its immediate historical conditions. Adorno is only ever interested in modernity, the birth of which for him seems to coincide with Kant and the French Revolution. Even when he traces the archaeology of modern subjectivity back into primordial rituals, as in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, his point is to show what of the premodern survives in the modern, not to analyse the premodern phenomena in themselves. Even the most radical genealogical claims are self-consciously anachronistic.

⁴²⁹ To use E. M. Forster's classic distinction. See Forster 1927, 86.

fering only makes sense in relation to the chain of events that necessarily caused it. Such determination is at odds with any revolutionary aspirations.

On the one hand, then, we have a series of events that lead to a tragedy, while on the other hand, the explanation of these events forges something akin to a mechanistic string of determinations between them, making it appear as if no other outcome were possible. This, in my view, is how Adorno's analyses of the dialectic of enlightenment appear. Not only has the *development* of the enlightened subjectivity been inevitable, tied as it is to our very humanity, but it remains essential to the way we see ourselves and the way we organise our social relations. It is difficult, if not impossible, to conceive of a world that is not reliant on the reification associated with enlightened subjectivity. To make sense of this predicament, we need to take a brief look at Lucien Goldmann's structuralist analysis of the tragic vision.

In *The Hidden God*, Goldmann argues that Pascal, Racine, and the seventeenth-century Jansenists all share a tragic vision of the world, which they give either a philosophical, theatrical, or theological expression.⁴³⁰ In Goldmann's terms, these expressions, the various cultural forms, are "genetically related to the same *transindividual* subject".⁴³¹ In other words, the works of philosophy and tragic theatre use their own particular means, which are partly determined by tradition, and partly innovated by their authors, to communicate the same vision regarding the human condition. Pascal, Racine, and the Jansenists were contemporaries so any similarities in their perspectives do not come across as particularly surprising. Goldmann, however, follows this line of thought a step further, claiming that certain visions are repeated throughout history, which explains why Pascal and Kant can share the same vision.⁴³² The tragic world view is engendered by a situation in which the possibility of a social group to reach its transcendent goals are frustrated by a power in which the group is irreversibly bound, such as the political and economic ruling forces, or, in Adorno's case, reason.⁴³³ The values attached to these transcendent goals are considered absolute and as such unattainable, re-enforcing the idea of an irresolvable

⁴³⁰ Goldmann 2016. For a summary of the main argument of the book and of Goldmann's philosophical position in general, see Markus 2004. In an earlier work, Goldmann argues that Kant also held a tragic vision. See Goldmann 1971.

⁴³¹ Markus 2004, 269. Emphasis in the original.

⁴³² In the words of György Markus (2004, 269): "At different times, in different historical circumstances particular social groups can find themselves in analogous situations as far as the principal possibilities of their social action are concerned."

⁴³³ See, for example, Goldmann 2016, 26–27: "In the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the monarchical state gradually became firmly established and the bourgeoisie became the economically ruling class, and at least the equivalent in power of the nobility, which tended to lose its real social functions and fall from being *noblesse d'épée* to being *noblesse de cour*; the bourgeoisie then organised the production of wealth and elaborated the doctrine of rationalism on the two fundamental planes of epistemology and of the physical sciences. At the time when Pascal was writing the *Pensées* both Aristotelianism and neo-Platonic animism had been put out of date; the development of capitalism had transcended them on the economic and social plane, while on the intellectual level they had been rendered completely unimportant by the work of a whole collection of more or less rigorous and scientific thinkers such as Borrelli, Torricelli, Roberval and Fermat, and above all by that of the great precursors of modern science such as Galileo, Descartes and Huygens."

contradiction between the subject and the object, revealing “the grandeur of man in his aspirations and his pettiness in the impossibility of realizing them”.⁴³⁴ The tragic vision contains an absolute and exclusive demand for impossible values and denies any possibility of a compromise.⁴³⁵

In my view, Adorno’s persistent refusal to define the good life, that is, his negativism, echoes Goldmann’s idea of unattainable goals.⁴³⁶ Adorno argues that we cannot conceive of a good life under the existing corrupt conditions, because the ideology of late capitalism taints our notion of a good life and the concepts that describe its components. A good life, in these terms, will appear as irrational and we cannot set irrational goals for our action, especially because irrationality makes it impossible to argue for one goal over another, making us susceptible to manipulation by demagoguery. This paradox is at the centre of Adorno’s conception of our political and theoretical condition. There is no possibility for us to envision let alone bring about change, that is, to realise philosophy, the moment of which has been missed.

6.3 Melancholy resistance

“You see? There are still faint glimmers of civilization left in this barbaric slaughterhouse that was once known as humanity. Indeed, that’s what we provide in our own modest, humble, insignificant – (*Sighs deeply.*) Oh, fuck it.”

– M. Gustave in *The Grand Budapest Hotel*⁴³⁷

As I mentioned above, art can reveal the limits imposed upon our thought and action from outside. It can, however, only reveal them through a specific type of gesture, which often means an indirect representation of the ineffable. In other words, art succeeds when it falls short of what it desires to do, which is to transcend the limits of representation. Only through this success is philosophy provided with material for critique. This is another aspect of the failure of art: only by sticking to its failure without providing an attempt to explain it through extra-artistic means can art fulfil its critical function. The role of art is to show, not tell. Philosophy, for its part, can only think about limits once they have been revealed to it through aesthetic means.

As Adorno puts it, thinking about limits already means crossing them.⁴³⁸ This means that thinking the limits of philosophy is already an antiphilosophi-

⁴³⁴ Goldmann 1971, 48.

⁴³⁵ Goldmann 1971, 47–48; 2016, 63. Cf. Williams 1966. Williams argues that tragedy arises in situations where lived experience and moral beliefs collide.

⁴³⁶ For Goldmann, tragedy precedes dialectical thought. Art can deal with the contradictions of the societal reality and through the unity of its form it seeks to overcome these paradoxes, but only dialectics, as the combination of thought and praxis, can do so. See Markus 2004, 269.

⁴³⁷ Anderson 2014.

cal gesture. Similarly, thinking the limits of thought transcends thought. As far as philosophy *is* thought, transcendence means undoing the traditional philosophical problems and reaching out towards the questions we encounter in the affective realm of experience, the original source of our political disappointment and the grounds of proper philosophy. And finally, since “whatever we think is also a matter of language”, we must face the limits of language, which as the problem of form and presentation, is central to Adorno’s modernism.⁴³⁹

Many modern artists and existential thinkers have sought to distance themselves from philosophy.⁴⁴⁰ Paradoxically, these gestures are always already philosophical as they seek to redefine a field of enquiry they simultaneously accept as belonging to the traditional domain of philosophy. This attempt to reclaim poetry’s role in the polis seems to be grounded on a mistrust of institutional philosophy. This is also a quintessential aspect of Adorno’s modernist understanding of philosophy. The aesthetic critique of philosophy seems to rely on the notion of philosophy as something rigid and systematic, something distant or distanced from life and our lived experience. For Adorno, the idea that art alone is more suitable or fitting than philosophy for addressing the questions life poses on us would mean either that art is misunderstood as having a speculative dimension or that all kind of speculation is by default systematic and oppressive. This is the reason Adorno seeks to incorporate a modernist sensibility into philosophy. Paradoxically, the only way to combine aesthetic modernism with critical philosophy is by keeping them separate, by understanding them as specific moments of the dialectic.

A tragic vision is born out of a political cul-de-sac and an acknowledgment of the fundamentally tragic nature of the human condition. In other words, in a tragic vision, the specific philosophical convictions of an individual regarding agency and ethics coalesce with certain ethical and political conditions.⁴⁴¹ The hope Adorno retains throughout his life is for a social and political organisation that would take the tragic flaws inherent to the human condition into account, thereby allowing humanity to thrive despite the bounds of our self-awareness, our proneness to suffering, and our limited ability to control our circumstances. The late capitalism Adorno witnessed does exactly the opposite and exploits these frailties to the benefit of a tiny minority of people. Adorno could not envision an end to this unnecessary suffering. Nevertheless, while the

⁴³⁸ Adorno mentions the idea of thinking about limits as already meaning their transcendence in several places throughout his work and attributes the insight to Hegel’s criticism of Kant. See for example Adorno 2005, 128 and Adorno 2002, 6: “The moment a limit is posited, it is overstepped and that against which the limit was established is absorbed.”

⁴³⁹ Adorno 2004, 111. In the German original: “alles Gedachte auch sprachlich ist” (Adorno 1966, 115).

⁴⁴⁰ Such as Camus and Fondane, quoted above, or the poet Geoffrey Hill. On Hill, see Pestell 2012.

⁴⁴¹ The conditions do not determine the vision of individuals. It is easier to have certain convictions under certain conditions, but it is nevertheless a matter of both individual preferences and historical probabilities.

tragedy of history has deprived us of optimism, it must not deprive us of hope.⁴⁴²

Adorno's political views also resonate with certain contemporary strains of so-called left communism that reject capitalism *tout court* while remaining highly sceptical of the possibility of instigating revolution and reluctant to envision what a communist future might look like.⁴⁴³ Critics have pointed out the affinity of such positions with the pessimism of the Frankfurt School and the romanticising of the ineffable that was prevalent in German Romanticism.⁴⁴⁴ In my view, this is evidence of the presence and the cultural relevance of the tragic vision in our era. It also shows that even a thoroughly negative philosophy may provide the grounds for genuine political analysis and commitment.

6.4 What is living and what is dead in this dissertation

“Something ... happened ... in the first half of this century, and the second half, hovering between nightmare and parody, is only its shadow. Even so we must take its measure. Not on a small scale, based on the last three or four centuries.... But since philosophy, even in its possibility, is at stake, the true assessment, incalculable as it is, of the entire history of the West is needed. And that is another matter altogether.”

—Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe⁴⁴⁵

In this dissertation, I have sought to demonstrate the complex ways Adorno's philosophy betrays a tragic vision. I have done so by pointing out the elements of his thought that correspond to certain notions found in tragic theatre and which modern thinkers of the tragic have identified as features signifying philosophical convictions. I have focused on certain key texts, namely the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and the *Aesthetic Theory*, to argue that the tragic vision, which is more clearly present in the early work, is also found in the posthumous text. By identifying the tragic aspect of Adorno's thought, the dissertation offers a starting point and a framework for future research on how this vision develops throughout Adorno's works and how its development relates to the broader historical and theoretical developments in the world around Adorno.

In this conclusion, I have alluded to Lucien Goldmann's reading of the tragic thought of Kant, Racine, and Pascal and it seems to me that an analysis of the relationship between Adorno's thought and the political and historical context in which it was formulated might help us to understand the way philoso-

⁴⁴² Cf. Eagleton 2015.

⁴⁴³ The Endnotes collective is the most telling example. Barker (2017) offers a good summary of their views in a review essay of the first four issues of their eponymously titled journal.

⁴⁴⁴ See Krul 2014.

⁴⁴⁵ Lacoue-Labarthe 1989, 481.

phy is embedded in the cultural formations of its time. After a long deliberation, I chose not to discuss either the historical conditions in which Adorno wrote or the biographical details that would enable speculating on why he experienced the conditions the way he did. The main reason for this is my willingness to focus on the aspects of the tragic vision that would more commonly be considered philosophical.⁴⁴⁶

From a philosophical point of view, the notion of vision may seem obscure, but that is the price I am willing to pay for retaining conceptual flexibility. Adorno is a complex thinker who does not shy away from writing in a deliberately obscure manner and although the breadth of his oeuvre is substantial, his most clearly philosophical works focus on certain key concerns that are reiterated like variations on a theme. Nevertheless, the modernist form and some of his fundamental philosophical commitments often make it difficult to tell what exactly that theme is. The tragic vision is one way to highlight the connections between Adorno's works and the concerns raised in them. It also allows us to see Adorno's work in relation to the context of modern and late modern European thought. Even thinkers who do not share a tragic view of the human condition are forced to deal with questions pertinent to the specific historical context in which they work. Approaching them from the perspective of tragic vision, by juxtaposing their key elements with those found in Adorno's treatment of related issues, will help to reveal the underlying ethical and philosophical commitments of other theories, the way those theories have helped me highlight the tragic underpinnings of Adorno's philosophy in this dissertation.

The manner of Adorno's writing and the complexity of his philosophy also seems to allow for several interpretations, making it something of a mystery why most of the existing commentaries are so alike. And sadly, it is in secondary literature on Adorno where his somewhat modest influence on philosophy is the most visible, although certain political and cultural developments, especially the rise of the far-right and the perceived failure of our western liberal democracies, have recently given rise to an increased interest in Adorno and the Frankfurt School. It would be interesting to analyse Adorno's philosophy in relation to the cultural context of its creation and to juxtapose it to the present context. This would enable us to see the demands the historical and cultural developments have set on philosophy and whether there are grounds for considering our present situation in tragic terms. Unfortunately, this too is outside the scope of the present study.

Another interesting venue for further exploration is the idea of vision itself and especially the way it can offer a common ground for philosophy and literature. Disliking the use of fiction to argue for ideas has not stopped authors from writing works of fiction that deal with fundamental philosophical questions such as desire, morality, or the good life. A good example is the stupendously

⁴⁴⁶ Anyone willing to engage in political and biographical speculation should consult the already mentioned Claussen (2008) and Müller-Doohm (2005), which are excellent sources for information on both Adorno as a person and the historical context of his thought.

prolific Georges Simenon whose *romans dur* portray a world with no redemption or salvation. Simenon's characters seem to have little idea why they act the way they do and their attempts to do the right thing often end in failure. While the novels deal with themes related to morality, human nature, or social issues, they do not seek to promote preconceived ideas on these topics. What holds the bleak and chaotic Simenon universe together is a tragic vision.⁴⁴⁷

I have sought to present the thesis in a dialectical manner, starting with an attempt to identify the key terms in Adorno's conception of modernity. These terms are then related to philosophical and critical analyses of the tragic and the tragedies that inspired those analyses. Combined, the two sets of problems reveal a need to reassess the role of philosophy in relation to modernism, which provides the key to understanding Adorno's method and the form of presentation it gives rise to. Finally, I have returned to the question of modernity in terms of the tragic vision outlined throughout the dissertation, offering the reader a way to understand the starting point of the study in a different light. The method, I believe, allows for subjecting the work to a reading that utilises elements found in the work itself, thereby honouring Adorno's demand to retain the priority of the object. I have subjected the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* to a much closer reading than any other of Adorno's texts. Considering the vestiges of a later abandoned reading of *Oedipus* found in the book, there is a risk that focusing on the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* might encourage a tragic reading of works that do not propagate a tragic vision. On a practical level, conducting a close reading of a work as massive as the *Aesthetic Theory* seems impossible.⁴⁴⁸ Theoretically speaking, the existing commentaries on the *Aesthetic Theory* and the *Negative Dialectics* that I am familiar with seem to agree on Adorno's convictions regarding all the main points that constitute a tragic vision, thus lending support to my thesis. Additionally, my point has been to highlight the similarities between the late works and the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, using the latter to understand the former, not to claim that the tragic vision can be read out of the *Aesthetic Theory* as such. In this sense, I have always been willing to historicise.

⁴⁴⁷ The philosopher John Gray has written on Simenon from a similar perspective. His afterword to the English translation of Simenon's *The Engagement* offers a summary of his reading. See Gray 2007.

⁴⁴⁸ Even Lambert Zuidervaart's (1991) doorstop on the *Aesthetic Theory* only focuses on certain parts of the text. The unpicking of Adorno's often obscure and provocative formulations tends to easily become unintentionally tangential, considering how far removed they often are of their points of reference. Sometimes Adorno even seems to confuse himself, like when in the *Negative Dialectics* he returns to the question about his famous statement regarding poetry after Auschwitz. He ends up grudgingly recanting a view he never seemed to hold in the first place – and the rejection nevertheless comes with several provisos. See Adorno 2004, 362; 1966, 353, cf. Adorno 1981, 34.

TIIVISTELMÄ

Adornon traaginen näkemys

Tutkimus käsittelee Theodor W. Adornon (1903–1969) filosofiaa määrittävää traagista näkemystä. Taustalla on ajatus, jonka mukaan jokainen filosofinen järjestelmä nojaa uskomuksiin, joita argumentaation avulla pyritään tukemaan. Näiden uskomusten kokonaisuus muodostaa näkemyksen, joka vaikuttaa niihin valintoihin, joita filosofiaa laadittaessa tehdään. Uskomukset saattavat olla keskenään ristiriitaisia sekä filosofeille itselleen tiedostamattomia, ja niiden muotoutumiseen vaikuttavat niin henkilöhistoria kuin kulttuuriset tekijät.

Traagisen näkemyksen mukaan ihminen on kyvytön ymmärtämään omaa vajavaisuuttaan ja tuomittu aiheuttamaan kärsimystä myös toimiessaan kehityksen ja kasvun nimissä. Modernilla ajalla tämänkaltainen ihmiskuva on ollut erityisen suosittu sotienjälkeisessä taiteessa, jossa yhteiskunnan materiaalisen hyvinvoinnin kasvun varjopuolia, kuten vieraantumista ja onnettomuutta sekä väliinpuotoajien kohtaloita, on kuvattu lukuisin eri tavoin. Adornon filosofian tarjoamasta näkökulmasta katsottuna tämänkaltaiset teemat paljastavat totuuden modernin maailman luonteesta. Taide tuottaa materiaalia filosofiselle analyysille ja on siten ymmärrettävää, että molemmat sisältävät traagisia elementtejä, sikäli kuin ne käsitteellistävät samaa todellisuutta.

Traagisuuden juuret juontavat antiikin Kreikan näytelmäkirjallisuuteen sekä saksalaisen romantiikan ja idealismin ajattelijoiden pyrkimykseen tunnistaa ja eristää tragedioista niiden traaginen ulottuvuus modernin teatterin hyödynnettäväksi. Tragedian filosofian isänä pidetään yleensä F. W. J. Schellingiä (1775–1854) ja sen tunnetuimpia varhaisia teoreetikkoja ovat Friedrich Hölderlin (1770–1843) sekä G. W. F. Hegel (1770–1831). 1800-luvulta alkaneen perinteen puitteissa on esitetty lukuisia näkemyksiä tragedian sekä traagisuuden luonteesta ja perusteluja on esitetty niin modernin tragedian mahdollisuuden puolesta kuin sitä vastaan. Adorno sijoitti itsensä jälkimmäiseen ryhmään kritisoidessaan tragediaa anakronistisuudesta sekä sen tavasta antaa kärsimykselle merkitys, mitä Auschwitzin edustaman mielettömyyden jälkeen on mahdotonta hyväksyä. Tästä huolimatta hänen filosofiassaan on lukuisia yhtymäkohtia tragedian puolestapuhujien, kuten Arthur Schopenhauerin (1788–1860) ja Friedrich Nietzschen (1844–1900), filosofioihin sekä esimerkiksi Bruno Snellin (1896–1986) ja Jean-Pierre Vernant'n (1914–2007) tragedian ja traagisuuden teorioihin.

Christopher Hamilton on teoksessa *A Philosophy of Tragedy* (2016) esittänyt eräänlaisen traagisuuden typologian, jossa kirjavaa teoriaperinnettä yhdistävät ajatukset sijoitetaan modernin ajan viitekehykseen. Hamiltonin mukaan keskeisimmät traagiset kannat koskevat kärsimystä ja sattumanvaraisuutta ihmisyyttä määrittävinä tekijöinä. Kärsimystä aiheuttavat ihmisen kyvyttömyys itsetunteemukseen ja osin tästä seuraavaan mahdottomuuteen saavuttaa onnellisuus. Sattumanvaraisuus puolestaan asettaa varman tiedon kyseenalaiseksi ja vaikeuttaa tekojen seurausten arvioimista. Kaiken lisäksi maallistumisesta seurannut meta-

fyysisten kannustimien puute on tehnyt hyveelliseen käyttäytymiseen rohkaisemisesta merkittävän kulttuurisen kysymyksen.

Kaikki Hamiltonin nimeämät traagiset ajatukset esiintyvät Adornon filosofiassa. Traaginen näkemys edellyttää määrätynlaisten eettisten ja poliittisiin kantojen yhdistymistä määrätynlaisiin toimijuutta ja etiikkaa koskeviin filosofisiin teorioihin. Adornon mukaan kyvyiltään rajallisen mutta pyrkimyksiltään suuruudenhullun ihmisen halu hallita niin luontoa kuin ihmisluontoa ovat tuottaneet poliittisia, taloudellisia, humanitaarisia ja ekologisia kriisejä, joille on vaikea kuvitella loppua. Länsimaissa vallitsevan taloudellisen ja poliittisen järjestelmän puitteissa millään ei ole itseisarvoa, vaan kaikki tulee nähdä vaihdon termin. Tämä näkyy Adornon mukaan kaikkialla, jopa tavassamme ajatella ja käyttää kieltä, eikä helppoa ulospääsyä tilanteesta ole tarjolla.

Tutkielman ensimmäinen pääluke käsittelee kärsimystä sekä nihilismia että siitä kumpuavaa epätoivoa. Luvussa esitellään Adornon filosofian aatehistoriallista taustaa edellä kuvattujen traagisten teemojen valossa. Nämä kytketään modernin ja myöhäismodernin ajan eettisiin ja poliittisiin ongelmiin. Adornon filosofian keskiössä on havainto järkikeskeisen länsimaisen kulttuurin kyvyttömyydestä luoda puitteet ihmisten kukoistukselle sekä estää tarpeettoman kärsimyksen voittokulku. Negatiivinen käsitys etiikasta sekä ihmisen vaikutusmahdollisuuksista yleensä kuitenkin estää Adornoa esittämästä käytännön ratkaisuja maailman muuttamiseksi. Vallitseva ideologia läpäisee ajattelumme ja käsitteemme, mistä johtuen meidän on mahdotonta ajatella aidosti toisin.

Toisen luvun aiheena on Adornon suhde tragediaan ja traagiseen ajatteluun. Adornon varhaisessa, Max Horkheimerin kanssa kirjoitetussa *Valistuksen dialektiikassa* (1944/1947) antiikin ajattelu on läsnä huomattavasti selvemmin kuin muissa Adornon teoksissa, mutta viittaukset tragediaan ovat tästä huolimatta vähäisiä. Huomionarvoista on, että teoksen suunnitteluvaiheessa *Odyseiaa* käsittelevä luku, jossa eepoksesta luetaan esiin modernin subjektin synty, keskittyi Sofokleen *Kuningas Oidipukseen*. Odyссеuksen ilmentämä moderni subjekti muistuttaa monelta osin Oidipusta ja mielihyvälle aistinsa avaava, mutta kehollisuutensa kieltävä ja juonittelulla sekä väkivallalla menestystä saavuttava yksilö on kaikkea muuta kuin yksiselitteisen sankarillinen hahmo. Adornon ja tragedian suhteen lisäksi luvussa analysoidaan Adornon filosofian keskeisiä teemoja kuten taiteen ja filosofian suhdetta, traagisen käsityksen vaikutusta moraalifilosofian kysymyksiin sekä etenkin järjen suhdetta kaikkeen edellä mainittuun. Adornon traaginen näkemys kytketään tragedian filosofiaa ja teoriaa käsitteleviin keskusteluihin ja ajattelijoihin.

Kolmannen luvussa palataan modernin kysymykseen ja tarkastellaan ensimmäisen luvun teemoja toisessa luvussa kehitellyn traagisen teorian valossa. Tarkastelun painopisteenä on Adorno myöhäisfilosofia sekä moderni mannermaisien filosofian perinne. Adornon päämääränä on tehdä filosofiaa, joka on aidosti ajassaan ja samalla tietoista omasta perinteestään. Tältä osin filosofian suhde sekä historiaan että nykyhetkeen muistuttaa taiteen suhdetta omiin ehtoihinsa, sillä, kuten Adorno *Esteettisessä teoriassa* (1970) esittää, taidetta määrit-

tävät yhtäältä taiteen historia ja toisaalta sen tulevaisuudennäkymät. Samalla se on elimellisesti kiinni todellisuudessa, jota se käyttää materiaalinaan.

Neljännessä ja viimeisessä pääluvussa modernia tulkitaan traagisen modernistisen filosofian avulla. Hyvän elämän, tai pikemminkin sen puuttumisen, ja toivon kysymykset asetetaan uudelleen määriteltäväksi tavalla, joka pyrkii ottamaan huomioon Adornon ajattelun aatehistoriallisen taustan sekä traagisen tulkinnan tarjoaman viitekehysten. Tarkoituksena on analysoida, miksi Adorno asettaa kysymykset valitsemallaan tavalla ja miksi hän toivostaan huolimatta pitäytyy ehdottomassa negatiivisuudessa.

Tarpeeton kärsimys, epätasa-arvo, toisen maailmansodan hirmutekojen paljastama länsimaisen rationaalisuuden käänttöpuoli, moraalien ja kulttuurin voimattomuus hirmutekojen äärellä sekä uhkaava ekologinen katastrofi ovat merkkejä ihmisen kyvyttömyydestä ymmärtää sekä hallita omaa kohtaloaan. Adornon *Valistuksen dialektiikassa* esittämä varhainen pyrkimys ymmärtää kulttuurin väijäämättömältä vaikuttava taantumisen barbariaan asettaa tapahtuneen osaksi laajaa historiallista kehityskulkua, joka alkaa antiikin Kreikasta ja saa kärjistyy Auschwitzissa. Myöhemmät laajat tutkimukset *Negative Dialektik* (1966) sekä *Esteettinen teoria* syventävät Adornon selitystä, ja vaikka teosten näkökulma on tietoisesti erilainen, vaikuttaa niiden taustalla edelleen sama traaginen näkemys, joka ohjasi *Valistuksen dialektiikan* kysymyksenasettelua.

Tutkielman lopuksi esitetään mahdollisia jatkokehittelyitä, joista keskeisin on traagisen näkemyksen hyödyntäminen tekstejä ja tieteenaloja yhdistävänä tekijänä. Esimerkiksi kaunokirjalliset teokset voivat valaista filosofisten teosten sisältämän maailmakuvan moraalisia seurauksia, niin kutsutun narratiivisen etiikan perinnettä hyödyntäen, ja filosofiset teokset saattavat auttaa ymmärtämään taiteessa epäsuorasti ilmaistujen kantojen teoreettisia ja poliittisia taustaoletuksia. Yhdessä nämä mahdollistavat entistä kattavamman kuvan luomisen jaetusta todellisuudestamme. Lisäksi traaginen näkemys mahdollistaa Adornon filosofian sijoittamisen laajempaan kulttuuriseen kontekstiin, josta filosofia muodostaa vain osan. Tämän avulla on mahdollista hahmotella uudenlaisia poliittisia ja filosofisia avauksia kulttuurin kipupisteiden tarkastelemiseksi.

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