

Dialectic and Enlightenment: The Concept of Enlightenment in Hegel and Horkheimer-Adorno

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Introduction

The opening line of Horkheimer-Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* reads, "Enlightenment has always aimed at liberating men from fear and establishing their sovereignty. Yet the fully enlightened earth radiates disaster triumphant".¹ This path of enlightenment is what the interpretations found in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* and Horkheimer-Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* have in common. Considered in terms of their broad outlines, these interpretations are the same. They differentiate themselves from one another only in the details. The conceptions of the enlightenment process in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* and Horkheimer-Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* are like perpendicular lines; they begin at the same point and then proceed to move further and further apart. However, even as they move apart, both conceptions still point back to their common origin, and no matter how far from that original point they move, one can still draw two parallel lines that relate them, one connecting the perpendicular lines, the other bisecting their point of origin. What I propose to do in this paper is draw a series of such parallel lines in the hopes of reaching the common point of origin: the concept of enlightenment. I will begin at the limit of enlightenment, the border where enlightenment crosses over into barbarism, and work my way back, step by step, line by line, from the limits of enlightenment to its public face, to its positive aspect, to its negative aspect, and finally to the very heart of enlightenment as conceived by Hegel and Horkheimer-Adorno. In the end, I believe, it will be shown that, while Hegel and Horkheimer-Adorno have different interpretations of how enlightenment plays itself out, they start

from the same fundamental concept of enlightenment. Along the way, it will, of course, have to be explained how and where Hegel and Horkheimer-Adorno diverge in their ideas on enlightenment.

Limits of Enlightenment: Terror and Anti-Semitism

Formally, the limits of enlightenment that Hegel and Horkheimer-Adorno posit are as different as can be. In Hegel, enlightenment reaches its limit in the Terror, where enlightenment becomes an orgy of violence, a fulfillment of the Hobbesian *bellum omnes contra omnia*. Enlightenment breaks down into pure and utter chaos. For Horkheimer-Adorno, on the other hand, enlightenment reaches its limit in the Nazi death camps. Here the process of the rationalization of means has come to its extreme. The most enlightened techniques are needed to put as many people to death as quickly and efficiently as possible. In Auschwitz, there was no frenzy, no orgy of violence. Describing the fascist-political anti-Semite, Adorno says,

He is cold, without affections, and is perhaps the most merciless of all [anti-Semites]. He deals with anti-Semitism as an export article. He has no immediate gratification from the persecution of the Jews, and if he has, it is only incidental. He deliberately plans [the Jews'] annihilation. He fulfills his task by administrative measures without any personal contact with the victims. He does not have to hate the Jews; he is able to negotiate with foreign ones most amiably. To him anti-Semitism is reified. It must function.²

There was a timetable, a schedule of showers and cremations that had to be stuck to. Formally, these effects are different; one is utter chaos, the other is the epitome of order. Materially, however, the limit of enlightenment is the same in Hegel and Horkheimer-Adorno: lots and lots of dead people.

What is the Terror? Death on a mass scale. But not merely death. Meaningless death. As Hegel says, "It is the coldest and meanest of all deaths, with no more significance than cutting off a head of cabbage or swallowing a mouthful of water".³ A French peasant who died during the Revolution itself at least had the

consolation that he died in battle against the *ancien regime*. But during the Terror, one dies for wearing the wrong color socks, for reading the wrong books, for having a name that sounds vaguely royal. The Terror is what happens when absolute freedom becomes “merely the *fury* of destruction”.⁴

But while the Terror simply means death in its material aspect, formally there is much more to it. There is, for example, the constant uncertainty that characterizes the Terror in the eyes of its victims. In this sense, the Terror is a return to the state of the master-slave wherein the slave confronts the very real possibility of his/her own death at every moment. The French citizen, living through the Terror, has experienced “the absolute melting-away of everything stable”.⁵ Or, as Shklar put it, “From having been a perfectly autonomous master, the revolutionary has now become the utterly instrumental servant”.⁶ Only for this citizen the uncertainty is actually worse; at his/her lowest, the slave could still depend on one bit of stability, the master. Even as the slave’s life is forfeit to the whims of the master, it is at least certain that the master and only the master can take the slave’s life. The citizen living under the Terror, however, has not even this assurance. S/he knows that his/her life depends on whomever happens to be in power now, but who that is changes constantly. Even the identity of one’s potential executioner is no longer stable under the Terror.

For Horkheimer-Adorno, the limit of enlightenment is reached at the gates of Auschwitz. Beneath the dictum “*Arbeit Macht Frei*”, a dictum that has strangely Hegelian-Marxian overtones, the victims of the Holocaust learned the true meaning of those words. Work makes humans free, free to be tools. Here the process reveals its inherent flaw. Enlightenment is the attempt to master nature, to free human beings from its grasp. The attempt, however, ends by mastering both nature and humanity; everything becomes a tool, a thing to be made useful or thrown out. In the death camps, the line which enlightenment has tried to maintain between objects and persons is obliterated. Persons become objects for manipulation and destruction. “Everything must be used and all must obey”.⁷ This obliteration is perhaps best exemplified in the ritual that prisoners arriving at the camps had to endure. The arriving prisoners would line up and doctors would separate out those who could work from those

who could not. Those who could work, did. Those who could not, died. One was either useful or sent to the showers. "The Jews are marked out as the absolute objects of domination pure and simple".⁸

This orderliness of the executions points to a key difference between Horkheimer-Adorno's account of the limits of enlightenment and Hegel's. For the victims of the Nazi death camps, unlike the victims of the guillotine, there was very little uncertainty about their fate. "Every 'other' person who 'doesn't know his place' must be forced back within his proper confines—those of unrestricted terror".⁹ Once one had reached the camp, it was little more than a question of time before one died. The question for the guillotined was "Will?" "Will I be next? Will they come for me tomorrow? The day after? Next week? Never? Will I survive?" In the death camps, the question was not "Will?" but "When?" "When will I die? When will they send me to the crematorium? When will I be shot? When will I finally die?" If the Nazis themselves did not send one to the gallows or the showers, there was starvation, fatigue, disease, and a plethora of other causes that would lead to one's death. There was no uncertainty in the death camps about one's fate; only about the means.

The meaninglessness of the deaths in the Terror provides a link to Horkheimer-Adorno's account of the Holocaust. The orgy that Hegel describes and the factory of Horkheimer-Adorno share this much in common: each death is, taken in itself, meaningless. The reasons for the violence are merely rationalizations. The acts themselves are not even motivated by hatred; in one case they are simply the only way for all to be socially useful, in the other they are simply tasks to be carried out. The frenzy must be sated, the quota must be filled. With whose blood, with whose corpses, is a matter of indifference. The aristocrats, the enemies of the revolution, the insane, the Jews. It is all one. These deaths, brought about in different ways and under different rationalizations, all represent enlightenment's failed attempt to actualize itself. The guillotine and the showers are both the end results of enlightenment's attempt to transplant heaven to the earth below.¹⁰ But how could it end this way? How could the enlightenment end in such atrocities? Why did enlightenment end with humanity "sinking into a new kind of barbarism"?¹¹ To answer this would be

to state fully what enlightenment is, which I am not yet prepared to do. However, there is a partial answer to be found in what Hegel and Horkheimer-Adorno hold in common about the limits of enlightenment that will take us a step closer to the full truth of enlightenment. That commonality is simply this: in both the Terror and the Holocaust, humanity is treated simply as a means.

Faces of Enlightenment: Absolute Freedom and the Culture Industry

Humanity however does not become degraded to mere means by the public faces of enlightenment, which I will now consider. Once we approach the limits of enlightenment, the transition of humanity into a means has long since taken place. The question for now is not how does humanity come to be a means, but rather, in considering the public faces of enlightenment—absolute freedom for Hegel, the culture industry for Horkheimer-Adorno—the question that must be asked is simply this: man is a means to what end? What is the task for which humanity is presented as the proper tool? The culture industry is rationalized, absolute control. Absolute freedom is the complete lack of control. Here it seems that rather than showing how Hegel and Horkheimer-Adorno have moved closer together in their interpretations of enlightenment, we have shown how they have moved farther apart. When considering the limits of enlightenment, we have at least the material effects, the body counts and the meaninglessness of the deaths, that are comparable. There is a similarity, however. Absolute freedom is the freedom to decide what, and who, is useful. It is the freedom to decide this not merely for oneself, but for society as a whole. What Hegel sees as the dream of the Revolution is what Horkheimer-Adorno see as the reality of the culture industry. The culture industry shapes thought in such a way that nothing is useless. The leisure that human beings are allowed by their masters is turned against them and used to enslave them all the more firmly. The culture industry, or rather those who control it, decide for everyone what, and who, is useful.

Absolute freedom, in Hegel's sense, comes about when every individual consciousness may set the goals and values of the entire

society. This ability expresses itself primarily in determining who and what has social utility. That is, who serves the common good and who does not. The key to absolute freedom is that each individual member of society is capable of making this determination, a determination which, by its very nature, effects the whole of society. This absolute freedom breaks down into the Terror when these decisions come into more and more intense conflict, to the point where faction after faction is claiming to be the voice of the general will and, in turn, executing their political and personal enemies for the common good. In considering absolute freedom, one can easily see how it could break down like this. If I, speaking on behalf of the general will, declare Fred to be an enemy of the people, and Fred, likewise speaking on behalf of the general will, declares me to be a traitor to the revolution, we have an apparent problem. For our claims to be speaking on behalf of the general will are not delusional; they are true. But if they are both true, then we must both be sent to the guillotine. I have obviously declared Fred to be a defective member of society, and he has done so to me. And both claims are true. Therefore, the faulty parts of society, Fred and myself, must be gotten rid of. But this is true not merely for criminals like Fred and I. After all, what each consciousness determines is social utility, not merely social detriment. So, a citizen who has done nothing actually contrary to his station may still be sent to the guillotine for any number of reasons. Perhaps s/he did not contribute enough to the veterans' fund, or was a bit late returning a library book, or was a minute late for guard duty. To the guillotine with them! This is why Shklar declares that "The only possible action of completely universal participation is 'negative action'".¹²

Absolute freedom is a prelude to the Terror. The culture industry is not, however, a prelude to the Holocaust. But the reason that absolute freedom is a prelude to the Terror is because it presents in theory what the Terror will later put into practice. Similarly, the culture industry presents the theoretical justification of fascism. Where absolute freedom allows each to speak on behalf of all, the culture industry allows some to speak on behalf of themselves and pretend they are speaking on behalf of all. But this is not all. The real key to the culture industry lies not in pretense, but in

manipulation. The culture industry is make-believe in the truest sense; it makes us believe. "The whole world is made to pass through the filter of the culture industry"¹³. The goal of the culture industry is to make us see ourselves, as well as our fellow human beings, as industry sees us: as customers and employees¹⁴. If the Nazi death camps represent the extreme limit of enlightenment, then the culture industry is the point we reach when that limit is on the horizon. The culture industry is, in Horkheimer-Adorno's eyes, nothing but the pure manipulation of human beings. "The culture industry as a whole has molded men as a type unfailingly reproduced in every product"¹⁵. It serves, not so much to treat humans as tools for given ends, as the death camps do, but to remind us that we are tools, to prepare us to be nothing but tools. "Amusement under late capitalism is the prolongation of work"¹⁶. There is a horrid B-grade science fiction movie from the 1980's entitled "Future War" in which the main character, when asked who he is, simply repeats "I am tool". The goal of the culture industry is to shape human consciousnesses in such a way that such self-images become standard. The purpose of each commercial, movie, television program and pop-song is to remind each of us of our function: we are tools, of importance only to the extent that we are useful as producers and consumers.

Absolute freedom allows each to decide the good for all. The culture industry robs us of the ability to decide at all. How are they connected? To answer this question we must first answer the question with which we ended the previous section: how do human beings become means to ends? For the common point between absolute freedom and the culture industry lies not in their objects nor even in their methods, it lies in a boundary which both have crossed. The boundary is the line drawn between humanity as an end in itself and humanity as a means to an end. This line is crossed, as I will argue in the next section, when enlightenment is forced to give itself a positive content. The common point between absolute freedom and the culture industry is the positive content of enlightenment. When the individual consciousness is granted the ability to determine questions for the whole of society, it determines what is useful for society. When the culture industry infects the minds of the masses, it infects them with notions of being of use to

society, of functioning properly. The hero is he who assures that the machine works properly. As was suggested earlier, humanity is a means. It is now time to explore exactly how this state of affairs comes about. How does humanity become a mere means to an end?

What is Enlightenment? *Positively*

We are now prepared to look at the positive content of enlightenment. Here we are drawing closer to our goal. We have moved in from the fringes of the phenomenon, closer to its core. What enlightenment posits in Hegel is intimately related to what it posits in Horkheimer-Adorno. In the one case, enlightenment posits utility, usefulness for the social whole, as its positive content. In Horkheimer-Adorno, however, it is not utility that enlightenment puts forth, but that form of thinking, means-end thinking, or in their phrase, instrumental reason. The positive content of Hegel's enlightenment asks, "Is that good for society? Is it useful for the social whole?" Instrumental reason asks a related, though somewhat broader question: What is that good for? How is that useful? Thus at their cores, utility and instrumental reason are the same: they deny that a given object or person may have any kind of intrinsic value. Everything and everyone can have value only as a means to some external end.

Utility is the judgment on an object's or a person's contribution toward the good of society. "Just as everything is useful to man, so man is useful too, and his vocation is to make himself a member of the group, of use for the common good and serviceable to all".¹⁷ Everything and everyone must be made useful for society. What does useful mean? According to Shklar, "Whatever pleases men most is most useful for all".¹⁸ Shklar holds that Hegel's utility is quite in line with Benthamite utilitarianism. While this holds true in the sense that both ideas of "utility" provide maximizing principles of evaluation, that is where the similarity ends. For Hegel is here using the term utility, I believe, in a sense that is more inspired by the same man whose thought inspired the French revolutionaries, Rousseau. What matters is not pleasure, but good. To argue with Shklar that utility is simply maximal pleasure is to

forget the republican aspects of the movement Hegel is describing. A person or thing is useful to society, not to the extent that s/he or it gives people pleasure, but to the extent that s/he or it makes people good. Hence the guillotine, which gives very few any pleasure, is of the highest utility, and the person whose head rolls away from the platform has been made as useful as s/he could be, as an example to others. The problem for enlightenment arises insofar as utility for the common good, usefulness to society, is an all too abstract idea. While it may easily be used negatively, to weed out elements that are actively damaging society, the common good proves a rather hollow idol when one attempts to use the concept to provide a goal. Thus absolute freedom which is the ability of each to determine the good for the whole, can end only in universal negation, in the Terror.

Instrumental reason arises from the attempt to master nature. It is distinguished from utility in Hegel's sense in that, while utility posits a goal, an end for which things are to be made useful, instrumental reason is simply the form of thought which treats things and persons as no more than means to ends. What the ends are is essentially irrelevant. Pleasure? Fine. Profitability? That works, too. Control? Why not? What matters to instrumental reason is not what a given object is useful for, but simply that it is useful. Hence it is not important to instrumental reason what the effects, psychological or physical, of the Nazi gas chambers are on their victims, but it is important that they produce in the most efficient way possible. Thus the story, whether true or fictional, that the Nazis switched to gas chambers after it was decided that they would be a cheaper means of carrying out genocide, coincides perfectly with instrumental reason. As Horkheimer-Adorno say, "Reason is the organ of calculation, of planning; it is neutral in regard to ends".¹⁹ Enlightenment, when it is forced to give itself a positive content cannot, in Horkheimer-Adorno's eyes, even go so far as Hegel claims it does. Enlightenment cannot posit a substantial goal, such as being useful to the community, at all. Instead it can only posit a form: utility, in the most abstract possible sense. "The means is fetishized".²⁰

Utility and instrumental reason, while obviously connected, are hardly the same. The primary difference lies in the notion of

an end. For Hegel's notion of utility there is a set end, the good of the community however vaguely conceived. Instrumental reason, however, has no such end and no way of setting one. A thing that is deemed useful, in Hegel's sense, is deemed useful for the community. For Horkheimer-Adorno, however, a thing is useful for whatever arbitrary goal has already been set. If that goal is the good of the community, fine. If it is not, if the goal is instead the destruction of the community, that is fine also. What Hegel sees as the positive content of enlightenment provides some material end, no matter how vaguely conceived. Horkheimer-Adorno's positive content of enlightenment is merely a formal type of thinking, considering everything as means to indifferent ends. The world has become a workshop.

This becomes very intriguing when we compare the reasons for enlightenment's positive content. In Hegel, the enlightenment must replace the faith that it has destroyed with something. As he says, "If all prejudices and superstition have been banished, the question arises, *What next? What is the truth Enlightenment has propagated in their stead?*"²¹ The answer we receive from Hegel is simply utility. In Horkheimer-Adorno, however, enlightenment has always been instrumental reason. The end always remains the same: preservation. "Its principles are the principles of self-preservation."²² This comes out most clearly, perhaps, in the first excursus of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. In the interpretation of the *Odyssey*, Odysseus is willing to do anything to preserve his own life. His vaunted cunning is simply instrumental reason. He gladly renounces his identity, only to preserve it, in the episode with the Cyclops. In dealing with the Sirens, he renounces his own freedom by having himself tied to the mast of the ship, in order that he might cheat the Sirens by hearing their song without falling prey to them. With Circe and the Lotus-eaters, he renounces pleasure to preserve himself. Every act of preservation requires two poles: the object (in Odysseus's case, Odysseus) to be preserved and the threat from which it must be preserved. What is this threat? In Hegel's account, enlightenment gives itself positive content once its negative content has been exhausted. In Horkheimer-Adorno, enlightenment is characterized by nothing more than the attempt to preserve humanity from some threat. It does this by attempting

to overcome the threat, to control it. But still we have not answered the key question, the final puzzle piece that will show us to the core of enlightenment: what is the other of enlightenment?

What is Enlightenment? *Negatively*

Enlightenment, in both Hegel and Horkheimer-Adorno, initially defines itself based on what it specifically is not. There is always an other for enlightenment which gives it its initial content. To put this in what Žižek calls “Hegelese”, enlightenment begins its life as a determinate negation. In Hegel, at least, Enlightenment only begins to posit its own content once it has exhausted its negative content; that is, only once it has completed the annihilation/assimilation of its other. Initially, enlightenment is “wholly dependent for its system of beliefs on the faith of its opponent. It simply says ‘no’ to every ‘yes’”.²³ Enlightenment has what it thinks to be a single task that can be completed, what Hegel calls its struggle with superstition. For Horkheimer-Adorno, however, enlightenment can never escape its other. This is true in Hegel as well, but for Hegel enlightenment never realizes this fact. Once enlightenment has destroyed the old form of faith, it believes itself to have overcome faith itself.

In Hegel, we must sort out what enlightenment believes itself to be renouncing and what it is renouncing. Enlightenment takes its opposite to be *Aberglaube* (superstition), when in fact it is *Glaube* (faith, belief). I mention the German terms because the English words do not, to my mind, properly convey the relation between the two concepts. The prefix that transforms faith into superstition is the German *aber*, the German word for “but”. So *Aber-glaube* can be seen as belief in spite of, the holding of a belief in the face of tremendous evidence to the contrary. I do not think that this fully comes across in the translations. The concept of superstition in the English-speaking world, after all, has something of a quaint quality to it. We modern human beings still have our superstitions, superstitions which we acknowledge to be superstitions but nevertheless uphold. Lucky charms, rituals, astrology, black cats and Friday the 13th's represent the superstitions of our day, but they are not *Aberglauben*. They are half-believed,

half sustained by habit, and the evidence against them is acknowledged. *Aberglauben*, on the other hand, are not merely believed in the face of evidence to the contrary, the more evidence there is, the greater the conviction becomes. *Aberglaube* is, rather than simple superstition, obstinate belief. It is *credens quia absurdum est*. The type of belief, with its low level of conviction, sustained by superstition would hardly be worth the attention of enlightenment forces. *Aberglaube* is the way that enlightenment views faith, *Glaube*.

The attack leveled by enlightenment against superstition/faith is threefold. First, enlightenment claims that the object of faith is simply an anthropomorphic projection. As Horkheimer-Adorno would later point out, this argument of enlightenment is as old as Xenophanes.²⁴ For Hegel, this is a misguided attack, not so much because it is wrong, but because faith is well aware of this aspect of itself. When enlightenment points out that faith's acts of worship center around earthly objects, and believers appear to be worshipping sticks and rocks, which merely points up of the fact that the believing consciousness is a consciousness divided. Secondly, enlightenment attacks the justifications of faith. Here faith is safe, so long as it does not try to justify itself using the tools of enlightenment. The final front on which enlightenment attacks faith is in terms of faith's actions. Faith's retort is simply to accept this criticism and shake its head at the poor enlightenment, which cannot see beyond the sticks and rocks to the actual objects of worship. As Hyppolite says, "The mistake of the Enlightenment was to offer a merely negative critique, to fail to grasp the content of faith".²⁵ From all of these attacks, faith is protected so long as it does not allow itself to engage enlightenment on its own grounds. That is, faith is invincible, so long as it does not attempt to rationally defend itself. Once that happens, faith "has already let itself be corrupted by the Enlightenment",²⁶ and what enlightenment is confronting is no longer faith, but enlightenment itself. Enlightenment cannot confront faith directly, because faith as such is incomprehensible to enlightenment. Before the struggle between faith and enlightenment begins, faith must be transfigured into enlightenment; it must see itself as enlightenment sees it and attempt to defend itself in the same manner, using the same weapons with which enlightenment has attacked it.

In addition to being simply obstinate belief, enlightenment's label of superstition has a personalized, conspiratorial aspect. It is not simply a matter of people believing falsely; they are being led to believe falsely. Enlightenment sees in faith an element of duplicity. Believers are being deceived by someone. This, Hegel says, is the essence of enlightenment's misunderstanding of faith. Because, had enlightenment understood faith for what it was, then it would have understood that for faith to be deception was impossible. Faith, in its essence, is the object of a people's (*Volk*) consciousness. Here Hegel very plainly anticipates Feuerbach's interpretation of religion.

The other of enlightenment in Horkheimer-Adorno is ostensibly myth. That is, just as enlightenment in Hegel takes its other to be superstition when it is in fact faith, the enlightenment for Horkheimer-Adorno takes its other to be myth, when it is in fact something else. In Horkheimer-Adorno's tale, enlightenment does not simply attack myth. Rather the attack is a continuous process. The essence of Horkheimer-Adorno's interpretation of the Odyssey is that each of Odysseus's adventures relates the confrontation between myth and enlightenment. Odysseus is, of course, enlightenment reason personified. Each of the perils he faces represents a different aspect of the mythical world, that is, a different threat to enlightenment. The Cyclops represents unenlightened humanity, beings essentially human but who do not have to work or organize in order to survive. The Cyclopes are humanity without civilization. Circe and the Lotus-Eaters represent the threat of regression to the pre-enlightened past. Circe threatens to regress Odysseus to a purely anima state if he yields to her. The Lotus-Eaters tempt Odysseus and his crew with what may be the greatest danger to enlightenment: lack of purpose. Those who eat the lotus flowers forget all their goals, their ambition, even the ambition to preserve themselves, leaves them. The Sirens also represent the threat of a kind of regression. Their song lures sailors with the temptation of forgiveness and forgetfulness. It seems worth noting that of all the threats Odysseus encounters, only the Cyclops seems to be an active threat. Circe, the Lotus-Eaters, and the Sirens are all temptations for the enlightened self. The Cyclops, and the Cyclops alone, presents a danger not to the enlightened self, but to

the actual life of that self. Perhaps this is because the Cyclops is seen as an earlier version of the human being. This creature, while slow-witted and uncivilized, must at least be active in order to be related to the enlightened self. Enlightenment is constantly fleeing from myth. But what enlightenment fails to realize is that in its flight it is also returning to myth. "Myth is already enlightenment, and enlightenment reverts to mythology"²⁷. Myth is not, in fact, the antithesis of enlightenment; it is merely another form of enlightenment, of what enlightenment is at its essence.

The true other of enlightenment in Horkheimer-Adorno is simply nature; the alien forces of wind and water, air and fire that lord over humankind for most of its pre-history. Enlightenment aims at freeing humanity from nature, not from myth. The only problem that enlightenment has with myth is that it failed to accomplish the goal of enlightenment. Myth was unable to complete its task, enlightenment's task, the mastery of nature. This is why myth and enlightenment are the same. Myth is simply an older, less effective version of enlightenment. Myth is the beta-release of enlightenment. It is also why Horkheimer-Adorno chose Sir Francis Bacon as their spokesman of enlightenment, rather than Voltaire or Kant. Bacon blatantly represents knowledge as simply a means for controlling nature. This attempt, in all situations, to control nature is what gives rise to the positive content of enlightenment, to instrumental reason.

We have a pair of odd triangles here. Enlightenment, in Hegel, describes its enemy as one thing, superstition, when it is in fact another, faith; furthermore this other is, in essence, the same as enlightenment. In Horkheimer-Adorno, on the other hand, enlightenment describes its enemy as one thing, myth, when it is in fact another, nature; but enlightenment is not, as in Hegel, the same as the third point of this triangle. Instead, enlightenment is, for Horkheimer-Adorno, the same as what it actually takes to be its other. Being the same, myth and enlightenment share a single other: nature. Our question must now become why? Why are faith and nature seen as others of enlightenment? What is it about enlightenment that makes faith appear as superstition, and nature appear as purely hostile? Why must enlightenment negate these others? The answer will take us to the very nucleus of the concept

of enlightenment. We are now finally prepared to pose the question: what is enlightenment?

The Concept of Enlightenment

We have thus far learned that enlightenment discovers its limits in the reign of meaningless death, that the key to that limit is the use of humanity as a means, that when enlightenment is forced to give itself positive content, it poses either utility, an abstract of community good, or instrumental reason, simple means-ends thinking, as that content, that the initial impetus of enlightenment consists in the negation of what it takes to be its other, and that the target of enlightenment in its determinate negation is nothing more or less than enlightenment itself. We appear to be well prepared to take on the questions, so famously posed by *Berlinische Monatsschrift* in 1783 and answered above all by Kant of what is enlightenment. The answer that Kant posed was that enlightenment was “*mankind’s exit from its self-incurred immaturity*”.²⁸ Maturity in Kant’s sense means no more than the ability to use one’s own reason, without the guidance of any kind of authority. But to use one’s reason to do what? Again, Kant supplies the answer. He claims, “*Sapere aude!* Have the courage to use your *own* understanding! is thus the motto of enlightenment”.²⁹ *Sapere aude!* Dare to know! But dare to know what? And to what end? And how are we to understand understanding here? The last question is the key to answering the other two. Knowledge, in Kant’s sense, means no more or less than the kind of systematic, scientific knowledge that enlightenment thinkers have always revealed in. Thus, to the question what is it that we are commanded to dare to know, the answer is simply facts, facts of all shapes and sizes, facts about people, places, and things, facts about flowers, weeds, and trees, facts about lions, tigers, and bears. For what purpose ought we to gather these facts? To use them, of course. In the arsenal of enlightenment, facts constitute one more kind of weapon against the eternal enemy, faith or nature. Thus we reach the heart of enlightenment and we find there an ugly little beast: positivism. This is the essence of enlightenment, in both its positive and negative aspects. But positivism in what sense? What is meant

here by positivism is not the simplistic worship of facts, as undertaken by the logical positivists. Rather it is the implication of that style of "thought" that members of the Frankfurt School relished pointing out: to affirm individual facts is likewise to affirm the world in which they exist, and all that is evil therein. This affirmation (in the derogatory Frankfurt sense) is the heart of enlightenment. This we can see even in the name of the process. To enlighten, to shed light on. *Aufklären*, to clear up, to make clear. Shedding light on the world leaves the world essentially unchanged. Explaining the causes and conditions of pain and suffering in no way entails alleviating or eliminating pain and suffering. Enlightenment, like any tool, is essentially indifferent to the ends for which it is used. The doctor who has learned the best ways to prevent death has likewise learned the best ways to inflict it.

But enlightenment positivism, like other forms of positivism, seeks the facts about every case except its own. Enlightenment will register the facts and seek the causes of each and every thing in the universe, except for its own desire to collect facts and find causes. Hence enlightenment positivism is a blind positivism. The true motto of enlightenment is not, as Kant claimed, "*Sapere aude!*", but instead the statement he made later on in that celebrated essay. "*Argue, as much as you want and about whatever you want, but obey!*"³⁰ We may question anything, argue about anything, save enlightenment itself. Thus the true failing of enlightenment is not in the quest for knowledge, a quest that Hegel and Horkheimer-Adorno can hardly reject, but that it sets limits on its own knowledge. As Hegel says, "Enlightenment declares to be an error and a fiction is the very same thing as Enlightenment itself is".³¹ Or again with Horkheimer-Adorno, "Enlightenment *must consider itself*, if men are not to be wholly betrayed".³² Enlightenment, to actually achieve itself, must be made reflexive. It must be turned back upon itself, must turn its desire for knowledge against itself. This is what critics of enlightenment, from Hegel to Nietzsche to Horkheimer-Adorno have sought to do. Without this element, enlightenment itself becomes a tool, serving the powers that be to preserve the order that is. If enlightenment achieves self-reflection, it may be able to achieve human liberation.

Conclusion

To put the preceding argument into its proper order, enlightenment begins, in both Hegel and Horkheimer-Adorno, as pure positivism. The break in the development from the concept of enlightenment to its limits occurs in the next stage, when enlightenment confronts its other. Both Hegel and Horkheimer-Adorno see that enlightenment always already is what it takes to be its other. Hegel is content to point out that what enlightenment takes to be its other, superstition, is in fact merely an aspect of something else, faith, which is enlightenment. Horkheimer-Adorno, however, see that behind what enlightenment takes to be its other, myth, there lies its true other, nature. From this distinction, different positive contents are proposed for enlightenment; utility for Hegel and instrumental reason for Horkheimer-Adorno. Utility and instrumental reason then provide the public faces of enlightenment in absolute freedom and the culture industry. These public facades then collapse into the Terror and the Holocaust.

The argument presented here is far from complete. Beyond the complexities in both Hegel's and Horkheimer-Adorno's accounts of enlightenment that had to be passed over due to a lack of time and space, there are further points which would have to be taken into consideration in thinking about the conditions that give rise to enlightenment and the aftermath of enlightenment. Further, some degree of injustice has been done to both Hegel and Horkheimer-Adorno in the preceding argument. For both interpretations, much of the complexity and detail has had to be passed over. And for Horkheimer-Adorno in particular, an injustice has been done by the very structure of the preceding account. In presenting *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as a sustained narrative, I have presented what is, as the subtitle indicates, a book of fragments, as something much more systematic than it actually is.

Notes

¹ Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno. 1999. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Trans. John Cumming. New York: Continuum. 3.

² Theodor W. Adorno. 1998. "Research Project on Anti-Semitism:

Idea of the Project," *The Stars Come Down to Earth*. Ed. Stephen Crook. New York: Routledge. 151.

³ G.W.F. Hegel. 1977. *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Trans A.V. Miller. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 360.

⁴ *Ibid*, 359.

⁵ *Ibid*, 117.

⁶ Judith Shklar. 1976. *Freedom and Independence: a study of the political ideas of Hegel's Phenomenology of Mind*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 174.

⁷ Horkheimer-Adorno, 183.

⁸ *Ibid*, 168.

⁹ *Ibid*, 183

¹⁰ Hegel, 355.

¹¹ Horkheimer-Adorno, xi.

¹² Shklar, 177.

¹³ Horkheimer-Adorno, 126.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 147.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 127.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 137.

¹⁷ Hegel, 342.

¹⁸ Shklar, 171.

¹⁹ Horkheimer-Adorno, 88.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 104.

²¹ Hegel, 340.

²² Horkheimer-Adorno, 83.

²³ Shklar, 167.

²⁴ Horkheimer-Adorno, 6.

²⁵ Jean Hyppolite. 1974. *Genesis and Structure of Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*. Trans. Samuel Cherniak and John Heckman. Evanston: Northwestern University Press. 431.

²⁶ Hegel, 338.

²⁷ Horkheimer-Adorno, xvi.

²⁸ Immanuel Kant. 1996. "An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?," *What is Enlightenment?* Ed. James Schmidt. Berkeley: University of California Press. 58.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 58.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 59.

³¹ Hegel, 334.

³² Horkheimer-Adorno, xv.