SITUATIONAL DEMANDS AND OBJECTIVE REASON IN *NEGATIVE DIALECTICS*

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Abstract: Habermas famously accuses Adorno's theory of being self-undermining – in presenting a totalizing critique of modern reason, it makes itself impossible. Habermas claims that only by maintaining a rational criterion intact and thereby a concept of reason separate from instrumental reason, can the latter's dominance be criticized; and suggests communicative reason as alternative concept. One strategy to defend Adorno is to counter that Habermas overlooks the notion of objective reason operative in Adorno's (and Horkheimer's) work. In this paper, I uncover traces of this notion by looking at how situational demands show up in *Negative Dialectics*. I suggest that these demands are manifestations of objective reason. They relate to 'the materialistic motive of morality', without which moral reason ends up in a 'bad infinity of derivation and validity', a 'terrible dialectic'. Moreover, they provide resources for an Adornian account of social pathology.

Habermas famously accuses Adorno's theory of being self-undermining – in presenting a totalizing critique of modern reason, it makes itself impossible. Habermas speculates that this was the result of the particular historical hour in which Adorno and Horkheimer wrote *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Habermas states:

> *'[…] it becomes intelligible how the impression could indeed get established in the darkest years of the Second World War that the last sparks of reason were being extinguished from this reality and had left the ruins of a civilisation in collapse without any hope.'* (Habermas 1984: 141/1987: 116f).

Yet, however comprehensible it might be, it is, nonetheless, unworkable: Habermas claims that only by maintaining intact a rational criterion of critique and thereby a conception of reason separate from instrumental reason, can the dominance of instrumental reason in modern society be criticized and counteracted. Instead of developing such an alternative conception of reason, Adorno – according to Habermas – remain stuck in the 'performative contradiction' of early Frankfurt School Critical Theory, even in his later works, such as *Negative Dialectics*, of which we commemorate the 50th anniversary of publication at this conference. As you will all know, Habermas' own work develops from this criticism into the suggestion of communicative reason as the alternative conception of reason with which to criticise instrumental rationality and the colonialization of the lifeworld by the system (notably in *Theory of Communicative Action* in 1981).

One strategy to defend Adorno is to counter that Habermas overlooks the notion of objective reason operative in Adorno's (and Horkheimer's) work. In this context, it is perhaps unfortunate that the English original of Horkheimer's 1947 book bears the title 'The Eclipse of Reason', rather than the title 'On the Critique of Instrumental Rationality' [*Zur Critique of instrumental reason*] of the German edition of 1967. Eclipse does indeed suggest that 'the last sparks of reason were being extinguished' or even that they had been extinguished. But anyone who has looked beyond the title should realise that the story is more complicated: Horkheimer operates not with a unified conception of modern reason as through and through instrumental, but rather with a dual (one is tempted to say, 'dialectical') conception of reason. Instrumental reason is the modern manifestation of subjective reason (or, at any rate, one such manifestation), but is contrasted – in the modern context – with objective reason. I will say more about this contrast later, but for now I just want to note my thesis – my thesis is that this dual conception of reason is also present in Adorno's work, including crucially *Negative Dialectics*.

In this paper, I uncover traces of this notion by looking at how situational demands show up in Negative Dialectics. Specifically, I suggest that these demands are manifestations of objective reason – in that sense the 'and' in the title of my talk should really be replaced by an 'as', to read 'Situational demands as objective reason in *Negative Dialectics*'. Furthermore, these demands relate, as we will see, to what Adorno calls, 'the materialistic

motive of morality', without which moral reason ends up in, what he calls, a 'bad infinity of derivation and validity' or elsewhere a 'terrible dialectic'. Finally, time permitting, I will also suggest that situational demands as objective reason provide resources for an Adornian account of social pathology.

I

Two of the most important passages for Adorno's practical philosophy are in Model I and III respectively in *Negative Dialectics*. These passages are important in a number of ways, but today I want to highlight the way they embody situational demands. Let me discuss them in the chronological order they appear in the book.

Before I do so, one more general comment in relation to the two passages. One of the controversies about Adorno's work is whether or not it includes an ethics, and if so, what kind of ethics. I have published on this matter extensively and I am happy to discuss the matter in more detail in the Q&A, but for now I just want to note that these two passages strongly suggest that Adorno, indeed, advances a kind of ethics, albeit one that is different from Kant's ethics (which Adorno sees as 'moral philosophy par excellence' (PMP 1963, 158/106)). One of the differences is that by 'ethics' in Adorno's work we cannot mean a 'private ethics' – one merely for individuals, concerned merely with their character traits or conduct as isolated from the wider social context and collective action problems. Adorno explicitly rejected that notion of ethics, but it is not the only one. Indeed, there is a long tradition going back at least to Aristotle, which sees ethics to include politics. To be doubly clear: the idea is not to add some individualistic ethics into politics, but to conceive of the ethical as encompassing politics, such that individual conduct and collective conduct are from the beginning understood as deeply and irrevocably intertwined (for better and for worse).

Here then is the first passage – I quote it in full:

> *'It is not in their nauseating parody, sexual repression, that moral questions are succinctly posed; it is in lines such as: No one should be tortured; there should be no concentration camps. … But if a moral philosopher were to seize upon these lines and to exult as having caught the critics of morality, at last – caught them quoting the same values that are happily proclaimed by the philosophy of morals – his cogent conclusion would be false. The lines are true as an impulse, as a reaction to the news that torture is going on somewhere. They must not be rationalized; as an abstract principle they would fall promptly into the bad infinities of derivation and validity. ... The impulse – naked physical fear, and the sense of solidarity with what Brecht called 'tormentable bodies' – is immanent in moral conduct and would be denied in attempts at ruthless rationalization. What is most urgent would become contemplative again, mocking its own urgency.'* (ND, 6: 281/285; translation amended; see also MCP, 182/116.)

There is a lot going on in this passage, but for our purposes here today, I will only pick up some of the elements. First, there is a clear sense that despite Adorno's critique of morality and moral philosophy, he is committed to an ethics in a certain to-be-specified sense – while moral questions might not pose themselves in a certain way; they *do* pose themselves. Second, whatever this ethics is, it is not one that is principle-based – in contrast to, most famously, Kant's ethics (or also Utilitarianism). Instead, third, morality is related to a somatic moment – the impulse as 'naked physical fear; and 'sense of solidarity'. To overlook that, fourth, is to end up in 'bad infinities of derivation and validity'. And, finally and, for our context today most importantly, ethics is conceived of as involving situational demands: when torture is going on, ethics consists in the reaction that no one should be tortured.

Four of these five elements are also clearly at play in the second passage I want to highlight from *Negative Dialectics*, but the second of the five – that whatever Adorno's ethics is, it is not one that is principle-based, in contrast to, most famously, Kant's ethics – appears as if it is called into question. This, I will suggest, is a mere appearance – in fact all five elements are present in the second passage too. Adorno writes:

> *'A new categorical imperative has been imposed by Hitler upon human beings in the state of their unfreedom: to arrange their thoughts and actions so that Auschwitz will not repeat itself, so that nothing similar will happen. This imperative is as refractory to being grounded as once the givenness [Gegebenheit] of the Kantian. Dealing discursively with it would be an outrage, for the new imperative gives us a bodily sensation of the moral addendum – bodily, because it is the now practical abhorrence of the unbearable physical agony, to which individuals are exposed, even after individuality, as a form of mental reflection, has begun to vanish. It is only in the unvarnished materialistic motive that morality survives.'* (ND, 6: 358/365; translation amended; see also MCP, 181/116)

There is something perplexing about the idea of a *new* categorical imperative – you will recall that Kant thought that there is and can be only one categorical imperative, albeit one that can be expressed differently (in different formulas). Be that as it may, I think the appeal to the idea of a categorical imperative – new or otherwise – reaffirms that Adorno holds an ethics. The second passage also reaffirms the somatic element – Adorno puts is strongly in saying 'It is only in the unvarnished materialistic motive that morality survives'. And Adorno again emphasises that overlooking this somatic element by trying to discursively ground the ethical demand in question is problematic (indeed, he puts the point also more strongly in this second passage by speaking of an 'outrage' that would be committed by attempts at such discursive grounding). In addition, we can also identify a clear sense of a situational demand here, albeit on a more abstract and general level than the first passage: the events for which the name Auschwitz stands demands a certain reaction of us – the reaction of preventing its reoccurrence (and the occurrence of similar horrors). And this provides a reason why Adorno even in this passage is not espousing a principle-base ethics. It initially

appears as if he does espouse a principle-based ethics because he invokes the idea of a categorical imperative – which for Kant, to recall, is the supreme principle of morality. However, at least part of what makes the new categorical imperative 'new' is that it is not meant as an abstract principle to rule them all. That would get us into the 'bad infinities of derivation and validity' that Adorno invokes in the first passage.[1] Finally, as a sixth element, let me just quickly note the fact that the new categorical imperative is formulated in third-personal *plural* terms: 'human beings [*den Menschen*]', 'their thoughts and actions'. This – and the additional fact that preventing that another Auschwitz' happens will inevitably involve socio-political matters, not just individual conduct and character traits – indicates a point I made earlier: when I speak of ethics in relation to Adorno, it is not just a private ethics for individuals, but the Aristotelian notion of ethics of which politics is always already an integral part.

As noted at the beginning, the element I particularly want to highlight today is the idea of *situational demands*. Now that we have briefly looked at the two passages and encountered already (what I submit are) two examples, it is time to say a bit more about this idea.

Let me begin by providing you with more examples of what I have in mind. First, then, here is another one such example from one of Adorno's lectures – specifically, his 1963 lecture course *Problems of Moral Philosophy* (which provided some of the draft material for Model I of *Negative Dialectics*). In fact, this passage contains two examples of situational demands. Adorno begins:

> *'If we attempt to set up an absolute law and to ask the laws of pure reason to explain why on earth it would be wrong to torture people, we would encounter all sorts of difficulties. For example, the sort of difficulties many Frenchmen have encountered in Algeria where in the course of the terrible concatenation of events in this war their opponents did resort to torture of prisoners. Should they follow this example and torture their own prisoners or should they not? In all such moral questions, the moment you confront them with reason you find yourself plunged into a terrible dialectic. And when faced by this dialectic the ability to say "Stop!" and "You shouldn't even contemplate such things!" has its advantages.'* (PMP 1963, 144/97; translation amended. See also MCP, 181–2/116.)

Once more we see here the idea of a bad infinity of derivation and validity – here interestingly described as 'terrible dialectic'. But more importantly for our purposes today, Adorno suggests here again – like in the first passage from *Negative Dialectics* – that the reaction that torture is going on or could be about to commence should be one of resisting such a move. Even the difficult situation of the Algerian conflict does not allow to use

[1] On this idea of bad infinities, see also PMP 1963, 144, 187-8/97, 126-7; MCP, 181-2/116; and my *Adorno's Practical Philosophy*, Chapter 7.

torture, but demanded of the French to desist from inflicting torture. Adorno goes straight on with a second example:

> *'For example, consider the moment when a refugee comes to your door and asks for shelter. What would be the consequence if you were to set up the entire machinery of reflection in motion, instead of simply acting and telling yourself that here is a refugee who is about to be killed or handed over to some state police in some country or other, and that your duty therefore is to hide and protect him – and that every other consideration must be subordinated to this? If reason makes its entrance at this point then reason itself becomes irrational.'* (PMP 1963, 144–5/97; see also 10.2: 550/CM, 85.)

Here another situation is invoked – the rather topical situation of a refugee asking for shelter – and Adorno suggests that this situation demands to shelter them. If, instead of acting on this situational demand, one were to enter into a complex deliberation about what the rational thing to do is – where presumably this would involve appeal to abstract principles, like Kant's categorical imperative (the 'old categorical imperative', if you like) – then this would again be problematic. (It is noteworthy, by the way, that Adorno here formulates the problem of such a discursive response not in the earlier terms of bad infinity or terrible dialectic, but in terms of irrationality of reason – or perhaps one should translate '*wiederverünftig*' here as 'unreasonable', to read 'reason itself becomes unreasonable'.)

Earlier in the same lecture course, Adorno also offers another example that embodies a situational demand – indeed, a particularly demanding one. It concerns one of the members of the late act of resistance among a small group of German elites against Hitler on 20th July 1944:

> *'I had the opportunity to make the acquaintance of one of the few crucial actors of the 20 July and was able to talk to him. I said to him, 'Well, you knew very well that the conspiracy's chances of success were minimal, and you must have known that if you were caught you had to expect a fate far more terrible than death - unimaginably terrible consequences. What made it possible for you to take action notwithstanding this?' - Whereupon he said to me - … - 'But there are situations that are so intolerable that one just cannot continue to put up with them, no matter what may happen and no matter what may happen to oneself in the course of the attempt to change them.' He said this without any pathos - and I should like to add, without any appeal to theory. He was simply explaining to me what motivated him in that seemingly absurd enterprise on 20 July.'* (PMP 1963, 20/8; see also 10.2: 778/CM, 274; HF, 333/240; and PMP 1956/7 (unpublished) 1, Vo1306–7).

This example brings out particularly starkly the way in which, when I talk of situational demands, it is the situation (not some supreme principle of morality or supreme law-giver) that demands that we act a certain way. The person in question – Fabian von Schlabrendorff – speaks of the situation as impossible to put up with. But I think this brings out a general feature that holds not just in the extreme case – namely, that situational demands are such

that the demand arises from the situation, irrespective of what might happen to the agent or agents in question. They are not about directly or primarily about the subjective orientation, interests and values of the person – though indirectly there might be a connection here (note how von Schlabrendorff talks of his not being able to put up with the situation – still, this is only indirect insofar as it is a feature of the situation that it is intolerable, to which von Schlabrendorff then aptly responds).

This feature is important because it relates to Horkheimer's notion of objective reason which I already mentioned briefly earlier, and to which I would like to turn now in more detail. Before doing so, let me just note that situational demands can occur in mundane contexts and, arguably, even in situations where an individual is on his/her own. Consider, by way of example, the film *All is Lost* (Washington Square Films, 2013). In it, Robert Redford plays an ageing unnamed mariner, sailing his yacht single-handedly. In the middle of the ocean, far away from anyone else, the yacht collides with a piece of maritime debris: a large shipping container, filled with shoes, that has been swept off a passing freighter. The collision badly damages the yacht's hull, just at the waterline. The film suggests very powerfully that Redford's character faces the situational demand to patch the hull, and then plays out how he aims to do so. This demand derives from the situation – a situation that includes the yacht, and the mariner, the container, and crucially the sea.[2]

II

As promised, let me now say something more about Horkheimer's notion of objective reason (and, what in modernity has become its contrast, subjective reason). A good starting point for this is Marx. In a letter to Arnold Ruge, Marx wrote in 1843: 'Reason has always existed, but not always in a rational form'.[3] This claim could serve as a motto for Horkheimer and Adorno – or almost could do so: they would not accept that reason has always existed, but instead suggest that ever since it has, it has not been reasonable. The doubling of reason implied in this claim – of reason and whether or not it is reasonable – already suggests a complex, multifaceted conception of it, rather than a mere reduction of it to instrumental rationality. Formulations reminiscent of Marx's can be found all over the works of Horkheimer and Adorno – perhaps most explicitly in Horkheimer's *Eclipse of Reason*:

[2] I owe this example to my colleague Wayne Martin, who introduces it in the context of discussing Løgstrup's work (notably *The Ethical Demand*), which overlaps in interesting ways with Adorno's work on this point.
[3] Die Vernunft hat immer existiert, nur nicht immer in der vernünftigen Form' (Marx, MEW 1, 'Briefe aus den "Deutsch-Französichen Jahrbüchern"', 337-346, 345). Here and throughout this section I draw on Hans-Ernst Schiller's work – notably his forthcoming 'Die Perspektive Des Denkens. Horkheimers kritischer Begriff der Vernunft'. Marx continues: 'Der Kritiker kann also an jede Form des theoretische und praktischen Bewusstseins anknüpfen und aus den *eignen* Formen der existierenden Wirklichkeit die wahre Wirklichkeit als ihr Sollen und ihren Endzweck entwickeln'.

> *'Reason can realize its reasonableness only through reflecting on the disease of the world as produced and reproduced by human beings'* (*Gesammelte* Schriften, 6:177/Bloomsbury edition 2013, 125; translation amended).[4]

This complex conception of reason relies centrally on a distinction Horkheimer introduces in this book between subjective and objective reason.[5] The former is characterised as a capacity of individual subjects – or rather a set of capacities: means-end reasoning, following logical laws, classifying and distinguishing. It is formal insofar as it does not rely on any specific material and ends – subjective reason can be used to decide on the most effective ways to make others happy or to make them miserable, on how to protect people from harm or how to inflict it on them. It is subject-dependent insofar as depending on whatever ends subjects happen to have, subjective reason can then help them to enact and connect them – there need not be something that is universally true of all subjects. In contrast, objective reason is understood as being a characteristic of the world (or, at least, the social world). It is not formal and subject-dependent, but substantive and object-dependent, and as such connected to a notion of 'objective truth'. Object here is understood more broadly than simply medium-sized material objects like tables and chairs. Indeed, Horkheimer, importantly, makes use of the language of 'situations' to explicate the specific kind of normativity build at stake in objective reason: seeing a drowning child or animal requires of those who pass by (and can swim) that they rescue it; someone's being ill requires treating them as best as we can; something beautiful requires that we appreciate it; and so on (6:34; 7:24f). Each of these situations 'speaks a language of itself' (6:34/p. 7) or, as Horkheimer puts it elsewhere, there is 'a silent appeal by the situation itself' (6:51/p. 21).[6]

According to Horkheimer, these two forms of reasons were originally connected – they are understood as aspects of the same concept. For a long time, objective reason was

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[4] 'Vernunft kann ihre Vernünftigkeit nur durch Reflexion auf die Krankheit der Welt verwirklichen, wie sie durch den Menschen produziert und reproduziert wird.'

[5] See also his later essay 'Zum Begriff der Vernunft' (1952). My focus here will be on Horkheimer, but much of what I will say holds also for Adorno. Indeed, Horkheimer includes an acknowledgement to Adorno in *Eclipse of* Reason, saying that it would be difficult to say, which thought in this book originated with him and which one with Adorno. In turn, Adorno picks up the distinction between subjective and objective reason, and the theses associated with it, in a number of his works – perhaps most explicitly in his 'Introduction to "The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology"', in which he refers to *Eclipse of Reason* as elaborating the distinction (8:285n7/p. 5n7).

[6] Bernstein later speaks of 'material inferences' in relation to Adorno, and gives the following central example: 'the logically expressed rule 'If p is bleeding badly from an external limb, and it cannot be stanched otherwise, then you should apply a tourniquet" is but the formal expression of what is the material connection between the experience of humans "bleeding badly" and everything about our experience of that situation – how awful, painful, threatening it is; how urgent is the requirement for response; how we aid one another in this way, and hence what giving aid is and how and why we do it; how different forms of damage require different forms of aid, and the role of touniquets in those forms of emergency aid – that makes 'applying a tourniquet' the thing to do' (Bernstein 2001: 356f). In many ways, Bernstein and I are in agreement. He emphasises the side of the subject and its concepts (albeit using a wider notion of concept and inference than the ones Adorno criticises), while I would accentuate more the side of the objects (especially the idea of situation-dependence).

predominant – connected to various metaphysical and religious systems – but the Enlightenment process means that this has been reversed and subjective reason has become dominant. Indeed, its dominance is the hallmark of modernity as we know it. Not just that: subjective reason increasingly threatens to nullify all remaining traces of objective reason (in that sense, speaking of 'eclipse of reason' is not mistaken, after all). And in so doing, subjective reason, also, undermines itself (6:71f; 7:25). Let me expand on how this is so (according to Horkheimer).

Subjective reason has been an instrument of enlightenment by challenging various magical, metaphysical and religions approaches, revealing them to be weak or even lacking in justification (notably 6:78). However, in so doing, it has undercut not just problematic worldviews and notions of 'objective truth', but any worldview and such notion of truth. If it succeeded in erasing objective truth altogether, then it would thereby erase itself too: for it cannot stand on its own. And here is why: without the substantiality of objective reason, concepts are only 'empty shells' (7:25) and thereby any 'reasonable justification' becomes impossible. Without the connection to concrete – and that is substantial, object-dependent – judgements, reason withers (6:72). In particular, it loses its essential element of being able to do more than reproduce facts or apply stereotypes (6:72f). It is, thus unsurprising, consternates Horkheimer, that subjective reason has been pliable to reigning interests and forms of domination, and co-opted by them (7:26,28), no longer able to condemn them as irrational (6:41, 51; 7:30f).

It is important to note that Horkheimer does not propose – as a remedy to the 'crisis of reason' – to abandon subjective reason altogether. Such an idea he finds in Huxley, but rejects as naïve and as leading to trust on blind violence, cynicism, and contempt for the masses, and thereby contribute to domination, rather than ending it (6:73f).

There also is no proposal of going back to previous arrangements where objective reason had priority. This is neither possible nor desirable (6:78f, 151). It is not desirable in good part because past arrangements were not free from domination either and characterised by thought systems we can and should not accept – subjective reason rightly unveiled them as problematic. In particular, the force of the systems of objective reason had its origin in myths, taboos, and the like, and thereby in the justified fear of being overwhelmed by a hostile environment and the first attempts to control it (6:54f) and the social domination which always went hand in hand with such attempts (6:106, 116). Indeed, modern forms of racism or anti-Semitism preserves an element of the archaic fear: the cave dwellers' fear of strangers (6:100). Moreover, past ideas were in contradiction with each other and in flux (6:79) – there is no fixed point to which we could simply return (and proper fidelity to these ideas would not be to ossify them and accept them dogmatically). Finally, Horkheimer even goes as far as claiming that the reason's 'illness' is based on its origin as

domination of nature (6:176) – there is no golden past of reason, but it has always already been intertwined with domination.

Instead, the remedy would be to reconcile subjective and objective reason – just as Hegel aimed for. This also means that the subject has to be given its due: 'only a definition of the objective goals of society that includes the purpose of self-preservation of the subject, the respect for individual life, deserves to be called objective' (6:176/p. 124).[7] Among other things, this is, presumably, a thinly veiled criticism of the Soviet Union and other nominal socialist regimes. But it also relates to another point: overcoming the rupture within the concept of reason is not merely a philosophical task, but a socio-political one (6: 182, 184; 7:34f).

In the absence of the required socio-political changes – presumably requiring a revolution – the question arises how critical endeavours, including critical theory, can continue. What enables the self-reflection of reason and the critique of its reigning form as unreasonable? Unfortunately, on that point Horkheimer's text is not sufficiently clear, containing a number of seemingly different strategies, none of which is well worked-out.

One such strategy seems to be to rely on the residual elements of objective reason still available to us. Specifically, the claim is that language still harbours such residues (6:167, 178; 7:30). In this way, we have to rely on something from the past, like feudal attitudes or long-forgotten forms of worship and superstition:

> *'These old forms of life smoldering under the surface of modern civilization still provide, in many cases, the warmth inherent in any delight, in any love of a thing for its own sake rather than that of another thing. The pleasure of keeping a garden goes back to ancient times when gardens belonged to the gods and were cultivated for them* (6:55/p. 23; see also 7:31).[8]

Even the idea of human dignity feeds off the awe for the gods and rulers (6: 178; 7:31f), and would become an 'empty phrase' without an – however buried – experience of this awe (see also 6:51).

What is perplexing, even problematic, about this move is how such memory or experience is meant to help. It seems to rely on the idea of a golden past of which we feed – despite, as seen, having ruled out such an idea. The awe of gods and rulers might have led people to develop the idea of ends in themselves, but this does not mean that there genuinely were such ends, rather than a domination-induced illusion thereof. Moreover, Horkheimer – and

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[7] '… nur eine Definition der objektiven Ziele der Gesellschaft, die den Zweck der Selbsterhaltung des Subjets einschließt, die Achtung vor dem individuellen Leben, es verdient, objective genannt zu werden'.

[8] 7:31: 'Was in der späten Gegenwart überhaupt noch das Leben lebenswürdig macht, zehrt von der Wärme, die jeder Lust, jeder Liebe zu einem Ding einmal innewohnte: Glück selbst hat archaische Züge, und die Folgerichtigkeit, mit der sie beseitigt warden, zieht das Unglück und die seelische Leere nach sich. In der Freude an einem Garten zittert noch das kultische Element nach, das den Gärten zukam, als sie den Göttern gehörten und für side gepflegt wurden' (7:31; see also 6: 55).

similarly Adorno – suggests that the ability to experience the archaic origins is withering, and with it the ability to wield objective reason. With the decline of the individual – sketched in Chapter Four of *Critique of Instrumental Reason* – the force of resistance is in decline too. As Adorno puts it at one point in *Negative Dialectics*, those who will see through the apologia of a total society 'are certain to die out' (ND, 6: 265/268; see also MM, Aphorism No. 88, 4: 153/135).

Sometimes, Horkheimer speaks not of the awe of gods, but the negation of past injustices. Such memories are required, he suggests, in order that value concepts like freedom, equality, justice and humanity retain some substance with which to criticise the hypostatised subjective reason and social reality (6:55/24; see also 178 and 7:32). This seems more promising an avenue[9] – not least because it would be compatible with negativism, to which Horkheimer and Adorno are deeply committed.

Let me briefly say something about negativism – for more detail, please consult my 2013 book on *Adorno's Practical Philosophy*. Negativism can take at least four forms – it can be methodological, epistemic, substantive, and metaethical. The relevant notions of negativism here are epistemic and metaethical. According to *epistemic* negativism, we can only know the wrong, the bad, illness, the abnormal, etc.; and we cannot know the good, the right, what health or the normal is. It is, thus, a claim about the limitations of our knowledge – at least in our current circumstances. The qualification of epistemic negativism is important in the context of Adorno's and Horkheimer's work: on my reading, both are epistemic negativists, but only within a certain historical context – specifically, they (like Hegel) thinks that we cannot know what the good life is prior to the realisation of its social conditions. These conditions are given neither in any pre- modern society, nor (pace Hegel) in our modern social world. Seeking the residues of objective reason in concrete bads and the history of resistance to them would fit well with epistemic negativism. It would also fit well with *metaethical* negativism – here the thesis is that knowledge of the bad (or parts thereof) is sufficient to account for the normativity of claims based on it. Put differently, we can account for value judgements or rational criteria even in the absence of knowing the good, the right, or any positive value. On any justifiable sense of account of normativity, the bad (or wrong or ill) is normatively sufficient on its own. Thus, in this context, concrete bads and the memory of resistance to them throughout history suffice as manifestations for objective reason – their occurrence in particular situations demand by themselves certain responses, notably Critical Theory and resistance to a wrong world.

Both Horkheimer and Adorno tie the idea of the irrationality of the social world dominated by subjective reason and capitalism to that of the lack of humanity – already in

[9] A particular current of second generation Frankfurt School theorists – notably Osker Negt and Alexander Kluge – made more out of this idea in *Geschichte und Eigensinn* (see also Johan Hartle).

Horkheimer's seminal text 'Traditional and Critical Theory'.[10] The notion of humanity at play here is a normative one – not a descriptive one about what human beings are like here and now:

> *'Critical thought has a concept of humanity as in conflict with itself […]. If activity governed by reason is proper to humanity, then existent social practice, which forms the individual's life down to its least details, is inhuman, this inhumanity affects everything that goes on in society'* ('Traditional and Crittical Theory' (1937), reprinted in his *Critical* Theory, 1972: 213; translation amended).

Horkheimer clearly affirms both the antecedent and the consequent – reason is proper to humanity, but the existing society is irrational in forming people in such a way as to deny the full exercise of this capacity (and irrational also insofar as, in many cases, it fails to fulfil many other needs). The actually existing human beings do not yet realise their humanity – such realisation lies in a possible future in a differently constituted social world. Critical Theory – he writes already in 1933 (in 'Materialism and Morality') – invokes the 'needs of a becoming humanity [*werdenen Menschheit*]'.

This approach seems anthropological not just in referring to a future realisation of humanity, but also – albeit possibly relatedly – in holding that this potential realisation is always already inscribed in human beings, even where – like in our current social world – they do not realise their species being. In the 'Postscript' (1937), Horkheimer writes that '[…] the thrust towards a rational society, which admittedly seems to exist today only in the realms of fantasy, is really innate in every human being' (1972:251; translation amended). And Adorno notes:

> *The preservation of humanity is inexorably inscribed within the meaning of rationality: it has its end in a reasonable organization of society, otherwise it would bring its own movement to an authoritarian standstill. Humanity is organized rationally solely to the extent that it preserves its societalized subjects according to their unfettered potentialities.* ('Marginalia to Theory and Practice' [1969], 10.2:775/Critical Models, see also 20.1: 147–8).

It sounds like Adorno and Horkheimer are making transhistorical claims about human nature and reason. The immediate challenge is that such transhistorical claims would seem inconsistent with their insistence on a thoroughly historical approach and perspective found in the very same texts (notably TCT, §§14, 48; N§§1, 2) as well as in other writings by Horkheimer (see, for example, M&M in GS 3:132) and Adorno.[11] Some of Horkheimer's successors – notably Habermas – have tried to escape this by way of a formal anthropology or universal pragmatics, but I suspect that Horkheimer (and Adorno) would have rejected

[10] See also, mainly in respect with Adorno, Freyenhagen 2011 and 2013: Ch. 9.

[11] See, notably, Adorno's statement in a lecture: '[…] criticism ensures that what has evolved loses its appearance as mere existence and stands revealed as the product of history. This is essentially the procedure of Marxist critique [...] Marxist critique consists in showing that every social and economic factor that appears to be part of nature is in fact something that has evolved historically' (*History and Freedom*, pp. 135–136).

this as either empty or insufficiently historical (or both). (Indeed, Amy Allen's recent critique of Habermas's programme of universal pragmatics suggests that his programme is anchored in the modern subject, and thus historically, after all.[12])

Elsewhere, I have suggested that a way to meet this challenge is to read Horkheimer's (and Adorno's) claims as postulates about human beings derived from the historical analysis of concrete bads. There are not traditional metaphysical claims about timeless essences, but rather ideal-typical constructions that arise in the context of interpreting and criticising certain phenomena, such as neurosis and anti-Semitism.[13]

This way of approaching the matter links up well with the idea that language still harbours residues of objective reason. Specifically, the link would be that concrete bads and the memory of resistance against them has left traces in our everyday discourse of objective reason. Critical Theory's role would then be to mobilise these resources by way of reminders – disclosing concrete bads and how they are interconnected and entwined with a social system that cannot but generate them.

III

It is here where we can see the beginnings of an Adornian account of social pathology – Adornian in its epistemic and meta-ethical negativism; Adornian in working upwards from concrete bads, rather than imposing a supreme principle (like 'old' categorical imperative in Kant's ethics, or the 'Discourse Principle' in Habermas' work) or imposing a master value (like recognition in Honneth or justice in mainstream political philosophy); and Adornian in disclosing and responding to situational demands.

Social Pathology has a long history as an idea. It means somewhat different things to different thinkers, but its core consists in the weaker thesis that society makes individuals ill and the stronger thesis that society itself is ill. Probably the clearest example of how society itself is ill, is the issue of human-made climate change. There are obvious health and disease implications for individuals – existing and future ones. But human-made climate change *also* suggests a notion of social pathology in a stronger sense: arguably, the very idea of human society implies the task of sustaining humanity for the future, and, hence, a society that systematically endangers that future is a pathological society. A humanity-destroying society is in a certain sense a contradiction in terms: it does not fulfil its in-built purpose.

This is sometimes overlooked. One reason for this is a kind of linguistic illusion. Language appears as if it were infinitely flexible. For example, it seems as one can combine any adjective both with a certain term *and* its contrast. For example, 'night' and 'day' are

[12] Allen 2016, esp. Ch. 2.
[13] See Freyenhagen 2011 and 2013.

understood as contrasts, but we can speak of a ‘cold night’ just as much as of a ‘cold day’. Yet, the appearance of infinite flexibility of language is misleading. It is true that that it *might seem* as if we can put any adjective and noun together just as sensibly as any other pair. *But this is not so*. Consider how jarring it is to combine ‘laudable’ and ‘torture’ or ‘beautiful’ and ‘oil spill’. While less obvious, I think it is also jarring to combine ‘unsustainable’ with ‘society’ or with ‘economy’. This is not to deny that there can be ‘unsustainable economies’. My point is, rather, that when reality works out such that it is apt, after all, to bring ‘unsustainable’ and ‘economy’ together, then this highlights a problem. A humanity-destroying society might well exist as a matter of fact. Indeed, we might live in such a society – our capitalist economic system looks like it is heading for disaster. But this does not take anything away from the fact that there is something inherently wrong in a humanity-destroying society – wrong according to the very idea of what a society is, which includes centrally the purpose of sustaining humanity into the future.

Here is how Adorno puts it – and with that quotation, I will end my talk:

> *Society, ..., ‘means’: objectively aiming at reproduction of life consonant with the state of its powers. Otherwise, societal arrangement – even societalization itself – in the simplest cognitive sense is absurd*. (‘Introduction to “The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology”’ [1969], 8: 348/p. 62; see also 10.2:775/Critical Models, pp. 272f, and ND, 203/203-4).