Inheriting Nietzsche: The Frankfurt School and Foucault on the Foundation of Critique

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INHERITING NIETZSCHE: THE FRANKFURT SCHOOL AND FOUCAU LT ON
THE FOUNDATION OF CRITIQUE

A Dissertation
Submitted to the McAnulty College and Graduate School of Liberal Arts

Duquesne University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

By
George William Shea, IV

May 2015
INHERITING NIETZSCHE: THE FRANKFURT SCHOOL AND FOUCAULT ON
THE FOUNDATION OF CRITIQUE

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ABSTRACT

INHERITING NIETZSCHE: THE FRANKFURT SCHOOL AND FOUCALUT ON
THE FOUNDATION OF CRITIQUE

By
George William Shea, IV
May 2015

Dissertation supervised by James Swindal

My dissertation examines the theoretical ramifications that rejecting a metaphysical foundation has for providing critical and normative resources. While commentators often dismiss post-metaphysical philosophies as contradictory variants of anti-metaphysics, I demonstrate using the work of Nietzsche that they proceed instead from a deliberate “methodological decision” to suspend the use of metaphysical principles. For this reason, while the methodological commitments of post-metaphysical critical social theories establish a theoretical orientation for their inquiries, they must forego analyses that attribute domination to the distorting effects of illusion, error, or illegitimacy, and would thus cast liberation from domination as a return to a metaphysical foundation. In this light, Horkheimer’s critique of instrumental reason ultimately fails insofar as it invokes a rational, human essence in need of liberation from the distorting effects of Western reason. Alternatively, Foucault’s conception of
critique, “the art of voluntary insubordination,” succeeds as a viable post-metaphysical practice since it uniquely advances a form of social and political resistance that refrains from appealing to any such essences. In the end, my dissertation establishes the coherence of post-metaphysical methodologies in general as well as the import of the Frankfurt School and Foucault’s normative resources specifically, both of which continue to be a source of debate in critical social theory.
DEDICATION

To the lean and hungry spirits that go forth to fatten themselves…
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

For the author of any project whose genesis belongs to a system of institutionalization such as academia there are of necessity innumerable persons without whom one could not have possibly brought one’s project to completion. I am grateful, of course, for all the efforts of these people.

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I would like to thank Michael Zander, Jared Welsh, and Clayton Fowler for the many late night, impassioned conversations that provided the early inspiration and insights, which eventually blossomed into this project. If those nights had not been so exciting, so intoxicating, and so addictive, I might just have gone on and done something useful with my life.
Lastly, I would like to thank the one and only Katherine Filbert, not only for the innumerable discussions that helped me to articulate many of the ideas in this dissertation, but more importantly for the understanding and encouragement that she freely gave as I descended into the depths of Jigoku, transforming into a demonic spirit that restlessly roamed our apartment, yearning to return to the land of living. If it were not for your saintly love and patience, I never would have made it!
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CHAPTER 1:

INTRODUCTION
At first glance, the work of Friedrich Nietzsche, Max Horkheimer, and Michel Foucault would seem to make for strange bedfellows. The generally accepted picture of Nietzsche presents him as an idiosyncratic loner who touts the modern triumph of an individualistic nihilism that finds its highest expression in the living existence of the Übermensch. Horkheimer, to the contrary, is most famously known as the early, socially-engaged, director of The Institute for Social Research and for penning, in conjunction with Theodor Adorno, the twentieth century’s most scathing critique of the Enlightenment, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Foucault, alternatively, is known as the twentieth century’s most renowned theorist-historian-philosopher-sociologist who sought to investigate the mechanisms of normalization and subjectivation that are linked to discourses of madness, discipline, and sexuality. Given the disparate focus of their work, they appear to share little in common.

Despite these surface differences, there are nonetheless a few key theoretical concerns that link their work. One might even say that Nietzsche, Horkheimer, and Foucault form a “loose” and “unofficial” tradition within the history of philosophy itself. All three thinkers undertake serious engagements with the entire history of Western thought, examine the interpenetration of reason and power, grapple with the contradictions of modernity, and reformulate the Enlightenment ideals of freedom and self-determination. However, as I will argue, the most significant thread that ties their work together is their sophisticated engagement with the history of Western metaphysics. All three thinkers characterize Western metaphysics as the project of ascertaining the essential, universal, and immutable structures of reality that underlie the totality of existence for the purpose of securing an indubitable foundation for our judgments concerning the world, our relation to it, our relation to one another, and our relation to ourselves. Under this interpretation, Western metaphysics aims to secure a primordial truth that
elicits everyone’s assent. Moreover, at the very heart of this project, Nietzsche, Horkheimer, and Foucault discern an impetus to tyranny and fascism. The drive to metaphysics is the drive to a singular primordial truth—or set of truths—that excludes all others and forces one’s fidelity. Metaphysics stands as an ideological weapon to include and exclude through its mechanisms of validation and invalidation, thereby establishing the legitimacy and illegitimacy of that over which it reigns. In this way, the dream of metaphysics is the dream of wielding a primordial truth that establishes the universal and necessary authority of those who possess it—that is, metaphysics is an instrument for establishing one’s rightful rule.

It is not difficult to see, then, that many commentators read Nietzsche, Horkheimer, and Foucault as engaged in a critique of Western metaphysics as well as a critique of the conceptions of reason that metaphysics presupposes. And thus, as a critique of reason, the work of all three thinkers is denounced as a variation of an “absurdist,” “aporetic,” “self-referential,” “relativistic,” anti-metaphysics. More specifically, Nietzsche, Horkheimer, and Foucault have all been read as engaging in an “unmasking” critique of reason that invalidates the claims of reason by disclosing reason’s association and admixture with something other than reason. On this account, Nietzsche’s work purportedly aims to reveal will to power as the fundamental reality that underlies all of existence and thus as corrupting reason at its very core. Horkheimer’s work supposedly reveals reason’s inextricable link with myth, which calls into question reason’s ability to substantiate its own standards of validity. And, Foucault’s work ostensibly demonstrates that the claims of reason are always relative to their historically constituted discourse, which calls into question reason’s claims to universality and necessity. Thus, all three thinkers are accused of undertaking a critique of reason that aims to invalidate reason, and thereby the project of Western metaphysics, via an appeal to a more fundamental insight into the
nature of reality. In this way, all three thinkers supposedly critique reason by somehow stepping outside of reason so as to nullify its authority. However, as their critics readily note, this is a self-refuting theoretical endeavor. By laying claim to a more essential insight into reality so as to invalidate reason, all three thinkers must in the end hold that their claims are truer than the claims of metaphysics, which ultimately leads to the espousal of a self-refuting anti-metaphysics. Critics of anti-metaphysical philosophies correctly demonstrate that every anti-metaphysics, in order to establish the validity of its own position, must ultimately rely upon its own appeal to a primordial truth, which in the end simply installs another metaphysical system. In this way, the critique of metaphysics presupposes metaphysics and the critics of Nietzsche, Horkheimer, and Foucault highlight the futility of any such endeavor.

While the critics of Nietzsche, Horkheimer, and Foucault are correct that every anti-metaphysical system is simply another metaphysical system in disguise, does this mean then that there is no escape from metaphysics? Must we always play its game and according to its rules? We seem to find ourselves in nothing less than a theoretical blackmail. One is either for or against metaphysics, and to be against metaphysics is, oddly enough, both to fail by the standards of metaphysical philosophy—anti-metaphysical philosophy is irrational—and also to be engaged in metaphysical philosophy—every anti-metaphysics is really just another metaphysics. Thus, it seems that there is no alternative to metaphysical philosophy.

As I will argue in the following chapters, the link that binds the work of Nietzsche, Horkheimer, and Foucault is precisely a sensitivity to this very blackmail as well as a sophisticated attempt to circumvent its grip. Like the Epicurean clinamen, like the slightest possible deviation between an arc and its tangent, Nietzsche, Horkheimer, and Foucault all attempt to chart a course between, and away from, the antipodes of metaphysics and anti-
metaphysics. More specifically, I will argue that the singular originality uniting their work is a conception of *post*-metaphysical philosophy as “methodology.” Nietzsche, Horkheimer, and Foucault are all aware of the theoretical pitfalls of an anti-metaphysical philosophy. For this reason, they establish their theoretical positions via a “methodological decision” to suspend the principles and assumptions of metaphysics—that is, they bracket the metaphysical presuppositions of timeless absolutes and universal subjects capable of discerning such absolutes—and instead begin with the decision to favor interpretation and historical contextualism over absolute knowing, contingency over necessity, nominalism over realism, and history over metaphysics. For this reason, their work does not aim to *disprove* metaphysics, as their critics contend, but rather stands as a methodological *alternative* to metaphysical philosophy.

The consequences of erecting a post-metaphysical philosophy upon the basis of a methodological decision to suspend metaphysical principles are quite noteworthy. First, since the project of metaphysics as Nietzsche, Horkheimer, and Foucault characterize it, is to disclose primordial truths about the immutable structures of reality that force everyone’s assent, and since Nietzsche, Horkheimer, and Foucault all aim to circumvent the grip of metaphysics methodologically, this means that the commitments that orient their inquiries turn out to be reflexive, tentative, experimental, and dialogical. In other words, since the commitments orienting post-metaphysical inquiries do not stand as universal and necessary truths regarding the nature of reality, they are instead reflexive heuristics established via a methodological decision on the part of the inquirer. Since the commitments orienting post-metaphysical inquiries do not feign to possess the finality of primordial truths, they are thus advanced experimentally and possess only a tentative status. And, lastly, given the reflexive, experimental, and tentative
character of the commitments that orient post-metaphysical inquiries, they are ultimately
dialogical—that is, they are always open for discussion and thus capable of reversal. In this way,
for Nietzsche, Horkheimer, and Foucault, post-metaphysical philosophy as a methodology
evades the latent impulse to tyranny discerned in metaphysical philosophy.

As a further consequence of advancing post-metaphysical philosophy as a
methodological alternative to metaphysics, Nietzsche, Horkheimer, and Foucault employ
alternative conceptions of critique to those typically deployed by metaphysics. Whereas
metaphysical forms of critique aim either to “unmask” as illegitimate those false absolutes that
do not accord with a primordial truth or to prescribe a course of action as legitimate based on its
accordance with a primordial truth—which is really to say that metaphysical forms of critique
attempt to justify their normative legitimacy via an appeal to a founding origin—the post-
metaphysical forms of critique offered by Nietzsche, Horkheimer, and Foucault, since they
methodologically suspend the use of metaphysical principles, do not advance conventional
normative resources. Neither the aims of their work nor the standards of value by which they
evaluate better and worse socio-political endeavors purport to express the intransigence of
primordial truths. Again, the methodological commitments that orient the post-metaphysical
philosophies of Nietzsche, Horkheimer, and Foucault are reflexive, tentative, experimental, and
dialogical. Thus, Nietzsche chooses life as a value and fabricates will to power as the measure of
life. Horkheimer considers the alleviation of human suffering a goal without need of justification
and advances dialectical materialism as a method best suited for achieving this purpose. And,
Foucault aims to make possible alternative styles of life in the forms of the “aesthetics of
existence” and the “undefined work of freedom” and deploys archaeological and genealogical
analyses as methods for developing techniques that would enable us to alter the conditions that
have made us into something that we would rather not be. Thus, as I will conclude, neither Nietzsche, Horkheimer, nor Foucault purport to advance primordial truths regarding the nature of reality or to advance normative positions to which everyone is beholden since such claims belong to the province of metaphysics.

Ultimately, my aim here is quite simply to demonstrate contrary to those critics who denounce the work of Nietzsche, Horkheimer, and Foucault as forms of an absurdist anti-metaphysics that all three theorists, rather than engaging in the self-refuting project of invalidating metaphysics, instead suspend methodologically the use of metaphysical premises. In this way, I establish via readings of Nietzsche, Horkheimer, and Foucault the theoretical coherence, and the thus tenability, of post-metaphysical philosophy in general when conceived of as a methodology. More significantly, I demonstrate that the purported failure of all three thinkers to propose universal and necessary foundations for normativity and critique is not a detriment to their work as is often claimed, but is rather a considered success when regarded as a methodological strategy for circumventing the impetus to tyranny they detect in metaphysics. Thus, Nietzsche, Horkheimer, and Foucault can each be read as fabricating novel, theoretical instruments for critique that simultaneously refrain from establishing the systems of tyranny they seek to avoid. In the end, I demonstrate that the advantage of post-metaphysical methodologies lies in their openness and dialogical relationship to both their own commitments as well as those of other forms of inquiry, which is an asset to any form of philosophy that aims to mitigate the fascist tendencies to domination, exploitation, and oppression as Nietzsche, Horkheimer, and Foucault all precisely aim to do.
CHAPTER 2:

NIETZSCHE AS POST-METAPHYSICAL PHILOSOPHER OF LIFE
INTRODUCTION

In *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* Jürgen Habermas claims that Nietzsche’s work falls prey to “the aporias of a self-referential critique of reason that is bound to undermine its own foundations.”¹ The reason for this, he argues, is that it undertakes an “unmasking” critique of reason that either assumes, on the one hand, the validity of its own position and thereby remains ensnared in the dialectic of enlightenment or, on the other hand, undermines entirely the standards of rational legitimacy and thereby calls into question the very foundation of its own critique. On either account, according to Habermas, Nietzsche’s position lapses into performative contradiction and is thus incoherent. Overturning Habermas’s misreading of Nietzsche as a postmodern irrationalist is significant since it continues to play a decisive role in shaping successive debates regarding the critical potential of Nietzsche’s work, most especially regarding the place of Nietzsche’s post-metaphysical philosophy in critical social theory. While Fred Dallmayr² defends Nietzsche by highlighting Habermas’s disingenuous reduction of Nietzsche’s oeuvre to ideas advanced in *The Birth of Tragedy*, and Karin Bauer³ situates Habermas’s anxiety regarding Nietzsche’s purported irrationalism within the context of Nietzsche’s influence on Horkheimer and Adorno, neither author directly challenges Habermas’s accusations of Nietzsche’s work as contradictory or incoherent. Here, I argue that in claiming Nietzsche employs *Wille zur Macht* both as a principle by which to *invalidate* the claims of metaphysics and as the primordial “other” to reason that “unmasks” it as an expression of domination, Habermas misreads in the work of Nietzsche a commitment to ideology critique—

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the project of unmasking illusions via an appeal to a primordial truth. In doing so, Habermas fails to account for Nietzsche’s problematization of the very notion of truth, something Habermas presumes necessary for Nietzsche’s critique. For this reason, Habermas’s misreading inverts Nietzsche’s line of argumentation by mistaking the conclusions Nietzsche draws from his critique of truth—Wille zur Macht as the measure of life rather than truth—for the reasons he advances for his critique of metaphysics and reason—the existence and value of truth is assumed on the basis of metaphysicians’ faith. Due to this inversion, Habermas constructs a reading of Nietzsche that is problematic since such a reading makes use of the very idea of a primordial truth that Nietzsche himself repudiates. Alternatively, I demonstrate that a coherent account of Wille zur Macht emerges when we interpret it as the fabrication of a post-metaphysical principle that originates from Nietzsche’s critique of truth and not as an impetus for it. Thus, by closely examining Habermas’ criticisms of what he considers to be Nietzsche’s critique of reason, I not only defend Nietzsche’s work from the accusations of incoherence and contradiction, but I also establish the central role Nietzsche’s critique of truth plays in conceptualizing Nietzsche as a post-metaphysical philosopher.

THE DIALECTIC OF ENLIGHTENMENT AND THE PROJECT OF MODERNITY

The Enlightenment’s most lasting effect has been the severing of any connection between faith and reason. The discovery of the “new world,” in conjunction with the events of the Renaissance and the Reformation, set in motion a critical suspicion of faith as a means for buttressing the social and cultural sway of myth, tradition, and religious authority that culminated in their eventual toppling. In faith’s place, reason established itself as the only rightful authority worthy of recognition since it alone was capable of generating universal understanding and consent. Yet, according to Habermas, reason’s ascendancy during the
Enlightenment brought with it what came to be the defining crisis of modernity—the need to establish its own criteria out of itself. Appearing initially in the realm of aesthetic criticism as the *querelle des anciens et des modernes*, modernity, as both a radical break from antiquity and the middle-ages, and as a consciousness of itself as “the new,” was confronted with the necessity of having to fashion for itself its own standards without recourse to the models that had gone before. According to Habermas, it was Hegel, however, who was the first to lift this issue to the level of a properly philosophical problem. Since modernity established itself through a rejection of the past—as superstitious, mythic, and irrational—it had to provide for itself, and out of itself, its own norms. Specifically, reason, which tore down the old idols and erected itself in their place, must, if it is to substantiate its claim to authority, also provide the norms by which modernity can guide itself.

Habermas locates both Hegel’s framing of this problem and his solution to this problem in Hegel’s early seminary writings while studying in Tübingen. According to Habermas, Hegel saw in the division between faith and knowledge, between Orthodoxy and the Enlightenment, an inability for either to speak to “the ethical totality of an entire nation and of inspiring a life of political freedom.” On the one hand, Hegel criticizes Orthodoxy for its reduction of the ethical life to mandates that usher solely from authority and thus denigrate the intrinsic value of rational human beings, which only further reinforces the separation of private religion from public life. On the other hand, Hegel claims that while the “religion of reason” holds that only that which is authorized by universal human reason is legitimately binding, it is nonetheless incapable of inspiring the heart and arousing enthusiasm, and thus fails to inspire the institutions of public life and thereby to unify the ethical totality of the state. In this way, the crisis of modernity finds its concrete expression in the division between an Orthodoxy inspired by an impassioned fidelity to

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blind authority and a cult of reason driven by an unimpassioned recognition of universal moral duty. Thus, the task for Hegel is to fashion out of modernity and for modernity a new model that can overcome the cultural division between private religion and public life, which would thereby inspire the ethical life of the nation as a whole.

According to Hegel, at the heart of the modern conception of reason, from Descartes to Kant, lies the principle of subjectivity: “…the structure of a self-relating, knowing subject, which bends back upon itself as object, in order to grasp itself as in a mirror image.” Manifested in the assertion of the authority of the subject’s own insights over and against the authority of religion and tradition, in the authority of individual freedom and will to establish government over and against the authority of divine right, in the authority of a knowing subject to disenchant nature through science and thus liberate itself from superstition, and in the authority of the individual to pursue his own welfare so long as it is in harmony with the welfare of others, the principle of subjectivity expresses itself in every major facet of social life. Its most significant expression, according to Hegel, is found in Kant’s three Critiques, which designate the proper limits of reason by dividing the epistemic, the moral, and the aesthetic spheres one from the other and erecting each upon its own distinct and sovereign foundation. While the principle of subjectivity has unshackled the powers of human freedom and reflection from the tyranny of tradition and religion, it has not been able to exhibit itself as a genuine power of unification via the creation of a new norm for modernity. In Hegel’s estimation, Kant fails to recognize in his own threefold division of reason the concrete divisions already at work within culture, which themselves stem from the principle of subjectivity itself. Thus, according to Hegel, in failing to recognize the concrete divisions at work within culture, Kant’s critiques provide a merely formal unity of reason instead of an actual unity of reason. Therefore, for Hegel, Kant’s failure to generate

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5 Habermas, *PDM*, p. 18.
concrete cultural unity from his merely formal unity of reason discloses modernity as an unfinished project and thereby elicits the need for a philosophical response. As Habermas frames it, “The question now is,” for Hegel, “whether one can obtain from subjectivity and self-consciousness criteria that are taken from the modern world and are at the same time fit for orienting oneself within it.”

If, for Hegel, the task of modernity is to provide for itself and out of itself its own criteria, and if the principle of subjectivity lies at the heart of modernity, then the philosophical task of modernity is to realize the unifying power of reason by employing the principle of subjectivity in order to overcome the divisions it has created. This means that reason must be conceived of as a form of reflexive relation within the subject that is nonetheless capable of creating real unity within the individual, society, and philosophy. As Habermas states: “If the true identity is in turn supposed to be developed from the approach of the philosophy of reflection, reason does have to be thought of as the relation-to-itself of a subject, but now as a reflection that does not merely impose itself upon another as the absolute power of subjectivity; rather, it finds its existence and movement in nothing else but resisting all absolutizing, that is, in doing away with every positive element it brings forth.” Whereas the finite and infinite, free and determined, known and believed remain irrevocably torn asunder in the Kantian philosophy, Hegel carries the internal logic of the principle of subjectivity to its conclusion and overcomes the divisions brought forth by subject-centered reason. According to Habermas, “In place of the abstract antithesis of the finite and infinite, therefore, Hegel puts the absolute self-relation of a subject that attains self-consciousness from its own substance and has its unity within itself as the difference between the

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6 Habermas, *PDM*, p. 20.
7 Habermas, *PDM*, p. 33.
finite and the infinite." In this way, Hegel’s characterization of absolute knowledge—the subject coming to know itself through the dialectic as the knowing subject—allows him to conceptualize reason as a unifying force that overcomes the dichotomy between private religion and subject-centered reason. Thus, as Habermas says, “The absolute comes to be neither as substance nor as subject; it is apprehended only as the mediating process of a relation-to-self that produces itself free from conditions.”

For Habermas, however, the story of modernity does not neatly end here:

If we pause now for a moment and look back at the course of our thought, it seems that Hegel has reached his goal with this concept of an absolute that overpowers every absolutization and retains as unconditional only the infinite processing of the relation-to-self that swallows up everything finite within itself. Hegel can conceive modernity in terms of its own principle. And, in doing this, he establishes philosophy as the power of unification that overcomes all the positivities that have issued from reflection itself—and thereby heals the modern manifestations of disintegration. Yet, the form that reason must assume in Hegel’s solution to the problem of modernity, on Habermas’s account, “solves the problem too well.” Hegel’s subject of absolute knowing is disclosed to itself both as an individual and as a universal; it is both a particular subject in the world and also the site of all possible cognition. In this way, the individual and the universal achieve unity only through the process of absolute knowing. However, for Habermas, “In the concrete universal, the subject as universal maintains a primacy over the subject as individual.” The political repercussions, according to Habermas, are tremendous: “For the sphere of the ethical, the outcome of this logic is the primacy of the higher-level subjectivity of the state over the subjective freedom of the individual.” For Hegel, this is the only solution to the antagonisms that arise between the state and society when individuals are freed from the

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8 Habermas, *PDM*, p. 33.
9 Habermas, *PDM*, p. 33-34.
10 Habermas, *PDM*, p. 36, emphasis added.
11 Habermas, *PDM*, p. 42.
12 Habermas, *PDM*, p. 40.
13 Habermas, *PDM*, p. 40.
arbitrary whim of monarchical political rule. Specifically, Hegel is addressing the new capitalist free-market economy in which the pursuit of individual self-interest is divorced from the ethical concerns of the nation and in which one’s own ends confront those of others in an arena of competition. Modern civil society, on Hegel’s account, is merely a market-like relation of individuals and not that of an ethical and social whole. In Hegel’s estimation, the principle of subjectivity and its resultant form of individuality has uncoupled economic aims from the aims of the political order. Thus, the socio-political task for Hegel is to overcome the dichotomy between an unfettered and absolute individual freedom and a state that imposes its political and social order. Just as with knowing, this division can be mediated only when the particular realizes itself as a moment of the universal and the universal realizes itself as a concrete particular. In terms of the individual and the state this means that the individual will is to find expression in the state and the state is to find expression in the concrete individual. “But,” Habermas contends, “when the ‘state’ of the Philosophy of Right gets elevated to the ‘reality of substantive will, to something rational in and for itself,’ this has the consequence that political movements that press beyond the boundaries drawn by philosophy offend against reason itself.”¹⁴ In effect, any political position that does not reinforce the status quo is ultimately deemed irrational. Thus, on this account, Hegel’s philosophy of the state ultimately undermines a foundation for political critique and resistance since the state essentially takes precedence to the individual who is supposed to identify with the state—that is, there is no foundation outside of the state upon which to anchor a critique of the state.

In the end, Habermas finds Hegel’s solution to the problem of modernity wanting since, in its attempt to establish a norm out of itself that could provide for the ethical totality of the nation, it ultimately undermines any position from which to launch political critique.

¹⁴ Habermas, PDM, pp. 40-41.
Nonetheless, according to Habermas, Hegel’s work is of lasting importance since he is the one to have “inaugurated the discourse of modernity. He introduced the theme – the self-critical reassurance of modernity. He established the rules within which the theme can be varied – the dialectic of enlightenment.”¹⁵ Those operating in Hegel’s wake, whether it was the Left or the Right Hegelians, adhered to the dialectic of enlightenment; they remained within a concept of philosophy that sought to correct itself via further philosophy, via further enlightenment. Thus, the radical “left” or “young” Hegelians, specifically Marx, disappointed with the Hegelian state, sought to realize the ideal of the ethical totality by shifting the principle of modernity away from the knowing subject and toward the producing subject. Marx critiqued Hegel’s theory of the state by disclosing the social antagonisms that manifested themselves in the state and pointed toward a self-organization of society that would overcome the alienation of laborers and the division between public and private life. In this way, Marx continued with the dialectic of enlightenment and attempted to further the project of modernity via the rules of the game that Hegel himself had established. Similarly, on Habermas’s account, the conservative “right” or “old” Hegelians—such as, Rosenkranz, Hinrichs, and Oppenheim—ultimately defended a strong state that could mediate the unfettered individuality and competitive interests unleashed under capitalism. On their view, only a strong state could guarantee the unity of particular and universal, individual and community, only it could be counted on to direct a people rationally and stand above a multitude of desires and conflicting inclinations. In this way, the right Hegelians too tried to remain within the dialectic of enlightenment to further the project of modernity, i.e., to affect a unity of the divisions wrought by the principle of subjectivity. On either account, enlightenment was to correct itself via further enlightenment. However,

¹⁵ Habermas, *PDM*, p. 51.
Habermas argues, only with the neo-romantics, with Nietzsche, is there an attempt to depart the dialectic. It is here, in this intellectual milieu, that Habermas situates the work of Nietzsche.

**NIETZSCHE, THE DIALECTIC OF ENLIGHTENMENT, AND MODERNITY**

According to Habermas, the project of modernity was ultimately one of trying to replace the socially unifying force that was once provided by religion with an ethical totality that was to arise from within reason itself. With Hegel, this project achieved self-consciousness—reason overcomes its deficiencies, not by going outside of itself, but rather by internally amending itself. To this extent, Hegel established the parameters within which the project of modernity was to unfold—the dialectic of enlightenment. Both the Left and Right Hegelians, while ultimately dissatisfied with the Hegelian brand of social mediation, nonetheless continued to develop the project of modernity via the dialectic of enlightenment, though they too ultimately failed to unify the divisions wrought by the principle of subjectivity. Here, “[in] the context of this constellation,” in the foundering project of modernity, Habermas claims that, “Nietzsche had no choice but to submit subject-centered reason yet again to an immanent critique – or to give the program up entirely.”\(^\text{16}\) Accepting the latter option, Nietzsche abandons reason and thereby takes leave of the dialectic of enlightenment.

By doing so, Nietzsche alternatively attempts to gain “a foothold in myth as the other of reason.”\(^\text{17}\) On this reading, Habermas casts what he considers to be Nietzsche’s critique of reason as an heir to the Romanticism of Schelling, Schlegel and the early Hegel—all of whom claim that, “[in] the forms of a revived mythology, art can reacquire the character of a public institution and develop the power to regenerate the ethical totality of the nation.”\(^\text{18}\) Thus, the early Hegel

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\(^{16}\) Habermas, *PDM*, p. 85-86.

\(^{17}\) Habermas, *PDM*, p. 86.

\(^{18}\) Habermas, *PDM*, p. 88.
argues that myth will ultimately replace philosophy since aesthetic intuition is the highest act of reason,\textsuperscript{19} and Schelling argues that in aesthetic intuition speculative reason surpasses itself in the form of a new mythology that unifies the true and the good in the beautiful,\textsuperscript{20} while Schlegel argues that only the mythopoetic that is cleansed of the rational opens the way to the primordial and unifying forces of myth.\textsuperscript{21} According to all three of these accounts, only art, in the form of a new mythology, can replace the unifying force of religion lost during modernity.

A serious challenge, however, faces the impulse of neo-Romanticism—that is, how can a new mythology emerge if the very terms of modernity prohibit an unmediated return to mythic origins? Whatever the new mythology will be it cannot be a simple revival of, or return to, the myths of yore. A form of neo-mythology must replace both the previous mythologies and modernity in order to restore the unifying power of religion. According to Habermas, this need for an “aesthetically renewed mythology,” born from the problems that erupted during modernity, explains Nietzsche’s appeal to the Dionysian. While the Romantics identified Dionysus with Christ, which would—in making the otherworldly promises of Christianity promises to be redeemed in this world—“rejuvenate” the hopes of the West and restore a socio-political solidarity severed by the rise of enlightenment, Nietzsche’s Dionysus is deployed as a means of departing entirely from both this Christian notion as well as Western modernity. In essence, the Romantic recuperation of Dionysus was an attempt to think the still-to-come

\textit{fulfillment} of the modern age. In Nietzsche’s hands, according to Habermas, the Dionysian

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becomes paradigmatic of an experience of self-oblivion that shatters the basic tenets of modernity:

What Nietzsche calls the “aesthetic phenomenon” is disclosed in the concentrated dealings with itself of a de-centered subjectivity set free from everyday conventions of perceiving and acting. Only when the subject loses itself, when it sheers off from pragmatic experience in space and time, when it is stirred by the shock of the sudden, when it considers “the longing for true presence” (Octavio Paz) fulfilled and, oblivious to itself, is transported by the moment; only when the categories of intelligent doing and thinking are upset, the norms of daily life have broken down, the illusions of habitual normality have collapsed – only then does the world of the unforeseen and the absolutely astonishing open up, the realm of aesthetic illusion, which neither hides nor reveals, is neither appearance nor essence, but nothing other than surface.22

On Habermas’s account, Nietzsche attempts to solve the problem of the origin of a renewed mythology by grounding reason’s “other” in an aesthetically disclosed experience of dissolution in which the subject is liberated from certainty and necessity and plunged into the excesses of power and illusion. With this move, Habermas argues, Nietzsche turns away from the emancipatory content of modernity and the dialectic of enlightenment and confronts reason with an aesthetico-mystical experience that supposedly vitiates reason’s claim to authority. As Habermas explicitly states, “As a counter-authority to reason, Nietzsche appeals to experiences that are displaced back into that archaic realm – experiences of a self-disclosure of a de-centered subjectivity, liberated from all constraints of cognition and purposive activity, and imperatives of utility and morality.”23

Here, according to Habermas, upon the authoritative revelation of the aesthetico-mystical experience of the Dionysian, Nietzsche builds a metaphysical theory of irrationality in which the world appears as “a network of distortions and interpretations for which no intention and no text provides a basis.”24 The de-centering of the subject becomes the site of an all-consuming de-centering of meaning. Art becomes human beings’ only genuine metaphysical activity since life

22 Habermas, PDM, pp. 93-94.
23 Habermas, PDM, p. 94, emphasis added.
24 Habermas, PDM, p. 95.
itself is nothing more than illusion. Moreover, as the site of illusion, of falsifications and fictions, of deception, and of art, life reveals itself for what it truly is—Wille zur Macht, the power to create meaning.\textsuperscript{25} Moreover, according to Habermas, armed with a theory of life as Wille zur Macht, Nietzsche sets out to unmask human existence generally, and reason specifically, for what it really is: “the subjective power claims of value appraisals”\textsuperscript{26} and the history of domination and subjugation. According to Habermas, much of Nietzsche’s work following The Birth of Tragedy\textsuperscript{27} is an attempt to “demonstrate” that Wille zur Macht operates behind our claims to knowledge, morality, and normativity. In the end, says Habermas, Nietzsche claims that the project of modernity, as the unfolding of dialectical reason, is nothing more than another expression of the Wille zur Macht that underlies all of human existence, nothing more than another expression of the will to domination and subjugation, despite all of the Enlightenment’s pretenses to freedom, liberty, and emancipation.

**HABERMAS’S CRITIQUE OF NIEZSCHTE**

As is evident, Habermas takes issue with what he considers to be Nietzsche’s attempt to undertake “an unmasking critique of reason that sets itself outside of reason.”\textsuperscript{28} Simply put, Habermas charges Nietzsche with appealing to an aesthetic experience that “enthrones taste, ‘the Yes and the No of the palate,’ as the organ of a knowledge beyond true and false, beyond good and evil.”\textsuperscript{29} Moreover, in doing so, Habermas claims that Nietzsche has confusedly pursued “a critique of ideology that attacks its own foundations.”\textsuperscript{30} In two short paragraphs in “Section III” of his chapter on Nietzsche in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, Habermas dismisses

\textsuperscript{25} Habermas, *PDM*, p. 95.
\textsuperscript{26} Habermas, *PDM*, p. 95.
\textsuperscript{27} *On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense; Untimely Meditations 2; Daybreak, Book I; Human, All Too Human; Beyond Good and Evil; and Twilight of the Idols*.
\textsuperscript{28} Habermas, *PDM*, p. 96.
\textsuperscript{29} Habermas, *PDM*, p. 96.
\textsuperscript{30} Habermas, *PDM*, p. 96.
the entire Nietzschean enterprise by arguing that the position Nietzsche attempts to establish is ultimately self-refuting since Nietzsche cannot legitimize the very perspective from which he claims the illegitimacy of reason—in other words, by appealing to a position that undermines the legitimacy of reason, and thereby the legitimacy and truth of any position, Nietzsche in turn undermines the very legitimacy and force of his own position.

On this reading, Habermas claims that Nietzsche is thus caught in a double bind: either Nietzsche is engaged in an aesthetic science, genealogy, that “unmasks” and “demonstrates” that *Welle zur Macht* is always at work in reason, which would undermine reason’s claims to objectivity, truth, and validity, but would also in turn destroy genealogy’s own claims to scientificity and truth, or Nietzsche appeals to a foundational aesthetic experience, the Dionysian experience of an obliterated and de-centered subjectivity, that reveals itself as the suppressed “other” to reason, which would undermine the authority of rational standards, but would also in turn undermine any standards upon which Nietzsche could establish the authority of his own aesthetic preferences. In either case, according to Habermas, Nietzsche falls prey to “the aporias of a self-referential critique of reason that is bound to undermine its own foundations.”  

In other words, for Habermas, Nietzsche undertakes an “unmasking” critique of reason that either assumes, on the one hand, the validity of its own position and thereby remains ensnared in the dialectic of enlightenment or, on the other hand, undermines entirely the standards of rational legitimacy and thereby calls into question the very foundation of his own critique.

**The Nietzschean Critique of Metaphysics**

That Nietzsche engages in a critique of truth, metaphysics, and reason, and that he rejects dogmatic philosophy and advances *Wille zur Macht* as a philosophical alternative, is rather

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31 Habermas, *PDM*, p. 104.
uncontroversial. Of issue is the manner and style in which this rejection is undertaken as are the purported conclusions that are supposed to follow from it. Considering that *Beyond Good and Evil* stands as Nietzsche’s first and most systematic expression of *Wille zur Macht*, whereas the previously published *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* presents a more literary account, and considering that *Beyond Good and Evil* additionally offers one of Nietzsche’s most sustained and lucid engagements with metaphysics, I will advance a reading here of Nietzsche’s position in *Beyond Good and Evil* that demonstrates that Nietzsche’s critique of metaphysics and his formulation and deployment of *Wille zur Macht* are neither incoherent nor self-refuting. In making this case, I will follow Alexander Nehamas in defining dogmatic metaphysics as that view that “aims to be accepted necessarily and unconditionally—not as the product of a particular person or idiosyncrasy but as the result of a discovery about the unalterable features of the world.” For this reason, dogmatic metaphysics does not merely aim to be a view amongst others but more significantly aims to be “an accurate description of the real world which forces its own acceptance and makes an unconditional claim on everyone’s assent.” In this way, when using the terms metaphysics and dogmatic philosophy throughout the rest of this essay, I will be referring to: the project of ascertaining the immutable and incontrovertible truths regarding the essential structures of reality, the concomitant values by which we are to live our lives, as well as the methodological procedures and commitments such a project implies.

In the opening lines of the “Preface” to *Beyond Good and Evil*, speaking directly in regard to dogmatic philosophy, Nietzsche states:

> Supposing truth to be a woman – what? is the suspicion not well founded that all philosophers, when they have been dogmatists, have had little understanding of women? that the gruesome

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32 Nietzsche mentions *Wille zur Macht* by name in *BGE* 9, 13, 22, 23, 26, 44, 51, 186, 198, 211, 227, and 259, which is more times than in any subsequently published text.
34 Nehamas, *NLL*, p. 32.
earnestness, the clumsy importunity with which they have been in the habit of approaching truth have been inept and improper means for winning a wench? Certainly she has not let herself be won — and today every kind of dogmatism stands sad and discouraged. If it continues to stand at all! For there are scoffers who assert it has fallen down, that dogmatism lies on the floor, more, that dogmatism is at its last gasp.\textsuperscript{35}

Quite simply, Nietzsche claims here that the project of Western metaphysics, if it is premised upon the acquisition of a primordial truth, is stillborn. While Nietzsche’s claim may be contentious, it is not without its justification. It would seem that if philosophy had indeed discovered a primordial truth—that is to say an irrefutable truth that is accessible and demonstrable to all rational people and not merely accepted as an article of faith, and that would act as an edifice upon which to erect the definitive theory of the essential structures of reality—then we would most likely “know” this truth, that it would be widely recognized, especially amongst philosophers. Yet, in the history of Western philosophy, we find neither a singular shared truth that has been passed down from generation to generation of philosophers nor even a generally accepted range of ideas. Instead, we find an incessant contestation and battle of wills, worldviews, and philosophical positions. At some time or another wholly incompatible and opposing philosophical theories have all been considered correct. In the Hellenic world alone idealist, materialist, mystical, and skeptical theories were all equally considered viable by different groups—the Platonists, Aristotelians, Epicureans, Stoics, Plotinians, and Academics—each one thinking that they alone possessed a primordial truth that secured the necessity of their dogmatic metaphysical system.

It is precisely here, however, that we must take the greatest precaution to read Nietzsche carefully. Nietzsche is neither a naïve nor an Academic skeptic, and he is all too aware of the skeptics’ dilemma. As Ken Gemes notes, “To deny the existence of truth is \textit{prima facie} paradoxical. Such denials invite the question ‘Is it true that there is no truth?’ To answer ‘Yes’ is

to claim there is at least one truth, namely that there is no truth. To answer ‘No’ is to deny that there is no truth and hence commit oneself to the claim that there is some truth.”

In either case, the position of Academic skepticism is self-refuting. Thus, we must avoid not only reading Nietzsche as an Academic skeptic, but we must also realize that Nietzsche’s critique of truth, and thus his critique of Western metaphysics, is a careful attempt to avoid the trap of either falling back into the project of metaphysics or of falling into the skeptics’ dilemma. As Stuart Dalton notes, “Nietzsche is challenged to find a way to get ‘beyond’ metaphysics without falling into such traps.”

In this way, Nietzsche sets himself the Herculean challenge of negotiating the dilemma of advocating either a form of dogmatic metaphysics—which is premised upon the existence of a primordial truth—or a form of absurdist relativism—which denies the very possibility of a primordial truth.

To begin, Jessica Berry has done considerable work arguing for, via Montaigne’s influence on Nietzsche, the manner in which Pyrrhonian skepticism affords a coherent theoretical model for rendering intelligible Nietzsche’s sophisticated skeptical position in regards to a primordial truth. As Berry notes, “Nietzsche is […] keenly attuned to Montaigne’s skepticism, since in [Human, All Too Human], too, skepticism is a necessary antidote to metaphysical dogmatism. It is what unseats the justification for metaphysical hypotheses without forcing Nietzsche into the opposite (negatively dogmatic) position of denying the existence of, for instance, things-in-themselves—recall Nietzsche’s reluctance to dispute ‘the absolute


38 In Outlines of Scepticism, Sextus Empiricus explicitly contrasts Pyrrhonian skepticism to both Dogmatic and Academic positions in philosophy. See Sextus Empiricus, Outlines of Scepticism, Eds. Julia Annas and Jonathan Barnes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 3. Moreover, in Will to Power 437, Nietzsche provides a eulogy of sorts to Pyrrho as a rare Hellenic philosopher who resists every impulse toward dialectics and thereby the tendency to dogmatic philosophy. Thus, there is textual evidence indicating that Nietzsche was aware of the paradoxes of Academic skepticism and the merits of the Pyrrhonian response.
possibility’ of a metaphysical world in [Human, All Too Human], I, 9.” Unlike more absurd forms of skepticism that deny either the existence or possibility of truth, and would thus advance the position that it is true that there is no truth, Pyrrhonian skepticism advances evidence equally on behalf of opposing sides of a position so as to render any judgment on the issue moot, thereby leaving one in a state of indeterminacy (aporia) and with no other option than to suspend judgment (epochê) until better evidence is brought to light. Thus, in arguing for Montaigne’s influence on Nietzsche as a sophisticated skeptic, Berry claims that, “As a Sextan Skeptic [Montaigne] is above all concerned that his attack on dogmatic convictions about human reason not itself become dogmatic. Since Nietzsche is motivated by a similar concern in [Human, All Too Human], namely, that his attacks on dogmatic metaphysics not simply install new dogmas, this point is important. For it is this concern that sets Pyrrhonism apart from other varieties of skepticism.” As Berry concludes, Nietzsche’s skepticism regarding the project of metaphysics does not commit him to the equally dogmatic position that the project of metaphysics is impossible and that a primordial truth does not exist. Thus, one can reasonably read Nietzsche as advancing reasons to “doubt” the credibility of the project of metaphysics—as the Pyrrhonian skeptics do with any dogmatic position—without insisting on the correctness of his own position—that is, without insisting that it is true that metaphysics is false. Nietzsche himself in Ecce Homo says of his own approach, “I do not refute ideals, I merely draw on gloves in their presence.” Thus, rather than casting Nietzsche’s position as a form of Academic skepticism and

40 Empiricus, p. 4: “Scepticism is an ability to set out oppositions among things which appear and are thought of in any way at all, an ability by which, because of the equipollence in the opposed objects and accounts, we come first to suspension of judgment and afterwards to tranquility.”
41 Berry, p. 508.
saddling his work with the theoretical aporias with which it is associated, I will—for the purposes of my argument—instead term Nietzsche’s relation to dogmatic metaphysics and its notion of a founding truth as “critically suspicious” in order to delineate it clearly from any variant of Academic skepticism.

In *Twilight of the Idols*, we find an excellent example of Nietzsche’s critical suspicion—as opposed to skepticism—regarding metaphysics in the chapter entitled “How the ‘Real World’ at last Became a Myth.” There, he says, “The real world—unattainable? Unattained, at any rate. And if unattained also unknown.” In this passage, Nietzsche neither asserts the impossibility of metaphysics nor the non-existence of a primordial truth. He does not declare that a primordial truth through which the real world would be disclosed is unknowable since this would be a dogmatic assertion about the impossibility of metaphysics. Rather, he precisely puts forward the claim that a primordial truth disclosing the real world is unattainable and elects not to assert it. Instead, Nietzsche announces his suspicion regarding the primordial truth of metaphysics: that the “real world” exists. In this way, we may consider Nietzsche a sophisticated skeptic, like the Marquis de Sade before him, who does not deny the existence of an ultimate entity, but rather—placing the “burden of proof” on those who advance the claim of an ultimate entity’s existence—maintains a vigilant suspicion of all dogmatisms until their claims have been proven true. Thus, from the perspective of Pyrrhonian skepticism, we can read Nietzsche’s critical suspicions, not as attempts to refute definitively the notions of a primordial truth and

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44 While Berry goes on to argue that Nietzsche’s brand of Pyrrhonian skepticism provides a foundation for a brand of naturalism he purportedly advocates in *Human, All to Human*, it is outside of the scope of my argument here to engage in that debate. I will, however, proceed to argue that Pyrrhonian skepticism provides a coherent basis for reading Nietzsche as a post-metaphysical and post-foundationalist philosopher.
46 There exists some debate as to whether or not Nietzsche ever read Sade. See Jean Paulhan, *Les Marquis de Sade et sa Complice* (France: Editions Complexe, 1987).
metaphysics, which would of necessity commit him to the dogmatic assertion of his own position, but rather as merely expressing doubt regarding the existence and knowledge of a primordial truth upon which a dogmatic metaphysical system could be erected.

Quite significantly, then, upon the basis of his critical suspicion toward metaphysics and its notion of a primordial truth, Nietzsche makes the methodological decision to begin theorizing as if we are without a primordial truth. While he does not state this methodological decision explicitly in Beyond Good and Evil, he does so in Human, All Too Human:

*Probable victory of skepticism* – Let us for once accept the validity of the skeptical point of departure: if there were no other, metaphysical world and all explanations of the only world known to us drawn from metaphysics were useless to us, in what light would we then regard men and things? This question can be thought through, and it is valuable to do so, even if we do for once ignore the question whether the existence of anything metaphysical has been scientifically demonstrated by Kant and Schopenhauer. For the historical probability is that one day mankind will very possibly become in general and on the whole sceptical in this matter; thus the question becomes: what shape will human society then assume under the influence of such an attitude of mind? Perhaps the scientific demonstration of the existence of any kind of metaphysical world is already so difficult that mankind will never again be free of mistrust of it. And if one has a mistrust of metaphysics the results are by and large the same as if it has been directly refuted and one no longer had the right to believe in it. The historical question in regard to an unmetaphysical attitude of mind on the part of mankind remains the same in both cases.47

In this paragraph, Nietzsche makes three points that are directly pertinent to conceptualizing his work as an alternative to metaphysics—that is, as “post-metaphysical.” First, Nietzsche is clear that he does not conflate a mistrust of metaphysics with the refutation of metaphysics. Thus, Nietzsche is explicit that he does not consider metaphysics refuted; he is not a dogmatic anti-metaphysician. Second, given this mistrust of metaphysics, however, Nietzsche tells us that he will proceed as if it has been refuted. In this way, Nietzsche makes a “methodological decision” to proceed philosophically on the alternative, conditional, and experimental basis that we are without a founding origin by means of which we could secure primordial truths concerning the way things “really” are; he is not a dogmatic metaphysician. Lastly, Nietzsche provides an

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interpretative key in this paragraph for making sense of his later affirmative claims regarding life and existence: Nietzsche tells us in no uncertain terms that the commitment orienting his later critical inquiries is to theorize about this world and this life as though the metaphysical interpretation had been refuted—in other words, Nietzsche reveals to us that the aim of his work is to provide an interpretation of existence in which the metaphysical interpretation has been methodologically bracketed; he is post-metaphysical. Though Nietzsche himself never describes his work explicitly in terms of a “methodological decision,” this decision on Nietzsche’s part to suspend methodologically the metaphysical interpretation of life is decisive for establishing the tenability of post-metaphysical philosophy in general as a coherent theoretical alternative to metaphysical and anti-metaphysical philosophies.

Proceeding from this methodological basis, Nietzsche can begin to examine critically what must now necessarily appear as “the prejudices of the philosophers.” Most significantly, Nietzsche’s post-metaphysical methodological procedure allows him to provide an alternative interpretation of the products born from the Wille zur Wahrheit—the very impetus to metaphysics. According to Nietzsche, the defining characteristic of philosophers to which der Wille zur Wahrheit gives rise is “the faith in antithetical values,” which Nietzsche terms the fundamental faith of all metaphysicians. According to Nietzsche, “It is on account of this their ‘faith’ that they concern themselves with their ‘knowledge’, with something that is at last solemnly baptized ‘the truth.’” Because they have assumed in advance the existence and value of a primordial truth, metaphysicians, on Nietzsche’s conjecture, divide existence into two mutually exclusive and opposing ontological realms. Here, it is reasoned by metaphysicians that if a primordial truth is by its very nature eternal, permanent, and unchanging, then logically it

48 Nietzsche, BGE, 2.
49 Nietzsche, BGE, 2.
must of necessity preclude all that is ephemeral, impermanent, and transitory since otherwise
truth—that which is unchanging—would be opinion—that which changes. From this single
intuition, Nietzsche speculates, a host of further assumptions follow on the part of philosophers:

‘How could something originate in its antithesis? Truth in error, for example? Or will to truth in
will to deception? Or the unselfish act in self-interest? Or the pure radiant gaze of the sage in
covetousness? Such origination is impossible; he who dreams of it is a fool, indeed worse than a
fool; the things of the highest value must have another origin of their own — they cannot be
derivable from this transitory, seductive, deceptive, mean little world, from this confusion of
desire and illusion! In the womb of being, rather, in the intransitory, in the hidden god, in the
“thing-in-itself” — that is where their cause must lie and nowhere else!’

Truth must have an origin of its own since nothing less than truth could give birth to it; the pure
cannot be born of the impure since that impurity would precisely contaminate it. Thus, since the
impermanent can never give rise to the permanent, or the impure to the pure, truth—so the
argument goes—must exist as uncreated and as ontologically distinct from untruth in its own
unique realm.

From this initial assumption concerning the nature of truth, and the metaphysical reality it
supposes, philosophers proceed to construct elaborate metaphysical theories regarding the
natures of both the self and knowledge. Since the senses reveal nothing more than a material
world in flux, and thus provide access to nothing more than the illusory, the apparent, and the
merely conjectural, there must be another faculty possessed by humans that is capable of
accessing the timeless and unchanging—namely, reason. Philosophers must therefore assume an
unproblematic and clear distinction between the instinctual and the conscious since the very idea
of a primordial truth that exists in its own realm necessitates the ideal of a free, rational, and
intellectual subject that can overcome and isolate itself from the impulses, drives, and desires
precisely so as to access a realm that could house a pure and unmediated truth. In this way, for

50 Nietzsche, BGE, 2.
51 See also Friedrich Nietzsche, “‘Reason’ in Philosophy,” 4, in Twilight of the Idols.
52 Nietzsche, BGE, 3.
Nietzsche, the very notion of a primordial truth contains within it the ideals of, and the divisions between the real and the merely apparent, the true and the false, the pure and the base, the unbiased and the biased, reason and the senses, the universal and the particular, the mind and the body, the doer and the deed, the free and the determined, the highest and the lowest… etc., etc. Thus, for Nietzsche, the notions of a primordial truth, metaphysics, and reason all mutually implicate one another. Yet, as Nietzsche rightly points out, if a primordial truth has yet to be proven, then these basic tenets of metaphysicians are nothing more than their articles of faith, which would, as Nietzsche satirically notes, highlight a failure on their part to live up to their very own standards of truth: “It has not occurred to even the most cautious of them to pause and doubt here on the threshold, where however it was most needful they should: even if they had vowed to themselves ‘de omnibus dubitandum’.” \(^{53}\) It would seem, on Nietzsche’s account, that the impetus to metaphysics—der Wille zur Wahrheit, born from a faith in the value of truth—is directly opposed to the very spirit of metaphysicians’ purported commitment to truth.

Significantly, then, Nietzsche’s methodological suspension of the metaphysical interpretation cuts at the core of the assumed division between appearance and reality. According to Nietzsche, it is only because metaphysicians presuppose the value of a primordial truth that they therefore devalue untruth and, by association, value another world as real and devalue this world as apparent. However, one is justified in characterizing this world as apparent only in relation to a real world. But, if one does not truly “know” whether the real world exists, then one cannot truly judge whether this world is apparent. Thus, Nietzsche further argues in *Twilight of the Idols*, “We have abolished the real world: what world is left? the apparent world perhaps? … But no! with the real world we have also abolished the apparent world!”\(^{54}\) The metaphysical

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\(^{53}\) Nietzsche, *BGE*, 2.

\(^{54}\) Nietzsche, *TI*, p. 51.
dichotomy of the real world and the apparent world can be maintained only upon the assumption that a primordial truth exists and that it must exist in a realm that is mutually exclusive from the one that is impermanent and untrue. However, when one of the mutually exclusive terms of the equation is removed—as is done by bracketing the metaphysical interpretation—we are not thereby left with the remaining mutually exclusive term. In other words, if we are without “reality,” we are not thereby left with “mere appearance.” Rather, according to Nietzsche, it is only because we assume another higher realm in which truth is purported to exist that we would even judge this world as a lesser realm of appearance. In this way, when we bracket the realm of reality in which a primordial truth is supposed to exist, we also suspend the very measure—the interpretation—by which we would even consider regarding this realm as untrue and as mere appearance. This means that Nietzsche’s methodological decision to bracket the metaphysical interpretation not only suspends the assumed distinction between the true and the untrue, but also suspends the entire system of dichotomies assumed by most metaphysical systems. More importantly, and in accordance with the Pyrrhonian dictum to assent only to appearances, Nietzsche’s methodological decision to suspend the metaphysical interpretation leaves us with only one world, this one, with which to give our assent.

THE PROBLEM OF NIHILISM

According to Nietzsche, if one takes seriously his critical suspicions regarding truth, metaphysics, and reason—and thereby the attempts on the part of past philosophers to secure an eternal ground for imbuing life with meaning and significance—then the problem of nihilism steps to the fore:

Finally: one discovers of what material one has built the “true world”: and now all one has left is the repudiated world, and one adds this supreme disappointment to the reasons why it deserves to

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55 Namely, all those metaphysical dichotomies mentioned above.
be repudiated. At this point nihilism is reached: all one has left are the values that pass judgment—nothing else.\footnote{Friedrich Nietzsche, \textit{The Will to Power}, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Random House, 1968), 37. Hereafter, \textit{WP}.}

What does nihilism mean? \textit{That the highest values devalue themselves}. The aim is lacking; “why?” finds no answer.\footnote{Nietzsche, \textit{WP}, 2.}

While the ascetic ideal as it is expressed in philosophy, art, and religion, is an attempt to ward off nihilism, Nietzsche thinks that pursuing the idea of a primordial truth to its ultimate consequence precisely leads to the critically suspicious position that informs his work.\footnote{See Friedrich Nietzsche, \textit{On the Genealogy of Morals}, trans. Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1967).} In other words, \textit{der Wille zur Wahrheit} when carried to its logical conclusion eventually turns back upon itself and calls into question the existence, and thereby the presumed \textit{value}, of truth. Significantly, without a primordial truth there is no basis upon which to judge with certainty that truth is \textit{more} valuable than untruth. In this way, while still under the sway of the metaphysical interpretation, it comes to appear that since metaphysicians have yet to establish the veracity of the value of truth that \textit{all} values are therefore foundationless and thus little more than fictions—in other words, it seems that without a primordial truth that \textit{nothing} is therefore of value. Life appears as wholly meaningless and devoid of purpose. The question, “To what end?” seems hopelessly unanswerable. However, as Nietzsche argues, nihilism is the result of the metaphysical interpretation, of positing the meaning of existence in a metaphysical realm that exists externally to this world:

\begin{quote}
The end of the moral interpretation of the world, which no longer has any sanction after it has tried to escape into some beyond, leads to nihilism. “Everything lacks meaning” (the untenability of one interpretation of the world, upon which a tremendous amount of energy has been lavished, awakens the suspicion that \textit{all} interpretations of the world are false).\footnote{Nietzsche, \textit{WP}, 1.}
\end{quote}

When we lose faith in the value of truth, by which we judged this world as lesser, we nonetheless tend to maintain a judgment of this world as meaningless since we still judge it from the
perspective of the *loss* of the other world, from the loss of “the true” meaning of existence, which was to be secured by the metaphysical interpretation. In this way, the problem of nihilism is deeply rooted in the critical suspicion of *der Wille zur Wahrheit* and metaphysics. Central to Nietzsche’s critical suspicion of a primordial truth, then, is the task of overcoming the problem of nihilism, which requires that we surmount this misplaced sense of loss.⁶⁰

For one should make no mistake about the meaning of the title that this gospel of the future wants to bear. ‘*The Will to Power: Attempt at a Revaluation of All Values*’—in this formulation a countermovement finds expression, regarding both principle and task; a movement that in some future will take the place of this perfect nihilism—but presupposes it, logically and psychologically, and certainly can come only after and out of it. For why has the advent of nihilism become necessary? Because the values we have had hitherto thus draw their final consequence; because nihilism represents the ultimate logical conclusion of our great values and ideals—because we must experience nihilism before we can find out what value these ‘values’ really had.—We require, sometime, *new values*.⁶¹

Nietzsche’s work thus contains two movements: one whereby he pursues his critical suspicion of *der Wille zur Wahrheit* to its terminus, leading to a methodological suspension of the metaphysical interpretation, and a second in which, having come upon the problem of nihilism, he fabricates post-metaphysical tools in order to overcome it. For this reason, as I will argue, it is imperative that we read Nietzsche’s tools for overcoming the problem of nihilism as the result of a considered post-metaphysical methodological procedure and not as a return to metaphysics if his work is to be regarded as coherent and as offering constructive resources for engaging our present.⁶²

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⁶⁰ Here, one is reminded of Derrida’s affirmation of ‘play’ in “Structure, Sign, and Play”: “Turned towards the lost or impossible presence of the absent origin, this structuralist thematic of broken immediacy is therefore the saddened, *negative*, nostalgic, guilty, Rousseauistic side of thinking of play whose other side would be the Nietzschean *affirmation*, that is the joyous affirmation of the play of the world and of the innocence of becoming, the affirmation of a world of signs without fault, without truth, and without origin which is offered to an active interpretation. *This affirmation then determines the noncenter otherwise than as loss of center. And it plays without security. For there is a sure play: that which is limited to the substitution of given and existing, *present*, pieces. In absolute chance, affirmation also surrenders itself to *genetic* indetermination, to the *semenal* adventure of the trace,*** p. 292.


⁶² This characterization of Nietzsche’s project as having two movements coheres with his statements regarding two forms of skepticism in *BGE* 208-211 in which he argues that a sick form of skepticism that is incapable of either
“SUCH DANGEROUS MAYBES”

Typically, according to Nietzsche, metaphysicians measure the value of a judgment in relation to its truth or falsity. In this way, a judgment is valuable only if it is true and only if it is true is a judgment valuable. Thus, for metaphysicians, untrue judgments are not only worthless, but they are also dangerous, and thus something to be avoided at all costs. However, since Nietzsche suspends methodologically the metaphysical interpretation, he stands on substantially different footing than that of the philosophers of whom he is critically suspicious. Specifically, truth is not a criterion of which he can avail himself in measuring the worth of a judgment since his methodological decision to suspend the metaphysical interpretation prohibits him from appealing to the very criterion that he has bracketed. Thus, while Nietzsche’s work is clearly in conversation with metaphysical philosophy, it cannot itself be another form of metaphysical philosophy if it is to avoid falling into hopeless confusion—that is, it cannot appeal to truth in order to measure the worth of its judgments without violating its own methodological constraints. In fact, Nietzsche is quite clear that he is aware of the methodological constraints that his decision to suspend the metaphysical interpretation place upon him: “The falseness of a judgment is to us not necessarily an objection to a judgment: it is here that our new language sounds strangest.” Nietzsche feigns no pretense to a commitment to the philosophical ideals of primordial truths and founding origins, and thus to a metaphysical theory of reality. For this reason, whatever post-metaphysical tools Nietzsche fabricates for overcoming the problem of

affirming or denying will be replaced by a stronger and healthier form of skepticism that can venture the experimental creation of values.

63 In essence, the majority of Nietzsche’s critics, including Habermas, accuse him of making this exact mistake. See Arthur Danto, Nietzsche as Philosopher (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980); Jacques Derrida, Writing and Difference, trans. Barbara Harlow (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978); and Martin Heidegger, Nietzsche Vols. I-IV (New York: Harper Collins, 1991). However, as I have demonstrated, Nietzsche quite deliberately avoids making this move.

64 Nietzsche, BGE, 4.
nihilism, it is more than evident that they are not going to be part of a metaphysical project of advancing a “true” theory of reality, i.e., metaphysical dogmatism.

**Life as a Value**

In accordance with the above-mentioned methodological constraints, Nietzsche fabricates a new evaluative criterion for determining the value of his post-metaphysical judgments:

[Our] fundamental tendency is to assert that the falsest of judgments (to which the synthetic *a priori* belong) are the most indispensable to us, that without granting as true the fictions of logic, without measuring reality against the purely invented world of the unconditional and self-identical, without a continual falsification of the world by means of numbers, man could not live – that to renounce false judgments would be to renounce life, would be to deny life.\(^{65}\)

Here, Nietzsche is arguing that if he, like a metaphysician, were to remain committed to the metaphysico-philosophical moral imperative to abide by truth, then in the absence of a primordial truth—which would guarantee both the certainty and the value of his judgments—he would have to renounce all of his judgments as though they were false and refrain from making any further judgments. However, if he were to do so, then it would be impossible for him to live since, as Nietzsche will later argue, life of necessity involves evaluation. Thus, unlike the Pyrrhonian skeptic who remains comfortably and dispassionately within a self-induced state of *aporia* and *epochê* in the hope of achieving *ataraxia*, Nietzsche ventures out from behind the safety of Pyrrhonian indifference and affirms his post-metaphysical commitment to life as a value.\(^{66}\) As Nietzsche states, “The question is to what extent is [a judgment] life-advancing, life-

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\(^{65}\) Nietzsche, *BGE*, 4.

\(^{66}\) This is where I disagree with Berry and think that a Pyrrhonian interpretation of Nietzsche can serve only as a point of entry into framing Nietzsche’s critical suspicion of metaphysics as a coherent form of non-dogmatic skepticism, but cannot serve as model to unify Nietzsche’s entire project, most especially since it cannot account for Nietzsche’s more affirmative claims advanced in solution to the problem of nihilism. As mentioned above, Aphorisms 208-211 in *BGE* speak to the need of a healthier form of skepticism. Similarly, in *Daybreak* 477, “Redeemed from skepticism,” and in *Untimely Meditations* II, 10, Nietzsche notes that he considers an affirmation that moves beyond “the hopeless infinity of skepticism” to be essential in moving past metaphysics and overcoming nihilism, otherwise one could not live. Also, in *WP* 455 Nietzsche characterizes Pyrrho as weary, again expressing that skepticism is not a philosophical destination, but only a way station.
preserving, species-preserving, perhaps even species-breeding.”\textsuperscript{67} Having suspended methodologically the metapsychical interpretation, Nietzsche explicitly advances an alternative measure for the value of a judgment to that of truth—that is, life stands as the measure for judgments not truth. For this reason, even though he is critically suspicious of what he considers to be metapsychical concepts such as causality, identity, and unity, Nietzsche nonetheless recognizes that he must employ these concepts, these “untruths,” and make judgments based upon them if he is to live.\textsuperscript{68} Thus, in his commitment to the employment of “untruths” in the name of life—the affirmation of life as a value being itself an “untruth” in the service of life—Nietzsche decisively places himself outside the confines of the metapsychical interpretation.

Significantly, Nietzsche draws the full consequences of his methodological suspension of the necessity to employ true judgments: “To recognize untruth as a condition of life: that, to be sure, means to resist customary value-sentiments in a dangerous fashion; and a philosophy which ventures to do so places itself, by that act alone, beyond good and evil.”\textsuperscript{69} In other words, as soon as one suspends methodologically the metapsychical interpretation, one thereby brackets the metapsychico-philosophical moral imperative to employ only truth as a standard by which to measure the value of one’s judgments. Moreover, in doing so, one renounces the entire metapsychico-philosophical apparatus that demands that one’s values usher from an essential insight into the basic structure of reality, that one’s values and concepts accord with reality. In

\textsuperscript{67} Nietzsche, \textit{BGE}, 4.

\textsuperscript{68} This is an important point in connection with both Nietzsche’s critical suspicion of metapsychics and, I think, his reasons for hypothesizing \textit{Wille zur Macht}, which I will go into shortly. If a founding truth presupposes self-identical and uncreated entities, then materialistic atomism would simply introduce another form of self-identical and eternal unit into existence. Moreover, such a unit is presupposed in all of our judgments regarding causality— that is, causal explanations presuppose the existence of numerically distinct entities that can be shown to interact with one another. However, as Nietzsche says in \textit{BGE} 12, “As for atomistic materialism, it is one of the best-refuted things there are; and perhaps no scholar in Europe is still so unscholarly today as to accord it serious significance except for handy everyday use.” Just as with a founding truth, there is no incontrovertible evidence for the existence of materialistic atoms. However, conceiving of existence in terms of fundamental units involved in causal relationships is necessary for creatures such as us to live. In this way, \textit{Wille zur Macht}, conceptualized as center of force, is an alternative to materialistic atomism, which is another form of dogmatic metapsychics.

\textsuperscript{69} Nietzsche, \textit{BGE}, 4.
this way, one frees oneself from the metaphysico-philosophical moral prohibition against the false, the untrue, and the uncertain. Thus, from the position established by the methodological decision to suspend the metaphysical interpretation, what metaphysicians derogatorily denote as perspective—untruth, bias, and prejudice—becomes, for Nietzsche, the basic condition of life.

**Perspective as the Basic Condition of Life**

Whereas metaphysicians begin with the assumption of the ideal of the real world and its lesser correlate the apparent world, Nietzsche, critically suspicious of a primordial truth, begins methodologically with the absence of truth as the condition in which we experience life. Thus, having bracketed the metaphysical interpretation, which posits the two mutually exclusive and ontologically distinct realms of reality and appearance, Nietzsche concludes that the only realm that we can reasonably assert to exist is this one, life.\(^70\) One of Nietzsche’s primary criticisms of metaphysics is that the presumed value of truth ultimately devalues this world, and thereby life, in favor of another world, one for which we have no evidence. Nietzsche criticizes Plato specifically, however, for having introduced this division, and the ramifications that follow from it, into Western history: “[It] certainly has to be admitted that the worst, most wearisomely protracted and most dangerous of all errors hitherto has been a dogmatist’s error, namely Plato’s invention of pure spirit and the good in itself.”\(^71\) The “error,” according to Nietzsche, lies in the

\(^{70}\) Once again, we can liken Nietzsche’s position regarding the appearance of life to that of the Pyrrhonian skeptics who claim: “Those who say that the Sceptics reject what is apparent have not, I think, listened to what we say. As we said before, we do not overturn anything which leads us, without our willing it, to assent in accordance with a passive appearance – and these things are precisely what is apparent. When we investigate whether existing things are such as they appear, we grant that they appear, and what we investigate is not what is apparent but what is said about what is apparent – and this is different from investigating what is apparent itself. For example, it appears to us that honey sweetens (we concede this inasmuch as we are sweetened in a perceptual way); but whether (as far as the argument goes) it is actually sweet is something we investigate – and this is not what is apparent but something said about what is apparent. And if we do propound arguments directly against what is apparent, it is not because we want to reject what is apparent that we set them out, but rather to display the rashness of the Dogmatists; for if reasoning is such a deceiver that it all but snatches even what is apparent from under our very eyes, surely we should keep watch on it in unclear matters, to avoid being led into rashness by following it?” Empiricus, p. 8.

\(^{71}\) Nietzsche, *BGE*, “Preface.”
fact that “[to] speak of spirit and the good as Plato did meant standing truth on her head and
denyng perspective itself, the basic condition of all life.” In other words, for Nietzsche, if we
do not possess a primordial truth, then the condition in which we exist and from which we
experience life is perspective. In this way, for Nietzsche, if perspective is the basic condition of
life, then our valuations do not issue from an essential insight into the ultimate nature of reality.
They are instead nothing more than the product of our own personal prejudices and biases.
Moreover, we do not merely possess preferential values, we also have no other recourse than to
affirm and assert those values since at its most basic, at the very core of living, we continually
affirm either the value of life or the value of death—that is, one either takes those actions
necessary to continue living or one will die. But again, without a primordial truth, we cannot be
certain that life is indeed more valuable than death. Thus, for Nietzsche, to live is to affirm the
value of life over and above death, and to affirm life is to prefer living to dying. Living is an
experiment in valuing life.

Once we affirm our preference for living, however, a host of further preferences ensue.
For instance, to prefer living is precisely to prefer our own life to that of others. Here, Nietzsche
is not advancing a form of egoism, but rather is noting that our preference for our own lives
compels us to impose ourselves upon existence—we rearrange the world in order satisfy our
preference for our own lives. This is manifested at its most basic in the necessity to eat—either

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72 Nietzsche, BGE, “Preface.” Nietzsche’s use of ‘truth’ here is clearly facetious. We can imagine, as a Pyrrhonian
skeptic, his bewilderment that Plato would trade the certainty of the “appearance” of this world for the uncertainty
of the existence of another, “real” world.

73 Often, commentators begin with Nietzsche’s affirmation of perspectivism and take his claims regarding
perspective as arguments for the impossibility of a founding truth. See James Poellner, Nietzsche and Metaphysics
Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995). This is, as commentators argue, a highly untenable position since Nietzsche would
in essence be affirming as true a position that allows him to argue that there is no truth. From this reading,
commentators usually discount Nietzsche as hopelessly incoherent. As I have argued however, if we inter, then prêt
Nietzsche’s perspectivism as the result of a methodological decision to suspend the metaphysical interpretation, then
we can provide a coherent account of Nietzsche’s thought that evades both the trappings of metaphysics and the
absurdities of either Academic skepticism or relativism.
we kill plants or animals, or we perish. Thus, our preference for our own lives entails that we at minimum take the life of non-human others. Similarly, we rearrange our environments in order to make our habitats more hospitable to our preference for life. Thus, for Nietzsche, to assert that perspective is the basic condition of life is to assert that the essence of life is to affirm the preference of one thing over and above another and to impose this preference upon others and the world. As Nietzsche says:

To refrain from mutual injury, mutual violence, mutual exploitation, to equate one’s will with that of another: this may in a certain rough sense become good manners between individuals if the conditions for it are present (namely if their strength and value standards are in fact similar and they both belong to one body). As soon as there is a desire to take this principle further, however, and if possible even as the fundamental principle of society, it at once reveals itself for what it is: as the will to the denial of life, as the principle of dissolution and decay. One has to think this matter thoroughly through to the bottom and resist all sentimental weakness: life itself is essentially appropriation, injury, overpowering of the strange and weaker, suppression, severity, imposition of one’s own forms, incorporation and, at the least and mildest, exploitation – but why should one always have to employ precisely those words which have from old been stamped with a slanderous intention? Even that body within which, as was previously assumed, individuals treat one another as equals – this happens in every healthy aristocracy – must, if it is a living and not a decaying body, itself do all that to other bodies which the individuals within it refrain from doing to one another: it will have to be will to power incarnate, it will want to grow, expand, draw to itself, gain ascendancy – not out of any morality or immorality, but because it lives, and because life is will to power. [...] ‘Exploitation’ [...] pertains to the essence of the living thing as a fundamental organic function, it is a consequence of the intrinsic will to power which is precisely the will to life.  

Thus, for Nietzsche, life is precisely a bold, arbitrary, and ultimately unjustifiable imposition of oneself, one’s preferences, and one’s values into and upon existence—life is Wille zur Macht.

However, it is important to remember that Nietzsche’s claim that perspective is the basic condition of life and his characterization of life as Wille zur Macht are not assertions of a fundamental insight into the nature of reality, nor are they intended as dogmatic metaphysical truths, rather, they are the results of Nietzsche’s methodological decision to suspend the metaphysical interpretation and to provide in its stead an alternative interpretation of existence—they are interpretative principles fabricated by Nietzsche for the purpose of living. As

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74 The word is ‘essence’ should be taken here loosely to denote only Nietzsche’s generalization of the characteristics of life and not as an insight into its ‘true reality.’

75 Nietzsche, BGE, 259.
Maudemarie Clark notes on this very point, “Nietzsche’s doctrine of will to power is not a
doctrine at all. Although Nietzsche says that life is will to power, he also gives us clues that he
does not regard this as a truth or a matter of knowledge, but as a construction of the world from
the viewpoint of his values.”\textsuperscript{76} In other words, Nietzsche is careful not to mistake \textit{Wille zur Macht} for another metaphysics of life.

\textbf{WILLE ZUR MACHT}

Having decided to suspend methodologically the metaphysical interpretation, to begin
alternatively with a methodological commitment to perspective as the basic condition of life, and
to characterize life without metaphysical justification as at bottom the affirmation of preferences,
Nietzsche fabricates \textit{Wille zur Macht} as the principle by means of which all of existence can be
interpreted: “A living thing desires above all to \textit{vent} its strength – life as such is will to power.”\textsuperscript{77}
Rejecting Epicurean or Newtonian materialistic atomism as another instance of the metaphysical
interpretation—in this instance as one that tries to imbue the apparent world of flux with a real
material permanence—Nietzsche alternatively hypothesizes that all of existence can be
interpreted as the dynamic interplay of centers of force—rather than as numerically distinct
material units that remain the same through space and time—wherein each center of force is
designated as a specified quanta of power that seeks above all else to vent its strength. The
notion of venting strength, for Nietzsche, includes the activities of growing, expanding, and
incorporating into oneself as well as suppressing, exploiting, appropriating, imposing one’s own
forms, and overpowering the strange and weak.\textsuperscript{78} Through their interplay, forces can be

\textsuperscript{76} Clark, \textit{NTP}, p. 227. I will come back to this point that \textit{Wille zur Macht} is a “construction of the world from the viewpoint of [Nietzsche’s] values” at the end my essay.
\textsuperscript{77} Nietzsche, \textit{BGE}, 13.
quantitatively distinguished as stronger or weaker. In this context, according to Nietzsche, “The stronger becomes master of the weaker, in so far as the latter cannot assert its degree of independence.” In this way, through their differentiated quantification, forces can be qualitatively distinguished as commanding and obeying, growing and decaying, ascending and descending, and as active and reactive. Significantly, then, while the history of philosophy is abound with metaphysical dualisms—appearance vs. reality, truth vs. error, knowledge vs. opinion, mind vs. body, freedom vs. determinism—that ultimately stem from Der Wille zur Wahrheit, Nietzsche’s characterization of existence as Wille zur Macht posits a single principle through which all phenomena can be interpreted. With this single interpretative device, Nietzsche provides his own alternative accounts of the perennial issues of philosophy. However, once again, Nietzsche is careful not to reify his interpretative principle into a new metaphysical dogmatism—Wille zur Macht is not the final culmination of metaphysics. As Nietzsche very clearly says:

Someone could come along who, with an opposite intention and art of interpretation, knew how to read out of the same nature and with regard to the same phenomena the tyrannically ruthless and inexorable enforcement of power-demands – an interpreter who could bring before your eyes the universality and unconditionality of all ‘will to power’ in such a way that almost any word and even the word ‘tyranny’ would finally seem unsuitable or as a weakening and moderating metaphor – as too human – and who nonetheless ended by asserting of this world the same as you assert of it, namely that it has a ‘necessary’ and ‘calculable’ course, but not because laws prevail in it but because laws are absolutely lacking, and every power draws its ultimate consequences every moment. Granted this too is only interpretation – and you will be eager enough to raise this objection? – well, so much the better. –

Nietzsche very clearly warns his readers not to confuse Wille zur Macht, an interpretation, for a metaphysical principle founded upon a primordial truth. In the end, Nietzsche’s Wille zur Macht remains coherently within the methodological parameters he established for himself—the

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79 Nietzsche, WP, 630.
80 Nietzsche, BGE, 22.
suspension of the metaphysical interpretation gives way to the fabrication of a post-metaphysical principle for interpreting life.

IN DEFENSE OF NIETZSCHE

Returning to Habermas’s critical reading of Nietzsche, there is much with which to take issue. Dallmayr in his piece, “Habermas’s Discourse of Modernity: Nietzsche as Turntable,” makes several observations in this regard. First, Dallmayr notes that Habermas’s presentation of the Dionysian in Nietzsche is highly oversimplified. Rather than having abandoned thought to pure Dionysian frenzy, Dallmayr claims that, “Even and particularly The Birth of Tragedy—a youthful and (in his own admission) somewhat Romantic and effusive work—did not simply glorify irrational chaos but rather culminated in a paean on Attic tragedy seen as combination and reconciliation of Dionysus and Apollo.” More importantly, Dallmayr points out that Nietzsche does not reject philosophical thinking entirely, but more specifically rejects essentialist and foundationalist inclinations within philosophy. In this way, Nietzsche’s critical suspicion is aimed, not at philosophy in toto, but dogmatic tendencies in thought, philosophy, and metaphysics specifically. If anything, and as I have been arguing, Nietzsche’s work is an attempt to escape the trappings of foundationalist and dogmatic thought so as to offer an alternative philosophical approach to the millennial old tendency to metaphysics—one that avowedly emphasizes an experimentalism that Habermas neglects to acknowledge. Lastly, Dallmayr importantly notes that Habermas’s dismissal of Nietzsche as “irrational” precisely enacts the very characteristics that later Nietzscheans, such as Foucault, will describe at work in

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81 Dallmayr, p. 92.
82 Dallmayr, p. 93.
philosophical discourse—namely, that every discourse “harbors a principle of exclusion, thus attesting to the intrusion of power (or the interlacing of pouvoir/savoir).”

Similarly, Bauer, in her “Nietzsche, Enlightenment, and the Incomplete Project of Modernity,” argues that Habermas’s own critical perspective, which emphasizes the division between the Enlightenment and its excluded “Other,” between rationalism and irrationality, perpetuates a dichotomous discourse of division and opposition that inhibits any discussion from moving to more fruitful terrain. One could argue that Habermas’s framing of the problem of modernity in terms of the Enlightenment and its excluded “Other” imports onto Nietzsche’s post-metaphysical philosophy a dialectical tinge that it precisely aims to avoid. Moreover, Bauer argues that, “By focusing on the Dionysian experience and elevating it to function—supposedly—as a doctrine, Habermas not only does injustice to The Birth of Tragedy but practically erases from his criticisms a serious engagement with Nietzsche’s later texts. Only by disregarding the multiplicity of perspectives in Nietzsche’s oeuvre can Habermas achieve his aim. For instance, nowhere in Genealogy can one speak of a subjectivity liberated from the constraints of cognition, purpose, utility, and morality. The very aim of the book is to expose these constraints.”

In other words, according to Bauer, Habermas’s reading of Nietzsche, which focuses heavily on The Birth of Tragedy, does not cohere with claims Nietzsche makes in later works. While both Dallmayr and Bauer’s engagements with Habermas’s reading of Nietzsche make important contributions to overturning Habermas’s characterization of Nietzsche’s work, neither author directly challenges Habermas’s accusations of Nietzsche’s work as contradictory or incoherent. My contention with Habermas’s portrayal of Nietzsche does not concern Habermas’s locating Nietzsche’s work in conversation with the philosophers of modernity or the

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83 Dallmayr, p. 99.  
84 Bauer, p. 106.  
85 Bauer, p. 112.
German Romantics, but rather with Habermas’s general claim that Nietzsche is engaged in a critique of reason that undermines its own foundations since it undermines the foundations for all critique.

First, implicit within Habermas’s criticisms appear to be his own commitment to the dialectic of enlightenment—that is, Habermas seems committed in advance to a form of thought that can conceive of philosophy only as operating along the lines of a mutually exclusive division between legitimacy and illegitimacy, and in which the sole aim of philosophy is to “unmask” illegitimate forms of thought via an appeal to a more legitimate form of thought—namely, one founded in a truth disclosed through reason. Consequently, Habermas reads Nietzsche as similarly engaged in the task of advancing a legitimate form of thought that is supposed to disclose the illegitimacy of other forms of thought via an appeal to a founding origin. And, in this case, Habermas reads Nietzsche as claiming that the Dionysian experience of self-oblivion discloses Wille zur Macht at the very core of reason and thereby as corrupting and rendering illegitimate all forms of rational thought. This is why Habermas says of Nietzsche:

On the one hand, Nietzsche sees the possibility of an artistic contemplation of the world carried out with scholarly tools but in an antimetaphysical, antiromantic, pessimistic, and sceptical attitude. Because it serves the philosophy of the will to power, a historical science of this kind is supposed to be able to escape the illusion of belief in truth. Then, of course, the validity of that philosophy would have to be presupposed. That is why Nietzsche must, on the other hand, assert the possibility of a metaphysics that digs up the roots of metaphysical thought without, however, itself giving up philosophy. He proclaims Dionysus a philosopher and himself the last disciple and initiate of this god who does philosophy.

The very attribution of the term ‘validity’ to what he calls “the philosophy of the will to power” indicates that Habermas situates Nietzsche’s work squarely within the dialectic of enlightenment,

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86 Habermas, *PDM*, p. 107: “In the tradition of the Enlightenment, enlightened thinking has been understood as an opposition and counterforce to myth. As opposition, because it opposes the unforced force of the better argument to the authoritarian normativity of a tradition linked with the chain of the generations; as counterforce because by insights gained individually and transposed into motives, it is supposed to break the spell of collective powers. Enlightenment contradicts myth and thereby escapes its violence.” See also Habermas, *PDM*, p. 112 and pp. 115-116.

87 Habermas, *PDM*, pp. 96-97.
within a vision of philosophy that remains tethered to the notion of a primordial truth. For this reason, Habermas overlooks Nietzsche’s methodological decision to suspend the metaphysical interpretation since he would not otherwise attribute to Nietzsche’s work a claim to validity that Nietzsche himself explicitly brackets. Thus, in situating Nietzsche’s work within the “unmasking” mechanisms of the dialectic of enlightenment, Habermas disregards the methodological procedure by which Nietzsche takes leave of the dialectic, metaphysics, and dogmatism. Moreover, so long as Habermas reads Nietzsche as engaged in the tasks of “refuting” or “invalidating,” Nietzsche must of necessity remain trapped in the dialectic—worse, Nietzsche’s work must appear as contradictory and incoherent. However, as I have argued, attributing the project of an “unmasking” and “vitiating” critique of reason to Nietzsche conflicts with what Nietzsche actually says regarding his “mistrust” of metaphysics and his methodological suspension of the metaphysical interpretation.

As I have demonstrated via a close reading of Beyond Good and Evil, part of Nietzsche’s philosophical project is to carry out a critical suspicion of a primordial truth the purpose of which is neither to disprove the existence of such a truth nor to prove its impossibility since both claims are self-refuting. Rather, Nietzsche’s initial aim, like that of the Pyrrhonian skeptics, is merely to advance enough evidence so as to render the existence of a primordial truth indeterminate and to do so without thereby lapsing into dogmatism himself. From this position, Nietzsche then suspends methodologically the metaphysical interpretation and, moving beyond Pyrrhonian skepticism, provisionally characterizes perspective—the absence of a primordial truth—as the basic condition of life. Thus, given Nietzsche’s methodological suspension of the metaphysical interpretation, it would be quite out of step with this methodological commitment, as Habermas would have it, for Nietzsche to assert that the Dionysian experience of a de-
centered subjectivity reveals “the world […] as a network of distortions and interpretations for which no intention and no text provides a basis”\(^8\) since even a primordial aesthetic experience revealed via a mystical intuition would nonetheless carry with it the weight of a metaphysical interpretation regarding the essential and ultimate nature of reality. In other words, even an aesthetico-mystical experience of a primordial truth—even if it were the truth of an irrational “other” to reason—would remain mired in the forms of metaphysical dogmatism that Nietzsche unambiguously strives to evade. Thus, since Nietzsche is of his own admission not a dogmatist, he cannot possibly appeal to an aesthetico-mystical experience of a de-centered subjectivity that would provide the ground to establish the truth that existence is *Wille zur Macht*—to do so would be to fall into a blatant and fatal contradiction; it would be to run in stark contrast with very aims of his post-metaphysical project. Therefore, despite Habermas’s contestations, *Wille zur Macht* is not a mere “metaphysical conception of the Dionysian principle.”\(^9\) Rather, as I have demonstrated, *Wille zur Macht* arises out of Nietzsche’s methodological suspension of the metaphysico-philosophical moral impulse to accord with the truth and is thus, as an alternative to principles purporting to be primordial truths erected upon founding origins, the *fabrication* of what I have termed a “post-metaphysical interpretative principle.”

Secondly, since *Wille zur Macht* is a post-metaphysical principle, it can neither be the case that Nietzsche employs *Wille zur Macht* to “unmask” the history of reason as an expression of domination nor that his later texts are attempts to “demonstrate” that *Wille zur Macht* is at work perverting the histories of knowledge, morality, psychology, and culture. Rather, Nietzsche’s deployments of *Wille zur Macht* are interpretations explicitly put forward for the purpose of advancing life. Moreover, we find that Nietzsche’s principle of *Wille zur Macht* quite

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88 Habermas, *PDM*, p. 95.
89 Habermas, *PDM*, p. 95.
impressively characterizes life, enacts that very characterization, and thereby meets the standards of that very characterization. As Philip J. Kain similarly notes:

The doctrine of will to power is an interpretation – not a truth but a mere belief – and to rank interpretations, to hold that the highest interpretation is the one that will give us the greatest feeling of power, is itself just a second interpretation. Nietzsche is holding that it is will to power which establishes and ranks our beliefs and at the same time that it is a mere belief to hold that will to power establishes and ranks beliefs. Circular as this is, it is a coherent position. If will to power is taken as the criterion of belief, then it should be the case that the criterion itself satisfies the criterion. Thus, if will to power is to be accepted as the criterion of belief, it is to be accepted only if it is the case that accepting it will increase our feeling of power, i.e., if accepting will to power increases will to power.⁹⁰

In other words, if for Nietzsche the measure of the value of a judgment is not its truth or falsity but whether or not it is life-advancing, and if life itself is characterized as the venting of strength, which is itself defined as the overcoming and mastery of weaker forces, then whether or not a judgment does indeed advance life is measured by whether or not it permits a force to overcome and command resisting forces, i.e., by the extent to which it increases a force’s strength. Thus, no judgment or interpretation is true or false for Nietzsche, but only stronger or weaker—that is, not all interpretations equally advance life since not all interpretations equally enhance power.⁹¹

For these reasons, Nietzsche’s deployments of Wille zur Macht in his later works serve several purposes. First, as has been repeatedly stated, they are ultimately in the service of advancing life. Second, they advance life precisely by providing interpretations that overcome resistance and enhance power. Nietzsche’s interpretations serve this latter purpose in two ways. On the hand, while deployments of Wille zur Macht do not aim at presenting a metaphysical account of existence, this is not to say that they do not aim at providing an account of existence. Thus, in order to demonstrate that Wille zur Macht provides a viable post-metaphysical

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⁹¹ This, quite simply, is why Nietzsche is not a pragmatist. The measure of the worth of a judgment is not in accord with its utility, but rather the extent to which it increases strength, i.e., life, which is itself defined as the venting of strength.
alternative to the metaphysical interpretation of existence, Nietzsche must be able to demonstrate that an interpretation of existence via *Wille zur Macht* can meet its own standards of internal coherence and consistency. On the other hand, in doing so, these interpretations must also advance life. Thus, Nietzsche’s genealogies of philosophy, morality, Christianity, nihilism, and the ascetic ideal are all instances of Nietzsche demonstrating that *Wille zur Macht*—as an interpretative principle—can provide both a coherent alternative interpretation of existence that meets its own standards as well as advancing life in doing so. We also find that *Wille zur Macht*, can be employed to interpret physics, chemistry, geology, weather, history, science, philosophy, psychology, morality, and all of existence—even interpretation itself. In this way, Nietzsche’s genealogies “perform” *Wille zur Macht*—they are instances of Nietzsche deploying *Wille zur Macht* as an interpretative force, venting its strength over resistant interpretative forces, so as to advance life. Thus, for Nietzsche, *Wille zur Macht* is the most life-advancing interpretative principle heretofore.\(^\text{92}\)

Nietzsche, however, is not unaware of the theoretical precariousness of his method. As he says in regard to *Wille zur Macht* as a post-metaphysical principle that enhances life, “One seeks a picture of the world in that philosophy in which we feel freest; i.e., in which our most powerful drive feels free to function. This will also be the case with me!”\(^\text{93}\) In other words, Nietzsche is “honest” with us that the project of advancing life via *Wille zur Macht* is, in the end, ultimately Nietzsche’s own personal way to overcome the problem of nihilism and of giving meaning to his life. It is the post-metaphysical philosophy of *Wille zur Macht* that most enhances Nietzsche’s sense of power, and therefore makes him feel freest. Thus, Nietzsche says in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*:


\(^{93}\) Nietzsche, *WP*, 418.
I came to my truth by diverse paths and in diverse ways: it was not upon a single ladder that I climbed to the height where my eyes survey my distances. And I have asked the way only unwittingly – that has always offended my taste! I have rather questioned and attempted the ways themselves. All my progress has been an attempting and a questioning – and truly, one has to learn how to answer such questioning! That however – is to my taste: not good taste, not bad taste, but my taste, which I no longer conceal and of which I am no longer ashamed. ‘This – is now my way: where is yours?’ Thus I answered those who ask me ‘the way’. For the way – does not exist!94

And also in Beyond Good and Evil:

Are they friends of ‘truth’, these coming philosophers? In all probability: for all philosophers have hitherto loved their truths. But certainly they will not be dogmatists. It must offend their pride, and also their taste, if their truth is supposed to be a truth for everyman, which has hitherto been the secret desire and hidden sense of all dogmatic endeavors. ‘My judgment is my judgment: another cannot easily acquire a right to it’ – such a philosopher of the future may perhaps say.95

Nietzsche is clear that his post-metaphysical philosophy of Wille zur Macht is not supposed to stand as a dogmatic solution to the problem of nihilism and to the problem of affirming life. Instead, it is a solution to his problem of nihilism and to his problem of affirming life. In this way, there is nothing coercive about Nietzsche’s post-metaphysical philosophy of Wille zur Macht. We are under no compulsion to accept it as true since it is fabricated out of a methodological suspension of—and as an alternative to—the metaphysico-philosophical moral imperative to accord with the truth. Thus, Nietzsche himself is clear that we need not read Wille zur Macht or his later genealogies as dogmatic metaphysical descriptions of reality—as Nehamas earlier defined them—to which we must assent.

CONCLUSION

In the end, Habermas’s insistence that Nietzsche’s work is incoherent and self-refuting, that Nietzsche is engaged in a critique of reason that undermines its own foundations since it undermines the foundations for all critique, is wholly untenable. As I have shown, Nietzsche’s critical suspicion of metaphysics is meant neither as a refutation of the existence of a primordial

95 Nietzsche, BGE, 43.
truth nor of the metaphysical systems truth presupposes. Likewise, *Wille zur Macht* is not meant to stand as a new metaphysical principle born from an aesthetico-mystical insight into the ultimate nature of reality nor as a principle by which to “unmask” the tyranny of reason. Instead, *Wille zur Macht* is a post-metaphysical principle fabricated for the purpose of advancing life. That Nietzsche can provide an account of reason via *Wille zur Macht* only serves to strengthen its interpretative force, to “demonstrate” that it can measure up to the standard to which Nietzsche holds it. In this way, that Nietzsche can provide a coherent and viable interpretation of existence via *Wille zur Macht* simply serves to demonstrate that there can be more than just the metaphysical interpretation of existence. Thus, Nietzsche’s account of metaphysics is not meant to be a “critique of reason” in the sense in which Habermas alleges. While for Habermas it is precisely reason that operates as a mechanism by which to unmask false absolutes as illusions, as a founding origin by which to erect the legitimacy of a position that can identify all illegitimacies, Nietzsche on all accounts disavows just such origins and just such a project. Thus, in no way can Nietzsche undermine his own “critique” since in no way is he engaged in the project of an undermining critique of a primordial truth. Moreover, as I have demonstrated, when we read Nietzsche as a “post-metaphysical philosopher,” we can provide an alternative to Habermas’s account of Nietzsche, one that is both viable and coherent.

This is not, however, to repudiate entirely Habermas’s reading of Nietzsche. Habermas is correct that Nietzsche does indeed aim to take leave of the dialectic of enlightenment and that he does indeed aim to jettison the metaphysical standards of truth and falsity. However, unlike on Habermas’s account, Nietzsche does not do so by appealing to an aesthetico-mystical experience, which would only draw Nietzsche back into metaphysics and thus only perpetuate the dialectic. Rather, Nietzsche draws the full consequences of his departure: he accepts “untruth” and
perspective as the basic condition of his life and hazards into the unknown, the uncertain, and the experimental. Thus, Nietzsche truly does exit the dialectic and take root in the mythical.96 Nietzsche’s myths tell the tale of *Wille zur Macht*, the eternal return of the same, free spirits, Ubermenschen, philosophers of the future, and the genealogy of morals. However, Nietzsche’s myths, precisely because they take leave of the dialectic, neither command nor elicit our allegiance. We are not coerced into accepting the truth of Nietzsche’s myths. And, it is here that Habermas misses the very strength of Nietzsche’s position. Habermas is correct, after modernity post-metaphysical philosophy cannot *return* to myth since pre-modern myth was still metaphysics. It can no longer serve us in its old guises. But, as Nietzsche suggests, “perhaps” metaphysical truth too is just one more myth: “It is no more than a moral prejudice that truth is worth more than appearance; it is even the worst-proven assumption that exists.”97 Thus, what Habermas misses is that as a *post-metaphysical* philosopher, Nietzsche goes forward—Nietzsche does not search for founding origins, he instead *fabricates*. And, it is here, resulting from a methodological decision to suspend the metaphysical interpretation of life and thereby the assumed value of primordial truths, that Nietzsche has something to offer those of us who consider ourselves post-metaphysical and post-foundational: the methodological courage to fabricate and experiment with new forms of thought and life—an experimental thinking and living that evades the metaphysico-philosophical moral impulse to tyranny.

CHAPTER 3:

HORKHEIMER’S DIALECTICAL MATERIALISM AS POST-METAPHYSICAL METHODOLOGY
INTRODUCTION

In the previous chapter, I advanced a reading of Nietzsche’s critique of metaphysics that argued not only for the coherence of Nietzsche’s work as a form of post-metaphysical philosophy, but also for its very significant and original characterization of post-metaphysical philosophy as the fabrication of methodological principles. Whereas the project of metaphysics aims for an insight into the essential structures of reality so as to provide an unassailable foundation for its first principles—most significantly for those that establish normative standards—post-metaphysical philosophy begins instead with a “methodological commitment” to the principles that establish its critical orientation. In this way, the principles of post-metaphysical philosophies do not reflect—nor do they claim to reflect—an insight into the fundamental nature of reality. Rather, post-metaphysical philosophy, as methodology, begins with a transparent and reflexive relationship to the commitments that motivate critical inquiry. Thus, unlike metaphysics, which aims for necessity and infallibility, post-metaphysical philosophy maintains a flexible and fallibilistic relation to both the principles that orient its critical inquiries as well as the metrics by which it assesses those commitments.

Even though Nietzsche advances a viable and rich post-metaphysical philosophy, the aim of Nietzsche’s work is predominantly geared toward personal transformation in the face of the advent of nihilism, which means that though Nietzsche’s work offers an abundance of conceptual resources for post-metaphysical philosophy—the Apollonian vs. the Dionysian, the Übermensch, the eternal return of the same, will to power, free spirits, philosophers of the future, genealogical history—those resources were not explicitly devised for the purposes and concerns of critical social theory. In order to address issues in post-metaphysical critical social theory specifically, I
will turn to the work of Max Horkheimer.\textsuperscript{98} Largely overshadowed by the work of his fellow colleagues Theodor Adorno and Herbert Marcuse, Horkheimer himself stands as more than just the early director of the Frankfurt School and his work stands as more than a mere appendage to that of Adorno and Marcuse. As J. C. Berendzen notes, one of Horkheimer’s most significant contributions to philosophy at large is his development of dialectical materialism as a viable post-metaphysical critical social theory.\textsuperscript{99} Similarly, Hauke Brunkhorst lauds Horkheimer’s “materialist destruction of philosophy” for opening the way to a “social-scientific transformation of philosophy” that takes leave of the problems of metaphysical philosophy.\textsuperscript{100}

Despite the few commentators that applaud the achievements of Horkheimer’s work, there are also those that consider Horkheimer’s work inherently aporetic, if not essentially incoherent—specifically, these criticisms are advanced by Thomas McCarthy,\textsuperscript{101} Jürgen Habermas,\textsuperscript{102} and Georg Lohmann.\textsuperscript{103} In turning to Horkheimer’s work, my aim here is twofold. First, I will examine these criticisms so as to demonstrate, contrary to these commentators, that Horkheimer’s dialectical materialism does indeed advance a viable and coherent post-metaphysical methodology, both epistemically and normatively. However, while disagreeing with their reasons, but in agreement with these commentators’ conclusions, I too will argue that

\textsuperscript{98} While a critical and reflexive relationship to metaphysics is a hallmark of the work of the Frankfurt School generally, Horkheimer’s work specifically provides an exemplary engagement with post-metaphysical philosophy as method since more so than any other theorist of the Frankfurt School, Horkheimer explicitly advances his philosophical method as an alternative to metaphysical philosophy, both in terms of its first principles regarding the nature of reality as well as its first principles regarding normative standards. For these reasons, I will focus on Horkheimer’s work to the exclusion of other members of the Frankfurt School.


Horkheimer’s critique of instrumental reason is inherently problematic—though not because it is ultimately self-contradictory, but rather because of the way in which it is undertaken in *Eclipse of Reason*. In the end, I will argue that Horkheimer’s critique of instrumental reason lapses into metaphysics despite his best efforts to keep it from doing so. This is problematic for Horkheimer as a post-metaphysical philosopher since he is committed methodologically to the position that metaphysics is an instrument of domination and hinders the alleviation of human suffering. Thus, by lapsing into metaphysics, Horkheimer’s critique of instrumental reason enacts the very tyranny, domination, and perpetuation of suffering that he sought to obviate, which therein transgresses the earlier methodological parameters he established for himself. Given both the achievements and failures of Horkheimer’s work, my second aim is to use them as a backdrop to address similar criticisms leveled against Foucault’s work as a post-metaphysical critical social theory. I will argue in the following chapter that the alleged failures of Foucault’s work—the purportedly opaque critical orientation of his genealogical method and his refusal to provide conventional normative resources—when contrasted to the work of Horkheimer, actually mark considerable successes for Foucault’s post-metaphysical critical methodology.

**McCarthy’s Critique of Normative Justification in Dialectical Materialism**

While Thomas McCarthy has high-praise for Horkheimer’s rather sophisticated solution to the epistemic problems concerning post-metaphysical methodology—dialectical materialism forgoes absolute metaphysical and epistemological foundations and yet evades falling into either academic skepticism or relativism by means of a rigorous contextualist approach to truth—he nonetheless considers Horkheimer’s attempt to replace Kantian pure practical reason with an “ungrounded feeling of compassion” for the suffering of all living beings as leaving dialectical materialism in a normative shortfall. On the one hand, McCarthy agrees with Horkheimer’s
assessment that the pure rational moralities of German Idealism problematically shift the moral burden from the social arrangement that produces oppression and inequality to the individuals constituted by that society, which has the unwitting effect of transmitting a socio-structural problem to the inner life of individuals. In Horkheimer’s estimation, as described by McCarthy, “[The] “characteristic opposition [in pure rational moral theories] between duty and interest, the universal and the particular, is an expression of the tension in capitalist society between the possessive individualism required to thrive in a market economy and a concern for the general welfare that, invisible-hand notions notwithstanding, is ill served by market mechanisms.”

Thus, for Horkheimer, morality is best addressed as a socio-historical and not an individual moral problem. However, on the other hand, McCarthy finds it wholly unsatisfactory that, given the shortcomings of pure rational morality, Horkheimer thereby rejects out of hand any attempt whatsoever to ground in reason the feelings of indignation, compassion, love, and solidarity. On McCarthy’s account, Horkheimer’s appeal to “ungrounded feelings” generates as many problems as it purportedly solves.

In McCarthy’s estimation, Horkheimer equivocates rational justification with ultimate grounding and thus imposes a needless opposition between irrational feelings and rational justification. Alternatively, according to McCarthy, “To drop the idea of pure rational motivation is not to deny that motives can be elaborated, criticized, defended, and shaped by reasons.”

Thus, just because Horkheimer rejects pure practical reason does not mean that he had to give up all attempts to provide rational justification for those “feelings.” Instead, as McCarthy argues, “If…Horkheimer had introduced into his discussion of morality the nonfoundationalist sense of rational justification he appealed to in his discussion of truth, this connection could not have

\[104\] McCarthy, p. 144.
\[105\] McCarthy, p. 147.
been sustained.” However, since Horkheimer creates an unbridgeable gulf between “ungrounded feelings of compassion” and the “rational justification of universal ideals,” he leaves us with no measure for determining with whom one should have sympathy and at what one should feel indignation. Moreover, since social relations affect feelings, feelings cannot act as an independent variable by which to gauge social imperatives. In this way, according to McCarthy, Horkheimer’s normative justification for dialectical materialism fails to provide any substantive normative resources.

**HABERMAS’S CRITIQUE OF DIALECTIC OF ENLIGHTENMENT**

As Karin Bauer, Peter U. Hohendahl, and Christopher Rocco all note, Habermas’s hostility to *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is motivated not only by what he considers to be the corrupting influence of Nietzsche’s critique of reason on Horkheimer and Adorno, but also by the danger of its “black” ideas metastasizing like a social cancer throughout the European intellectual milieu, especially in the forms of Derridean deconstruction and Foucaultian genealogy. As Habermas himself says, “…under the sign of a Nietzsche revitalized by poststructuralism, moods and attitudes are spreading that are confusingly like those of Horkheimer and Adorno. I would like to forestall this critique.” The “moods and attitudes” that so distress Habermas in connection with Nietzsche, Horkheimer, and Adorno are those manifested in a pessimism regarding the emancipatory potential of reason. On Habermas’s account, just as Nietzsche attempts to unmask reason as an expression of *Wille zur Macht*, which

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106 McCarthy, p. 147.
in the end undermines the rational standards of epistemic and moral legitimacy, so too do Horkheimer and Adorno attempt to unmask the Enlightenment’s complicity with myth, which in calling into question the distinction between reason and myth, undermines the very criterion presumed necessary for the modern conception of critique. For Habermas, this means, then, that in both cases the authors engage in a totalizing critique of reason that ultimately undermines its own foundations. As a result, both projects equally fall prey to performative contradiction.

On Habermas’s account, the Enlightenment established itself in direct contrast to myth, tradition, and religion. In this way, the early task of the Enlightenment was to affect a break between reason and myth. Since it alone was capable of generating universal understanding and consent, reason discredited tradition and religion as legitimate sources of authority and installed itself as the only rightful authority worthy of recognition. Moreover, in doing so, reason thereby located myth—delineated now as the irrational—as the origin of the inhumane, barbaric, oppressive, dominating, and regressive at work within the social field. As the Enlightenment progressed, having cast the openly mythic as invalid, it similarly achieved a reflexive and critical relation to its own theories via the method of ideology critique developed by Marx. As Habermas explains it, ideology critique:

…Attempts to show that the validity of a theory has not been adequately dissociated from the context in which it emerged; that behind the back of the theory there lies hidden an inadmissible mixture of power and validity, and that it still owes its reputation to this. Ideology critique wants to show how, on a level for which this painstaking distinction between contexts of meaning and contexts of reality is constitutive, precisely these internal and external relationships are confused—and that they are confused because validity claims are determined by relationships of power. Ideology critique itself is not a theory competing with some other theory; it simply makes use of certain theoretical assumptions. Thus equipped, it disputes the truth of a suspicious theory by exposing its untruthfulness. It advances the process of enlightenment by showing that a theory presupposing a demythologized understanding of the world is still ensnared by myth, by pointing out a putatively overcome category mistake.\textsuperscript{111}

\textsuperscript{111} Habermas, \textit{PDM}, p. 116.
In this way, ideology critique exposes the invalidity of a theory by unmasking the power relations that establish its standing and therein what must be considered the illegitimate grounds for its acceptance. In essence, ideology critique discloses a purportedly “true” theory as another instance of myth. According to Habermas, in ideology critique the Enlightenment was able to safeguard against mythic principles being reintroduced under the guise of theory. With Horkheimer and Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, however, ideology critique itself comes under suspicion. Whereas ideology critique originally tested a theory so as to be certain that it derived from principles of reason, and not from the particular power interests of a social class, ideology critique in the hands of Horkheimer and Adorno reflects back upon itself and calls into question the very principles of reason that establish the grounds for distinguishing universally valid and legitimate understanding from myth. Thus, the major thesis of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, “Myth is already enlightenment, and enlightenment reverts to myth,”\(^\text{112}\) erodes the very distinction between myth and enlightenment that makes possible the liberating potential of modernity and the Enlightenment on Habermas’s reading.

At the core of Horkheimer and Adorno’s argument in defense of their thesis is the claim that in both myth and reason an identical relation to nature holds. Via a reading of the history of Western culture beginning in the Homeric myths, continuing through the early modern sciences of Bacon, Descartes, and Newton, and having culminated in the organization of 20th century late-capitalism, Horkheimer and Adorno attempt to demonstrate that the underlying impetus driving the entirety of the Western world is a desire to dominate nature for the purpose of self-preservation. In this way, according to Habermas, the aim of Horkheimer and Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is to unmask the operations of power that lurk beneath and corrupt Western


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reason so as to affect a totalized form of ideology critique. Horkheimer and Adorno’s critique reduces reason to an “instrumental” form: reason can no longer generate its own ends but operates strictly as a mechanism for determining the most effective means to any end. Horkheimer and Adorno’s unmasking of the infusion of power into Western reason thus calls into question the very standards and ideals by which the Enlightenment established itself in contrast to myth. As Habermas says:

With their concept of “instrumental reason” Horkheimer and Adorno want to add up the cost incurred in the usurpation of reason’s place by a calculating intellect. This concept is simultaneously supposed to recall that when purposive rationality, overblown into a totality, abolishes the distinction between what claims validity and what is useful for self-preservation, and so tears down the barrier between validity and power, it cancels out those basic conceptual differentiations to which the modern understanding of the world believed it owed the definitive overcoming of myth.¹¹³

Thus, by disclosing instrumental reason’s origin in the drive to self-preservation, Horkheimer and Adorno purportedly dissolve the distinction between myth and enlightenment that makes critique possible. In this way, since ideology critique is aimed at its own foundations, critique becomes total and falls prey to the accusation of performative contradiction. However, what Habermas finds even more disconcerting in their critique is that, “Horkheimer and Adorno regard the foundations of ideology critique shattered – and yet they would still like to hold on to the basic figure of enlightenment.”¹¹⁴ In other words, even though Horkheimer and Adorno employ ideology critique to call into question its very foundations, they do so with the intent of enlightening the Enlightenment about itself. Thus, they confusedly hold onto Enlightenment ideals in some form. For this reason, Habermas claims, “If they do not want to renounce the effect of a final unmasking and still want to continue with critique, they will have to leave at least one rational criterion intact for their explanation of the corruption of all rational criteria. In

¹¹³ Habermas, *PDM*, p. 119.
¹¹⁴ Habermas, *PDM*, p. 118.
the face of this paradox, self-referential critique loses its orientation.” That is, without some rational basis, critique forfeits its critical purchase. But, Horkheimer and Adorno ultimately refuse this path. They carry their critique past the point of no return and, in this way, slide off into “the groundless.” Thus, in the end, according to Habermas, Horkheimer and Adorno find themselves in “the performative contradiction inherent in an ideology critique that outstrips itself.”

LOHMANN’S CRITIQUE OF ECLIPSE OF REASON

Lohmann advances similar critiques to both McCarthy and Habermas, but aims them directly at Horkheimer’s last major text, Eclipse of Reason. In this context, Lohmann argues that Horkheimer’s analysis of the crisis of reason undermines any foundational position from which one could indict or resist the collapse of reason. According to Lohmann, the first major difficulty with Horkheimer’s analysis is that he locates the point of resistance in the individual who is “let alone.” Such an individual is characterized as one who lives without metaphysical comfort and whose suffering is unappeased by society’s offerings of happiness. Purportedly following Schopenhauer, Horkheimer claims that in suffering we find compassion, which is the recognition of, and sympathy with, the suffering of others. Upon this basis, Lohmann argues, Horkheimer tries to construct a foundation for social solidarity: “The solidarity of compassion, one might say, kindled by the observation of individual suffering, links—in a negative way—the self-realization of one individual with that of another and, finally, with that of all individuals. Human beings would thus experience their solidarity not in happiness but in misfortune, suffering, and pain.”

115 Habermas, PDM, pp. 126-127.
116 Habermas, PDM, p. 128.
117 Habermas, PDM, p. 127.
118 Lohmann, p. 400.
119 Lohmann, p. 401.
Thus, compassion, born out of suffering, is supposed to found an obligation to respect all livings beings in nature capable of suffering. Lohmann contends, however, that our own suffering does not necessitate compassion for others and thereby solidarity in suffering. Here, Lohmann cites a study by Barrington Moore\textsuperscript{120} that establishes empirically that only in certain instances does suffering transform into compassion, which is considered enough to refute Horkheimer’s Schopenhauerian thesis. For this reason, though Horkheimer tries apparently to construct a universal obligation for compassion out of suffering, he fails to provide an adequate explanation or ground for how or why one ought to feel compassion. Thus, Lohmann says, “…[It] is still unclear whether and how the intended solidarity of compassion can be derived…from conscious individual suffering.”\textsuperscript{121} In the end, Horkheimer’s position amounts to a baseless assertion that compassion for others serves as the foundation of social solidarity.

Secondly, Lohmann argues that Horkheimer’s critique of reason either remains merely at the level of the programmatic or succumbs to historical relativism since it fails to secure an adequate foundation for critique. In Lohmann’s terms, it needs a “comprehensive concept of reason” through which the critique of reason can be justified. However, since Horkheimer’s history of the crisis of reason tells the story of the rise of subjective reason as calculating instrumentality, and its overthrow of an objective reason that could secure metaphysical foundations, critique therein loses any basis upon which to rest truth-claims. Thus, Horkheimer’s critique of subjective reason must be relativistic since, on Horkheimer’s own admission, there is no form of absolute reason to which he can appeal. For this reason, Lohmann claims that, “The demonstration that the instrumental reason of subjective self-preservation ultimately destroys the individual whose self-realization it originally aimed to promote is…denunciatory. Yet this

\textsuperscript{121} Lohmann, p. 404.
finding yields no objectively justifiable alternative. It shows only that these approaches do not work.”

In the end, according to Lohmann, all Horkheimer is left with is a vague appeal to a form of reason that is “other” to the one that was born of the metaphysical impulse to dominate nature.

**APPROACHING THE FRANKFURT SCHOOL**

In defending Horkheimer from the above criticisms, and so as to defend my own critical thesis, I will here follow Helmut Dubiel’s standard division of Horkheimer’s work into the three distinct phases of materialism, critical theory, and the critique of instrumental reason.

However, since the history of the Frankfurt School is both a long and a complicated one, an attempt to delve into the precise ways in which the members of Frankfurt School changed their theoretical approach in relation to those conditions is beyond the scope of my intentions here, especially considering that Dubiel, Jay, and Wiggershaus have each written exacting histories of the Frankfurt School that meticulously trace its theoretical development in relation to the historical exigencies it faced. Thus, while there is much of importance to be said with respect to the Frankfurt School’s foundation in Marxism, its engagement with Lukács, and its appropriation of concepts found in Weber, I point readers to the above named studies for detailed responses regarding these connections. Instead, borrowing from their work, I will provide only the necessary bits of socio-historical background needed to establish and inform the theoretical continuity between the three major phases of Horkheimer’s work. The specific thread of continuity that will guide my presentation of Horkheimer is his life-long commitment to the

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“open dialectic” as an alternative methodological approach to metaphysics. Thus, in what follows, I will begin with an account of the early theoretical orientation of the Frankfurt School, its transformation into critical theory and the critique of instrumental reason, and I will conclude by addressing Horkheimer’s critics as well as advancing my own criticism of Horkheimer’s critique of instrumental reason as it is presented in *Eclipse of Reason*.

**EARLY ORIENTATION OF THE FRANKFURT SCHOOL**

At the heart of Horkheimer’s early materialist phase is the concern to establish a more just and rational society, which, according to the early Frankfurt School theoreticians, meant abolishing the private ownership and control of the means of production and reorganizing them under the management of a planned economy. However, despite their Marxist leanings, the Frankfurt School found itself at odds with the Communist party on two points, and thus as Marxist outsiders. First, based on the work of Frankfurt School economist Friedrich Pollock, its members maintained that the liberal period of free-market capitalism Marx both analyzed and critiqued had transformed into what Pollock would eventually term ‘state capitalism.’ According to Pollock’s thesis, free-market capitalism, in which entrepreneurs pursued their own economic interests unimpeded by state regulation and interference, was as crisis-prone as Marx had claimed. However, after the global economic collapse in the 1920’s, the state began to intervene in the marketplace and stave-off tendencies toward crisis. These interventions, Pollock argued, could potentially preserve the capitalist mode of production indefinitely. The gist of Pollock’s thesis was that the catastrophic economic collapse of capitalism, which was supposed to act as a catalyst to a socialist revolution on Marx’s account, was no longer inevitable. Thus, the Great Depression signaled for Pollock and other members of the Frankfurt School, not the end of capitalism, but only the end of its liberal phase. In this way, state capitalism, through
interventions in the market place, could mitigate the tendencies toward crisis in capitalism and yet still serve the profit interests that drove liberal capitalism rather than the humanitarian interests advocated by socialism.\textsuperscript{126}

Secondly, Horkheimer rejects Lukács’—and, for that matter, the entire socialist intelligentsia’s—identification of the proletariat as both the object of political theory and the subject of political action.\textsuperscript{127} The guiding position of socialist theory is that only with the development of a commodity economy, as in capitalism, does society become totalizing in such a way that the exploitative and alienating conditions of the proletariat can be known and that the recognition of these conditions will be sufficient to overthrow the capitalist organization of society. In this way, when workers are brought to see the conditions of their existence under capitalism, they will revolt. For this reason, the proletariat is considered both the object of theory and the subject of practice. However, Horkheimer rejects the thesis that a “class consciousness” is present, either transcendentally or empirically, in the proletariat as a theoretical knowledge adequate to their condition and thus as an impetus to political revolution. Specifically, Horkheimer’s rejection of “class consciousness” as a mediating point for theory and action was a response to the defeat of the German labor movement towards the end of the Weimar Republic.\textsuperscript{128} As Jay notes:

Critical Theory was developed partly in response to the failure of traditional Marxism to explain the reluctance of the proletariat to fulfill its historical role. One of the primary reasons for Horkheimer’s early interest in psychoanalysis had been the help it might give in accounting for the psychological “cement” of society. Accordingly, when he assumed the reins of the Institut in 1930, one of the first tasks he announced was an empirical study of the mentality of workers in the Weimar Republic.\textsuperscript{129}

\textsuperscript{127} Jay, p. 47.
\textsuperscript{128} Dubiel, pp. 23-31.
\textsuperscript{129} Jay, p. 116.
Thus, in order to understand the failures of “class consciousness,” the Frankfurt School introduced psychoanalytic method into orthodox Marxism. Moreover, this ultimately led members of the Frankfurt School to reject Marxism’s insistence on the complete dependency of the cultural superstructure upon the economic base, which alienated them only further from the Communist party. It is, in this context, that the members of the Frankfurt School begin to develop their unique methodological approach to the problems of social injustice in the early part of the 20th century.

THE INSTITUTE FOR SOCIAL RESEARCH

In his inaugural address as director of the Institute for Social Research, Horkheimer claims that:

[Social philosophy’s] ultimate aim is the philosophical interpretation of the vicissitudes of human fate—the fate of humans not as mere individuals, however, but as members of a community. It is thus above all concerned with phenomena that can only be understood in the context of human social life: with the state, law, economy, religion—in short, with the entire material and intellectual culture of humanity.130

Moreover, according to Horkheimer, in order to identify the social forces that shape the structure of society, and thereby the life of humanity, the guiding question of social philosophy must be:

The question of the connection between the economic life of society, the psychical development of individuals, and the changes in the realm of culture in the narrower sense (to which belong not only the so-called intellectual elements, such as science, art, and religion, but also law, customs, fashion, public opinion, sports, leisure activities, lifestyle, etc.).131

With this task in mind, Horkheimer rejects previous social philosophies that have developed out of the work of Kant and Hegel, and that have culminated in a positivistic approach to social philosophy at large. For Horkheimer, Kant’s philosophy ultimately remains trapped within an isolated subject that determines the transcendental conditions of possible experience. Since the

131 Horkheimer, “PSSP,” p. 11.
knowing subject is ultimately considered constitutive of cultural phenomena, it is therefore incapable of examining the ways in which the economy, law, and religion act as social forces constitutive of the subject. While Hegel improves upon the work of Kant by situating the knowing subject within the constitutive forces of its social framework and history, and thus locates the meaning and reason of the individual within the State and the historical destiny of nations, the failure of the contestation of individual wills to find a synthesis in a higher order or reason leads to an ever-increasing disbelief in the metaphysical realization of Absolute Spirit, which culminates in a Schopenhauerian pessimism. Thus, according to Horkheimer, the Hegelian philosophy is a failed attempt to “demonstrate—above the level of actual empirical events—the existence of a higher, autonomous realm of being, or at least a realm of value or normativity in which transitory human beings have a share, but which is itself not reducible to mundane events.”¹³² For this reason, the death and suffering of individuals appears senseless and meaningless in the absence of a metaphysical absolute. Lastly, while positivism attempts to reduce science to a set of empirically verifiable facts, it not only abdicates a method for assessing the viability of competing theories of reality in doing so, but also thereby rejects metaphysics as a meaningful phenomenon at large. However, according to Horkheimer, a careful survey of the dominant social philosophies of the time—Comte, Marx, Weber, or Scheler—all employ metaphysical theories of social reality nonetheless. Thus, positivism is at bottom methodologically limited and careless in its unsupported metaphysical assumptions.

Given the failings of the above-mentioned approaches to social philosophy, Horkheimer offers his own procedure for social philosophy that addresses the inadequacies of the previous theories. According to Horkheimer, “[The failure of social philosophy thus far] can be overcome to the extent that philosophy—as a theoretical undertaking oriented to the general, the

‘essential’—is capable of giving particular studies animating impulses, and at the same time remains open enough to let itself be influenced and changed by these concrete studies.” In other words, Horkheimer advocates a synthetic and working relationship between philosophy and science. “In short, the task is to do what all true researchers have always done: namely, to pursue their larger philosophical questions on the basis of the most precise scientific methods, to revise and refine their questions in the course of their substantive work, and to develop new methods without losing sight of the larger context.” Thus, with philosophy and science working in tandem, the scientific research of studying society can be directed by the larger philosophical question of the connection between economics, psychology, and culture, while at the same remaining open to revisions as the collected data opens and closes horizons of inquiry.

With this interdisciplinary approach, Horkheimer holds that he can avoid the trappings of both metaphysical dogmatism and empirico-scientific shortsightedness. As a specific example, Horkheimer contrasts his new interdisciplinary approach to both a naïve Hegelianism and a naïve Marxism. Horkheimer rejects a naïve Hegelianism that would hold ideas as primary and determinant and material conditions as derivative and secondary. Similarly, Horkheimer also rejects a naïve Marxism that would hold the economy as the only true reality and human psychology and culture as epiphenomenal. Instead, Horkheimer, by means of an interdisciplinary approach, seeks to discover the ways in which the economy, human psychology, and culture are interrelated and mutually affect one another. Thus, the agenda of the Institute is from the very beginning to formulate a comprehensive theory of society, i.e., one that does not privilege a

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133 Horkheimer, “PSSP,” p. 9.
single perspective, such as idealism or the economy, but rather critically interprets both society and the individual from several perspectives in an attempt to understand how they interrelate.

**Dialectical Materialism and Metaphysics**

Having established the agenda of the Frankfurt School, Horkheimer takes great pains to develop a method adequate to its ambition and sensitive to its concerns. It is in this context that Horkheimer distinguishes the methodological approach of the Institute from both previous metaphysically dominated approaches in philosophy and current trends in science. I will examine the ways in which Horkheimer characterizes dialectical materialism\(^\text{135}\) in relation to metaphysics first and then science.

**Characterization of Metaphysics**

According to Horkheimer, metaphysics, as classically conceived, is primarily concerned with securing an absolutely perfect understanding of ultimate reality. In the tradition of metaphysics, the inquiring subject attempts to discern with perfect clarity the fundamentally unified and universal structure of reality that underlies the totality of being. As a result, one of the central components of metaphysical thinking, and the epistemological position that it assumes, is the tendency to pursue an ideal correspondence between knowledge and the known—or rather, an identity between the concept of the object and the object of the concept. Metaphysicians maintain that the knowing subject can indeed accurately grasp the fundamental structure of reality as it is and that the concept will thus accurately reflect this structure. In this way, the knowledge of the knowing subject and the fundamental structure of reality will perfectly reflect one another.

\(^{135}\) In characterizing Horkheimer’s position of dialectical materialism and metaphysics, I draw primarily from his 1933 essay, “Materialism and Metaphysics.” However, my characterization of dialectical materialism is also informed by his essays: “Materialism and Morality,” “On the Problem of Truth,” “The Rationalism Debate in Contemporary Philosophy,” and “Montaigne and the Function of Skepticism.”
Since all of metaphysics is concerned with the attempt to attain an accurate knowledge of the fundamental structure of reality that underlies it in its totality, Horkheimer declares that, “Every metaphysics strives for insight into an essential nature, with the idea that the nucleus of the future is already contained in it; what metaphysics discovers must underlie not only the past but the future as well.” Horkheimer argues that if metaphysics, as it understands itself, is to attain to the level of an absolutely perfect understanding of ultimate reality, then that which metaphysics is trying to know cannot be subject to change; it must seek knowledge of an essential nature that holds for all time. Conceiving of metaphysics in this way, Horkheimer states, “Metaphysics takes the most general characteristics, the elements as it were, which are common to all men in all times and places, and calls them concrete.” Metaphysics de-emphasizes particulars in favor of a general and universal structure that provides a stable foundation for understanding particulars. Thus, metaphysicians consider that which is both most real and most valuable to be that which is eternal and unchanging.

Importantly, Horkheimer contends that metaphysicians do not engage in the project of metaphysics, or a “disinterested contemplation of things,” merely for its own sake. Rather, according to Horkheimer, metaphysics is motivated by a desire to provide an absolutely certain foundation for action. As Horkheimer states:

The effort to make his personal life dependent at every point on insight into the ultimate ground of things marks the metaphysician. It makes no difference whether what he intuits urges him to intense worldly action or to indifference or to asceticism, and whether the demands made on men by reality are presented as identical for all men at all times or as differentiated and changeable.

The metaphysician thus believes that, in the being he seeks to discover, a basis may be found for shaping the individual’s life… Ultimate reality is regarded as normative, however, not only in those systems where religious origins of the dependence relationship still show in the form which

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137 Horkheimer, “Materialism and Metaphysics,” p. 32.

The metaphysical tradition, as Horkheimer takes it, is an attempt to ground ethics and a basis for normative critique in an understanding of ultimate reality. In this way, one of the fundamental assumptions of the metaphysician is that contained within an accurate understanding of the fundamental structure of reality is an insight into the meaning and purpose of existence—that is, an insight into how we “ought” to live. Thus, the metaphysician not only wants an accurate concept of reality, but also to set her actions in accord with that reality. In this way, and very importantly, knowledge of ultimate reality is intended to dictate what we should and should not do.

**Objection to Metaphysics**

Horkheimer objects to the project of metaphysics for two reasons. First, he claims that the task of trying to ascertain the fundamental structure of reality that underlies all of existence turns us away, in the end, from the problems of this world and focuses us instead on another, and quite possibly illusory, world. This, in effect, actually cultivates insensitivity to the wretchedness of this world and our time, and distracts us from seeking its causes and altering its conditions. Thus, rather than placing a higher value on changing the immediate material conditions of human existence in this world, metaphysics relegates the social problems of this world to an inferior position relative to the project of absolute knowing. Thus, for Horkheimer, the task of metaphysics by its very nature devalues human existence in favor of another world and thereby ignores the plight of humanity.

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Second, Horkheimer claims that, under the guise of universality, metaphysical theories have been employed throughout history as a means for justifying the demand to recognize the particular interests of individuals and social groups:

Ruling and ruled classes alike have not been satisfied to present their claims simply as expressions of their particular needs and desires. They have also proclaimed them as universally binding requirements grounded in transcendent sources, as principles in accord with the eternal nature of the world and man.\textsuperscript{140}

In other words, social classes are rarely content to present their specific needs as an expression of their own personal agenda and instead often present those needs as universal and binding laws of nature.\textsuperscript{141} In this way, Horkheimer specifically characterizes metaphysics as an instrument of domination, as a method for imposing one’s interests on others and soliciting their obedience in the process of doing so.

**CRITIQUE OF METAPHYSICS**

Fundamentally, however, Horkheimer is critically suspicious of the project of metaphysics—that is, Horkheimer casts doubt on the very possibility of gaining an absolute insight into the eternal and unchanging structure of ultimate reality. According to Horkheimer,

> The claim that there is an absolute order and an absolute demand made upon man always supposes a claim to know the whole, the totality of things, the infinite. But if our knowledge is in fact not yet final, if there is an irreducible tension between concept and being, then no proposition can claim the dignity of perfect knowledge. Knowledge of the infinite must itself be infinite, and a knowledge which is admittedly imperfect is not a knowledge of the absolute.\textsuperscript{142}

For Horkheimer, the project of metaphysics *assumes* both an eternal and unchanging structure that underlies the totality of existence and a knowing subject that can, through reason, transcend the particularities and specificities of space and time to access this essential structure. However, it is not clear to Horkheimer that this can be done. Methodologically, Horkheimer operates with an alternative conception of the knowing subject as deeply situated within its historical and

\textsuperscript{140} Horkheimer, “Materialism and Metaphysics,” p. 22.
\textsuperscript{141} Nietzsche levels this criticism against slave morality, as does Marx under the form of ideology critique.
\textsuperscript{142} Horkheimer, “Materialism and Metaphysics,” p. 27.
contextual perspective and thereby limited by this perspective. In this way, the project of metaphysics is an epistemological impossibility for Horkheimer’s contextualist subject of knowledge.\footnote{Clearly, Horkheimer cannot possibly assert that the knowing subject is necessarily limited to its historical and contextual perspective so as to refute the possibility of the epistemic project of metaphysics since Horkheimer would immediately fall back into asserting a metaphysical variant of the knowing subject—albeit a historical and contextual one. However, it is theoretically coherent for Horkheimer to begin methodologically with a perspectively limited knowing subject as a reasonable and hypothetical position from which to begin philosophizing. As I will go on to explain, Horkheimer is quite explicit that his methodological foundation is not a metaphysical foundation. Moreover, Horkheimer takes great pains to defend his position as a coherent alternative to metaphysics, skepticism, and relativism.}

Furthermore, Horkheimer’s method not only affirms the historically and contextually limited position of the knowing subject, it also affirms the historically and contextually conditioned position of the object of knowledge:

The theoretical activity of men, like the practical, is not the independent knowledge of a fixed object, but a product of ever-changing reality. Even in a society that would freely determine what it is to be, nature, however gradual the change in it might be, would be a militating factor against such an identification of knowledge and the object. Physics is an abstract product of human action and may be related to future experience only as a highly conditional hypothesis, not as the full reflection of a supposed essence of natural history.\footnote{Horkheimer, “Materialism and Metaphysics,” pp. 28-29.}

That is, according to Horkheimer, we do not find a stable structure of nature in experience. Rather, we seem to find something that is itself in a constant state of flux. Thus, as Horkheimer attempts to elaborate in the above quoted passage, despite our attempts to formulate concepts adequate to the phenomena of nature, nature itself seems to change both in its very structure and its processes. Thus, from Horkheimer’s methodological position, an identity between knowledge and object cannot be achieved.

For these reasons, Horkheimer considers our concepts as always limited and hypothetical. We can never be sure that we have been given all the necessary information to formulate an adequate concept of the object such that we have achieved absolute knowledge—an identity between concept and object. Since we are both limited in our perspective, and nature itself seems...
to be in flux, our concepts remain hypothetical since some further information could be revealed that demands that we revise our initial concepts. Therefore, for Horkheimer, given the epistemic difficulties he identifies, the project of metaphysics seems implausible, and thus it is more useful methodologically to consider our knowledge as probable rather than as necessary.

**DIALECTICAL MATERIALISM AS AN ALTERNATIVE TO METAPHYSICS**

Horkheimer terms his methodological alternative to metaphysics “dialectical materialism.” According to Horkheimer, “materialism…maintains an irreducible tension between concept and object.” That is, unlike metaphysics, which holds that the knowing subject can attain knowledge that perfectly resembles the way reality truly is, and thereby points to an identity between knowledge and known, dialectical materialism does not hold that such an identity can ever occur. Rather, “materialism, unlike idealism, always understands thinking to be the thinking of particular men within a particular period of time. It challenges every claim to the autonomy of thought.” Thus, dialectical materialism begins with the methodological understanding that the knowing subject, given the historically and contextually situated condition of both itself and nature, can never attain to absolute knowing.

More decisively, dialectical materialism does not envision the subject and nature as two independent units of which the metaphysical task is to bring them into accord, i.e., to achieve absolute knowing. Instead, for dialectical materialism, both the subject and nature are two

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146 Horkheimer, “Materialism and Metaphysics,” p. 32.
147 Brunkhorst similarly emphasizes the importance of understanding dialectical materialism as a method so as to distinguish it adequately from metaphysics: “The other limit is the historicity of real subjects. Entirely in the sense of historicism, the contingent historical horizon of the ‘respective concrete situation of the actor’ is an insuperable given for them. Everything is historically conditioned. Nor is that meant as transcendental philosophy: it is only a refutable supposition, which has taken its leave of philosophy. Therefore…Horkheimer’s materialism is essentially methodological materialism. It has a decidedly scientistic streak. It accepts the distinction between ‘is’ and ‘ought.’ Fallibilistic and oriented toward the sciences of experience, this materialism seeks to expose its own hopes to disillusionment. Along with Dilthey, it regards metaphysics as a mere hypothesis. It is a resolute attempt at a transformation of philosophy into science but not simply in order to have the specialized disciplines step into the place of philosophy. Methodological materialism takes the primacy of experience as its point of departure” (pp. 78-79), emphasis added.
interdependent aspects of a fundamentally unified structure. Thus, for dialectical materialism, we will never be able to distinguish with absolute precision the boundary between the subject and nature. As Horkheimer states, “In what we call objective, subjective factors are at work; and in what we call subjective, objective factors are at work.”

Using Kant as an example of an undialectical metaphysical thinker, Horkheimer claims that while Kant ultimately prohibits reason from absolute knowing—barring reason from the noumenal and relegating it to the phenomenal—he nonetheless presupposes a process of knowing that, while it lies at a point in infinity, nevertheless envisions the process of knowing as a process in which the subject and object march progressively closer to one another, a process in which the concept and object are ever-approximating one another even though the ultimate coincidence of the two lies at a point in infinity. Thus, while the Kantian project abandons the possibility of an ultimate unity between subject and object, it nonetheless still guides the Kantian project in the form of a hope. In contrast, dialectical materialism wholly rejects the model of metaphysics upon which the epistemological task of philosophy founds itself.

Using science as an example, and envisioning it across Kantian lines, we typically and naively hold that the concepts of science as they develop through history are an ever-greater approximation of nature. Both the metaphysical and Kantian ideas of science assume the ideal of an infinite progress in knowing and that there is, ultimately, an essential and unchanging structure of reality that we are ever more-closely approximating conceptually. Dialectical materialism, however, rejects the idea that we are taking steps toward the absolute. “Metaphysics usually has its gaze fixed on ‘the structural unity of this one, great, unknown reality to whose

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149 Clearly, this is quite a contentious accusation against the Kantian critical philosophy and I do not pretend to defend Horkheimer’s interpretation of Kant. Rather, as is usual for Horkheimer, his critique of another philosophical position—in this case Kant—sheds light on his own interpretation of his project—in this case dialectical materialism.
questions we have no answer, but for the materialist such a unity is habitually neither starting-
point nor goal.” Rather, for dialectical materialism, the process of knowing and formulating
concepts always occurs within the dynamism of history and society. In this way, dialectical
materialism understands that specific men formulate concepts at a specific time, in a specific
socio-economic context, and with a specific agenda in mind. Thus, these concepts do not reveal a
fixed and timeless reality that existed in the past and will hold for the future. Rather, they are
operative within, and indicative of, a moment in time. Any concept can one day reveal itself as
meaningless. Likewise, for Horkheimer, just as historical context shapes concepts, so too do
concepts shape their historical context as a productive force. At any given time we accept certain
concepts as true, and act on and shape our world according to those concepts, i.e., religious
ideals, economic theories of incentive, etc. Here is the mutual interdependence of concept and
object in dialectical materialism. Nature, as a socio-historical context shapes our concepts, but
our concepts equally shape nature as principles that inform our action.

As is evident, dialectical materialism operates wholly outside the confines of a project
that busies itself with getting reality “right,” which is the task of metaphysics. Instead, dialectical
materialism abandons the old paradigm of measuring its concepts against reality or an ideal of
absolute knowing: “Since that extra historical and hence exaggerated concept of truth is
impossible, which stems from the idea of a pure infinite mind and thus in the last analysis from
the concept of God, it no longer makes sense to orient the knowledge that we have to this
impossibility and call it relative.” Dialectical materialism thus abandons the traditional project
of philosophy, as metaphysics, and moves closer to the methods and practices of science—that
is, dialectical materialism utilizes concepts as hypotheses formulated on the basis of the best and

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most rigorously accumulated data at the time, but nonetheless holds those concepts open to revision and continual scrutiny. As Brunkhorst characterizes it, “The most general fundamental principles of the materialists—constituent-theoretical, even ontological-sounding theses such that ‘all that exists is material’—have a merely hypothetical status, dependent of fallible experience…”\footnote{Brunkhorst, p. 77.}

**RELATIVISM, SKEPTICISM, AND TRUTH**

Considering that dialectical materialism rejects metaphysical absolutes for contextually situated subjects and objects, it appears on the surface that dialectical materialism is either a form of relativism or a form of skepticism. If we cannot know truth absolutely, or an absolute truth, then one might argue that we are unmoored from any means by which to determine the validity of concepts, that the difference between concepts would be liquidated by epistemic, and thus metaphysical, uncertainty. Yet, Horkheimer asks, “Is there really only a choice between acceptance of a final truth, as proclaimed in religious and idealistic schools of philosophy, and the view that every thesis and every theory is always merely “subjective,” i.e., true and valid for a person or group or a time or human beings as a species, but lacking objective validity?”\footnote{Horkheimer, “PT,” p. 183.} This is a false dilemma. Horkheimer explicitly critiques both relativism and skepticism, and casts dialectical materialism as an alternative to both the naïveté of the metaphysics of truth and the absurdities of a relativistic skepticism.\footnote{See “On the Problem of Truth,” “Montaigne and the Function of Skepticism,” and “Remarks on Philosophical Anthropology.”}

According to Horkheimer, Hegel refutes philosophical skepticism via the concept of “determinate negation.” While one could argue that because a series of concepts fail to represent an object accurately and thereby that the project of knowledge is flawed, Hegel argues instead
that the series itself is a process of more accurate depictions of the object and not a series of failures. Thus, when an element of an object invalidates our concept of the object, we do not merely abandon the previous concept. The negation of the previous concept is not absolute. That is, a “determinate negation” is not a disjunction in which either the book is on the table or the book is not on the table. Rather, the negation of a previous concept pushes knowledge forward and points toward the formulation of a new concept. Using the U.S. 2012 presidential race as an example, the Republican Party self-avowedly had a poor concept of the American voting constituency. This was manifested in the extreme disjunction between their anticipation of the election results and the actual election results. This discrepancy forced the Republican Party to reexamine its initial concept. However, the previous concept is not merely negated, it is negated in a fruitful way: the inadequacies in the original concept point toward a more accurate concept. Thus, Hegel’s concept of “determinate negation” overcomes skepticism.

However, for Hegel, “The goal is as necessarily fixed for knowledge as the serial progression; it is the point where knowledge no longer needs to go beyond itself, where knowledge finds itself, where Notion corresponds to object and object to Notion.”155 On Horkheimer’s reading, Hegel remains within idealistic, dogmatic, and metaphysical philosophy. In this way, for Horkheimer, just as Kant’s theory of knowledge succumbs to Hegel’s critique, so Hegel’s critique of Kant succumbs to Marx’s critique:

[In] contemplating his own system, Hegel forgets one very definite side of the empirical situation. The belief that this system is the completion of truth hides from him the significance of the temporally conditioned interest which plays a role in the details of the dialectical presentation through the direction of thought, the choice of material content, and the use of names and words, and diverts attention from the fact that his conscious and unconscious partisanship in regard to the problems of life must necessarily have its effect as a constituent element of his philosophy.156

That is, Hegel does not account for the historically situated element of thought, Hegel falls prey to Marx’s critique—historical materialism—that thought is influenced by its time.\textsuperscript{157}

Thus, whereas Hegel ultimately advocates a “closed dialectic” that will one day resolve itself in absolute knowing, Horkheimer advocates an “open dialectic” that maintains an irreducible tension between concept and object:

The open-ended materialistic dialectic does not regard the ‘rational’ as completed at any point in history and does not expect to bring about the resolution of contradictions and tensions, the end of the historic dynamic, by the full development of mere ideas and their simple consequences. It lacks the aspect of the idealistic dialectic that Hegel described as ‘speculative’ and at the same time as ‘mystical,’ namely, the idea of knowing the ostensibly unconditioned and thereby being oneself unconditioned.\textsuperscript{158}

Yet, this does not mean that a measure for truth cannot be established. As in the sciences, “generally accepted criteria”\textsuperscript{159} are in place at any given time for determining the truth-value of propositions. Horkheimer speaks to the example of medicine. While the concept of cancer may change over time and eventually become meaningless, it nonetheless has a precise meaning at a given time and only one of two conflicting claims as to what indicates the presence of cancer in a patient can be correct. That is, given the current state of knowledge concerning cancer at a particular time, a doctor’s claim that a patient has cancer is either correct or incorrect. As Horkheimer states, “Truth is decided not by individual’s beliefs and opinions, not by the subject in itself, but by the relation of the proposition to reality.”\textsuperscript{160} There is a generally accepted body of knowledge and a rigorous method for establishing truth. One either correctly or incorrectly employs this method. This is not to say that the very concept of cancer cannot be called into question and ultimately overthrown, but within set parameters, according to Horkheimer, a non-relativistic truth can be established. Moreover, “From this follows the principle that every insight

\textsuperscript{157} Horkheimer, “PT,” p. 186.
\textsuperscript{159} See Horkheimer, “PT,” p. 192 and p. 203.
\textsuperscript{160} Horkheimer, “PT,” p. 194.
is to be regarded as true only in connection with the whole body of theory, and hence is so to be understood conceptually that in its formulation the connection with the structural principles and practical tendencies governing theory is preserved.¹⁶¹ In other words, while on the particular level of specific instances of cancer, one either diagnoses correctly or incorrectly, when the battle of the very concept of cancer is called into question, this itself takes place within the greater context of a theoretical framework and will ultimately have to resolve itself within this framework. Here, Horkheimer is describing something akin to a “paradigm shift” within a specific discipline.¹⁶² Concepts and theories can be brought into play that call into question the entire body of knowledge heretofore established in a discipline—for example, the Einsteinean re-framing of Newtonian mechanics. Yet, these debates themselves take place only in the context of a greater theoretical framework, in the context of methods and aims that superseded and directed the very nature of those debates.

In this way, we can see that Horkheimer is employing a combination of the correspondence theory of truth and a coherence theory of truth. Yet, rather than naively thinking that either reaches at reality, Horkheimer emphasizes the radically historically situated nature of both the knower and her tasks. Theory is always related to socio-historical practice, even those theories that appear most theoretically abstract on the surface. Thus, while there is no “absolute knowing” for Horkheimer, not all claims to truth are equally valid. Within the generally accepted parameters of knowledge at a given time, there is a criterion and a method for distinguishing true claims from false claims, even if those claims once held true one day may prove to be false from a refined and newly established perspective.

¹⁶¹ Horkheimer, “PT,” p. 204.
Horkheimer is careful to distinguish the open dialectic of dialectical materialism from pragmatism. According to Horkheimer, pragmatism is a theory of truth that claims that the validity of propositions is determined by 1) what one accomplishes with them, 2) the ability to produce desired effects, 3) the furtherance of life, 4) promotion of human activity, and 5) that which “pays.” Horkheimer’s critique of pragmatism is that so long as it operates independently of social philosophy, it ultimately works in collusion with the dominant form of society—that is, it ultimately reinforces the interests of the powerful status quo. Thus, one must ask, “A theory is correct if it advances life for whom?” So long as pragmatism is untethered from social critique, it ultimately plays into the hands of reinforcing the status quo.

This ultimately underlines Horkheimer’s point that all theory is ultimately tied to practice. In essence, Horkheimer ultimately rejects the idea of “disinterested contemplation.” Instead, all scientific inquiry—loosely construed—is motivated by particular agendas at a particular moment in history. Whether it is research into the genome project because of the profitably of potential medicines, or political economy with the intent of altering the basic economic configuration of society, all theory is motivated by practice, i.e., seeks to bring about an effect in the world or is situated in a nexus that seeks to have an effect in the world. For this reason, Horkheimer is clear that his goal is to understand the economy, like any other object of science and nature, so as to be able to manipulate it and direct it.

Here we return to the Frankfurt School’s Marxist roots. Ultimately, what distinguishes dialectical materialism from metaphysics, relativism, and science is that it seeks to understand the current forms of social domination that arise under the capitalist mode of production so as to change them. Thus, since the very object of inquiry for dialectical materialism is highly mobile...

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and fluid—understanding as a multi-faceted, complex, and inter-related phenomenon—
dialectical materialism must of necessity take into account not only the fluidity of its object, but
also the necessity to remain fluid in its concepts. And, it is for this reason that dialectical
materialism rejects static metaphysical theories and opts instead for a fluid and open dialectic.

Thus, stating the benefit of the open materialistic dialectic, Horkheimer claims:

But by ceasing to be a closed system, dialectic does not lose the stamp of truth. In fact, the
disclosure of conditional and one-sided aspects of others’ thought and of one’s own constitutes an
important part of the intellectual process. Hegel and his materialist followers were correct in
always stressing that this critical and relativizing characteristic is a necessary part of cognition.
But being certain of one’s own conviction and acting upon it do not require the assertion that the
concept and object are now one, and thought can rest. To the degree that the knowledge gained
from perception and inference, methodical inquiry and historical events, daily work and political
struggle, meets the test of the available means of cognition, it is the truth. The abstract proposition
that once a critique is justified from its own standpoint it will show itself open to correction
expresses itself for the materialists not in liberality toward opposing views or skeptical indecision,
but in alertness to their own errors and flexibility in thought.164

By means of an open dialectic, dialectical materialism can evade the problems of dogmatism that
beset Marxism in the latter part of the 19th century and the early part of the 20th century,
especially under Lenin and Stalin.

**MATERIALISM AND ACTION**

Since dialectical materialism is operating outside the confines of the traditional project of
metaphysics, dialectical materialism also rejects the notion of a metaphysically grounded
normative position of action or critique. As Horkheimer notes, “What we have already said
implies that materialist views are incompatible with the idea of an absolute demand made upon
man.”165 Dialectical materialism, methodologically, bars the possibility of providing an absolute
foundation for morality. In fact, Horkheimer openly admits that dialectical materialism is without
a ground for its moral and normative position. “This materialist view has the negative
significance that it rejects a metaphysically grounded morality. But in addition it has always

meant to materialists that man’s striving for happiness is to be recognized as a natural fact requiring no justification.”¹⁶⁶ In this way, dialectical materialism refuses to postpone changing this world in favor of theorizing about another one. Instead:

The materialist tries to replace the justification of action with an explanation of it through an historical understanding of the agent. He regards justification as an illusion. Most men down to the present day feel a very strong need for such a justification; in important decisions they are not content to rely on their feelings of indignation, compassion, love, solidarity, and so on, but must relate their feelings to an absolute world-order by calling them ‘moral.’ But this widespread need does not prove that there is a reasonable fulfillment of it. The life of most men is so wretched, the deprivations and humiliations are so many, and their efforts and success are for the most part so disproportionate, that we can easily understand the hope that the earthly order of things may not be the only one.¹⁶⁷

Thus, the focus of dialectical materialism is ultimately on altering the material conditions of this world in which men suffer and employing a theoretical position that can most effectively realize this project: “[Materialism] is concerned with changing the concrete conditions under which men suffer and in which, of course, their souls must be stunted.”¹⁶⁸ According to Horkheimer, we find in the 20th century a disproportionate amount of suffering. Moreover, this is neither due to a deficiency in resources nor in technology since in the 20th century the resources and technology exist to provide a reasonable quality of life for all individuals. Thus, dialectical materialism does not seek a ground for claiming that we should help people, as in metaphysics, but simply chooses to do so. Moreover, it holds that the current state of inequality and barbarism found in the 20th century is a product of the economic situation of the 20th century, i.e., capitalism as dominant mode of production.¹⁶⁹ Thus, the goal for dialectical materialism is to develop an economic theory of society that ameliorates the suffering of the majority of people in this world, rather than

¹⁶⁶ Horkheimer, “Materialism and Metaphysics,” p. 44.
¹⁶⁷ Horkheimer, “Materialism and Metaphysics,” p. 23. Quite interestingly, Horkheimer here appeals to “feelings” rather than “reason.” As will be discussed later, this is a significant methodological commitment on Horkheimer’s part, one with which both McCarthy and Lohmann take issue.
¹⁶⁸ Horkheimer, “Materialism and Metaphysics,” p. 32.
¹⁶⁹ Here, Horkheimer’s identification of the economic organization of society as the source of modern suffering is indicative of his continuing commitment to Marxism. As I will note shortly, disillusioned with Marxism, Horkheimer shifts the origins of domination from capitalism to the form instrumental rationality, and then to Western reason itself.
focusing on finding a reason to do so in another world. Significantly, then, rather than attempting to gain an insight into reality so as to know how to live, the materialist wants to interpret to the best of her ability how the world works so that she can direct it to her purposes—the fulfillment of human satisfaction—rather than herself to it: “The reality which the materialist seeks to master for himself is the opposite of divine, and his effort is to direct it according to his will rather than to direct himself according to it.”

FROM TRADITIONAL THEORY TO CRITICAL THEORY

While Horkheimer initially casts the project of dialectical materialism in distinction to the task of metaphysical philosophy, and therein aligns dialectical materialism more closely to science, by the late 1930’s Horkheimer also begins to cast the aims of his project in contrast to the reigning science of his time as well as now referring to the theoretical position of the Frankfurt School as “critical theory.” This transition, as Dubiel states, occurs in response to the major socio-historical transformations occurring at the time. Most importantly, the Frankfurt School had come to consider Soviet-style socialism under Stalin as a significant failure. In previous years, the Frankfurt School thought that the abolition of the private ownership of the means of production was enough to bring about the emancipatory effects of socialism. However, Stalin’s Russia demonstrated that the means of production could be removed from private ownership and put in the hands of a state-bureaucratic apparatus and yet still not serve the needs of a society in the form of a planned economy. In this way, the Frankfurt School came to reject openly Soviet-style Marxism as they realized that a planned economy in and of itself was not enough to bring about a more rationally organized society. Thus, the Frankfurt School’s adoption

170 As I will argue later, Horkheimer’s rejection of the need to ground compassion metaphysically aligns him closely with Buddhism.
of the term “critical theory” was intended to cast them as engaged in a more “authentic” form of Marxism than either that of the *Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands* (SPD) or the *Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands* (KPD). In this way, Horkheimer’s use of the term “critical” was an explicit attempt to re-appropriate and redeploy Marx’s notion of the critique of political economy developed in *Capital*, which on Horkheimer’s reading was intended to act as a theory “adequate to its situation” rather than as a theory that misconstrues its analyses of history for the process of history itself, as with Hegel. Moreover, the rejection of the proletariat as a revolutionary force brought the Frankfurt School to place a greater focus on the individualizing and politically stultifying effect of the scientific attitude on society. Thus, the name “critical theory” marks for the Frankfurt School both an abandonment of the utopian image of socialism after the failures of the Soviet Union as well as the project of critically appropriating science for the precise purpose of transforming the current configuration of society into one that is organized more rationally.

**Traditional Theory**

For Horkheimer, the traditional concept of theory is, on the one hand, the culmination and realization of the ideals of science set forth in Cartesian modernity. In essence, theory is simply “the sum total of propositions about a subject.” In accordance with the basic principles of Euclidean axiomatic geometry, the fundamental and most basic propositions of theory should form a systematic, unified, and comprehensive whole that will thus provide a basis for a universal and systematic science of all possible objects. In this way, every proposition within theory must fit together consistently. However, the traditional concept of theory is not itself pure mathematics. The goal of all theory is to provide an explanatory model of the totality of

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phenomena. Therefore, the primary goal of theory is to achieve a consonance between the propositions of theory and the phenomena they are intended to describe. Specifically, this holds for the most basic and fundamental propositions of theory since, regardless of the exact science in which the theorist is engaged, they are derived from experience through a rigorous inductive process. This means that new phenomena could potentially appear at any time creating a dissonance between the propositions of theory and the phenomena they are intended to explain. Thus, theory must always remain hypothetical. Furthermore, the task of theory is not merely to explain phenomena as though theory were an idle curiosity. As Horkheimer points out, the traditional concept of theory is, rather, the realization of Francis Bacon’s scientific dream of manipulating and controlling nature. In this way, the Industrial Revolution with its technological advances is the culmination of the task of the traditional concept of theory.

CRITIQUE OF TRADITIONAL THEORY

According to Horkheimer, a danger arose within the traditional concept of theory. With its task set to manipulate and control nature for the purpose of human interests, the traditional concept of theory was slowly reified until it came to stand as the only method for the acquisition of knowledge, as though the traditional concept of theory was in accord with the inner and essential nature of knowledge itself. Most problematically, traditional theory still operates as under the Enlightenment era fascination with science as a gentleman’s hobby, overlooking its relationship to society at large. Thus, to this extent, so long as science focuses on its research as a practice of the fully realized methodology for gathering knowledge, scientific activity continues to occur as though it were an isolated activity divorced from other social processes. Yet, as soon as we ask how the objectives and goals of traditional theory are established and why some projects are undertaken as opposed to others, it becomes evident that they are set by the interests
of society in general and the interests of industry specifically, which becomes all the more
evident when one recognizes the predominance of the pragmatic principle of utility in science—
only that research that can deliver “useful” results is of value. Thus, according to Horkheimer, so
long as science continues to operate as if it were an isolated discipline divorced from the social
nexus, it will fail to recognize its relationship to—and more importantly, its complicity with—
the current and dominant mode of production, i.e., capitalism. As Thomas McCarthy notes, “One
of the first tasks of critical theory is to challenge the privileged ‘nonposition’ of socio-scientific
knowledge by analyzing the modes of its production, the role it plays in society, the interests it
serves, and the historical processes through which it came to power.”174

Horkheimer is concerned with traditional theory’s unreflective complicity with capitalism
for several reasons. First, for Horkheimer, an economic system based on commodity exchange is
inherently oppressive, exploitive, unjust, and barbaric. As Horkheimer states:

The bourgeois economy was concerned that the individual should maintain the life of society by
taking care of his own personal happiness. Such an economy has within it, however, a dynamism
that results in a fantastic degree of power for some, such as reminds of the old Asiatic dynasties,
and in material and intellectual weakness for many others. The original fruitfulness of the
bourgeois organization of the life process is thus transformed into a paralyzing barrenness, and
men by their own toil keep in existence a reality that enslaves them in ever-greater degree.175

Here, Horkheimer is calling attention to a contradiction that has arisen within free-market
capitalism. The basic tenets of free-market capitalism claim that, through the pursuit of
enlightened self-interest, a greater distribution of wealth will occur within society and lift the
general level of happiness experienced by most people from that previously experienced under
feudalism. Yet, according to Horkheimer, we currently find in society the consolidation of
wealth in the hands of a few, an ever-increasing population of those that are exploited and
oppressed, and an economic, political, and cultural system designed to ensure the privilege of a

few at the expense of many. Moreover, according to Horkheimer, the basic politico-economic principle of capitalism—that the interests of all can be met by the individual pursuit of self-interest by each—was formulated and implemented in a very purposive fashion. Thus, capitalism is not an historical accident, but a human construction quite consciously brought into existence. However, for Horkheimer, this means that, “The bourgeois type of economy, despite all the ingenuity of the competing individuals within it, is not governed by any plan; it is not consciously directed to a general goal; the life of society as a whole proceeds from this economy only at the cost of excessive friction, in a stunted form, and almost, as it were, accidentally.”  

In other words, rather than developing and implementing an economic system that utilizes and distributes the resources of society in an organized and rational fashion, capitalism is “orchestrated chaos.” What is worse, according to Horkheimer, is that capitalism is cast as though it is an organic and inevitable product of nature and history and not as the design of very specific individuals at a very specific moment in time. Thus, those who benefit from it cast resistance to capitalism as futile. However, as Horkheimer notes:

There will always be something that is extrinsic to man’s intellectual and material activity, namely nature as the totality of as yet unmastered elements with which society must deal. But when situations which really depend on man alone, the relationships of men in their work, and the course of man’s own history are also accounted part of ‘nature,’ the resultant extrinsicality is not only not a suprahistorical eternal category (even pure nature in the sense described is not that), but it is a sign of contemptible weakness. To surrender to such weakness is nonhuman and irrational.”  

It is cowardly to continue to see capitalism as an inevitable and unalterable historical fact. So long as we continue to see capitalism as natural, we will forestall any effort to change it. Thus, Horkheimer argues:

Unemployment, economic crises, militarization, terrorist regimes—in a word, the whole condition of the masses—are not due, for example, to limited technological possibilities, as might have been the case in earlier periods, but to the circumstances of production that are no longer suitable to our time. The application of all intellectual and physical means for the mastery of nature is hindered

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because in the prevailing circumstances these means are entrusted to special, mutually opposed interests. Production is not geared to the life of the whole community while heeding also the claims of individuals; it is geared to the power-backed claims of individuals while being concerned hardly at all with the life of the community. This is the inevitable result, in the present property system, of the principle that it is enough for individuals to look out for themselves.  

For Horkheimer, the historical nature of the principle of commodity exchange, and the exploitation and oppression that follow from it, are reason enough to call capitalism into question and to push towards a new politico-economic organization of society.

Ultimately, then, the problem with traditional theory for Horkheimer is that it reinforces a metaphysical picture of the subject in which the individual is considered as an autonomous agent that acts independently of social forces, and as if the individual herself were the sole ground of all her values, beliefs, and actions. So long as the knowing subject remains a Cartesian subject, divorced from a social and historical context, the individual will continue to operate with an illusory sense of freedom and autonomy, and fail to recognize her place and role in the social whole. The Cartesian knowing subject fails to recognize itself as an agent of social change and abdicates its social responsibility. Thus, the form of the knowing subject under traditional theory ultimately serves to reinforce a mode of production that is inherently exploitative and unjust.

**Critical Theory**

As a corrective to traditional theory, and as a major tenant of critical theory, Horkheimer emphasizes the historically and socially situated condition of the knowing subject of dialectical materialism. According to Horkheimer, “The facts that our senses present to us are socially performed in two ways: through the historical character of the object perceived and through the historical character of the perceiving organ.”

In other words, neither is the world given as a neutral and brute fact nor is the knowing subject merely a passive receptacle of information. Rather, the objects of the world present themselves as part of a larger historical and social nexus.

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Every cultural artifact bears the mark of the time and place of its manufacture—that is, I do not simply perceive a video game console in front of me, I see instead the Nintendo Entertainment System, which, with its boxy appearance and video controllers that are connected directly to the console via a cable, bears the technological and aesthetic marks of 1980’s. Moreover, when I see the video games *Super Mario Bros.* or *The Legend of Zelda* on the television screen, I do not simply see a “video game,” I see a 1980’s 8-bit video game in all its pixilated glory. Horkheimer’s point is that objects do not exist in the world as brute facts, but locate themselves in the precise historical and social nexus in which they arose and stand in relation to, and stand out from, objects created in different historical and social milieus. I do not merely perceive a phone; I perceive a phone either as a smart phone, cell phone, or a landline. I can place an object within the historical and social milieu from which it arose. Moreover, according to Horkheimer, not only are the objects themselves historically and socially conditioned, but our senses are as well. Our senses become acclimated to technological “progress.” I grow accustomed to using the latest operating system on my personal computer. However, when using an encroachingly outdated computer in my office at work, I find the visual aesthetic and technological capabilities of the dated operating system to be disruptive—to be honest, I find them downright appalling. Having become accustomed to high-definition video, standard analog video stands out within my visual horizon as an oddity. Thus, according to Horkheimer, we find a two-fold socio-historical mediation of knowledge—both the object and the subject are historically and socially conditioned. Objects reveal the place and time in which they were manufactured and my senses are acclimated to the aesthetico-technological capabilities of the time. For Horkheimer, this is enough to call into question the Cartesian ideal of an autonomous and isolated knowing subject. Moreover, an historically and socially conditioned knowing subject exists precisely in relation to
her place and time, and thus cannot in good faith ignore the socio-political environment in which she exists.

All this is to say that critical theory, which takes as its object of study society itself, neither engages in a disinterested and isolated examination of society nor takes its cues from industry in its examination of society. Rather, the goal of critical theory is to study the fundamental politico-economic structure of capitalism, which it considers irrational and unjust, so as to bring about a more rationally organized society that will meet the needs of humanity at large. To this end, critical theory is comparable to the discipline of medicine. Critical theory is not interested in developing a merely abstract theory of the economic mechanisms at work in capitalism. Rather, critical theory aims to develop a theory of society by means of which they can change it. In this way, just as a doctor seeks to understand an illness so as to cure a patient, so critical theory seeks to understand the principle of exchange at work in capitalism so as to cure society of the ills that it creates. Thus, the goal of critical theory is to demonstrate that the dominant system of political economy and exchange necessarily leads to the ills of the current form of social organization—oppression, alienation, exploitation, and injustice—and to formulate a way of creating a more rationally organized society that meets the needs of everyone; or, as Horkheimer says, “Its goal is man’s emancipation from slavery.”180 In other words, the goal of critical theory is to analyze the dominant organization of society, i.e., capitalism, so as to pinpoint the causes of social injustice, and ultimately ameliorate them.

**Dialectic of Enlightenment and the Critique of Instrumental Reason**

By the 1940’s the Frankfurt School’s theoretical orientation undergoes another transformation. Its members no longer locate domination in either the structure of class conflict

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generally or even in capitalism specifically, rather they now locate domination in humanity’s relation to nature. Inspired initially by Marx’s critique of capitalism, Horkheimer held out that a humane form of society could be achieved by replacing the inherently irrational and anarchic socio-economic organization of capitalism with a more rationally organized economy. However, disillusioned by the totalizing and oppressive nature of post-liberal capitalism, as well as by the powerful forms of psychology that support it, Horkheimer begins to locate the current forms of socio-economic domination in the drives that gave rise to the scientific worldview—what they now designate as *instrumentellen Vernunft*. On this account, it is instrumental reason’s appropriation of nature as a mere resource—to be dominated and manipulated for human purposes—that slowly turns humans themselves into another resource to be dominated, manipulated, and controlled. Thus, Horkheimer’s turn to a critique of instrumental reason marks a definitive break with Marx’s vision of a socialist utopia achieved through emancipation from nature.\(^{181}\) As Dubiel puts it:

> Behind the implicit identification with this *topos* is the surrendering, never made explicit, of Marx and Engels’ prognosis that the emancipation of the human race will be achieved by perfecting human domination of nature. The claim made by the industrial age—to have achieved emancipation from the domination of nature through a high level of technological development—is interpreted as signifying the deepest fall into nature. Hence the conviction, of the old European, rationalist tradition, of the primacy of spirit over nature, is dialectically turned against itself: a view of reason restricted merely to improving the technology of self-preservation is still a part of that nature which actually instrumentalizes reason to even the score. This critique of technical control over nature is the programmatic theme integrating all of the specific analyses made in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and other writings of the 1940s.\(^{182}\)

In this way, Horkheimer’s emancipatory hope no longer lies in a more rational organization of society, but rather in a form of thinking that is “other” to instrumental reason. Nonetheless, this shift in Horkheimer’s thought does not constitute a radical break with his earlier work since

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\(^{181}\) According to Jay, this marks a break with class conflict as the motor of history and replaces it with man’s domination of nature (p. 256).

\(^{182}\) Dubiel, p. 90. See also Jay (p. 269): there he argues that *Dialectic of Enlightenment* situates Marx in the Enlightenment tradition they critique since Marx’s theory of the human subject as *animal laborans* perpetuates an instrumental relation to nature.
unifying all of Horkheimer’s thinking is an impassioned concern to identify the causes of human suffering and oppression in the contemporary world so as to alleviate them. Thus, as Wiggershaus notes, “Horkheimer and Adorno believed that by interweaving these two themes [of Weberian disenchantment and Klagesian domination of nature] they could give a better account of the disastrous consequences of a form of capitalism which had led to fascism than they could by continuing the Marxian critique of capitalism.”183

HORKHEIMER AND ADORNO – DIALECTIC OF ENLIGHTENMENT

In the “Introduction” to Dialectic of Enlightenment, Horkheimer and Adorno describe the project of their work as, “nothing less than to explain why humanity, instead of entering a truly human state, is sinking into a new kind of barbarism.”184 Aside from being an open condemnation of the state of Western culture during their time, which was born from witnessing the atrocities of World War II and the Nazi regime in Germany, this question also sets the stage for Horkheimer and Adorno’s development of a radical conception of the history of Western thought and its evolution into 20th century late-capitalism. Their radical conception of the history of Western thought is born from their analysis of the philosophy of the Enlightenment and their resultant conviction in the necessity of a reflective criticism of the underpinning drives motivating its development. According to Horkheimer and Adorno, “What is at issue here is not culture as a value…but the necessity for enlightenment to reflect on itself if humanity is not to be totally betrayed. What is at stake is not conservation of the past but the fulfillment of past hopes.”185 In other words, Horkheimer and Adorno consider the “new barbarism” of their age to stem directly from the philosophy of the Enlightenment and thus they hold that the only way to

183 Wiggershaus, p. 327.
184 Horkheimer and Adorno, DE, p. xiv.
185 Horkheimer and Adorno, DE, p. xvii.
provide a corrective to this “new barbarism” is to trace the development of the philosophy of the Enlightenment back to its origins so as to uncover the drives that motivated it in the hope of redeeming it.

In the opening line of the first section of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, “The Concept of Enlightenment,” Horkheimer and Adorno state that, “Enlightenment, understood in the widest sense as the advance of thought, has always aimed at liberating human beings from fear and installing them as masters.”186 In fact, these two goals have set not only the trajectory for the philosophy of the Enlightenment, but also the trajectory for the whole course of Western thought. Specifically, these two goals can be traced back to the mythological thinking of Homer’s *Odyssey* and to the scientific thinking of the early pre-Socratics. Both mythological and early scientific thinking find their source in the human tendencies toward self-preservation driven by fear—fear in the face of a hostile world that threatens survival and fear in the face of a world that is mysterious and unknown. In both of these experiences of fear can be found the desire to understand and explain nature. In other words, since “humans believe themselves free of fear when there is no longer anything unknown,”187 they seek to understand and explain nature. Thus, through an ability to explain nature, by which the inexplicable would no longer remain inexplicable, humans hope to eliminate any and all fear and to maximize self-preservation. However, out of this simple desire Horkheimer and Adorno see the foundation of a burgeoning tendency toward the domination and mastery of nature. In fact, Horkheimer and Adorno go so far as to claim that, “What human beings seek to learn from nature is how to use it to dominate wholly both it and human beings.”188 In other words, driven by fear, a form of knowledge is born that becomes a method for understanding and mastering nature. Yet, the ability to master nature

through knowledge, and thereby dominate nature, inevitably reduces nature to a matrix of objects capable of manipulation that exist solely for the purpose of serving the knowing subject’s ends—in this case, knowledge turns nature into a means for human self-preservation.

Through the rise of what Horkheimer and Adorno term “instrumental reason,” thought takes on a form that is capable of achieving the type of knowledge necessary for mastering and manipulating nature. The hallmark of instrumental reason, or scientific reasoning in general, is the reduction of quality to quantity. Though the seed of instrumental reason can be found in the science of early pre-Socratic thinkers, the Pythagoreans most especially, it first comes to prominence with Galileo’s mathematization of nature. Under the Galilean conception of nature, everything is reducible to number and calculability, and only that which is calculable is considered real—that is, the world of pure ideational rationality becomes the one and only true world. Thus, reason becomes the instrument for knowing the world through the ritualization of mathematical procedures. In this way, thinking gives birth to a systematic conception of the world that can be understood in its entirety through a mathematical method, which is seen as the one and only method. In essence, science becomes technology. However, as Horkheimer and Adorno point out, “Mental representation is only an instrument. In thought, human beings distance themselves from nature in order to arrange it in such a way that it can be mastered.”

That is, the scientific conception of nature gives rise to a particular type of relationship between humans and nature. Nature comes to be seen merely as a means for achieving human purposes—namely, self-preservation—which in turn is the reduction of nature to an instrumental objectivity capable of manipulation. Once nature is reduced to a mere means for serving human purposes, a break is introduced between humans and nature that creates a false sense of separation between the two—humans come to see themselves as distinct from nature since they become its master.

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The danger of instrumental thinking, for Horkheimer and Adorno, lies in the fact that instrumental reason becomes all-pervasive. In fact, Horkheimer and Adorno consider instrumental reason to be nothing less than a cloaked form of totalitarianism. This has two devastating effects. First, since under instrumental thinking only that which can be quantified and calculated is considered real, any form of thought that does not fit into the system of quantification and calculation is excluded. As Horkheimer and Adorno note, “For enlightenment, anything which does not conform to the standard of calculability and utility must be viewed with suspicion.”\footnote{Horkheimer and Adorno, \textit{DE}, p. 3.} Consequently, any form of thinking for the Enlightenment that exists outside the province of instrumental reason is seen as thoroughly irrational. However, this means that instrumental thinking is incapable of self-reflection or self-critique. In other words, since instrumental reason is strictly limited to assessing the most efficient means for achieving any posited end, it cannot thereby assess the posited ends towards which it is directed. The question of ends is outside the scope of instrumental reason. This means that questions of quality and non-instrumental value are outside the quantitative scope of instrumental reason since questions of quality and of value are in fact a question of ends. Thus, there is no “objective” basis or criteria by which instrumental reason can assess the appropriateness of its own ends. That is, the ends of instrumental reason—in this case the mastery and the domination of nature—are unjustifiable through instrumental reason itself.

Second, since instrumental reason turns all material objects of nature into objects capable of being manipulated and dominated, humans also become capable of being manipulated and dominated due to the fact that they too are material beings in the world. The false sense of separation humans feel from nature, which results from human domination and mastery over nature through technological and instrumental thinking, induces a forgetfulness amongst humans.
that they too, as material beings in the world, are capable of being manipulated and are thus subject to the same principles of mastery and domination as nature. It is for this reason that Horkheimer and Adorno aptly state:

At the moment when human beings cut themselves off from the consciousness of themselves as nature, all the purposes for which they keep themselves alive—social progress, the heightening of material and intellectual forces, indeed, consciousness itself—become void, and the enthronement of the means as the end, which in late capitalism is taking on the character of overt madness, is already detected in the earliest history of subjectivity. The human being’s mastery of itself, on which the self is founded, practically always involves the annihilation of the subject in whose service that mastery is maintained, because the substance which is mastered, suppressed, and disintegrated by self-preservation is nothing other than the living entity, of which the achievements of self-preservation can only be defined as functions—in other words, self-preservation destroys the very thing which is to be preserved.191

That is, once instrumental reason is coupled with industrial capitalism, human beings become material means for achieving self-preservation by other human beings who possess power—the knowledge necessary for mastering and dominating nature. This effect of instrumental reason concerns Horkheimer and Adorno the most. It leads to the mastery and domination of some human beings by others, which is precisely what led to Horkheimer and Adorno’s characterization of their age as a new type of “barbarism.” In the end, instrumental reason, which sought to liberate humans and establish their sovereignty, has merely streamed-lined the processes by which some human beings can dominate other human beings, and has thereby brought about exactly the opposite effect to which it was initially directed, which they consider evidenced in the consumerism of 20th century late-capitalism.

Yet, despite the bleak picture Horkheimer and Adorno paint of the development and current state of Western culture, they nonetheless hold onto the possibility of redeeming the Western ethos. For Horkheimer and Adorno, “what matters today is to preserve and disseminate

freedom, rather than to accelerate, however indirectly, the advance toward an administered world.”¹⁹² And, more importantly:

Through this remembrance of nature within the subject, a remembrance which contains the unrecognized truth of all culture, enlightenment is opposed in principle to power, and even in the time of Vanini the call to hold back the enlightenment was uttered less from fear of exact science than from a hatred of licentious thought, which had escaped the spell of nature by confessing itself to be nature’s own dread of itself.¹⁹³

Herein lies Horkheimer’s and Adorno’s corrective to the new age of “barbarism” in late-capitalism. By redeeming the hopes of the past—the hope of liberating men from fear and establishing their sovereignty—we can move beyond the domination and mastery at work in our age. But again, since humans currently fail to see themselves as a part of nature and have forgotten their fundamental dialectical relation with nature, a forgetfulness which has resulted from the processes of instrumental thinking, humans also fail to see the forms of domination currently at play in culture and the way in which a technological view of nature gives rise to this domination. Thus, a move away from the domination of humans and nature requires a rethinking of the relationship between humans and nature.

First, Horkheimer and Adorno suggest that the freedom of every human subject must be a criterion for assessing the state of culture at any given time. This is an end they hold can be recognized by every individual and is without need of justification. Second, this is an end that must take into account the forgotten relationship between humans and nature. Here, Horkheimer and Adorno provide little by way of an explanation as to how we should conceive of this relationship. However, Horkheimer and Adorno claim the need for a form of liberating reason as opposed to instrumental reason. First, given that the essence of instrumental reason is to think strictly in terms of quantification and calculation with the intent of reducing nature to a closed system of known facts, we can surmise that a form of liberating reason would refrain from the

¹⁹² Horkheimer and Adorno, DE, p. xii.
¹⁹³ Horkheimer and Adorno, DE, p. 32.
tendency toward totalizing systems by respecting the dialectical relationship between our concept of nature and nature as an “uncomprehended whole.”¹⁹⁴ In other words, if one of their critiques of instrumental reason concerns its totalizing tendency, then it would seem that the alternative would be to refrain from such a tendency by resisting the reduction of nature to any particular concept of it. Again, instrumental reason employs a totalizing concept of nature since its very aim is to reduce all of nature to quantifiable measure and thus render nature knowable in its entirety. Moreover, in so doing it excludes all other concepts of nature as “mythic” and “irrational.” In this way, a dialectical conception of nature would recognize and maintain a relationship with nature as an incomprehensible whole. Second, since instrumental reason estranges humans from nature through its domination over nature, an alternative form of thinking would recognize nature within the subject. Thus, for Horkheimer and Adorno, to escape the state of domination and mastery that results from instrumental thinking, humans must adopt a form of liberating reason that can simultaneously respect the autonomy of individuals, recognize nature within humans, and maintain the dialectical relationship between our concept of nature and nature as an incomprehensible whole.

**Eclipse of Reason**

While *Dialectic of Enlightenment* advances a novel telling of the rise of Western history, its analyses remain hastily sketched and only partially developed, and solutions to the problems it raises are near non-existent. Thus, we find in Horkheimer’s *Eclipse of Reason* a richer and more nuanced development of the ideas first elaborated in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Horkheimer states, in no uncertain terms, that the purpose of *Eclipse of Reason* is “to inquire into the concept of rationality that underlies our contemporary industrial culture in order to discover

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whether this concept does not contain defects that vitiate it essentially.” 195 The concept of rationality with which Horkheimer is here concerned arose with ancient Greek mythology and eventually developed into the philosophical project of ascertaining the ultimate nature of reality. However, according to Horkheimer, the very ascendency of that reason, which was supposed to usher in liberation from the irrational and hostile forces of both man and nature by disclosing the path to the best possible life, has transmogrified into an instrument of domination, which has ultimately had the inverse effect of establishing tyranny and oppression as all-pervasive features of contemporary social life. Specifically, reason has abdicated its role in establishing a collective purpose for humans that transcends individual pursuits and has, instead, reduced both the self and the world to mere instruments in a sadistic pursuit of irrational self-interests. Ultimately, as Horkheimer argues, this has created a situation in which we forfeit any attempt to pursue our own personal fulfillment and alternatively deny ourselves so as to survive in a seemingly inescapable socio-political environment that is driven entirely by the pursuit of economic profit. In other words, we find ourselves in the midst of a crisis of reason. Rather than culminating in the Enlightenment ideals of liberty, justice, and freedom, reason has devolved into an instrument of domination that has caused an all-encompassing alienation and exploitation to metastasize throughout the social body. According to Horkheimer, in order to overcome this crisis, philosophy needs to affect a reconciliation between nature and reason via a “remembering” of forgotten nature. Ultimately, this entails abandoning the static concepts of metaphysics for a dynamic conceptual thinking embodied in the open dialectic of dialectical materialism.

SUBJECTIVE AND OBJECTIVE REASON

Reason, according to Horkheimer, manifests itself in two distinct, and yet intertwined, forms. In its subjective formation reason is the formal mechanism of thought itself, which is displayed in the faculties of classification, inference, and deduction. Its operations lie entirely in coordinating the most efficient means for any given end. In this way, its primary activity is to evaluate the suitability of concepts, procedures, tasks, and courses of action in light of already established ends. Subjective reason itself, however, cannot evaluate the suitability and worth of ends in themselves. It is the task of the objective formation of reason, rather, to reveal and determine ends. As it originated in antiquity with Socrates and Plato, the purpose of objective reason is to access and disclose the rational order inherent in the universe that exists independently of individual subjects. The intention behind objective reason is to discern the proper and harmonious relations between humans and humans, and humans and nature, which would ultimately be the embodiment of the best possible life. As Horkheimer notes:

The term objective reason thus on the one hand denotes as its essence a structure inherent in reality that by itself calls for a specific mode of behavior in each specific case, be it a practical or a theoretical attitude. This structure is accessible to him who takes upon himself the effort of dialectical thinking, or, identically, who is capable of eros. On the other hand, the term objective reason may also designate this very effort and ability to reflect such an objective order.

Thus, objective reason seeks to establish a measure by which we can determine the suitability of personal interests in relation to the community and nature that is independent of, and transcends, those interests.

196 Horkheimer, throughout the text, refers to subjective reason interchangeably as: formalized reason, instrumental reason, and relativist reason. Similarly, throughout the text he names John Locke (p. 5), the Sophists (p. 10), etc. as epitomizing subjective reason.

197 Objective reason, also called autonomous reason, according to Horkheimer, is exemplified by Plato, Aristotle, scholasticism, 17th century rationalism, Spinoza, and German idealism (p. 4).

198 Horkheimer, ER, p. 11.
CONFLICT BETWEEN OBJECTIVE REASON AND RELIGION

By its very structure, objective reason makes a claim to absolute authority regarding the ultimate nature of reality. To this extent, objective reason exists in a tension with mythology and religion, both of which similarly make claims regarding the ultimate nature of things. This conflict manifested itself most decisively within early modern philosophy in the tension between religion and rationalist metaphysics. As Horkheimer notes:

From the time of the Renaissance, men have tried to excogitate a doctrine as comprehensive as theology entirely on their own, instead of accepting their goals and values from a spiritual authority. Philosophy prided itself on being the instrument for deriving, explaining, revealing the content of reason as reflecting the true nature of things and the correct pattern of living.\(^{(199)}\)

The hope for objective reason was that it would provide an insight into ultimate reality such that it would disclose universal and necessary truths, and thereby universal and necessary interests binding for all rational people. Thus, the truths revealed by the natural light of reason would convey to us how best to live. In this way, both rational metaphysics and religion agreed on the role ultimate truth plays in orienting our moral lives, but disagreed whether reason or revelation had the final word about that truth. Ultimately, objective reason, as it was resurrected in the Renaissance, developed into the Scientific Revolution, and culminated in the ideals of the Enlightenment, won out over religion as a legitimate source of knowledge and authority.

THE PURSUIT OF SELF-INTEREST AND THE COMMON GOOD

According to Horkheimer, with the victory of metaphysics over religion, “common sense,” which was itself an appeal to self-evident truths grounded in objective truth, supplanted revelation as the governing authority in the organization of the political body. The concept of the “nation,” which established itself during the American and French Revolutions, supplanted the centrality of previous religious and monarchic authorities. Ultimately, the ideal of the pursuit of

individual “self-interest” established itself as the objective principle of social organization that would ensure the liberty and security of both individual interests and the common interest. The appeal to self-interest as an organizing political principle was itself grounded in the insights of common sense as reflecting natural reality, i.e., dominant trends in both materialist and hedonist philosophies. Thus, according to Horkheimer, “Originally the political constitution was thought of as an expression of concrete principles founded in objective reason; the ideas of justice, equality, happiness, democracy, property, all were held to correspond to reason, to emanate from reason.” In this way, with the Enlightenment, the socio-political organization of the nation directed toward the pursuit of individual self-interest was thought to reflect reason’s insights into the proper order of things.

**Science and the Crisis of Reason**

Yet, according to Horkheimer, the very rationality that had overthrown religious tenets as superstitious and mythological, and had supplanted them with the “common sense” conception of the nation built upon the ideal of the pursuit of individual self-interest, ultimately undermined itself:

The philosophers of the Enlightenment attacked religion in the name of reason; in the end what they killed was not the church but metaphysics and the objective concept of reason itself, the source of power of their own efforts. Reason as an organ for perceiving the true nature of reality and determining the guiding principles of our lives has come to be regarded as obsolete. Speculation is synonymous with metaphysics, and metaphysics with mythology and superstition. We might say that the history of reason or enlightenment from its beginnings in Greece down to the present has led to a state of affairs in which even the word reason is suspected of connoting some mythological entity. Reason has liquidated itself as an agency of ethical, moral, and religious insight.

In other words, the rationalist metaphysical systems of early modernity evolved into formalized science, and with this evolution a purportedly more rigorous method of determining truth in the broadest possible sense was established. While Horkheimer is unclear about this historical

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201 Horkheimer, *ER*, p. 18.
evolution, he is most likely referring to the rise of empiricism as the official methodological position of the sciences. Basically, since empiricism equates truth regarding reality with empirically verifiable facts, it thereby renders the problems of rationalist metaphysics pseudo-problems.\footnote{Horkheimer repeatedly rails against this positivistic turn in theory and the consequences, which he outlines below here as elsewhere, that follow from it.} Moreover, with this move, science establishes itself as the sole method for securing truth and in effect excludes all other forms of thought from having a claim on truth, i.e., the poetic, mystical, intuitive, etc. In this way, just as objective reason dethroned religion upon the basis of casting it as irrational myth, so too science cast metaphysics as unfounded speculation, and thus as another iteration of myth and superstition.

With the rise of scientific absolutism during the 19\textsuperscript{th} and 20\textsuperscript{th} centuries, subjective reason comes to supplant objective reason, which ultimately results in a crisis of reason—that is, once objective reason is cast as another form of delusion and superstition, it no longer stands as an authority to appraise the content of such concepts as equality, justice, and happiness since a metaphysical order that could establish the objective content of such concepts is considered mythological and irrational.

The present crisis of reason consists fundamentally in the fact that at a certain point thinking either became incapable of conceiving such objectivity at all or began to negate it as a delusion. This process was gradually extended to include the objective content of every rational concept. In the end, no particular reality can seem reasonable \textit{per se}; all the basic concepts, emptied of their content, have come to be only formal shells.\footnote{Horkheimer, \textit{ER}, p. 7.}

In this way, science stands as the one, true authority, and yet, according to Horkheimer, \textquoteleft\textquoteleft The statement that justice and freedom are better in themselves than injustice and oppression is scientifically unverifiable and useless. It has come to sound as meaningless in itself as would the statement that red is more beautiful than blue, or that an egg is better than milk.\textquoteright\textquoteright\footnote{Horkheimer, \textit{ER}, p. 24.} In other words, without reference to ends established by objective reason, subjective reason, as...
manifested in scientific empiricism, is reduced to a mere instrument; it no longer acts in accord with an objective orientation. Thus:

If the subjectivist view holds true, thinking cannot be of any help in determining the desirability of any goal in itself. The acceptability of ideals, the criteria for our actions and beliefs, the leading principles of ethics and politics, all our ultimate decisions are made to depend upon factors other than reason. They are supposed to be matters of choice and predilection, and it has become meaningless to speak of truth in making practical, moral, or aesthetic decisions.205

Something other than reason constitutes the values and ends that direct our lives. This means that we are without a standard of measure or a principle of critique by which to assess what is indeed in our own self-interest. The very notion of “our own best interest” has been severed from any objective ground. According to Horkheimer, herein lies the crisis of reason: reason has transmogrified into unreason. The dominant myth of our time is that through the pursuit of individual self-interest our common interests will be preserved, and yet, without an objective rational basis by which to measure what is indeed in our own self-interest, we abandon both ourselves, and the common good, to irrationality.

SUBJECTIVE REASON AS A MECHANISM OF ADAPTATION

With the demise of objective reason thought no longer offers a utopian ideal according to which we might try to change the world, but exists rather as a mere mechanism of adaptation to the world as it is. This is because, in having abdicated a position of critique and an orientation grounded in objective thought, subjectivized reason works in the service of, and conforms to, the dominant interests and dominant ends of the time. Specifically, in the absence of objectively orienting thought, the only obvious individual interest that remains, according to Horkheimer, is the pursuit of self-preservation. Moreover, since the overthrow of objective thought strips existence of any intrinsic meaning, the only value that remains is that of “utility”—in other words, things possesses value only to the extent to which they are “useful” for some further...

205 Horkheimer, ER, pp. 7-8.
purpose, which ultimately means in the context of our current and dominant socio-economic environment that something contributes to economic profit. This means then, for Horkheimer, that in order to survive in our current socio-economic environment, we adapt to our world by making ourselves “useful” in it.

The effect of this is that the process of adjusting oneself and adapting oneself to our current socio-economic environment in order to survive ultimately leads to individuals abandoning both the pursuit of their own individual self-interest and their hope of any form of personal fulfillment in life. Once subjective reason takes hold of economic profit as its exclusive end, the individual engages in an all-encompassing series of calculations in order to render himself into an economically “useful” agent. As Horkheimer says:

> By echoing, repeating, imitating his surroundings, by adapting himself to all the powerful groups to which he eventually belongs, by transforming himself from a human being into a member of organizations, by sacrificing his potentialities for the sake of readiness and ability to conform to and gain influence in such organizations, he manages to survive. It is survival by the oldest biological means of survival, namely, mimicry. 206

The point is that without objective content informing reason, individuals no longer aim to change the world in order to meet their ideals. Rather, individuals transform themselves so as to adapt to the demands of the world. And, they do this by repeating already established patterns of behavior that have been demonstrated to be “useful” in this context. On the one hand, individuals primarily engage in thinking and activities that are ultimately useful for employment and thereby industry, and, on the other hand, individuals readily accept the established aesthetic values produced via the marketing of the culture industry. Thus, subjective reason meticulously weighs every choice and action so as to bring individuals into accord with what currently passes as “useful.” In its most basic sense, this means for Horkheimer, that individuals do not realistically consider lifestyles that will not produce a “return on investment.” One does not seriously

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206 Horkheimer, ER, p. 142.
consider spending one’s life cycling around the world since this is “useful” to no one. An education does not serve the purpose of transforming oneself into a better person so as to live a potentially more fulfilling life; it provides the qualifications necessary to appear employable. If one engages in more aesthetic endeavors, the quality of the work is assessed in terms of its salability on the marketplace and not transcendental criteria—again, just like our lives. Moreover, one is almost certain to wear fashionable clothes, listen to popular music, and watch popular television programs so as to appear relatively normal, since, in deviating from the norm, one runs the risk of exclusion, and those who are excluded diminish their chances of survival. All this is to say that one does what must be done in order to survive, one adapts to the socio-economic environment in which one finds oneself, which is ultimately accomplished by demonstrating one’s worth in the marketplace.

To Horkheimer, there is a real absurdity and contradiction in this situation. The very form of reason that was supposed to overcome tyranny and oppression so that individuals could pursue their own self-interests and find personal fulfillment has actually created a situation in which we completely abandon our individuality and any hope of personal fulfillment so as merely to survive. In this way, reason, rather than creating a better society, has created a socio-economic environment that destroys the very individuality of the individual. Thus, the crisis of reason is such that we find ourselves without a principle of critique and an intellectual means of resisting the tide of global conformity and the decline of individuality. Reason’s only function now is simply to adapt to the dominant irrational interests already in place. Thus, for Horkheimer, Sade’s imprisoned pleasures have installed themselves as our social nightmare:

207 See Horkheimer and Adorno, DE, p. 106: “Anyone who does not conform is condemned to an economic impotence which is prolonged in the intellectual powerlessness of the eccentric loner. Disconnected from the mainstream, he is easily convicted of inadequacy.”
It may be just as meaningless to call one particular way of living, one religion, one philosophy better or higher or truer than another. Since ends are no longer determined in the light of reason, it is also impossible to say that one economic or political system, no matter how cruel and despotic, is less reasonable than another. According to formalized reason, despotism, cruelty, oppression are not bad in themselves; no rational agency would endorse a verdict against dictatorship if its sponsors were likely to profit by it.\textsuperscript{208}

In effect, Horkheimer agrees with Nietzsche—God is dead; what we now face is the problem of nihilism.\textsuperscript{209} Reason has abdicated its role in establishing a ground and principle of critique, and society has thus come unmoored from its objective roots and is adrift in an all-encompassing irrationality.

\textbf{REASON AND DOMINATION}

In claiming that the experience of the loss of individuality is a result of the crisis of reason, Horkheimer is moving away from a Marxist critique of political economy that asserts that exploitation and alienation are inherent in the socio-economic organization of capitalism, and is instead arguing that the reign of irrationality under which we currently exist is a result of the form of reason itself. As Horkheimer states:

\begin{quote}
The transition from objective to subjective reason was not an accident, and the process of development of ideas cannot arbitrarily at any given moment be reversed. If subjective reason in the form of enlightenment has dissolved the philosophical basis of beliefs that have been an essential part of Western culture, it has been able to do so because this basis proved to be too weak.\textsuperscript{210}
\end{quote}

In other words, Horkheimer claims that objective reason, manifested in metaphysics, was always destined for failure. This is, quite interestingly, because the project of reason has always been to establish human security and fulfillment through the domination of nature. According to Horkheimer, the history of the project of metaphysics is the story of the abstract ego dominating and subjugating everything alien to it. Whether it is the Platonic tripartite soul, the Thomistic eternal soul, the free Cartesian ego, the Kantian transcendental ego, or the Hegelian Absolute

\textsuperscript{208} Horkheimer, \textit{ER}, pp. 31-32.
\textsuperscript{209} Horkheimer, \textit{ER}, p. 93.
\textsuperscript{210} Horkheimer, \textit{ER}, p. 62.
Spirit, all of metaphysics assumes an abstract ego that distances itself from everything alien to it—impulses, desires, the body, and the world—so as to more thoroughly dominate and command them.

It is instructive to follow Descartes’ efforts to find a place for this ego, which is not in nature but remains close enough to nature to influence it. Its first concern is to dominate the passions, that is, nature, so far as it makes itself felt in us. The ego is indulgent to agreeable and wholesome emotions but is stern with any conducive to sadness. Its central concern must be to keep the emotions from biasing judgments. Mathematics, crystal-clear, imperturbable, and self-sufficient, the classical instrument of formalized reason, best exemplifies the workings of this austere agency. *The ego dominates nature.* To describe the ego’s aims except in terms of its own indefinite persistence would contaminate the concept of the ego.²¹¹

Horkheimer’s point is that the history of metaphysics, as the history of the abstract ego, has been the story of the history of the domination of nature both within and without the subject—that is, in order to guarantee the purity of its conceptualizations, which are necessary for dominating nature without, the subject, as the ego, must dominate the corrupting influences of nature, as desire, instinct, and passion, within. Thus, according to Horkheimer, the very project of the domination of nature has always necessarily included the project of the domination of man.²¹² Yet, the ancient Greeks dominated themselves in the name of a common good that transcended their own personal interests, but whose realization would allow them to find personal security, happiness, and fulfillment in life.²¹³ We, however, under the nihilistic reign of subjective reason, dominate ourselves for no higher purpose than an ever greater, and yet aimless, domination of nature, which reciprocally increases the domination of ourselves. Thus, according to Horkheimer, rationality itself, as manifested in the abstract ego’s attempt to dominate nature for the purpose of securing and propagating human individuality and freedom, essentially transforms into an all-encompassing mechanism of aimless domination that brings about global conformity and tyranny, i.e., the loss of individuality and freedom.

²¹³ Horkheimer, *ER*, p. 131.
REMEMBERING NATURE

For Horkheimer, the corrective to the crisis of reason and the effacing of individuality, which is brought about through the ego’s construction of an artificial distance between itself and nature, is to reconcile the antinomy of the two via the construction of a dialectical concept that embraces the interpenetration of the two. However, as Horkheimer notes, “The disease of reason is that reason was born from man’s urge to dominate nature, and the ‘recovery’ depends on insight into the nature of the original disease, not on a cure of the latest symptoms.”214 As mentioned above, the disease of reason is most acutely manifested in the metaphysical impulse to conceptualize nature for the purpose of commanding it more effectively. Thus, if one is to “cure” the disease of reason, then one must not only guard against the impulse to domination, but one must also guard against employing the very metaphysical techniques that have constituted the nature of that domination. Specifically, this means developing something other than a metaphysical conceptualization of nature.

According to Horkheimer, at the core of metaphysical conceptualizations is the logic of identity—the attempt to fashion all-encompassing and totalizing concepts from which nothing can escape and for which there is no remainder.215 The metaphysical ideal of epistemic conceptualizations is a perfect equivalence between concept and object. However, metaphysical concepts presuppose both transhistorical unities that exist independently of the historical contingencies of space and time, and a knowing subject that can overcome those historical contingencies so as to access such transhistorical unities. In this way, Horkheimer couples the birth of the metaphysical impulse with the genesis of the abstract ego—that is, the metaphysical impulse, which employs the logic of identity, of necessity includes the ideal of an abstract ego.

214 Horkheimer, ER, p. 176.
215 Horkheimer, ER, p. 169.
that can extricate itself from nature, both within and without, so as to conceptualize accurately
nature for the purpose of dominating and mastering it. Thus, at bottom, the metaphysical impulse
pits the abstract ego, as the basis of reason, against nature as if they were two distinct, and yet
somehow related, entities—of which Cartesian dualistic ontology is a paradigmatic example.

All in all, for Horkheimer, if we are to confront the disease of reason, then the task of
philosophy must be to affect a real reconciliation between reason and nature via a non-
metaphysical or dialectical concept or paradigm that neither perpetuates the illusory separation of
the two nor forces a false unity between them. As regards false unities, Horkheimer has in mind
both materialist theories that reduce conceptualizations to operations of matter, and idealistic
theories that reduce the material world to a manifestation of the mind. Ultimately, both
materialism and idealism remain trapped within the logic of identity and are thus both still driven
by the metaphysical impulse, and are thereby employing metaphysical conceptualizations since
each attempts to reduce one element to the other for the purpose of dominating nature. Instead,
Horkheimer is, once again, advocating the open dialectic of dialectical materialism. However,
this time he is advocating it not only as an alternative to metaphysical approaches to critical
social theory, but also as a solution to the tendencies toward domination inherent in the
metaphysical impulse, which has manifested itself in the most insidious of forms in the 20th
century. Thus, Horkheimer states:

Reason can realize its reasonableness only through reflecting on the disease of the world as
produced and reproduced by man; in such self-critique, reason will at the same time remain
faithful to itself, by preserving and applying for no ulterior motive the principle of truth that we
owe to reason alone. The subjugation of nature will revert to subjugation of man, and vice versa,
as long as man does not understand his own reason and the basic process by which he has created
and is maintaining the antagonism that is about to destroy him. Reason can be more than nature
only through concretely realizing its ‘naturalness’—which consists in its trend to domination—the
very trend that paradoxically alienates it from nature. Thus also, by being the instrument of
reconciliation, it will be more than an instrument. The changes of direction, the advances and
retrogressions of this effort, reflect the development of the definition of philosophy.216

216 Horkheimer, ER, p. 177.
In effect, Horkheimer is claiming that in order to overcome the crisis of reason—the impulse to domination that has manifested itself in the 20th century as global mass conformity and oppression—reason must recognize its own “naturalness”—the impulse to domination—at work in its construction of the dualism between the abstract ego and nature, which itself was born out of the impulse to dominate nature. Thus, if the impulse to dominate nature is at the heart of reason’s invention of an abstract ego that stands above and outside nature, as the corrupting impulses that would contaminate its absolute knowledge of conceptual truths, then reason must precisely recognize its origin in, and relation to, nature. In other words, reason, as manifested in the abstract ego, conceptualizes nature as other to itself only out of its drive to dominate nature. In this way, once reason recognizes the metaphysical impulse as a manifestation of the will to dominate nature—and thus that the metaphysical impulse itself is a manifestation of nature—it can begin to suspend the will to dominate nature and thus the metaphysical impulse to conceptualize nature as alien to the abstract ego. Moreover, only then can it begin to formulate a dialectical concept of nature that neither re-inscribes the dualism between reason and nature nor reduces the one to the other, but that is adequate to the complex interrelation between reason and nature.

So, in the preceding quote, when Horkheimer refers to the “principle of truth that we owe to reason alone,” he is referring to the correspondence theory of truth, to “the adequation of name and thing.” However, as has been stressed again and again, this is not a metaphysical criterion of conceptualization and truth, but a dialectical one. Horkheimer explicitly rejects the metaphysical systems and methods of philosophy since they fail to recognize the mutually interpenetrating relation of subject and object, of reason and nature, and thus only perpetuate the

217 Horkheimer, ER, p. 180. See also Jay, pp. 262-263.
tendencies to domination. Thus, Horkheimer advocates fidelity to the historically situated conceptualizations of dialectical materialism rather than the eternal ones of metaphysics, and to this extent aligns himself with Nietzsche’s critique of metaphysics. As he says:

Unlike science, ontology, the heart of traditional philosophy, attempts to derive the essences, substances, and forms of things from some universal ideas that reason imagines it finds in itself. But the structure of the universe cannot be derived from any first principles that we discover in our own minds. There are no grounds for believing that the more abstract qualities of a thing should be considered primary or essential. Perhaps more than any other philosopher, Nietzsche has realized this fundamental weakness of ontology.218

In other words, Horkheimer agrees with Nietzsche’s assessment that metaphysics is an expression of will to power, or, in Horkheimer’s words, the will to dominate. And thus, metaphysics is always ideological at bottom since it obscures the power relations, the social context, at work in the formation of its concepts.

THE TASK OF PHILOSOPHY

Having abandoned the traditional philosophical project of metaphysics as an impulse toward domination, what then is the task of philosophy? According to Horkheimer, philosophy’s positive character is developed through a two-fold negation. First, dialectical materialism exposes the historical relativity of metaphysical systems that present their principles as ultimate and eternal truths. Second, it measures a culture’s basic ideas and values against the social reality in which they are supposed to belong. In other words, dialectical materialism assesses the breach between ideas and reality. Thus, while ideals such as justice, equality, and freedom may have no timeless metaphysical content, they are imbued with a certain meaning and value within a specific socio-historical formation. Thus, according to Horkheimer, the task of philosophy, as dialectical materialism, is to expose the historically situated nature of those concepts and to measure social reality against the ideals it professes to valorize for dissonance.

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218 Horkheimer, ER, p. 180.
Significantly, for Horkheimer, dialectical materialism is not a form of stoical quietism. The realization that concepts are historically situated and constituted is not a terminus of philosophical activity. Only metaphysics equates “wisdom with fulfillment.” To realize the historically constituted nature of one’s situation is not to overcome it. Philosophy is not practice. At best, for Horkheimer, philosophy can act as a form of cultural memory and hold social reality up to the humanistic ideals of our past to test for their consonance or dissonance with our time. In this way, philosophy can act as a corrective to history, and, in the words of Horkheimer, “thereby help to keep the course of humanity from resembling the meaningless round of the asylum inmate’s recreation hour.” Thus, philosophy, through negation, can remove impediments to free development of humanity, which is ultimately, for Horkheimer, a step toward a more robust freedom and individuality for humanity.

IN DEFENSE OF HORKHEIMER

Returning to Horkheimer’s critics, the criticisms leveled against Horkheimer fall into two forms. On the one hand, McCarthy and Lohmann attack Horkheimer for abandoning all rational justification for normative ends and for instead appealing to “ungrounded feelings.” In this way, for both McCarthy and Lohmann, Horkheimer’s appeal to compassion as a normative ground is baseless and thus lacks normative purchase. On the other hand, Habermas and Lohmann attack Horkheimer for engaging in a totalizing critique of reason. Both Habermas and Lohmann claim that Horkheimer’s critique of reason undermines its own foundations and thus falls prey to performative contradiction.

First, McCarthy and Lohmann’s critiques of the normative foundations of dialectical materialism fail to address adequately Horkheimer’s critique of metaphysics. Horkheimer

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219 Horkheimer, ER, p. 183.
220 Horkheimer, ER, p. 186.
explicitly establishes dialectical materialism as a post-metaphysical methodological alternative to metaphysics. This means, as I demonstrated previously in regard to Nietzsche, that Horkheimer—as a post-metaphysical philosopher—is not engaged in the task of refuting metaphysics since the assertion of the impossibility of metaphysics would only mire him more deeply in metaphysics. Thus, Horkheimer’s objections to metaphysics are not refutations of metaphysics. Instead, they establish the methodological commitments that orient dialectical materialism as a critical and social program. As was discussed above, Horkheimer objects to metaphysics for two reasons: 1) it prioritizes the project of knowing another possibly illusory realm over and above the project of ameliorating the suffering and wretchedness of individuals in this world, and 2) it has, historically, been used as an apparatus to justify the imposition of a particular group’s interests upon the social body as a whole under the guise of universally binding obligations—that is, metaphysics has historically served the purposes of domination. In this way, Horkheimer does not merely equivocate, as McCarthy claims, rational justification with metaphysical foundation. Rather, Horkheimer very clearly establishes as a post-metaphysical methodological commitment that the aim of dialectical materialism is to change the concrete conditions under which humans suffer. Thus, any task that subverts this aim is antithetical to the very method of dialectical materialism. For this reason, Horkheimer does not engage in the task of providing “rational justifications,” as McCarthy suggests, precisely because to do so, while not the project of metaphysics per se, nonetheless deprioritizes the aim of alleviating suffering for the aim of providing “rational justifications.” In other words, McCarthy’s concern to provide “rational justifications” for alleviating suffering would, for Horkheimer, precisely place greater value upon those justifications than the aim of alleviating suffering and is thereby antithetical to dialectical materialism. Thus, Horkheimer’s reluctance to
provide “rational justifications” is wholly consistent with the methodological parameters he sets for himself.

Similarly, despite Lohmann’s claims to the contrary, Horkheimer does not advance suffering as an ontological foundation for the universalization of compassion since to do so would be to sneak a metaphysical foundation into dialectical materialism via the subject. And, as has been repeatedly demonstrated, Horkheimer rejects methodologically all metaphysical foundations, both regarding the world and the subject. Thus, compassion, for Horkheimer, is not intended to serve as an absolute normative foundation that would in some way reveal our social obligations to others. Again, as was just argued in the previous paragraph, such attempts to “ground” normative foundations are precluded from dialectical materialism for very explicit reasons: they tend to forestall the immediate alleviation of suffering and they have been used as mechanisms of domination. Thus, Horkheimer’s appeal to the “feelings” of indignation, compassion, love, and solidarity, which require no justification, is his attempt to obviate the previous two objections to metaphysics. First, without metaphysical justification, it is precisely these feelings that call us to act for better or worse. And, second, by refusing to provide metaphysical or rational justification, Horkheimer maintains a distanced relationship from those theories that have come to act as mechanisms of domination and oppression. In other words, since Horkheimer does not present the aim of dialectical materialism as a timeless absolute, that

While it is outside the scope of my argument to delve into this claim here, I will suggest that the confusion regarding the role of compassion in Horkheimer stems from its association with Schopenhauer rather than Buddhism. Horkheimer’s Dämmerung, a collection of aphorisms written between the years 1926-1931 and that constitute his earliest writings, demonstrates Horkheimer’s familiarity and engagement with Buddhism from the very beginning of his theoretical development. Rather than serving as an ontological foundation for a normative obligation to feel compassion towards all living things, suffering in Buddhism acts instead only as an impetus for some people to develop compassion for others who suffer. Buddhism, which is itself a non-metaphysical philosophy that characterizes itself only as a “cure” to suffering and not as a “theory of reality,” makes no claim that all people ought to alleviate the suffering of others or feel compassion towards all living beings, let alone that all people ought to be Buddhist. Rather, it is simply the experience of suffering that compels one to alleviate it for Buddhists. Thus, Buddhism offers itself as method available to those who want to alleviate suffering and not as mandate or moral obligation. Reading compassion in dialectical materialism via the lens of Buddhism would go a long way in potentially forestalling criticisms regarding normative foundations in Horkheimer.
aim precisely remains something fallible and open to questioning, revision, or even overturning—something that is precisely up for debate as McCarthy wishes. In this way, Horkheimer establishes a methodology malleable enough to evade the tyrannical transformation Marxism underwent at the hands of Stalin. Thus, despite McCarthy and Lohmann’s criticisms, Horkheimer’s refusal to provide or engage in normative foundations is an asset of dialectical materialism as a method and not a failure.

Secondly, Habermas and Lohmann’s claims that Horkheimer engages in a totalizing critique of reason are premised upon a failure to locate Horkheimer’s analysis of instrumental reason within the methodological parameters of dialectical materialism. This is in part due to many commentators attributing Horkheimer’s turn to the critique of instrumental reason to an abrupt and pessimistic break in his own thinking. It is important to note, however, that nothing about this shift in Horkheimer’s critical focus marks a decisive break with his earlier work. In fact, the single defining aim of Horkheimer’s entire oeuvre is to identify the sources of suffering in our contemporary world so as to alleviate them. This motif is present in Horkheimer’s earliest writing, Dämmerung, up until his last essays such as, “Threats to Freedom” and “The Future of Marriage.” In his early materialist phase, still attached to the emancipatory hope of Marxism, Horkheimer locates the causes of social suffering in the private ownership of both property and the means of production. In this way, he hoped that a more rational and just society could be achieved through the socialist management of a planned economy. However, as has been said earlier, Stalinism, state-capitalism, and pessimism regarding the proletariat as the locus

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of revolutionary potential cast doubt on this hope. Thus, Horkheimer sought an alternative source for contemporary suffering. Whereas Horkheimer previously saw philosophy and science working in tandem to promote emancipatory ends, by the time Horkheimer adopts the term “critical theory” to describe his work, he comes not only to see science as complicitous with capitalism, but to see also that this complicity is born out of the feigned impartiality of science. As was discussed earlier, Horkheimer begins to claim that science perpetuates a vision of the subject as an autonomous and disinterested spectator, as though the interests of the subject are unaffected by the conditions in which it finds itself. Thus, the knowing subject, reified into the Cartesian subject, becomes a monadic social entity hovering above the fray of social life. This vision of the subject as a monadic individual perpetuates an image of the subject as the ground of its own values and not as a product of social forces. In this way, the monadic individual operates with an “illusory” sense of freedom and autonomy, and fails to recognize itself as an agent of social change, thereby abdicating its social responsibility. As Benhabib notes:

Horkheimer moves from an “externalist” to an “internalist” critique of science and theory: the primary object of his attack is not the uses to which science and theory have been put in society, but the manner in which the concepts, constructions, and scientific operations of traditional theories reproduce a distorted image of social reality.  

However, once Horkheimer locates the reified knowing subject as the cause of the socially disengaged monadic subject, as he does under “critical theory,” then it becomes apparent that the next critical move for Horkheimer is to trace out the historical origins of the scientific attitude, most especially since dialectic materialism as a method begins with the principle that all thinking is historically conditioned. In this way, one can reasonably read the critique of instrumental reason not as radical break in critical method, or even a shift in critical object, but rather as a tracing of the historical origins of the scientific attitude critiqued under the earlier aegis of

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“critical theory.” If Horkheimer has correctly identified the schematic form of the ills of our time—a socially disengaged monadic subject—which he quite clearly thinks he has, then the task becomes one of tracing the rise of this form of subjectivity back to its roots so that it can be “corrected,” so that an alternative path can be taken, which is in accord with the very early aims of dialectical materialism, which need not be construed as a metaphysics of history. *Dialectic of Enlightenment* precisely presents us with just such a history of the modern knowing subject.

Contrary to Habermas’s claim that the purpose of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is to “unmask” the power relations that lurk beneath reason and corrupt it—that it is engaged in a totalizing critique of reason—the project of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is far more modestly to analyze only that form of reason that has reified itself in the 20th century as scientific thinking—namely, what Horkheimer and Adorno term instrumental reason. One of their essential concerns regarding instrumental reason is that it has established itself historically as the only form of reason and yet, as a technique devoted solely to quantification and calculation, it cannot by its own standards of legitimacy lay claim to its tyrannical exclusivity. Thus, Horkheimer and Adorno do not trace reason’s origin back to myth so as to vitiate reason in toto, and thereby also the project of the Enlightenment, rather they advance an historical analysis of the origin of the contemporary form of reason in the drive to self-preservation so as to locate the cause of the instrumentalization of reason itself. In this way, by tracing instrumental reason back to its origin, the guiding hope of the analysis undertaken in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is that by identifying the processes that gave rise to it, and thus to the forms of domination at work in the

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226 Jay argues that Horkheimer’s “The Origins of the Bourgeois Philosophy of History,” is a particularly paradigmatic example of this continuity in the oeuvre of Horkheimer (p. 257).
228 Wiggershaus notes that *Dialectic of Enlightenment* precisely holds out hope for an alternative and utopian form of reason: enlightenment serves both as a positive and negative ideal (pp. 331-333).
20th century, we can thereby cease to enact those processes and affect a rupture in history such that humanity can begin to write a truly humane history for itself, precisely so that the ideals of the Enlightenment might be realized. Moreover, given the methodological parameters of dialectic materialism, these ideals no longer stand as absolute truths, but merely as regulative ideals. This is evidenced in Horkheimer and Adorno’s commitment to alternative forms of reason, subjectivity, and relations to nature. However, as commentators often note, these alternative forms are quite opaque and never fully developed—they never draw an explicit connection between the open dialectic of dialectical materialism and the alternative form of reason they advocate—leaving *Dialectic of Enlightenment* with a generally pessimistic tone despite its optimistic aim. In this way, the critique of instrumental reason continues, and remains squarely within, the methodological parameters of dialectical materialism—that is, it maintains its commitment to both the open dialectic and the project of alleviating the current forms of suffering in our world.\(^{229}\)

As Lohmann argues, however, Horkheimer’s analysis of reason in *Eclipse of Reason* is far more problematic. Here, Horkheimer’s analysis veers towards the more totalized form of critique that Habermas attributes to *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. However, my contention is that this totalization occurs at a different register than either of the ones at which Habermas or Lohmann locate it. Whereas Habermas claims that Horkheimer and Adorno’s purpose is to undertake a form of ideology critique that discloses the illegitimate admixture of power and reason by exposing reason’s origin in the drive to self-preservation, and Lohmann claims that Horkheimer’s analysis of reason either remains merely at the level of the programmatic or

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\(^{229}\) I will here only suggest that the tendency to attribute to *Dialectic of Enlightenment* specifically, and the Frankfurt School generally, a totalizing critique is perhaps due to most commentators reading the later work of Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, into the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and thereby into the work of the other Frankfurt School theorists, most notably Horkheimer and Marcuse.
succumbs to historical relativism since it fails to secure adequately a foundation for critique, my position is that, by appealing to non-identity thinking, Horkheimer lapses into an anti-metaphysics—rather than the post-metaphysical position he was able to maintain throughout his career—that ultimately thrusts dialectical materialism into asserting a metaphysical position.

The focus of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is an historical analysis of the origin and rise of instrumental reason, which is, in essence, the modern scientific attitude. While *Dialectic of Enlightenment* holds out the hope for a form of reason that is other to instrumental reason, a discussion of the relationship between metaphysics and instrumental reason is conspicuously missing from its analysis. In part, *Eclipse of Reason* provides a fuller and richer historical account of the rise of instrumental reason, there termed subjective reason. Included within this richer historical account is now an explicit preclusion of metaphysics as an antidote to the tyrannical reign of subjective reason. While Horkheimer’s historical account of the evolution of Western reason in *Eclipse of Reason* continues to locate the birth of reason in the drive to self-preservation and the reciprocal impulse to dominate nature, its history now passes through metaphysics. In this way, Western reason finds its first expression in myth, transforms into metaphysics, and ends in science. The significance here is worth noting. Whereas Horkheimer had formerly been quite careful to characterize dialectical materialism as an *alternative to* metaphysics, and not as *refutation of* metaphysics, here in *Eclipse of Reason* Horkheimer announces the destruction of Western metaphysics. However, it is not because of reason’s admixture with power, as Habermas argues. Rather, it is because, on Horkheimer’s account, metaphysics already contains within itself the traces of its own destruction. Metaphysics, the aim of which is to employ reason so as to gain access to the necessary and universal truths regarding reality, slowly evolves into modern science, and in doing so comes to be seen, from the
perspective of science, as little more than a form of idle speculation, as fairytale. Thus, in this way, it is science that puts an end to metaphysics and catapults the modern world into its nihilistic malaise.

Unifying myth, metaphysics, and science is the impulse to dominate nature and it is here, in the impulse to dominate nature, that Horkheimer locates reason’s creation of the division between the abstract ego, as the knowing subject, over and against nature as that which is to be conceptualized and schematized for the purposes of being controlled. In this way, again, the concerns that guided Horkheimer under the aegis of “critical theory” are sustained and elaborated with the critique of instrumental reason. However, with the critique of instrumental reason, Horkheimer can now locate the cause of our modern suffering in the false dichotomy between the abstract ego and nature. Thus, if at the core of abstract conceptualizations is the logic of identity—the metaphysical ideal of all-embracing and totalizing epistemic conceptualizations that achieve a perfect equivalence between concept and object, and which presuppose the existence of transhistorical unities that exist independently of the historical contingency of space and time as well as a knowing subject that can overcome those contingencies so as to access such transhistorical unities—then, according to Horkheimer, we need to affect a reconciliation between reason and nature via a new form of non-identity thinking, one that no longer perpetuates the illusory separation of reason and nature due to its impulse to dominate nature.

Significantly, whereas Horkheimer previously advocated the open dialectic and the alleviation of suffering from within the parameters of dialectical materialism as a method, Horkheimer makes the move to ground his critique of instrumental reason in the nature of reason itself. As he himself states:
Reason can realize its reasonableness only through reflecting on the disease of the world as produced and reproduced by man; in such self-critique, reason will at the same time remain faithful to itself, by preserving and applying for no ulterior motive the principle of truth that we owe to reason alone.\textsuperscript{230}

The concept of truth—the adequation of name and thing—inherent in every genuine philosophy, enables thought to withstand if not to overcome the demoralizing and mutilating effects of formalized reason.\textsuperscript{231}

In essence, by tracing our modern form of scientific thinking back to its historical origins, Horkheimer claims to have disclosed the aberrant moment in history, in thinking, at which reason derailed from its emancipatory potential—namely, at the moment of the \textit{creation} of a division between the abstract ego and nature as an antagonist. In this way, in \textit{Eclipse of Reason} Horkheimer can confidently advocate non-identity thinking as the corrective to our modern barbarism—which is only intimated at in \textit{Dialectic of Enlightenment}. However, as Lohmann points out, if this is the case, “then the denunciatory version of the self-criticism of reason has…passed over into the attempt to recover a comprehensive concept of reason.”\textsuperscript{232} And thus, “The ‘basic difference between the ideal and the real’ characteristic of this ‘true philosophy’ is at the same time a relapse into metaphysics.”\textsuperscript{233} In other words, for Lohmann, Horkheimer’s appeal to a foundational conception of truth, and thus a comprehensive concept of reason, means that Horkheimer is engaged in metaphysics. However, for Lohmann, this leaves Horkheimer in an irresolvable contradiction since, in regard to metaphysics, Horkheimer elsewhere states that, “The classical systems of objective reason, such as Platonism, seem to be untenable because they are glorifications of an inexorable order of the universe and therefore mythological.”\textsuperscript{234} Horkheimer appears to both denounce metaphysics and yet appeals to a foundational conception of truth that has metaphysical implications.

\textsuperscript{230} Horkheimer, \textit{ER}, p. 177.
\textsuperscript{231} Horkheimer, \textit{ER}, p. 180.
\textsuperscript{232} Lohmann, p. 407.
\textsuperscript{233} Lohmann, p. 407.
\textsuperscript{234} Horkheimer, \textit{ER}, p. 180.
Lohmann, however, is incorrect; the tension here is not a blatant contradiction, but a category mistake on Horkheimer’s part. Since Horkheimer narrowly equates metaphysics with identity thinking, he thereby considers a disclosure of the non-identical at the heart of a more authentic reason to be something “other” than metaphysics. Though the open and non-totalizing character of non-identity thinking is, on the surface, different from the closed and total character of identity thinking, it nonetheless serves in Horkheimer’s final thought the very same function he had earlier in his career attributed to metaphysical philosophy—namely, an insight into the essential structure of reality upon which one can establish the normative foundations for one’s life, albeit in this case the insight reveals non-identity rather than identity. Here, one could designate the difference between identity and non-identity thinking as the difference between what I will term “centripetal” and “centrifugal” metaphysics. Whereas a centripetal metaphysics, which Horkheimer rejects, would aim to wash away historical contingency and difference so as to reveal an absolute identity that would in some way return us to the privileged perspective of a metaphysical center, a centrifugal metaphysics would aim to disclose the fundamentally contingent nature of history so as to “unmask” all metaphysical identities as false in the name of a non-center that continually displaces and fractures.\(^{235}\) Thus, Horkheimer’s critique of instrumental reason does not contradict itself; it is a metaphysics of non-identity.

That non-identity thinking now serves as a centrifugal metaphysics for Horkheimer is evidenced both in his characterization of identity thinking and in his claims regarding the new tasks of philosophy. First, because Horkheimer considers non-identity true, he falls into designating identity thinking as false, the division between the abstract ego and nature as an illusion, and the forms of domination at work in 20\(^{th}\) century as the result of an error that can be

\(^{235}\) As forms of centrifugal metaphysics I have in mind standard interpretations of Sartrean être-pour-soi, Derridean différence, and Deleuzean difference in itself.
corrected only by returning to the truth, i.e., non-identity thinking. In this way, the only tasks Horkheimer can envision for his new centrifugal metaphysics are merely destructive and negative. Besides maintaining the now vague hope of alleviating the suffering of individuals in contemporary society, Horkheimer can envision no greater aims than dismantling all false absolutes and persevering in the vigilance against advancing any himself—and, it is here that we find the origin of the pessimistic tone with which the early-Frankfurt School’s work is generally characterized. In this way, non-identity thinking stands as a form of proto-deconstruction. In the end, Horkheimer managed to fashion another absolute in the attempt to undermine all absolutes, and for this reason succeeded in reestablishing what he had fought his entire career to avoid: the tyranny of dogmatic metaphysics. But, in this case, it is the tyranny of anti-metaphysics committed to uprooting every identity in the name of the non-identical at the heart of reason.

CONCLUSION

Throughout his career, Horkheimer was vigilant in casting dialectical materialism as a methodological alternative to metaphysical philosophy, one that importantly evades the equally perilous absurdities of academic skepticism and relativism. This was all the more impressively demonstrated in Horkheimer’s refusal to provide a metaphysical foundation for the normative orientation of dialectical materialism, especially given the overwhelmingly powerful impetus we experience in wanting to do so. Thus, one of the single greatest contributions of Horkheimer’s work to critical social theory is the rigor and sophistication with which he demonstrated that post-metaphysical philosophy can serve as a coherent and viable method for addressing the socio-political issues of our time. His emphasis on alternative forms of thought and subjectivity,

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as well as alternative ways of relating to others and the world, still stand as significant ideals for
critical social theory. However, in the end, having turned from the open dialectic of dialectical
materialism to a critique of instrumental reason grounded in non-identity thinking, Horkheimer
shifted from employing a post-metaphysical methodology to establishing an anti-metaphysical
philosophy, which mires him in the totalizing, dominating, and oppressive forms of thought that
he ultimately sought to evade. It is, here, against the backdrop of Horkheimer’s successes and
failures as a post-metaphysical philosopher, that I would like to situate the work of Foucault. My
intention is to demonstrate that the alleged failures of Foucault’s work—the purportedly opaque
critical orientation of his genealogical method and his refusal to provide conventional normative
resources—when contrasted to the work Horkheimer, actually mark the considerable
achievements for a post-metaphysical critical social theory that aims to resist tyrannical and
fascist forms of thinking and living.
CHAPTER 4:

UNMASKING FOUCAULT: FROM A METAPHYSICAL TO A GENEALOGICAL METHOD
INTRODUCTION

The apparent lack of an orientating foundation for critique as well as the explicit lack of normative resources in the work of Michel Foucault has generated considerable debate in regard to the role that genealogy might play in furthering the emancipatory politics of critical social theory. Early critics of Foucault such as Charles Taylor, Nancy Fraser, and Jürgen Habermas dismiss genealogy either as falling prey to a form of performative contradiction since it ostensibly employs principles of critique that it ultimately undermines or as failing to provide the normative resources requisite to differentiate between opposing political interests since it purportedly suspends questions of both epistemic and normative justification. Contemporary commentators such as Amy Allen, Colin Koopman, and Dianna Taylor are equally in disagreement on the issue of normativity in Foucault, arguing for the necessity of either a “middle ground” between Habermasian critical theory and Foucaultian genealogy, for a “synergistic” deployment of pragmatic critical theory and genealogy, or for genealogy’s contribution to politics via a critique of normativity itself. While this debate largely unfolds under the assumption that normativity is essential to critique, it generally fails to examine genealogical critique from the perspective of the set of problematics with which it is engaged, which ultimately obscures the very objectives and advantages of genealogical critique as a form of post-foundationalist critique. So as to defend Foucault’s refusal to provide either a normative principle of critique or a political program for resistance, I argue that Foucault not only provides

a conceptually coherent and strategically advantageous post-foundationalist critical philosophy, but that he also provides a version of critique that evades forms of domination and normalization without himself introducing a principle of normativity.

To make this case, I first defend Foucault from the criticisms that his purported genealogical ‘unmasking’ of metaphysical absolutes as historical contingencies is self-refuting. These criticisms, I claim, hinge on reading Foucault as engaged in the project of ideology critique, the aim of which is to liberate individuals from domination by unmasking false absolutes in the name of a primordial truth. From this perspective, Foucault’s critics incorrectly read him as appealing to a ineradicable field of power that reveals discourses of truth both as historically contingent and as producing insidious effects of domination and normalization. Thus, it is claimed, Foucault’s work is inconsistent since he supposedly undermines any viable conception of truth via an appeal to a more primordial truth concerning power. However, a coherent account of Foucault emerges when we cease to read him as vitiating self-identical and immobile structures and instead as beginning with the methodological decision to favor discontinuity and fabricated assemblages. On this account, Foucault’s deployment of genealogy is a methodological alternative to, and not an invalidation of, metaphysics. Thus, as an alternative to metaphysics, genealogy must renounce any version of critique or resistance that would aim to emancipate an “authentic” subject from domination by liberating it from the maliciously corrupting powers of untruth and returning it to the sacrosanct province of truth.

I subsequently defend Foucault’s refusal to provide conventional normative resources by situating Foucault’s post-foundationalist conception of critique, “the art of voluntary insubordination,” within the context of his claim that the “politics of truth” is the locus of political activity. Specifically, I argue that because Foucault claims from the methodological
perspective of genealogy that discourses of truth induce effects of normalization on subjects and are thereby a form of exclusion and domination, he therefore refuses to offer a normative principle as a basis for critique, which, as another discourse of truth, would only induce new forms of normalization. Instead, Foucault aims political resistance at “the politics of truth,” the very apparatus of the production of truth that induces effects of power. In this way, genealogical critique, as political refusal, focuses on altering the conditions of the production of truth that normalize and exclude subjects rather than on emancipating subjects in the name of a primordial truth or set of truths. Thus, in the end, by closely examining both Foucault’s methodological decision to favor genealogy rather than metaphysics, as well as the conception of critique that necessarily follows from this decision, I demonstrate that Foucaultian genealogy, as a form of post-foundationalist critique, is not only coherent, but is also an advantageous strategy for altering practices of coercion and domination, which simultaneously evades reintroducing those practices itself by refusing to offer conventional normative resources.

TAYLOR’S CRITIQUE OF FOUCAULT’S IMPLICIT USE OF TRUTH AND FREEDOM

While Taylor takes issue with several specific analyses in Foucault’s later genealogical works, it is ultimately Foucault’s position on the relationship between power, freedom, and truth that Taylor finds most troublesome. Quite simply, Taylor argues that Foucault’s position is inconsistent since Foucault employs notions of freedom and truth that he explicitly rejects. As Taylor himself states, “To speak of power, and to want to deny a place to ‘liberation’ and ‘truth’, as well as the link between them, is to speak incoherently.”

Taylor’s argument against Foucault turns on Taylor’s definition of domination, which is, for him, synonymous with power: “Something must be imposed on someone, if there is to be

An imposition, on Taylor’s account, must take the form of an intervention that frustrates or prevents one’s non-trivial desires, interests, or purposes if it is to be intelligible as domination. While a subject need not actively wield the application of power, power must nonetheless always have a subject as its target of application. For this reason, power necessitates a notion of liberty as the removal of the restraint that impedes the fulfillment of one’s interests. However, according to Taylor, the aim of Foucault’s genealogies is precisely “to discredit as somehow based on a misunderstanding the very idea of liberation from power.” Thus, for these reasons, Taylor thinks Foucault’s position is indefensible—one cannot have an account of power that does not also include an account of freedom. Similarly, Taylor also argues that power necessitates a notion of truth. Since power imposes itself upon us through deception and illusion, since power falsely presents itself as reality, since power falsely presents its interests as our own, it can only do so against the backdrop of truth. In this way, according to Taylor, not only does power necessitate freedom, but it also necessitates truth as the condition of that freedom since one must recognize domination for what it ‘truly’ is in order to remove it as an impediment to freedom. Thus, again, Foucault’s position is incoherent since he repudiates notions of freedom and truth that are essential to his analyses of power.


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244 Taylor, “Foucault on Freedom and Truth,” p. 91.
“[there] can be no such thing as a truth independent of its regime.” In this way, Foucault’s acceptance of Nietzschean relativistically undermines the possibility of a primordial truth to which we could appeal so as to unmask as false the “truths” imposed by a specific regime. According to Taylor, Foucault leaves us instead only with a ceaseless game of “musical chairs” in which one regime of truth is replaced by another without there ever being “a gain in truth or freedom.”

There is no truth to which we could appeal in order to denounce the forms of domination that originate and circulate within our current regime of truth. However, the problem for Taylor, once again, is that even to consider these regime-relative truths as falsely presenting themselves as “truths” is to evaluate them as untrue in accordance with a truth that stands above any specific regime-relative truth: “The idea of a manufactured or imposed ‘truth’ inescapably slips the word into inverted commas, and opens the space of a truth-outside-quotes, the kind of truth, for instance, which the sentences unmasking power manifest, or which the sentences expounding the general theory of regime-relativity themselves manifest (a paradox).” In other words, for Taylor, Foucault must be advancing his genealogical account of the regime-relative nature of truth as a regime-independent truth that unmask the falsity of the specific regime-relative productions of truth.

Ultimately, Taylor claims that Foucault’s genealogical analyses remain committed to the unmasking structures of truth and liberation that his genealogical analyses purportedly aim to undermine and repudiate. Taylor even finds this tendency in Foucault’s last work, claiming that Foucault sought to unmask as an illusion the notion of a “true self” introduced into Western history by Christianity—that is, Foucault’s last work was supposed to rescue us from the illusion of a “true self,” which would make possible the truth of self-making found in an “aesthetics of

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249 Taylor, “Foucault on Freedom and Truth,” p. 94.
existence.” In the end, according to Taylor, Foucault’s position is at best paradoxical and at worst incoherent.250

FRASER’S CRITIQUE OF FOUCALUT’S “NORMATIVE CONFUSION”

Like Taylor, Fraser is concerned with what appears to be at best another ambiguity in Foucault’s work and at worst a blatant contradiction. Even though, on Fraser’s account, Foucault’s work offers a novel approach for conceptualizing modernity, the methodological strategy that enables this conceptualization ultimately renders Foucault’s theoretical stance suspect. Specifically, Foucault’s suspension of questions regarding the epistemic justification of the validity and invalidity of the discourses produced by the modern power/knowledge regime allows him to investigate the procedures, practices, apparatuses, and institutions that function to produce those discourses. Furthermore, Foucault’s analysis of the modern power/knowledge regime also suspends normative questions regarding the legitimacy and illegitimacy of the exercise of power in modernity so that he can analyze the ways in which power operates within those procedures, practices, apparatuses, and institutions. However, according to Fraser, it is the suspension of the question of normative legitimacy that is most problematic for Foucault’s analyses. Foucault’s analyses explicitly suspend the standards of liberal, political legitimacy and yet ultimately seem to presuppose them. Thus, Fraser can only conclude that Foucault’s work lacks adequate normative resources.

According to Fraser, Foucault’s analyses draw a unique distinction between pre-modern and modern forms of power. Whereas previous pre-modern forms of power were centralized in a

250 Obviously, Taylor’s argument rests on whether or not he has correctly presented Foucault’s conception of power, which, as Patton has adequately demonstrated, he does not. Thus, my interest is not in ascertaining whether or not Taylor has adequately understood Foucault’s conception of power, but rather whether Taylor has adequately understood Foucault’s method, which Taylor likens to “unmasking.” While not wholly irrelevant, I will not address the question of freedom here—that is, Patton focuses on delineating clearly Foucault and Taylor’s uses of power and freedom, I am solely interested in Taylor’s characterization of Foucault’s method.
person or institution such as the king, sovereign, or state and exercised their power through conspicuous acts of violence and force for the purpose of suppressing dissent, the modern form of power is localized in diverse institutions and operates throughout the social body via disciplinary micro-techniques that aim to produce desirable forms of subjectivity. For Fraser, however, Foucault’s account of modern power as both capillary and productive—rather than centralized and repressive—renders the modern concepts of political legitimacy and illegitimacy inadequate to the nature of modern power. The concept of a sovereign whose exercise of power can be determined as illegitimate when it transgresses its rightful limits does not apply to Foucault’s account of a non-centralized, modern power. And yet, according to Fraser, despite Foucault’s suspension of the standard, liberal normative framework that allowed him to advance his theory of modern power, Foucault nonetheless casts the formation of the modern power/knowledge regime as something “undesirable and in need of dismantling and transformation.” Foucault speaks of domination, subjugation, and subjection as practices to be corrected. Thus, despite Foucault’s claims to suspend normative questions, his work is clearly engaged in political critique. The question becomes, for Fraser, to what normative framework does Foucault appeal—to a new alternative normative framework or to the old liberal ideals? As Fraser says, “Only with the introduction of normative notions could he begin to tell us what’s wrong with the modern power/knowledge regime and why we ought to oppose it.”

Though Foucault is often vague on this issue, he nonetheless suggests that his analyses of power are strategic and military rather than normative. His analyses simply describe the operations of power in a strategic field. However, Fraser finds Foucault’s stance unsatisfactory since, again, Foucault’s analyses are clearly not neutral, but politically engaged. Foucault’s

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251 Fraser, p. 280.
252 Fraser, p. 283.
work, according to Fraser, precisely identifies schools, prisons, hospitals, and mental institutions as sights of domination. Thus, Fraser argues that Foucault must be employing a new normative framework since he purportedly suspends the use of the standard, liberal normative framework.

But, Foucault never explicitly offers any such framework nor is any such framework to be constructed from the concepts with which Foucault analyses modern power. Foucault offers no way to justify one’s commitment to one side or the other in war. He cannot tell us why resistance is preferable to submission or why domination ought to be resisted. Thus, according to Fraser, Foucault’s analyses of domination, baring an alternative normative framework, seem to presuppose the very liberal norms that he rejects. For these reasons Fraser concludes that:

Foucault vacillates between two equally inadequate stances. On the one hand, he adopts a conception of power that permits him no condemnation of any objectionable features of modernity. But at the same time, and on the other hand, his rhetoric betrays the conviction that modernity is utterly without redeeming features. Clearly what Foucault needs and needs desperately are normative criteria for distinguishing acceptable from unacceptable forms of power.253

It appears that Foucault explicitly refuses to employ any normative position, implicitly employs one in his analyses, and yet offers none to justify his analyses. Thus, Fraser ultimately concludes that, “Foucault’s work is normatively confused.”254 It appears essential to Foucault’s own project that he can distinguish better from worse social practices and yet to do so requires greater normative resources than he possesses.

Habermas’s Critique of Self-Referentiality

In The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity Habermas states quite clearly his critical interest in the work of Foucault: “I will take up the question of whether Foucault succeeds in bringing off a radical critique of reason in the form of a historiography of the human sciences, which starts as archaeology and is expanded into genealogy, without getting caught in the

253 Fraser, p. 286.
254 Fraser, p. 284.
aporias of this self-referential undertaking.” Here, we find Habermas in essence leveling the same critique against Foucault that he earlier levels against both Nietzsche and Horkheimer and Adorno. The problem with their work, for Habermas, is that it must implicitly employ conceptions of truth and normativity that it explicitly aims to repudiate and thus remains mired in an untenable theoretical contradiction.

On Habermas’s reading, Foucault’s early archaeological work, as historiographical inquiry, is a form of anti-science that aims to unmask reason as a mechanism of violence and exclusion that results in practices of domination. In this way, the archaeological analyses of History of Madness and The Birth of the Clinic demonstrate that reason secures its sovereignty through the exclusion of its other. In the above-mentioned works, Foucault demonstrates that rational discourse excludes madness as inherently irrational and thus as abnormal and inhuman. These archaeological analyses ultimately reveal the inextricable link between discourse and practice. The historically shifting discourses of madness result in shifting practices of exclusion, confinement, and treatment linked to them, practices that are ultimately cast as techniques of domination.

In the end, Foucault’s archaeological inquiries reveal the historically contingent and socially constructed nature of discourses in general as well as that historically discontinuous discourses structure the conditions of the possibility of making statements at any given time. This means that both the objects of scientific inquiry and the practices surrounding them are constituted by discourse—in other words, archaeology uncovers the historically divergent discursive regimes that shape the criteria of validity that separate true from untrue statements. Most vexing, for Habermas, is that this means that one cannot assess the validity or invalidity of discourses themselves since there is no “outside” the contingency of discourse. For this reason,

255 Habermas, p. 247.
Habermas reads Foucault as having sought to neutralize the validity claims of philosophic and scientific discourse by demonstrating that their claims are always historically constituted by the discursive regimes that produce them and thereby demonstrating that discourse is both historically relative and that any discourse that attempts to stand outside discourse is itself another historically constituted discourse. In this way, Foucault’s archaeological work stands as the apotheosis of an absurdist anti-science for Habermas.

According to Habermas, the insidious mechanisms of violence and exclusion that Foucault uncovers in the discourses of the human sciences—what Foucault comes to term “the will to knowledge”—reveal a will to power that lurks behind all discourse. Thus, Foucault turns from archaeological analyses that reveal the play of power in discourse to the play of power that accounts for the contingent ebb-and-flow of historical discourses in general—that is, genealogy analyzes the “politics of truth.” As Habermas says:

[Foucault] strips the history of discourse-constitutive rules of any authority based on validity and treats the transformation of transcendentally powerful discourse formations just as conventional historiography treats the ups and downs of political regimes. Whereas archaeology of knowledge (and in this it is similar to the destruction of the history of metaphysics) reconstructs the stratum of rules constitutive of discourse, genealogy strives to explain “the discontinuous succession of the sign-systems (ungrounded in themselves) that coerce people into the semantic framework of a determinate interpretation of the world”—and indeed it explains the provenance of discourse formations from practices of power that are entwined with one another in the “risky game of overpowering.”

On this reading, Habermas takes the task of Foucault’s genealogical inquiries as undermining universal and necessary structures by disclosing the contingent beginnings of discursive formations, as dissolving the illusion of identity by uncovering complexity, and as dissolving false continuities by disclosing the play of historical rupture. For the genealogist, Habermas claims, “the space of history is seamlessly filled by the absolutely contingent occurrence of the disordered flaring up and passing away of new formations of discourse. No place is left for any

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256 Habermas, p. 265.
257 Habermas, p. 255.
overarching meaning in this chaotic multitude of past totalities of discourse.”

Thus, genealogical inquiry ultimately undermines the possibility of a singular and totalized history and leaves us instead only with a battle of contingent discourses. The play of power alone describes the historical ebb and flow of discursive regimes.

On Habermas’s reading of Foucault, every discourse of truth is vitiated essentially since all discourse is now inextricably bound to a determination by power—that is, criteria of validity cannot free themselves of the play of power. However, for Habermas, this is the point at which genealogy becomes unintelligible since genealogy can only regard its reduction of discourse to the play of power as true if it itself is somehow outside the bounds of genealogical analysis, if it itself transcends the play of power and discourse. Thus, in the final analysis, Habermas considers genealogy a form of relativism that falls prey to its own relativism—that is, it attempts to show that everything is relative, but then its claims to truth must also be relative, and if that is the case, then genealogy of necessity loses its force as an unmasking critique.

Lastly, for Habermas, this has a devastating effect on the capacity of genealogy to engage in critique. Since every discourse is constituted through the play of power, there is no position outside the play of power from which one could establish critique—that is, counter-power cannot lay claim to validity since it itself is constituted through power. Moreover, since every counter-power moves within the horizon of power, counter-power is transformed into a new nexus of power even if it wins. Thus, according to Habermas, “Genealogy only confirms that the validity claims of counter-discourses count no more and no less than those of the discourses of power—they too are nothing more than the effects of power they unleash.”

For Habermas, as for Fraser, genealogy can provide no impetus or justification for critique; genealogy cannot tell us

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258 Habermas, p. 253.
259 Habermas, p. 281.
why domination ought to be resisted or why struggle is better than submission. If genealogy is
simply a methodological strategy, then what gives it critical force? Why resist? In the end,
Habermas says, “Foucault cannot adequately deal with the persistent problems that come up in
connection with an interpretative approach to the object domain, a self-referential denial of
universal validity claims, and a normative justification for critique.”

SUMMARY OF FOUCAULT’S CRITICS

Nancy Fraser, in summarizing Habermas, captures explicitly the thrust of the above
criticisms:

In their zeal to be as radical as possible, they [Nietzsche, Heidegger, and the French post-
structuralists] ‘totalize’ critique so that it turns against itself. Not content to criticize the
contradiction between modern norm and modern reality, they criticize even the constitutive norms
of modernity, rejecting the very commitments to truth, rationality, and freedom that alone make
critique possible.

Here, Fraser captures the methodological commitments that separate Foucault from his critics
and are, I am claiming, at the origin of the confusion and disagreement surrounding this debate.
Whereas Foucault’s critics seem incapable of conceiving of critique along any other lines than
“ideology critique,” Foucault’s work is best understood, on my reading, as an attempt to think
other than, and outside of, ideology critique. If I were to pose this difference of method as a
question, it would be this: Is truth necessary for critique? Foucault’s critics say, “Yes,” and
Foucault says, “No.”

260 Habermas, p. 286.
261 Fraser, p. 186. Emphasis added.
262 Basically, I am arguing that the two incommensurable methodological approaches create a division between
Foucault and his critics. And, more importantly, Foucault is sensitive to these differences while his critics miss the
divide between them.
FOUCAULTIAN METHODOLOGY: GENEALOGICAL VS. METAPHYSICAL HISTORY

Foucault states explicitly the methodological decision that orients his historical inquiries in his lecture from the Collège de France on the 10th of January 1979:

Historicism starts from the universal and, as it were, puts it through the grinder of history. My problem is exactly the opposite. I start from the theoretical and methodological decision that consists in saying: Let’s suppose that universals do not exist. […] So what I would like to deploy here is exactly the opposite of historicism: not, then, questioning universals by using history as a critical method, but starting from the decision that universals do not exist, asking what kind of history we can do.\textsuperscript{263}

In his essay “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,”\textsuperscript{264} Foucault elaborates on the significance of this methodological decision for his historical inquiries by contrasting the orienting commitments of genealogy to those of metaphysical history. On Foucault’s account, the metaphysical approach to history assumes the existence of self-identical and immobile structures that lie beneath history and act as what he calls “founding origins.” Specifically, these founding origins, once unearthed, are supposed to serve as the sites of primordial truths that would provide a suprahistorical perspective from which to survey history as a singular and closed totality. In this way, the founding origin, as the site of a primordial truth, would provide a singular understanding of history as the result of either a cosmological cause—something like Platonism or Monotheism—or as the progressive realization of a teleological aim—something like Marx or Hegel.

The genealogist, alternatively, has no “faith in metaphysics”\textsuperscript{265} and therefore “refuses the certainty of absolutes.”\textsuperscript{266} For this reason, rather than start with the assumption that its objects of inquiry are self-identical and unified entities that remain the same through time, the genealogist instead approaches history as a network of fabricated assemblages, ruptures, and multiple


\textsuperscript{264} Significantly, Taylor, Fraser, and Habermas all refer to this essay in formulating their characterization of Foucault’s genealogical method.


\textsuperscript{266} Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” p. 379.
beginnings brought about through a play of forces and dominations. Thus, the genealogist neither feigns pretense to disinterested observation nor is interested in pursuing ideal metaphysical absolutes, but rather affirms the very perspective by which she constructs historical interpretations from discontinuous and fragmented elements. What this means, then, is that methodologically the genealogist divests herself of the task of washing away historical contingency so as to reveal a primordial truth that would in some way return us to the privileged position of a metaphysical origin—“the homeland to which metaphysicians promise a return.” Instead, the genealogist chases the “infinite task of interpretation” to point of near “madness.” However, this also means that the genealogist is not engaged in the inverse task of disclosing the fundamentally contingent nature of history so as to “unmask” purported metaphysical absolutes as illusory, since this would, in essence, be the very same task as metaphysical history—that is, difference would stand as an inverted metaphysical origin that would eternally de-center and fracture history rather than congeal and totalize it. Ultimately, then, by affirming interpretation, the genealogist renounces any and all claims to founding origins—whether those are absolutes or contingencies. All this is to say that from the outset, as a method, genealogy is avowedly post-metaphysical and post-foundational. Genealogy begins with the methodological decision to postulate history as composed of discontinuous and fragmented practices whose emergence can be traced from the play of forces.

267 This feature of genealogical history alone checks Fraser and Habermas’s claims to crypto-normativity since Foucault accepts methodologically that the genealogist as historian has a vested interested in examining the particular historical phenomena that she investigates. So, Foucault does not claim to engage in genealogy from “nowhere.” Genealogy is precisely that method that is already underway from somewhere, from a vested interpretative perspective or position.


270 Centripetal and Centrifugal Metaphysics—Derrida and Deleuze. Significantly, however, it is this latter task that I think Foucault’s early critics, especially Habermas, wrongly attribute to him.
THE ANALYTIC GRID: TRUTH, POWER, AND THE SUBJECT

In “What is Critique?” a lecture to the French Society of Paris on the 27th of May 1978, Foucault further elaborates upon the methodological decisions that orient his work. According to Foucault, the theme with which his historical-philosophical work is concerned is the relationship between truth, power, and the subject. More specifically, Foucault tells us that his historical-philosophical inquiries are an examination of what he calls “eventualization,” which he defines as an investigation into “the relationships between structures of rationality that articulate true discourse and the mechanisms of subjugation that are linked to it.” The aim of these investigations is to identify connections between mechanisms of coercion and contents of knowledge. In Foucault’s own words, he says:

What we are trying to find out is what are the links, what are the connections that can be identified between mechanisms of coercion and elements of knowledge, what is the interplay of relay and support developed between them, such that a given element of knowledge takes on effects of power in a given system where it is allocated to a true, probable, uncertain or false element, such that a procedure of coercion acquires the very form and justifications of a rational, calculated, technically efficient element, etc.

Moreover, as someone who avowedly eschews the search for metaphysical origins in favor of constructing interpretative assemblages, Foucault is explicit about the methodological decisions that enable his inquiries. First, in investigating “eventualizations,” Foucault suspends the traditional philosophical questions regarding both the validity of the systems of knowledge as well as the legitimacy of the practices in question: “We are not attempting to find out what is true or false, founded or unfounded, real or illusory, scientific or ideological, or legitimate or abusive.” Second, the very terms of investigation, “knowledge” and “power,” serve as an

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273 Foucault, “What is Critique?” p. 56.
analytic grid for investigation: “[These] two terms have only a methodological function. It is not a matter of identifying general principles of reality through them, but of somehow pinpointing the analytical front, the type of element that must be pertinent for the analysis.”

In this way, as analytical terms, savoir refers to the procedures and effects of connaissance in a given historical domain and pouvoir refers to the mechanisms that induce behaviors and discourses.

One of the most important concepts that Foucault formulates in connection with these historical investigations is his notion of “power/knowledge.” Typically, and this is paradigmatic of philosophy in general and metaphysics specifically, we approach power and knowledge as uniquely distinct and separate entities. Power manifests itself as either legitimate or illegitimate based on its relation to truth, and truth is that which stands free from the corrupting influences of power. Likewise, the subject is considered autonomous to the extent to which it remains faithful to the truth and is corrupted to the extent to which it deviates from the truth. However, within Foucault’s analytic grid, “truth is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power.”

In this way, power and knowledge form the nexus or ensemble “power/knowledge.” Describing the power/knowledge ensemble in greater detail, Foucault states:

Nothing can exist as an element of knowledge if, on the one hand, it does not conform to a set of rules and constraints characteristic, for example, of a given type of scientific discourse in a given period, and if, on the other hand, it does not possess the effects of coercion or simply the incentives peculiar to what is scientifically validated or simply rational or simply generally accepted, etc. Conversely, nothing can function as a mechanism of power if it is not deployed according to procedures, instruments, means, and objectives that can be validated in more or less coherent systems of knowledge.

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276 Foucault, “What is Critique?” p. 60.
What this means is that mechanisms of power are always deployed according to precise procedures, with specific instruments, for definite aims, all of which are given validity via a coherent system of knowledge. And, every coherent system of knowledge, in that it is generally accepted, rational, and valid, induces effects of power. In this way, mechanisms of power are always deployed in concert with a coherent system of knowledge and every coherent system of knowledge induces mechanisms of power.

Foucault’s deployment of the power/knowledge ensemble as an analytic grid allows him to analyze power/knowledge ensembles at two different levels—the archaeological and the genealogical. At the archaeological level, Foucault can take an empirically observable and historically accepted power/knowledge ensemble such as the mental health system, the penal system, delinquency, or sexuality and inquire into both the conditions of its acceptability as well as the historical ruptures that indicate its emergence and disappearance as a distinct ensemble separable from other ensembles. Foucault’s own distinction between discourse analysis and linguistic analysis clarifies precisely how these ensembles can be identified:

Even if it disappeared a long time ago, even if no one speaks it anymore and it is reestablished on rare fragments, a language always constitutes a system for possible statements. It is a finite ensemble of rules which authorizes an infinite number of performances. Discourse, in contrast, is the always-finite and temporally limited ensemble of those statements alone which were formulated. They might be innumerable; they might, by their mass, exceed any capacity for registration; they nevertheless constitute a finite ensemble. The question asked by linguistic analysis, concerning a discursive act, is always: According to what rules has this statement been constituted and consequently, according to what rules could other similar statements be constructed? The description of discourse asks a different question: How is it that this statement appeared, rather than some other one in its place?280

In other words, archaeological analysis investigates the mechanisms of constraint that produced, out of infinite possibility, the actual practices and statements found at a particularly time. Significantly, for Foucault, these empirically observable ensembles are to be regarded as pure

singularities and not as historical species, forms, universals or essences—that is, Foucault is not investigating something like “madness as such” and its historical variations, but rather is investigating the absolute singularity of different power/knowledge ensembles constituting madness, delinquency, or sexuality.

At the genealogical level, Foucault can investigate the process of emergence of a power/knowledge ensemble as a singularity. This means for Foucault that his genealogical analyses must involve a complex causal network that is capable of accounting for a singularity as an effect. Significantly, having methodologically suspended a metaphysical approach to history, Foucault will not deploy causal schemes that aim to reduce the singularities under investigation to unitary, pyramidal, or necessary principles—in other words, Foucault avoids causal accounts that reduce singularities to either a single causal agent (economics), reduces the characteristics of the singularity to a species variation of a genus, or reduces the singularity to a necessary phenomena via an appeal to a teleological final cause. The goal is to make the singularity intelligible as a singularity. Thus, Foucault says, “[As] opposed to a genesis oriented towards the unity of some principal cause burdened with multiple descendants, what is proposed instead is a genealogy, that is, something that attempts to restore the conditions for the appearance of a singularity born out of multiple determining elements of which it is not the product, but rather the effect.”281 In this way, genealogy is a method for rendering the emergence of singularities intelligible without reifying and totalizing them along the lines of a metaphysical causal account since no element in a singularity is taken as either primary or fundamental. Thus, Foucault’s genealogical analyses aim to trace the complex causal networks that give rise to a singularity rather than totalizing a singularity by reducing it to the effect of a singular cause. For this reason, a singularity, a power/knowledge ensemble, is thus a fabricated assemblage—that is,

281 Foucault, “What is Critique?” p. 64.
archaeological and genealogical analyses never feign either to trace the boundaries of a singularity in its exactitude or to exhaust the potentially infinite causes that constitute its emergence.

Proceeding along these methodological lines, Foucault can investigate “eventualizations” as historically contingent forms of knowing—that is, as historically contingent discursive and epistemic formations. And so, suspending the traditional philosophical question regarding the validity of these systems of knowledge, Foucault can instead examine the ways in which truth, power, and the subject interpenetrate one another and function within these systems. This means, then, that when the genealogist ceases to ask the question of whether or not a particular discursive formation is a legitimate way of knowing, she can instead investigate the procedures that make a discursive regime function as true at a particular time as well as the operations and effects of truth within that system.

Ultimately, Foucault calls this circular relation, in which truth is linked with a system of power that produces and sustains it, and to effects of power that it induces and extends, a “regime of truth.” Foucault uses different terms to name this circular relation throughout his career: a “regime of truth,” the “general politics of truth,” the “political economy of truth,” or “games of truth.” Nonetheless, Foucault’s point is that every society has its regime of truth—that is, “the ensemble of rules according to which the true and the false are separated and specific effects of power attached to the true.” The specific effects of power with which Foucault is concerned are the normalizing and subjectivizing effects of regimes of truth. For this reason, Foucault investigates a plurality of regimes of truth that create subjects of sexuality, gender, law,

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delinquency, medicine, etc., and that all have the effect of normalizing and abnormalizing, including and excluding, and producing both social subjects and social practices.284

This relation finds its most systematic treatment in Foucault’s Discipline and Punish. There, he focuses on modern disciplinary power, which both normalizes and subjectivizes. Quite simply, disciplinary power operates through pervasive and anonymous surveillance, the diagram of which is embodied in Bentham’s Panopticon. For Foucault, the Panopticon illustrates the ensemble formed between forms of knowledge, mechanisms of power, and their subjects. Using the Panopticon as a spatial metaphor, Foucault details the ways in which—whether it is in prisons, schools, or barracks—the observation of individuals’ conduct allows for the accumulation of data about them that transforms individuals into cases that can described, measured, and compared. Significantly, the scientific discourses built upon this data produce truths about individuals that then function as the norm—that is, we can plot statistical trends on a graph concerning anything from diet and fitness to spending habits and sexual proclivities. This knowledge serves as a basis by which to both identify individuals who are aberrant as well as forformulating techniques for correcting their deviant behavior. Thus, for Foucault, modern disciplinary power serves as a mechanism of normalization and, significantly, this mechanism of normalization operates through individuals’ internalization of the norms produced from scientific discourse—a process Foucault calls subjectivation and later the “government of individualization.”285 In his own words:

This form of power that applies itself to immediate everyday life categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him that he must recognize and others have to recognize in him. It is a form of power that makes individuals subjects. There are two meanings of the word ‘subject’: subject to someone else by

284 Foucault says this even of mathematical discourses.
control and dependence, and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge. Both meanings suggest a form of power that subjugates and makes subject to. Returning to the spatial metaphor of the Panopticon, individuals internalize the norms of modern disciplinary power and in effect act like their own prison guards in an attempt to approximate norms and fashion themselves into acceptable social subjects. In the end, Foucault’s account of modern disciplinary power describes a situation in which the modern power/knowledge ensemble acts to produce specific socially acceptable subjects.

Foucault’s focus on the human sciences is highly illustrative since both their history and operation most clearly reveal the mutually interpenetrating relation of power/knowledge and its relation to the subject that Foucault is investigating—that is, the interpenetrating relationship of truth, power, and the subject is at its most intense register in those sciences that take the subject as its object of inquiry. So, from the genealogical approach, a singular phenomenon like “madness,” as Foucault demonstrates, not only manifests itself in multiple clearly delineated historical forms, but also reveals the historically contingent discursive formations that produced madness as a phenomenon of investigation. Moreover, the truths produced by these multiple investigations deploy themselves in the social body and structure social practices and subjects. So, as Foucault illustrates, the “truths” produced by psychiatry about the “insane” legitimates the social practice of dividing the populace into sane and insane subjects. And, these “truths” produced by psychiatry have considerable effects within the socio-political sphere since the “insane” are excluded and rendered silent while specific types of behavior constitute one as “sane” and grant the sane unique privileges within the socio-political sphere—such as the right to speak for oneself (whether as a citizen, in a court of law, in a voting booth, or even as a person since the insane are not quite people) or the right over one’s own body (the insane are literally

286 Foucault, “The Subject and Power,” p. 331.
confined in space while the insane are administered medication without consent while the insane are operated upon without consent while the insane can refuse to undergo operation). Foucault similarly examines these mechanisms in relation to medical institutions, penal institutions, and sexuality.

**POWER, FREEDOM, AND DOMINATION**

With the first volume of his *History of Sexuality*, Foucault turns to a more focused, sophisticated, and nuanced treatment of the power relations operative in mechanisms of normalization and subjectivation. According to Foucault, power relations are very simply the way that some act on the actions of others. Foucault tells us quite explicitly, however, that:

> By power, I do not mean “Power” as a group of institutions and mechanisms that ensure the subservience of the citizens of a given state. By power, I do not mean, either, a mode of subjugation which, in contrast to violence, has the form of the rule. Finally, I do not have in mind a general system of domination exerted by one group over another, a system whose effects, through successive derivations, pervade the entire social body.  

Rather, Foucault says:

> It seems to me that power must be understood in the first instance as the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization; as the process which, through ceaseless struggles and confrontations, transforms, strengthens, or reverses them; as the support which these force relations find in one another, thus forming a chain or a system, or on the contrary, the disjunctions and contradictions which isolate them from one another; and lastly, as the strategies in which they take effect, whose general design or institutional crystallization is embodied in the state apparatus, in the formulation of the law, in the various social hegemonies.

On this account, the power relations that serve as an analytic grid for Foucault’s analyses are local, everywhere, and unstable; they are coextensive with every social relationship. This means that rather than locating the locus of power in the centralized point of a sovereign and its associated bureaucracies, Foucault prefers to examine the networks of power relations formed between economies, doctors’ offices, courtrooms, Child Protective Services, schools,

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workplaces, and families as well as the everyday practices between social groups and individuals. Rather than confining his analyses of power relations to the great binary divide of rulers and ruled, which would form a pyramidal structure of the application of power from the top down, Foucault instead focuses on power relations that pervade the social body and thus cannot form or provide either a privileged foundation for analysis or a mechanism for a totalized causal account of the social order. In other words, rather than examining power relations in simplistic vertical or horizontal axes of application, Foucault prefers to examine power relations as de-centered, multiple, multi-layered, mobile, and reverberating networks of social interactions. This means, for Foucault, that, “Power relations are both intentional and nonsubjective.”

Power relations always involve strategies, objectives, and aims as well as their associated tactics, methods, and procedures of implementation even if these do not directly arise from the conscious choice of individual subjects—that is, as subjects, we find ourselves permeated by networks of interacting and reverberating power relations that precede us, act on us, and shape the styles of behavior in which we can identify ourselves as normal and legitimate subjects. In Foucault’s own words, he says:

[Neither] the caste which governs, nor the groups which control the state apparatus, nor those who make the most important economic decisions direct the entire network of power that functions in a society (and makes it function); the rationality of power is characterized by tactics that are often quite explicit at the restricted level where they are inscribed (the local cynicism of power), tactics which, becoming connected to one another, attracting and propagating one another, but finding their base of support and their condition elsewhere, end by forming comprehensive systems: the logic is perfectly clear, the aims decipherable, and yet it is often the case that no one is there to have invented them, and few who can be said to have formulated them: an implicit characteristic of the great anonymous, almost unspoken strategies which coordinate the loquacious tactics whose “investors” or decision makers are often without hypocrisy.

Foucault’s description of power in “The Subject and Power” attests to the complex and vast field of analysis that interests him:

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[Power] operates on the field of possibilities in which the behavior of active subjects is able to inscribe itself. It is a set of actions on possible actions; it incites, it induces, it seduces, it makes easier or more difficult; it releases or contrives, makes more probable or less; in the extreme, it constrains or forbids absolutely, but it is always a way of acting upon one or more acting subjects by virtue of their acting or being capable of action. A set of actions upon other actions.²⁹¹

Such a “conception” of power relations allows Foucault to examine and make intelligible—without reducing them to a single conception of intelligibility—the widest possible array of social interactions and practices.

Ultimately, and quite significantly, Foucault’s conceptualization of power stands in contrast to those advanced by Marx and Freud—namely, ideology and repression. At the core of the concept of ideology—in what one might call “naïve” Marxism—is the position that the dominant conceptual schemes of the time—the superstructure—ultimately serve to mask and maintain the economic interests of the ruling class. In this way, ideology distorts the mechanisms of economic domination that are in place exploiting the proletariat. To break the spell of ideology and liberate oneself from its mechanisms of exploitation requires an insight into the “true” nature of capitalism. In this way, truth is necessary as a corrective to abuses of power.

Repressive power, on the other hand, operates entirely along the lines of prohibition. It is a power that acts through mechanisms of civilization and socialization to impede upon and disrupt our acting-out our basest desires. In this way, repressive power acts to separate us from what we truly are at our core.

Ultimately, both of these conceptions of power are inadequate models for the forms of social inquiry with which Foucault is interested. On the hand, ideology must employ a conception of truth that stands outside the influences of power so that it can stand as a counter to, and as an unmasking mechanism for, ideology. Additionally, in conceiving of truth as an unmasking antidote to ideology, ideology must envision a subject that can extricate itself from

the corrupting influences of a power that aligns itself with illusion. Ideology critique presupposes a truth outside the influence of power and a power that can come uncoupled from truth as well as subject that is caught in the fray of their relation. Repressive power, on the other hand, has as its mirror-inverse an ideal of power that is free from all coercion, discipline, and normalization—repressive power dreams of a free subject that can liberate its “true” self from the influences of power. Moreover, repressive power in the end, by focusing only on the prohibitive aspects of power, is incapable of accounting for the ways in which power produces, induces, and seduces. As Foucault’s analyses demonstrate, power can equally be conceived as productive of subjectivities through the mechanisms of normalization and subjectivation. Thus, ideology critique and repressive power, as they are envisioned along Marxist and Freudian lines, necessitate conceptions of truth, power, and the subject that Foucault rejects methodologically.

Despite the oceanic presence of power relations throughout the whole network of the social, Foucault nonetheless tells us, “Where there is power, there is resistance.” Since Foucault rejects from the outset a centralized locus of power that would exist in contrast to its “other”—an “other” that would stand outside power and nonetheless serve as the site of the application of power—and since power relations involve their own objectives and aims as well as their own mechanisms and strategies for success, power relations thus stand in an “agonistic” relation to one another rather than in an “antagonistic” relation. In other words, there is no “great war” of binary power relations arranged in a mutually exclusive and confrontational opposition to one another. Rather, the network of the social is composed of a multiplicity of power relations pursuing their own aims and deploying their own strategies, and all without direction from a center. In this way, power relations, through interaction and play, can just as

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much reinforce, extend, and strengthen one another as they can reverse, deplete, and weaken one another. Therefore, since there is no center to power relations, since there is no outside to power relations, there is therefore no privileged position of refusal to power relations. Similarly, just as there is no center to power relations and only a play of multiple power relations, there is also no great locus of refusal, but only a multiplicity of resistances. Thus, for Foucault, the whole network of the social is the strategic field of the play of power relations.

Furthermore, since power relations are, on Foucault’s account, both fluid and mobile, they can also therefore be conceived in terms of freedom and domination. As Foucault states:

When one defines the exercise of power as a mode of action upon the actions of others, when one characterizes these actions as the government of men by other men—in the broadest sense of the term—one includes an important element: freedom. Power is exercised only over free subjects, and only insofar as they are ‘free.’ By this we mean individual or collective subjects who are faced with a field of possibilities in which several kinds of conduct, several ways of reacting and modes of behavior are available.294

In this way, for Foucault, freedom exists as an intrinsic feature of his conception of power relations. Since power relations are inherently unstable, they are capable of intensification and extension as well as de-escalation and reversal. Thus, freedom for Foucault ultimately speaks to the element of modification in any power relation. And, when this capacity for modification is absent, a state of domination exists:

The analysis of power relations is an extremely complex area; one sometimes encounters what may be called situations or states of domination in which power relations, instead of being mobile, allowing the various participants to adopt strategies modifying them, remain blocked, frozen. When an individual or social group succeeds in blocking a field of power relations, immobilizing them and preventing any reversibility of movement by economic, political, or military means, one is faced with what may be called a state of domination. In such a state, it is certain that practices of freedom do not exist or exist only unilaterally or are extremely constrained and limited.295

On Foucault’s account, then, freedom is not a state free from power relations, but is instead the inherently fluid dynamic of power relations themselves. And, likewise, domination is not the imposition of power on a state of freedom, but is instead a particularly static power relation.

IN DEFENSE OF FOUCAULT

Having given a general account of Foucault’s work let me return to Foucault’s critics, beginning with Habermas. On Habermas’s reading, Foucault’s work can be reduced to the general project of a totalizing critique of reason. As Habermas sees it, Foucault’s work presents a three-prong attack on the autonomy of reason. First, for Habermas, Foucault’s archaeological analyses of discursive formations reveal not only the historically contingent nature of discourses themselves, and thus the relativity of the scientifical-philosophical statements and practices produced within those discourses, but also that there is thus no “outside” of discourse. In this way, Habermas reads Foucault as having taken aim at the heart of reason itself—archaeology purportedly “demonstrates” that all claims to truth are essentially undermined since all claims to validity are necessarily relative to the historically contingent discursive formations in which they are produced and for this reason the possibility of necessary and discourse-transcendent truths is foreclosed. Second, and following from the previous point, Foucault’s archaeological and genealogical analyses “unmask” the necessity purported to adhere in the claims of reason as the historically contingent formations that they truly are. In this way, Foucault’s analyses ultimately disarm truth’s hold on us and liberate us from its mechanisms of domination. Lastly, Foucault’s genealogical analyses demonstrate, for Habermas, not only that discursive formations are historically contingent, but that they are also the result of the play of power. In this way, since all truth claims are relative to the discourses in which they are produced, there is thus no truth that can stand outside the play of power, which undermines the autonomy of all claims to truth.
However, for Habermas, all this means that Foucault’s work is little more than the height of absurdity since in order to accept Foucault’s analyses regarding the historically contingent production of discourses as true, those analyses would themselves have to stand outside discourse and the play of power, but this is a possibility that Foucault’s analyses precisely foreclose. Thus, for Habermas, Foucault’s analyses fall prey to the relativism of which he accuses other discourses and therein lose their validity and critical force.

While much has been made of the supposed debate between Foucault and Habermas, my aim is less to stir the waters once more than it is to use what I take to be a significant misunderstanding on Habermas’s part to highlight Foucault’s unique approach to metaphysics and critique so as to open up new ways to engage and utilize Foucault’s work. In essence, my aim is precisely to move away from this debate rather than possess the pretension to try to put an end to it. Nonetheless, at issue here in this “non-debate” is a question of method. It is a question of the nature of the task and the approach to the task that each thinker presumes. Habermas regards the task with which Foucault is engaged as the task of metaphysical philosophy—the aim of which in this case is to undertake a critique of reason that discloses its inherent tendencies to exclusion and domination via an appeal to a more fundamental insight into the nature of power. For this reason, the term with which Habermas continually characterizes Foucault’s work is “unmasking.” According to Habermas, Foucault’s archaeological analyses “unmask” necessity as contingency and Foucault’s genealogical analyses “unmask” truth as power. Upon this reading, Habermas is correct that Foucault’s work—as well as that of many other thinkers from the twentieth century—is inherently aporetic. Any appeal to a deeper reality so as to undermine metaphysics, even to that of contingency and power, would nonetheless remain trapped in the

structures of metaphysics and would ultimately only reestablish what it sought to displace. Habermas’s insights into the perils with which a critique of metaphysics is faced are significant for any movement of thought that seeks to operate outside the confines of metaphysical philosophy. And, my claim is that Foucault’s work is sensitive to just such perils.

As my account of Foucault’s work above importantly demonstrates, archaeology and genealogy begin with the methodological decision to suspend belief in the existence of the self-identical and immobile structures of history that are presupposed by metaphysics. Instead, both archaeology and genealogy proceed upon the inverse theoretical basis that fabricated assemblages and contingency constitute the basic ensembles of theoretical inquiry. Quoting Foucault’s lecture from the Collège de France on the 10th of January 1979 again, he states:

Historicism starts from the universal and, as it were, puts it through the grinder of history. My problem is exactly the opposite. I start from the theoretical and methodological decision that consists in saying: Let’s suppose that universals do not exist. [...] So what I would like to deploy here is exactly the opposite of historicism: not, then, questioning universals by using history as a critical method, but starting from the decision that universals do not exist, asking what kind of history we can do.297

Here, Foucault rejects explicitly the theoretical position that Habermas attributes to him. Thus, Habermas’s insistence that Foucault’s archaeologies disclose the rupturing and fundamentally contingent nature of historical discourses so as to “unmask” the universal and necessary claims of philosophy as false is fundamentally incorrect. This is not the task of thought to which Foucault sets himself.

Moreover, in methodologically suspending the presuppositions upon which metaphysical philosophy operates, Foucault likewise suspends the notions of a founding origin and a primordial truth that are essential to metaphysics. In other words, since Foucault suspends the existence of self-identical and unified structures in his analyses, nothing could thereby serve as an unalterable foundation upon which to erect a immutable truth. In relation to Habermas’s

297 Foucault, The Birth of Biopolitics, p. 3. Emphasis added.
criticisms, Foucault’s suspension of the use of the metaphysical notion of a primordial truth is significant for two reasons. First, since Foucault suspends from the outset the possibility of the metaphysical conceptions of a founding origin and a primordial truth, Foucault’s archaeological and genealogical analyses clearly cannot, and do not, aspire to the status of a “suprahistorical” perspective from which to survey history as a singular and closed totality—that is, Foucault’s archaeological and genealogical analyses clearly do not aspire to the status of a metaphysical theory of history and thus do not claim the status of truth that Habermas attributes to them. Second, it cannot be the case that Foucault appeals to a theory of power that is antecedent to reason and truth so as to “unmask” them as manifestations of power since, again, Foucault’s analyses do not aspire to the status of a metaphysical theory of reality. As Foucault clearly states in *The History of Sexuality*, “The aim of the inquiries that will follow is to move less toward a ‘theory’ of power than toward an ‘analytics’ of power: that is, toward a definition of the specific domain formed by relations of power, and toward a determination of the instruments that will make possible its analysis.”298 Clearly, Foucault’s work does not aim to advance a theory of power, but rather only more modestly to delineate and investigate a field of analysis.

Like Habermas, Taylor also mistakes Foucault’s methodological approach and analytic grid for metaphysical claims concerning a theory of power. According to Taylor, by accepting Nietzsche’s theory of power, Foucault ultimately reduces truth to an effect of power and thus undermines the possibility of a primordial truth by which one could “unmask” as false counterfeit truths. Yet, for Taylor, this places Foucault in a double bind since Foucault’s genealogical analyses commit him in the end to the structures of truth and liberation that he precisely aims to invalidate. On the one hand, if we are to regard as true the genealogical revelation that reason is a manifestation of power, which would undermine all claims to validity, 

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298 Foucault, *History of Sexuality, Vol. 1*, p. 82.
then Foucault’s own analyses must operate outside the confines of power to make a claim to validity. However, this would violate the very finding of genealogical analysis that all truth is relative to power and thus points to a fundamental incoherence in Foucault’s position. On the other hand, according to Taylor, any notion of power must of necessity include a conception of liberation. In other words, if power is capable of being imposed upon me, it must also therefore be capable of being removed. And yet, on Taylor’s reading, the aim of Foucault’s genealogies is precisely “to discredit as somehow based on a misunderstanding the very idea of liberation from power.” Thus, for Taylor, Foucault rejects the very notion of liberation and yet must presuppose it in his analyses.

As was stated just before in connection with Habermas, Foucault neither advances a metaphysical theory of power nor do his archaeological and genealogical analyses aspire to disclose primordial truths. Thus, quite simply, Taylor misunderstands the relationship between truth and power in Foucault’s analyses as well as the methodological commitments orienting his inquiries. Foucault himself explicitly rejects the reduction of truth to power that both Habermas and Taylor attribute to him:

[When] I talk about power relations and games of truth, I am absolutely not saying that games of truth are just concealed power relations—that would be a horrible exaggeration. My problem, as I have already said, is in understanding how truth games are set up and how they are connected with power relations.

Again, truth and power serve as analytic grids of inquiry for archaeological and genealogical analyses, both of which have suspended the use of metaphysical assumptions. Thus, Foucault is engaged in an entirely different project than the one Taylor attributes to him. And, this misunderstanding further manifests itself in Taylor’s comments on liberation. As was mentioned above, Foucault’s account of power relations differs from those that posit power as a

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unidirectional phenomenon that finds its center of application in the singular bureaucratic apparatus of the state or some other similar construct. Rather, Foucault’s conception of power relations conceives of them as de-centered, multiple, multi-layered, mobile, and reverberating networks of social interactions and practices. Thus, Foucault considers power relations as omnidirectional and therefore as fragile, tentative, and fluid. This means that Foucault is not concerned with describing a binary ontological condition in which there either exists power or freedom from power, but is rather interested in describing the ways in which power relations operate—their formation, circulation, condensation, dissipation, and reversal. Since power relations are in Foucault’s conception already fluid and dynamic, they therefore include the possibility of reversal and augmentation—in other words, the possibility for a reversal or augmentation in power relations, which Taylor wants to call “liberation,” is already included in Foucault’s conception of power relations as “omnidirectional.”

Taylor is correct, however, that Foucault takes issue with the idea of “liberation,” but the conception of liberation with which Foucault is concerned is not that which Taylor describes. In Foucault’s own words, he tells us:

I have always been suspicious of the notion of liberation, because if it is not treated with precautions and with certain limits, one runs the risk of falling back on the idea that there exists a human nature or base that, as a consequence of certain historical, economic, and social processes, has been concealed, alienated, or imprisoned in and by mechanisms of repression. According to this hypothesis, all that is required is to break these repressive deadlocks and man will be reconciled with himself, rediscover his nature or regain contact with his origin, and reestablish a full positive relationship with himself.  

The problem with this conception of liberation is not that it somehow gets “reality” wrong, or is inherently problematic, but rather that it employs a host of metaphysical assumptions that Foucault methodologically suspends in order to undertake his archaeological and genealogical analyses. As quoted above, Foucault assumes methodologically that universals do not exist, and

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this must of necessity include the universals of a human essence or nature. As Foucault explicitly states:

[The] first rule of method for this kind of work is this: Insofar as possible, circumvent anthropological universals (and, of course, those of a humanism that would assert the rights, the privileges, and the nature of a human being as an immediate and timeless truth of the subject) in order to examine them as historical constructs.302

Again, Foucault does not undertake his archaeological and genealogical analyses so as to “unmask” as false the purported universal and necessary truths of the human subject by disclosing their historical contingency, but rather begins with the assumption of contingency and inquiries into their historical construction. In this way, Foucault cannot possibly make use of Taylor’s conception of liberation in his analyses. Thus, despite Taylor’s claims to the contrary, Foucault neither aims to discredit such a conception of liberation in his work nor does he employ one in his analyses of power.

The last criticism I will address concerns the place of a normative foundation for critique in Foucault’s work. On this front, both Fraser and Habermas accuse Foucault of “normative confusion” since his analyses purport to provide neutral descriptions of the modern power/knowledge ensemble while nonetheless seeming to suggest that the modern power/knowledge ensemble is something “undesirable and in need of dismantling and transformation.”303 And yet, despite the appearance of denunciation on the part of Foucault toward the modern power/knowledge ensemble, he offers neither a normative principle of critique nor a political program for resistance in his work. Thus, according to Fraser, Foucault’s work is normatively deficient since he never offers us a way to justify taking a stand for one side of a power relation over another, or a reason for why we should find resistance to domination more preferable than submission.

303 Fraser, p. 280.
Habermas finds Foucault’s position even more untenable than Fraser. Since, on Habermas’s reading, Foucault reduces discourse to the play of power, there is no position outside the play of power in which one could establish a foundation for critique. In other words, since every position is constituted by the play of power, no position possesses any more validity than another—all positions are equalized in Foucault’s field of power. Resistance is no more legitimate than the mechanisms of power that it seeks to supplant. Thus, for Habermas, genealogy in the end can provide no justification for critique. As a methodological strategy, it lacks all critical force.

Foucault’s critics, however, employ a conception of critique that operates upon the theoretical assumption that domination, subjugation, and tyranny are always some form of infidelity to, and distortion of, the truth since on their conception power is only legitimate when it is applied in accord with truth; moreover, upon this assumption, liberation from domination must entail a free subject capable of liberating itself from the corrupting influences of illegitimate power so as to bring itself back into accord with truth. Thus, for Foucault’s critics, critique, as resistance to domination and illusion, must be grounded in a truth accessible to a free subject, which is alone capable of establishing a privileged position from which to distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate instances of power and from which non-dominating social practices can be orchestrated and arranged. It is for this reason that Fraser claims that truth, rationality, and freedom alone make critique possible. In other words, Foucault’s critics, as good metaphysicians, are of the position that truth alone, in disclosing that which is universal and necessary, can stand as a legitimate authority and that possession of the truth requires a free

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304 Here, I am thinking something like Plato vs. the Sophists, which Foucault mentions in “The Discourse on Language.”
subject capable of extricating itself from the influences of power. In this way, only a truth held in
possession by a subject free from the influences of power could lay claim to legitimate critique.

Given the methodological commitments of genealogical analysis, however, Foucault
must of necessity repudiate such a conception of critique. And, he explicitly does so:

[The] question is no longer through what error, illusion, oversight, or illegitimacy has knowledge
come to induce effects of domination…The question instead would be: …In what way can the
effects of coercion characteristic of these [regimes of truth] not be dissipated by a return to the
legitimate destination of knowledge and by a reflection on the transcendental or semi-
transcendental that fixes them, but how can they instead by reversed or released from within a
concrete strategic field, this concrete strategic field that induced them.  

Clearly, Foucault refuses his critics’ line of thinking since, whatever critique and resistance are
going to be for Foucault, they are never going to be about either an “escape” from domination
and distortion, or a “return” to some privileged position and founding origin—that is, Foucault
cannot employ a metaphysical conception of either critique or resistance. They are going to have
to be something altogether different since the methodological commitments of archaeology and
genealogy demand something different—or, more specifically, they demand post-metaphysical
and post-foundational conceptions of critique and resistance. And, in fact, Foucault offers us a
conception of critique consistent with these demands:

I will say that critique is the movement by which the subject gives himself the right to question
truth on its effects of power and question power on its discourses of truth. [Critique] will be the art
of voluntary insubordination, that of reflected intractability. Critique would essentially insure
desubjugation of the subject in the context of what we would call, in a word, the politics of
truth.  

In other words, for Foucault, critique is the political act of refusal; it is to refuse the effects of
power induced by discourses whose authority rests in their purported truth; it is to refuse to
accept as authoritative those discourses whose truths induce effects of power; it is to refuse the
forms of subjectivity to which we are compelled to have allegiance. Thus, for Foucault, critique

305 Foucault, “What is Critique?” p. 66.
is aimed at the “politics of truth,” at the circular relation that links mechanisms of normalization and subjectivation to effects of power that are induced by discourses of truth.

Conspicuously missing from Foucault’s account of critique are precisely the normative resources grounded in claims of truth and legitimacy for which his critics chastise him. And, obviously, it is this “lack” of such resources that continues to generate debate. However, as I have argued, sensitivity to the methodological commitments that orient archaeological and genealogical analyses reveals that those commitments of necessity preclude advancing conventional—which is really to say *metaphysical*—normative resources. If one accepts the methodological commitments orienting archaeological and genealogical analyses, if one accepts their analytic grids of investigation, and if one accepts their conceptual constructs, then three things of necessity must follow for Foucault’s post-metaphysical methodology. First, no founding origin could serve as a basis upon which to erect a primordial truth or as a basis to which one might return and to which one might appeal as an ultimate principle of adjudication. Second, the discursive regimes that produce truths must be treated as historically contingent and thus amenable to change. Lastly, *every* metaphysical truth is going to induce effects of power that establish mechanisms of normalization and subjectivation. Thus, for Foucault, *if*—and note that I use the conditional—the goal is to evade or resist mechanisms of normalization and subjectivation, then the only thing that an appeal to a conventional normative principle of critique is going to achieve is to introduce new mechanisms of normalization and subjectivation since every principle of normative critique is itself an appeal to a truth as a founding origin—that is, one is precisely going to establish a new regime of truth in order to justify one’s normative principle. “In fact,” Foucault tells us, “we know from experience that the claim to escape from the system of contemporary reality so as to produce the overall programs of another society, of
another way of thinking, another culture, another vision of the world, has led only to the return of the most dangerous traditions.” Thus, if the aim of Foucault’s work is, as he tells, the desubjectivation of the subject via a reversal of the regimes of truth operative in our present, then traditional, metaphysical normative resources will run counter to this very aim since there is an inherent incompatibility between metaphysical normative principles and the methodological commitments of genealogy.

For this reason, given the methodological commitments of archaeological and genealogical analyses, Foucault is neither “normatively confused” nor is his work inherently aporetic. Rather, he is correct not to offer conventional normative principles. The very aim and commitments of archaeology and genealogy as methods demand that we re-conceive our relation to normativity. It is precisely for this reason that Foucault insists on an experimental ethos in his later works in the form of “an aesthetics of existence” and as the project of “the undefined work of freedom.” If Foucault were to tell us what to change and why we should change it, he would no longer offer us a method for desubjectivation, but would instead manage to erect a new mode of subjectivation, the very antithesis of the aim of genealogy.

CONCLUSION

In the end, Foucault’s critics are correct; he offers neither a conventional normative principle of critique nor a political program for resistance, which his critics so desperately want. However, when examined from the perspective of the methodological commitments of genealogy, these are not ineptitudes or careless omissions on the part of Foucault, but rather great strides in advancing a coherent and strategically advantageous post-metaphysical and post-foundational conception of critical social theory. In other words, the lack of conventional

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normative of resources in Foucault’s work is neither an aberration nor a failure; it is instead a considered success as well as testament to both the sensitivity and courage of Foucault’s own thinking. In evading the metaphysical impulse, Foucault locates critique in individual’s and group’s “refusal to be governed.” This means that the impetus for political resistance is not the possession of a truth that guarantees that one carries justice on one’s side, but is rather the refusal to continue participating in social practices that one has come to find intolerable. Thus, in aiming political resistance at the “games of truth” that make us into what we are, Foucault provides a strategy, based in genealogy as a method, for altering the conditions that make us into something that we would rather not be. Genealogy as a method is “the art of voluntary insubordination”: genealogical method is the right one gives oneself to call into question those discourses that presuppose that the only legitimate form of critique is that which is undertaken in the name of truth by a free subject liberated from power.
CHAPTER 5:

CONCLUSION
In the preceding chapters, I have sought to overturn those readings of Nietzsche, Horkheimer, and Foucault that characterize their work as self-refuting critiques of metaphysics. According to these readings, Nietzsche, Horkheimer, and Foucault each purport to “unmask” reason’s origin in power, myth, and contingency so as to undermine the authority of all rational standards. However, as commentators note, such critiques manage in the end only to undermine their own foundations since, by undermining the rational standards that ground all critique, they of necessity also undermine the standards that ground their own critiques. For this reason, critics often dismiss the work of Nietzsche, Horkheimer, and Foucault as little more than variations on postmodern, absurdist philosophy.

As I have argued, however, attributing the project of an “unmasking” and “vitiating” critique to Nietzsche does not accord with what Nietzsche actually says in his texts regarding his “critical suspicion” of either metaphysics or a primordial truth. As I have demonstrated via a close reading of *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche’s philosophical project is to carry out a critical suspicion of a primordial truth the purpose of which is neither to disprove the existence of such a truth nor to prove its impossibility since both claims are in fact self-refuting. Rather, Nietzsche’s initial aim, like that of the Pyrrhonian skeptics, is merely to advance enough evidence so as to render the existence of a primordial truth indeterminate and to do so without thereby lapsing into dogmatism himself. Significantly, it is upon the basis of this critical suspicion that Nietzsche proceeds to suspend methodologically the metaphysical interpretation of life. On Nietzsche’s account, philosophers take-up the metaphysical interpretation of life—and thus the project of ascertaining the way the world really is—out of a desire to set their lives, as well as those of others, in accord with the ultimate nature of things. Whether it is Socrates and the Ancients, Augustine and the Medievalists, or Montaigne and the early Modernists, nearly
every philosophical system purports to offer the essential insight into the true nature of reality such that if one accepts its metaphysical system and the moral position that follows from it, then one will live the best possible life. The reasoning behind this assumption is quite clear. Philosophers generally assume that the singular motive driving all humans is the desire for happiness.\footnote{This reasoning is actually Nietzsche’s from his \textit{Will to Power} notebooks (WTP, 434).} It seems to philosophers that it is the nature of human beings to pursue happiness as the single end to which all other ends become a means. Thus, the fundamental questions of human existence become, what is happiness and how do I achieve it? In this way, the entire project of Western metaphysics for Nietzsche has been an attempt to avoid blundering on the path to happiness. In other words, metaphysics has been an attempt to disclose the infallible means to happiness. It is within this context that Nietzsche situates the all-important roles of truth and reason to metaphysics. Reason can purportedly overcome the biases of our emotions and senses so as to access that which is eternal and abiding. Thus, metaphysics is an attempt to discern a primordial truth so as to secure an assured means to happiness. Fundamental to metaphysics, then, is the assumption that there is a “right” way to live and that one can gain insight into this path if one can understand the ultimate nature of things. In other words, the fundamental logic operating at the core of every metaphysical system is the belief that the good life is to accord with knowledge of reality and that the worse life is the one lived in ignorance of truth.

This facet of metaphysics is most apparent in the case of Socrates as Nietzsche depicts it in \textit{Twilight of the Idols}. According to Nietzsche, the time of Socrates’ Athens was a period of \textit{decadence} and dissolution of the good life. The instincts had become unruly and anarchic. More importantly, they were beginning to play the role of tyrants. An Athenian male out of sorts could have just as easily been misled by an insatiable sexual appetite or addiction to alcohol as he
could have been by obsessive greed for wealth and power. Moreover, it was held that unless one’s appetites could be curbed, one was destined for failure or ruin. Thus, according to Nietzsche, the sentiment of the time must have gone something like: “[If] the instincts want to play tyrant, we must devise a counter-tyrant who is stronger.”

Interestingly, though, given the way in which Nietzsche quite purposefully phrases the problem of metaphysics, the question of a legitimate ruler for the instincts comes to the fore. From the perspective of metaphysics, at least according to Nietzsche, not only can the instincts not lead themselves, but they themselves are also the cause of a disastrous life. The instincts are both fleeting and unquenchable. In the estimation of metaphysicians (of Socrates), the instincts are neither permanent nor true, but are instead precisely expressions of impermanence and opinion, and thereby a danger and a temptation to falter on the path to happiness. As Nietzsche says:

The fanaticism with which the whole of Greek thought throws itself at rationality betrays a state of emergency: one was in peril, one had only one choice: either to perish or – be absurdly rational….

The moralism of the Greek philosophers from Plato downwards is pathologically conditioned: likewise their estimation of dialectics. Reason = virtue = happiness means merely: one must imitate Socrates and counter the dark desires by producing a permanent daylight – the daylight of reason. One must be prudent, clear, bright at any cost: every yielding to the instincts, to the unconscious, leads downwards…

Thus, according to Nietzsche, we find in Socrates’ turn to reason both the counter-tyrant to the instincts and the savior from décadence. Reason can discern the measure and standard by which to determine the best course of action—or rather, how best to co-ordinate one’s instincts and drives. Again, it is held by philosophers that the instincts are fleeting and impermanent, are expressions of bias, preference, and opinion, and do not represent, or come from, anything lasting and firm. Therefore, the instincts are disqualified as rightful measures according to

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310 Nietzsche, *TI*, p. 43.
metaphysicians. Rather, the ideal of an impartial judge is needed to put the instincts in accord and to relegate each to its proper place; the instincts and drives need a legitimate and rightful master, an unswerving standard by which to calculate an assured path to happiness and justice, which, as the proper relation between things, amounts to the same thing.

It is precisely here, when the question of the legitimacy of a rightful ruler is raised, that the connection between metaphysics and morality presents itself. Truth alone is the rightful ruler since it alone is both certain and enduring—it is the ensured means to happiness. For metaphysicians, opinion is not knowledge, and thus not certainty. Thus, that which issues from bias and opinion can only ever be a false claim to authority. Philosophers dismiss all claims to legitimate rule—those from the instincts, drives, desires, and emotions—except for those that issue from a primordial truth itself, from an essential insight into the ultimate nature of things, from a founding origin. Thus, for metaphysicians, reason alone is the rightful ruler over the instincts since only reason can access the truth and provide the abiding and assured means to happiness and keep us from falling upon the path of ruin. As an expression of truth—as the very mouthpiece of truth—reason does not express its whims and fancies as do the instincts, but rather employs an immutable standard derived from the ultimate nature of things to impose upon the turbulent rabble that are the instincts. Again, latent deep within the project of metaphysics is the belief that there is a way to order things properly, and that if this way is not characterized with certainty, if this way does not issue as a decree from a true authority, i.e., that which is undeniable, then calamity will strike.

In this way, the essential function of metaphysics, according to Nietzsche, is to ground morality (as the assured means to happiness) in a primordial truth. In order to remain grounded in the truth, one’s moral position must emanate from one’s understanding of reality since
otherwise one’s moral position is nothing more than an opinion, which is not only antithetical to the project of metaphysics itself, but also lacks any binding force. The assumption here amongst metaphysicians is that if a claim is merely someone’s opinion, then it is not a true authority and thereby a danger. For metaphysicians, true authority is established strictly upon the foundation of a primordial truth. All other claims to authority are always false claims, are merely instances of ideology. Thus, if a moral position is an expression of opinion, then one need not accept it; if a socio-political position is an instance of ideology, then it is illegitimate. In fact, one ought to be wary of ideology according to metaphysicians. However, in the case of truth, something abiding exists that cannot be dismissed—the truth is certain, and thus its authority is undeniable. If a moral position is true, then it is an expression of the ultimate nature of reality; and, if it is an expression of the ultimate nature of reality, then it applies universally to all people equally, and therefore there is no escaping it. Thus, if the universal moral law is an expression of a universal law of reality from which there is no escape, then one will be punished for breaking the law. In other words, every moral demand is coupled with a reciprocal punishment. To disregard the truth is to court disaster; it is to break the inherent laws of the universe for which one will be punished. In this way, the very idea of a primordial truth assumed by metaphysics carries within it a sense of causal necessity—disregarding the truth will make one miserable, will cause one to suffer. In essence, the idea of a primordial truth carries within it the idea that one will be punished, and ought to be punished, for disregarding the truth. We have two choices: either obey the truth and be saved, or disregard the truth and take one’s chances in the hope of evading punishment and misery. Thus, for metaphysics, the truth saves and deviation from the truth punishes.

As Nietzsche rightly identifies, the equation “reason = virtue = happiness” is the formula of metaphysics. Here, it is presumed that only reason can transcend the senses, instincts, drives,
and emotions, and can access the essential structures of reality, which alone can serve as the basis for the proper ordering of our desires and the path to the good life: virtue is the proper measure of desire that can put the instincts into accord, which is the sole path to happiness and the best possible life. The truth will keep us from falling into error, which for metaphysicians is the same as danger. This is the dream of metaphysical philosophy: reason as the mouthpiece of truth is the rightful and legitimate ruler over the instincts and desire—reason is the tyrannical master. For Nietzsche, all of metaphysics assumes this equation. Thus, from the perspective of Wille zur Macht, Nietzsche ultimately regards metaphysics as a form of tyranny and domination. Metaphysics is an attempt to justify the imposition of a moral position on others via an appeal to a founding origin that establishes its normative position as an incontrovertible primordial truth—that is, metaphysics, in assuming the value of truth, equates truth with legitimate authority.

Alternatively, having suspended methodologically the metaphysical interpretation of life, Nietzsche draws the full consequences of this decision and accepts “untruth” as the basic condition from which he will theorize about life. This means that, unlike metaphysics, neither the values he affirms nor the principles he deploys in characterizing life stand as immutable truths, but rather possess only a heuristic and hypothetical tenor. Thus, contrary to those critics who read Wille zur Macht as a metaphysical principle, I have demonstrated that out of Nietzsche’s methodological suspension of the metaphysico-philosophical moral impulse to accord with the truth, and as an alternative to a primordial truth erected upon a founding origin, Wille zur Macht is instead the fabrication of what I have termed a “post-metaphysical interpretative principle.” In this way, Nietzsche’s deployments of Wille zur Macht are merely heuristic interpretations explicitly put forward for the purpose of characterizing life in such a way so as to be able to affirm life.
Consequently, unlike metaphysical philosophies, we are under no theoretical compulsion to employ *Wille zur Macht* as the one and only principle for interpreting life in our own interpretations of life since only metaphysical philosophies maintain the exclusivity of a singular interpretation of existence and Nietzsche has, once again, suspended methodologically the assumptions of metaphysics. For this reason, there is nothing coercive about Nietzsche’s post-metaphysical philosophy of *Wille zur Macht*; no one has to accept it as true. Moreover, as a post-metaphysical philosopher, Nietzsche can affirm the existence of different and competing interpretations of existence since he does not aim to present *Wille zur Macht* as the definitive, and thus as the exclusive, theory of reality. In other words, as a post-metaphysical philosophy, Nietzsche can advance *Wille zur Macht* as an interpretation of life in contradistinction to other interpretations while nonetheless affirming and maintaining the difference between interpretations—that is, without subsuming their differences under the identity of *Wille zur Macht*. Thus, in suspending the metaphysical interpretation of life, Nietzsche brackets the antagonistic and mutually exclusive characterizations of legitimacy and illegitimacy. *Wille zur Macht* is not intended to stand in a position of legitimacy in relation to a field of illegitimate and false contenders.

It is here in his methodological decision to suspend the metaphysical interpretation of life and to experiment with fabricating a heuristic principle for interpreting life, *Wille zur Macht*, that Nietzsche paves the way for conceptualizing post-metaphysical philosophy as a methodological alternative to metaphysics. Since the fundamental principles underpinning metaphysics are to be founded upon an incontrovertible insight into the essential structures of reality that establish legitimate authority—and are thus to be regarded as immutable, universal, and necessary—then Nietzsche’s work reveals that we can alternatively regard the commitments that orient post-
metaphysical philosophies as reflexive, tentative, experimental, and dialogical. In this way, Nietzsche’s work establishes the tenability of an experimental thinking and living—embodied in post-metaphysical philosophy as a methodology—that circumvents the impulses to tyranny and domination that he discerns in metaphysical philosophies. Post-metaphysical methodologies lay no claim to the exclusivity of metaphysical legitimacy by which to denounce other positions as “imposters.”

Similar to Nietzsche, Horkheimer advances dialectical materialism as a methodological alternative to metaphysics. This means that Horkheimer, as a post-metaphysical philosopher, is not engaged in the task of refuting metaphysics since the assertion of the impossibility of metaphysics would only mire him more deeply in metaphysics. Thus, Horkheimer’s objections to metaphysics are not refutations of metaphysics. Instead, they establish the methodological commitments that orient dialectical materialism as a critical and social program. As was discussed previously, Horkheimer objects to metaphysics for two reasons: 1) it prioritizes the project of knowing another possibly illusory realm over and above the project of ameliorating the suffering and wretchedness of individuals in this world, and 2) it has, historically, been used as an apparatus to justify the imposition of a particular group’s interests upon the social body as a whole under the guise of universally binding obligations—that is, metaphysics has historically served the purposes of domination. Thus, Horkheimer, like Nietzsche, ultimately equates metaphysics with domination. For this reason, Horkheimer very clearly establishes dialectical materialism as a post-metaphysical methodology that eschews the metaphysical ideals of epistemic and normative certainty, and instead advances as a methodological commitment the historically contextual character of both the knowing subject and the object known as well as changing the concrete conditions under which humans suffer as a socio-political project without
need of justification. Horkheimer’s refusal either to posit the metaphysical ideal of absolute knowing or to provide a metaphysical foundation for critique stands as the greatest triumph of his early work. Horkheimer refuses to accept the false dilemma that one must either hold a metaphysical standard of epistemic certainty or be a relativist, and takes great pains to present dialectical materialism as a metaphysical, epistemic, and normative alternative. Similarly, Horkheimer is aware that if he were to provide a metaphysical foundation for normativity, he would simply erect another system of domination; he would participate in the strategy of securing a foundation for his socio-political program that would establish its exclusive legitimacy such that he could denounce all other positions as illegitimate. Thus, Horkheimer recognizes that to circumvent metaphysics is to circumvent the need to provide an absolute justification for one’s normative position via an appeal to a primordial truth founded upon a metaphysical philosophy of either the world or the subject. In this way, Horkheimer’s early work is paradigmatic of the reflexive, tentative, experimental, and dialogical tenor that characterize post-metaphysical philosophy as a methodology. More importantly, Horkheimer explicitly casts dialectical materialism in these terms.

As I argued, however, Horkheimer’s later analysis of reason in *Eclipse of Reason* is far more problematic. Here, Horkheimer’s analysis veers towards the more totalized forms of critique that his critics attribute to anti-metaphysical philosophies. Whereas Horkheimer previously advocated the open dialectic of dialectical materialism and the alleviation of suffering as reflexive and tentative commitments from within the methodological parameters of dialectical materialism as a post-metaphysical philosophy, in *Eclipse of Reason* Horkheimer proceeds to ground his critique of instrumental reason in the essential nature of reason itself, thereby falling back into a metaphysical strategy of critique. According to Horkheimer, the project of reason has
always been to establish human security and fulfillment through the domination of nature. On this account, the history of the project of metaphysics is the story of the abstract ego dominating and subjugating everything alien to it—impulses, desires, the body, and the world—so as to more thoroughly dominate and command them. Horkheimer’s point is that the history of metaphysics, as the history of the abstract ego, has been the story of the history of the domination of nature both within and without the subject—that is, in order to guarantee the purity of its conceptualizations, which are necessary for dominating nature without, the subject, as the ego, must dominate the corrupting influences of nature, as desire, instinct, and passion, within. Thus, according to Horkheimer, the very project of the domination of nature has always necessarily included the project of the domination of man.  

However, under the nihilistic reign of subjective reason, which was brought about through reason’s own destruction of metaphysics via science, we dominate ourselves for no higher purpose than an ever greater, and yet aimless, domination of nature, which reciprocally increases the domination of ourselves. Thus, according to Horkheimer, rationality itself, as manifested in the abstract ego’s attempt to dominate nature for the purpose of securing and propagating human individuality and freedom, essentially transforms into an all-encompassing mechanism of aimless domination that brings about global conformity and tyranny, i.e., the loss of individuality and freedom. We do not try to change the world through metaphysical ideals, but rather adapt ourselves, our lives, to the world as it is given.

According to Horkheimer, at the core of metaphysical conceptualizations is the logic of identity—the attempt to fashion all-encompassing and totalizing concepts from which nothing can escape and for which there is no remainder. The metaphysical ideal of epistemic

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conceptualizations is a perfect equivalence between concept and object. However, metaphysical concepts presuppose both transhistorical unities that exist independently of the historical contingencies of space and time, and a knowing subject that can overcome those historical contingencies so as to access such transhistorical unities. In this way, Horkheimer couples the birth of the metaphysical impulse with the genesis of the abstract ego—that is, the metaphysical impulse, which employs the logic of identity, of necessity includes the ideal of an abstract ego that can extricate itself from nature, both within and without, so as to conceptualize accurately nature for the purpose of dominating and mastering it. Thus, at bottom, the metaphysical impulse pits the abstract ego, as the basis of reason, against nature as if they were two distinct, and yet somehow related, entities.

This division is, however, on Horkheimer’s account, the construction of a false dichotomy between the abstract ego and nature. The principle of truth that is the very principle of reason—the adequation of name and thing—reveals for Horkheimer the very impossibility of that adequation. The very attempt to generate an adequation between concept and object reveals the historically constituted nature of both objects and knowing subjects, which ultimately undermines the very possibility of an identity between concept and object. This in turn reveals that the knowing subject is not an abstract ego and that nature is not something wholly different from us—in fact, the very problem is that the impetus to metaphysics leads reason to think that it is somehow other than nature. Thus, the very principle of truth born from reason—the adequation of name and thing—reveals that the project of metaphysics and the ideals of an abstract ego and an independent nature, which have given birth to the modern forms of domination, are impossible. In this way, by tracing our modern form of scientific thinking back to its historical origins, to metaphysics and myth, Horkheimer claims to have disclosed the
aberrant moment in history and thought at which reason derailed from its emancipatory potential—namely, at the moment of the invention of a division between the abstract ego and nature. Thus, in *Eclipse of Reason*, Horkheimer confidently advocates non-identity thinking as the corrective to our modern barbarism. Though the open and non-totalizing character of non-identity thinking is, on the surface, different from the closed and total character of identity thinking, it nonetheless serves in Horkheimer’s final thought the very same function he had earlier in his career attributed to metaphysical philosophy—namely, an insight into the essential structure of reality upon which one can establish the normative foundations for one’s life, albeit in this case the insight reveals non-identity rather than identity. That non-identity thinking now serves as a metaphysical origin for Horkheimer is evidenced both in his characterization of identity thinking and in his claims regarding the new tasks of philosophy. First, because Horkheimer considers non-identity true, he falls into designating identity thinking as false, the division between the abstract ego and nature as an illusion, and the forms of domination at work in 20th century as the result of an error that can be corrected only by returning to the truth, i.e., non-identity thinking. In the end, Horkheimer managed to fashion another absolute in the attempt to undermine all absolutes, and for this reason succeeded in reestablishing what he had fought his entire career to avoid: the tyranny of dogmatic metaphysics. But, in this case, it is the tyranny of an anti-metaphysics committed to uprooting every identity in the name of an essential non-identity at the heart of reason.

It is, here, against the backdrop of Horkheimer’s successes and failures as a post-metaphysical philosopher, that I have situated the work of Foucault. The alleged failures of Foucault’s work—the purportedly opaque critical orientation of his genealogical method and his refusal to provide conventional normative resources—when contrasted to the work of
Horkheimer, actually mark considerable achievements for a post-metaphysical critical social
theory that aims to resist tyrannical and fascist forms of thinking and living. First, as my account
of Foucault’s work most importantly demonstrates, archaeology and genealogy begin explicitly
with the methodological decision to suspend belief in the existence of the self-identical and
immobile structures of history that are presupposed by metaphysics. Instead, both archaeology
and genealogy proceed upon the inverse theoretical basis that fabricated assemblages and
contingency constitute the basic ensembles of theoretical inquiry. This means that despite claims
to the contrary on the part of critics, Foucault’s archaeologies and genealogies do not aim to
disclose the rupturing and fundamentally contingent nature of historical discourses so as to
“unmask” the universal and necessary claims of metaphysics as false. Rather, Foucault is quite
clear that his aim is to offer historical inquiries into the relationships between truth, power, and
the subject that refuse the metaphysical assumptions of essentialist and universal structures.
Thus, Foucault’s work is not a variant of anti-metaphysics.

Second, in methodologically suspending the presuppositions upon which metaphysical
history operates, Foucault likewise suspends the notions of a founding origin and a primordial
truth that are essential to metaphysics—that is, since Foucault suspends the existence of self-
identical and unified structures, nothing could thereby serve in his analyses as unalterable
foundations upon which to erect primordial truths. This means that from the very beginning
Foucault disavows methodologically the very notions of either a disinterested and neutral
account of history from nowhere or a complete and totalized conception of history that would
provide a singular and absolute account. Thus, again, despite critics’ claims to the contrary,
Foucault suspends methodologically any foundations that could serve to establish the anti-
metaphysical forms of history that his critics attribute to him—even the possibility of a
foundation built upon an insight into the inherently contingent nature of things. For this reason, rather than providing either a neutral or an anti-metaphysical account of history as contingency, Foucault tells us that:

Criticism is no longer going to be practiced in the search for formal structures with universal value but, rather, as a historical investigation into the events that have led us to constitute ourselves and to recognize ourselves as subjects of what we are doing, thinking, saying. In that sense, this criticism is not transcendental, and its goal is not that of making a metaphysics possible: it is genealogical in its design and archaeological in its method. Archaeological—and not transcendental—in the sense that it will not seek to identify the universal structures of all knowledge [connaissance] or of all possible moral action, but will seek to treat the instances of discourse that articulate what we think, say, and do as so many historical events. And this critique will be genealogical in the sense that it will not deduce from the form of what we are what it is impossible for us to do and to know; but it will separate out, from the contingency that has made us what we are, the possibility of no longer being, doing, or thinking what we are, do, or think. It is not seeking to make possible a metaphysics that has finally become a science; it is seeking to give new impetus, as far and wide as possible, to the undefined work of freedom.313

Foucault does not feign to provide either an anti-metaphysics grounded in the true nature of reality as contingency or disinterested and value-neutral historiographies. Like Horkheimer, Foucault establishes via a methodological decision the commitments that orient his inquiries—Foucault asks: In what ways can suspending the assumptions of metaphysics, and assuming an ontology of contingency, instead enable us to reconceive and thus transform ourselves? Thus, Foucault is clear that the purpose of his archaeological and genealogical inquiries is not to unmask as false the philosophical narratives of essentialism and humanism; they are instead heuristics for transforming our lives—our relations to our selves, our relations to others, and our relations to the world.

More specifically, Foucault’s historical inquiries examine “regimes of truth,” the interpenetrating relationship of truth, power, and the subject. According to Foucault’s historical accounts, every regime of truth induces of effects of power that act on and shape subjects and relations of power are deployed in accordance with procedures and objectives established via a

coherent system of knowledge. Foucault details the ways in which the observation of individuals’ conduct allows for the accumulation of data about them that transforms individuals into cases that can described, measured, and compared. Significantly, the scientific discourses built upon this data produce truths about individuals that then function as the norm—that is, we can plot statistical trends on a graph concerning a variety of forms of behavior. This knowledge serves as a basis by which to both identify individuals who are aberrant as well as for formulating techniques for correcting their deviant behavior. Thus, for Foucault, regimes of truth serve as mechanisms of normalization and, significantly, these mechanisms of normalization operate through individuals’ internalization of the norms produced from scientific discourse, i.e., subjectivation. Moreover, every society has its regimes of truth—that is, “the ensemble of rules according to which the true and the false are separated and specific effects of power attached to the true.”314 For this reason, Foucault investigates a plurality of regimes of truth that create subjects of sexuality, gender, law, delinquency, medicine, etc., and that all have the effect of normalizing and abnormalizing, including and excluding, and producing both social subjects and social practices.

Foucault’s historical inquiries into regimes of truth, and the practices normalization and subjectivation that are attached to them, brings us to the question of the place of normativity and critique in Foucault. Foucault’s critics claim either that genealogy undermines any position from which to differentiate between legitimate and illegitimate instances of power or that Foucault fails to offer any normative resources for determining how we might proceed to move from social arrangements of more domination to less domination—or, some variations on these. Foucault’s critics hold that both truth and freedom are essential conditions for critique. However,

Foucault’s critics employ a conception of critique that operates upon the theoretical and methodological assumption that domination is always some form of infidelity to, and distortion of, the truth since power is only legitimate when it is coupled with truth; moreover, upon this assumption, liberation from domination must entail a free subject capable of emancipating itself from the corrupting influences of illegitimate power so as to bring itself back into accord with truth. Thus, for Foucault’s critics, critique, as resistance to domination, must be grounded in a truth accessible to a free subject, which is alone capable of establishing a privileged position from which to distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate instances of power, and from which to orchestrate and arrange non-dominating social practices. Given the methodological commitments of genealogy, however, Foucault would of necessity have to repudiate conventional notions of normativity and critique. And, Foucault explicitly does so:

[The] question is no longer through what error, illusion, oversight, or illegitimacy has knowledge come to induce effects of domination…The question instead would be: …In what way can the effects of coercion characteristic of these positivities [these regimes of truth] not be dissipated by a return to the legitimate destination of knowledge and by a reflection on the transcendental or semi-transcendental that fixes them, but how can they instead by reversed or released from within a concrete strategic field, this concrete strategic field that induced them. 315

In other words, practices of normalization and subjectivation are not, on Foucault’s account, the result of power relations that have come uncoupled from truth. Normalization and subjectivation are not aberrant practices. They are not to be “corrected” via a return to truth, which is supposed to establish legitimate and correct practices. Thus, critique and resistance are not going to be, for Foucault, either an “escape” from domination or distortion, or a “return” to some privileged position or founding origin. If one accepts Foucault’s genealogical method and his analyses of power/knowledge, then there are no primordial truths or founding origins to which we could either appeal or to which we might return. Secondly, given the methodological commitments of

genealogy, truths and the discursive regimes that produce them are historically contingent and
thus could never establish the universal and necessary legitimacy that Foucault’s critics demand
of normative resources. And, lastly, every primordial truth, of which a conventional normative
principle would have to be classified, is going to induce effects of power that normalize and
subjectivize according to Foucault’s analyses.

So, for Foucault, if—and note that I use the conditional—the goal is to evade or resist
mechanisms of normalization and subjectivation, then the only thing that an appeal to a
conventional normative principle of critique is going to achieve is to introduce new forms of
normalization and subjectivation since every principle of normative critique is itself an appeal to
a primordial truth and a founding origin—that is, one is precisely going to establish a new
regime of truth in order to justify one’s normative principle. Thus, as I have demonstrated,
genealogy as a post-metaphysical methodology precludes conventional normative resources; it
demands an alternative conception of critique. By locating critique in individual’s and group’s
“refusal to be governed,” Foucault offers such an alternative. This is why Foucault characterizes
critique as “the art of voluntary insubordination.” The impetus for political resistance is not the
possession of truth, but the refusal to continue participating in social practices that one has come
to find intolerable. Only metaphysics demands a “reason” to resist. Only metaphysics demands
that one do nothing for fear that one’s resistance is illegitimate. Metaphysics is, as Horkheimer
notes, a tendency to inaction. Thus, in aiming political resistance at the “games of truth” that
make us into what we are, Foucault provides a post-metaphysical method for altering the
conditions that make us into something that we would rather not be. The very aims and
commitments of genealogy as a method demand that we re-conceive our relation to
normativity—thus, Foucault insists on the experimental, undefined, and dialogical in his later
works, which emphasizes the tentative, open and reversible nature of the commitments of
genealogy in contradistinction to those of metaphysics. The demand on the part of critics that
Foucault provide either a principle by which to distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate
practices, a program for political action, or a reason to resist and struggle is ultimately a demand
that Foucault violate the methodological parameters he established for himself, that Foucault
return to metaphysics.

In the end, I have demonstrated, contrary to those commentators of Nietzsche,
Horkheimer, and Foucault who regard their work as forms of self-refuting metaphysics, that their
work is instead a coherent form of post-metaphysical philosophy. As post-metaphysical
philosophies, their tenability rests in their methodological suspension of metaphysical
assumptions. This means that the theoretical commitments that orient their critical inquiries do
not claim the status of incontrovertible truths regarding the immutable structures of reality, but
are instead the result of a reflexive and tentative methodological decision. Furthermore, I
demonstrated that post-metaphysical philosophies, having suspended methodologically the
assumptions of metaphysics, must advance alternative normative resources to those typically
advanced by metaphysical philosophies. Thus, where Horkheimer’s appeal to non-identity
ultimately lapses into metaphysics, Foucault’s notions of the art of voluntary insubordination, the
aesthetics of existence, and the undefined work of freedom, mark considerable advances for
post-metaphysical critical social theories that aim to circumvent mechanisms of domination and
the tendencies to tyranny and fascism that produce them.

My dissertation, nonetheless, raises several important questions for further analysis: how
might post-metaphysical philosophies arbitrate epistemic and normative conflicts? To what
forms of epistemology and ontology are post-metaphysical philosophies committed? As
heuristics, how are post-metaphysical philosophies different from pragmatism? How else might we conceive of post-metaphysical philosophy? Despite these questions, the import of my dissertation ultimately rests in demonstrating that there exists a coherent philosophical position outside of the theoretical blackmail of being either for or against metaphysics. Whereas both metaphysical and anti-metaphysical philosophies purport to begin with universal and necessary principles, post-metaphysical philosophies proceed instead from a methodological commitment to maintain a reflexive, tentative, experimental, and dialogical relation to the principles that orient their inquiries. Thus, the uniqueness of post-metaphysical critical social theories lies in their openness and dialogical relationship to both their own commitments as well as those of other forms of inquiry, an asset to any form of philosophy aiming to mitigate domination, exploitation, and oppression.


