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FRAMES

Social Philosophy and Hermeneutics as Focal Points for Theology-Related Readings of Theodor W. Adorno’s Critical Theory

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1. INTRODUCTION

The present study should be read against the backdrop of a tension between two questions. The first is quite general: What is a successful interpretation of Theodor W. Adorno’s critical theory today? The second is more particular: What is a helpful reception of his thought today in theology-related contexts?

These two questions are intended to focus a possible theological relevance of Adorno’s thought without ignoring the general discussion of Adorno’s relevance or irrelevance against the background of contemporary theory. One can make quite fancy interpretations of certain traits in Adorno that might suit a certain theological framework, but to what extent does his thought allow for it? In what way does the more recent discussions on critical theory in the postmodernist debates inform us when we want to make use of Adorno in theology today? The general purpose of the study is not to say anything binding about Adorno per se, but to establish plausible and useful interpretative frames for contemporary theology-related readings of Adorno; readings that respect the negative intent of his thought as well as the general critique directed towards his thought today.

To be able to accomplish this end I will first take on a strategy of close reading of a very typical text from the period during the Second World-War—and relate that text to a text written by Max Horkheimer (this choice is made for biographical reasons\(^1\))—in order to develop a notion of a social-philosophical hermeneutics. It has to be stated immediately: this is not a systematic study of Adorno’s

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\(^1\)Although study focus on Adorno’s thinking and its possibilities I will to a certain extent have to go into the thought of Horkheimer as well, at least in chapter 2 where I have chosen to deal with a text from the forties, when they collaborated very closely. See further the sections “Why Horkheimer and Adorno?” and “Historical and Biographical Issues” in this introduction.
thought as a whole, but a study of relevant examples of his thought, how it works in its own context and in the contemporary context.

Secondly—and consequently—I will discuss some contemporary approaches to Adorno and to hermeneutics, and other recent texts, although not directly concerned with Adorno, clearly relevant for the contemporary reception of Adorno’s thought. Thirdly I will sum up the discussion by relating the insights to my own present Swedish theological context.

Two questions must be addressed immediately. What does ‘theology’ and ‘theology-related’ really mean in this context? What I have in mind when I use the notion ‘theology’ in this study is the academic discipline of theology with systematic ambitions. That is: a systematic reflection on religious and philosophical matters aiming at historically and philosophically legitimate accounts of (1) the reach and validity of general and particular religious languages and (2) the meaning and truth of religious expressions (3) the implications of religious discourse for different social realms. Thus, “theology” means systematic reflection and research on religion with both descriptive and normative ambitions (of course, “normative” does not necessarily imply confessional norms).

Given these brief notes on my use of “theology”, I have to add that I view modern philosophical and systematic theology as clearly and inevitably dependent upon hermeneutical reflection. In the context of the broad and diverse traditions of Christian theology, Werner Jeanrond has argued that “hermeneutics has proven to be not an optional occupation for sophisticated theologians, but a vital necessity for any theologian who understands his or her task as a critical service to the church, the world and to the pursuit of truth”.

In accordance with the general reach of this study, I have to abstain from any argument concerning the content of theology and, consequently, the explicit addressees of theology. Therefore, in this context, Jeanrond’s statement concerning “the church, the world and the pursuit of truth” must be seen exclusively as an illustration of a

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possible interpretation of theological ambition. However, when it comes to the question of the relevance of hermeneutics I fully agree with Jeanrond. Hermeneutics is necessary for every theologian (although this is more obvious in some traditions than in others).³

Furthermore, I agree with Jeanrond when he says, “critical interpretation of interpretation theory itself is of particular importance for any branch of the human sciences which wishes to make claim to intellectual integrity”.⁴ Understood as decisive reflection for all theology, hermeneutic reflection must be constantly criticized, from new and relevant perspectives. Both the embracing and the critical attitude toward hermeneutics are relevant to theology and the double hermeneutical concern explains the expression “theology-related”.

Generally, by saying “theology-related reading” I mean reading of philosophical and methodological material in a way that is particularly suited for further theological reflection. In this specific study, the ambition to produce interpretative frames, relevant for theology-related readings of Adorno, will be accomplished with reference to philosophical hermeneutics, construed as a central field for theology.

**Heuristic and Interpretative Method**

The study proceeds from a heuristic method-perspective. The notion ‘heuristic method’ is not intended to oppose technical methods as, for example, historiographic, genealogical or theory-reconstructive methods, but to propose a way of structuring and applying such methods; heuristic method is thus a methodology.

The heuristic method-perspective involves an inventive, dialectic and tentative attitude to the subject matter; no matter what specific method one is applying. It is inventive in the sense that it tries out new

³See also Ingolf Dalfert; *Theology and Philosophy* (Blackwell: Oxford/New York 1988), pp. 54-55. A Philosophical theologies that does not view itself as hermeneutical in the emphatic sense is nevertheless often closely tied to hermeneutical disciplines, such as anthropology; cf. Wolfhart Pannenberg; *Theologie und Philosophie* (Vandrehoeck & Ruprecht: Göttingen 1996), pp. 359-367.
⁴Jeanrond; *Theological Hermeneutics*, p. 181.
connections for the sake of opening up, unexpected interpretative perspectives. It is dialectic because it does not opt for a complete and univocal strategy of argumentation, it rather presents a dialectically meaningful “picture” of the proposed connections. Lastly, and in close connection to the dialectical moment, it is tentative because it attempts to break new and fresh ground for interpretation without establishing a closed system of interpretative norms or criteria.

The concrete purpose of the study will be achieved through an interpretative procedure that links (1) coarse apprehensions of Adorno’s thought with (2) certain theoretical apprehensions of the contemporary debates on theoretical and cultural issues relevant for a contemporary study of Adorno. Due to the heuristic method-perspective, this means that the interpretative method should establish qualified connections between two types of interpretations that can work as inventive, dialectical and tentative markers for further interpretation.

However, a direct consequence of the heuristic ambition is that it becomes impossible to draw explicit lines between (1) a preparatory discussion of relevant aspects that must be taken into consideration before the task of giving qualified interpretation of Adorno’s thought, and (2) an accomplished interpretation of his thought. Nevertheless, in the context of the scope of this work there are good reasons for making a practical and tentative distinction between preparatory considerations and actual interpretative work. The level of ambition in this study corresponds only to the preparatory moment so the two levels have to be kept apart. The results of the study must therefore not be viewed as an accomplished interpretation of Adorno’s thought.

5“Accomplished interpretation” means an actual interpretation that really is intended to specify and transmit the content of a certain material, not only a preparatory interpretation focusing on hermeneutical “pitfals”.
Theology-Related Frames
Besides the comments given above, the notion ‘theology-related’ has a clearly regulative function. In methodical respect, it constitutes a certain order of priority. This order becomes important in connection to issues that are highly relevant for the interpretation of Adorno but difficult to cope with sufficiently in connection to theology-related ambitions. There are several such areas, but the most important in relation to Adorno are perhaps advanced art and aesthetics, and cultural critique of natural scientific theory and technology.

By paying attention to “advanced art and aesthetics” I want to make clear that the order of priority in this study does not give these areas a central position (notwithstanding the fact the recent discussions in these fields have a profound affinity with the general discussion in the disciplines concerned with cultural theory and the discussions of Adorno).

Likewise, results and problems in the cultural theoretical debates on “natural science and technology” are obviously very significant for every general philosophical and sociological understanding of contemporary culture and, as such, also for an understanding of Adorno’s critical theory. Yet, the full implications of these aspects cannot but be somewhat unfairly treated in an account that aims at a theology-related reception.

However, by saying this I do not mean that overtly significant areas (as those mentioned) can be ignored completely. I only want to underline that the heuristic, preparatory interpretation has to emphasize some philosophical areas more and other less, and, furthermore, that the perspective I have chosen inevitably has shortcomings if the material is evaluated from other perspectives.

Philosophical Traditions
Another demarcation should be made explicit. Certain important traits in the philosophical discourse, which some analytic philosophers would have given priority, will be left completely untouched in the
course of the study. In some areas, there is an astonishing difference between the tradition in which Adorno can be placed, and the tradition of analytical philosophy. Analogously, there is a big difference between the approaches to—and discussions of—issues immediately relevant for an interpreter of Adorno and the approaches characterizing analytic philosophy.

To enable a preparatory interpretation within the confines of this study, any imaginable analytic philosophical rejection of the whole enterprise going on in the speculative discussion on social and cultural theory must be set aside. This restriction is not meant to imply that analytic philosophy today is one concise tradition that can be generalized and opposed to other traditions, nor that analytic perspectives in general are uninteresting for a discussion of the issues in this study. Moreover, it is not intended to propose that analytic philosophy must be problematic for a reading of Adorno in theology-related ways. In fact, it does not even imply that analytical perspectives as such are avoided in the study. The demarcation from “analytic philosophical rejections of the whole enterprise” is only meant as an acknowledgment of the basic speculative and heuristic orientation of my own thought (and its basic optimism in relation to the possibilities inherent in Adorno’s speculative thought). Thus, the explicit demarcation from analytic philosophy should be viewed positively, as an attempt to

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6 I here use “analytic philosophy” in contrast to “continental philosophy”, and I count Adorno among the continental philosophers. The philosophical issues that I must avoid are those related to the analytic philosophical strictness in questions of the meaning of isolated propositions. Such questions, concerning the cognitive and theoretical status of propositions, have been on the analytic philosophical agenda since Frege, and they still play a decisive role. In the continental tradition, the speculative frames are more prominent and fundamental. The last fact gives continental philosophy a different character, which sometimes clashes with analytical philosophical frames.

7 One example is Karl Popper’s well known critique of Adorno in the debate called the Positivismusstreit, although Popper did not represent a positivistic perspective his roots in the analytical tradition made his rejection of Adorno complete. His arguments were based on a general rejection of the whole tradition that Adorno represented. See further Theodor W Adorno, Karl R Popper, et al.; The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology (Heinemann: London 1976).
give as clear and frank a presentation of my point of departure as possible.

**Disposition**

Adorno once said, “philosophical thoughts that can be reduced to their skeleton or net profit are useless”. I am at least partly influenced by this Adornian “motto” and I think it is wise to account for this influence in direct connection to the outline of the study. However, at this stage of the argument, someone might point out that a disposition of an investigation of a certain motto should (perhaps “ought”) not reflect the content of the motto under consideration. There is of course a great deal of truth in that objection.

The chapters have a clear logical connection: a) interpretation of Adorno, b) interpretation of the general contemporary background, c) correlation between a and b, and d) ways ahead. However, the building blocks of these chapters, taken separately, cannot be related directly to the same logical scheme, and thus, in consonance with the heuristic method, the complete disposition takes on a dialectical form. In the following remarks on my disposition, I will try to account for the overarching dialectic between the order of the chapters and the order within the chapters.

(1) After a minimal historical sketch of the Frankfurt School and Adorno in this introduction, the first chapter introduces a plausible reading of Adorno’s (and Max Horkheimer’s) critical theory of the early forties. This reading (a) insists on Adorno’s and critical theory’s specific theoretical characteristics compared to other theories, and it (b) establishes a link between critical theory and other theories, especially those that have been important for the development of today’s movements of speculative thought.

The catchwords social philosophy and hermeneutics “symbolize” these two moments: if the “link” is hermeneutics then a certain under-
standing of critical social philosophy is the “specific characteristic” that distinguishes critical theory from more usual hermeneutical theories. Thus, the first chapter is, in itself, an attempt to widen the scope of Adorno’s critical theory in way that can be qualified productive for theology-related readings (at least if the importance of hermeneutics for theology is taken into consideration). This means that the whole ambition of the study is prefigured already in the first chapter.

(2) The second chapter breaks off with a different perspective. Adorno’s theory is temporarily abandoned and the aim is to shape a limited but useful picture of speculative theoretical endeavor in our time. In terms of the overarching structure between the chapters, this chapter should be seen as a bridge, leading from an interpretation of Adorno to a wider, applied interpretation in the following. However, in itself the chapter delineates one terminology especially typical for the present discussion, namely, the terminology emanating from the notion ‘postmodern’. This is motivated because ‘postmodern’ is a decisive concept both in the contemporary interpretation of Adorno and in contemporary hermeneutics and hermeneutical theology. Adorno’s own theoretical heritage has been treated as both foreboding and hampering for the development of the intellectual positions that gathers under the headline “postmodern thought”. Therefore, the terminology in the debate on the postmodern forms a relevant critical background for a further discussion of the “social philosophical” and “hermeneutical” traits introduced in the first chapter. The second chapter is thus both critical and constructive; it outlines and exemplifies ways of grasping the curiosities going on in the debate on the postmodern.

(3) In the third chapter, broad strokes in the theoretical reception of Adorno’s thought are explicitly discussed in light of the two former chapters. Problems and possibilities related to the reception of Adorno is exposed, and in the last sections of the chapter the focus

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is set on the “methodological” aspects. The social philosophical and hermeneutical aspects introduced in the first chapter are brought to the fore and a deepened notion of “social philosophical hermeneutics” is presented. Together with this notion, which is fundamental for the study, the discussion concludes in a series of related interpretative frames for a theology-related reading of Adorno.

(4) In one sense, the concluding chapter is detached from the other parts of the work. The purpose of the last section is not to summarize the arguments of the preceding chapters. Rather, it hints at a possible application of Adorno’s thought for reflection on philosophical theological matters. A specific philosophico-theological problem is delineated against the background of three Swedish theologians. In connection to these theologians, I attempt—very briefly—to delineate an argument for the theological relevance of Adorno and of the interpretative frames provided by the study.

Why Adorno and Horkheimer?
The reader will soon be aware that there is a certain discrepancy between the sub-heading of the study and the actual subject matter of the investigation. In the heading, only Adorno’s critical theory is mentioned, while in chapter one the actual object of study is Adorno and Horkheimer’s critical theory. For what reason do I risk this equivocation?

The reason is quite simple. The first chapter locates Adorno’s theory in a very specific historical context, namely, the historical context in which his critical theory developed from being a series of philosophical, sociological and aesthetic attempts to a critical theory of society. Due to the specific intellectual history of the Frankfurt School and Adorno’s thought, one cannot discriminate completely between Horkheimer’s thought and Adorno’s thought during these years (1938-1947). The collaboration culminated in the co-authored work *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

The later Adorno changed his perspective, but the recent discussion of his thought is still caught in the formative categories that
resulted from the collaboration with Horkheimer. This is the major reason for me to approach the period when Horkheimer took part in Adorno’s philosophical production. When I refer to one essay of Adorno and one of Horkheimer, I consciously take departure in the double perspective, typical of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

However, given all this my purpose could perhaps have been accomplished by choosing texts from *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Yet, I am nonetheless choosing texts from the years before this major work, why? Horkheimer’s entrance on the scene of this study can be explained by the fact that he happened to write an essay (actually a preparatory work for *Dialectic of Enlightenment*) called “The End of Reason”, one that represents an important part of Adorno’s own theory.

Adorno, in his turn, wrote an essay called “On Popular Music”, one that is very different although possible to read as a consequence of the perspective outlined by Horkheimer in his essay. In order to show the consequences of the contextual factors that are important for the question of interpretation of Adorno today, the difference-in-unity of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* seems more difficult to handle than the unity-in-difference of the separate essays. In the last instance, however, the absolute closeness of their collaboration during these formative years is the primary pretext for this choice of material.\footnote{For accounts on the intimacy of their intellectual collaboration during the specified years, see, e.g., Martin Jay; *The Dialectical Imagination. A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923-1950* (University of California Press: Berkeley/Los Angeles/London [1973] 1996), pp. 65-66, where Jay argues that “although the two men did not work together until 1940’s, there was a remarkable similarity in their views from the first.” See also Theodor W Adorno; *Minima Moralia. Reflexionen aus dem beschädigten Leben* (GS:4), p. 17; Theodor W Adorno; “Max Horkheimer” (GS:20.1, pp. 149-152), especially p. 151. For other accounts on Horkheimer, see GS:20.1, pp. 152-168. See also Robert Hullot-Kentor; “Back to Adorno”, *Tels* (81:1989, pp. 5-29), pp. 7-9.}
**Preleminary Definitions**

Some initial definitions cannot be dispensed with. One important concept with somewhat unusual connotations in this study is ‘methodology’. Methodology should here be understood in the broadest possible sense; as a concept that gathers overarching philosophical and theoretical strategies for decent analysis and reflection on reality. Examples of methodologies in this sense are hermeneutics, post-structuralism, but also my own heuristic method-perspective, foundationalism and anti-foundationalism.

The aim is thus not to discuss which set of methodological rules that some theorists happens to use in comparison to others. The overarching use of methodology I propose here should be viewed as a philosophical treatment of intellectual strategies within critical theory and other relevant theories. As it will be used here, “methodology” is a flexible non-metaphysical category “in between” older intellectual strategies like, for example, epistemology and ontology. I hold it as very important to introduce a concept that enables critique of the metaphysical connotations of these classic philosophical notions, and, at the same time, does justice to the wide and important philosophical problems that these metaphysical notions traditionally have covered.

In general, the notion ‘ontology’ (with its original meaning ‘doctrine of being’) stands closer to the original notion of metaphysics

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11What I have in mind here is the analytical notion of methodology at work in the following chapters, not the heuristic and interpretative methodology that I discussed in the previous sections.

12The definitions of foundationalism differ. A general definition: a theoretical approach that lays claim to self-justification through self-consistent first principles or axioms. The following is an example of what can be called an analytical, anti-metaphysical definition of foundationalism: “Foundationalism is the view that propositions are of two kinds, those who stand in need of evidence, and those which provide the required evidence. The latter are said to be foundational, since they do not stand in need of further evidence”. D Z Phillips; Faith after Foundation-alism (Routledge: London 1988), p. xiii. Descartes attempt to ground being in the self is an example of foundationalism, see further the following note and note 25, chapter two.
than does ‘epistemology’. Yet, in this study, philosophical epistemology, with its roots in transcendental speculation, should also be viewed as part of metaphysics. In the context of Adorno’s thought, epistemology signifies a theory of knowledge attained through foundationalist reduction and/or ontologizing speculation.\(^\text{13}\)

In the strict sense, “metaphysical” propositions can be defined as evidence-transcendent propositions. However, in this study metaphysics are used a bit looser, in the pejorative sense of a self-contradictory or, alternatively, non-sentical theory of speculative propositions intended to establish a firm ground for further reflection, without being able to give logically sufficient argument for that procedure. Metaphysics is illegitimate foundationalism.

When I use the concepts ‘theory’ and ‘theoretical’ they have a certain affinity to “metaphysics”, but “theory” does not equate to “metaphysical theory”. If metaphysics is speculative theory in a pejorative sense then theory should be seen as speculative thought in a positive, heuristic sense. Furthermore, I mostly use “theory” in the sense of “large comprehensive theory”. However, given this specific content, “theory” can nevertheless be understood both as speculative framework and as nexus of hypothetical statements. Although I cannot exhaust the concept of theory here, “broad” or “large” theories must not be equated with a-theoretical value-structures. In the pre-

\(^{13}\)In his lectures on Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*, Adorno argues that Kant does not attempt to answer the metaphysical questions directly, and that one important hermeneutical principle for understanding Kant is to maintain that Kant refuses to give such answers. However, this does not mean that epistemology can be separated from metaphysics generally. In Kant’s non-metaphysical but fundamental question “How are synthetic propositions *a priori* is possible?” (which must be separated from the metaphysical and non-Kantian question “are there synthetic propositions *a priori*”) there is a tendency towards illegitimate philosophical impartiality. Adorno calls this attempt to reach unbiased points of departure the *Fundierungswahn* (the delusion of foundation) of philosophy. In the last instance, Kant’s attempt to separate the structure of reason from the contingent content of experience gives his epistemology affinities with ontology and thus metaphysics in the classical sense of *prima philosophia*. Theodor W Adorno; *Kants ‘Kritik der Reinen Vernunft’* (NS:IV-4), e.g., pp. 17; 30; 71.
sent study, speculative theoretical frameworks are thought of as enabling hypothetical conclusions with a qualified cognitive status (although their status cannot always be criticized along the lines of analytical philosophy). Thus, to summarize this, one can say that “theory” to a certain extent works in a “metaphysical way”, but without “metaphysical pretensions”.

Lastly, the concept ‘contemporary debate’ (and related concepts) is crucial for the following chapters. By expressions such as ‘contemporary (or recent) debate’ and ‘discussions on present situation’ I mean philosophic and intellectual discussions on large theories concerning politics, culture, society, power, knowledge, etc. that have been going on and still are going on in journals like Theory and Culture, Telos, Diacritics, Philosophy and Social Criticism (and many, many others), that is, in journals and books, which focus continental philosophy and the continuing discussion on broad theoretical motifs rooted in the continental tradition. An immense amount of philosophical, linguistic, epistemological, aesthetic, cultural and social theoretical motifs are brought to the fore within these frames and it is therefore impossible to give a more specified account of what is meant by expressions such as ‘contemporary debate’, the following chapters will hopefully reveal it. However, one thing is clear, the contemporary debate(s) I am focusing upon has a specific affinity with the motifs and problems in the debate on the modern/postmodern.

Previous Research

When it comes to the question of Adorno research today, the picture becomes complicated. The total history of reception and research is too extensive for a complete survey. Therefore, I will limit this overview to some notes on four influential branches of the recent

14For an account of the German reception since the fifties see, e.g., Karl Heinrich Bircele; Mythos und Aufklärung. Adornos Philosophie, gelesen als Mythos—Versuch einer kritischen Rekonstruktion (diss. Würzburg 1977), pp. 5-13. One important task of this study is to give an account of relevant readings of Adorno today. Thus, the following chapters, especially chapter three, discuss the recent reception.
international discussion on Adorno’s critical theory (I will also return to these branches in chapter three).

There is one “Frankfurt-tradition” represented by the second generation of the Frankfurt School with scholars such as Jürgen Habermas and Albrecht Wellmer. This tradition, with its clearly “revisionist” relationship to Adorno’s original theories, has effected an enormous influence on the reception throughout the seventies and eighties; an influence, however, which now tends to diminish. The second tradition of Adorno research is represented by the attempt to show his affinities with the strategies poststructuralist of thinkers such as Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida. These interpretations are still significant. A third tradition reiterates the essential Marxism of Adorno. Fredric Jameson is the most prominent representative of this strategy. Lastly, in recent years scholars have returned to Adorno’s texts and treated them by their own standards. This tradition is represented by a row of scholars with slightly different approaches, Robert Hullot-Kentor, has underlined the importance of the musical aspects of Adorno’s thought, Lambert Zuidervaart prefers to relate more directly to aesthetics as a philosophical category, others such as Peter Hohendahl try more explicitly to relate the different segments of Adorno’s thought.

An important turn in the latest research on Adorno was expressed by the title of a recent book, The Actuality of Adorno. After the Habermasian revisionism (some would call it failure) and the poststructuralist and Marxist reconstructions, this book indicates a shift from direct application of Adorno’s thought to a more sophisticated

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15See Hullot-Kentor; “Back to Adorno”.
understanding of the obstacles involved in such an application; to be able to relate Adorno to the present state of mind, one has also to reflect on the difference between his context and our. It is within this interpretative tradition the present study should be situated.

This is not the place to present a survey of the theological reading of Adorno, but two comments are relevant. First, Adorno’s theory has not had any significant influence on the substantial systematic theological discourse. However, due to his importance for other philosophical and sociological traditions, he has had a real but a bit indefinite influence on certain strands of revisionist theology. Second, there has been a limited but not wholly insignificant reading of Adorno as a methodological resource for systematic theology. The German scholar Werner Brändle is one representative of this reception.

**Historical and Biographical Notes**

Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno was born in Frankfurt am Main, 11 September 1903. Very early, Adorno gained a deep interest and skill in music. This musical approach would become decisive for the whole of his intellectual identity. However, classic philosophy also played a crucial role in his early years. Already as a teenager he was well aquatinted with Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* and large parts of Kierkegaard’s oeuvre.

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Adorno achieved his doctorate in philosophy in 1921. In 1925, he went to Vienna to study composition under Alban Berg. He was caught up in the expressionistic circle of composers around Arnold Schönberg. Nevertheless, despite a successful career as an essayist in avant-gardist journals he returned to Frankfurt 1927 to continue his academic career. In 1931, he earned his right to teach at the university by a dissertation on Kierkegaard, written under the supervision of Paul Tillich. In 1934, he fled from the Nazis to Oxford and, in 1938, he went to New York to join Horkheimer and the other scholars at the Institute for Social Research (the institutional basis for the Frankfurt School). The research institute had emigrated *in toto* from Frankfurt to New York in 1934. In 1944, Horkheimer and Adorno published their book, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, and during the fifties and the sixties Adorno led the work of the Frankfurt School—which had resettled in Frankfurt am Main at the beginning of the fifties. During this last period of his life, Adorno developed his specific type of negative dialectical philosophy. Adorno died in 1969.

The story of the Frankfurt School and critical theory begins in the early twenties. More precisely, it can be located to the research institute, founded in 1923 by the intellectual Marxist Felix Weil. The Institute was a free scientific department with a non-partisan but strictly Marxist theory and methodology. Horkheimer became the director of the Institute in 1931. From the beginning of his directorship, Horkheimer tried to develop a comprehensive theory for social research. It was connected to an optimistic effort to merge philosophy and science in a critical regulative theory of society, useful for all sorts of social research. Successively, however, Horkheimer became aware of the problems involved this project and the “pessimistic” trait (that still is an obstacle to reception of critical theory) was attained already during the thirties.

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21 Neither “Frankfurt School”, nor “critical theory” are original labels for the group of people and the endeavor that took place at the Institute. However, in this study I will employ these labels without further qualification, by reference to the broad consensus over these labels in the debate.
To generalize, one can say that Horkheimer’s perspective was indebted to Hegel’s understanding of dialectical totality and the Marxist interpretation of it; he viewed society as a dynamic economic totality. This indicates that Horkheimer understood social change as something clearly beyond subjective consciousness, occasioned by changes in the economic structures. However, for reasons connected to his idealistic philosophical heritage and the political and social development during the twenties and thirties, the concept of political praxis made up a crucial difficulty to him from the beginning. The critical social theory was constructed to reach beyond the limitations of, on the one hand, traditional philosophy with its narrow epistemological and formalistic consciousness and, on the other hand, the political naiveté of revolutionary and reactionary theories.

A testimony to this ambivalence between theoretical and political ambitions is the fact that the social philosophical theory was developed in a constant dialogue with psychoanalytical perspectives. According to Horkheimer a proper (richtig) theory for depiction of society and its problems had to be able explain as many as possible of the crucial antagonism within the social totality itself. This approach asked for explanations on the social economic level, but also on the individual level. Society should not be looked upon as a seamless whole that can be exhausted by isolated investigations, but as an antagonistic whole full of inner tensions, cracks and objective illogicalities that could not be known at all if not through the synthesizing speculation of critical theory. Thus, the theoretical perspective needed to be refined on many levels, the psychological motifs were indeed regulated by the overarching social perspective, but it had a real and crucial significance for the critical theoretical reflection.

During the years in the United Stated, and especially during the war, a gradual change occurred in Horkheimer’s and Adorno’s original theories, a change that can be described as a movement from a fundamental trust in the nature of scientific disciplines and their methods to a suspicion of empirical science in se.\(^2\) In a very impor-
tant essay from 1937, Horkheimer distinguishes between traditional and critical theory. 23 Traditional theory represents the scientific and rationalist paradigms which had shaped the intellectual mentality of “bourgeois” thinking. The growing suspicion towards this bourgeois mentality led him develop his theoretical attempts into wholly new conceptions of critical theory. One can say that the theorists’ earlier perspective was one of critical awareness of the social pressure, while the later theory developed into a theoretical negation of the social whole as such. 24

Although the ambition to enable a theoretical understanding of the problematic social whole had been a characteristic trait in the theory since the beginning, it now became the trademark par excellence for Adorno and Horkheimer. The suspicious critical theory became the last possibility for a thought that had to avoid transgression of its own limits but nevertheless searched for truth in a social world, whose scientific outposts had surrendered to their narrow spheres and betrayed their obligation to criticize themselves and the ideologies sustaining the prevailing condition.

2. TOWARDS A SOCIAL PHILOSOPHICAL HERMENEUTIC

The introduction ended with a hint at a development in Horkheimer and Adorno’s theoretical approach at the end of the thirties. In the present chapter, I will discuss the further development of their critical theory into a “theoretical negation” of the social reality and I will relate to what I hold as methodologically important aspects.\textsuperscript{25} The aim is to grasp the essential changes in the critical theory of Horkheimer and Adorno that culminated in \textit{Dialectic of Enlightenment} and, furthermore, to use them as a point of departure for a discussion of a hermeneutical understanding of critical theory. This will be achieved through close readings of some relevant texts that exemplifies a very characteristic philosophical and sociological approach.

First, however, I will attempt to contextualize the critical theory of the late thirties and the early forties. Here “contextualize” means to give an account of the general social and historical trends that seems to be of specific importance to the development of critical theory. As any large theory with a political sentiment, the development of critical theory depended both upon (a) the general status of philosophical and scientific thought and (b) more or less opaque traits in the broader political and economic situation. Sketching the context will thus enable me to outline principles for more substantial explanations concerning concrete development of critical theory.\textsuperscript{26}

\textsuperscript{25}See the “definition” of methodology in the introduction.

\textsuperscript{26}These explanations cannot be anything other than partial because it seems to be impossible to locate any precise, or even satisfactory, casual relations between \textit{thoughts} and \textit{historical situations} in which the thoughts develop. Yet, it is clearly fruitful to use presumptive causal aspects to interpret relations that otherwise are impossible to grasp at all, even though it is impossible to settle the ultimate adequacy of such explanations. See further the discussion about postmodernism and post-
Critical Theory in Context

The first consciousness of the intellectual, political and later also economic crisis, today referred to as the “crisis of modernity”, can be said to have its basic roots in the post-liberal turn. Following the German sociologist Peter Wagner, the beginning post-liberal thought and practice might be dated, approximately, to the second half of the nineteenth century. Post-liberalism is of course everything but an unequivocal label (like all “post” notions) but two specific characteristics will specify the reach of the term in this context.

Firstly, post-liberalism can be said to include a movement from immediate liberal ideals to an ideal of preserving the liberal achievements. According to Wagner, the post-liberal mentality was “guided by the question of what needs to be done to save as much as possible of the liberal and Enlightenment ideals (…)”. Secondly, its theoretical self-reflection was characterized by a far-reaching social theoretical and philosophical criticism, which can be said to express an obvious discontent with the situation (for example, Marx, Nietzsche and later on Weber) that went beyond the former attempts of liberal idealistic philosophy and liberal positivistic sociology.

According to Wagner, the post-liberal intellectual self-understanding can be thought of as guided by “grand critiques” that were put forth by the “great critics” mentioned above. The theories were “grand” because they contained both of the two extremes in modernity in the following chapter. Cf. also the theoretical discussion in the field of ‘empirical research on life-views’, e.g., Carl-Reinhold Bråkenhielm et al., Tro och värderingar i 90-talets Sverige. Om samspelet livsärskaldning, moral och hälsa/Faith and Values in Sweden of the Nineties. On the Interaction between Life-View, Moral and Health (Libris: Örebro 1996), pp.15-47.

28Wagner; “Liberty and Discipline”, p. 470.
29See, e.g., Christopher G A Bryant; Positivism in Social Theory and Research (Houndmills/London 1985).
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On the one hand, they voiced a “radical critique of the existing aristocratic-bourgeois society and its institutions (…)” in short a distinctive critique of liberalist reality. On the other hand, they focused “on the ways these structures work on the individual”. There was, in other words, an equally clear liberal concern for the subject whose self-realization was seen as threatened. The liberal ideals were confronted with a clear discontent with the liberal condition.

It is possible to understand the intellectual side of this period as an expression of a European “crisis of modernity”. The political side of this crisis was expressed in the constant need of successive social and economic reorientation in the European countries. Wagner holds that the “entire period from the beginning of the First to the end of the Second World War can be seen as a long and protracted struggle for social reorganization.” Yet, in this process “the ingenious idea that atomistic individuals might autonomously achieve a viable organization of society was widely seen as flawed and replaced by notions of more class-, culture-, or ethnicity-based collective politics”.

In the thirties it became painfully obvious that the prevailing liberal ideals of the great post-liberal criticism of liberalism had been impossible to realize (this can be said of Marx and Engels as well as of Weber). The new “great” political systems of the period, the Soviet Union, the Third Reich and the success of other fascist and communist regimes in Europe pointed toward a wholly different status of the relation between the state and the individual, undermining every notion of liberalism contained in the older political theories. However, although in slightly different forms, liberalism survived and continued to develop in the United States. To grasp this development, which goes far beyond the sphere of political theories

30 According to Pascal’s dictum: “you don’t show grandeur by being at an extreme point, but by touching both at the same time”. Wagner; “Liberty and Discipline”, p. 472.

31 Wagner; “Liberty and Discipline”, p. 472.

32 Wagner; “Liberty and Discipline”, p. 472.
we need a complementary approach, oriented towards macroeconomic explanations of the development in the post-liberal era.

The post-liberal society of the turn-of-the-century had strong inherent contradictions. During the post-war twenties, these tensions entered the surface with an increasing momentum, especially in Europe. What was going on was a rapid technological development with enormous economic implications. Technology had successively brought about great changes in the sphere of production. There was thus both a problem of overproduction and a problem underconsumption. 33

The technological development had enabled a production that superseded any traditional understanding of the correspondence between production and consumption. Emerging from what I will call (a bit simplified) the macro-economic sphere, this imbalance “occasioned” a reinterpretation of the traditional notion of consumption. A new macro economic category, mass-consumption, had to be invented. It was based on a different logic between production, distribution and consumption—in its turn dependent on the technological redefinition of production and distribution.

Wagner argues that the establishment of a new order of mass-consumption meant a “demand for standardized products by a large number of consumers who essentially were at the same time the producers of these goods by means of mass-production technologies or, increasingly, their distributors by means of large-scale technological networks”. 34 In the 1960s, this new economic reality had stabilized and become normality. What once was viewed as a “crisis of modernity” had now turned into a stable condition. Consequently, new social-theoretical and national economic attempts to grasp this different social reality deviated strongly from the “grandeur” of the post-liberal critiques. The inherent crisis of underconsumption and/or overproduction—the crisis of the older forms of capitalism—seemed now to have turned into a permanent equilibrium that

33Economists tend to term the developments of the late 1920s and the 1930s as a crisis of overproduction or underconsumption.” Wagner; “Liberty and Discipline”, p. 474.

34Wagner; “Liberty and Discipline”, p. 474 (emphasis added).
undermined the very pathos of post-liberalism. The American society of the early forties (in which Horkheimer and Adorno shaped their mature theory) was already deeply involved in an irrevocable turn towards a reality of mass-consumption where the individual became a kind of pawn in an economic game-machinery. Thus, as the first “late-capitalist” nation, the United States portended the equilibrium that the market forces had called for decades earlier. Astonishingly enough, the actual realization of this equilibrium had been literally impossible to foresee only one or two decades earlier.

On the theoretical level, the “new” logic of consumption, by which the equilibrium was sustained, made it difficult to maintain notions of the social that supported an understanding of the individual as genuinely free agents, or as atomic individuals. Through the following decades, the attempts to describe the implication of this new socio-economic logic of mass-consumption put forward a cluster of approaches that deviated strongly from the intention of the grand critiques of post-liberalism. “Society’ was reconceptualized as masses who reacted to a stimulus and developed regular patterns of behavior”.35 The theoretical efforts to settle the “crisis of modernity” were rapidly changing. In the middle of the twentieth century, the relative “turn-of-the-century” comprehensibility and transparency of the socio-economic reality, which enabled the post-liberal fusion between theories and political praxis, had turned into pure opacity. The theories had to be adapted to a dawning multiplicity and circulation in the very concept of reality; reality became a kind of “hyper-reality”, today often analyzed as postmodernity.36

The substantial affinities between the socio-economic factors emphasized by this brief outline and the deep structures in the theory of the Frankfurt School are many and profound. The first, and perhaps most obvious one, is the fact that, for example, in their understanding of late capitalism as a capitalism without crises (monopoly capitalism, state capitalism), Friedrich Pollock and Horkheimer seem to have grasped some basic features of the new technological logic,

35Wagner; “Liberty and Discipline”, p. 475.
36For a discussion of ‘postmodernity’ and related concepts see the next chapter.
which only later on was accepted as a functional theoretical framework for anti-positivist studies of society and culture. Yet, as immigrants of war, and thus as involuntary pioneers in this area, they experienced the new reality as a catastrophic event. They were more or less forced to handle all the political manifestations as consequences of a crude and confusing reality.\footnote{Their attempts to understand fascism indicates this. See, e.g., Friedrich Pollock; "Is National Socialism a New Order?" \textit{(SPSS} pp. 440-455). Friedrich Pollock; "State Capitalism: its Limitations and Possibilities" \textit{(SPSS} pp. 200-225). Max Horkheimer; "The Authoritarian State", pp. 95-117 in Andrew Arato & Eike Gebhardt (eds.); \textit{The Essential Frankfurt School Reader} (Blackwell: Oxford 1978). Herbert Marcuse; “Some Implications of Modern Technology” \textit{(SPSS} pp. 414-439). There were also another, competing interpretation of national socialism at the Institute, represented by Franz Neumann and Otto Kirchheimer, see further Helmut Dubiel, Alfons Söllner (eds.); \textit{Wirtschaft Staat und Recht im Nationalsozialismus. Analysen des Instituts für Sozialforschung 1939-1942} (Europäischen Verlagsanstalt: Frankfurt am Main 1981).}

For simple moral reasons, the fundamental, anti-individualist principles behind the socialist and fascist systems of the thirties and forties could not have been translated into a theoretical, socio-philosophical language \textit{at that time}. However, the texts from these years also reveals to what great extent the optimistic political implications of the older post-liberal attempts of Marx and Weber had faced their bankruptcy as affirmative theories of social change.

Thus, in the early forties, Horkheimer and Adorno were caught in a political and theoretical vacuum. Their post-liberal theoretical roots seemed hopelessly out-of-date and the tumultuous empirical reality, to which they were irrevocably directed, was utterly difficult to handle. Indeed, these experiences should have been good soil for a \textit{wholly} new orientation (and to some extent they were). However, the fact that their actual orientation became what we now know it to be (historically speaking it is thrown in between the older paradigms of post-liberalist thought and the new linguistic anti-positivism of the sixties) has two reasons that are more intricate. (1) The theorists were practically \textit{able} to reflect on their European experiences. As immigrants their objective distance from the crude European reality (a
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Europe which, however, seemed to be very close to their hearts) enabled critical-reflection of the European condition. (2) However, as immigrants in the New World, they were also practically able to experience the new capitalist reality of technological domination and mass-consumption from the perspective of older ideals of European liberalism.

Both the absurdities of a Europe in a meaningless war, and the late capitalist threat to older ideals of enlightened Europe, shaped the critical analyses at the Institute. The great complexities in the questions concerning the individual and the social explains why the “neo-liberal” Theory, together with fascism, the American society became one of the main targets of the critique. In a certain sense, the critique of the technological implications of American capitalism became the theoretical cement, which also made possible a certain dialectical continuity with the ‘grand’ post-liberal theories. This double position (between the old and the new world), in which their theoretical constructions developed, gave their attempts an unique and ambivalent double-stamp, whose direct importance for the evaluation of their theory often have been underestimated. As heirs of the post-liberal theorists, they could most easily use the negative side of, for example, Weber’s analysis (the progress towards a stifling iron cage. But, as “prophets” of the new condition they were equally “aware” of the fact that the authenticity of liberalism and the grandeur of the post-liberal pathos had to be fundamentally questioned—if not completely denounced.

The present sketch forms background for an argument: the new turn of critical theory (that was initiated earlier, but that was clearly expressed first in 1940 and more clearly in Dialectic of Enlightenment) could very easily have lead to a wholly new theory. However, the political shock-effects on their philosophical imagination—caused by their double experience—explains their faithfulness to the older

theoretical frames, there was no new theory to turn to. Therefore, the older theory of the Institute with its more explicit post-liberal imprints was not rejected, but modified. In accordance with these historical hints, one can say that the theoretical building stones that formed, for example, Dialectic of Enlightenment in a one sense was clumsy and out-of-date already when the work was written.

In general, the philosophical adaptation of critical theory to the new condition was made in the context of a major crisis, not a crisis of any isolated notion of modernity, but of the western world as a whole. Furthermore, it was done by people with a radically ambiguous identity (they were German, Jewish, leftist in right-wing America etc.). This last fact suggests that not only the historical closeness to the overwhelming events can explain the “clumsiness” of Horkheimer’s and Adorno’s critical theory and the emergence of another, more elegant, linguistically promoted and in many ways more successful sociology and social philosophy in the fifties and the sixties, but also a cultural difference and lack of appreciation of the new implications of capitalist liberalism. The most important theoretical discoveries in the early post-war era, which still prevail in our days in modified forms, have their origin in Anglo-American and French figures of thought rather than in the Frankfurt-version of critical theory with its idealist echoes.

Evidently, this does not mean that the theory of the Frankfurt School has been insignificant in the development of these new theories. The ground breaking efforts of Horkheimer, Adorno and Marcuse are more than well known. However, it is not unusual that commentators unconsciously stumble on the historical “double-stamp” of Adorno and Horkheimer’s critical theory: they show their

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39 The break with positivism and empirical social science is documented in Dahms Positivismusstreit.
41 In thinkers such as Pierce, de Sassure, Levi-Strauss, Foucault, Rorty to mention a few.
appreciation of it but do not appreciate it at the same time. To spell this out in terms of a historical paradox: in the context of our late capitalist society, the negative, partially anachronistic, half-paranoid tenor of some of their most important texts from the forties have become as difficult to handle as was the social situation in which they were written.

**Preliminary Examples: Reason and Culture in Crisis**

However, despite the presence of these difficulties, the purpose with the preceding comments was not to throw suspicion on Adorno and the Frankfurt School. The purpose was rather to indicate that there is a real potential for different meaningful readings of critical theory if one underlines the open and basically interrogative nature of its impulses. Such potential value is seldom noticed. The prevailing popular classification of critical theory is mostly seen as an important historical phenomenon that now is out-of-date. My thesis, however, is that this potential is real and that it is an especially evident sphere of heuristic methodology. Once one has become aware of the limitations implied by the circumstances around the birth of critical theory, this potential can be used constructively. For Horkheimer and Adorno, the radical lack of new, positive and adequate means in the area of grand theoretical perspectives made room for nearly astonishing methodological somersaults in other areas.

The political development after the war and the new anti-positivist theories of science have during the last three decades been used as an argument for a permanent shift in methodological and theoretical respects. It is well known that this so-called “postmodern” consciousness has a real and substantial connection to the Frankfurt School. Nevertheless, the early Frankfurt School are very

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seldom viewed as an example of theorizing that is aware of the most drastic implications of the postmodern. In this and the following sections, I will take a closer look at the methodology in some interesting texts, written by Horkheimer and Adorno in the early forties.

The texts I will deal with first are two essays from the last issue of the Zeitschrift (an issue that was published in English for the first and last time under the title Studies in Philosophy and Social Science). The essays are Horkheimer’s “The End of Reason”, and Adorno’s “On Popular Music”. Although it is not spelled out clearly, Adorno’s text is a critique of American capitalism and Horkheimer’s is a critique of European fascism. This section consists of a parallel interpretation of these texts.

“The End of Reason” takes a general historical point of departure. Horkheimer views the political catastrophe in Germany as a consequence of the complex nature of human reason in general. The essay claims that throughout the western history philosophers, church fathers and later on reformers and prophets of enlightenment have argued explicitly or implicitly for a kind of innate reason and meaning in the world, closely related to the innate structures of human reason. During the centuries, science and philosophy has been viewed as an activity that reveals the rational status of the world. Rationalistic and optimistic conceptions of humanity, human thought and the relation between reason and the world have very seldom been seriously threatened.

However, Horkheimer argues that this rationalism from the very beginning also contained its own critical opposite, skepticism. During the later history of philosophy, skepticism has conquered the pure forms of rationalism in such a successful way that its original shape is almost completely abandoned. Yet, fundamental aspects of rationalistic optimism have survived the attack of skepticism by transfiguration into pragmatic rationality, in which the gaps in rationality are bridged by an instrumental understanding of reason. Science and

philosophy have developed an instrumental and technological rationality to be able to dominate its material (empirical and spiritual) by intellectual force. By this, the world has again obtained a kind of general meaning, a “pragmatic sense” that relates to “use” and “application” by admitting its own lack of completeness. Through science, however, the world presents itself as rational, but it can only do this by means of reason’s restless rationalization of the world’s inherent contingencies. This process draws reason into an illusion of omnipotence.

According to Horkheimer, instrumental reason is a highly vigorous hybrid of skeptic scientist realism and optimistic rationalism, defined by “the bond between reason and efficiency (…)”. Yet, these instrumental moments have always been a decisive aspect of rationality, which means that the recent development in the sciences is continuous with the history of reason in general. The “bond” that Horkheimer detects between reason and efficiency has its locus in the social reality. “The causes of this interconnection lie within the basic structure of society itself. The human being can fulfill his natural wants only through social channels. Use is a social category, and reason follows it up in all phases of competitive society; through reason the individual asserts or adapts himself and gets along in society”. This “social universality” of reason viewed as inherently instrumental implies that the average individual must live in a certain degree of obedience to the social totality. For Horkheimer, this fact underscores the most acute social aspect of reason, which becomes all the more acute in times where reason more overtly appears as instrumental reason: in fascism instrumental reason as social cement poses a threat to all freedom, it “swallows up everything, even the freedom to think”.

49 Horkheimer; “The End of Reason”, p. 368 (emphasis added).
At the surface, Adorno’s essay “On Popular Music” is not concerned with the problems of reason and rationality at all. In contrast to Horkheimer, Adorno deals with a specific phenomenon in the late modern society of economic equilibrium. However, the broader philosophical and social theoretical concern is soon revealed in the course of the essay. Throughout the text, the social logic of popular music is characterized by the concept of standardization, which can be interpreted as a special kind of coercion within the cultural material that corresponds to the social dimensions of instrumental reason as threat to individual freedom.

According to Adorno, the fundamental role of coercive standardization in popular music appears in the pre-established standard scheme that defines the complete piece (the rhythm, the beat, and the structure). However, standardization is not limited to the temporal and rhythmical framework, it is apparent throughout the whole piece, from the smallest details to broadest structures. Musically, for Adorno, the main problem with popular music is that its standardized form causes a liquidation of substantial musical differences, which aesthetically ought to exist between the details and the general structure. The differences are still formally apparent in the songs—that is, they should be there both in terms of the intra-popular music values and in terms of broader musical theoretical criteria—but the musical substance is forced and reduced to the standardized scheme where the differences are liquidated. Adorno argues that differences in


52 I want to underline that Adorno’s theory of popular music here represents an example of his scientific approach. The aim here is not to say something normative about popular music. One has to keep in mind that popular music was very different in the beginning of the forties than it is today, and even more important, Adorno’s musical interest was defined by European art music which means that his perspective is narrow and selective.

53 Adorno; “On Popular Music”, pp. 18ff
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popular music become important only as a matter of effect. Sociologically, thus, the problem is that the songs gain their substance not from their own artistic form but from their social role of being music. Instead of being autonomous artistic totalities in themselves—where the details have a constitutive function for the shape of the whole—the popular music songs, viewed as seamless standardized music, become songs for something else, music ultimately substantiated by economical structures.54

Adorno deciphers popular music as commercial music and the songs are interpreted as standardized commodities.55 Standardization is in itself dependent upon the one-dimensional, instrumental market. This interpretation has several consequences. Adorno argues that the social-psychological function of the standardization is to provoke standard reactions so that the economic-instrumental rationality of the commodity can be upheld with a high degree of continuity. This is decisive because it explains how popular music, by itself, can dictate the way it wants to be understood even though it appears to be autonomous art. Because of the standardization, now revealed both as music’s and the listener’s social imprisonment, popular music is always “pre-digested”, and thus it reflects the degree of innate social unfreedom in a certain phase of the history of reason. This is especially paradoxical and ironic because it takes place in historical phase in which the listener more than ever before lives with an economic self-understanding implying that every consumer is free to choose his or her own amusement.56 Thus, to relate to what was said above,


56Adorno; “On Popular Music”, pp. 22; 38. The account is concerned with the American situation.
Adorno’s attempt to decipher popular music as standardized art-commodity with an instrumental character makes the following general interpretation possible: the logic of popular music as commodity is in analogous to the logic of instrumental rationality that was established historico-philosophically by Horkheimer in at the first pages of “The End of Reason”.57

To deepen the critique of rationalism in its various forms, Horkheimer insists that reason, even in the most enlightened phases of its history, always has clung to the objective principle that the individual has to submit to the totality of social order. “The individual has to do violence to himself and learn that the life of the whole is the necessary precondition of his own. Reason has to master rebellious feelings and instincts, the inhibition of which is supposed to make human co-operation possible. Inhibitions originally imposed from without have to become part and parcel of the individual’s own consciousness, — this principle already prevailed in the ancient world. What is called progress lay in the social expansion of it”.58

According to Horkheimer, the “social expansion” of the decisive individual inhibitions has gained its universal legitimacy by what I here will call a secondary freedom or limited personal freedom. Personal freedom (free time, hobbies etc.) under the social pressure of late modernity should be understood as a freedom that is strongly limited to the private sphere and not comparable to the strong kind of freedom that was implied by older philosophical notions of freedom.59 I interpret this in the following way: the presentation of common conceptions of strictly personal freedom turns into a description of social unfreedom. To be able to make sense of this argument I will introduce a concept that is very typical for the Frankfurt School although not explicitly present in “The End of Reason”, namely, the concept of

57Cf. Lewandowski; “Adorno on Jazz and Society”, p. 112.
59A strong notion of freedom can be exemplified by Kant’s argument concerning respect for the law as free submission to the law. “The consciousness of the free submission of the will to the law, yet combined with an inevitable constraint put upon all inclinations, though only by our own reason, is respect for the law.” Immanuel Kant; Critique of Practical Reason (GBWW, pp. 289-361), p. 325. See also, Theodor W Adorno; “Freizeit” (GS:10.2, pp. 645-655).
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second nature. This concept enables a view of the social reality as something petrified. To interpret social reality as a second nature means to interpret social freedom as a pseudo-freedom. Second nature should be construed as a dimension of late modern social reality that tends to neutralize the individual subjects into static parts of a machinery. When the social is naturalized, that is, when it has become second nature, individuality becomes mere neutral technicality.

Given other theoretical work at the Institute at the time of the outbreak of the war, it can be argued that one important point in Horkheimer’s argument concerning social unfreedom was to say that there is a certain affinity between the horrifying irrationalism of fascism, the instrumental economic rationality of late capitalism and older versions of enlightened rationality, for example, in Descartes, Bacon, and Kant. The concept of second nature is useful for the establishment of a relationship between a qualitative reduction of individuality in the general social realm and the philosophical understanding of reason in general. For Horkheimer—and this is perhaps the most crucial point in critical theory—even the most cogent philosophical principles of freedom and individual freedom, for example, the determinants of Kant’s practical philosophical sphere (or for that sake later notions on individual freedom such as Sartre’s), are in the last instance related to some inevitable and unavoidable conditions. These conditions resemble natural laws because they provide the social with a universal and—therefore also—rational status.

One example might clarify this. In the context of Kant’s construal of practical reason, the formal law of freedom is associated with the


61See note 13 above. It is very interesting to notice that the most recent development in research on fascism resembles the Frankfurt School thesis that fascism is a consequence of not a reaction to the modern liberal society. See, Roger Griffin (ed.); International Fascism. Theories, Causes and the New Consensus (Arnold: London 1998).
categorical imperative. According to Horkheimer, it is possible to say that the categorical imperative (as moral law) necessarily results in a notion of individuality that includes and embraces self-limitation and sacrifice of individual interest. Thus, the manifestation of an absolute freedom in relation to the realm of pure practical reason in Kant appears at the same time to be an indisputable guardian of the rationality of the social whole, the universal. The motif of absolute freedom with its constraint on the particular and the individual appears the protagonist of the social whole. Kant argued that “[t]he autonomy of the will is the sole principle of all moral laws and of all duties which conform to them; (...) In fact the sole principle of morality consists in the independence on all matter of the law (namely, a desired object), and in the determination of the elective will by the mere universal legislative form of which its maxim must be capable. Now this independence is freedom in the negative sense, and this self-legislation of the pure, and therefore practical, reason is freedom in its positive sense. Thus the moral law expresses nothing else than the autonomy of the pure practical reason; that is, freedom”.

Interpreted as a social being, even the most well articulated notion of autonomy and self-legislation of the free individual being has a profound relationship to individual self-reduction and social unfreedom. The universalist notions of freedom makes freedom impossible. Given this interpretation, it is possible to expose an inner connection between the enlightened and rational principles of freedom and the context of unfreedom as slavery under the laws of a second nature.

This Kantian example also makes clear why the notion of universal reason becomes untenable for Horkheimer when he opts for a changed theory. He insists that the “universality of reason cannot be anything else than the accord among the interests of all individual alike, whereas in reality society has been split up into groups with conflicting interests. Owing to this contradiction the appeal to the universality of reason assumes the features of the spurious and the illusory”.

Appeals to principles of universal reason are nothing

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62Kant; *Critique of Practical Reason*, p. 304 (emphasis in the original text).
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more than appeals to an instrumental logic of domination, and the
talk of absolute individual freedom in a context where objective irra-
tionality and unreason dominates (in fascism) serves no other pur-
pose than distraction, it becomes a hindrance for serious reflection
on the objective unfreedom that is latent in all absolutist notions of
universality. Horkheimer’s argument is dialectic because (1) he stays
within the conceptual frames of reason and freedom throughout the
argument, (2) he argues that any abstract notion of reason leads to a
concept of freedom that is in opposition to the conceptual frames of
freedom itself, and (3) he thus ends up with a claim on reason based
on the notion of reason itself; a claim on reason that it must avoid to
involve itself in the aporias of universality otherwise it will turn itself
into its opposite, unreason.

For Adorno, similar moments of instrumental reason and social
unfreedom (masquerading as universal reason and individual fre-
dom) is apparent in the broader, social logic of popular music. Songs
appear to be free creations but are instead dependent on a basic in-
stamental interest, namely to generate “more money”. However, the
mass-production of music as commodity is obviously not technolog-
ically standardized on every single level. Music as commodity is
possible to delineate in terms of a coercive standard form but, to be
formally true to its own concept (namely as art) and credible (in face
of the romantic understanding of art as something genuine and natu-
rnal), music as commodity has to include something new and unex-
pected that transcends the narrow scheme of standardization. Quali-
ties such as “new”, “natural” and “unique” becomes very important,
without them the song would be impossible to sell.64

However, according to Adorno, these aspects of the songs, which
initially seem to falsify any broad application of the argument of
standardization and coercion, can indeed be explained in terms of
standardization if the scheme is widened to embrace the commercial
structures that exerts the most decisive influence on popular music.
The production of the popular music is covered by the notion of
pseudo-individualization, which conforms to the theory of stan-

The artist is mastered, not by any narrow scheme but through his subsumption under the economic logic. Adorno insists that “[c]oncentration and control in our culture hide themselves in their very manifestation. Unhidden they would provoke resistance. Therefore the illusion and, to a certain extent, even the reality of individual achievement must be maintained”. To be able to uphold the attractiveness of music as commodity it “is imperative to hide standardization. The ‘backwardness’ of musical mass production, the fact that it is still on a handicraft level and not literary on an industrial one, conforms perfectly to that necessity which is essential from the viewpoint of cultural big business”. The industrial core is hidden by the fact that the commodities are made by individuals. The crucial point is therefore not the individual that composes, but the threatened autonomy of the individual: in terms of the scheme of standardization the composer is caught up by the economic totality, which therefore stringently can be said to have produced the songs.

However, this social dependence occasions a further need. The music becomes dependent upon advertisement, that is, on a broad socializing process lending it the dynamic force, which is inherent neither in the material itself nor in the pseudo-individuality of its production. Following his scheme of standardization, Adorno use the term “plugging” (in the sense of aggressive promotion) to capture this socializing process. Plugging as multi-dimensional, mass-medial advertisement breaks down “the resistance to the musically ever-equal or identical by, as it were, closing the avenues of escape from the ever-equal”. The new moments are actually old, the new is the “approved”; a *sine qua non* for the maintenance of popular music.

This aspect of standardization is thus realized by constant repetition. Standardization as plugging and repetition is understood as the inevitable complement to standardization of the musical material. According to Adorno, plugging ensures that the prerequisites for

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65 Pseudo-individualization is a concept that to some extent corresponds to Horkheimer’s notion of a self-contradictory notion of narrow individual freedom.


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The consummation of popular music are hammered into the listener. The principal means for this process is mass media. Because of polarizing effects of modern mass media, it also becomes fundamental for popular music to align itself with socially constructed “life styles” and “categorical convictions”. In other words, to musical trends and movements which are extended far beyond the musical realm (today we know these phenomena as “mods”, “punk”, “hip-hop” etc.). Through this effect of plugging, the listeners are unconsciously forced to accept, irrationally, certain “predigested” opinions. The only substance in this choice is the fact that it is a choice and that the logic of choosing is a social norm. In terms of freedom, the choosing is irrational and void because it always a choice of the essence of the market.

If we relate Horkheimer’s essay to Adorno’s, it becomes possible to say that the full effect of the logic of standardization is disclosed in the phase of objective irrationality—in fascism. Fascism is understood as a direct consequence of the crudest aspects of instrumental reason, which has always been present in reason, but not clearly visible. Horkheimer argues that reason itself “has degenerated because it was the ideological projection of a false universality, which now shows the autonomy of the subject to have been an illusion. The collapse of reason and the collapse of individuality are one. ‘The ego is unsavable’, and self preservation has lost its ‘self’.”

If we relate Adorno’s account to Horkheimer’s, the social-psychological analysis of the reactions of the music listener becomes an enlightening example of this liquidation of individuality in the context of market economy.

In correspondence to the logic of standardization, the habits of the listeners of the popular music can be characterized by recognition and habituation. This is not the place for a presentation of Adorno’s quite extensive theory of the musical listener, but it is sufficient to say that his scheme of those who listens to popular music tends to

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70Adorno; “On Popular Music”, p. 32.
Imply that the listening functions as distraction. Distraction is simultaneously a commercial presupposition for, and a function of, the popular music (construed as standardized commodity). The complex social determination of the music material makes it hard for the listener to stand in opposition to society’s forces, the social pressure is real for the individual who listens and occasions him or her to accept the given reality. The distraction is a distraction form social opposition. “[T]he disproportion between the strength of any individual and the concentrated social structure brought to bear upon him destroys his resistance and at the same time adds a bad conscience for his will to resist at all”. What this implies is nothing less than a radical weakening of the subject or the self. The commercial totality of popular art expropriates the domains of free will and choice by making these aspects the abstract but inevitable focus of the life-project of personal freedom in the modern social reality.

This indicates that the illusive freedom of popular music as commodity forms the space for an intersection between the two rational principles given in Horkheimer’s text; (1) the principle of responsibility for the social totality (the inner subjugation and self sacrifice exemplified by Horkheimer’s critique of notions of universal reason) and (2) the free will, so crucial both for rationality in se, and for commercial progression. Moreover, it means that the basic experiences in a world dominated by individual quasi-choices of mass-produced/mass-consumed commodities are as difficult to unmask in ordinary terms of freedom and rationality as is the social logic in itself.

The radical consequences of Adorno’s analysis are clearly related to Horkheimer’s discovery that absolute freedom in the form of elective but responsible planning have turned into irrational choosing in the narrow private sphere. Horkheimer argues that in late modern times “it has become senseless for it [the subject] to preserve itself for

71See Adorno; “On Popular Music”, p. 32ff. For another account on the sociology of listening and musical behaviour, see Theodor W Adorno; Einleitung in die Musiksoziologie. pp. 178-198.

72Adorno; “On Popular Music”, p. 44.
some distant future or plan for its heirs. In the present period the individual has opportunities only for short term.” The foundations of rational action are consequently changed from theoretical consciousness into useful “know how”. Hence, both Horkheimer and Adorno hold that freedom have become choice of the already worn-out and empty. However, due to Horkheimer’s point of departure in a general grasp of reason, he also underscores the dialectic nature of all reason in every age. This should be seen as a clear dissociation from any nostalgic vision, or from dystopia of the “decline of high culture”. The point of the dialectical arguments on reason, universality and freedom is not to say that there was a time when reason was in qualitatively better shape than now. On the contrary, the argument seems to include the horrifying fact that reason itself has always been constituted by both rational and irrational moments. Surely, it was the absurd outer conditions that became the incitement for Horkheimer’s analysis but this fact must not be confused with a nostalgic longing for the “good old times”.

Thus, instead of looking back Horkheimer holds up a “utopia” of love as an example against the present form of exaggerated, instrumental reason. He concludes: “Love is the irreconcilable foe of the prevailing rationality, for lovers preserve and protect neither themselves nor the collectivity. They throw themselves away; that is why wrath is heaped upon them”. Lovers care for each other and focuses neither on the social relevance of their behavior, nor on the individual gain. Given this ideal of love, devoted lovers can be seen as objectively retarded in comparison to the development of society and yet they represent one of few phenomena indicating that there is

75Later I will argue against the credibility of interpretations that relates (especially Adorno’s) critical theory to nostalgia. Here it is enough to say that such interpretations are quite usual.
76Horkheimer; “The End of Reason”, p. 383.
another, thinkable form of open, inclusive and soft rationality— even in the social context of a *stäblichen Rhythmus*.

Horkheimer prefers to think that in the late era of instrumental reason, the fascist era, all because of its own inner logic, reason has turned into a horrible machinery, opposite to every connotation of love. Instead of genuine reconciliation between universal structures and the individual, the principle of individuality is demolished and the individuals are brought to death, not only personally but brought to death also as individuals. This opaque line of thought appears to mean that the individual’s own death has become increasingly insignificant since the objective outburst of the inherent irrationality of human reason. In fascism, living, physical persons are robbed even of their own individual deaths, they are given numbers and are killed as groups. Once again, Horkheimer returns to the stifling of the individual in face of the universal. He insists that the deeply civilized and highly respectable philosophical idea of the *ego* or subject as fundamental identity-principle (which saw death as a complete catastrophe) was false in important ways. Its original dependence on the principle of self-sacrifice, the sacrifice of its non-identical aspects, puts its logical continuity in question.

The logical incompleteness of the enlightened philosophies of subjectivity has been completed by the brutal and unreconciled collectivism that makes individual death insignificant. “Fascism shatters this fundamental principle [of individuality]. It strikes down that which is tottering, the individual, by teaching him to fear something worse than death. Fear reaches farther than the identity of his con-

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77Max Horkheimer & Theodor W Adorno; *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (GS:3), p. 141. The argument on love is not very clear in the essay. However, the ideal of love indicates one attempt to gain a conceptual distance from the otherwise all-encompassing technological-instrumental rationality of late capitalist society, it is a first indication of how to construe the logic of critical theoretical deviation from the prevailing rationality. Later, especially in Adorno’s philosophy this utopia of love was turned into a negative utopia, see further below.


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The individual must abandon the ego and carry on somehow without it. (...) This inconsistency into which the ego has been dissolved is the only attitude adequate to a reality which is not defined by so-called plans but by concentration camps".80 The notion of pain rounds off the theory of this essay. Pain and torture could be seen as means both for the civilized ego in gaining its social identity by self-sacrifice and for the annihilation of the ego in the fascist state. Thus, for Horkheimer, rationality is now revealing one of its formerly hidden constituents. “The new order of Fascism is Reason revealing itself as unreason”.81 The objective outburst of irrationality in the twentieth century is a consequence of the fact that the rational framework of civilization is partly based on its own opposite. The punishment of the ego and the slow and exaggerated death-process of subjective individuality have been the necessary basis for all abstraction, classification, rationalization and intellectual domination throughout the history of reason.

Social Theory and Dialectical Interpretation

Read together, as two different articulations of one philosophical and social theoretical position the two essays can be seen as a social philosophical interpretation of the early forties. This, however, is not a trivial conclusion if the scope and reach of the essays is taken into consideration. What substantial relationship makes these two accounts so coherent? Why do the results converge while the issues and the goals are so different?

To be able to answer these questions, I will give an overarching characterization. On the one hand, Horkheimer constructs a model of the objective unreason and irrationality of fascism in terms of the history of civilized reason. As such, it can be seen a history of the present in terms of rationality. This makes Horkheimer’s essay philosophical. On the other hand, Adorno analyzes a cultural object, and his considerations lend voice to a critical sociological perspective, directed

to another (capitalist) social reality. Together, this means that two distinct methodologies, as well as two distinct targets of critique, should be considered. Methodologically, there is a formal difference between a *historico-philosophical* and a *sociological* approach.

Still, if the essays are viewed together, as one differentiated expression of the philosophical and sociological dimensions of critical theory, then the differing methodologies seem, at a first glance, to correspond roughly to the dimensions of (a) the theoretical, systematizing level (Horkheimer) and (b) the empirical level (Adorno) in “ordinary” logic of social science (in which empirical facts are ordered by logical and mathematical operations and the theoretical framework are more or less possible understood as distinct from the facts).82

So far the formal, methodological structure. When the substantial content of the essays is taken into consideration together with the logic of ordinary science all such correspondence comes to an end. In contrast to Adorno, Horkheimer’s philosophical endeavor in the essay can be likened to (although not equated with) what recently has been called “deconstruction”.83 He exposes a grave problem in the present condition of reason by transmitting the substance of that

82The somewhat loose expression “ordinary logic of social science” is related, on the one hand, to Horkheimer’s critical notion of traditional theory (see the introduction), and, on the other hand, to the consolidation of a positivistic and empirical social science that took place during the thirties and forties (especially in the American context), which have had great importance all the way into our own time. For an account on the distinctive break with positivism, see Hans-Joachim Dahms; *Positivismusstreit. Die Auseinandersetzung der Frankfurterschule mit dem logischen Positivismus, dem amerikanischen Pragmatismus und dem kritischen Rationalismus* (Suhrkamp: Frankfurt am Main. 1994), pp. 267ff. For an account on the logic of sociology, see Stanley Aronowitz; *Science as Power. Discourse and Ideology in Modern Society* (Macmillan Press: Houndmills 1988), pp. 272-300, and Tom Bottomore; *Sociology. A Guide to Problems and Literature* (Allen & Unwin: Herts/London [1962] 1987). For accounts on ‘ordinary’ logic of empirical social science, see Bryant; *Positivism in Social Theory and Research*, especially pp.133-173.

problem to an interpretation of its antecedent, historical appearances. Thereby, he is able to expose the flawed aspects of the concept of reason, not from the outside, but from the inside, with reference to its own inherent contradictions. The dialectical critique draws on an aporia within the concept of reason. To be able to say that reason has forced itself into pure unreason, one has to presuppose a space (or difference) between the conceptual outline and the actual conceptual content. Dialectically speaking, thus, in Horkheimer’s essay, unreason is not viewed as a static and isolated moment in the course of history that can be approached by a set of transcendental, analytical categories, but as part and parcel of the notion of reason itself. Quite differently, Adorno starts with a material-transcendent, methodological terminology, that is, a systematic and logical concept: standardization. By a systematic use of standardization on his material, he ties the whole cultural phenomena of popular music to a socio-economic scheme, with overtly philosophical implications.

Hence, the correspondence to the usual levels in theory of science collapses. Horkheimer’s historico-philosophical deconstruction does not have the same status as strict theory-construction in empirical social science. Again, Adorno’s analysis has evidently not the status of empirical research; it rather seems to include both the empirical and the systematizing moments. Horkheimer works on a speculative, philosophical level, and this speculation seems to be substantially connected to the outcome of Adorno’s analysis.\textsuperscript{84} Not very surprisingly, thus, it makes more sense to characterize the connection between the essays in terms of \textit{dialectics} than in terms of ordinary logic. As a dialectical relationship, the connection between the two approaches in the essays can be decomposed into the following points:

(1) The concrete, partly empirical perspective in Adorno’s essay is, in itself, constituted by a dialectic between a theoretical consciousness of the present condition and a concrete social phenomenon, which is determined by that condition. Viewed as an empirical study,
it incorporates its own systematic character and viewed as a theoretical study it draws directly on the empirical material, without making the usual distinctions. Through the doubleness it provides far-reaching, speculative results that clearly transcends the jurisdiction of any strict empirical analysis.

(2) The same dialectical logic can be outlined in the context of Horkheimer’s essay. Although it is not immediately obvious, the notion of unreason, emerging out of the present political condition, has social scientific and thus empirical connotations. The philosophical deconstruction of reason can therefore be classified as an immanent, dialectical interpretation of a notion of unreason, constructed in reference to truly empirical moments.

(3) Thus, as parts of the same critical theoretical context, the two essays are also dialectically related to each other. Horkheimer’s philosophical critique can be seen as the theoretical horizon towards which Adorno’s sociological analysis strives to merge its object. And, conversely, Adorno’s sociological analysis, with its more concretely defined object, can be seen as the relative evidence of an overarching tendency of social-economic unreason, to which Horkheimer’s philosophical critique of fascism has to adhere.

However, as has now become obvious, these dialectical patterns do neither correspond to the logical relationship between empirical facts and theoretical ordering of facts in usual notions of social science, nor to the more optimistic Marxist dialectical structure between Forschung and Darstellung, which Horkheimer developed at the Institute in the early thirties. In Adorno’s essay on popular music, the “empirical” level is produced dialectically by the pre-understanding of a trait of instrumentality within the notion of universal reason and, as such, the investigation ceases to be empirical in any ordinary sense. In the last instance, this means that the resulting concep-

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ualization of popular music cannot be given the status of an empirical study of popular music. Instead, it becomes a part of a broader theoretical construction of a theoretical concept of the social, involving a dialectical theory of reason and unreason. From this point of view, any other phenomena could have been characterized as standardized in the same sense as popular music if it could have been associated with the social-economic totality (that is, to mass-consumption or repressive-progressive technology).

Seen from the perspective of ordinary logic of social science, the radical employment of dialectics acutely threatens to hollow the analysis of popular music and make it tautological. It presupposes all the substance that will proceed from the analysis. The empirical moment becomes more or less theory-dependent (aprioric instead of aposterioric). However, from the perspective of the critique of traditional theory—that is, the paradigm under which Horkheimer put all ordinary understanding of social science—the dialectical approach indicates a progression towards a radical interpretative approach, a hermeneutical social philosophical methodology. From this point of view, traditional theory is tautological, hollow and empty of critical political consciousness. Critical theory is the politically and socially conscious philosophizing, which might burst the tautology from within. In the following I will try to develop this interpretation of the dialectical approach as a social philosophical hermeneutic.86

Before I can do that, however, I must say something more concerning the development of Adorno and Horkheimer’s critical theoretical paradigm. The radicalized critique from 1937 was still consonant with the basic features of Marx’s critique of political economy that guided the earlier formulation of critical theory. In 1931, Horkheimer wrote that science “shares the fate of other productive forces and means of production: its application [das Maß ihrer Anwendung] is

sharply disproportionate [argem Missverhältnis] to its high level of development and to the real needs of mankind”. However, in the early forties the perspective had begun to change from the critical awareness of social Missverhältnis (disproportion) to a theoretical negation of the social reality—which, in fact preserved the Missverhältnis through its institutions, the institutions of science and humanities included. Although Horkheimer was unaware of the major consequences of this change of direction in 1937, it did not take very long before the Marxist framework showed its objective limitations.

In the various anti-positivist camps, the social and economic changes (symbolized by the change from consumption to mass-consumption) turned out to be the watershed between the post-liberal episteme and a new, at that time very indefinite, social scientific consciousness. There is no doubt that Horkheimer and Adorno, still during the forties, made emphatic use of Marx’s critique. Yet, at a second glance, one notices that the change of perspective must be seen as an adaptation of the Marxist figures of thought to a philosophical, interpretative scheme that maintains Marxist idioms and thought-figures but transcends the basic economism of its praxis related materialism. Simon Jarvis hits the right spot when he interprets the change of perspective represented by Horkheimer’s critique of fascism in “The End of Reason”. “[T]here is domination before there is capitalist class domination. The subject appears with conscious mastery over impulse and over other subjects. Accordingly, an end to capitalism and its property relations, difficult enough as this already is to imagine, might not of itself secure an end to domination”.

87Max Horkheimer; Critical Theory, p. 4. The original German Wording can be found in Max Horkheimer; Kritische Theorie. Band I (S Fischer Verlag: Frankfurt am Main 1968), p. 2.
89A notion of episteme: “a conception of the world that inscribes itself in the institutions, material practices, and social relations of an epoch”. Aronowitz; Science as Power, p. 364n. 10. Cf. also pp. 272 and 278.
90Jarvis; Adorno, p. 28.
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The critical theorists had begun to philosophize materialism, in consonance with their intensified theoretical experience. The fact that they “philosophized” materialism does not mean that they rejected it. It rather indicates that they drew the most radical philosophical consequence out of materialism, namely, that an absolutely infinite material world is a “bad” quantitative infinity, a antagonistic whole, in the context of which rational thought falls silent. In a later text Adorno argues that the “nonidentity of the antagonistic (...) is the nonidentity of a whole that is not the true but the untrue, the absolute opposite of justice.” The antagonistic whole appears to be a coherent whole, a natural state, but “[t]his kind of deluded identity is the essence of ideology, of socially necessary illusion”.

Practically, this nihilistic experience meant that the qualitative economical conceptions of the material world had lost their basic explanatory preponderance. The reality of a macro-economic equilibrium (ambiguously felt in the double experience of fascism and late capitalism) and the increasing force of technological domination ruled out all trust in any rationally planned socio-economic overturn of social injustice.

The political and socio-economic situation of the early forties lends the present analysis a certain momentum. Instead of resorting to a comparison of the methodological ambiguities in the essays of Horkheimer and Adorno with later, structuralist, versions of anthropology and scientific Marxism, I want to make room for Horkheimer and Adorno’s specific experiences, which had nihilistic traits but required a philosophical bridge between theoretical critique and


92Although this must not be understood as a deviation from materialist convictions, “by the early 1940s, serious doubts had developed about the continued applicability of the classical formulations of Marxist political economy, particularly the theory of economic crisis, to the new situation”. Bailey; Critical Theory and Sociology of Knowledge, p. 30 (emphasis added). Cf. above, the section ‘Critical Theory in Context’.
social praxis. As their “new” materialist approach implied, every notion of revolution or mere activist practice had to be bracketed. Therefore, the concepts of action and practice posed serious problems when they were illuminated by the basic materialistic consciousness of the fundamental incoherence of the relationship between social reality and the individual. Horkheimer and Adorno’s theory was now, more than before, concerned with the social dimension of the philosophical problem of non-identity between subject and object. However, the bad political condition of the world forced them to develop alternative, philosophical—although still socially “responsible”—conceptions of social reality. Therefore, critical theory underlined its old characteristic, as a far-reaching critical interpretation of the social whole in terms of an antagonistic, problematic whole. Now however, with the intensified emphasis on the coercive economic equilibrium, which covers up any actual misery of the individual and stifles freedom.

93Louis Althusser’s appraisal of Marxism today indicates a lack of a ‘Marxism of Marxism’ (Göran Theborn) which indicates the consequences of a scientific reiteration of Marxism. “Although bland, his (Althusser’s) remarks are devastating in their import for Marx’s expectations: ‘the revolution did not take place in nineteenth-century Britain nor in early twentieth-century Germany; it did not take place in the advanced countries at all, but elsewhere, in Russia, then later in China and Cuba, etc. (…) the revolutions which we know are either premature or miscarried’. (Althusser) ‘This is nothing less than an acknowledgment that the most fundamental expectations of Marxism have been falsified by history’. Alvin W Gouldner; The Two Marxisms. Contradictions and Anomalies in the Development of Theory (MacMillan: London/Bakingstone 1980), p. 27.

94An insight, whose tendencies had been present in both Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s theoretical attempts since the late twenties. See, e.g., Theodor W Adorno; Der Begriff des Unbewußten in der Transcendentalen Seelenlehre (GS:1), pp. 303-322; Horkheimer, Max; Between Philosophy and Social Science (MIT Press: London/Cambridge Mass. 1993), pp. 129-149.

95By calling it responsible conception I mean a conception that is comprehensive and directed towards problem solving in the broad political realm. Given this definition, an irresponsible theory would be to focus exclusively on such a small segment of the social reality that the validity and adequacy of the theoretical results could be fundamentally questioned with reference to a trivial question of relevance to the whole.
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To summarize this, the implications of critical interpretation (which can be understood in terms of a theoretical negation of the social-economical logic) resulted in (1) a theoretical negation of the immediacy in the important theory-praxis scheme, which, in its turn, led to (2) a further dependence on the immanent, dialectical materialist interpretation of philosophical categories within the idealist tradition. Against this background, the impetus gained by the theory-praxis continuity (so important for liberalism, Marxism and earlier versions critical theory) became extremely difficult to handle and the critical purpose—the constructive telos of critical social analysis—was radically obscured.

Yet, also as dialectical critical theory, the renewed version needed its constructive moment of theory-praxis continuity. One aspect of dialectics is discontinuity, but dialectics is never absolutely negative in the strong sense of dipolar contradiction; dialectics opts for solutions. To reduce social criticism to philosophical contemplation on absolute contradiction would be to justify precisely those social conditions that had brought forward the need for dialectical rationality in the first place. As heirs of liberalist and Marxist theories Horkheimer and Adorno could not but make room for implications of a dialectical consciousness, represented by the positive aspects of the theory-praxis problem. Therefore, praxis became a philosophical concept, a

96 The negation I have in mind here is a dialectical negation. The notion of dialectical negation plays an important role in Hegel's understanding of how history and reason in history proceeds and in, e.g., Adorno's demythologized construal of Hegel's philosophy of history the determinate, dialectical negation continues to be decisive for the understanding of the necessary conceptual character of reason as a dialectic between nature and freedom. Very generally—and superficially—one can say that a determinate, dialectical negation is a negation that takes a certain, distinct point of departure, it negates with a certain purpose in mind, i.e., to overcome a specific structure and replace it with another. It is not a logical negation opposing completely and absolutely in terms of a formally complete domain of opposites. See further Robert C. Neville; *The Highroad Around Modernism* (SUNY: Albany 1992), pp. 111-120; Adorno; *Drei Studien zu Hegel*; Paul Redding; *Hegel’s Hermeneutics* (Cornell University Press: Ithaca/London 1996) 144-165. Cf. also the following note.
constituent of the social philosophical task. It constituted the utopian moment of critical theoretical interpretation, because it forced reflection to be a critical self-reflection on its own moral justification. However, the utopian idea, implying that a factual change in the social relations could be based directly on a critical theory, was left behind. The necessary connection between theory and praxis was preserved negatively within the critical theoretical consciousness of an idea of a just social theory. As such, Horkheimer and Adorno’s theory exchanged the classical notion of utopia into something that can be called negative utopia or a strategy of utopian negativity.97

A quotation from the preface of Dialectic of Enlightenment can shed some more light on the philosophical and scientific motivation behind the complex introspective development of Adorno’s critical social philosophy.

Even though we had known for many years that the great discoveries of applied science are paid for with an increasing diminution of theoretical awareness, we still thought that in regard to scientific activity our contribution could be restricted to the criticism or extension of specialist doctrines. Thematically, at any rate, we were to keep to the traditional disciplines: sociology, psychology, and epistemology. However, the

97Without here going into the (obviously problematic) consequences of a direct comparison with Hegel, it might nevertheless be helpful to say that this idea is a consequence of the critical theorists’ reception of Hegel’s dialectical logic. In Phenomenology of Spirit Hegel argues that the dialectical form of philosophizing at once negates and preserves the thought-content. This is related to the difficult notion of Aufhebung (sublation), which presupposes that both a formal structure and a substantial content are mediated in and through the dialectical development of thought with the further consequence that there is both continuity and discontinuity within the same notion of reason (although not in Hegel’s notion of absolute spirit). G W F Hegel; Phenomenology of Spirit (Oxford University press: Oxford 1977), p. 68, §113. For accounts on the notions of negative utopia, anti-utopia, and utopian negativity, see Jarvis; Adorno, pp. 3ff. Inge Münz-Koenen; Konstruktion des Nirgendwo. Die Diskursivität utopischen Denkens bei Bloch, Adorno, Habermas (Akademie Verlag: Berlin 1997), pp. 91-139.
fragments united in this volume show that we were forced to abandon every such reliance. If the observant maintenance and testing of the scientific heritage are an essential moment of knowledge, then, —especially where zealous positivists have treated it as useless ballast and consigned it to oblivion—in the present collapse of bourgeois civilization, not only the activity, but the meaning of science has become problematical in that regard.98

Viewed through the suspicion of this quotation, Adorno’s analysis of popular music looks like a hermeneutical challenge to a rationality that represses subjective moments through its indifferent attitude to the contradictory character of the socio-economical sphere. In the analysis of popular music, the socio-economical structures were hypostatized, not for the sake of an exact determination of certain state of affairs, but to produce an interpretative momentum that could “reinforce” the critical consciousness of the problematic social reality. The difficulties connected to any analysis relying on the totalistic conception of reality as an “iron cage” is to handle the problem of how to construct a credible notion of reflection and critique under the aspect of permanent unfreedom. Rationalization and disenchantment (to continue with a Weberian terminology)—implying

98Hatten wir auch seit vielen jahren bemerkt, daß im modernen Wissenschaftsbetrieb die großen Erfindungen mit wachsenden Zerfall theoretischer Bildung bezahlt werden, so glaubten wir immerhin dem Betrieb so weit folgen zu dürfen, daß sich unsere Leistung vornehmlich auf Kritik oder Fortführung fachlicher Lehren beschränkte. Sie sollte sich wenigstens tematisch an die traditionellen Disziplinen halten, an Soziologie, Psychologie, und Erkenntnistheorie. Die Fragmente, die wir hier vereinigt haben, zeigen jedoch, daß wir jenes Vertrauen aufgeben mußten. Bildet die aufmerksame Pflege und Prüfung der wissenschaftlichen Überlieferung, besonders dort, wo sie von positivistischen Reinigern als nutzloser Ballast dem Vergessen überantwortet wird, ein moment der erkenntnis, so ist dafür im gegenwärtigen Zusammenbruch der bürgerlichen Zivilisation noch bloß der betrieb sondern der sinn von Wissenschaft fraglich geworden.” Horkheimer, Adorno; Dialektik der Aufklärung, p. 11 (Et. p. xi, translation modified).
causal relationships between, on the one hand, the reality of technological production, mass-medium advertising (plugging) and, on the other hand, the behavior of social subjects as mass-consumers (that is, the \textit{sine qua non} of the system) seems to have very little room for a philosophical notion of critical thought, and for any revised notion of freedom. The strategy of utopian negativity was an answer to such problems.

**Hermeneutical Turn**

I will now turn directly to the notion of social philosophic hermeneutics and ask what “negative utopia” is in relation to that notion.\(^9\)

“What is the relation of negative utopia to ontology?” What kind of relationship can be established between negative utopia, strategies of utopian negativity and ontological hermeneutics? In “The End of Reason” Horkheimer tried to give a corrective to the catastrophic relation between the social and the individual by introducing the notion of love. However, in the further development of critical theory, the utopian perspectives became strictly negative and regulative.

One candidate for interpretation of negative utopia could be to say that it forms an ultimate \textit{theoretical horizon}. It is a horizon because it provides an \textit{ultimate theoretical frame for consciousness}. Yet, it is a negative horizon because it eludes positive determination. Understood in that way, it could be compared with the concept of horizon in philosophical hermeneutics, in particular ontological hermeneutics.\(^{10}\) In ontological hermeneutics, the play between different hori-


\(^{10}\)“The horizon is the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point. Applying this to the thinking mind, we think of narrowness of horizon, of the possible expansion of horizon, of opening up new horizons, and so forth.” Gadamer; \textit{Truth and Method}, p. 302.
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horizons of historical consciousness establishes the mode of understanding and experiencing truth. According to Gadamer “the horizon of the present is continually in the process of being formed because we are continually having to test all our prejudices. An important part of this testing occurs in encountering the past and in understanding the tradition from which we come. There is no more an isolated horizon of the present in itself than there are historical horizons which have to be acquired. Rather, understanding is always the fusion of these horizons supposedly existing by them selves.” The course of interpretation, accomplished through fusion of horizons (Horizontverschmelzung), reveals the fundamental historicity of human life in the world. In the mode of understanding (Verstehen), consciousness works in the tension between a fore-understanding (Vorverstehen) of the particular aspects of reality and the given reality—in—itself. The fore-understanding is thus based on a pre-established ontological relationship between being-in-itself (Sein) and being-there (Dasein).

Social philosophical hermeneutics can never be ontological hermeneutics because the negative utopia has no ontological dimension comparable to the category of historicity in ontological hermeneutics. In social philosophical hermeneutics, the negative utopia puts up an indeterminate, abstract frame for conception of the relations between the universal and the particular, the subject and the object, and the social and the individual. Thereby, it reminds more of a transcendental, epistemological frame for critical consciousness than

101 Gadamer; Truth and Method, p. 306 (Gadamer’s emphasis).
102 I do not think epistemology is a good characterization of Adorno’s philosophy, but in relation to later texts than those I have referred to here, Brian O’Connor argues “Adorno proposes, in essence, a particular relationship between subject and object which provides the structure of rational philosophy.” and he continues, the terms of rational description constrains the rationality of philosophical analyses. That is to say, Adorno tries to show that his account of subject-object is compelling on the basis that those whose accounts of the experience are at odds with it cannot present a coherent system. This is the Kantian basis of his critique of modern philosophy.” O’Connor, Brian; “Adorno and Heidegger and the Critique of Epistemology”, Philosophy and Social Criticism (24:1998, pp.43-62), pp. 46 and 47.
of an ontological determination of the fundamental structures of being. However, the difference from ontological hermeneutics does not mean that the comparison fails. In the last instance, negative utopia should be thought of neither as an epistemological, nor as an ontological category. The idea behind my comparison is rather to outline Adorno’s critical theory as a heuristic critical theoretical mode of interpretation, which can be a corrective for too pretentious philosophies of understanding. Critical theory has both an “epistemological trait” and an “ontological dimension”, which gives it a mediating position. The epistemological trait is the negative utopia as “theoretical” frame, and the ontological dimension is the negative utopia as theoretical “horizon”.

In ontological hermeneutics, understanding is established ontologically, on the one hand, for the sake of overcoming temporal determination and alienation between the past and the present, on the other hand, to the overcoming of the alienation between the interpreter and the interpreted. To “be historical” becomes the overarching mode of being, which relates all beings, past and present, to each other. Entities are related with reference to their intrinsic historicity. Understanding is initiated if the interpreter enters the hermeneutic circle, or, with other words, enters the dialectic of conversation between different horizons. The circularity arises from the dialectic between the ontological “fore-structure” (Vor-struktur)

103Gadamer; Truth and Method, e.g., pp. 179; 295; 386-387.
104Richard Palmer uses the word ‘historicality’ instead of ‘historicity’. Although he does not mention it himself, it might be a good strategy for the purpose of discriminating between the inevitable historical situatedness of certain object of interpretation, historicity (which is apparent according to earlier versions of philosophical hermeneutics, i.e., Dilthey’s) and the ontological understanding of history as a fundamental structure of being itself, historicality. However, the notion historicity is so commonly used that I prefer it here with these qualifications. See Richard E. Palmer; Hermeneutics Interpretation Theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gada-mer (Northwestern University Press: Evanston 1969), e.g., pp. 176ff.
of the interpreter and the ontological determination of the interpreted (text or any other subject matters).

Gadamer argues that “Heidegger’s description and existential grounding of the hermeneutical circle (…) constitute a decisive turning point (…)” for hermeneutical thought. “Heidegger describes the circle in such a way that the understanding of the text remains permanently determined by the anticipatory movement of fore-understanding”\(^{106}\). If one relates this logic of fore-understanding to critical theory, one can say that the hermeneutical character of critical theory can be defined as a “fore-understanding” of the problematic social context of discontinuous and flawed subject-object, universal-particular, and social-individual relations. Together with the notion of “negative utopia”—which I viewed as a vague (in the sense of indeterminate, not fuzzy) frame for understanding the social—the notion of “fore-understanding” establishes a hermeneutic consciousness, an interpretative circularity that can be likened to the Heidegger’s hermeneutical circle.\(^{107}\)

Still, though, the negative utopia of critical theory must not be confused with the notion of being (\textit{Sein}) or existence (\textit{Dasein}) so characteristic of Heidegger’s ontology.\(^{108}\) Moreover, and even more important, in critical theory the hermeneutic circle (or fusion between a theoretical or interpretative horizon and another horizon) is not \textit{grounded} in a fundamental ontological notion of the intrinsic historicity of being that warrants disclosure and appearance of truth.\(^{109}\)

\(^{106}\)Gadamer; \textit{Truth and Method}, p. 293.

\(^{107}\)The notion “vague” will be discussed in chapter two and three. See especially the section “Totalizing ‘isms’ and Weak Thought” in chapter two and the section “Final Impotence” chapter three.


Understanding in critical theory is never “permanently determined” by fore-understanding. Instead, the hermeneutical aspects of critical theory are related to the under-determined future (that’s why “utopia” is a relevant term). Its interpretative mode is a heuristic (not ontological) determination of the proper relationship between the categories of the social and the individual. This determination should not be construed in terms of a unified framework of the finitude and historicity of being but in terms of a thinkable future reconciliation of all relations that are perverted in history. The actual perversion of relations prohibits unified frameworks of history and advocates theoretical illumination of the perverted relations through the vision of an undistorted relation. That is why critical theory always depicts the actual state of affairs as an antagonistic totality, a totality that is intimately determined by the bad infinity of materialism. The negative utopian vision of a non-antagonistic whole (the same dream embodying all metaphysics) is deposited (although never explicated) in the very center of critical consciousness. It mediates the critical notion of the antagonistic whole but it never confuses the actual with the merely illusory (as does metaphysics).

Thus, to summarize, the hermeneutics of critical theory can be defined by a qualified philosophical consciousness of a genuine reconciliation between the universal and particular, the social and the individual. This consciousness preserves the uniqueness of every particular entity in the context of the integrated totality. However, the anti-existential, negative utopian horizon has nothing to do with reality or truth of being, it is at most connected to hope (that is, under-determined consciousness of dialectical possibilities). In Minima Moralia, a very famous collection of aphorisms, written during the same time as Dialectic of Enlightenment, Adorno delineates the “inside” of the strategy of utopian negativity. “The only philosophy which can be


Adorno deals explicitly with these motifs in two essay called “Zu Subjekt und Objekt” (GS:10.2, pp. 741-758) and “Marginalien zu Theorie und Praxis” (GS:10.2, pp. 759-782).
responsibly practiced in face of despair is the attempt to contemplate all things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption. (…) Besides the demand thus placed on thought, the question of the reality or unreality of redemption itself hardly matters”,

In the way I have delineated it here, the notion of negative utopia reveals the materialistic trait in critical theory. In fact, materialism “explains” the negativity of the utopian perspective: an adequate critical theoretical understanding must be located in a never-ending, open dialectic; in an endless, successive negation of distinct subjective perspectives; in a consciousness aware of the actual nihility of the spiritual; in a context of an unspecified and postponed theory-praxis relation; in a materialistic, bad infinity where the topography of reality is absolutely incalculable and unforeseeable.

Given the materialistic trait, the hermeneutical aim of critical theory is to enable the philosophizing consciousness to dissociate itself from matter, as it were. To establish an interpretative distance that lends thought a relative freedom to choose alternative interpretations; alternatives to the interpretative possibilities granted by immediate experience of the social reality. Immediate experience tends to “insert” the spiritual (renamed as ground, being, anthropology, etc.) in a way that obliterates the possibilities for qualified social criticism. The materialistic consciousness is aware of the inadequacy of the given, the absence of genuine freedom from nature. Thus, critical theory can be said to opt for a secondary freedom; an interpretative freedom.

Yet, in Horkheimer’s essay it becomes clear that even this, secondary, critical theoretical freedom fragile. If we are to define a herme-

neutical version of critical theory, we have stay within the tentative theoretical mode. One is not allowed to resort to ontology. All categories that the social philosophical hermeneutics can draw into its interpretative circle is theoretical constructions from the very beginning, they have neither ontological nor epistemological status. If we compare it to ontological hermeneutics, Adorno’s analysis of popular music can be looked upon as initiating a determinate hermeneutical Horizontverschmelzung (fusion of horizons) between the category of the social and the category of the individual. However, this interpretation of Adorno’s essay is possible if, and only if, the mode of understanding is cut loose from the historicity of the individual and from any preconceived ontological unity of the category of the social.

In social philosophical hermeneutics, a certain interpretation of a relation within the antagonistic whole determines that relation in the frame of the tension between the antagonistic whole and the negative utopia. However, one determinate relation does not prefigure all other relations. Instead—and here the reality of the antagonistic whole reappears—the critical theoretical consciousness continues to be an incentive to ever new interpretations of the infinite amount of concrete relations, and the sum of all determinations still does not become a determinate whole of sound relations. The tension between actuality and possibility remains unresolved.

Given the fragility of the freedom, introduced by this conception of interpretation, one can conclude that critical theoretical interpretation does not provide means for political action. To state it paradoxically, the utopian moment of theoretical consciousness cannot be conceptualized positively, only the negative moment can be stated positively—namely, in terms of an antagonistic totality. Therefore, the interpretative endeavor does not lead to a deeper insight into being as such, or to knowledge of principles for right practice, or to theology. It is remains theoretical.
Interpretative Philosophy: Concluding Example

The “hermeneutical content” of critical theory will now be exemplified by a short text from *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944, 1947). As its original German title indicated, this book should not be understood as a completed whole but as a collection of fragments. Here, I will only discuss a single passage from a draft from the last section of the book, called “Notes and Drafts”. The draft is entitled “Man and Animal”.

However, I must first say something more about the book in broad outline. In the draft, Horkheimer and Adorno discuss an “anthropological” motif that draws directly on the two main theses of the book. The theses concerns the dialectical instability within the human nature, on which they ground a theory of the ambivalence of human freedom from nature (cf. the previous sections of this chapter). The two theses is (a) that myth—that is, the human attempt to mimaetically, esthetically and magically reduce nature to something stable and eternal—in itself contains enlightenment and (b) that enlightenment—that is, the rational development of means to control nature—always lapses into mythology. The draft “Man and Animal” relates loosely to these theses when it illuminates the inescapable moment of nature in human being and human being’s ambiguous relationship to nature. The ambiguities are connected to the human existence in *nature-history* and humanity’s fear of falling back into the status of pure nature. In the broad context of critical theory this fear of nature are connected to the notion of “second nature”,

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112 *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is an immediate continuation of the theoretical development that begun in the essays from the last issue of the *Zeitschrift*.

which is important for the interpretation of social constructions, here it is viewed as part of historical consciousness.\textsuperscript{114}

The authors argue that deep traits within the various folkloric traditions of \textit{fairy tales} testify to the human fear of nature: “Recurrent in national fairy tales is the punishment of being transformed from man to animal”. According to the authors, the folkloric traditions contain a symbolic frame that points ahead to a deep existential ambivalence concerning the human situation in the frame of nature and culture. “The mute savagery in the animal’s eyes bears in itself witness to a dread that humans fear about such transformation. Every animal suggests an abysmal disaster that took place in primeval times. The fairy tale discloses man’s premonitions”.\textsuperscript{115}

To be able to analyze this tiny example of critical theoretical interpretation of the state of humanity in the antagonistic whole it is fruitful to lay bare three dialectically interrelated presuppositions: (1) the abstract critical theoretical consciousness of unfreedom can be found, as deposit, in human traditions; (2) the theoretical consciousness is necessary to apprehend such “depositions”; (3) the actual symbolism of, for example, the fairy tales, which is a concrete example of past human reflection, determines critical consciousness through a dialectical disclosure and determination of certain aspects of the abstract critical consciousness.

In the language of ontological hermeneutics, the \textit{temporality or historicity}—the “now” (the present horizon of social reality) and the “before” (the historical horizon of the fairy tales)—produces a fur-

\textsuperscript{114}There is not enough space here to outline the relation between nature and the social in Adorno’s theory. The concept of “second nature” is a key (see the section “Reason and Culture in Crisis” above). The social philosophical motif of individual unfreedom in relation to the social whole is closely connected to the motif of the social as a second nature.

ther insight, namely that the alienation of man “now” in a very specific sense can be seen as continuous with the condition of man “before”. The continuity, however, is not established in terms of anthropology or ontology but in terms of the abstract critical theoretical consciousness, which actively produces a plausible interpretation of the fairy tales in consonance with the critical theory of society. Thus, the “alienation” is possible to understand as running through the self-conception of human being if— and only if—we approach human history by means of a perspective of critical theory. Deciphered in the language of critical theory, the folkloric obsession to metamorphosis from man to animal reveals the difficulty that human being faces at the border between freedom and nature.

It is this theoretical circularity in social philosophical hermeneutics that produces the critical “understanding” of particular phenomena. However, it is also the circularity that prohibits the critical theorist to step from critical understanding to portray the truth. Furthermore, it is the circularity that prohibits generalization of the “understanding of the particular” into understanding of the whole. Social philosophical hermeneutics does never reach the truth. It would be ridiculous to say that the “deepest” meaning of fairy tales is to depict a certain kind of human dread. Likewise would it be ridiculous to say that a collection of critical theoretical interpretations of cultural phenomena, analogous with the one treated here, could claim to state exhaust the true logic of the cultural condition. Such generalization is not (and I dare to say: have never been) the point of social philosophical hermeneutics. Unlike ontological hermeneutics, critical theory does not intend to lay bare the structure of understanding, but again, unlike the psychologism of pure methodological hermeneutics it does not provide method of reconstructing trustworthy interpretations. Critical theoretical interpretation is an interpretative philosophy, which relies on its critical theoretical horizon, and whose truth content only can be evaluated against that horizon. The meaningful “truth content” of the man–animal theme in the fairy tales is thus opened up in a dialectical re-configuration of the theory: (1) The literal content of the fairy tales, namely the “every day” stability of
the human identity and animal identity are negated, due to the theoretical consciousness of social relativization of all particular identities. 

(2) The negation of that stability is once again negated in a particular determination of critical consciousness through the interpretation of folkloric symbolism.

This reconfiguration of critical theory through traces of historical human consciousness, leads to a deeper critical understanding of the complexities involved in the relation between human being and nature and, furthermore, within the notion of reason and rationality as products of human freedom. The temporal difference between (a) the objective meaning of the fairy tale and (b) the objective condition that brings forth the social theory becomes the creative momentum for the negative Verstehen of social objectivity, that is, the social reality viewed as an antagonistic totality. However, despite the negativity, which implies that the theory cannot be transformed into political praxis, this Verstehen can be specified as a motivation for further philosophical interpretation in the nihilistic political mode of resistance, persistence or perseverance of the present state of affairs; it becomes an intellectual overturn of status quo.\(^{116}\)

\(^{116}\)In Adorno’s thought, the question of how to reiterate a concept of an adequate and independent philosophical reflection and critique was urgent through his whole life. Later it led him to systematize the aesthetic traits that always acted as a counterpart to his social critique. The aesthetic side of critical theory has not been discussed here, but must be taken into consideration in an accomplished interpretation of his theory. The ambition here is to present a frame for such interpretation, not of give it. The esthetic side of critical theory can be found in several texts, however, the most important is the unfinished Ästhetische Theorie. Theodor W Adorno; Ästhetische Theorie (GS:7).
3. RECENT METHODOLOGICAL AMBIGUITY

After having dealt heuristically with Adorno’s critical theory in terms of philosophical hermeneutics and in light of the specific context in which it developed, I now intend to make a general interpretation of the recent development in the broad context of theoretical matters with connections to Adorno’s thought. One manifest point of connection is the theoretical and methodological considerations in the wake of contemporary developments in market economy, globalized culture, the “mass-medialization” of the world, and the profound technologization of human life. A further contextualization of the hermeneutic proposals in the previous chapter must begin somewhere in the nexus of issues related to the rapidly changing reality. However, it is quite a thing to do justice to those “issues”.

The methodological ambiguity of today’s theoretical considerations on culture, and the enormous amount of new literature in all the fields relevant for a continued discussion of Adorno—critical social theory, cultural theory, hermeneutics, poststructuralism, communication theory, mass-media studies, aesthetics (to mention some)—makes it impossible to find a completely safe, or even satisfactory point of departure for a further discussion. Radical simplifications, limitations, and generalizations are unavoidable. However, one thing is beyond all doubt, a major difference between the critical theory of the forties and the contemporary debate on the cultural situation is that virtually all contemporary perspectives in one way or

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\[117\text{Fortunately, the recent edition of a major reader on the themes of the postmodern debate has made the task of surveying the important aspects of the field easier. Victor E. Taylor & Charles E. Winquist; Postmodernism. Critical Concepts. Vol. I–IV (Routledge: London 1998).}\]
another are related to (dependent on, hostile to, or deeply conscious of) the thought figures provided by the theoretical alternatives, which—to use Daniel Bell’s words—carelessly have been “designated (I cannot say ‘known’) as postmodernism”.[118]

Although “the postmodern” is exceedingly difficult to define—due to the internal differences and the vastness of the available literature—it is easy to see that the consciousness of it (whatever it might be) affects and even determines broad segments of the contemporary debates concerning the status of, for example, philosophy, knowledge, rationality, praxis, politics, science, history, social theory, art, and religion. In this theoretical context, our present cultural situation is often loosely defined as a postmodern “situation”, and our “epoch” is called postmodernity.[119] Furthermore, a whole cluster of theories are developed under the label postmodernism. Not very surprisingly, though, this movement in the recent development of the humanities is closely tied to differing but, nevertheless, determinate understandings of the modern, modernity and modernism. It is of

118 Daniel Bell in a new afterword to his book The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism (HarperCollins: New York [1976] 1996), p. 297 (emphasis in the original). The following example will suffice to visualize the current importance of the phenomenon: “Every social science journal has been deluged with manuscripts about postmodernism for the past few years. If authors aren’t explaining the meaning of postmodernism, they are using the language of postmodernism, and lately, they have also been re-imagining their discipline in a hipper, postmodern style”. Sharon Zukin; “Doing Postmodernism: A Forum”, Theory and Society (21:1992, pp. 463–465), p. 463 (emphasis in the original).

119 Although a bit ambivalent in the judgment, reserved scholars—like Andreas Huyssen—consent to the fact that the postmodern framework must be taken seriously. Andreas Huyssen; “Mapping the Postmodern” (PCC:II, pp. 180-195), p.180. Postmodernism, “What is it? Everyone who has written a book or article on postmodernism begins with an apology for the inability to define the term. This is understandable, for if one could define it, it would not be postmodernism, since it would then have an identifiable referent”. Bell; The Cultural Contradictions, (Afterword:1996) p. 297. On the problems concerning simplified surveys and the need for simplified surveys anyway, see for instance William Grassie; “Postmodernism. What One needs to Know”, Zygon (32:1997, pp. 83–94), pp. 83f.
course the relationality of these concepts that really complicates the picture.120

For quite a long time now, there have been little doubt about the relative adequacy of those indefinite feelings that indicates an upheaval of modern values, the modern society, and modern ways of living and thinking.121 Peter Wagner expresses this in the following way. “No sensitive observer of contemporary reality will deny that there is what some have called a deep-seated ‘crisis of representation’, which reaches far beyond the academic discourses on society into all major social institutions”.122 Yet, one of the main problems is to decide whether or not the changes, or the “crises”, are still comprehensive as modern phenomena or if they, in some ways, are genuinely postmodern. Theoretically, positions like “I am a postmodernist” or “I am a protagonist of modernity” tends to bring many problems to the fore. Even if some of the changes, or the crises, are possible to grasp theoretically—and thus relevant to break down in terms of theological positions—other decisive aspects appear to be very difficult to embrace unequivocally; especially in discourses that both presupposes an objective change of life-condition and simultaneously wants to initiate a change of mind.123

121Cf. Zukin; “Doing Postmodernism”, p. 464. Zukin argues that if empirical research in the social sciences continues to follow relatively traditional methods, the consciousness of the theorists, “those who do theory”, longs for relevance in their works. At least on the theoretical and methodological level, this illuminates a common field, shared by those who searches for a theoretical and methodological identity in social science (among other areas), and those who experiences a crisis in the understanding of how, why (and if) to do theology.
122Wagner; “Liberty and Discipline”, p. 467.
123Cf. Ihab Hassan; *The Postmodern Turn* (Ohio State University Press: Columbus 1987), p. 84f.
To be able to end up with helpful frames for a relevant reading of Adorno’s social philosophical hermeneutics today, it is necessary to connect the interpretation in the former chapter to the current debate via a qualified (and extended) reference to the dimensions of the problem of the modern/postmodern. The main argument for this detour is the important role (relatively speaking) that terms such as postmodernism and postmodernity have in many of the present debates. Today, methodologies prescribing the scope and applicability of “larger theories”, (given the definition in the introduction that means speculative theories, which use broad inclusive categories like, for instance, hermeneutics, structuralism and critical theory), have to relate to the “post-”movements in one way or another. The question is just how to do it. There is literally a jungle of methodological perspectives available and if one adds the problem of the modern/postmodern these methodological perspectives cannot be adequately distinguished from the question of large theories. In fact, the present multiplicity brings the heading of this chapter right into the very methodology of the chapter itself.

I intend to deal with the recent ambiguity in the frame of the modern/postmodern dilemma, which means that basic question is an open one: What is postmodern…? Formally, this question implies a cluster of other fundamental questions: What is modern…? What is the significant relationship between modernity and postmodernity? What is the significant relationship between modernism and postmodernism? What is the significant relationship between modernity and postmodernism? etc., etc.

A comparison between three short quotations, concerning the status of one important theory and/or methodology—namely, poststructuralism—illustrates the “chaotic” situation: “Poststructuralism (…) is really synonymous with postmodernism…” Grassie; “Postmodernism”, p. 86; “Though postmodernism and poststructuralism can not be identified, they clearly reveal many affinities”. Hassan; *The Postmodern Turn*, p. 96n. 20; “I will argue (…) for reading poststructuralist theory (…) apart from any argument of postmodernism”. Craig Calhoun; *Critical Social Theory, Culture, History, and the Challenge of Difference* (Blackwell: Oxford/Cambridge Mass. 1995), p. 99.
One can put every combination of these word-stems and suffixes on the form of similar questions, and behind those questions lies some of the most pressing substantial problems for the discussion of recent philosophical methodology in the cultural, humanistic and theological sciences (at least in the continental tradition\textsuperscript{125}). In the subsequent sections I will not even try to say something explicit about every one of the possible questions (that is, all the formal combinations indicated above), but the consciousness of the possibilities of these questions plays a highly important part in the analysis.

My strategy in the chapter as a whole can be likened to (but not equated with) the strategy expressed by Andreas Huyssen in the essay “Mapping the Postmodern”. Huyssen says, “I will not attempt here to define what postmodernism is. The term ‘postmodernism’ itself should guard us against such an approach as it positions the phenomenon as relational. Modernism as that from which postmodernism is breaking away remains inscribed into the very word with which we describe our distance from modernism, [\textit{sic}] Thus keeping in mind postmodernism’s relational nature, I will simply start from the Selbstverständnis of the postmodern as it has shaped various discourses since the 1960s”.\textsuperscript{126} Even though I think it is impossible to give an account based only on such a Selbstverständnis, I will try to give as relational, open and multidimensional a picture of the philosophical phenomena involved as I find necessary for the further qualifica-

\textsuperscript{125}See the section “Philosophical Traditions” in the Introduction to this study. Unfortunately, there is still a deep-lying difference between the major philosophical traditions. One have been concerned with less formal matters such as existence, understanding, commitment (the continental tradition) and the other with analyses of concepts and formal logical relations (the analytical tradition). The most profound essence of this cleft within philosophy is not easy to grasp. It is obvious, however, that absurdly little effort is made to bridge the gap. The discussion in this chapter concerns the discussion of the continental tradition(s) but its open character is also a serious attempt to invite analytically minded persons to a discussion of the substantial problems that the continental traditions have detected.

\textsuperscript{126}Huyssen; “Mapping the Postmodern”, p. 185.
tion of how to grasp Adorno’s thought in terms of the present intellectual context.\textsuperscript{127}

Post-Modern…

In this section, I will delineate the postmodern and especially postmodern thought, to give a “first impression” of themes that can be said to dominate broad layers of the contemporary debate. In a short “outline-article” called “Themes of Postmodernity” the Danish scholar Steinar Kvale presents some important and broadly accepted aspects of postmodern thinking. I will relate my preliminary delineation to some of Kvale’s themes.

(1) In many postmodern philosophies and interpretation theories there are a clear and outspoken movement away from the belief in one true reality, that is, a turning away from realism. This circumstance has both narrow scientific and broad cultural implications. Scientifically and hermeneutically, for the postmodern mind “[t]here exists no pure, uninterpreted datum; all facts embody theory”.\textsuperscript{128}

\textsuperscript{127}It is well known that postmodernism for many intellectuals are everything but philosophy in the strict sense of the word. Cf. Jacques Derrida; \textit{Writing and Difference} (The University of Chicago Press: Chicago 1978), p. 79. The fact that my discussion below focuses on philosophically relevant issues and leaves out important fields such as pop-culture, post-humanism, post-puritanism etc. can be seen as a crucial weakness. However, even in these fields the ambivalence that will be discussed prevails in almost an identical way as in philosophy. For instance, Huyssen argues that the “‘populist’ trend of 1960s with its celebration of rock’n roll and folk music, of the imagery of everyday life and of the multiple forms of popular literature gained much of its energy in the context of the counter-culture and by next to a total abandonment of an earlier American critique of modern mass culture. (– – –) There is a curious contradiction in all this. (...) [P]opulism reiterates precisely that adversarial relationship between high art and mass culture which, in the accounts of Clemens Greenberg and Theodor W Adorno, was one of the pillars of the modernist dogma” which it “had set out to undermine”. Huyssen; “Mapping the Postmodern”, p. 195.

Various versions of the subjectivist copy theory (that is, theories saying that the world with some amount of adequacy presents itself as it is in and through plain perception) are critically transformed into pragmatic and rhetoric theories of knowledge, in which knowledge is transformed from simple correspondence to an objective reality into coherence, function, efficiency, and persuasiveness. Therefore, in postmodern thought, truth and knowledge takes on a very different relationship than they have in traditional epistemology. Consequently, according to Kvale, the status of knowledge is obscured. “There exists no standard method for measuring and comparing knowledge within different (...) paradigms; they are incommensurable”. For the postmodern thinker, scientific “projects” are not related to a single cumulative process. Knowledge cannot be approached through epistemological criteria, but the scientist is obliged to use a cluster of different interpretative strategies.

Culturally, the belief in an immediate access to objective values and preferences for action through the shape of a certain way of living (for example the Western way of living) is undermined. The enlarged technical possibilities that reason have brought forth challenges the stability that raised those possibilities in the first place. This cultural insight results in a global ambiguity. The concept of modern technology still refers to stability, efficiency and ruthlessness, but the technological development constantly undermines stability. Even if it is an ambivalent insight, technological possibilities (and the cultural manifoldness which technology successively has revealed) can be interpreted as pivotal for the postmodern insight in the inadequacy of all “imperialistic” strategies intended to secure the absolute adequacy of a certain view of, and attitude to reality.

(2) A second characteristic, which is closely connected to the previous, is the postmodern turn towards a broad use of linguistic models for the reflection on scientific explanation and hermeneutical understanding. The postmodern awareness of cultural relativity is connected to an awareness of the linguistic character all of social and cultural

\footnote{Kvale; “Themes of Postmodernity”, p. 21.}
For many theorists it seems that the discovery of the multiplicity of reality on one level also reveals a fundamental textual and linguistic character of reality that “explains” its ambiguity. Kvale formulates this opinion in a characteristic way that relates to the technologization of reality. “In a world of media, the contrast between reality and fantasy breaks down and is replaced by a hyperreality, a world of self-referential signs. What remains are signs referring to other signs, texts referring to other texts”\(^{(131)}\). One could describe this linguistic aspect of postmodern thought as closely related to the suspicion of realism by saying that it undermines all simplified and generalized considerations concerning universal legitimacy: if there is no way to determine the truth about reality, then, in practice, there is no independent reality to which the signs could refer. The reference is to the reality of other signs; the signs and the contexts of the signs—the texts—are the flux of (hyper)reality in itself.\(^{(132)}\) In postmodern thought, it is usual to express this by saying that language shapes and produces reality.\(^{(133)}\)

\(^{130}\)Of course, one has to admit that the linguistic modeling of thought cannot be limited as characteristic only of outspokenly postmodern theories. On the contrary, it is typical of twentieth century philosophy as a whole. However, it becomes an especially important feature for postmodern interpretation because reality is constructed in analogy with signs.

\(^{131}\)Kvale; “Themes of Postmodernity”, p. 19 (emphasis added).

\(^{132}\)The notions ‘hyperreality’ and ‘hyperreal’ were coined by Guy Debord (a close associate to Jean Baudrillard) in 1967, and Baudrillard have made the term known for the broader public. “[T]he hyperreal is the ‘that which is always already reproduced’, that which perfectly instantiates its model (…). In a hyperreal world, ‘the model comes first’, and its constitutive role is invisible, because all one sees are instantiations of models”. Douglas Kellner; Jean Baudrillard. From Marxism to Postmodernism and Beyond (Stanford University Press: Stanford 1989), pp. 82–83 (Kellner’s emphasis).

\(^{133}\)“The problem of reference, dealt with here, must not be confused with an opportunist rejection of reference. The French philosopher Jacques Derrida once defended his “postmodern” approach of “deconstruction” from such simplification. “It is totally false to suggest deconstruction is a suspension of reference. Deconstruction is always deeply concerned with the ‘other’ of language. I never cease to be surprised by critics who see my work as a declaration that there is nothing beyond language, that we are imprisoned in language; it is, in fact, saying the opposite. The critique of logocentrism is above all else the search for the ‘other’ and the
philosophy, the strong emphasis on language has lead to a new set of questions; philosophy has undergone a linguistic turn.134

(3) This leads to a third, more strictly philosophical, characteristic of postmodern thought, which Kvale relates to the problem of the universal and the particular. According to the postmodern mind, claims to universality derive from the modern way of thinking. “In modernity the person is an object for a universal will, or for general laws of history and nature. Or the person is overburdened; man has become the center of the world, the individual self-feeling being the cornerstone of modern thought, a self stretched out what it is and what it ought to be”.135 The presumptive postmodern overturn of this aspect of modernity is thus a longing for the particular, the local, the internal as the opposite of the intellectual conquest through abstraction inherent in universalizing thought. “The particular” should not to be


134See Kvale; “Themes of Postmodernity”, p. 22; For a typical analysis of the interior, structural linguistic character of the “world of total meaning” see Roland Barthes; “Rhetoric of the Image”, (PCC:1, pp. 28–40). Jacques Derrida’s Of Grammatology opens with the following statement: “However the topic is considered, the problem of language has never been simply one question among others. But never as much as present has it invaded, as such, the global horizon of the most diverse researches and the most heterogeneous discourses, diverse and heterogeneous in their intention, method, and ideology”. Jacques Derrida; Of Grammatology (John Hopkins University Press: Baltimore/London [1974] 1998), p. 6.

135Kvale; “Themes of Postmodernity”, p. 20.
understood as a new terminology for the completely sustained, meaningful and self-sufficient, but it refers to something, whose identity is radically dependent upon its local context. This means that the identity of something particular is impossible to delineate in terms of well-defined wholes; the notion of conceptual identity is undermined. Especially important in the broad debate is the so-called collapse of “meta-narratives”, that is the collapse of the absolute implications of broad horizons of ultimate, universal meaning (e.g., the Christian salvation history). A postmodern denunciation of such universals should be accomplished both on the basis of an understanding of knowledge, and on the basis of an understanding of the postmodern cultural condition. According to Kvale, “[t]he particular, heterogeneous and changing language games replaces the global horizons of meaning. With a pervasive decentralization, communal interaction and local knowledge become important in their own right”.

The postmodern mentality opts for a decentralized (decentralization), or deconstruction of basic philosophical principles, concepts and entities, such as the subject (the Cartesian cogito) the literary text, the author, the artist, the social whole, etc. The “substance” of rationality, earlier searched for in transcendental or other logical delineations of the limits of rational discourse should now be searched for in the context of immanent mechanisms, such as communicative action—that is, in linguistic activity—in which it gains a wholly new form (although it is difficult to say whether or not the content or substance of rationality becomes “wholly” new).

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136“The postmodern ethos resists unified, all-encompassing, and universally valid explanations. It replaces these with a respect for difference and a celebration of the local and particular at the expense of the universal”. Stanley J Grenz; A Primer on Postmodernism (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids/Cambridge 1996), p. 12.
137Kvale; “Themes of Postmodernity”, p. 20.
139Kvale; “Themes of Postmodernity”, p. 21. The uncertainty that the postmodern mode of thought puts forward instead of the certainty that postmodernists attribute to modern thought has its roots in classic philosophy. In his establishment of the thinking subject as the foundation and guarantee for truth René Descartes put forward “clearness” and “distinctness” as practical criteria of truth. He saw clearly
(4) When the broad horizons of metaphysical meaning is done away with—in the form of cultural or historical meta-narratives—a fourth, constructive characteristic of the postmodern comes to the fore. Kvale relates the postmodern task to re-narrativization, that is, to tell stories. Local narratives function as the motor of an expansion of a flexible rationality, suitable for the experience of fundamental multiplicity. This expansion should be seen in contrast to the expansion gained by the means-end-rationality, which many postmodern theorists holds as the trademark of modern subjectivist and scientist thought.\textsuperscript{140} If modern rationality is scientific, and as such instrumental and dualistic, then postmodern rationality is a social rationality based on communication and narrativity. According to Kvale, “[t]he narratives of a community contribute to uphold the values and the social order of that community”.\textsuperscript{141} The idealism and rationalism inherent in many versions of modern thought is dismissed in favor and distinctly that the subject necessarily existed. In his second meditation on first philosophy he concluded: “I am, I exist, is necessarily true each time that I pronounce it, or that I mentally conceive it”. René Descartes; \textit{Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy} (Yale University Press; New Haven/London 1996), p. 64. However, Descartes existing I (the I saying \textit{cogito ergo sum}) does not exist in a vacuum. In a later meditation he proves God’s existence as supreme being through the stability of the cogito and manages thereby establish an even firmer ground for the abstract cogito. “I recognise that it is not possible that my nature should be what it is (…) if God did not veritably exist…”. It is in direct contrast to Descartes archetypically modern way of founding everything on a first principle that the Madman’s words in Friedrich Nietzsche’s famous aphorism becomes so shocking “‘Whither is God’ he cried. ‘I shall tell you. We have killed him—You and I’”. Friedrich Nietzsche; \textit{The Portable Nietzsche} (Penguin Books: New York [1954] 1982), p. 95. The Madman completely reverses and decomposes Descartes stability, first he declares the death of God, and then he accuses himself and us for that crime with the consequence that “I”, the killer is in a state of flux. “Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there any up or down left? Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing?” pp. 95. This negative correspondence between Nietzsche’s disintegration and Descartes rationality is paradigmatic for broad layers in the postmodern philosophical consciousness.

\textsuperscript{140}Kvale; “Themes of Postmodernity”, p. 22. Cf. the discussion of reason, unreason, rationality and instrumental rationality in the previous chapter.

\textsuperscript{141}Kvale; “Themes of Postmodernity”, p. 21.
of a pragmatic and non-idealistic rationality that is produced by new local *stories*. The constructive postmodern task, often (but not always) described as the realization of a communicative and narrative rationality, is viewed as qualitatively different from universal and unifying systems of explanation that underlies “modern” thought.  

(5) If I am allowed to simplify the matter for a moment, I can assert that postmodern thought chiefly strives to do away with the modern rationalist and empiricist notion of meaning as a product of unifying and systematizing reason. Given this assertion, it becomes quite understandable that a lot of postmodern thinkers also are suspicious toward *critique* as the attempt to find *deeper layers* of meaning in behind appearance. Kvale argues that the postmodern pathos to a certain extent is “uncritical” because it rejects the critical potential of human reason. Postmodern “interest in *surface*, in what manifestly appears” stands “in contrast to a debunking attitude where nothing is what it seems to be”. He continues by arguing that “hermeneutics of suspicion, inherent in much modern thought, was carried into its extremes in some versions of psychoanalytic and Marxist thought”. In the critical context, an action is never what it looks like, “rather it is an expression of some deeper, more “real” reality, a symptom of more basic sexual or economic forces”.  

143 Like many postmodern thinkers, Kvale argues that the modern attitude of critique can be likened with paranoia. In contrast to this paranoia, a postmodern sentiment “involves a suspicion of suspicion, and a refined sensibility to the surface, an openness to the differences and nuances of what appears”.  

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143 Kvale, “Themes of Postmodernity”, p. 24. This can also be characterized as a move “from an objectivist to a constructivist outlook”. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernity*, p. 40.

Even though this call for superficiality and surface is far from the only postmodern attitude to critique, it is important for the one who wants to understand the postmodern phenomena. On various occasions, the French thinker Jean Baudrillard has expressed the cultural background the problem of critique problem critique. In a passage on the fundamental superficiality of postmodern TV-life (technology life, mass-media life) and the new type of TV-shows called “reality shows” or “real world” he reveals the inherent rationalism and traditionalism in ordinary critical mode of thought.

We don’t need digital gloves or a digital suit. As we are, we are moving around in the world as in a synthesized image. We have swallowed our microphones and headsets, producing intense interference effects, due to the short-circuiting of life and its technical diffusion. We have interiorized our own prosthetic image and become the professional showmen of our own lives. Compared with this, the reality shows are only side effects and, moreover, mystifying, because in indicting them as manipulation, the critics assume that there is somewhere an original form of life, and reality shows would be only the parody and the simulation of it (Disneyland). This criticism is over, as is over every art of situationistic criticism of the “spectacle”, as also in substance all criticism of “alienation”.145

The five points discussed, could easily have been extended to ten or twenty, or reduced to three or even one. However, to give a manageable but open picture of what the general postmodern philosopheme deals with I think these points will suffice. Still, though, another eva-

145 Jean Baudrillard; “The Virtual Illusion: Or the Automatic Writing of the World”, Theory, Culture & Society (12:1995, pp. 97–107), pp. 97–98. For Baudrillard Disneyland stands for the hyperreal, the more than real America. “It is meant to be an infantile world, in order to make us believe that the adults are elsewhere, in the ‘real’ world and to conceal the fact that the real childishness is everywhere, particularly amongst those adults who go there to act the child in order to foster illusions as to their real childishness”, Baudrillard quoted in Kellner; Jean Baudrillard, p. 82.
sive motif can be said to underlie many of the other. Although Kvale
does not consider it explicitly, the general literature on postmodern
thought often actualizes the motif of “the end of history”. Philosophizing
on the theme of “the end of history” is pivotal for radical thought
because it becomes the paradigm for several other “end of…”- theories
that is crucial for the postmodern consciousness (the
end of art, the end of modernity, the end of philosophy, the end
of the book etc.). Kvale himself clearly draws on this motif when he
turns to the ethical dimension of postmodern life. “With the death
of the Utopias, the local and personal responsibility for actions here
and now becomes crucial”.

However, “the end of history” cannot be treated as a univocally
postmodern motif. One of the central missions of, for example,
Claude Lévi-Strauss’ modernist and structuralist project was to give
a synchronous view of history and culture. In philosophical terms, one
can say that Lévi-Strauss wanted to defy Jean-Paul Sartre’s historicist
dialectics in terms of a nature-system, and Sartre’s humanism in
terms of a liquidation of the concept of human as an ultimately
meaningful entity in nature-history. Yet, both the great historicists
(such as Hegel, Marx and Sartre) and Lévi-Strauss contributed to the
postmodern development.

However, it is probably right to say that most modern views of
history draws on historicist attempts to problematize history and
construct models of history with reference to a concept of the essence
of history. The nature and the overall construal of this “essence” vary
strongly. In the scientific context the essence have been reduced to
and leveled with the possibility of establishing “valid” historical facts,
and in the philosophical context it has been interpreted within

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146 See, e.g., Anthony Giddens; The Consequences of Modernity (Polity Press: Cambridge
147 Kvale; “Themes of Postmodernity”, p. 25.
148 Historicism is a view that reduces explanation of culture to historical processes,
however the term has been used to denote both historical metaphysics, or aprioric
views of history and a kind of scientistic reduction of history to strictly historical-
critical explanations on the basis of empirical sources.
frames of aprioric or dialectical constructions. Of course, on the primary level, the two modern approaches to history is diametrically opposed to each other (one cannot but remind the reader of Karl Popper’s critique of Hegel and Marx in *The Open Society and its Enemies*). But, there is also a common concern, namely, to give history a well-defined meaning for the present in terms of the present.

For Hegel and Marx, the history as a whole had a *telos*, rendering it a potential meaning in and for the present. Hegel saw history as a matter of self-revelation of the world spirit and Marx saw it as a consequence of revolutionary activity based on and produced by an historical analysis of the present condition. Yet, even for Karl Popper, who only could opt for a strict historiographic analysis of the past, the fundamental potentiality (N.B. not actuality) of historical progression into something better was nonetheless never questioned. In the last instance, Popper’s social-political notion of “piecemeal engineering” (which must be interpreted as the opposite to “social engineering” based on dubious historical and social laws or utopian visions) must be viewed in the context of a rationalist reliance upon a basically positive notion of reason. The Popperian “piecemeal optimism” can be said to disclose an essentialist tendency. After his refutation of metaphysical historicism, Popper concludes that history has no meaning. However, as a modern minded thinker, Popper—like Descartes—cannot exclude meaning as such. “Although history has no ends, we can impose these ends of ours upon it; and *although history has no meaning, we can give it a meaning*.” In difference from Descartes, history is viewed as a radically contingent process, but in

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149 I am aware of the problems of interpretation of Marx, but I cannot enter the discussion of how the revolution should be construed in terms of the historical process. See further, Lars Andersson; *Alienation. En genomgängande linje i Karl Marx’ tankande/Alienation. A Pervading Theme in the Thought of Karl Marx* (Nya Doxa: Nora 1997), pp. 123-179.


152 Popper; *The Open Society*, p. 265 (Popper’s emphasis).
likeness with Descartes, reason as a pervasive constructive force becomes the ultimate guarantee for a coherent historical development.

Thus, the historical problem cuts through both modern and postmodern thinking. For the postmodern mind, and its basically unessential view of historical knowledge, the collapse of the stable scientific frames for historical analysis (which certainly also is a modern problem) underlines and substantiates the consciousness that there is a crisis in all notions of the general and the universal. The different deaths—the death of utopias, the death of artworks as meaningful entities, the death of philosophy as a bringer of universal truth—seem for many postmodern thinkers to imply that a post-modern situation is a situation beyond, or “at the end of history”. Peter Wagner, for example, delineates the situation as a situation of crises, and “analyses of the crises have been cast in terms of stories claiming that the end of something has occurred and that we therefore live in a post-something era”.\footnote{Wagner; “Liberty and Discipline”, p. 467.} The utopias of the modern (no matter if they are Marxist or Popperian) tend to invalidate themselves in the postmodern condition. All notions implying determinate historical movement, no matter whether it is based on absolute spirit or subjectivist rationalism, risks unintelligibility.

Together with the suspicion of suspicion, the postmodern, decen-tred, and now also “post-historical”, subject fails to achieve distance from its surrounding context; its borders are fading away and it dissolves. It collapses as an ordered historical entity and even its own historicity collapses because historicity in itself is exposed as being dependent upon precisely the illegitimate notion of subjectivity that undermines the all stable comprehension. Both Popper’s and Hegel’s otherwise very different approaches to history and historicity depended in the last instance upon a relatively stable view rationality, which, in its turn, was dependent upon a notion of a transparent rational subjectivity. The postmodern consciousness cannot sustain this stability, with the consequence that the rational direction given by the discrimination between the past, the present and the future cannot be held on to.
In consonance with this, David Ashley argues that postmodern thought proposes a “form of hyperreflexivity that is self-absorbed but not critically self-reflexive”. In the postmodern condition, subjectivity is altogether twisted and disabled for the assignment of the discrimination between the objective historical condition and the subjective meaning that Popper needs for his projection of meaning onto history. According to Ashley, this also says something about the postmodern as a necessary life-condition, “neither intelligence nor perspicacity” grant any possibilities “to resist postmodernism”. Postmodern thought is the necessary philosophical turn from an inquiry of reality to an inquiry of hyperreality in which time, as it were, stands still.

However, there is also another complex connection between modern theories and the postmodern sentiment. One can say that, for example, Marx, in dealing with the situation as an economic totality, relied on the modern consciousness of history, which held the possibility of qualitative historical change as fundamental. However, the specific Marxist perspective (in contrast to Hegel’s absolutist) was a particularist perspective. It was contextual in the historiographic sense, but it used this particularity to extrapolate a universal strategy through historical progression. A postmodern theorist could very well agree with Marx on the historical, economic and sociological descriptions of the mechanisms of the social reality, but as a theorist at the “end” of history—or in the circularity of the present (to allude to Nietzsche’s important notion of “the eternal return”)—the postmodern thinker cannot but universalize the initial a-historical perspective concerning the mode of the postmodern condition, and from that mode draw certain particularist conclusions. The paradigm of the hyperreal or the post-historical becomes the only clue for an interpretation of the world, but the concrete multiplicity and chaos

155 Ashley, *History without a Subject*, p. 4.
implied by this mode of understanding rules out all hope for any universalization and historization of political strategies.\textsuperscript{156}

This last conclusion shows that the usual interpretation of the modern thinkers as a hard headed universalist and the postmodern as a humane particularist is more problematic than is often admitted. By saying this, however, I do not say that postmodern thought is flawed (nor do I intend to say anything definite regarding modern thought).\textsuperscript{157} The only thing that is wholly certain is that the different aspects touched upon above raises a set of questions about historiographic, ontologic, and epistemologic relationships between the modern and the postmodern, towards which I now will turn.

\section*{Modernity and Postmodernity in Space and Time}

My hope is that the previous section was “sufficiently insufficient” to necessitate a twist of strategy at this moment of the account. The double-barreled and open language (modern… and postmodern…) makes room for some further questions regarding the temporal (that is, historically, diachronically relational) and modal (that is, internally, synchronically relational) implications of the concepts in the debate on the postmodern.\textsuperscript{158}

\textsuperscript{156}In the radical literature, this motif is developed in many contexts. Cf. Baudrillard who takes up a motif concerning the consequences of universalization that was apparent already in Horkheimer’s article “The End of Reason” from 1940. “In the concentration camps, even more than life, it was death that was exterminated. The prisoners were dispossessed of their deaths—deader that dead, disappeared.” Baudrillard; \textit{The Illusion if The End}, p. 98.

\textsuperscript{157}The great variation between different postmodern (and different modern) thinkers permits me from such judgement.

\textsuperscript{158}Regarding “relational”, see the quotation from Huyssen, p. 44, this chapter. The notion of modality is here to be understood as containing the aspects of “change in perspective”, “change of shape”, “reconfiguration”. From this follows that when a shift is modal it is a contextually immanent shift if the context is viewed as the spatial realm, it is a qualitative shift but it is possible to reduce successfully the causes to the spatial realm and, thus, it is not an shift dependent on historical time. As such, it is reversible. Temporal shift, on the contrary, should be understood as dependent upon the aspect of historical time. If a shift is temporal then it is ille-
The question What is postmodern? seems initially to be conditioned by the question What is postmodernity? Still, that conclusion is not necessarily right if the postmodern, post-historical perspective is taken into consideration. Indeed, in terms of an ordinary perspective, the question What is modern? depends on the answer of the question What is historical modernity? But, is not that the case only because modernity already from the beginning was distinguished as an epoch that constitutes a certain rationality? From the postmodern, post-historical point of view, one could ask if it is justified even to attempt to define epochs whose episteme is overtly non-historical.159

In recent, self-consciously postmodernist literature on the postmodern condition, “postmodernity” is not generally held to be an autonomous epoch like modernity, while, in the modern literature on postmodernity, its is very often insinuated that postmodernity must be seen as an epoch to be understandable as terminologically meaningful. There is thus an initial asymmetry between the notions of modernity and postmodernity caused by an initial asymmetry between modern and postmodern styles of reflection. Among other things, this asymmetry is occasioned by the historical question. One is tempted to ask: Is the question of epochs important at all? Is it necessary to answer the question about when the postmodern shift did occur to be able to talk about postmodernity? Kvale’s notion of

159Cf. also the following quotation regarding the relationship between modern and postmodern art: “a close examination reveals that the modern cannot be discriminated from the postmodern by simple chronology. (…) [T]he two styles are better understood as recent manifestations of two persistent parallel traditions”. William V Dunning; The Roots of Postmodernism (Prentice-Hall: Engelwood Cliffs, New Jersey 1995), p. xi.
postmodern thought clearly appears to rely on a “shift” but is the historical notion of shift an adequate way of approaching postmodern thought?\footnote{If one wants to relate to Lyotard, for instance, these questions cannot be dealt with in any simplified, straightforward historical way, because “the idea of a linear chronology is itself perfectly modern”. Jean-François Lyotard; “Note on the Meaning of ‘Post-’”, pp. 47–50 in Thomas Dockerty (ed.); \textit{Postmodernism. A Reader} (Simon and Schuster: Hertfordshire 1993), p. 48. However, viewed in the context of the origin of the term ‘post-modern’, e.g. in Toynbee’s studies of history (the term appears in 1939), postmodernism has a clear diachronic connotations, see further Thomas Dockerty’s introduction to \textit{Postmodernism. A Reader}, p. 1–2.}

Convinced of the partial inadequacy the notion of a historical shift, some scholars relates postmodernity to modernity through softer models. It can be done by listing cultural modes or styles that have vanished from the modern agenda. Such changes are held to indicate a shift dependent on social factors but not primarily understood as an epochal shift. The question of the postmodern thus transfigures into a question concerning a postmodern “strain” within different spheres of culture.\footnote{Robert C Neville’s is an example of this kind of think. See further the last section of this chapter.}

For the modern mind, the softer interpretation could be a possible way to rescue the ambiguous notion of a post-historical postmodernity within modernity by interpreting it as a notion of cultural development or trend within the frames of the modern episteme and the modern epoch. However, the question is more problematic than this line of thought seems to admit. In the last instance, modern typologizations of cultural postmodernity are deeply bound to the historical focus of the modern epoch, and the consciousness of a certain self-evident meaningfulness of modernity. From the modern point of view, the argument concerning a postmodern strain in the midst of the modern epoch would imply that within modernity there has to be a culturally evident withdrawal from cultural modernity that can be conceptualized in terms of modernism and postmodernism but still definable as modern in the temporal and historical sense. As
we shall see, this is a problematic way of handling the question of the postmodern.

The American sociologist and critical theorist Craig Calhoun argues that it is difficult to make credible the required symmetry between modernity/postmodernity and modernism/postmodernism on the basis of an epochal shift. Calhoun argues that “[t]he period from the early 1890s to the 1920s must be reckoned the glory days of high modernism”. Yet, even in the works from this period there are traits “that seem very close to the so-called postmodern”.162 Hence, from a specific point of view some significant aspects of the modern appear to be postmodern. “The themes of fragmentation of consciousness, the distance between the intentions and ends of action, the severing of symbol from referent are all felt in the art and social thought of high modernist era”.163

Even if it is not wholly obvious, this—at least—indicates possibility for a modal understanding of the notion of qualitative shift. The modal shift can be seen as a simultaneous shift, a reconfiguration of content occasioned by fundamental tensions in the cultural condition. Such tensions in the cultural condition acquires intellectual form and shape different clusters of opinions, tastes and theoretical standpoints. A cultural condition is a multiplicity with a unified shape, that is, it has a certain shape but is not univocal. Within the frames of multiplicity, the cultural condition opens for many different formations of the cultural consciousness. Thus, even though some formations is more likely to appear, one must not be astonished by the fact that virtually opposite characterizations of the culture appears. On the intellectual—theoretical and artistic—level, one can say that the cultural consciousness develops and changes through modal restructuring (Gestalt shifts). Tentatively, thus, one can conclude that the modernist consciousness and the postmodernist consciousness, very well could have been present in the late nineteenths century culture. In terms of modal restructuring, thus, it is

163Calhoun; Critical Social Theory, p. 101.
possible to keep modernity and postmodernity apart as qualitatively different cultural situations without imposing a temporal-historical distinction between them. The historical “meaning”, the undercurrent of progression, imposed through arguments that presupposes historical shifts is therefore not necessary to understand postmodernism as a significant and preferable way of approaching a culture, which, thus, in its turn, can be called postmodernity.

However, Calhoun has not discovered this modality in the concept of culture. Instead, he argues that if the ambiguous themes (that is, the postmodern moments he referred to) in modern art “are all to be embraced as part of the postmodern, then (1) the postmodern must be understood as part and parcel of the modern, and (2) the label must be seen as essentially misleading…” Seen from the historical-temporal perspective, this means that the continuity between, on the one hand, the postmodern as “postmodernism” and, on the other hand, postmodern as “postmodernity” is unclear because the postmodern already appear in historical modernity. If it is not understood as dependent upon historical progression, the notion of postmodernism is thus “essentially misleading”. Calhoun seems to mean that if the height of modernism also includes the essence of postmodernism then the notions ‘modernism’ and ‘postmodernism’ as well as ‘modernity’ and ‘postmodernity’ becomes useless for distinguishing a qualitative change in the historical condition. In the last instance, postmodernists are unable to show postmodernism’s excellence and superiority over modernism in terms of a historical shift, and thus, for the modern historicist, it becomes an unnecessary and confusing category.

However, by being ensnared in the temporal-historical issues Calhoun does not notice that the very acknowledgment of the “mislead-

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164 Historical conditions are of course always significant for the characterization of a condition. The point here is not to leave the perspective of history, only to show that the postmodern post-historical consciousness can be construed as an important moment in our own cultural consciousness, that it is not a illegitimate construction.

165 Calhoun; Critical Social Theory, p. 101.
ing” nature of the concepts under consideration also can be said to extinguish the possibilities to give an adequate account of the obvious duality of the high modernist culture. On an unconscious level, Calhoun’s univocal, “modern” approach still harbors the experiential core of the problem of the actual difference between the modern and the postmodern. This duality can be interpreted (1) as enclosed by the modern way of thinking the distinction between the modern and the postmodern in the model of historical progression and as (2) disclosed by a different, post-historical, perspective.

Given this critical interpretation of Calhoun, his own critique of the postmodern typology leads to an aporia. Calhoun’s liquidation of non-historical distinctions between modernism and postmodernism implies: (a) from the modern point of view, that if one wants to take postmodern thought seriously it is more or less impossible to avoid the problem of a historical shift but, (b) from the postmodern point of view, this means that that the very rejection is meaningless and unintelligible because it avoids the core of the postmodern argument concerning the post-historical.

Traces of the problems, here outlined with reference to Calhoun, reappears in other advocates of renewed but nevertheless modern thought, such as Anthony Giddens. “[I]f Nietzsche was the principal author disconnecting modernity and postmodernity, that is happening today, how is it possible that he saw all this almost a century ago? Why was Nietzsche able to make such a breakthrough without, as he freely said, doing anything more than uncovering the hidden presuppositions of enlightenment itself?”

Moreover, Giddens adds an additional line of thought also dependent on the historical perspective (this line of thought is a variation on a critique of postmodern thought that already has become classic). “To speak of post-modernity as superseding modernity appears to invoke that very thing which is declared (now) to be impossible: giving some

166 I tend to think that Calhoun’s concept of meaning and meaningfulness in fact presupposes historical progression.
167 Giddens; *The Consequences of Modernity*, p. 47.
coherence to history”, that is, to reconstruct a meta-narrative of the present, “and pinpointing our place in it”.

In the context of this discussion of the hidden problems in temporal or historical dimension of the issue, Giddens’s argument depicts the concrete content of the aporia, which can be interpreted as follows: the defender of the modern cannot appreciate the postmodern motifs without entering the sphere of postmodern critique of the modern and, consequently, the postmodern cannot appreciate the modern attempt to understand the postmodern without betraying its own experiential basis. Thus, my corollary in face of the modern approach to the postmodern turns out to be an embarrassingly simple question: Are there other, more sensitive ways of dealing with the postmodern?

Verwindung of the Modern
From Calhoun’s modern point of view one can carry the issue to its extremes—postmodernism is totalizing and bad, because an understanding of it implies being a postmodernist, which means that modern people are a priori excluded from the circle of the postmodern. Throwing pies would perhaps be a more fruitful activity than to renew a discussion on these premises.

Yet, I strongly believe there are other, more constructive ways of grasping the tensions involved (like the tension between the historical-temporal and the simultaneous-modal construal of the “shift”). Still, though, in face of the aporia, one can draw the conclusion that a formally exhaustive solution cannot be found. Therefore, the most efficient strategy is probably to choose a certain perspective and try to delineate some of the sprawling consequences as far as possible. In this and the following sections, I will investigate the consequences of such a perspective.

169 Cf. Neville; The Highroad around Modernism, especially the “Introduction”.
Recent Methodological Ambiguity

In his book *The End of Modernity*, the Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo has explored an elusive motif in the postmodernist debate, which nevertheless is fundamental. His account is deeply influenced by Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger, whose groundbreaking philosophies generally have become fundamental for intellectual movement of postmodernism. This fact makes his argument particularly relevant in this context.

As an expert on Heidegger, Vattimo is able to tie many of the problems touched upon above to Heidegger’s distinction between the German terms *Überwindung* and *Verwindung*. Whereas Heidegger’s use of *Überwindung* can be translated successfully by terms such as ‘overcoming’ and ‘conquest’ (with clear spatial and temporal connotations), his use of *Verwindung* (which in ordinary German also contains aspects of overcoming) withdraws from direct translation. In Heidegger, whose ontological project can be said to culminate in a particular overcoming of metaphysics, “the term *Verwindung* indicates a sort of improper *Überwindung*, an overcoming which is an overcoming neither in the usual sense nor in the sense of a dialectical *Aufhebung*.”

The verb *verwinden* includes several nuances: to heal or to be cured of an illness, that is, to overcome the illness; to interlace or entwine; to be resigned. Heidegger’s use of *Verwindung* as an overcoming of metaphysics is thus not a treatment of metaphysics as “something that can ‘be put aside like an opinion. Nor can it be left behind us like a doctrine in which we no longer believe’; rather, it is something which stays in us as do the traces of an illness or a kind of pain to which we are resigned”. For Heidegger, who established critical

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170 I am here primarily thinking of the European, especially the French, tradition including genealogy, deconstruction, poststructuralism etc. and the American reception of this traditions. Some of the most important thinkers are Lyotard, Derrida, Baudrillard, Deleuze, Barthes, Foucault, Kristeva, Butler, White. See also note 17 in this chapter.

171 See, e.g., Martin Heidegger; *Identität und Differenz* (Pfullingen 1957).

172 Vattimo; *The End of Modernity*, p. 171.

173 Vattimo; *The End of Modernity*, p. 172.

connections between traditional metaphysics and the world of modern technology, “metaphysics can never be simply accepted, any more than the Ge-Stell [that is, Heidegger’s notion of the modern technological world, the German Gestell means ‘scaffold’, ‘chassi’, ‘frame’] can be accepted without reservation, since it is the system of technological domination. Metaphysics and Ge-Stell may be lived as an opportunity or as the possibility of a change by virtue of which both metaphysics and the Ge-Stell are twisted in a direction which is not foreseen by their own essence, and yet is connected to it”.175

According to Vattimo, this use of Verwindung defines Heidegger’s philosophical position. It can be seen as an attempt to grasp both the task and the condition that faces humanity “at the end of philosophy in the form of metaphysics”.176 This means, furthermore, that to be at the end of modernity is not primarily to be present in a specific temporal-historical situation but rather to be determined by a specific self-understanding of thought, namely thought as a constant redefinition of thought. In the context of Verwindung of metaphysics, the meaning of the concept ‘post-metaphysical philosophy’ is exhausted by its determination as the activity that restlessly deals with defectiveness of metaphysics by recollecting metaphysics.177

These somewhat complicated ideas can be related to the discussion about the status of the postmodern initiated in the previous section. Vattimo declares that the mode of thought represented by Heidegger’s post-metaphysical ontology provides us with a broader frame for interpretation than the narrow historicist (historisch) and the

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175Vattimo; The End of Modernity, p. 173 (emphasis added).
176Vattimo; The End of Modernity, p. 173.
177In his critique of Levinas’s critique of Heidegger’s ontology as oppressive and ignorant of ‘the other’, Jacques Derrida argues for the same kind of recollection by referring to Heidegger’s Sein (Being) as foreign but not completely opposed to the metaphysics of prima philosophia. “The notion of totality is always related to the existent. It is always a ‘metaphysical’ or ‘theological’ notion, and the notions of finite and infinite take on meaning in relation to it. Foreign to the finite totality, or to the infinity of existents (…) foreign without being another existent or another totality of existents, Being could not oppress or enclose the existent and its differences”. Derrida; Writing and Difference, p. 141, see also p. 137.
simple conquering (Überwindung) modes of thought. “[I]n any consideration of modernity” the logic of Verwindung of metaphysics “holds good not only for what we today call ‘post-modern’ (…), but also for the dissolutive tendencies already apparent in the great early twentieth-century avant-garde movements, such as, for instance, Joyce’s transition from *Ulysses* to *Finnegan’s Wake*”, which scholars correctly have seen “as the key event for the definition of the post-modern”.\(^\text{178}\)

According to this quotation, postmodernism can be understood in a wider sense, as a Verwindung of modernism and, analogously, the establishment of a notion of postmodernity can be seen as a Verwindung of the limitations involved in the notion of modernity. Treated within Vattimo’s frames, the asymmetry in the former section no longer poses any problem. However, another problem comes to the fore, which can be depicted by the following questions. Is it possible to make a plausible distinction between, on the one hand, the modern/postmodern *condition* (that is, modernity/postmodernity) and, on the other hand, modern/postmodern *thought* (modernism/postmodernism) in the context of this post-metaphysical line of thought? Compared to the question I asked Calhoun, I will now ask the post-metaphysical Vattimo the opposite question: does not the relative plausibility and significance of historical changes as qualitative progression on several levels mean anything for a post-metaphysical protagonist of postmodern thought?

These questions force us into the real multi-dimensionality of the apparent methodological ambiguity in the debate over the postmodern. On the one hand, post-historical postmodern thought appears to be a *liquidation* of the subjectivity which is the prerequisite for knowledge, at least if knowledge is understood as involving critique. From this follows nothing less than a pure liquidation of thought as critical-intentional thought. On the other hand, the constant growth of literature on the postmodern condition of the social reality indicates that the situation still might be discussed successfully both within modern and postmodern frameworks; a fact that also underlines (a) that a flourishing postmodern thought really exists and that

\(^{178}\) Vattimo; *The End of Modernity*, p. 106 (emphasis added).
(b) the postmodern liquidation of subjectivity *de facto* has been unsuccessful.

If one chooses a postmodern framework (for example, defined in consonance my delineation of Kvale’s motifs) for a discussion of the present social situation then this endeavor must be named “postmodern thought”. The trivial but striking unsuccessfulness, and impossibility of any strict liquidation of thought makes one tempted to draw the conclusion that methodological ambiguity does not depend on problematic notion of a crisis of thought or culture, or on philosophy as such, but on the inner tension of a thought that can think of itself as thought in crisis. To approach the ambiguity in a constructive way, thus, one has to approach the immense depth of thought.

For making a very difficult and tentative argument a bit more comprehensive, I will distinguish between two dimensions of thought, (1) the dimension of organization and (2) the dimension of critical intention. It would indeed be an exaggeration to say that the dimension of intention and the dimension of organization could be completely distinguished from each other; the distinction is tentative. However, in a heuristic context it is justified to say that a depiction of thought as an active critical intention is in more direct need of a philosophical subject that can focus and criticize (an intending pole), while organization and objective arrangement can be depicted more independent of a strong, self-conscious subject. If this distinction is accepted, it follows that the notion of thought contains a subjective and an objective pole, whose interior tension I view as helpful in my further characterization of postmodern thought.

179 Not objective in the sense of arranging the “ultimately real” but in the sense of arranging “transsubjectively”. ‘Transsubjectively’, in its turn, is first and foremost to be thought of in connection to the social and linguistic determination of the individuals, crucial for any talk about a decentred subject. In this context thus “arranging objective relations” is to organize without presupposing any subjective power over that which is arranged.

180 The notion ‘pole’ indicates the relative status of this distinction.
Everyone can draw the conclusion that the various books, containing what we call postmodern thought, are books by authors that try to clarify a problematic subject matter. Thus, the barrier between what can be called postmodern and modern thinking about a complex subject matter might be found at the confine between the organizational pole and the critically intentional pole of thought. Postmodern thought is not critical in the traditional sense, because the break with the clear frames of realist and idealist epistemology ruins all faith in the principles that are decisive for critical intention. Therefore, postmodern thought can be said to orient itself towards the organizational pole of thought.

Given this prerequisite, postmodernism in, for example, philosophy can be interpreted as “organizing thinking” in the modus of Verwindung of metaphysics, but not as a straightforward critical intention (that would mean Überwindung). Critical intention, on the other hand, is the thinking mode of subjective research, “critical spotting” by means of well-defined and preconceived structures and categories (which is another ways to depict philosophy based on a prima philosophia, or axioms). The modern foundationalist—that is, the modern, who strives to grasp reality through stable and controllable epistemological/subjective means—organizes the complex subject matter critically while the postmodern anti-foundationalist organizes the complex subject matter in an un-critical and un-intentional way. In the context of the two poles of thought, the clash between modern thought and postmodern thought must not necessarily be seen a clash between one outdated and one fashionable strategy.

However, the obvious limitation of this tentative description of thought calls for other points of departure. The collision between the modern and the postmodern can also be understood as a clash between two distinct points of departure, two separate hermeneutical starting points, which in their turn are related to two fundamental “feelings”, standing in complex relationship to the social reality/hyperreality. In lack of any better terms, these feelings will here be labeled ‘the feeling of final potency’ and ‘the feeling of final impo-
In accordance with this terminology, the contemporary social situation that have been called postmodern seems to include a certain logic or structure, which tends to heightens the collective feeling of final impotence. Yet, this does not mean that the feeling of final potency is ultimately inadequate within the frames of this situation. Analogously, as both Calhoun and Giddens have noticed, the feeling of final impotence are clearly visible in the artistic and philosophical documents from the same era that can be said to embody the feeling of final potency, namely the optimistic consciousness of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

What I here have called the “feeling of final impotence” can also be connected to philosophy as post-metaphysical thought. Vattimo prefers to call post-metaphysical thought il pensiero debole (weak thought). A fusion of Vattimo’s terminology with my own leads to the conclusion that much postmodern thought on the postmodern condition strives for a comprehension of thought’s final impotence. It can be called weak because it does not hold thought to be capable to organize its subject matter in such a way that its rigorous logical skeleton becomes discernible, at least not in the strict sense of earlier critical philosophies. In weak thought, the bones merges with the flesh, so to say. Thought’s inner reinforcement—gained by the stable cogito, the transcendentals, the époque, the formal-logical structure, the semiotic structure—breaks down and the subject as coherent basis collapses, or, ceases to be the final outpost, the principle of final potency.

I suggest these terms despite their psychological—yes, even psychologist—connotations. What I am after is neither any narrow-minded psychological explanation, nor any sociology-of-knowledge type of explanation. I want to hint at a logic for a partial explanation of the complicated relation between theory and historical condition, which not a priori excludes the possibility of further elaboration by empirical studies.


The notion of the ‘subject’ as a model for philosophical certainty dates from Descartes’ cogito ergo sum. It has been a very important model both for modern critical philosophy in general and for many of the critics of modern thought. For
Moreover, these reflections raise another kind of question. Does this weakness exhaust the “methodology” of postmodern thought? Is the method of organizing without a clear intention the methodology *par excellence* of the postmodern thinker? If this really was the case, would it not make a lot more sense to drop the headline “methodology”, once and for all, and deny the intellectual relevance of weak thought; acknowledge its final impotence?

Despite all that have been said, I will maintain that the problem of the postmodern is permeated with a genuinely methodological ambiguity. This opinion is based on the fact that the problem of critique still have a proper and significant place in finally impotent, weak and—to use another popular term—nihilistic thought.\(^{184}\) The debate over the postmodern is clearly also a debate over the problems and possibilities of the postmodern and, as such, it tends to substantiate its claims from an ambivalent but nevertheless critical or semi-critical perspective.\(^{185}\) In the end, one has to admit that my heuristic definition of the relationship between the modern and the postmodern, based on two differing feelings, at most is an indication of two extremes of a spectrum of socially substantiated (although not determined) feelings.

However, before I close this section and turn to a methodological approach for weak thought, I will return to the question of the historical shift. I want to relate the discussion of the *Verwindung* of modernity to an interesting argument on modernism and postmodernism of David Harvey. From the context of his own historical and geographic sketch of the postmodern condition in the famous book

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184See, e.g., Vattimo; *The End of Modernity*, pp. 20–47; cf., Gasché; “Deconstruction as Criticism”, p. 55.

The Condition of Postmodernity

Harvey draws the conclusion that the shift from modern to postmodern ways of life is “within the grasp of historical materialist enquiry”. Even though many contemporary theorists are sympathetic to Harvey’s conclusion, it is evidently not a postmodernist one. Historical materialism is a critical theory, and as such, it is inherently modern, even modernist.

Harvey’s argument departs from the assumption that the social development still depends on mechanisms in which capital accumulation has a determining role. This assumption relies, in its turn, on a far-reaching decentralization of the liberal social subject through materialism. In this way, as emanations from Marx and Engels, the critical theories based on historical materialism both connect to and portend the postmodern arguments. Therefore, Harvey argues, instead of referring to a historical change in perspective, the terminology of modernism and postmodernism constitutes a structural image of the totality of economic and cultural relations within capitalism.

That idea, outrageous by postmodernism’s own standards (…) makes more than a little sense. It helps to explain how it is that Marx’s Capital is so rich in insights into what the current status of thinking is all about. It also helps explain how the cultural forces at work in, say, fin de siècle Vienna constituted such a complex mix that it is almost impossible to tell where the modernist impulse begins or ends. It helps us to dissolve the categories of both modernism and postmodernism into a complex of oppositions expressive of the cultural contradictions of capitalism. We then get to see the categories of both modernism and postmodernism as static reifications imposed upon the fluid interpretation of dynamic oppositions. Within this matrix of internal relations, there is never one fixed configuration, but a swaying back and forth between centralization and decentralization, between authority and deconstruction, between hi-

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187Cf. the comments on Marx above.
erarchy and anarchy, between permanence and flexibility, between the detail and the social division of labour (...). The sharp categorical distinction between modernism and postmodernism disappears, to be replaced by an examination of the flux of internal relations within capitalism as a whole.  

Harvey’s understanding of the cultural and especially the economic whole as a more fundamental category than the notions of modernism and postmodernism is of course open for harsh critique. However, seen from a heuristic point of view, it points ahead to a useful conclusion that Harvey himself avoids, namely, the fact that the notion of the capital as an overarching concept, together with the notion of a historical and a modal shift from modernity to postmodernity and from modernism to postmodernism, each in due respect, can be construed as the most fundamental. Every such inclusive concept can be used to analyze the condition but not to exhaust it. Harvey’s argument, understood in a heuristic way, thus becomes helpful for a relativization of the modern as well as the postmodern.

In accordance with my heuristic interpretation, Vattimo’s detailed analysis of Heidegger’s reflection upon the human existence and understanding, and Harvey’s rejection of a dipolar contradiction between modernism and postmodernism, can be said to unite in the following conclusion: to develop a progressive theory about a condition that is overtly determined by theories of the former conditions is bound to fail as long as one avoids to reflect upon the fundamental continuities and discontinuities between different conditions from a viewpoint of final uncertainty. The exaggeration of intellectual the importance of positions, no matter whether it is historical materialist, modernist or postmodernist positions, unmasks an illegitimate certainty.

In the context of Heidegger’s thought, Vattimo argues that “[i]t is precisely by taking up and reflecting on (...) ‘repressed’ elements of Heidegger’s philosophy, which are also the most frankly existential elements of his work, that it may be possible to lead hermeneutics beyond a simple acceptance of collective consciousness and beyond

188Harvey; The Condition of Postmodernity, pp. 339; 342.
the risk of being reduced to an apology for what already exist”.¹⁸⁹ This can be also interpreted as saying that it is only by taking up the Verwindung of the modern feeling of final potency that the postmodern feeling of final impotence can be reconciled with a critique of the complex condition that substantiates the feeling of final impotence. It is not very likely that such a strategy would result in a grand modern or postmodern theory; but who would grieve such a rash hubris?

**Totalizing “-isms” and Weak Thought**

In the book *The Highroad around Modernism*, the American scholar Robert C. Neville expresses dissatisfaction with the heavy influence of “postmodernism” in the current intellectual debate. Not wholly different from some of the arguments already presented, he holds that the insistence on a dualism between modernism and postmodernism represents an unfortunate exaggeration of some traits within the manifold discourse of modernity. Like Huyssen, the argumentation of Neville can be seen as “relational”, although he uses the relational connections to criticize not to embrace. The following passage by Kramer seems to capture Neville’s point of departure.

“Postmodernism presupposes modernity as the founding premise of its project. Thus postmodernism, via its two-valued, diacritical ‘play’, is nothing without modernity”¹⁹⁰

Like many postmodernists, the modern thinker, Neville, understands philosophical modernism as typically foundationalist and problematic. The “foundational need” of many traditions of modern thought is possible to relate to the modernist turn in the arts and in aesthetics; to movements that strove “to find meaning, significance and validity solely in itself, without reference to history, context, or

¹⁸⁹Vattimo; *The End of Modernity*, p 143.
Recent Methodological Ambiguity

biography of the artist". \(^\text{191}\) Such foundationalism can be detected in at least three branches of the intellectual endeavors of the early twentieth century. Firstly, in the contempt for broader cultural theories and the search for empirical and mathematical foundations, peculiar to analytical philosophy. Secondly, in the eidetic intuition of Husserl and phenomenology, with its hope to “find a pure empirical base for philosophy and science”. \(^\text{192}\) Thirdly, in Lévi-Strauss’s attempt to establish a social science based on linguistic codes, indebted to de Saussure’s semiotics (the linguistic basis of structuralism).

However, for Neville it is pivotal to underline that modernity is something else than this foundationalist modernism. It represents the worldview and cultural mode of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (the modern era), which occasioned many different styles of thought and art that have survived, along each other. “Modernity in its wholeness includes all these, surely Pierce as much as Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, and Heidegger. But modernism, a specific nineteenth- and twentieth-century movement in the arts, letters, and philosophy, is only one development”. \(^\text{193}\)

The central point in Neville’s critical argument against postmodernism is his establishment of a connection between the theoretical frameworks of postmodernism and modernism. The approach of today’s loud critics of modernity includes a narrowing of modernity to one single branch of modernity called modernism. Since two or three decades, postmodern thought have been fashionable and other “modern” figures of thought have, consequently, more or less lost their possibilities to participate in the generic discussion about the contemporary situation. Neville defends the thesis that only deeply “modernist philosophies would totalize whole traditions so as to identify themselves by being postsomething”. \(^\text{194}\) Thus, in a very deci-

\(^{191}\) Neville; *The Highroad around Modernism*, p. 7. In a lecture, Adorno uses the word Fundierungswhahn (delusion of grounding) to express this “habit”. Adorno; *Kant’s “Kritik der Reinen Vernunft”*, p. 30.

\(^{192}\) Neville; *The Highroad around Modernism*, p. 7.

\(^{193}\) Neville; *The Highroad around Modernism*, p. 5 (emphasis added).

\(^{194}\) Neville; *The Highroad around Modernism*, p. 5 (emphasis in the original).
sive respect, postmodernism is an extension of modernism, more rightly labeled most-modernism or ultra-modernism.\textsuperscript{195}

The logic of this argument demonstrates that it is seminal for Neville to unmask the postmodernism in the contemporary debate and to show that its theoretical significance is exaggerated. Its importance is unfounded as long as it is hypostatized into a theory that can overcome (überwinden) modernity. According to Neville, “modernism is the cultural style that seeks self-contained intelligibility, significance, and worth; in a diverse world this leads to professional specialization; its self-consciousness involves making a self-contained new start, significantly discontinuous with the past; and the methodological self-definition of a specialty allows, indeed encourages, a practitioner to declare those who follow other methods to fall outside the specialty.”\textsuperscript{196} However, in its far-reaching and totalizing rejection of precisely those aspects of modernist reason, postmodernism itself has usurped a modernist and foundationalist meta-structure in its programmatic self-definition as the cultural style of “self-sustained”, immanent critique and deconstruction of the modern. “Ironically, postmodernism thinks of itself as liberating and freeing up cultural impulses that had been stifled by modernism. Yet in philosophy, postmodernism functions quite strictly to shut down all forms of philosophy except those consisting in criticism. It engages the very same academic politics of delegitimation as practiced by the modernist philosophies of logical positivism, analysis, and pure phenomenology.”\textsuperscript{197} Thus, according to Neville, the progressive difference between modernism to postmodernism is minimal.

Neville’s constructive counter-argument, developed in order to overcome Überwindung (to borrow Heidegger’s term), claims that, for example, the modern American philosophical heritage, the pragmatic tradition (Pierce, James, Dewey, etc.), is an almost untried resource for a further elaboration with the problems of modernity, whose


\textsuperscript{196}Neville; \textit{The Highroad around Modernism}, p. 59 (emphasis added).

\textsuperscript{197}Neville; \textit{The Highroad around Modernism}, p. 2.
deepest traits are ignored by the postmodernist critique of modernism. The early pragmatic thinkers pointed ahead, to a way "around" modernism, while postmodernism is guided by modernism and therefore acts as incapable of seeing modernity in its richness.  

According to Neville, an epistemological alternative could be a revised notion of systematic thought. The basic idea would be that a kind of conditioned (that is, not aprioric) metaphysical thinking can provide critical thought with a framework that is far more fruitful than the hypostatization of one programmatic statement. The modernist mode of thought he wants to challenge is the theories focused on foundationalist epistemology and absolute ontology. In talking about a conditioned kind of metaphysics, Neville argues that the notion of the whole, which has been a stumbling block in modernist philosophy after Kant, must be revisited in an unfoundational way, to open for alternatives to modernism. "The concept of totality seems to be central to systematic philosophy. Rightly or wrongly, both modernists and postmodernists take it to be central when they reject metaphysics, speculation and system. The concept of totality marks the scale or domain of things to be understood and is thus related to the problem of identifying reality". 

Due to the discovery of the fundamental antinomies of pure reason—that is, the problems in rational thought that Kant faced when 

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198Cf. Rorty’s anti-metaphysical reading of the pragmatic tradition; Richard Rorty; *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minnesota University Press; Minneapolis 1982). Neville argues that Rorty gives in to the European critique when he interprets Dewey as an essentially non-metaphysical thinker. Neville; *The Highroad around Modernism*, p. 14. 
199It is important to notice that one criterion for Neville’s rejection of postmodernism is that it is totalistic as was said above. Heidegger is not modernist in Neville’s way of structuring the history of philosophy, but he is totalistic. "The brilliance of Heidegger’s strategy is that by reducing Western culture to a single story he totalized it and made it possible for the whole thing to be rejected. The irony of Heidegger’s strategy is that logocentrism hardly existed in western culture until Heidegger invented it, following clues from Hegel". Neville; *The Highroad around Modernism*, p. 8. 
200I interpret Neville’s notion of metaphysics as very similar to my own notion of large theory. See further “Definitions” in the Introduction to this study. 
201Neville; *The Highroad around Modernism*, p. 111.
he analyzed the concept of totality in *Critique of Pure Reason*—it has since long been mortal to make systems where, on the one hand, human knowledge of reality and, on the other hand, reality itself have been possible to construe as ontologically equal. To explain this a bit further: Kant found out that reason logically can justify the totality of things both in terms of an infinite whole and a finite totality. From this follows that a contradiction arises when reason inquires the totality of existence. Reason cannot possibly grasp the whole of reality in a coherent way. The astonishing importance of Kant’s inquiry of cognition’s fundamental antinomies—which also Neville appreciates—was recognized very early. In *Science of Logic*, for instance, Hegel argues that “[t]hese Kantian antinomies will always remain an important part of the critical philosophy; they, more than anything else, brought about the downfall of previous metaphysics and can be regarded as a main transition into more recent philosophy...” Hegel himself, however, tried tirelessly to conceive the total “after Kant”, as it were, and even to invent an all-encompassing system “after Kant”.

I cannot reproduce Neville’s discussion of these matters here, but his dense interpretation of Hegel and Whitehead can be said to embody the following line of thought: to be able to retrieve systematic and, what he calls, “metaphysical” thought one has to relate oneself both to the post-Kantian traits in Hegel’s constructive thought and Kant’s argument that any interest in systematic thought must be shaped by the fundamental insights into the ontological incompleteness of totality.

All attempts to be true to the problems of the aporetic and deeply problematic structure of theoretical reason without falling back into...

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204 Neville; *The Highroad around Modernism*, pp. 111-129
205 I have to underline again that Neville’s notion of metaphysics is not traditional, it can be likened to what I called “large theory” in the introduction to this study, see pp. 10-11.
mere foundational epistemology seems to lead to an utterly problematic “Hegelian position”. Neville is therefore left with two alternatives. If he so chooses, he can follow Hegel and reconstruct a new way of grasping the whole idealistically. The other alternative is to follow Hegel part of the way and then criticize the new conception of totality, again with a Kantian ambition. The last alternative clearly involves the risk of falling back into Kantian and modernist variations on foundationalist transcendental deduction.

Neville shapes a third alternative, an attempt to mediate between the untenable Kantian and Hegelian positions. Although he cannot follow Hegel in his construction of an absolute system, Kant’s epistemology is far from the intended goal. Neville’s uses the Kantian insights as a critical basis for philosophical inquiry but his own notion of a system presupposes the category of the whole in a way that goes beyond Kant. Neville can be said to make use of metaphysical whole as a pragmatic category. Through the category of the whole, he usurps the constructive and binding parts of Hegel’s dialectic. “Because metaphysics is so central to the way around modernism, and because metaphysics is both speculative and systematic in some sense or other, it is necessary to see whether systematic philosophy truly requires that a systematic perspective hold that things are united in a totality”.206

Neville unmasks the radical ambiguity of totality in Hegelianism. “Hegel’s reading of Western history seems plausible when reinforced by those institutions he sees as rational. But it surely is Whig history. History from the perspective of the women’s movement is very different, with many of Hegel’s heroes slipping into the fortuitousness”.207 The totality, which Hegel reaches by dialectics, is nothing more than a totality gained from a specific perspective. For Neville, this means that “we must abandon the dream of totality and necessity and acknowledge instead that, as far as we know, there are many pockets of order, sometimes interrelated, sometimes not, often irrelevant and indeterminate with respect to each other, passing with

206Neville; The Highroad around Modernism, p. 111.
207Neville; The Highroad around Modernism, p. 119.
tangential connections, partially overlapping, sometimes in conflict but even then not in coherent arrangement concerning what the fight is about”. Totality, construed as a completed, determinate and self-contained fullness, is nothing more than an illusion (as Kant saw). However, to go beyond Kant with the help of Hegel’s ingenious dialectic, one can say that there are many possible totalities (with real substantial and ontological references). That means, philosophical systems as determinate totalities of concrete relations (involving the real) should always be understood as relative to specific perspectives and not as absolute. For Neville, there is still room for this kind of systematic thought and he delineates a fourfold notion of a plausible speculative system.

Firstly, a speculative, tentative system has to make use of a systematic method, implying a methodological principle: try to see as much from as many perspectives as possible. The system tries to put the issues in the widest context possible. This means furthermore that systematic thought cannot be reduced to “program philosophy”. Program philosophy is philosophy connected to a specific tradition to whose fundamental conceptions it adheres, while systematic philosophy has to be ready to question every initial claim. The system has to be self-reflexive and, moreover, heuristic—it must try to discover something new in the given by linking different entities and different levels of inquiry to a speculative framework.

Secondly, the system is fallible. It is a tentative approach towards reality with a tentative point of departure. “[K]nowledge of the ‘foundations’ is not foundational knowledge in the sense that it itself is presupposed as knowledge by all other knowledge”. This means that systematic philosophy initiates a conversation or debate about reality. The fallibility condemns the system as inappropriate if it is

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208 Neville; *The Highroad around Modernism*, p. 119.
209 Neville; *The Highroad around Modernism*, pp. 158–159.
210 Neville; *The Highroad around Modernism*, p. 139.
acts as a dogmatic instrument. This can be expressed by saying that the system must opt for self-criticism.

Thirdly, following from the fallibility, the system is tolerant. Neville argues that the traditional denunciation of systematic thought focuses on its imperialistic character. Philosophical systems have traditionally represented attempts to make that which seems incommensurable into something commensurable, violation of “the other”. However, the system as tentative system gains its credibility (and coherence), not by forcing “the different” or “the other” into coercive molds, but by stressing its categorial vagueness. “A vague proposition is one that requires a further assertion to identify its object and give it truth value. (...) Vague categories are those into which their objects cannot be put without some further identification of objects. As a logical notion vagueness does not mean fuzzy or emotive or distracted. For vague assertions are still determinately distinct from their logical alternatives. (...) The vagueness in a philosophical system requires that the system be supplemented by intermediate assertions arising from elsewhere than the system (...).”

The pragmatic system has to be coherent and objectively preferable in some senses but it has also to be incomplete and open for further specification. Given this open framework, there are four levels of inquiry within the vague system: (a) the level of concrete subject matter, that is, the empirical level, (b) the level of interpretative language, that is, the hermeneutical level, (c) the level of categorial systematic language, that is, the methodological level and, (d) the level of the speculative systematic frame, that is, the ontological level. “The system then is a vague abstraction specified by expressions which themselves abstract from the interpretative domains that abstractly respond to subject matters.”

Systematic thought is thus a cluster of abstractions on different levels, interacting in such a way that relevant aspects of specific things may emanate in greater and lesser determination. Neville’s levels of increasing abstraction run through the whole system. How-

211Neville; The Highroad around Modernism, pp. 146–147.
212Neville; The Highroad around Modernism, p. 148.
ever, this does not mean that systematic thought derives the subject matters from an initial configuration and abstraction of the notion of the world. “A vague system is not by itself a neutral language to which a poem, a scientific theory, and another philosophy all may be reduced. Nor can the system be substituted for any of these things. But the system provides a language such that, when the poem, scientific theory, or other philosophy are re-expressed in the system’s language, the important things in them that are expressible do not vitiate what is expressed". This means furthermore that two incommensurable theories (like Freud and Skinner’s theories) may be made commensurable within the system. The contradictoriness and competitiveness of the theories is still there, per se, but a structure can appear in the system in which the theories may come to term with each other in a new and fruitful way.

Fourth, Neville views the system as engaged. The systematic character establishes relations and makes the private public in a qualified sense: that, which was unconnected when unmediated by the system becomes interrelated through the system. The system draws its subject matters into new formations and thus it pinpoints hidden aspects, which is actual and relevant; it actualizes and creates important matters. Philosophical imagination and fantasy accomplish this. Neville holds skepticism to be the moment in thought that asks if the imagery is a vital one or if it is flawed with respect to its subject matters. He calls this mode of skepticism the natural standpoint. The natural standpoint “locates the problem of skepticism in imagination: is the imagery properly working? Better imagery engages us with that with which it is important to be engaged, while worse imagery distorts the importance of things and inhibits genuine engagement".

Neville relates the natural standpoint to Kant’s Critique of Judgment. It is the imagination (which for Kant was the synthesizing activity) that relates and combines the facts in unintentional reality into productive experience. “For every new level of judgment there is an enabling imagery. And although some images may be brought to

213Neville; The Highroad around Modernism, p. 149.
214Neville; The Highroad around Modernism, p. 154.
Recent Methodological Ambiguity

consciousness and subjected to critical judgment, even formed by critically deliberative artistic activity, the images function in experience prior to any critical intentional judgment”. From this follows, furthermore, that systematic thinking is radically dependent upon the concrete situation in which it developed. It is located and thus social. “The role of systematic philosophy as the search for truth is conditional upon society. The essential character of the form of the system (...) is to aim for a unified experience that allows for grasping the world with breadth and systematic engagement. This dimension of systematic philosophy as both public interpretation and experiential envisionment can be called ‘theory’”.

Concluding Reflections on the Ambiguity

Neville’s ideas concerning systematic thinking is one attempt among many to delineate what can be called weak thought. As such, however, it is not fully compatible with the understanding il pensiero debole of Vattimo. It is even necessary to use Vattimo as a corrective to Neville, whose notion of metaphysics must be criticized. Likewise, Neville’s word, “system”, has problematic connotations.

However, what is at stake here is not whether or not Neville’s understanding of contemporary thought and philosophical, sociological and cultural thinking is the best, or a preferable alternative to postmodern thinking. The chapter has made clear that every self-assured judgment concerning the status and the relevance of the postmodern must be treated with suspicion. Neville’s understanding of postmodernism is indeed limited; this is easy to see if one compare his arguments to others given above. However, also Kvale’s, Vattimo’s and Calhoun’s perspectives are limited.

The underlying mold that has shaped this chapter has been a notion of methodology, and therefore I view it as a good thing to be able to present a tentative systematic vision that to some extent includes both the ambivalence of the present discussions in the theo-

215 Neville; The Highroad around Modernism, p. 154.
216 Neville; The Highroad around Modernism, p. 156.
retical humanities and aims at saying something about how one can think about and organize experience in the same ambivalent situation; saying something about what a methodology for the present may look like.

Seen from the perspective of postmodern thought, I am well aware of the fact that Neville is likely to be characterized as a narrow-minded modern, he tries to grasp the totality of contemporary thought, organizes it by way of a critical intention. However, guided by the somewhat fragmented but wide analyzes of the concepts around which this chapter hovers, I understand it to be completely legitimate to argue that the “vague ontology”—which emanates from Neville’s system and which also, to some extent, equals Vattimo’s understanding of Heidegger’s ontology as “weak ontology”—are useful for a hermeneutical discussion of the contemporary status of Adorno’s critical theory. Moreover, without claiming to be an absolute, or the best formulation of constructive thought today, it can nevertheless work as a link to an Adorno-inspired critique of contemporary thought in terms of social philosophical hermeneutics.
4. ADORNO’S CRITICAL THEORY IN THE CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT

Given the purpose of this study as a whole, the broad heuristic discussion of the concepts modern and postmodern has to lead back to the issues outlined in chapter one. Thus, one must ask: How to integrate the proposed understanding of Adorno’s theory as social philosophical hermeneutic with the issues found in the analysis of present debate(s)?

Can the “integration” be accomplished by contrasting the content of the first chapter with the second? Must not Adorno’s “modern” thought be discriminated from the problems of the postmodern to enable further elaboration? I do not think that the answers to these questions can be positive, although one have to be careful with the distinctions in order not to make Adorno into a bleak copy of the present state of mind. However, in the end, other questions must guide the integration.

What is the nature of the postmodern, read through the lens of Adorno’s thought? Can the hermeneutical perspectives or the questions gained from theology-related approaches open areas that are still hidden? What would a postmodern reading of Adorno look like if it were delineated and restructured in terms of the different motifs I brought forward in the previous chapter? These questions are more relevant at this stage of the study, and I will answer them all by merging the insights from the previous chapters with a closer look at the methodological moments in Adorno’s critical theory.

The chapter starts in a discussion of some typical, although very different evaluations of Adorno that have been put forward during the last twenty-five years. However, in the last instance, I want to initiate a constructive discussion of how to read Adorno, and there-
fore the following sections slowly turns from qualitative analysis of reception into constructive reinterpretation.

When it comes to the status of the general reception of Adorno in the modern/postmodern debate Peter Hohendahl asserts that it is “highly contested; evaluations range from extreme rejection to critical acceptance”.²¹⁷ Many scholars have argued that there are several traits in Adorno’s thought that share characteristics with recent critical philosophy, aesthetic and cultural theory and this makes his thought relevant.

One example of such traits in Adorno’s philosophy is those that are in accord with the French, so-called “poststructuralist”, critique of the modern philosophical tradition. Occasionally, the genealogical and deconstructive motifs within this disparate tradition clearly resemble Horkheimer and Adorno’s critique of the idealistic and imperialistic tendencies within reason itself. Max Pensky, for example, holds that “Adorno and the contemporary poststructuralists certainly bear some intuitively clear affinities: both are efforts to work out the philosophical import of the collapse of philosophical idealism. Both seeks to work out this collapse not in terms of a simple liquidation of philosophy but rather attempt to perform a self-liquidation of the contents and intents of idealist philosophy toward some radically new conception of philosophical practice”.²¹⁸

However, even though such affinities with poststructuralism can explain important aspects of the renewed interest in Adorno’s thought, there are significant (and perhaps insurmountable) dissimilarities between Adorno and, for example, Derrida, Lyotard and Foucault. These dissimilarities become visible when the supposed

²¹⁷Hohendahl; Prismatic Thought, p. 12.
“common characteristics” are analyzed more closely. Indeed, poststructuralism in itself is very problematic to evaluate as a single phenomenon; the artificiality of the label, the strongly varying intellectual heritage and the political ambiguity of the “movement” makes the difficulties immense. One can at least say that it is very difficult to imagine a harmonious relationship between Adorno’s politically grounded philosophy—proposing an enlarged concept of rationality and enlightenment—and the “ironic” philosophies of “surface” and “play”, typical of some well known strains of poststructuralist thought.

Back or Forward to Adorno?
The American translator of Adorno, Robert Hullot-Kentor, views dialectical reason as the essential core of Adorno’s critical theory. Hullot-Kentor’s interpretation is very important for those who want to avoid too narrow an understanding of Adorno’s contemporary


221 Cf. the section “Postmodern...” in the previous chapter.

222 See Hohendahl; Prismatic Thought, p. 15.
relevance. Hullot-Kentor’s arguments are important because they return to the essential focus of Adorno’s own philosophical consciousness and do not stumble on problems regarding general notions such as “totality”, “critique” and “linguistic turn”. This, however, does not mean that one should dismiss the insights provided by the investigations of the present debates and relapse into a purely philosophical position without any concern for the present state of mind. Rather, the argument I will propose is that the understanding of the present intellectual context must be widened and to some extent also be interpreted through the characteristic features of Adorno’s philosophy itself before it can be related to the proposed interpretations of the postmodern phenomena.

Adorno has been interpreted in very different ways by thinkers that claims to be part of the recent development in theory. Examples are Jürgen Habermas, whose evaluation is critical since he locates Adorno in the camp of postmodern irrationalists; Jean-Francois Lyotard whose interpretation is almost the opposite of Habermas’s. Lyotard claims that Adorno is a thinker that in the last analysis must be evaluated as modernist and thus inadequate. Another example of recent interpretation is Frederic Jameson’s. Jameson argues that Adorno is a Marxist modernist and as such he outdated given the postmodern conception of the situation. However, since Jameson is critical towards the available postmodern theories he defends Adorno by claiming his continuation of Marxist modernism is far more promising a strategy than the postmodernisms of our time.

As opponent to the Adorno-interpretations represented by Habermas and Lyotard (and, for that matter, even Jameson), Hullot-Kentor puts forward two problems that really have obscured the recent debate on Adorno and hindered constructive reception. Un-

\footnote{Peter U Hohendahl’s critique of Lambert Zuidervaart’s interpretation of Adorno’s aesthetic theory boils down to the fact that he ignores certain indispensable insights into the difference between the present situation and Adorno’s own intellectual context. Hohendahl; *Prismatic Thought*, p. 258n.30. See Zuidervaart; *Adorno’s Aesthetic Theory*, pp. 304-306. Cf. also the discussion concerning the historical and economic context of Horkheimer and Adorno’s thought in the forties.}
under the headline “Back to Adorno” Hullot-Kentor argues that (1) the popularity of poststructuralism and deconstructionism have occasioned a serious hindrance for adequate reception of critical theory. The genuinely critical insights have been neglected for the benefit of an ambivalent and reactionary mode of thought. For Hullot-Kentor, the vogue of poststructuralism has ruined the basis of radical thought.

(2) However, also Habermas’s version of critical theory is criticized severely by Hullot-Kentor. The all-embracing reception of Habermas has damaged the possibilities for a nuanced discussion of the fundamental dimensions of Adorno’s thought. To be able to read *Dialectic of Enlightenment* today one must “confront Habermas who, as the result of a terrifically unlucky historical mismatch, has emerged as the preeminent representative of the Frankfurt School on this [that is, the American] side of the Atlantic”. Due to these problems, Adorno’s theory in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* can be viewed today as a fresh, heuristic and materialist interpretation of the development of reason without risking the anachronistic fallacy (that is the fallacy of ignoring the problems posed by the postmodern). For example, my interpretation of Adorno’s critical theory as social philosophical hermeneutic is intended to make room both for a constructive and forceful use of it and for a rejection of all light-hearted calls for immediate continuity between theory and praxis. My interpretation aims at a replacement of the metaphysical presumptions of both historicity-hermeneutical and activist-political continuity with a critical and hermeneutical strategy that turned the concept of the social into the “theoretical horizon” against which ideal constructions such as “reason” and ”rationality” could be discussed as something secondary, something mediated. To view critical theory as social philosophical hermeneutic is thus to accept a dialectical discontinuity in all concepts, and particularly strong concepts of philosophy. Given this explanation, critical theory is far from a rejec-

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224 Hullot-Kentor; “Back to Adorno”, p. 5.
tion of reason. It represents an approach that intends to reveal the arbitrariness in positions ignoring the social dialectic of reason.

However, is my own social philosophical “opinion” only a harmonizing interpretation of Hullot-Kentor’s critique, which in the end falls pray to Habermas’s critique? Could the notion of social philosophical hermeneutic be made acceptable in a broader circle of interpretations or does it, together with Hullot-Kentor’s, constitute performative contradiction? I think that my hermeneutical position can be defended. Hohendahl, for example, argues that Adorno’s critical theory “unfolds the dialectical tension between the principle of domination and the resistance to the social system.” This means that critical theory is involved in a social philosophical interpretation of the limits of current concepts of reason and the current state of the social system, rather a self-contradictory critique of reason in toto (as Habermas and Wellmer have attempted to demonstrate).226 To interpret the limits of reason in social reality is not to pose a purely idealistic principle of reason as social product and then criticize the social (which would result in a contradiction), but it is to decipher the relationship between reason and social existence.

Hullot-Kentor argues that the arguments proposed in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* depend on two idealistic principles that have undergone a radical materialistic transformation. Rather than resulting in an irrational liquidation of rationality (or for that sake in an adherence to a traditional understanding of reason), these idealistic principles reveal that Adorno’s actual errand crystallizes in developed and refined notions of reason and rationality that reaches beyond idealism. Firstly, Hullot-Kentor relates Adorno to the idealistic principle saying that the defense of reason are inseparable from inquiries in the aesthetic and mimetic sphere (for example in Kant and Schiller).227 Secondly, he relates Adorno to two Hegelian notions, namely, (a) the principle of the “cunning of reason” (that is, that reason as such transcends the

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226 Hohendahl; *Prismatic Thought*, p. 8. On Wellmer and Habermas, see, e.g., Zuidervaart; *Adorno’s Aesthetic Theory*, p. 277.
227 For the moment it will suffice to say that it is represents the imitative, aesthetic moment within magical and mythical approaches to reality.
individual and takes on a Gestalt of its own) and (b) the related principle of the sacrifice of the “average” individual on the “altar of history” (that is, the principle that history, viewed as a basically rational development, is interpreted as reasonable and good beyond the historical contingency of particular individuals, and that the individual is genuinely historical only insofar that he or her is possible to grasp in terms of rational history).\textsuperscript{228}

To begin with the twofold, second principle, the social philosophical motif of rationality as self-sacrifice that underlies the theoretical perspective of Horkheimer’s “The End of Reason”, and Dialectic of Enlightenment (see chapter one), is according to Hullot-Kentor, a reversal of Hegel’s notion of history as a justified process of extinction of individual subjectivity. The motif of sacrifice is connected to the principle of an ultimate cunning of reason. To be able to find a way to grasp reality in an exhaustive way, reason posits the framework for reality. There is a “calculating” cunning (on the trans-individual level) involved in the attempt of conceiving reality. The cunning consists in the positing of a fundamental unity.\textsuperscript{229} “The creation of (...) unity is a perpetual act of cunning”.\textsuperscript{230} Hegel’s insight into reason’s need to unify, together with the historico-philosophical motif of sacrifice becomes an unholy alliance in idealism. “Cunning develops as progress in sacrificial substitution. The power to substitute an ox for a human sacrifice is no different from the power of the employer to substitute the labor of others for his or her own labor”.\textsuperscript{231} Yet, given the negative moment, the separation between the absolute ideal of progress (or completion) and dialectics, the framework of reason, cunning and sacrifice can be said to constitute Adorno’s under-

\textsuperscript{228}Hullot-Kentor; “Back to Adorno”, pp. 19-21; G W F Hegel; The Philosophy of History (Dover: New York 1956), pp. 14; 29ff; 55; Neville; The Highroad around Modernism, pp. 118-119.

\textsuperscript{229}The language here is metaphorical, one does not need to think of Hegel as the worst representative of illegitimate speculation, his terminology is perhaps odd but it is possible to interpret as a metaphorical way to speak about the indisputable processes that are difficult to grasp in ordinary language.

\textsuperscript{230}Hullot-Kentor; “Back to Adorno”, p. 19.

\textsuperscript{231}Hullot-Kentor; “Back to Adorno”, p. 20.
standing of the enlightenment as a dialectical movement of reason (without determinate progression).

However, if we leave the complicated matter of dialectics, one can also say that Adorno’s reversal of Hegel’s idealistic principles is based on the social demythologization of the notion of reason as such. This social demythologization is, paradoxically, related to the other (the first) idealistic principle, namely that rational activity is impossible to separate strictly from mimetic, and imitative activity. This means that the rational sphere in the last instance is inseparable from the aesthetic sphere. The insight into the aesthetic moment of reason and the rational moments of mimesis and aesthetic activity is nothing other than the foundation for the whole argument in *Dialectic of enlightenment*, namely, (a) that enlightenment always is involved in a certain kind of mimesis, that is, a mythical overturn into a second nature, and (b) that mythology already initially should be viewed as a form of enlightenment (that is, the rational activity viewed as an imitation for the sake of taking control).  

If these conclusions have been reached from the perspective of Adorno’s philosophy, then it would be possible to reach similar conclusions from the perspective of Adorno’s *Aesthetic theory*. Peter Osborne seems to verify this last hypothesis. “First ‘works of art must be able to integrate materials and details into their immanent law of form’. This is the moment of the interpretation of mimesis and rationality, of unity, out of which the classical aesthetic conception of form as ‘the non repressive synthesis of diffuse particulars’ arose. Second, however, this integration must not take place in such a way as to conceal the inevitability of its ultimate failure. Works of art, in other words, ‘must not erase the fractures left by the process of integration, preserving instead in the aesthetic whole the traces of those elements which resisted integration’”. If we transfer Osborne’s interpretation of Adorno’s aesthetics back to the philosophical

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232 These two aspects are the main thesis of their book. Horkheimer, Adorno; *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, p. 16.

sphere can be used to delineate the demythologization of Hegel: in its own effort to depict and take control over reality reason is smart. It presupposes unity in an anticipation of a universal consummation of the real. Yet, because there is no univocal consummation of reality, reason’s smartness immediately also becomes its own curse. It moves around at random and must admit its own affinity to simple imitation and fallible interpretation.

The dialectical and aesthetic understanding of reason in Adorno’s social philosophical reversal of idealism could again be said to consist of the utopian vision of the real (as a reconciled whole). However, the negative function of utopia, its role a solely theoretical horizon, implies that realization of the utopian vision is permanently postponed. Given this aesthetic relativization of rationality, a problem appears in connection to Hullot-Kentor’s programmatic approach “back to Adorno” (in which this section begun). In a certain similarity to Lyotard, Habermas and Jameson, Hullot-Kentor’s strategy promotes a tendency to isolate the notion of dialectical reason and the notion of the whole: that emphasis makes Adorno problematic in the present debate, which doubts the whole. My interpretation of Hullot-Kentor is perhaps diametrically opposed to the intentions of his “back to Adorno”, but the far-reaching consequences of the contemporary insights into the social situation and thought in its “weak” forms are ignored (or at least runs the risk of being ignored) in his account. If one takes the perspectives of, on the on hand, what I have called a social philosophical hermeneutic and, on the other hand, the analysis of thought and its relation to the interesting and constructive aspects of the “postmodern condition”, one can say that “back to Adorno” is only an adequate device as far as one is prepared to constantly revise Adorno in face of the present; move forward towards a changing Adorno, as it were. Forward to an Adorno beyond the already outworn present. Adorno’s thought, viewed as a social philosophical hermeneutic does not allow any strong exclama-

234At this point, every detailed interpretation is obliged to introduce a complete argument concerning the role of aesthetic and music in Adorno’s philosophy. However, due to the aim of this preparatory interpretation, this obligation will be dispensed with in accordance with the comments in the introduction, see p. 5.
tions “back to...”, certainly not with reference to itself. “Forward to Adorno” would then mean to have power to resist the temptation of one strong and stable interpretation of Adorno (ignoring the fruitless but tempting siren call: “back to..., back to...”) at the same time as one was criticizing any narrow delineation of Adorno that intends to judge him solely on the basis of the present and fashionable. The Sociologist Stephen Crook argues that “there should be no ‘Adornoism’”. And he continues, the “nature and extent of Adorno’s claim to attention must always be contingent on the degree to which his work can illuminate contemporary developments in culture polity and society”.

I want to add that Adorno’s claim to attention also must be contingent to which degree it can illuminate the uncertainty of the future in light of the past and the present. Thus, a thinkable motto for a hermeneutical reading of Adorno coincides to some extent with the content of this thought: resistance to simplifications without simplistic framework and “-ism”.

Final Impotence: Vague Ontology and Weak Thought

What resources do we need to contemplate further on that evasive motto? Neville’s “vagueness” and Vattimo’s “weakness” might be helpful. But, is not Neville’s “system” incompatible with Adorno?


236Cf. the last sentence of the quotation in note 77 (this chapter).

237In relation to Hegel’s philosophical style Adorno comments on vagueness. “Vagueness, something that cannot be eliminated in dialectic, becomes a defect in Hegel because he did not include an antidote to it in his language, although in other respects, in the subject matter of his philosophy, with its emphasis on and ultimately celebration of all kinds of objectivity, he provided it liberally (109). (emphasis added)
Even though the basic intention of Adorno’s theory was to provide a suitable **theoretical critique** of the situation in which it was developed and not an explicitly systematic discourse, I think one can argue that the outcome can be likened to a “systematic” approach if this concept is specified along the lines of Neville.

However, to be able at all to speak about systematic thought in relation to Adorno one have to be very cautious. I will therefore begin with some considerations on Adorno’s understanding of a good thought practice. In a famous text called “The Essay as Form”, written sometime in between 1954 and 1958, Adorno proposes what can be called an open and therefore **good philosophical form** compared to a closed systematic form that prescribes reduction. In this actual text, the “essay-form” is suggested as the form **par excellence** for expressing advanced philosophical and theoretical reflection. Adorno wants a form that can match the **depth** of thought. “Thought’s depth depends on how deeply [wie tief] it penetrates its object [Sache], not on the extent to which [wie tief] it reduces it so something else”. According to Adorno, systematic thought reduces thought to the formal structure of a presupposition, devoid of the philosophical content that its concepts “pretend” to bear.

In relation to what have been said in the previous sections, Adorno’s argument concerning the depth of thought can be interpreted in two opposing directions. The first is **realist** and the second is **aesthetic-hermeneutic**. (1) A realist could argue that the notion of ‘depth’ in the quotation indicates something about a possibility to **grade** thought. A “deep thought” penetrates reality in a **better** way than...
a “superficial thought”. To be able to define thought as more or less valid, one has to admit that there is something to measure thought against, that is, reality. Thus, given this interpretative direction, the quotation seems to presuppose a quite classical realism and, therefore, Adorno can be classified as an ordinary modern thinker.

However, in the broader context of Adorno’s thinking, this seems to be a very unsatisfactory interpretation of the intention of “The Essay as Form”. (2) The alternative interpretation of the quotation focuses on the “object” and how that concept is used in the passage. If one connects the aesthetic implications of the question “what form?” to the understanding of the object, some interesting conclusions can be drawn. An aesthetic penetration of an object is not the same as an expression of objectivity in the sense of “corresponding to reality”. Rather, the aesthetic depth of a presentation—a philosophical text or artwork—is related to the degree of theoretical consciousness and theoretical relevance (primarily critical) that the form of presentation in itself reflects. In accordance with this, the essay as non-systemic and open form of account, gives the very expression both an internal and an external shape that is “deeper” in the sense of “more adequate” in relation to the aesthetic and historical nature of reason itself. In a reflection called “Adorno as Lateness Itself”, Edward Said relates to this aesthetic interpretation of Adorno’s philosophical practice. “What Adorno does is theoretical, that is, his construction isn’t supposed to be a replica of the real thing, which had he attempted it would be a little more than a packaged and domesticated copy. The location of Adorno’s writing is theory, a space where he can construct his demystifying negative dialectics”.

240This might very well be the right way to interpret Karl Popper’s angry criticism of Adorno’s social theory. The question of realism explains why he was so contemptuous to Adorno’s evasive maintenance that the whole is inscribed in the parts: Popper viewed Adorno as a bad realist. Cf. also the naive comments on Adorno in Karl Popper; “The Frankfurt School: An Autobiographical Note”, pp. 167-170 in Marcus, Tar; The Foundations of the Frankfurt School.

Another, overtly hermeneutical passage from “The Essay as Form” helps us to continue questioning the closed system. “The merely individual experience, in which consciousness begins—since it is closest to itself—is itself mediated by the all-encompassingness of historical humankind. To insist that the historical humankind is mediated and one's own experience is unmediated would be mere self-deception on the part of an individualistic society and ideology. Hence, the essay”, which in contrast to the systematic account is mediated by definition, “revises the opinion that was has been produced historically”, that is, that which cannot be treated as immediate, “is not a fit object of theory”.

In consonance with the Frankfurt School’s general attempt to specify and satisfy a need for critical theory in opposition to traditional theory (see the introduction), Adorno can here be said to reorganize the traditional *ordo* of epistemological reflection (realist/idealist biases) by criticizing the notion of individual experience in the light of the social, but also—and this makes the argument so difficult—in the same dense context, by criticizing the idealist notion of the subject in light of the object and the realist notion of the object in light of the subject. This double, social philosophical and hermeneutical, movement consists of at least four interconnected lines of thought.

(a) Like many philosophical hermeneutes (certainly Gadamer) Adorno understands the individual experience as mediated by the very historicity that underlies human self-understanding and thus understanding in general. The ignorance of this fact—the decentration of human subjectivity—is therefore nothing but a socially

supported lie in the context of an ideology that proposes atomistic individuality as something natural.

(b) However, according to Adorno, even the inverse of the subject–history relation must be emphasized, namely, that the very historicity, which mediates individuality, in itself is mediated and not a solid ground for a new theory of immediacy. The idea of a factual mediation of historicity is implicit in the actual passage and I want to make it into an explicit challenge to ontological hermeneutics. When Adorno argues that “the essay challenges the opinion that was has been produced historically is not a fit object of theory” he opens for the following interpretation: (1) the fact that experience is historically produced and (2) the fact that the this historicity of experience also is mediated historically indicates (3) that historically produced entities, rather than ahistorical axioms and reasons, are fit objects of theory. Both the subject and the social realm mediate the historicity that in its turn mediates the subject and the social realm. Individual subjectivity, social objectivity and subjective–objective history mediate each other and are all secondary. Here Adorno’s difference in comparison to ontological hermeneutics becomes obvious. Historicity does not a priori promote Verstehen. Instead, the consciousness of historicity as something mediated draws Dasein back to its own mediated, individual, social and historical interiority, which does not constitute any disclosure of the truth of the whole.243

(c) The general ideology of individuality, bespoken in the quotation, is a symptom of a objective tendency within the social and historical reality that can be connected directly to the rationalist and idealist principle saying that the subject (as a coherent and atomic whole) has an objective potential to control its own environment. In

243“Dasein is always already called understanding. This is to say: Particulars are mediated in a context of meaningful relationships which enables one to find one’s way in a world; the facts we come upon are so interpreted as to allow practical orientation. Inasmuch as Heidegger draws on the old theory of lumen naturale he means that wherever Dasein is, therefore is, of course, at one stroke, also illumination.” Rüdiger Bubner; “On the Ground of Understanding”, pp. 68-82 in Brice R Wachterhauser (ed.); Hermeneutics and Truth (Northwestern University Press: Evanston 1994), p. 76. Cf. Gadamer; Truth and Method, pp. 304-307.
resemblance to the analysis of “The End of Reason” and “On Popular Music” in chapter one, Adorno here argues for a kind of irrational “ideological idealism” inherent in the very core of modern rationality itself. The critical consciousness, which exposes the illegitimacy of this idealistic trait, descends from hermeneutical and dialectical questioning of traditional notions of objectivity. Therefore, it is possible to say that the decentration of the subject occurs with reference to the object because it is the object (Sache) of thought that is mutilated by the coercive force of the ideological idealism. Without the negative consciousness of the trans-subjective moment of the object, the movement towards decentration comes to an end.

(d) However, as was implied in (b) above, also the opposite ignorance of the individual and the social as determinate mediators of historicity (an ignorance that traditional hermeneutics in fact shares with scientism) supports the same fundamental atomism, namely the realist notion of the object as something fundamentally graspable by means of separate intellectual efforts, no matter whether or not it is scientific method-procedures or hermeneutical Verstehen of an in-the-end-coherent historical whole, like the one proposed by Gadamer when he says, “I myself am not restricted by what I believe when I speak with others about something, (…) no one of us embraces the whole truth within his beliefs but (…) the whole truth can, however, embrace us both in our individual beliefs.”

Thus, as a consequence of a social philosophy of subjectivity, a decentration of the emphatic hermeneutical notion of truth (or for that sake the scientist notion of objectivity) can established through a form of reflection that is conscious of the very limits of reason without making those limits the systematic principle (cf. Kant). According to this fourfold interpretation of Adorno, the philosophical role of social subjectivity, is to lend voice to the object through an account that does not reduce things to pure (or abstract) subjectivity or to pure (or abstract) objectivity. In this context, the notion of the object as something trans-subjective must not be thought in terms of correspondence (realism), nor in terms of subjectivity (idealism), nor

244Hans-Georg Gadamer; “What is Truth?”, p. 46.
in terms of an overarching theory of historicity (phenomenological ontology).

However, the crucial benefit of rational systematizing and ordering of thought makes itself heard—even for Adorno. Without the essay as a kind of systematic form, these conflicting perspectives within reason itself could not be held together at all. For Adorno, then, the essay as a preferable alternative to rigid systematic accounts seems to capture the disintegration of thought without pushing it by force into illegitimate integration and systematic immediacy. “Not for nothing does the essay immerse—instead of reducing—itself in cultural phenomena as in second nature, second immediacy, to sublate \textit{aufzubehben} the illusion of immediacy through the essay’s perseverance”\textsuperscript{245}. This insight can be turned into a completely different terminology: the essay-form is capable of handling both the ontological and epistemological aspect of thought without satisfying its metaphysical and transcendental requirement.

Practically speaking, Adorno’s understanding of the form of the essay as an adequate form for presentation of the results of advanced reflection implies that the usual sense of the words ontology and epistemology must be bracketed. Given the framework of the essay-form, philosophy cannot be presented as comprehensive, systematic thought. However, the essay as form enables another understanding of systematic reflection that can be likened to Neville’s vague system. For Neville, the notion of vagueness has a very decisive role for what a systematic appearance of thought can be. “A vague system is not by itself a neutral language to which a poem, a scientific theory, and another philosophy all may be reduced. Nor can the system be substituted for any of these things. But the system provides a language such that, when the poem, scientific theory, or other philosophy are

\textsuperscript{245}“Nicht umsonst versenkt er [der Essay], anstatt sie zu ‘reduzieren’, sich in Kulturphänomene als in zweite Natur, zweite Unmittelbarkeit, um durch Beharrlichkeit deren Illusion aufzuheben.” Adorno; “Der Essay als Form”, p. 28 (Et. p. 19, translation modified and clarified).
re-expressed in the system’s language, the important things in them that are expressible do not vitiate what is expressed”. 246

This open system-structure could very well be compared to Adorno’s understanding of the totality of the essay as something distinct from the totality of traditional coercive system-thinking. It is especially as critique of a seamless, original, ahistorical, Archimedean, and neutral structure of thought that Neville’s notion of system and Adorno’s notion of the essay-form converges. The essay does never confuse human thought with something original, it never present things as immediate, never as perfect creation ex nihilo. “Neither does the essay itself—always directed towards something already created—appear as creation, nor does it desire something all-encompassing, whose totality would resemble that of creation. Its totality, the unity of a form developed from within itself, is the form of a non-total, a totality that not even as form maintains the thesis of the of the identity of thought and object; the thesis it rejects with reference to content [die sie innhaltlich verwirft].” 247 The affinity between Adorno and Neville at this specific point becomes even more obvious if one juxtaposes Neville’s ambition to “re-express” objects in the “language of the system” and Adorno’s “non-total unity”, always directed towards the “already created”. The rough concept “re-expression” can never lead the imagination to something unmediated or original. To “re-express” is to shape, not to create. Furthermore, a “non-total unity” can never promote unequivocal reduction to itself; to if it did it would be the same as saying that everything is reducible to something particular.

246Neville; The Highroad around Modernism, p. 149.
247“Weder tritt der Essay selbst, stets bezogen auf schon Geschaffenes, als solche auf, noch begehrt er ein Allumfassendes, dessen Totalität der der Schöpfung gliche. Seine Totalität, die einheit einer in sich auskonstruierten Form, ist die des nicht Totalen, eine, die auch als Form nicht die These der Identität von Gedanken und Sache behauptet, die sie innhaltlich verwirft.” Adorno; “Der Essay ald Form“, p. 26 (Et. p. 17, emphasis added, translation modified). In this context, “Creation” should be understood as something original, originary and tied to a perfect creator, in contrast to something secondary.
Neville goes on with his polemic against traditional systematic thinking in an almost Adornian fashion, “vague philosophic system does not presuppose that the world is a unity (...).” For Neville, unity is adequate as means for the intellectual establishment of determinate relations between entities, not as ontological or metaphysical presupposition. The two circumstances (a) that Adorno still speaks about unity and (b) that Neville continues to call good thinking “systematic thinking”, taken together with the fact (c) that these two circumstances unites the two thinkers, can explain the suspicion that radical protagonists of the postmodern (like Lyotard) direct towards thinkers like Neville and Adorno—notwithstanding the obvious consciousness of final impotence that their models represent: it seems that they do not “wage war on totality”. In the last instance, Adorno and Neville appear to refer to a solid subject, whose rationality is nuanced but, nevertheless, based on a unity-model of reason.

Is this imagined Lyotardian critique relevant? Do not Neville and Adorno, in the last instance, presupposes strong subjects? Given both the relation between Adorno and Neville, and Neville’s sharp critique of the postmodern pathos of “play” and “flux” as a fundamentally totalizing pathos in itself, one can argue that Adorno’s own critique transcends the fallacies that, for example, Lyotard fears when he argues that the Frankfurt School “blurred” its own critical model. Lyotard argues, “we cannot conceal the fact that the critical model in the end lost its theoretical standing and was reduced to the status of a ‘utopia’ or ‘hope’, a token protest raised in the name of man or reason or creativity, or again of some social category (...) on which it conferred in extremis the henceforth improbable function of critical subject”. In the face of Neville’s critique, I conclude that what Adorno had in mind was not a critique in extremis but a critical approach that was guided, not by a transparent and auto-creative language (which also can be seen as a positive utopia), but by a negative utopian horizon, a genuinely “theoretical” horizon of the “non-total”.

248 Lyotard; *The Postmodern Condition*, p. 13.
249 For an interesting account on the dream of universal language see Anders Jeffner; *Theology and Integration* (Almquist & Wikselli Stockholm 1987), pp. 9-17.
This would mean that Lyotard’s critique misfires in relation to Adorno precisely because it ignores the relativity that the negative utopia introduces both in relation to the concept of the subject (the origin of critique) and in relation the whole (the object of critique). The negative utopia (which is an theoretical, not factual, representation of a reconciled relationship between the universal and the particular) can only be thought of in connection to the subject if the subject is thought of as destabilized through its encounter with the negative utopia. The negative utopia is a representation of subjectivity’s longing for objectivity, that is, subjectivity’s theoretical projection. Subjectivity’s own theoretical insight into this is destabilizing for the subject as epistemological category. In Adorno’s words, the essay-form “complies with the critical idea that the human being is no creator and that nothing human is a creation”. This can be interpreted to mean that human achievement is secondary and must resort to a context in which it appears as secondary and not as original. The essay as form is the form of presentation that suits a destabilized self-consciousness that wants to present the theoretical vision (the negative utopia) as an interpretative frame for its own possibilities, for its own “project” (to use hermeneutical jargon). It is a form that enables the subject to see that the horizon is discontinuous and, thus, that Horizontverschmelzung is meaningless in itself. The subject needs to be theoretically active in every synthesis, and within the frames of the essay-form, it cannot escape this insight. “The essay has to enlighten a partial feature of the totality—chosen or given—without asserting that the totality is actually present”. Thus, taken together, the subject, the whole, the essay, the vague system and the

250 Negative utopia can also be described as the theoretical consciousness of the object as something trans-subjective that must be taken seriously precisely as trans-subjective, that is, not forced into the immanence of the moulds of the subject.


252 Der Essay muß an einem ausgewählten oder getroffenen partiellen Zug die Totalität aufleuchten lassen, ohne daß diese als gegenwärtig behauptet würde.” Adorno; “Der Essay als Form”, p. 25 (Et. p. 16, translation modified).
negative utopia can be seen as a mode of interpretation that falsifies Lyotard’s qualification of critical theory as a simplistic, suspicious version of a self-confident subjectivism.

However, another objection could be posed. In *Dialectics of Enlightenment* the systematic traits are not at all shown by the form of the attempt, which is fragmentary and thus reflects a non-totalizing ambition. Yet, in that work, there is a systematic ambition present in the very thesis, it reflects an ambition to comprehend the very structure of thought’s relationship to the social and historical whole. It wants to “prepare the way for a positive notion of enlightenment (…)”. Such strong ambitions could very well be said to indicate a relapse into traditional theory. 

The critical reader might take the expression “positive notion” and view it as a sign, revealing a traditional and naive optimism. However, instead of thinking of the “positive notion of enlightenment” as a re-establishment of a grand theory that proceeds from a certain epistemology or ontology, one have to view it as an appeal to the remnants of epistemology and ontology, to systematic thought in a “vague” sense. Adorno starts in a theoretical context from which it is possible (not secure) to move forward, towards questions concerning reality, knowledge and interpretation. This understanding of vague systematic thought implies that theoretical attempts to grasp any object is always made by a heuristic introduction of adequate but finally insecure assumptions that deviates strongly from the stable and axiomatic claims that regulates traditional systematic ambitions. Thus, it makes sense when Neville relates his idea of a vague system to a notion of the world as ontologically vague. I interpret his whole ambition to end up in a decentration of ontology, a *Verwindung* of ontology, as it were, in a notion of “vague ontology”.

Although there are differences, “vagueness”—delineated as above—strongly reminds us of Vattimo’s expounding of Heidegger’s

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254 Neville; *The Highroad around Modernism*, pp. 125-126.
ontology in the direction of weakness and nihilism. Vattimo claims that

a [m]eaning for history can be re-appropriated only insofar as we accept that it has no metaphysical and theological weight and ‘essential’ value. Nietzsche’s accomplished nihilism also fundamentally possesses this meaning, for the call that comes to us from the world of late modernity is a call for a taking leave. This call echoes in the work of Heidegger, who is too often and too simplistically considered the philosopher of (the return of) Being. Yet it is Heidegger who speaks of the necessity of ‘forgetting about Being as foundation’ if we are to ‘leap’ into the abyss. Inasmuch as this abyss calls us from the generalization of exchange-value (…), however, it cannot be identified with and deeper meaning with overtones of negative theology.\textsuperscript{255}

Given the previous analysis of Vattimo, the quotation seems to argue that meaning—the only meaning which possibly can be ascribed to thought within a context of a nihilism (and the call for giving up any essentialist project)—is always a weak form of meaning. However, as a weak form of meaning, it cannot be equated with mere meaninglessness. Weak thought is far from both natural and negative theology, the nihilistic strive to forget about “being as the ground” might be construed as an emerging insight into the very boundless boundlessness of reality (or hyperreality) that in itself is without essence, but, which always turns out to be the essential counterpart to human interaction in thought and practice. Vattimo’s nihilism thus seems to be a nihilism that liberates thought from its own tendency to make strong essentialist claims.

In connection to the rejection of essentialism, Vattimo also discusses the crisis of modernity in terms of a crisis of essentialist humanism. To think consequently in un-essentialist mode means—as far as humanism draws on essentialist conceptions of the human—to

\textsuperscript{255}Vattimo; \textit{The End of Modernity}, pp. 28-29.
think anti-humanism (that is, to un-think absolute human stability and prosperity). If thought wants to stay within the confines of weak thought, then the only adequate mode of “humane” thought becomes an anti-essential reflection on the human existence as the essential object for all human reflection.

However, given this delineation of anti-essential and consequently anti-ontological thought, a question appears that is very important in face of Adorno’s severe critique of Heidegger’s ontology. Vattimo is dependent upon Heidegger and one can rightly ask what Heidegger’s ontology actually is if it should not be viewed a philosophy of “being as ground”. Vattimo argues that

Heidegger connects the crisis of humanism to the end of metaphysics as the culmination of technology and the moment of passage beyond the world of the subject/object opposition. In this way he does not only confers a systematic dignity on those ‘radical’ intuitions—exemplified by the works of Spengler and Jünger—concerning the crisis of humanism (...), but, in a more far-reaching way, constructs the theoretical basis for on the one hand situating the crisis of humanism as it occurs in the institutions of late modern society, and on the other for taking leave of subjectivity developed in important strands of twentieth century thought, in a relation which is not simply polemical.²⁵⁶

In the first place this can be understood as a definitive move away from ontology, because it proposes an interpretation of Heidegger that does not seem to have room for any variation on the notion of being as ground. At a second glance, though, it might be held as a radical, but nevertheless, correct, variation on ontology precisely because it attempts to say something concerning the human without resorting to humanism in the narrow sense of that concept, that is, to cultural subjectivism or mere indignation on behalf of a categorical imperative to which life in society not really conforms. As theoretical

²⁵⁶Vattimo; *The End of Modernity*, p. 45.
approach, based on the *question* of being it includes the humane without the ambition to provide an essential humanism; a *Verwindung* of narrow humanism. “If the liquidation of the subject at the level of social existence may be given a meaning that is not merely a destructive one, this may be achieved through ‘the critique of the subject’ that the radical theories of the crisis of humanism—especially Nietzsche’s and Heidegger's—have developed”.\(^{257}\) Here Vattimo’s idea appears to be in accordance with the interpretation of Adorno that I discussed in relation to Neville. It conforms to a context of vague ontology, an ontology *without* the foundationalist conception of “being as such”. Therefore, it becomes very confusing when Vattimo continues by saying: “The destiny of human existence in technological society, if it is not viewed through a theoretical critique of the subject, can only appear as—and be—the inferno of a wholly administered and regulated society as it is described by the Frankfurt School”.\(^{258}\)

The combination of the question of how to clarify Adorno in the context of Vattimo’s interpretation of Heidegger, and Vattimo’s own critique of the typically Adornian conception of the whole as the untrue (that is, the social whole as a basically perverted and unredeemed totality), puts the previous argument at a real test. Are the connections between Adorno’s philosophy and weak thought that I put forward in the preceding paragraphs only passing fancies? Or, is Vattimo’s understanding of the theory of the Frankfurt School and Adorno too simplistic compared to his qualified “left-wing” interpretation of Heidegger?\(^{259}\)

Vattimo claims that he has found essentialist traits in Adorno. He holds as the profoundly humanist and subjectivist mode of Adorno’s thought is revealed as essentialist because his “work is emblematic of a way of thinking that sees the task of twentieth-century thought as one of resistance to the attacks launched against man’s humanity—still defined in terms of subjectivity and self-consciousness—by the

\(^{257}\text{Vattimo; }\textit{The End of Modernity, }\text{pp. 45-46.}\)

\(^{258}\text{Vattimo; }\textit{The End of Modernity, }\text{p. 46.}\)

\(^{259}\text{Vattimo; }\textit{Beyond Interpretation, }\text{pp. 11-14.}\)
rationalization of social labour”.²⁶⁰ Is this judgment right? I believe that Vattimo has a good point. As have been said, Adorno’s thought clearly echoes Hegelian-Marxist idealism, and it was formed in a period of outer chaos, with the consequence that it had to rely on some problematic residuals from older liberal and post-liberal themes. Moreover, if one is critical to the roughness and indignation of Adorno’s language, one could perhaps even maintain that there is an illegitimate foundation on which indignation proceeds, a certain metaphysical residual, which suffocates all attempts to turn away from essentialism.

Yet, all such critique of Adorno must be prepared to meet a counter-criticism that argues for a different understanding, both of the Hegelian-Marxist heritage and the tenor of indignation. In a very important sense, Vattimo misunderstands the whole ambition of Adorno’s social philosophical speculation by ascribing to his thought a simplistic, positive appeal to resistance, related to a positive notion of the subject and of *humanitas*. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the problem essentialism is touched upon in the context of political engagement. Irrational moments in simplistic “humane” activism based on simplified notions and principles (such as an essentialist view of humanity) are depicted in a way that strongly deviates from Vattimo’s scurrilous portrait of the Frankfurt School. In an invented polemical argumentation Horkheimer and Adorno expresses the problematic consequences of “strong” thought.

*(The “would-be-wise” person of common sense to the critical theorist:)*

—You consider the existing power to be unjust, do you, therefore, think that no other power than chaos shall prevail?
—You criticize the uniformity of life and progress?
—Shall we light wax candles in the evening, shall our cities to be full of stinking refuse as they were in the Middle Ages?
—You do not like slaughterhouses, shall society from now on eat raw vegetables?

²⁶⁰Vattimo; *The End of Modernity*, p. 45.
(The critical theorist to the reader)
—However absurd it may seem, the positive answer to questions such as these are met with sympathy. Political anarchy, the cultural reaction from the art-industry, radical vegetarianism, and deviant sects and parties have (…) persuasive power. The doctrine just needs be general, sure of itself, universal, and imperative. Intolerable is the attempt to break away from the ‘Either-Or’, the mistrust for the abstract principle, perseverance without doctrine. 261

This critical theoretical attack on self-confident reflection—which is a critique of the reduction of sound thought to a simple choice between complete resignation or hard-headed activism—points ahead to a more nuanced picture of Adorno’s “humanism” than the one Vattimo displays. Adorno can neither be viewed as a pessimistic and reactionary critic of progress (a cliche that still is popular among Adorno’s critics), nor as an idealistic heir of Hegel. Rather than being a self-conscious and self-confident critique of the present social order, based on certain principles, the true errand of his thought is to balance on the breaking point between the insight into the im possibility of a transparent self-consciousness (that is, the liquidation of subjectivity) and the evident and pressing need for “responsible”

strategies of thinking the political reality. With other words, one can say that Adorno on many occasions pleads for a Verwendung of subjectivity, by turning the self-confidence of the simplistic logic of opinion-activism into radical question without support from any “third” position. According to this interpretation, Verwendung comes very close to “perseverance without doctrine”.262

From the perspective of the Heideggerian nexus of technology and metaphysics Vattimo continues, “[t]o see technology in its relation with this”, that is, the Heideggerian, “tradition means not to permit it to impose its own version of the world as the ‘reality’, which would posses the same peremptory and still metaphysical nature as that of the Platonic ontos on. A subject which can no longer be thought of as a strong subject is indispensable if we are to deny the grandeur of the metaphysical ontos on to technology, its productions, its laws, and the world it creates”.263 Again, this equals, rather than contradicts, my interpretation of Adorno as restless critic of the present on behalf of a negative utopia, on behalf of a vision of an impossible possibilities of reconciliation. Or, to play with hermeneutical terminology: on behalf of a vague being that only can be depicted vaguely and therefore constitutes a vague horizon, which, taken for itself, appears to be radically meaningless and in need of constant critical reinterpretation.

This leads us back to Neville. As was suggested in the previous chapter Neville appears to have a double aim in mind when he develops his notion of systematic philosophy. On the one hand, he is trying to overcome the unfruitful dichotomy between postmodernism and modernism and, on the other hand, he is trying to find a constructive strategy to be able to say something at all about reality (which in principle is equivalent with saying something about hyperreality) without presupposing what reality is.

Now it is relevant to ask: What are the specific aims of Adorno’s critical theory compared to this? Adorno tries to overcome the hypostatization of the ontological division between spirit and nature.

262 The last words of the previous quotation.
263 Vattimo; The End of Modernity, p. 47.
The object of the critique is the seductive and deceptive “meta-narrative”, which unexpressedly presupposes a certain innate reason—or a spiritual realm—in enlightened history. In that sense, his theoretical ambition appears to be more similar to a purely deconstructive intention than to Neville’s attempt to create systematic spaces for reflection. Furthermore, as have already been said, Adorno’s critique of reason in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* clearly avoids resorting to any kind of fixed ontological conclusions, and it therefore becomes strikingly incapable to present a constructive alternative beyond its critique (as many later theorists have noticed, especially Habermas).

However, the interpretation of Neville’s vagueness initiated above in connection to Vattimo’s weakness, gives a hint to a more advanced reading of Adorno. Neville’s notion of a system is neither an epistemological construction nor an ontological foundation, but a kind of methodological norm. Furthermore, it is an incitement neither for a metaphysical natural theology, nor for a negative theology; although it lends voice to a kind of “negative ontology”. Vague ontology means that the world as a whole is vague and that concrete accounts on specific issues always are permeated with faultiness. One can say what the world not is, and, therefore, vague ontology and the consequences of weak thought can be named “apophatic ontology”.

Irrespective of the daring terminology, to assume that Adorno’s theory can be viewed as an apophatic ontology makes much better sense than to construe it as sheer pessimism. Pessimism needs certainty to be pessimistic; vague ontology rejects all certainty. For Adorno, read through the frames of Neville and Vattimo, total being is neither “this” nor “that” because “this” and “that” is precisely an

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265 Cf. Pizer; “Jameson’s Adorno”, pp. 137-139.
266 Cf. Vattimo; *Beyond Interpretation*, p. 13. Vattimo would supposedly dislike the term apophatic ontology. Yet, it is not to be confused with apophatic (or as Vattimo’s translator prefers to say ‘apophasic’) theology, although it is a use of ‘apophatic’ that is analogous to the function it has in the constellation ‘apophatic theology’. 
instant moment of reality and not reality in se. To say that the world is ontologically vague by means of an apophatic ontology means in fact that the world is neither “this” nor “that”. It means that the world is finally incomprehensible and thus neither “this” nor “that”. The “is” in “is not” invites to a dialectical form of explanation and understanding that can be made intelligible in relation both to the vague system and to the essay form as adequate form for reflection, and, the “not” in “is not” obliges one to keep on to the insight that dialectical theoretical explanation and understanding “is not” actually adequate for exhausting the world.\(^{267}\)

Even though the former chapter prohibits generalization about postmodern theory, one can say something about the difference between “apophatic” (vague, weak) strategies and the popular understanding of what a postmodernity means for philosophy. The apophatic ontology does not negate ontology completely. \textit{Verwindung} of metaphysics does not negate metaphysics like an \textit{Überwindung}. This makes understandable why many accounts on, for example, post-structuralist theories, positive to immanent critique, such as Derrida’s, is both similar and radically dissimilar to Adorno’s employment of a related immanent critique.

Unfortunately, the thought of postmodern thinkers like, for instance, Derrida is too complicated to discuss on this limited space but I will relate to Derrida through popular postmodern readings of him. Popular expositions of Derrida maintain that reality as such “is” \textit{diffèreance} in analogy with a text and the other of the text.\(^{268}\) For Adorno, neither reality, nor texts “are not” completed wholes, not even total in terms of \textit{diffèreance}. In popular postmodern theory (perhaps more in connection to Wittgenstein and Lyotard than Derrida) the cultural world “is” a cluster of differing language games. In the context of Adorno’s critical theory the social world “is” an antago-

\(^{267}\)“What marks out Adorno from almost all of his contemporaries is the view that philosophical reason is inadequate to the task of understanding the world.” O’Connor; “Adorno and Heidegger and the Critique of Epistemology”, p. 59.

nistic totality, which also means that it “is not” reducible to a systematic whole—not even to a closed notion of irreconcilable language games. For Derrida, pointing out difference “is a strategy without finality”, while negative dialectics for Adorno is a strategy under the aspect of final impotence. \( ^{269} \) These different nuances in the two traditions do not provide us with arguments for a complete denunciation of all connections between, for example, Derrida and Adorno, but the nuances are still very important. On the one hand, they show the reason why Adorno is more likely to be called a modern thinker than, for instance, Derrida. But, it also indicates that postmodern thinkers real concern is often overshadowed by an opportunist jargon. Adorno is intricate, he discusses totality in negative terms as something that “is not…”, while in postmodern jargon totality “is” not. \( ^{270} \)

Given my interpretation in the present and the former chapter, Neville’s critique of the modernist/postmodernist scheme can be seen as radically postmodern, although in a wholly different sense than for example Kvale’s or Mark C Taylor’s. Neville transcends relativism (which, in the end, like skepticism, needs something stable to lean on) by focusing on the fallibility, engagement and tolerance instead of strictly formal issues. A notion of the world as ontologically vague maintains that a systematic delineation of the world is not a conclusive representation of the world. From this follows that the theoretical endeavor must be treated as an ever-changing interpreta-

\( ^{269} \)Derrida quoted in Varadharajan; *Exotic Parodies*, p. 4. If the immediate continuity between theory and praxis is the utopia of an absolutist mentality, one can say that Adorno acknowledges final impotency by saying: “Aktionismus ist regressive. Im Bann jener Positivität, die längst zur Armatur der Ichschwäche rechnet, weigert er sich, die eigene Ohnmacht zu reflektieren.” Adorno; “Marginalien zu Theorie und Praxis”, p. 776 (Et., p. 273).

\( ^{270} \)I say jargon, because the great thinkers, like Derrida is too often misinterpreted their thoughts are forces into clichés, see note 17, chapter two. Cf. also the approach in the peculiar book Nots, Mark C Taylor; *Nots* (The Univesity of Chicago Press: Chicago/London 1993).
Neville argues that “the special function of systematic philosophy is to create perspectives from which what otherwise would be private becomes public”. This is a consequence of the understanding of the system as engaged, “systematic method (...) engage important matters”. Thus, the apophatic ontology is not negative, it searches for explanations on lower levels than the total by saying what the totality “is not” this or that. I do not say that Neville can be equated with Adorno no more than can Vattimo or Heidegger, however, Neville’s vagueness and Vattimo’s weakness opens constructive perspectives for interpretation of Adorno. If one is cautious enough to see that Adorno’s thought withdraws from final representation, the ambivalence of the modern/postmodern can function as the widest frame for qualified interpretations of his texts.

However, it is also important remember the relative difference between Adorno’s time and our time. Although our situation is crude, Adorno’s situation was in many ways outright traumatic. To plead for Adorno is therefore also to plead for the return of a grave seriousness based on shocking experiences and materialized in extremely ambitious and difficult texts. “For Adorno (...) dialectics is on the one hand (as he wrote) the wrong state of things, and, on the other, dialectical research is the capacity to give shape in the particular to this state of things. To the extent Adorno succeeds in this his writings are neither a metaphor, a method, a perspective, or a system”.

Summation: Frames for an Intellectual Frame of Mind

To be able to conclude this chapter and finish off the preparatory interpretation of Adorno, I will contemplate on the heading of the

271Later on Adorno argued that “Seen from the viewpoint of the concrete possibility of utopia, dialectics is the ontology of the wrong state of things” (“Angsicht der konkreten Möglichkeit von Utopie ist Dialektik die Ontologie des falschen Zustand”). Adorno; Negative Dialektik, p. 22 (translation modified, Et. p. 11).

272Neville; The Highroad around Modernism, pp. 142.

273Neville; The Highroad around Modernism, pp. 152.

274Hullot-Kentor; “Suggested Reading: Jameson on Adorno”, p. 171.

Can the “result” of this and the former chapters be called frames? If so, in what sense? How does these frames relate to the other key words in the sub-heading? I admit that the metaphorical language of “frames” and “focal points” might be a bit evasive when it comes to evaluation. Yet, I am assured that they are good metaphors also for a summation and entwinement of the various threads that my investigation has uncovered. What I mean with “frames” are heuristic conceptual entities that can be helpful for those who want to approach Adorno’s thought. Defined as such, the frames that my study proposes as candidates for theology-related interpretations of Adorno—besides “social philosophical hermeneutic”—are “philosophizing in the mode of final impotence”, “methodology vacillating on the border between ontology and epistemology”, “vague systematic thought”, “weak thought”, and “apophatic ontology”, etc. Each one of these themes can be called “frame” because each one can be used heuristically to take a comprehensive grasp of Adorno’s thought without final pretensions.

One of the central words in the sub-heading is “theology-related”, which I discussed in the introduction. I will now clarify its function again in the light of the accomplished investigation. The proposed frames are clearly related; their different focuses are not wholly detached or unconscious of each other. This can be explained by the fact that the analytical and interpretative perspectives have been chosen in a process of constant feedback from the idea that the frames must be possible to relate to theological reflection. Although this does not mean that the frames are directly applicable in a theological context, it indicates that the frames have a common trait that should be favorable for theological discussion of Adorno.

This brings three other concepts from the sub-heading—“social philosophy”, “hermeneutic” and “focal points”—to the fore. If “theology-related” in itself could mean very much, the optical metaphor specifies it. As the study have pointed out, the frames must be thought of as relevant for theology-related readings with a specific
qualification, namely, in the extension, as it were, of one ray of light refracted in two different lenses; the lenses of hermeneutics and social philosophy. I claimed in the introduction that hermeneutics is indispensable as equipment for theology, and because of that, the initial applicability of my frames for theology-related readings of Adorno must be viewed as a dependent upon the focal point of the hermeneutical lens. However, the critique of hermeneutics that have been carried through by the introduction of the notion of social philosophy indicates a certain challenge to the shape of theology’s hermeneutical resources. The critical moment, founded on Adorno’s thought, is thus the focal point of the other lens.

The critical, social philosophical lens has a different focal distance and a different focal length than the hermeneutical lens (to continue the optical metaphor). In optics, this would mean that various combinations of the two lenses produce different and partly unexpected refractions. The image that appears on a screen after the lenses have been combined and a light-beam has shone through them is the actual “frame” that states an interpretative point of departure. Likened to such optical images, all possible frames have clear connections because they are the result, not of many, but of two specified foci. However, the frames should nevertheless always be viewed as “different refractions” because there is never an absolute relationship between two different lenses and one screen. One can always vary the horizontal distance and vertical relation between the lenses and the distance between the lenses and the screen and thereby get an endless number of different refractions on the screen; upside down, magnifications, reductions, etc.

Therefore, in relation to theology, the frames proposed by this study should be taken as heuristic instruments that can be developed further, reshaped, extended by other intellectual resources, and rejected if they happen to fall outside the theologically meaningful. In the last instance, the nature of the possible theology-related readings, towards which this study has gravitated, cannot be settled as one univocal context. Moreover, I think that if theological reflection on Adorno is to be good reflection it has to make an analogous expli-
cation of frames for reading theology in an Adorno-related context. I hope I have made clear that the frames proposed here are no automatic system that can be used to generate adequate readings of Adorno. The frames are developed in a weak mode of thought and they cannot be anything than weak in themselves. In the last instance, the heuristic method of this study coincides with the weak way of describing thought that the investigation has presented. Only as means for a weak philosophy, which some critics might hold as outrageous means for philosophy, could the frames be full of disordering blessings for theology.
5. CONCLUSION: APPROACHING THEOLOGY

In the introduction I implied that the study will abstain from substantial definitions of theology. I will not transgress that limitation in this concluding section. However, to be able to end the study constructively, and point ahead to a possible application of the arguments given in the previous chapters, I will depict one of the specific theological contexts of problems that have been crucial for the choice of material, the formation of the problematization and argumentation of the study. The concluding remarks in this section should thus not be seen as an endpoint, but rather as an example of a possible a starting point for a further discussion of theology-related matters within the frames provided by the two foci, hermeneutics and social philosophy.

The concrete issue I will approach here is the problem of the relation between general and particular discourses (or rationalities) and, more concretely, the treatment of this problem in recent Swedish philosophical theology. The status of the argument in this section is philosophical but, if philosophical theology is understood as a discipline trying to make room for an intellectually justifiable theology then, perhaps, the following comments can be viewed as philosophical theological comments.

During the seventies and eighties, Anders Jeffner has developed an epistemological concept of theological integration. Theological integration is a cognitivist approach that opts for a field of rationality in which theology, viewed as a particular discourse, can partake as inte-

grated and legitimate in terms of the general academic discourse. In the frames of Jeffner’s concept of rationality, the basic idea is that theology is possible to view as intellectually continuous with philosophy of science, empirical scientific language and other, more particular languages, such as ethics. From this position of integration, Jeffner has pointed out different tasks for academic theology as research area. When it comes to systematic and dogmatic theology he has proposed a qualification of an enlarged concept of knowledge and experience that enables theology to cling to the basic rationality of empirical science and still uphold a certain particularistic and revelational moment within the scientific realm of academic theology.\footnote{Anders Jeffner; \textit{Vägar till teologi}/Paths to Theology (Verbum: Stockholm 1981), p. 9; 82-101.}

Jeffner has qualified his notion of a shared field of rationality in terms of human experience and the intellectual procedures that are at work in all decent attempts to order the world of experiences. Behind the intellectual order, there lies a certain common rationality based on so called “rational reasons” and “fundamental rules”. \textit{Rational reasons (rationella skäl)} are reasons, which are acceptable according to the \textit{fundamental rules} that one has arrived at in an attempt to bring order in one’s own world of experiences. \textit{Fundamental rational reasons} are arguments that one brings forth in the process of accepting certain fundamental rules for the world of experiences”.\footnote{Rationella skäl är sådana skäl som är godtagbara enligt de grundregler man kommit fram till när man försökt skapa ordening i sin upplevelsevärld. Grundläggande rationala skäl är de skäl man anför för att anta vissa grundregler för upplevelsevärlden.” Jeffner; \textit{Vägar till teologi}, p. 17 (italics added to the words “fundamental rules”).} The common rationality must always be taken into consideration. Thus, to be able to integrate, for example, theological propositions with empirical propositions in an academic context, one has to widen scope of the set of scientific fundamental rules from being a class of rules that prescribes strictly empirical experiences to a class of rules that justifies a larger concept of human experiences. According to Jeffner, in arguments concerning God, one has to extend “the
amount of fundamental rules and maintain that there are several other kinds of rational reasons than those who usually are used in science.²⁷⁸

However, according to Jeffner, to allow modification of the field of knowledge does not imply that all experiences could be given the status of knowledge by referring to an extension of the amount of fundamental rules. Addition of fundamental rules cannot be done arbitrary. On the contrary, Jeffner employs strict criteria to extend the notion of legitimate knowledge. He argues for five especially qualified fields of experiences, which are so overtly persuasive that he holds it to be problematic not to view them as experiences that founds some kind of real knowledge.²⁷⁹ Thus, integration means the attempt to relate theological “knowledge” to general criteria of scientific knowledge, (a) without resorting to a complete revision of those extra-empirical experiences that does not fit into strict empirical frames, and (b) without resorting to the inevitable isolationism of a theology that poses its own criteria of knowledge.


²⁷⁹The fields (which I not intend to criticize here) are (1) mystical experiences of unity, (2) experiences of persons (I-Thou experiences), (3) experiences of relations of human kindness, and (4) ethical intuitions. These fields generate fundamental rules that enlarge the ordinary field of legitimate knowledge in an intellectually legitimate way. Jeffner; Vägar till teologi, pp. 49-58. (5) There is also a fifth field that has a slightly different status; it is called fundamental pattern. A fundamental pattern is a psychological and/or social attitude, which forms the intellectual character in a way that concerns the status extra-scientific explanations. There are at least two rational attitudes, one optimistic and one pessimistic way of pre-experiential ordering of the experiential realm. In relation to the optimistic attitude that views the world as open for theistic impulses Jeffner argues that “we have opened the door for a legitimate use of religious language which is in accordance with its factual use among religious men. We can make truth-claims for problematic sentences and see them as statements, with a localization in the real world”. However if we relate to the pessimistic atheistic attitude “this is impossible”. Jeffner; The Study of Religious Language, 131 (cf. the same book 105ff).
However, like all attempts to develop universal criteria and, in particular, criteria for a rational discourse, Jeffner can be criticized from standpoints of pragmatism, hermeneutics, discourse analysis, and poststructuralism. In a study on the reception of Karl Barth’s theology in Sweden, Ola Sigurdson has made an attempt to solve some of the problems concerning the universally or broadly human discourse and particular discourses (like Christian theology) by “bringing down” the problem from Jeffner’s level of universal rationality to the level of perspectivist positions in dialogue; that is, a “particular universalism”. Sigurdson understands particular perspectives (like Christian) and broadly human perspectives (such as a scientific rationality) as equally contingent and imperfect perspectives. “I do not intend to argue that the ‘Christian’ shall be inaccessible to external criticism. My point is that the ‘broadly human’ must not made inaccessible to a criticism from the ‘Christian’ (or another perspective)”.

Sigurdson is therefore suspicious of all forms of epistemological criteriology that gives precedence for a certain kind of universal rationality. He is thus also suspicious of Jeffner’s “universalist” strategy of integration. “In the Uppsala-theology”, that is, Jeffner et al.,

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280 Ola Sigurdson; Karl Barth som den andre: En studie i den svenka teologins Barth-reception/Karl Barth as the Other. A Study in the Barth Reception of Swedish Theology (Symposion: Stockholm/Stenhag 1996), pp. 293-332. Sigurdson himself calls his position “particular universalism” (partikulär universalism), which is neither skeptical nor relativist, see further pp. 219-322.

281 “[Därmed] avser jag inte att argumentera för att det ‘kristna’ skall göras oåtkomligt för en yttre kritik. Min poäng är att det som är ‘allmännmänskligt’ inte skall göras oåtkomligt för en kritik av det ‘kristna’ (eller ett annat perspektiv).”

282 Although he does not want to equate his position with any absolute particularism, Sigurdson refers to radically particularist thinkers—Foucault, Lyotard and Rorty—as indispensable resources for critique of universalism. The movement from epistemological, transcendentalist and criteriological thinking is motivated with reference to Rorty’s pragmatic “philosophy as hermeneutic” (in contrast to philosophy as epistemology) where consensus has taken the place of correspondence. Sigurdson; Karl Barth som den andre, pp. 304-306. For the connection between
“the broadly human have been transposed to a determinate rationality, expressed in analytic-philosophical terms.”

According to Sigurdson, Jeffner’s “fundamental rules” are shaped in a way that in the last instance gives priority to the empirical scientific discourse of rationality. The “broadly human” is equated with a model of empirical rationality that can be extended and discussed from within, but never questions as such. Sigurdson does not reject the communicative idea behind integration as such, but he accuses Jeffner for proposing a rationality that trivializes theological expressions (such as Karl Barth’s) and reduces them to something problematic in face of the broadly human. He wants to avoid a homogenization of which he suspects Jeffner’s scheme.

Sigurdson’s suspicion focuses on the fact that “a theology that in a relatively uncomplicated way refers to ‘the broadly human’ or ‘the universal’ runs the risk of giving reductive exposition of theologies or other thought that cannot be subsumed under the accepted understanding of ‘the broadly human’ and ‘universal’”. His alternative thinking can be likened to communicative perspectivism. Theology must avoid “false humbleness” and assimilation with the generally accepted discourse and be prepared to communicate without discarding itself.

Another attempt to overcome the strong demands of metatheoretical universality that seems to be at the bottom of Jeffner’s theory of integration is provided by Bengt Kristensson Uggla. In pragmatism and hermeneutics, see Richard Rorty; Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature (Princeton University Press: Princeton 1979), pp. 357-365.

It is not too far-fetched to argue that Sigurdson in this context has Jeffner’s critique of Barthian types of revelational theologies in fresh mind. See Jeffner; Vägar till teologi, pp. 66ff.
connection to a profound discussion of Paul Ricoeur’s critical refinement of hermeneutical philosophy he tries to describe the task of theology as distinctively related but not reducible to other scientific expressions. Like another theologian active in the Swedish context, Werner Jeanrond, Kristensson Ugga talks about an “epochal movement” of hermeneutics in theology and theology-related discourses. As such, hermeneutics relates theology explicitly to the human, provides it with a motive for communicating with other discourses without the attempt to establish objectivist criteria for communication.

According to Kristensson Ugga, theology—viewed as a particular discourse—must go beyond relativism and objectivism and enter a communication that dwells at the bursting point. This means that communication is possible as such, but not possible to foresee through the molds of a meta-language. Thus, instead of referring to a universal rationality or universal criteria, he proposes a position that relates the possibilities of reasonable theology to a hermeneutic perspective determined by interpretative universals, such as anthropology and creation. “In my investigation of Ricoeur’s project I have underlined that his reflections concerning hermeneutics and fantasy have anthropological conditions, which, in their turn, have been shaped by a creational perspective (skapelseperspektiv) of life and human being. However, I have also constantly emphasized that he never makes the thought of creation into a pure philosophy of the spontaneous (ommedelbarhetsfilosofi). In Ricoeur, the perspective of creation (skapelseperspektivet) is always mediated and includes therefore a latent insight about the necessity of interpretation.”

286 Bengt Kristensson Ugga: Kommunikation på bristningsgränsen/Communication at the Breaking-Limit (Symposion: Stockholm 1994), pp. 475-582. Cf. Jeanrond; Theological Hermeneutics, p. 181. One has to notice the internal relation between Sigurdson’s and Kristensson Ugga’s positions given the hermeneutical undercurrent in Sigurdson’s secondary sources, see note 8 in this chapter.

287 “I min undersökning av Ricoeurs projekt har jag understrukt att hans reflexioner kring hermeneutiken och fantasien har antropologiska förutsättningar, vilka i sin tur formats av ett skapelseperspektiv på livet och människan. Men jag har också hela tiden betonat att han aldrig gör skapelsetanken till en ren omedelbarhetsfiloso-
Conclude

stand this line of thought, there is a possible but fragile universal perspective that can be established anew through communication; there is an anthropological and vague ontological basis for communication, consisting of themes such as finitude, creativity, unforeseeable surplus of meaning and existence.  

Thus, Kristensson Uggla’s “methodological” strategy of hermeneutical communication has universal, epistemological and ontological connotations because it is directly linked to “a question of culture and therefore something one already is a participant of”. He goes on by saying, “Christianity always appears in the form of concrete reality. Hermeneutics and anthropology are (...) not independent notions (storbeter) but limit-concepts, they are two methodological constants that uncover dimensions in the present, or historically given, phenomenon (...) we call Christianity”. Even though the last quotation appear to be a bit obscure (one can indeed ask what difference there is between independent notions and methodological constants), the basic point seems to be the following: what normally has been thought of as universal propositions—for, on the one hand, an independent theology and, on the other hand, a universal rationality of academic reflection and science—has to be exchanged for a hermeneutical distinction, aware of the placedness, locality and historicity of discourses (in this case Christianity) within the realm of human experience as such.

Thus, Kristensson Uggla’s evaluation of Jeffner’s theory of integration becomes more embracing than Sigurdson’s, he seems to be ready to give credit to Jeffner’s ambition to open for epistemologically oriented choices of intellectual perspectives within a broader

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288 Kristensson Uggla; Kommunikation på Bristningsgränsen, p. 534.
289 Kristensson Uggla; Kommunikation på Bristningsgränsen, p. 362.
290 “det (...) är i form av konkret verklighet som kristendomen uppträder. Hermeneutik och antropologi är (...) inte självständiga storbeter utan gränsbegrepp, de är två metodologiska konstanter som frilägger dimensioner i det aktuella, eller historiskt givna, fenomen (...) vi kallar kristendom.” Kristensson Uggla; Kommunikation på Bristningsgränsen, p. 539.
field of intellectual rationality. However, in the last instance, what Kristensson Ugglå himself, like Sigurdson, is calling for is a hermeneutical integration where no meta-language has preponderance.\textsuperscript{290} It is interesting that both Kristensson Ugglå’s and Sigurdson’s interpretations of Jeffner in the end wants to make way for anti-analytical interpretations of Jeffner, who himself always has argued within analytical frames. In the last instance, I am not so sure that Jeffner’s “common ground” can be separated from the analytical argument concerning “fundamental rules” and “fundamental rational arguments”, which seems to be intimately tied to a the idea of an epistemological meta-language for a universally rational discourse.\textsuperscript{291}

To summarize this brief sketch: Sigurdson’s philosophical argument is based on pragmatic and poststructuralist motifs underlining the profound difficulties of any universalizing integration by means of analytical meta-language, and Kristensson Ugglå’s is based on a hermeneutical argument that understands the task of the humanities and theology as something different than empirical scientific work and therefore prefers to argue for an integration in terms of conflicting but also ontologically related interpretations in the realm of the humanities. Thus, both Sigurdson’s and Kristensson Ugglå’s “objections” to the epistemological-criteriological approach of Jeffner draws on very important insights from the various branches of speculative philosophy of the twentieth century.

However—and I am now approaching an \textit{Anknüpfungspunkt} to my own hermeneutical perspective, partly presented in this study—both Sigurdson’s and Kristensson Ugglå’s arguments seem to exclude at least one fundamental perspective that this study wants to add to the discussion, namely the hermeneutic perspective of \textit{critical social theory}.\textsuperscript{292} If I am allowed to exaggerate some traits for the sake of mak-

\textsuperscript{290}Kristensson Ugglå; \textit{Kommunikation på Bristningsgränsen}, p. 507.
\textsuperscript{291}See Jeffner; \textit{Theology and Integration}, p. 7.
\textsuperscript{292}These sketches should of course not be seen as comprehensive evaluations of Sigurdson and Kristensson Ugglå. There are several traits in Kristensson Ugglå’s analysis of Ricoeur that very well could be related to the perspective I am now to
ing my point visible, I will insist that Sigurdson’s type of communicative perspectivism has a tendency to ignore the fundamentality of the persuasive power inherent in broadly legitimate social constructions, such as the scientific rationality of Western academic life. This social power has a real, significant and—in a certain sense—legitimate, influence on the processes of formation and development of other related discourses. What I mean is that general and prevailing “perspectives” (or discourses)—no matter if it is the accepted academic rationality, a culturally established system of norms, or basic ideas in a framework of successful political ideologies—appears to have a far more profound regulating influence on the processes of legitimization and justification of other discourses than Sigurdson’s perspectivism allows for. An optimistic communicative perspectivism (I view his particular universalism as a profoundly optimistic theory), defined in consonance with the quotations from Sigurdson, needs to bracket the most aggressive implications of a critical social theory and substitute it with an ideal of communicative rationality. 293 Although there are clear differences between Sigurdson’s communicative perspectivism and, let’s say, Habermas’s famous version(s) of communicative rationality, one can conclude that the idea of a rationality, based on an ideal situation of intellectual and linguistic exchange between different perspectives cannot avoid to be stricken from behind by the problem of metadiscourses. 294 Paradoxically, thus, Sigurdson critique of metadiscourse directed to Jeffner’s theory of integration partly hits his own theory.

present. See, e.g., the passages concerning utopia, Kristensson Ugglä; Kommunikation på Bristningsgränsen, p. 380.

293 See, e.g., Sigurdson’s reference to Nicholas Rescher’s “perspectivist rationalism”. Sigurston; Karl Barth som den andre, p. 322.

294 Habermas does explicitly relate his position to other transcendentalist positions, see further Rorty; Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature, pp. 380-381. However, even Rorty’s pragmatism can be understood as based on a communicative meta-principle. His notion of poetic and edifying philosophy is clearly built on an optimistic principle of “the other” as a path to clearer and more comprehensive coherence. See, e.g., pp. 365ff.
Again, Kristensson Ugglä’s deconstruction and reconstruction of communication, tends to underestimate the problem of the social in about the same way. Like Sigurdson he uses various forms of critical hermeneutics and in the choice of hermeneutical resources he goes farther than Sigurdson and argues (with Ricoeur) for a psycho-social “hermeneutics of suspicion” to be able move away from the naiveté of, for example, Gadamer’s hermeneutics. There is no doubt that this philosophical position is one of critical theory. Yet, to a certain extent, that critical theoretical force is neutralized by the “essentialist” tendencies, which inhabits all hermeneutical strategies beginning in ontology, anthropology, conversation or communication.

My own constructive approach is therefore intended to correct the problematic harmonizing tendencies in the approaches discussed so far. I cannot present a systematic account of my alternative here but two important arguments will be presented. (1) Integration is necessary for good theology and it has always to be accomplished under the actual social pressure of social totality understood as an antagonistic totality. (2) A particularistic theological critique of the illegitimacy and iniquity of the social reality has to be executed from within the context of the actual social pressure by means of a critical social theory, not by means of a rejection of integration.

\[295\text{See, e.g., Kristensson Ugglä; Kommunikation på Bristningsgränsen, p. 360. When I say “essentialism” it is very important to distinguish what I have in mind from the notion of essentialism that, e.g., Rorty proposes as the problem of philosophy-as-epistemology. Rorty proposes hermeneutics against every struggle for a neutral framework (that, according to him, is inherent in epistemological philosophy). Rorty; Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature, pp.315-316. What I mean with “essentialism” is anthropological notions of the human and the human language that does not consider the deep ideological and social theoretical problems that notions such conversation, communication raises. Thus, when I say that there is “essentialist tendencies” in all hermeneutical strategies beginning in anthropological theories or ontologies of conversation I do not mean that, e.g., Rorty’s hermeneutic theories is an essentialist theory but that his strategy can be accused of having essentialist tendencies, although this accusation must be expressed along other lines than those Rorty himself views as typical for essentialism.}\]}
(1) The first argument can be explained further by saying that no discourse can ignore the relative stability of the prevailing academic discourse when it comes to matters of making claims to knowledge. No matter how “wrong” it happens to be, the given rationality is the rationality that judges other presumptive candidates for truth claims in society. In this sense Jeffner’s development of a meta-perspective (or meta-language) for the sake of integration of theological rationality within the realms of the given academic rationality is quite ingenious.

(2) However, Jeffner’s has not developed his theory by keeping this social logic before his sight and thus the theory is vulnerable to the social pressure and risks compliance with the broad academic rationality. There is no necessary link between (a) the insistence on the relative stability and significance of a given rationality (discourse) and (b) adherence to the values and forces behind that rationality. With the help of Adorno’s critical theory and the frames I have proposed for a contemporary interpretation of Adorno, the rationality that Jeffner rightly presupposes as an inevitable condition for theology can be termed and exposed as the socially constructed category it actually is. In a democratic society there seems to be room for a theory that observes both the progressive, regressive and oppressive forces behind all social constructions (the academic rationalities included). Integration in the frames of Adorno’s critical theory can make up for the shortage of political reflection. Given the social critical theory, the dialectic between the particular and the universal (observed by all three of the theologians I have discussed) the particular discourse can be a critical force within the given rationality without proposing any neutralizing, too optimistic and perhaps even reactionary epistemological or ontological essence.

In relation to the academic task of theology as a part of the humanities, I believe that Jeffner’s theory of integration is a very promising candidate for being the best structural alternative that is available. Without a profound adherence to the constructed rationality of the secular academia, no one will take theology seriously as academic reflection. Jeffner’s extension of the field of knowledge-founding
experience is a strong challenge to the exclusively empirical rationality that so easily is thought of as the paradigm for academic reflection, and it is made in terms of the given rationality and thus it has the potential of being progressive. What is lacking in Jeffner’s theory of integration is thus not a knowledge of the fruitful hermeneutical or communicative character of the humanities and theology (such perspectives are in fact clearly apparent in his texts296), but a critical theoretical horizon that can lend it a more definite subversive force; a consciousness of the “antagonistic character” of academic rationality. A consciousness that can challenge and even defy the partly unfounded claims made by a socially legitimized rationality from within. Such a critical perspective does fall prey neither to epistemological essentialism (nor foundationalism), nor to communicative essentialism.297

Both Sigurdson’s and Kristensson Uggla’s approaches are very helpful for the sake of delineating problems within Jeffner’s theory and pinpoint the hermeneutical questions. Their texts contain healthy suspicion towards rationalistic reductionism and epistemological essentialism, but they lack the social theoretical means to execute their suspicion in a full-fledged way. In the last instance Kristensson Uggla and Sigurdson, as well as, Jeffner seem be “too satisfied” with the present state of mind, too satisfied with the given rationality. They are too satisfied with the rational frames that threaten to stifle their ambitions. Integration must not be exchanged for critical resistance but completed through an immanent critique. In the last instance, I view the need for social theoretical hermeneutic as a recognition of the political dimension inherent even at the most fundamental level of all academic reflection theological considerations included.

To summarize, in reference both to my own argument and to Kristensson Uggla’s and Sigurdson’s careful criticism of assimilation as key to integration I want to say that the universalizing criteriology

296See, e.g., the notion of fundamental pattern, Jeffner; Vägar till teologi, pp. 58-63.

297Cf. the two notions of essentialism that I mentioned in note 21 above.
of Jeffner’s theory of integration also tends to miss the critical perspective of an objective social irrationality (also permeating academic rationality). In this specific way, Jeffner’s approach inhabits problems connected to ignorance of the social category. Sigurdson and to a certain extent Kristensson Uggla are able to pinpoint some aspects of this problem but not to avoid it. The general lack of critical social philosophical perspectives in these different and partly opposing positions have inspired me to underline the importance of the significant but invisible (or at least very evasive) implications of the politically brimful category of the social. I propose social philosophical hermeneutics as means for socially legitimate (but of course weak) theological reflection.

As I have tried to show in the course of this study, there is a political task inherent in the very notion of reason and reflection. Theology, has to be attentive to this problem which clearly is a hermeneutical problem. Although this study does not fall under the category of philosophical theology, it can be seen as introducing frames for a theology-related reading of Adorno. It presents material that can bring new momentum into an already inventive Swedish context of philosophical theology. Thereby it can broaden the discussion and redirect it to the question of the political. Not, however, to the po-

298Invisible: In many ways “feminist theory” must be viewed as paradigmatic for all seriously political reflection. Although it is always wrong to treat feminism as one movement, there is a theoretical trait common to several feminist perspectives; namely the fact that there is a need for heuristic critical hermeneutic categories that can handle both the empirical problems of oppression and inequality and the theoretical, social and historical basis for these problems as such. For many feminists it is of great importance to use tentative categories, which makes the invisibility of oppression of women visible. Such heuristic categories are pivotal to bring forth and illuminate problems that traditional androcentric theories by definition are literally unable to grasp. This heuristic aspects of feminist theory is parallel to the heuristic aspect of the category of the social in this study. The social is taken into consideration as a speculative heuristic hermeneutic category that makes visible things and conditions that other theories such as perspectivism, philosophical hermeneutics and theories concerning universal scientific criteria cannot handle effectively enough.
itical as an independent theme, but as an essential matter on every level of theological reflection, even the most fundamental.
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