

Adorno's Positive Dialectic

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Adorno's Positive Dialectic

Introduction

Our aim in *Adorno's Positive Dialectic* is quite distinct from our Prelude, which served merely an introductory role. We wish herein to focus upon a central issue that has as yet not been satisfactorily addressed in Adorno scholarship, namely, the nature and extent of his utopianism.

In Adorno's central text *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, he (with Horkheimer) depicts the central social problem of the twentieth century: the phenomenon of the decline of Western civilisation into Nazism in Germany. Adorno depicts this as the decline of enlightenment into 'myth'. In *Adorno's Positive Dialectic* we want to deduce Adorno's possible solution to this decline. In order to see this we first make a systematic analysis of Adorno's negative dialectic of enlightenment.¹ From deepening our understanding of why Adorno believes enlightenment fails, we are then able to understand how he might regard it as succeeding.

In *Adorno's Positive Dialectic*, the tone of our analysis changes considerably. In the main introduction and throughout the Prelude, we have examined Adorno's work from rather an epic perspective. We have swept through three centuries of German philosophy, from the eighteenth to the twentieth in Prelude I, and mapped concepts from two powerful traditions, the

¹ We need to take note of a few central features of Adorno's mode of philosophical expression. For Adorno, all understanding of our world is historically transmitted to us and therefore changes over time. This includes the very meaning of the concepts we use. He draws from this the conclusion that it is inappropriate to offer formal definitions of his central concepts. Adorno is at pains to avoid not only inappropriate determinacy in definition but also in the overall structure of theoretical understanding. When analysing his ideas, therefore, some commentators make an attempt to imitate his prose and style of thought. Herein, however, we attempt to provide a systematic exposition of Adorno's thought. This has the problem of being an instance of determinacy, which is exactly what Adorno seeks to avoid. However, as he expresses it: 'systems elaborate things; they interpret the world while the others really keep protesting only that it can't be done' (Adorno, 1973: 20 [ND 31]). In following the systematic approach I am true, at least, to this paradox.

Hegelian-Marxist and the Freudian psychoanalytic in Prelude II. However, henceforth we make a shift to a far more intimate relationship with Adorno's work. In order to construct *Adorno's Positive Dialectic*, we examine in very close detail our pivotal text Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. As well we look to Adorno's *Negative Dialectics*, *Aesthetic Theory*, and *Minima Moralia*, again paying close attention to textual detail. Part I, Chapters 1–4 constitute our analysis of Adorno's depiction of enlightenment's failure. Part II, Chapters 5–9 constitute our deduction of how Adorno might see enlightenment succeed.

PART I

NEGATIVE THESIS

The Decline of Enlightenment

INTRODUCTION

In Part I of our monograph which focusses upon Adorno's negative thesis, expressed in his *Dialectic of Enlightenment*¹, we analyse why Adorno believes enlightenment fails. The central figure to whom Adorno is indebted for this analysis is Sigmund Freud, hence here we unravel the Freudian dimension to Adorno's depiction of enlightenment's failure.

The 'architecture' of the negative thesis is as follows. Chapter 1 depicts the failure of the enlightenment, linking Adorno's views on a Freudian based notion of subjectivity, the acquisition of knowledge and the enlightenment's aims. Chapter 2 focuses upon issues in Subjectivity. Chapter 3 explores the notion of knowledge acquisition. Chapter 4 looks at Adorno's own 'negative' solution to enlightenment's failure; and points out the limitations of this.

ENLIGHTENMENT'S FAILURE

Before embarking on the specific chapters of the negative part of the monograph, let us clarify Adorno's thesis about enlightenment's failure. We have introduced the main details of this negative philosophy of history in Prelude I. Here, however, let us remind ourselves of the main points.

Adorno in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* believes the following. Enlightenment sees itself as having transcended myth; as having overcome myth's *negative* features of animism, immaturity, domination, fear, barbarism and

¹ We discuss Adorno only, rather than Adorno and Horkheimer, even when depicting their coauthored text, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. This is not to detract from Horkheimer's contribution, but is because our claim only extends to Adorno for our overall thesis, the negative as well as the positive dialectic: we do not wish to enter into claims about Horkheimer's own views.

regression. According to Adorno, the entire self-conception of enlightenment is formed in opposition to myth².

Adorno believes that enlightenment fails. He argues that this failure is of the nature of a regression to myth. The regression of enlightenment into myth is what the enlightenment itself would conceive of as a regression into its absolute opposite and thus a sign of complete failure. It is a regression that for Adorno encompasses *all* aspects of enlightenment³.

Adorno's project, as we know, is an analysis of how and why the enlightenment regresses to myth. In order to assess this, Adorno first establishes what the enlightenment regards as its aims. These are best depicted by Kant's verbalisation of (historical) Enlightenment. Adorno explains how the central aim of the enlightenment goes hand in hand with a series of other aims; maturity, freedom, security, peace, and progress (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1979: 81 [DA, p. 100]). The central aim, upon which all these others depend, is however, the attainment of knowledge and reason⁴. These should not be dependent upon authority, status, prejudice, or opinion but should be gained through the Subject's independent ability.

Due to the fact that Adorno views knowledge acquisition, and reason as the main aims of enlightenment, his analysis centres upon these⁵. His assessment thereby becomes one of how enlightenment *knowledge acquisition* fails. He addresses this problem in a very distinct way.

Adorno deploys Freud's ideas about 'Subjectivity', that is, about the *essential nature of the human mind*, to see what underlies the acquisition of knowledge. He then takes Freud's ideas and applies them to gain an analysis of the psychological undercurrents of enlightenment knowledge acquisition. In so doing, he accounts for enlightenment's failure.

Adorno's account of enlightenment's failure is in the form of a historical narrative. It is a historical narrative of the gradual collapse of the psychological undercurrent to enlightenment knowledge acquisition, and the corresponding collapse of enlightenment itself.

² See Prelude I of this book, pp. 63–69, for the details of Adorno and Horkheimer's definitions of enlightenment and myth.

³ Adorno uses the terms *enlightenment culture*, *the enlightenment*, and *enlightenment* interchangeably.

⁴ Note that Adorno refers to the enlightenment's mode of knowledge acquisition with the terms 'enlightenment knowledge acquisition', 'instrumental knowledge acquisition', 'conceptualisation', and 'conceptual thought'. He tends to vary his use of terms according to context. He uses 'enlightenment' as prefix when discussing knowledge in its cultural context, 'instrumental' as a prefix when talking about knowledge in relation to the instincts or the feature of control, and 'conceptualisation' or 'conceptual thought' when discussing epistemological details themselves.

⁵ We use the term conceptualisation in order to avoid the more common term, 'epistemology' as Adorno is against epistemology. See Adorno, T. (1982a).

1

The Decline of Subjectivity

The Instincts

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter we show how Adorno regards enlightenment as regressing into myth. We do so through an examination of Adorno's use of Freud. We see how Adorno deploys Freud to make a critique of the *instinctual* basis of enlightenment Subjectivity.

First we depict the relevant aspects of Freud's work on the instincts. Secondly, we show how Adorno uses Freud. We do this by following his narrative of the decline of enlightenment which we depict through four clear stages.

ADORNO ON FREUD

Adorno utilises Freud's ideas in order to interpret the enlightenment. Although deploying Freud, we have noted in our Prelude, that Adorno's relationship with Freud's work is complex; he both appropriates and criticises. We should note that in fact, the complexity of this relationship derives in no small measure from Adorno's view that Freud is deeply connected to enlightenment. There are two dimensions to Adorno's view of Freud in this regard.

First, Adorno considers that Freud most clearly represents the ideas of the enlightenment. That is to say, Freud is an instance of the general phenomenon of enlightenment which means that Adorno regards him as both inherently positive, in the sense of being in league with the enlightenment's *aims*, and inherently negative: he is part and parcel of the *failure* of the enlightenment.

Second, Adorno's ambivalence towards Freud has a further peculiarity. Not only is Freud intrinsically part of enlightenment culture but, in Adorno's view, Freud provides a conceptual framework through which to view enlightenment critically. This Freudian conceptual framework is ubiquitously employed by Adorno (often tacitly) and shall therefore be depicted here.

More specifically, in what follows we will interpret the way in which Adorno deploys Freud's ideas about the Subject's drives in order to see how Adorno believes that enlightenment regresses into myth⁶. Let us first depict the relevant aspects of Freud.

FREUD

All Freud's theorising centres around a perceived aim in human life, namely as with his Greek forefathers, that of 'happiness'. His theorising is directed towards an understanding of the psychological grounds of happiness in human beings. He claims, in fact, that for the individual to be happy and secure in the world he must attain *maturity*. Maturity is equated with the idea that the Subject will develop a full 'sense of self'⁷. The central focus of all Freud's theoretical work is, therefore, as we have seen in our Prelude, an understanding of how the individual develops to maturity and attains a full 'sense of self'.

Much of Freud's work explores the various stages of psychological development and the pitfalls that may befall the self if development towards a 'full sense of self' is prematurely arrested. Freud's theorising over his lifetime, as explained in Part II of our Prelude, can be read as consisting of five interconnected stages, of which, we are interested only in the theoretical stages that Adorno uses. Adorno looks to Freud's use of the notions of the ego and id drives, and to the concept of narcissism. Let us offer more detail about the former of these aspects of Freud here.

As we will recollect, at its initial most primitive stage, Freud conceptualises the self as a mere *pleasure-seeking* entity, which consists of various (uncontrolled) impulses for pleasure and for the avoidance of 'unpleasure'⁸. Later as the self develops it attains the faculty of *control*. However, an aspect of the uncontrolled pleasure-seeking part of the self remains and is referred to by Freud as the *id*. The other part develops into the mature adult's *ego*⁹. The ego and the id thus correspond to two very different aspects of the adult self (Freud, 1923: 364). The ego refers to the part of the self that is

⁶ Note that, as it would be contrary to Adorno's mode of philosophical expression, I refrain from defining the term 'Subject'. I use it, as he does, in the context of its historical transmission to us. However, I will note that Adorno tends to use 'Subject', 'self', and 'selfhood' rather interchangeably. The former is more common in historical, cultural and epistemological discussions whereas the latter two terms more commonly in psychological contexts.

⁷ Note that when Adorno borrows from Freud, he often discusses the notion of 'sense of self' without clearly distinguishing it from the notion of 'identity'. In Freud, 'identity' is a richer concept than 'sense of self', and incorporates many features that distinguish one individual from another, whereas 'sense of self' usually refers to the highly developed self in general – the 'foundation' for identity.

⁸ 'Unpleasure' is Freud's own term for the *opposite* of pleasure (Freud, 1911: 37).

⁹ Freud first mentions these categories in Freud (1911: 345) although his full exposition is given in Freud (1923: 357–408).

responsible for self-preservation, capable of control and gaining a sense of reality. The id is the more *primitive* aspect that is uncontrolled and concerned with pleasure¹⁰.

In his early work Freud was concerned with the *structure* of the self, using the terms ego and id to demarcate its principal regions. However, he later became concerned with the self as something *active* in the world and so was not content merely to talk about it as a *structure*, but began to conceive of it as something driven by *instincts*. He then used the concepts ego and id to discuss the self in instinctual terms¹¹.

Instincts, according to Freud, form the basis of the individual's action. They emerge out of the ego, when they are referred to as the 'reality principle', and out of the id, when they are referred to as the 'libido' (Freud, 1915b: 105–138).

An important characteristic of instincts is that they have an *aim* and their aim is an *Object*¹². Freud writes: 'the object of an instinct is the thing in regard to which or through which the instinct is able to achieve its aim' (Freud, 1915b: 119). The id seeks out an Object in order to satisfy its aim of pleasure, whereas the ego seeks out an Object in order to satisfy its aim of self-preservation. The Object of the instincts is predominantly external reality – although it can (*sometimes* abnormally) be the self or even 'illusions'¹³.

The satisfaction of these instincts upon their Object leads to different consequences and thus to a different kind of experience of the Object. For the *id* it leads to *pleasure*. It is important to note that Freud's notion of pleasure is somewhat distinct from his notion of happiness. Freud writes: 'happiness has a positive and a negative aim. It aims, on the one hand, at an absence of pain and unpleasure, and, on the other, at the experiencing of strong feelings of pleasure' (Freud, 1930: 263). As it is, the satisfaction of the ego-instincts that control the world to provide security these are the ones that secure an 'absence of pain', that is the negative aim of happiness. However, Freud goes on to say that security, whilst an essential *precondition* for happiness, is not actually the *content* of happiness itself. He writes: '[i]n its narrower sense the word 'happiness' only relates to the [positive form]' (Freud, 1930: 263). The positive form is the pleasure derived from the satisfaction of the id-instincts. The experience of *true happiness* in relation to an Object can only be achieved through the id.

¹⁰ Notice that for Freud the definition of the id is that it is intrinsically undeveloped – we will return to address this point in Chapters 8 and 9.

¹¹ These categories are not, of course, completely coterminous but I am not concerned here with the various distinctions. For these see: Freud, 1923 and Freud, 1915a.

¹² For Freud, the term 'Object' refers to things external to the sense of self, that is to things in the external world including other people, and also the self when it is converted into a 'thing' for contemplation, desire, etc. in contrast to selfhood as an 'experiential process'.

¹³ The term illusion will be discussed later in this chapter.

The id-instincts also secure a further crucial feature, for Freud, which is also an aspect of the notion of happiness. There is a kind of *meaning* in human life which is dependent upon the satisfaction of the id-instincts (Freud, 1930: 261–270). For instance, Freud argues that a vocation gains its meaning to the person employed in it through the pleasure he derives from it (Freud, 1930: 272). Art gains its meaning, Freud argues, through the pleasure derived from the experience of beauty, and another person becomes deeply meaningful because of the pleasure of sexual love (Freud, 1930: 270). This kind of meaning, for Freud, is distinct from that associated with knowledge, which relates to the ego instincts; see below. For example the kind of meaning that being in love with a person imbues them with is quite distinct from the kind of meaning contained in the knowledge of how the human organism functions (Freud, 1930: 261). Let us refer to these two distinct kinds of meaning as ‘Meaning A’, for that relating to knowledge (derived from the ego-instincts), and ‘Meaning B’, for that related to pleasure (derived from the id). An Object can only be experienced as Meaningful B, according to Freud, through the satisfaction of the id-instincts.

Happiness, for Freud, is comprised of both elements, pleasure and Meaning B, entailed by the satisfaction of the id-instincts. Furthermore, Freud claims, happiness is the goal of human life which is to say that happiness is an end in itself rather than a means to another end (Freud, 1930: 262). As Meaning B is an aspect of happiness, it is of the nature of being an end in itself. That is to say, the kind of meaning gained through the satisfaction of the id-instincts upon the Object is of the nature of experiencing that Object as meaningful in and of itself rather than in relation to any use or gain.

Let us now look at the ego. As we have seen, the ego, according to Freud, provides for *self-preservation*¹⁴. Self-preservation is achieved, according to Freud, by the ego’s capacity for control. The ego controls the self internally, balancing needs arising from the id and the body with external conditions for their satisfaction. It also relates to Objects in the external world in order to avoid danger and to gather what is necessary in order to satisfy internal needs.

Self-preservation is also, Freud claims, achieved through the acquisition of knowledge. The ego can glean all the information it needs from the world in order to procure survival. Freud writes: ‘Consciousness now learned to comprehend sensory qualities in addition to the qualities of pleasure and unpleasure which hitherto had alone been of interest to it. A special function was instituted which had periodically to search the external world, in order

¹⁴ Survival is one form of self-preservation, when self-preservation is understood as the preservation of the biological entity of the ‘self’ – that is, the self understood as dependent upon the body. Self-preservation can also be conceived of in a purely psychological sense in which the self is a ‘sense of self’ or ‘psychological identity’.

that its data might already be familiar if an urgent internal need should arise' (Freud, 1911: 37–38).

Freud's view of knowledge acquisition as stemming from the ego leads him to claim that knowledge acquisition consists of certain features. First, it means that knowledge acquisition is bound up with *self-preservation*. Second, it is bound up with the feature of *control*.

Third, it includes the further feature of *discrimination*: when the ego searches the external world for information it discriminates more than simply between pleasure and unpleasure. It discriminates between Objects in the external world.

Finally, Freud's conception of knowledge includes the notion of meaning, which we have termed 'Meaning A'. This is a 'categorising' kind of meaning. It occurs, according to Freud, within the propositional statements that form knowledge in so far as these statements refer to Objects in the external world¹⁵. So for example, 'knowing that' the earth orbits the sun is an instance of Meaning A. It is also related to the 'use', 'function' or 'instrumental' dimension of an item. Thus, 'knowing how' a radio works such that one can repair it is also an instance of Meaning A. Because it is related to instrumental activity, Meaning A can be considered as 'instrumental' in nature. This makes it contrast with Meaning B which is bound up with the end of happiness. We could say therefore, that Meaning A is a kind of meaning that is bound up with 'means' whereas Meaning B is bound up with ends. Furthermore, for Freud, only Meaning A is related to knowledge. Armed with this detail about Freud, we can now move on to see how Adorno deploys it to criticise enlightenment.

NARRATIVE OF DECLINE

Adorno deploys Freud to interpret the failure of enlightenment. This interpretation takes the form of a historical narrative. It is worth noting that Adorno's narrative of enlightenment has been criticised for being historically inaccurate; however, it is *not* intended as an empirical history, but as an 'ideal' one¹⁶. Further, Adorno's depiction is a critical theory, intended, in his words, to 'enlighten the enlightenment about itself' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1979: xi–xvii [DA 11–18]). (See Prelude I for more detail).

I divide this 'narrative' into four clear stages which I entitle, '*impoverishment*', '*fantasy*', '*totalisation*', and '*fragmentation*'. The categories are my

¹⁵ I wish to delimit my thesis such that it does not verge into a discussion of the notion of meaning. I am deploying this notion as secondary to that of knowledge acquisition which is central to my thesis.

¹⁶ There is a reductive commonplace about Adorno's concept of the enlightenment. For instance Young writes of: 'the obsessive iteration of 'modernity' as a watchword of enlightenment, which is to be found in writers such as Adorno and Horkheimer' (Young, 1998: 5).

own and should not themselves be read as historical or even temporally successive; they are an interpretative or heuristic device¹⁷.

Adorno's narrative of the decline of enlightenment to myth centres around a key character from Homer's *Odyssey* – namely Odysseus. Although initially somewhat surprising to see Odysseus appearing in a narrative about *enlightenment*, this is explicable in that Adorno regards Odysseus as the 'prototype' of the enlightenment Subject. Odysseus embodies many of the key characteristics of enlightenment subjectivity, such as the pursuit of certain *aims*¹⁸. For instance, Odysseus has a central aim. This is to attain security and steer his ship safely home to Ithaca¹⁹.

Impoverishment

The first stage of Adorno's critique of the enlightenment I term 'impoverishment'. This is a stage illustrating the first point of Adorno's critique. Adorno argues that the enlightenment, in order to achieve certain of its aims, generates a culture that is *impoverished* in certain ways.

Adorno displays impoverishment in enlightenment Subjectivity through a critical look at Odysseus. Odysseus sets out to attain his central aim: security. In order to achieve this, Odysseus, according to Adorno, has an absolutely paramount need to establish control. Odysseus needs to control his external world in order to avoid its dangers. He must also control his ship, his crew, and, as much as possible, himself. Odysseus' need of control over other Objects gives him the feature of an instrumental attitude towards the world, an organisational mind and an overall administering and administered 'personality'. Odysseus' trait of self-control leads Adorno to write that Odysseus 'is the self who always restrains himself' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1979: 55 [DA 73]).

There is a cost. Adorno reveals this through an analysis of Odysseus' encounter with the Sirens. In order to keep his ship on course, Odysseus must avoid being drawn in by the Sirens' singing (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1979: 32–34; 58–59 [DA 49–52, 77–78]). To achieve this he plugs the ears of the rowers so that they should not be exposed to the temptation of the song. Odysseus has himself tied to the mast, from where he can hear the song but is secure from the danger of responding to it. Adorno explains how Odysseus thereby oppresses the impulse for pleasure in his fellow humans – the rowers whose ears are plugged cannot even hear the song. Odysseus

¹⁷ I do illustrate these through examples from periods of the twentieth century: for instance, Adorno's view of Nazism, his 'contemporary American culture', and I add 'post-modernism'.

¹⁸ These are instances of the traits depicted and are not intended to be part of any causal claims. This is in contrast to any trait of mythic subjectivity wherein, for Adorno, there would be no aims.

¹⁹ For a distinct analysis of Odysseus' role in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, see Dews, P. (1995), pp. 231–33; or Whitebook, J. (1995), pp. 148–150.

also represses his own pleasure in rendering himself unable to jump overboard and submerge himself in the music. In being unable to respond to the Sirens, Odysseus receives only a diluted aesthetic experience. Both he and the rowers therefore (virtually) 'know only the song's danger and nothing of its beauty' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1979: 34 [DA 51]). The price of Odysseus' control, quite simply, is an impoverishment in the quality of pleasure.

The impoverishment of pleasure encompasses a loss of *sensual pleasure*: Odysseus cannot submerge himself completely in the sensuality of the Sirens' song. It also entails a restriction of the *imagination*²⁰. 'With the technical easing of life the persistence of domination brings about a fixation of the instincts by means of heavier repression. Imagination atrophies' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1979: 35 [DA 52–53]). Furthermore, the capacity for self-abandonment is lost. Whereas 'primitive man experienced the natural thing merely as the evasive object of desire . . . Odysseus . . . cannot yield to the temptation to self-abandonment' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1979: 35 [DA 52]). Finally, as the faculties of response to beauty decline, so too does *the actual existence of beauty*. The lack of appreciation of the Sirens' song results in a depreciation of the song itself:

Despite all the power of his desire, which reflects the power of the demi-goddesses themselves, he cannot pass over to them, for his rowers with wax-stopped ears are deaf not only to the demi-goddesses but to the desperate cries of the commander. The Sirens have their own quality, but in primitive bourgeois history it is neutralised to become merely the wistful longing of the passer-by. The epic says nothing of what happened to the Sirens once the ship had disappeared. In tragedy, however, *it would have been their last hour*. Adorno and Horkheimer, 1979: 59 [DA 78]²¹.

From Adorno's use of certain of Freud's ideas we can see an additional, related element to this cost. Pleasure, as we have seen, is accompanied by an experience of the Object as Meaningful B. With Odysseus' loss of experience of the world as pleasurable, there also comes a loss of experience of the world as Meaningful B. Odysseus thereby loses not only experience of the world as beautiful but also as, in part, meaningful.

Adorno depicts a clear tension in the story of Odysseus' encounter with the Sirens. In order to attain his goal of security, Odysseus must forfeit the pleasure and Meaning B of the Siren's song.

Adorno considers this anecdote of immense importance because it illustrates one of the central problems of enlightenment. Like Odysseus, the enlightenment Subject has a series of aims which include the attainment of security and peace. Like Odysseus, the enlightenment Subject, in order to achieve his aims, must exert control over himself, his fellow human beings

²⁰ 'Imagination' is used here in the ordinary sense of the word.

²¹ My emphasis.

and his external world. The enlightenment Subject is controlled, organised, administered and administering. That is to say, the enlightenment Subject relates to his world in an *instrumental* fashion.

Like Odysseus, the enlightenment Subject must also pay the price. As with Odysseus, he forfeits much of the sensual pleasure of the world. He also loses his capacity for imagination and self-abandonment. Moreover, the actual existence of beauty within his world plummets: the quality of art declines. Relatedly there occurs an etiolation in substantive meaning. The enlightenment Subject begins to lose a sense of the world as a meaningful place²².

Adorno believes there is a terrible tension contained in the enlightenment. In order to achieve its aims²³, the enlightenment Subject, like Odysseus, must relinquish pleasurable and substantive experience. The tension is felt and the price paid. As a consequence, Adorno believes the enlightenment Subject becomes *impoverished*.

By impoverished, Adorno means two specific things. First, that there is an impoverishment in the Subject's experience of reality. We can see this from Adorno's use of Freud. Adorno sees that pleasure in all its aspects is derived from the id-instincts. When, in impoverishment, the Subject loses the experience of pleasure he suffers a 'depreciation' of the id-instincts. The enlightenment Subject, like Odysseus, loses not simply pleasure, but pleasure in relation to reality: reality is no longer the Object of the satisfaction of the id-instincts. Thus reality as an Object of experience becomes depreciated.

Secondly, there is an impoverishment in actual Subjectivity. The stage of impoverishment consists of the withdrawal of the Subject's id-instincts from reality and any withdrawal of the instincts constitutes a regression for Freud²⁴. Adorno thus considers that impoverishment sees the onset of the regression of Subjectivity in one instinctual sphere.

Whilst the failure of enlightenment to provide pleasurable and substantive experience for the Subject may be regarded as an *external* criterion by which to judge enlightenment, the onset of regression thereby encountered marks a failure of an *internal* aim of the enlightenment, namely that of maturity. Impoverishment thus consists of an external problem and the onset of an internal failure.

Fantasy

The stage of impoverishment does not stand still. It heralds further decline: thereby emerges the stage which I have termed *fantasy*. Fantasy entails

²² In the sense of substantive meaning only.

²³ The fundamental ones of which are security and peace – fundamental because, Adorno argues, without security and peace, the enlightenment sees no possibility of any freedom or progress etc.

²⁴ The details of this will be elaborated in the next chapter.

further regression in Subjectivity and so consolidates failure in one of the enlightenment's aims – maturity²⁵.

'Fantasy' comprises a split in the Subject's instinctual relationship with reality. This occurs in the following way. In the stage of impoverishment, as we have seen, the Subject's ego-instincts are deployed upon reality while the id-instincts are 'impoverished'. That is, only *half* the Subject's instincts are actually engaged upon reality. What therefore happens to the other half? That is to say, what do the id-instincts now take as their aim?

Freud argued that all human instincts aim to have an Object upon which they can satisfy themselves. As a consequence of the increasing loss of reality as an Object for the derives, Freud explains a likely outcome: '[when] the connection with reality is . . . loosened; satisfaction is obtained from illusions' (Freud, 1930: 268). The id seeks an alternative Object. It turns to illusion.

Freud argues that the earliest stage of human development is that of infantile narcissism²⁶. In this condition the self, not properly formed, is unable to discriminate between the internal and the external. One aspect of this lack of discrimination encompasses an inability to discern between sensations derived from Objects in the external world and the self's own impulses or wishes. The self in such a primitive condition *simply wishes* and then satisfies its instincts upon these wishes. In the 'adult' self this process can also occur. The adult self *projects* its wishes outward. It either projects them onto an external Object 'converting it' into what the id would wish it to be, or its wishes reside within the imagination without forming an attachment to any external Object. The 'Objects' of these wishes are *illusions*. They are the Subject's projections generated from the id's own impulses then masquerading as an 'Object' in the external world. Illusion is a feature of a primitive stage of the self's development and any reversion to it in adult life constitutes a regression.

Following on from the stage of impoverishment, when the id can no longer satisfy itself upon the external world, is a stage characterised by the generation of illusions. We can term this the stage of 'fantasy'. In 'fantasy', the ego satisfies itself upon reality whilst the id generates its own illusions. Half of the self is thus engaged upon the world, half not. The self is split.

This split in the self's engagement with reality encompasses a regression. Half of the self, the id, in turning to illusion is *turning away from reality* and towards itself as its Object. Freud terms this condition narcissism as it is a reversion to a condition akin to infantile narcissism.

An instance of fantasy is given by Adorno through his account of Odysseus' experience of the Lotus-eaters. The lotus is a source of obvious pleasure. Homer describes it as 'sweeter than honey'. However (unlike the song of the

²⁵ See Adorno and Horkheimer, 1979: 3, 81 [DA 19, 100].

²⁶ I will elaborate upon the notion of narcissism in more detail in the next chapter.

Sirens) the lotus, according to Adorno, does not embody any *reality-content*. In contrast to the Sirens', who knew 'everything that has happened on this so fruitful earth, including the events in which Odysseus himself took part' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1979: 33 [DA 50])²⁷, the lotus is a pleasure which is wholly disconnected from reality. It is, for Adorno, a 'kind of idyll, which recalls the happiness of narcotic drug addicts reduced to the lowest level' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1979: 62 [DA 81]). Due to this lack of 'reality content' in the lotus-eaters' experience, the pleasure itself, according to Adorno, 'is actually the mere *illusion* of happiness' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1979: 63 [DA 81])²⁸. The pleasure results from the satisfaction of the id upon its own products. This 'condemns [the Lotus-eaters] to no more than to a primitive state' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1979: 62 [DA 81]), for the pleasure encompasses a loss of desire for reality: 'whoever browses on the lotus . . . succumbs . . . [to] oblivion' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1979: 62 [DA 81]), so that 'all who ate the lotus . . . thought no more of reporting to us, or of returning. Instead they wished to stay there . . . forgetting their homeland' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1979: 62 [DA 81]).

For Adorno, the lotus-eaters appear in modern society in the guise of the culture industry²⁹. Culture industry products, such as film, 'lull the audience into a state of [empty] passivity' and through a kind of illusionary pleasure which, in reality 'confirms . . . that the real . . . will never be reached' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1979: 139 [DA 161]). Because this pleasure disconnects the 'Subject' from reality, the consumers of the culture industry's products are condemned, like the lotus-eaters, 'to a primitive state' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1979: 120–168 [DA 141–191]).

For Adorno, worse is yet to come. He follows Freud in believing that there is an interconnection between pleasure and Meaning B. For Freud, as we know, the pleasure that emerges out of the satisfaction of the id-instincts upon their Object is accompanied by a sense of the Object as Meaningful B. Adorno takes up and elaborates Freud's notion. For Adorno, we cannot necessarily depict the exact content of this Meaning B in linguistic form. However, through the experience of pleasure we can gain it. What we gain is a sense of a 'value' or 'significance' in the Object which is independent of any need, desire or usage of it³⁰. That is, Meaning B refers to the Object's *own* inherent significance. We could say that the Object is an end in itself rather than a means to the Subject's ends. When Adorno considers something as an

²⁷ Although Adorno interprets the Sirens as embodying 'reality content', this is not an unproblematic interpretation. Some would see the Sirens as an instance of illusion. We will follow Adorno's interpretation because it is internally consistent with the rest of his argument.

²⁸ My emphasis.

²⁹ See Adorno and Horkheimer 1979, on the culture Industry [DA 141–191].

³⁰ This kind of meaning is most vividly present for Freud in religious experience. Adorno might agree with Freud that religious sentiment is related to Meaning B, although Freud's general account of religious experience is reductive in contrast to Adorno's.

end in itself rather than a means to another end, he regards it as substantive. Let us therefore refer to Meaning B as substantive meaning from this point on. We will depict it in more detail in Chapter 6³¹.

According to Adorno's analysis, when illusion becomes the new source of pleasure, because pleasure is inherently linked to *substantive meaning*, then illusion also of course becomes the new source of *substantive meaning*. Illusions therefore come to *replace reality* not only as a source of pleasure but also as a source of substantive meaning. This marks a terrible regression. Illusions, for Adorno, are infantile fantasies which are intrinsically substantively meaningless. Therefore when they become imbued with substantive meaning, the substantively meaningless mistakenly comes to be taken as meaningful. This is a state of *delusion*³².

Delusion is even more regressive than illusion; for substantive meaning has not merely been forfeited – as was the case in 'impoverishment' – nor even exchanged for entertaining illusions – as is the case with 'illusion' – but has actually become 'false'. That is to say, Objects devoid of substantive content have become imbued with it. This is illustrated in the case of the lotus eaters when their experience 'is like yet unlike the realisation of utopia' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1979: 63 [DA 82]). That is, their experience begins to *imitate* utopia whilst lacking the substantive meaning that such genuine experience would hold. In modern society it is the culture industry's products that emulate substantive meaning, so it is these that are responsible for generating delusion.

What we have depicted here as 'fantasy' represents only half of the Subject's instinctual engagement with reality. The ego-instincts are highly developed and strongly engaged upon reality: the enlightenment Subject experiences an ever-spiralling increase in control. This is apparent, Adorno argues, in the increase in technological power paradigmatic of enlightenment culture³³.

'Fantasy' corresponds to the split in the Subject's instinctual engagement with reality is a society made up on the one hand of enormous technical power and efficiency, and on the other of depleted pleasures and illusory

³¹ It is terribly important to note that this is a particular kind of substantive meaning which, for Adorno, is impossible to conceptualise. A 'propositional' kind of substantive meaning is totally impossible, in Adorno's view, in the twentieth century.

³² In this way, Adorno argues, illusions become actual *delusions*. Note that the concept 'delusion' will be used throughout the text to refer to the notion that an idea, belief or statement is *mistaken* about its own nature or validity. This is distinct from a mere fantasy or illusion where an idea or image etc. may be 'imagined' but not actually believed to be real. Delusion is also in contrast to the notion of 'ignorance' which refers to the notion that an idea, belief or statement is merely *incomplete* or *inadequate*.

³³ In the film industry for instance, we have a growth in the technological systems of communication, administration, production and distribution. See Adorno and Horkheimer (1979: 120–168 [DA 141–191]).

meanings³⁴. Although strong in its instrumental sphere, the Subject's engagement with the Object has declined to myth in its 'substantive sphere'.

Adorno's critical point here, that the substantive sphere has declined to myth, is an external criticism because the substantive sphere does not directly participate in the enlightenment aims. That is to say, the enlightenment does not aim for high quality pleasure, aesthetic sophistication, substantive meaning etc. Therefore, although Adorno's criticism is indeed a criticism, it is not yet of enlightenment itself.

However, in the sphere of enlightenment proper there is the onset of a further problem³⁵. The withdrawal of the Subject's instincts in half their sphere entails a regression into narcissism in one half of the self. This comprises a failure of the Subject to attain complete maturity. (The culture industry, for Adorno, expresses this immaturity.) In failing to attain maturity, enlightenment fails to attain one of its aims, and in this respect *enlightenment proper* partially declines into myth.

The stage of 'fantasy' marks two aspects of decline. First, in the substantive sphere, pleasure and substantive meaning regress to delusion and the id instincts regress to become narcissistic. We thereby have myth in the substantive sphere. Secondly, the sphere of enlightenment proper begins to decline. The aim of maturity fails and we have the *onset* of regression towards myth here too.

Totalisation

With further 'progress' the enlightenment worsens and enters the third stage of decline. This can be characterised as the stage of totalisation. This represents a regression, not simply in the substantive realm but in the realm of enlightenment proper. It occurs in the following way.

In 'fantasy' the only set of instincts engaged upon reality were those of the ego. According to Adorno, in the stage of totalisation these grow more and more powerful and exert more and more control over the id. As a result the id-instincts become more restricted and are eventually unable to generate their 'wish Objects,' that is to say, the enlightenment Subject becomes increasingly unable to generate illusions. Adorno writes: 'with the technical easing of life the persistence of domination brings about a fixation of the instincts by means of heavier repression. Imagination atrophies' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1979: 35 [DA 52–53]). However, the drive of the id, if weakened, persists. What therefore can it turn to in order to obtain satisfaction?

³⁴ Adorno and Horkheimer illustrate this split with respect to the culture of industrial societies which they claim consists of regressive 'fantasy' entertainment on the one hand and *highly sophisticated* technology on the other (1979: 120–168 [DA 141–191]).

³⁵ The onset actually first emerges in the stage of impoverishment although it is only here that it really becomes apparent.

In fact, there is a readily available 'Object' for the id to satisfy itself upon. In its predominance, the ego has generated a complex web of instrumental 'knowledge', a world of science, logic and technology. This complex technological world is a readily available 'Object' for the id. Thus, in the third stage of the enlightenment the ego's products become the new Object for the id.

What are the results of this? We know that the id has the characteristic of experiencing Objects in terms of pleasure; therefore when the ego's products become the Object of the id, instrumentality becomes a source of *pleasure*. Adorno sees this phenomenon as ubiquitous in the culture industry, which encompasses a shift away from escapist fantasy towards an appreciation of special effects, the latest modern gadgets, that is, of technology³⁶. In his analysis of the stage of totalisation Adorno sees a shift in the Object of pleasure, examples of which permeate, for instance, the realm of music. For example, in the sphere of 'popular' music sounds begin to emulate machinery in the literal sense so that the instrumental working of technology begins to be taken as pleasurable (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1979: 148 [DA 170–171]).

I have characterised this stage as that of *totalisation* for the following reason. Previously, when the enlightenment was split into two halves (enlightenment proper and 'substantive myth' or 'fantasy') there still remained two *separate* spheres of experience. However, once instrumental abstraction replaces illusion as the Object for the id, then, on the hand, the ego-instincts are the *only* way of relating to reality itself and, on the other hand, although the id-instincts remain, they neither relate to reality nor do they even any longer generate their own Object. They can only experience the ego's products. Thus the ego provides the only way of *experiencing* reality and has come to *replace* reality as the experiential realm for any other aspect of the self. Instrumental abstraction becomes the only kind of possible experience in both spheres. In this sense, the enlightenment is totalized.

Totalisation entails certain devastating problems in *instrumental knowledge acquisition*. To see these, consider the following. Through the id, the Subject experiences Objects as pleasurable and substantively *meaningful*. Hence the products of the ego – instrumental Objects and knowledge – become experienced not only as pleasurable but also as meaningful – which is to say meaningful in the id's sense, what Adorno considers as *substantive meaning*. This raises a question. Does instrumental knowledge contain

³⁶ It is important to note that Adorno does not necessarily regard this kind of pleasure as *intrinsically* regressive: a degree of pleasure drive towards the 'self' – understood in this context as the kind of subjectivity of a particular culture – through cultural forms including the technical is beneficial. However, there are distinctions within the realm of the technical between that which, for Adorno, is regressive and that which is 'meaningful' – in some sense of the notion of 'meaning'. There is a further distinction which is of scale – it is the scale of 'ego-worship' in instrumental society that Adorno finds problematic.

substantive meaning? We know that it contains *Meaning A*, that of enlightenment knowledge – which we can refer to from now on as *instrumental meaning* – but this is entirely distinct from substantive meaning.

We can see Adorno's answer to this in his comments on art. With respect to art, Adorno talks of 'the catastrophe of meaning', after which he claims 'appearance becomes abstract' (Adorno, 1997: 22 [AT 40]). For Adorno the catastrophe of meaning refers to a loss of *substantive* meaning, such that for him 'abstract appearance' certainly does not contain this *substantive* kind of meaning. Thus, when the Subject experiences abstraction as *substantively* meaningful, he experiences a kind of meaning within it which it does not inherently possess. This is delusion. Adorno also believes that this delusion spreads into 'thought' itself. Adorno writes: 'thought appears meaningful only when meaning has been discarded' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1979: 93 [DA 113]).

An example of delusion in thought would be a belief that an explanation of the Subject along biological lines which contains *instrumental meaning* conveys a sense of the inherent significance of the Subject – an instance of *substantive meaning*. Another instance of delusion could be economic forms of explanation (such as rational choice theory) supplanting substantive explanations of the Subject and then posing as substantive themselves. Mathematics, is Adorno's own example, which for him is the purest form of instrumental abstraction and comes to be taken as substantively meaningful. To imbue the instrumental with substantive properties is to be, in fact, deluded about the instrumental itself. In so doing instrumental knowledge becomes deluded about its own nature. This delusion marks the onset of *myth* in instrumental knowledge acquisition which is part of the sphere of enlightenment proper.

For Adorno, the enlightenment reduces all knowledge to the instrumental. Adorno writes: 'enlightenment... is the philosophy which equates *the* truth with scientific systematization' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1979: 85 [DA 104])³⁷. As the instrumental becomes deluded about itself, Adorno and Horkheimer write that enlightenment becomes one of the '[e]xplanations of the world as all or nothing... mythologies' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1979: 24 [DA 40]).

Totalisation also marks a regress in the further aims of enlightenment. Consider maturity. In 'totalisation', once the id has turned to worship the products of the ego, the relationship between the self and the external world alters: '[t]he libido that has been withdrawn from the external world has been directed to the ego and thus gives rise to an attitude which may be called narcissism' (Freud, 1914: 67). From *reality*, to *fantasy*, to the *ego's products*, the self has turned increasingly away from the external world as its source of pleasure and meaning, and towards its own ego. The self, in

³⁷ 'Truth' for Adorno in this context refers to *all possible kinds of meaning*.

turning towards its own ego, is returning to 'a primitive objectless condition' (Freud, 1915a: 202), which marks a *regression*³⁸. The feature of *maturity* is thus fundamentally undermined.

The further aim of *freedom* also fails. In totalisation the *only* relationship with reality is through the ego. This limits the Subject's experience of reality to forms of instrumental control. In turn, in Adorno's view, this entails the onset of the problem of domination, which is, of course, a loss of freedom. Adorno's analysis of freedom is complex, but in terms of its relevance to us we can focus upon two dimensions.

First, there is the freedom of the Subject understood as that emanating from the id-instincts. This is an 'expressive' kind of freedom and appears in forms of sensual and imaginative behaviour etc. The total control exerted from the instrumental sphere prevents this kind of freedom. For example, Adorno writes of 'the self-dominant intellect, which separates from sensuous experience in order to subjugate it' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1979: 36 [DA 53])³⁹. The best instance of this is found in Adorno's interpretation of Odysseus' encounter with the Sirens. Odysseus forfeits the freedom of full sensual abandonment to the music in order to steer his ship safely home.

This 'expressive' notion of freedom, is, however, 'external' to the enlightenment. Domination also prevents a second kind of freedom – freedom conceived of as the Subject's 'free will': free will, in turn, being conceived of as a free 'instrumental will'⁴⁰. The Subject's freedom in this respect is the freedom he has to carry out tasks essential to his own self preservation. The Subject in dominating the external world (including other subjects) becomes himself an Object of domination. For instance, Odysseus, once tied to the mast, not only loses the freedom to drown in the music but also the freedom to enact his instrumental will in other ways. Once tied, he cannot perform other actions. The instrumental attitude adopted to attain his aim 'enslaves' him with respect to the pursuit of other instrumental actions. Furthermore, a social dimension of domination creeps in. Odysseus forces the rowers to row. He therefore forces the rowers to engage in a particular instrumental activity and thereby dominates their free (instrumental) will. The goal of the enlightenment, freedom, whether conceived 'expressively' or instrumentally, is therefore undermined.

Let us now look at the enlightenment subject's remaining (instrumental) relationship with reality and its impact upon the aim of security. Access to reality is solely through the ego and its products. The ego relates to its

³⁸ The 'Subject' at this stage is already declining from an ideal concept of subjectivity, that is a fully developed 'sense of self'. He is, however, a Subject in the sense that he typifies the regressive subjectivity of his historical moment in time.

³⁹ See also Adorno and Horkheimer, 1979: 32–35 [DA 49–53].

⁴⁰ The control of this other kind of freedom is, for instance, expressed in the cry that 'the government must control the population' – that is, control their 'free-wills' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1979: 89 [DA 106–108]); see also: 86–88 [DA 108].

Object in terms of *survival* and when the world is related to solely through the drive for survival it is treated as something that is a potential *threat*. Of course, in part the world had always been experienced as dangerous but this *had* been offset by the pleasure and substantive meaning which it afforded. Now that pleasure and this kind of meaning have gone the world is experienced *solely* as *dangerous*: reality becomes *only* a source of *fear*. This marks the emergence of another feature of myth. Whereas enlightenment (Adorno and Horkheimer claim) aimed for security, it regresses to a culture of fear. Adorno thus writes: 'enlightenment is mythic *fear* turned radical' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1979: 16 [DA 32])⁴¹.

Let us analyse this feature of fear and see how it leads to the loss of the final goal of enlightenment, peace, and so to the onset of the final feature of myth, barbarism.

Fear entails that the self will be concerned only with the preservation of itself (Freud, 1930: 264–272). Self-preservation becomes the omnipresent concern of the enlightened self. Here 'self-preservation' should be understood as psychological survival, that is the preservation of a '*sense of self*' or 'identity', rather than merely biological survival. For this psychological kind of self-preservation the self is threatened by that which is different: it fears that this may 'contaminate' its own identity. We can term that which is different from the self 'the Other'⁴².

Now ordinarily, the self relates to 'the Other' through both its instincts so that 'the Other' is potentially pleasurable and substantively meaningful as well as potentially harmful. At the stage of totalisation however, now that the ego's products are the only source of pleasure and substantive meaning whilst external reality is devoid of these qualities, the world is no longer a source of pleasure or meaning. It is *only* threatening. Adorno argues that this sense of threat reaches paranoid proportions so that the 'enlightened self' fears obsessively *everything* that is not self.

This fear is, as we have seen, a fear of difference: a sense that 'the Other' will annihilate the self's identity. This kind of fear expresses itself in several ways. One is an attempt to *remove* the threat. Adorno argues that this can manifest itself in a drive for the *destruction* of difference. It can be a drive for the destruction of external reality or of any perceived 'Other'.

Epistemologically, this manifests itself, Adorno claims, in the rigid closed systems of logic which are concerned with their own internal rules and reject all that lies without. Adorno writes that: 'the system is the belly turned mind. . . . It eliminates all heterogeneous being' (Adorno, 1973: 23, 26

⁴¹ My emphasis.

⁴² The way in which 'difference' is perceived by the Subject as threatening to his or her identity is complex. We have offered merely one suggestion. Of course, that which is different may also be threatening in the sense that it may be a physical threat, ie. it is unknown and could thus be potentially physically harmful.