

Consequences of Enlightenment

What is the relationship between contemporary intellectual culture and the European Enlightenment it claims to reject? In *Consequences of Enlightenment*, Anthony J. Cascardi revisits the arguments advanced in Horkheimer and Adorno's seminal work *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Cascardi argues against the view that postmodern culture has rejected Enlightenment beliefs and explores instead the continuities contemporary theory shares with Kant's theory of judgment. The positive consequences of Kant's failed ambition to bring the project of Enlightenment to completion, he argues, are evident in the aesthetic basis on which subjectivity has survived in the contemporary world. Cascardi explores the link between aesthetics and politics in thinkers as diverse as Habermas, Derrida, Arendt, Nietzsche, Hegel, and Wittgenstein in order to reverse the tendency to see works of art simply in terms of the worldly practices among which they are situated. Works of art, he argues, are themselves capable of disclosing truth. The book explores the post-Enlightenment implications of Kant's claim that feeling, and not only cognition, may provide a ground for knowledge.

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The book is dedicated to my family, who have watched it grow along the way: to Elisa, to Matthew, and to Trish.



The consequences of Enlightenment



There has always existed in the world, and there will always continue to exist, some kind of metaphysics. Immanuel Kant ¹

Philosophy, which once seemed obsolete, lives on because the moment to realize it was missed. The summary judgment that it had merely interpreted the world, that resignation in the face of reality had crippled it in itself, becomes a defeatism of reason after the attempt to change the world miscarried . . . Having broken its pledge to be as one with reality or at the point of realization, philosophy is obliged ruthlessly to criticize itself. Theodor Adorno ²

We have art – lest we perish of the truth. Friedrich Nietzsche ³

The present volume represents an attempt to reassess the relationship between certain issues in contemporary critical theory and the question of Enlightenment. I take my bearings by reference to claims about the self-canceling nature of Enlightenment rationality as formulated in the opening essay of Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* ("The Concept of Enlightenment"), and move conceptually from there to address the ways in which their concerns can be reevaluated in light of an aesthetic critique modeled along lines sketched out

¹ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1965), B xxxi.

² Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Seabury Press, 1979), p. 3.

³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, ed. Walter Kaufmann, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage, 1968), sec. 435.

in Kant's *Critique of Judgment*. More broadly, I hope to account for the predominantly "aesthetic" forms in which a critical self-consciousness carried forward from the Enlightenment has survived the critique of enlightened reason that seemed to have reached an impasse in Horkheimer and Adorno's essay. I place the term "aesthetics" in quotes so as to indicate its incomplete and problematic association with what we regard as autonomous works of art.⁴ When Nietzsche wrote the words cited in the epigraph above, when he claimed even more notoriously that "art is worth more than the truth – for life," and when in *The Birth of Tragedy* and subsequent texts he said that the existence of the world could be justified only aesthetically – it was not only particular artworks that he had in mind, but a project designed to reclaim the world of appearances from what he thought of as the Platonic foundations of the Enlightenment.⁵ But so too Kant's theory of aesthetic judgment is independent of the specificity of works of

⁴ Theodor Adorno: "The autonomy of art is not something given *a priori*, but is the result of a process that is constitutive of the concept of art." *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, trans. C. Lenhardt (New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), p. 26 (henceforth cited as *AT*). Cf. Michel Foucault, whose remarks indicate a clear discontent with the restriction of the category of the "aesthetic" to works of art: "What strikes me is the fact that in our society, art has become something which is related only to objects and not to individuals, or to life. But couldn't everyone's life become a work of art? Why should the lamp or the house be an art object, but not our life?" ("On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress," in Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, eds., *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983], p. 236). At some level, the source for this discontent is Nietzsche's claim that art is worth more than the truth for life.

⁵ What Friedrich Nietzsche called "perspective" was essential to this project. In his view, Platonism (and Christianity) means "standing truth on her head and denying perspective, the basic condition of all life." *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), p. 2. Martin Heidegger takes up Nietzsche's claim about art in *Nietzsche, 1: The Will to Power as Art*, trans. David Farrell Krell (New York and San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1979), pp. 140–41. Heidegger's remarks on the "new interpretation of sensuousness" (pp. 211–20) are also of help. At the same time, Heidegger insists that Nietzsche had not arrived at a sufficient understanding of the nature of "truth" to warrant the position he holds. For his part, Heidegger argues that the decisive shift in Plato's thought came with the application of the word *eidos* to the world of forms: "We, late born, are no longer in a position to appreciate the significance of Plato's daring to use the word *eidos* for that which in everything and in each particular thing endures as present. For *eidos*, in the common speech, meant the outward aspect [*Ansicht*] that a visible thing offers to the physical eye. Plato exacts of this word, however, something utterly extraordinary: that it name what precisely is not and never will be perceivable with physical eyes." "The Question Concerning Technology," in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper and Row, 1979), p. 20.

fine art.⁶ As Jacques Derrida remarks in speaking of Kant,⁷ “art” is a misleading title for what lies at stake in the question of aesthetic reflection, which seeks instead to validate the “subjective” moment – the moment of affect, of pleasure or pain – that goes unaccounted by the conceptual frameworks associated with cognition and morality.

In contrast to most contemporary theory, which is interested in subsuming artworks under a series of worldly discourses, my interest is in discovering the ways in which aesthetics is itself the forgotten discourse of the world. It is forgotten, I suggest, to the degree that our confidence in the validity of affective modes of apprehension has been weakened. If I begin with Horkheimer and Adorno, this is because their work is representative of a particularly influential interpretation of the Enlightenment and its consequences as a pervasive disenchantment or world-loss. Although “The Concept of Enlightenment” was originally published in 1947, the principal questions broached in it remain central for critical thinking today.⁸ (In an essay entitled “What is Critique?”

⁶ Kant: “Taste is . . . merely a critical, not a productive faculty; and what conforms to it is not, merely on that account, a work of fine art. It may belong to useful and mechanical art, or even to science, as a product following definite rules which are capable of being learned and which must be closely followed.” *Critique of Judgment* (henceforth, *CJ*), trans. James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), sec. 48, p. 175. Heidegger remarks that the *Critique of Judgment* has been influential “only on the basis of misunderstandings.” *Nietzsche, 1: The Will to Power as Art*, p. 108.

⁷ Jacques Derrida writes that “a seminar would treat of art . . . It would thus answer to a program and to one of its great questions. These questions are all taken from a determinate set. Determined according to history and system. The history would be that of the philosophy within which the history of the philosophy of art would be marked off, insofar as it treats of art and the history of art: its models, its concepts, its problems have not fallen from the skies, they have been constituted according to determinate modes at determinate moments.” “Parergon,” in *The Truth in Painting*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 18. Behind Derrida’s resistance to the objective determination of art stands Heidegger. In the Epilogue to “The Origin of the Work of Art,” Heidegger writes that “almost from the time when specialized thinking about art and the artist began, this thought was called aesthetic. Aesthetics takes the work of art as an object, the object of *aisthesis*, of sensuous apprehension in the wide sense. Today we call this apprehension experience . . . Yet perhaps experience is the element in which art dies. The dying occurs so slowly that it takes a few centuries.” “The Origin of the Work of Art,” in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), p. 79.

⁸ For one understanding of the case for Adorno against poststructuralist theory and criticism, see Fredric Jameson, *Late Marxism: Adorno, or, the Persistence of the Dialectic* (London: Verso, 1990), especially pp. 227–52, “Adorno in the Post-

for instance, Michel Foucault argues that the problem of *Aufklärung* remains the central problem of modern philosophy, the part of our cultural history from which we cannot clear free.⁹) Indeed, it could be said that Horkheimer and Adorno's essay has cast a long shadow over contemporary intellectual debates about the autonomy of the subject as an independent center of feeling and value, as well as about the social and political orders that this notion of subjectivity founds. Horkheimer and Adorno gave a very powerful description of the self-negating tendencies at work in the particular forms of self-reflection that came to dominance during the modern Enlightenment. They suggested that the emancipated society promised by the procedures of Enlightenment – reason's democratic hope – failed to defend the possibility of reciprocal recognition among subject-selves against the ongoing threats of rationalization, reification, and domination. In spite of the Enlightenment's efforts, or on Horkheimer and Adorno's account, because of them, the progressive goals of the Enlightenment remained unrealized: "In the most general sense of progressive thought, the Enlightenment has always aimed at liberating men from fear and establishing their sovereignty. Yet the fully enlightened earth radiates disaster triumphant."¹⁰ For these and related reasons it has been thought, at least since Romanti-

modern." Seyla Benhabib sets the issue against a somewhat broader background: "In their critique of modernity and liberalism, communitarians and postmodernists unwittingly echo many of the themes of the first generation of Frankfurt School thinkers and especially of Adorno and Horkheimer in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. The uncovering of the darker side of the liberal ideals of economic growth and scientific progress, the memory of non-instrumental human relations, and even the critique of the repressive subjectivity which is always thought to accompany the domination of nature are among the themes, by now well known, of this work." See Benhabib, *Situating the Self: Gender, Community, and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics* (New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 69–70.

⁹ Michel Foucault writes: "I would like right away to note, in approaching this problem which makes us brothers with the Frankfurt School, that to make *Aufklärung* the central question at once means a number of things." "What Is Critique?" in James Schmidt, ed., *What Is Enlightenment?: Eighteenth-Century Answers and Twentieth-Century Questions* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), p. 391. Foucault's essay was originally given as a lecture at the Sorbonne in 1978. On the hidden importance of aesthetics to Foucault's earlier work, see Peter Bürger, "The Return of Analogy: Aesthetics as Vanishing Point in Michel Foucault's in *The Order of Things*," *The Decline of Modernism*, trans. Nicholas Walker (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992), pp. 48–54.

¹⁰ "The Concept of Enlightenment," in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York: Continuum, 1972), p. 3.

cism, that any continuation of the ethical and emancipatory goals of the Enlightenment, and certainly any project committed to an ethical praxis grounded in mutual recognition and respect, must overcome Enlightenment rationality.¹¹

This volume appeals to Kant's *Critique of Judgment* in order to suggest that we cannot so clearly position ourselves on either side of the debate concerning the Enlightenment and its consequences. As I hope will become clear over the course of what follows, the question of our relationship to the Enlightenment is better understood in terms of the difficulty of locating any position that would be categorically inside or outside the Enlightenment, inside or outside objectivity, inside or outside critical or systematic thought. Our current position is itself a consequence of the non-closure of the Enlightenment. Similarly, this volume represents an effort to challenge the view that the pursuit of constructive social and ethical goals requires an anti-Enlightenment stance. But it proposes to do so without summoning us to return to Enlightenment rationality, either in its orthodox, transcendental versions or in the more recent "communicative" variant endorsed by Jürgen Habermas. These challenges are entered on several grounds, all of which share in their underlying orientations a notion of subjectivity that is based on principles that can broadly be called "aesthetic." The first of these is that many of the concerns of contemporary intellectual culture, including, but by no means limited to, the preoccupations of Frankfurt School critical theory, of Franco-American poststructuralism, and of the neo-pragmatist language philosophies fashioned from elements of Wittgenstein, Dewey, and Heidegger, can themselves be seen as the consequences and continuations of a process of self-criticism that originates within the Enlightenment, rather than as cancellations of Enlightenment

¹¹ The connections between Romanticism and the critique of the Enlightenment have been made from a variety of different directions in recent criticism. Two of the most fruitful instances are Stanley Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), and Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *L'absolu littéraire: Théorie de la littérature du romantisme allemand* (Paris: Seuil, 1978), trans. Philip Barnard and Cheryl Lester as *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1988). Whereas Cavell thinks of Romanticism as a response to Kant, Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe stress the links between Kant's aesthetic theory and Romanticism, saying that "an entirely new and unforeseeable relation between aesthetics and philosophy" articulated in Kant makes possible the "passage" to Romanticism (*The Literary Absolute*, p. 29).

thought. Calls either for a “return” to the principles of the Enlightenment or for their rejection thus represent significant self-misunderstandings on the part of some of the most critical of the inhabitants of the present age.

In connection with this first claim, my task will be to spell out how the Enlightenment can be understood as having such “consequences,” principally by articulating the ways in which the Enlightenment project as formulated by Kant was structurally incomplete. Kant’s articulation of the problem of aesthetic judgment, which stems from a reflection upon the separation of the spheres of cognition and morality, represents an effort to reconcile the terms that his own system of critical philosophy had set apart; but in discovering that there was no point beyond the system from which to reflect upon it, this was also the point at which the Kantian critical system encountered the impossibility of achieving closure. Kant’s admitted inability to arrive at a proof of the theory of aesthetic reflection, and thereby to complete the system of critical philosophy, can help account for what has remained uninterpreted in the relationship between the fundamental ambitions of Enlightenment rationality and those subsequent modes of thought that claim either to have turned away from Enlightenment rationality altogether or that urge a return to its principles. If we can understand Enlightenment rationality as something whose central ambition to be at once systematic and complete was left unfinished, then it can be argued that the lingering controversy over the Enlightenment itself represents a moment in the ongoing transformation of self-consciousness, but also a continuation of subjectivity even if by other, aesthetic, means. At the very least, this can help us refute what may be left of the idea that we have – for better or worse – reached the “end of philosophy,” the “closure of metaphysics,” or the “end of history.”¹²

To be sure, the rapid succession of “unmaskings” that has characterized critical engagements of Enlightenment thought can tempt us to short-circuit the process of reflection. Consider the fact that each in a line of prominent thinkers – each one prematurely believing himself to be the last – seems to have been

¹² These notions originate as consequences of Hegel’s thought. They have been explored in, among other places, Francis Fukuyama’s *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: The Free Press, 1992).

complicit with the metaphysical project that each proclaimed to have rejected. Nietzsche, for instance, rejected the Hegelian concept of the rational whole in favor of an aesthetic critique of reason that offered "art" as a way to redeem the world of appearances. But in spite of his commitment to the appearing world (or perhaps because of that commitment), Nietzsche remained a Hegelian, bound also to the idea of the closure of history to the extent that he accepted the principles of his own "eternal return of the same." In fact, Nietzsche's "eternal return" has been seen by Paul de Man as a rearticulation of the figure of prolepsis that de Man finds at work in the Hegelian philosophy of reflection.¹³ On Heidegger's account, by contrast, Nietzsche was merely an "inverted Platonist"; Nietzsche's notion of "will to power" still remained within the framework of Western metaphysics. But Derrida has in turn marked Heidegger himself as operating within this framework. Having caught a glimpse of just how ineluctable this problem has been, Richard Rorty has subsequently suggested that we simply circumvent Western metaphysics and dispense with the project of "overcoming" altogether.¹⁴ Rorty addresses the heroic efforts of his predecessors to overcome the past by recommending irony as an alternative to the "sublime" desire for a final overcoming. In Rorty's account, the philosopher of the historical sublime yearns for "a future which has broken all

¹³ In "Sign and Symbol in Hegel's *Aesthetics*," Paul de Man reads Hegel's notion of the re-collection of experience through reflection as an instance in which thought projects the hypothesis of its own possibility into a future under the expectation that the process enabling thought will eventually meet up with the projection. *Critical Inquiry*, 8 (1982).

¹⁴ Richard Rorty, "Deconstruction and Circumvention," in *Essays on Heidegger and Others, Philosophical Papers Volume 2* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 85–106. Cf. Stuart Hampshire, who has written "one cannot pass by a situation; one must pass through it in one way or another." "Logic and Appreciation," in William Elton, ed., *Aesthetics and Language* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1954), pp. 162–63. As Michael Fried has nonetheless argued, Hampshire's distinction between "logic" and "appreciation" fails to hold for modernist works of art – which is to say, for precisely the kind of works that I would link with the reflective criticism generated by Kant's third *Critique*. "Once a painter who accepts the basic premises of modernism becomes aware of a particular problem thrown up by the art of the recent past, his action is no longer gratuitous but imposed. He may be mistaken in his assessment of the situation. But as long as he believes such a problem exists and is important, he is confronted by a situation he cannot pass by, but must, in some way or other, pass through; and the result of this forced passage will be his art." Fried, *Three American Painters* (Cambridge, MA: The Fogg Museum of Harvard University, 1965), p. 9.

relations with the past, and therefore can be linked to the philosopher's redescriptions of the past only by negation." As he goes on to say, "this quest for the historical sublime – for proximity to some event such as the closing of the gap between subject and object or the advent of the superman or the end of metaphysics – leads Hegel, Nietzsche, and Heidegger to fancy themselves in the role of the 'last philosopher.' The attempt to be in this position is the attempt to write something which will make it impossible for one to be redescribed except in one's own terms – make it impossible to become an element in anyone else's beautiful pattern, one more little thing."¹⁵

As this passage suggests, Rorty's account of the history of philosophy is told with an irony that prompts one to ask whether it can itself be distinguished from cynicism. Already Hegel identified something like cynicism as a possible consequence of the process by which enlightened thought seeks to correct itself: "To see that thought in its very nature is dialectical, and that, as understanding, it must fall into contradiction – the negative of itself – will form one of the main lessons of logic. When thought grows hopeless of ever achieving, by its own means, the solution of the contradiction which it has by its own action brought upon itself, it turns back to those solutions of the question with which the mind had learned to pacify itself in some of its other modes and forms. Unfortunately, however, the retreat of thought has led it, as Plato noticed even in his time, to a very uncalled-for hatred of reason (misology)."¹⁶ More recently, the successive unmasking of theories has impelled some critics to regard cynicism as the most powerful antidote to the Enlightenment desire for a further or final unmasking. As Peter Sloterdijk remarked on the occasion of the 200th anniversary of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, the cynic attempts to deflect the possibility of any further disenchantment by claiming that disenchantment is itself the truth of the Enlightenment. The conclusion to be drawn from the history of the Enlightenment is that "new values have short lives . . . Just bide your time . . . Our lethargic modernity certainly knows how to 'think historically,' but it has long doubted that it lives in a

¹⁵ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 105–06.

¹⁶ *Hegel's Logic*, trans. William Wallace (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), pp. 15–16.

meaningful history."¹⁷ The unhappiness that accompanies these doubts is thus mollified by the awareness that history can never be brought to an end; the baleful consciousness of reflection is mitigated by the cynic's joyful wisdom. As Sloterdijk argues, the figure of thought best suited to describe these conditions is Nietzsche's "eternal recurrence of the same" (*ibid.*). This is, for the cynic, the principle that can transform unhappiness and even resentment into "joyful knowledge."¹⁸

But how and why attach the name "aesthetics" to a position that, in its discovery of the non-closure of the Enlightenment, stands in such close proximity to what many would characterize as nihilism?¹⁹ The germ of a response can be identified in Kant's third *Critique*, where Kant describes as "aesthetic" those judgments that take their bearings by the subject's particular pleasure and/or pain and that refuse to yield the knowledge of any "thing." In an effort to find a way of thinking that does not subordinate particulars to

¹⁷ Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, trans. Michael Eldred (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), p. xxvii. As Sloterdijk also observes (p. 40), the figure of the "eternal return" contains in a nutshell the psychoanalytic insight into the "truth" of the logic of unmasking: what I criticize in others is what I myself am. In Nietzsche's terms, it is the "Romantic" artist who is able to draw creative strength from dissatisfaction with himself. *Will to Power*, sec. 844, p. 445.

¹⁸ Nietzsche's "eternal return" and Slavoj Žižek's analysis of retroactive performativity provide alternatives to the vision according to which the project of critical reflection eventually cancels itself or becomes exhausted when confronted by the apparent endlessness of its task. Rather than see, e.g., Derrida's work as reverting back to the metaphysics from which he attempted to clear free, we can instead read Kant's analysis of reflective judgment as exposing the very difficulties that are essential to deconstruction's understanding of indeterminacy. So seen, the philosophical past can never be "overcome" (much less "circumvented"), if only because the assertive posture demanded by "overcoming" presupposes a self-consistency that can never be assured. But by the same logic of fate we could say that the Enlightenment quest for absolute knowledge is ironically fulfilled by the very failure of that project. As Žižek writes of Hegel, "the true Absolute is nothing but the logical disposition of its previous failed attempts to conceive the Absolute." Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor* (London: Verso, 1991), p. 100. Žižek goes on to say, the *Phenomenology of Spirit* is "the presentation of a series of aborted attempts by the subject to define the Absolute and thus arrive at the longed-for synchronism of subject and object. This is why its final outcome ('absolute knowledge') does not bring a finally founded harmony but rather entails a kind of reflective inversion" (p. 99).

¹⁹ While Kant is often regarded as standing at the origin of modern aesthetic theory, it should be recognized that he has important predecessors in these matters, including Baumgarten, Wolff, Hume, and even Gracián.

universal categories, Kant's theory of reflective judgment begins from the affects. Aesthetic reflection originates in "pleasure" and "pain," which are not so much positively constructed experiences as ways in which the subject responds to the contingency of the world.²⁰ Indeed, the description of affect as something other than a positively constructed and determinable experience that the subject "has" suggests that pleasure and pain are moments of passion, something the subject undergoes. Recall Horkheimer and Adorno's analysis of pleasure as originating in the separation of individuals, which is to say, in loss. Pleasure, they suggest, begins in sacrifice to another.²¹ The point is not that "pleasure" and "pain" need to be situated within a network of overlapping frameworks – social, cultural, and historical – but rather that there always remains something that these frameworks cannot adequately determine. As we shall see in connection with Kant, this is a "something" that may be described in terms of the qualitative dimension of our relationship to the representations formed in making cognitive and moral judgments.²²

To think of affect in this way allows us to see a closer link between Kant's theory of aesthetic reflection and postmodern positions that are often thought of as standing in opposition to Kant. For Jean-Luc Nancy (whose links to Kant are mediated by Heidegger) for instance, the "something" that cannot be captured by the determinative reasoning of cognitive and moral judgments points to the subject's openness to whatever may happen to it from outside. Affect indicates a form of passivity, a mode in which the subject is capable of being affected from without: "Pass-

²⁰ Heidegger offers a succinct account of the genealogy of "experience" in "The Origin of the Work of Art," beginning with a clarification of the relationship between beauty and form: "The beautiful does not lie in form, but only because the *forma* once took its light from Being as the isness of what is. Being at that time made its advent as *eidōs*. The *idea* fits itself into the *morphe*. The *sunolon*, the unitary whole of *morphe* and *hulē*, namely the *ergon*, is in the manner of *energeia*. This mode of presence becomes the *actualitas* of the *ens activa*. The *actualitas* becomes reality. Reality becomes objectivity. Objectivity becomes experience" (p. 81). On Adorno's engagement with the issue of "experience" in *Aesthetic Theory*, see Jameson, *Late Marxism*, pp. 127 ff.

²¹ As such, pleasure is distinctively non-natural: "Nature does not feature enjoyment as such; natural pleasure does not go beyond the appeasement of need. All pleasure is social – in unsublimated no less than in sublimated emotions. It originates in alienation." *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 105.

²² The best discussion of qualities remains that of Charles Altieri in *Act and Quality* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1981).

ivity 'is' in fact only that: the fact that something happens to it, from somewhere else, from the other. The fact that some difference happens to it. Passivity is not the property of being passive – of, for example, letting such or such a mark be given or imprinted. Passivity does nothing, not even in the mode of 'doing' that would be letting something be done. More 'passive' than what is called passivity, the soul is itself only in that it is affected from outside. Its 'passivity' is given to it with the affection. Its passivity does not come first, like a property of soft wax. The soul *is* affected . . . ”²³ As for Derrida, the affects of “pleasure” and “pain” indicate the openness, vulnerability, or dislocation of the subject by pointing to the “*constitutive* outside” on which any structure depends. The indeterminacy of the domain that Kant couches in affect thus becomes the basis for a conception of the subject as a site of loss or dispossession rather than for the recuperation of a positive relationship to the world. The affects are not subjective analogues of the lost order of nature, as is the case in certain versions of Romanticism (to which Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* has itself been linked). Rather, as for thinkers like Derrida and Nancy, the affects provide an opening for an ethical determination of the subject – ethical because determined by a responsibility to the other: “Almost nothing remains (to me): neither the thing, nor its existence, nor mine, neither the pure object nor the pure subject, no interest of anything that is in anything that is . . . I do not like, but I take pleasure in what does not interest me, in something of which it is at least a matter of indifference whether I like it or not . . . And yet *there is* pleasure, some still remains; *there is, es gibt, it gives* the pleasure is what *it gives*; to nobody but some remains and it’s the best, the purest” (Derrida, “Parergon,” p. 48).²⁴

My second set of claims is related to the first and argues that in responding to the Enlightenment many critics have tended to homogenize and flatten the object of their critical attention, thus only magnifying the monster of abstraction they are seeking to tame. Thinkers notably less subtle than Horkheimer and Adorno

²³ Nancy, *The Birth to Presence* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993), p. 29.

²⁴ Once again anticipating the concerns of postmodern critical theory, Adorno takes the procedures of negative dialectics as having as their goal a turn toward non-identity whose ethical aim is a “total self-relinquishment” that yields an almost Levinasian openness toward the other. *Negative Dialectics*, p. 13.

have been especially prone to imagine that the cultural paradigm they are attempting to address is a monolithic formation, homogeneously constituted, and devoid of any significant internal differentiations. To be sure, the great conceptual leaps of “The Concept of Enlightenment,” which link everything from thinking with numbers in Plato’s last writings to the “repressive equality” of modern democratic culture lend themselves to this interpretation. But I would challenge any such reductive reading of the central thesis of “The Concept of Enlightenment” first, by arguing that such an interpretation is not sufficiently sensitive to what Horkheimer and Adorno meant in their analysis of the entwinement of Enlightenment and myth and, second, by arguing that such a thesis at best represents a truncated interpretation of the dialectic of self-consciousness at stake in the question of Enlightenment.

So that my own invocation of the term “Enlightenment” will not have this effect, I propose to mark the principle of differentiation as an integral moment of the critical Enlightenment project, and to recognize that such a principle is itself constitutive of the Enlightenment understanding of reason, not merely congruous with it.²⁵ As is best exemplified in the work of Kant, Enlightenment rationality stakes its claims to truth on the basis of the *systematic* limitation of reason’s different powers with respect to the various spheres or domains of knowledge.²⁶ As a paradigmatic example of systematic thought, I refer to the Kantian effort to distinguish and delimit the cognitive and moral spheres over which reason has jurisdiction, in order to establish “fact” as separate from “value” and to preserve a realm of absolute value or moral freedom not constrained by the contingencies of any fact. First, Kant wishes to secure the validity of cognitive claims by establishing their independence from desire and the will. This

²⁵ In Sloterdijk’s view, differentiation eventually breaks down: “Critique does not have a unified bearer but rather is splintered into a multitude of schools, factions, currents, avant-gardes. Basically, there is no unified and unambiguous enlightenment ‘movement.’ One feature of the dialectic of enlightenment is that it was never able to build a massive front; rather, early on, it developed, so to speak, into its own opponent” (*Critique of Cynical Reason*, pp. 76–77).

²⁶ In “The Age of the World Picture” Heidegger explains “system” in terms of the essential standing-together characteristic of the picture-thinking of the modern age; Heidegger locates systematic thought in opposition to an interest in the particularities of experience (*empeiria*). Heidegger, “The Age of the World Picture,” p. 141.

means that what we claim to know (as fact) should be independent of what we might want or desire to be true. Second, Kant wishes to preserve a realm of moral freedom that would not be constrained by the contingencies of fact: we should, for instance, credit an action as moral only when it is done out of a sense of obligation to the moral law (duty), and not when it comes about by merely fortuitous means. In this same regard, I would note Kant's philosophical adjudication of the "contest of the faculties" of the University proposed in the *Streit der Facultäten*, where Kant justifies the systematic division of teaching faculties on the basis of its resemblance to the rational Idea and not according to any internal principle.

Not surprisingly, the Kantian notion that knowledge claims can be legitimized only insofar as they are articulated within a duly constituted object-sphere drives a contemporary thinker like Habermas to suspect that an aesthetic critique of reason may result in the "de-differentiation" of these autonomous spheres and, consequently, in a collapse of the powers of reason. Horkheimer and Adorno themselves recognized that differentiation is a way to reduce fear: "Everything unknown and alien is primary and undifferentiated: that which transcends the confines of experience; whatever in things is more than their previously known reality" ("The Concept of Enlightenment," p. 15). But, as we shall see over the course of what follows, the Habermasian attempt to defeat the specter of "de-differentiation" through a theory of communicative action is based upon a fundamental misreading of Kant's third *Critique*. Specifically, Habermas treats Kant's notion of the *sensus communis aestheticus* as if it were the *sensus communis logicus*, thus presupposing that the conflict of the faculties can be adjudicated by reference to an order of "reason" rather than an order of "sense."

Rather than accept Kant's (or any other) systematic division of the rational faculties as self-contained or self-justifying, as something that can be verified as categorically valid or *a priori* true, I would call attention to the legislative force that must divide reason into these separate domains. In Kant, this legislative force attempts to isolate our cognitive understanding of nature (as theorized in the first *Critique*) from the work of practical reason or morality (theorized in the second *Critique*). Aesthetic judgment is called into play as Kant attempts to reflect upon and thereby

justify the principle of differentiation that divides the two in the third *Critique* when Kant discovers that pleasure and pain cannot be accommodated within it.²⁷ (It is in the project to re-mark this difference that Kant's *Critique of Judgment* stands closest to Hegel's philosophical expressivism.²⁸) In the "Preface" to the first edition of the *Critique of Judgment* Kant speaks of a critique "which sifts these faculties one and all, so as to try the possible claims of each of the other faculties to share in the clear possession of knowledge from roots of its own" (*CJ*, p. 3). And in the "Introduction" he claims that "in the division of a rational science the difference between objects that require different principles for their cognition is the difference on which everything turns" (*CJ*, p. 9).²⁹

²⁷ The detailed argument is contained in the first section of the "Introduction" to the *Critique of Judgment*, entitled "Division of Philosophy" (pp. 8–10). There Kant speaks of the distinction between the "concept of nature" and the "concept of freedom." In technical terms, the issue is whether the concept of the will (which, Kant argues, acts as one among the many causes in the world) gets its rule by a concept of nature or a concept of freedom. In other words, Kant needs to know whether the principles of the will are "technically practical" or "morally practical."

²⁸ For a recent commentary on the logic of the "re-mark," see Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do*, pp. 72–84.

²⁹ Thus Jürgen Habermas dutifully records the fact that "Kant's *Critique of Judgment* . . . provided an entry for a speculative Idealism that could not rest content with the Kantian differentiations between understanding and sense, freedom and necessity, mind and nature." *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, trans. Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987), p. 48. But in saying that Kant "perceived in precisely these distinctions expressions of the dichotomies inherent in modern life-conditions" Habermas unwittingly attributes to Kant a view that is more accurately Schiller's in the "Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man." When Habermas writes that "the mediating power of reflective judgment served Schelling and Hegel as the bridge to an intellectual intuition that was to assure itself of absolute identity" (*ibid.*), he correctly notices that the Hegelian dialectic may be seen as a carrying forward of some of the central problems outlined in Kant's third *Critique*; but he misses the central point of Hegel's own critique of "absolute identity," which is emphatic in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Hegel writes that "Dealing with something from the perspective of the Absolute (for which we may now read 'Being') consists merely in declaring that, although one has been speaking of it just now as something definite, yet in the Absolute, the $A = A$, there is nothing of the kind, for there all is one. To pit this single insight, that in the Absolute everything is the same, against the full body of articulated cognition, which at least seeks and demands such fulfillment, is to palm off its Absolute as the night in which, as the saying goes, all cows are black – this is cognition naively reduced to vacuity. The formalism which recent philosophy denounces and despises, only to see it reappear in its midst, will not vanish from Science, however much its inadequacy may be recognized and felt, till the cognizing of absolute actuality has become entirely clear as to its own nature." *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), par. 16, p. 9.

In the arguments that have been advanced by a range of thinkers from Schiller to Weber and Habermas, the discourse of aesthetics and the problem of reflective judgment could only come to light in an environment that embeds these differentiations socially and materially. The best-known consequence of this differentiation is the autonomization of art as a purely aesthetic phenomenon. In Heidegger's essay on "The Age of the World Picture," the aestheticization of art is marked as a definitive feature of the differentiated landscape of enlightened modernity. As we shall see later, it is the phenomenon of differentiation that ties the theory of aesthetic judgment to that of intersubjective communication, whose aim is to reestablish the links among the various spheres that Enlightenment reason sets apart. In the Romantic tradition, which Habermas, following Hegel, identifies with Schiller's "Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man," it is the more ambitious task of aesthetics to reinscribe value within fact and thereby to endow a disenchanted empirical world with the powers of self-animating spirit. To be sure, there is a (re)conciliatory desire traceable directly to Kant's third *Critique*, as evidenced in his commitment to the communicability of aesthetic judgment and to the unity of experience. As Adorno takes pains to argue in the posthumous *Aesthetic Theory*, each of the spheres that Kant needs to recognize as separate and distinct preserves a trace of its significant relation to the others from which it is cut off, if only as a way of recalling (or, perhaps, in the Kantian sense, imaginatively reconstructing) the unity of experience that has been carved up into separate realms. But even for Kant the unity of experience can only be felt in pleasure, or its loss registered in pain, never proved to the satisfaction of reason or the understanding. Indeed, the failure of the Kantian effort to offer a rational proof of the unity of cognition (nature) and morality (freedom) is a driving force in the third *Critique*, where the specific difficulty involved in the exposition of the theory of reflective aesthetic judgment serves as evidence of the final impossibility of a rational apprehension of the integration of cognition and morality. In spite of Kant's wish to identify the role of reflective aesthetic judgment with the functions of recuperation and repair with respect to the Enlightenment division of fact (nature) and value (freedom) articulated in the first two *Critiques*, and in spite also of Kant's effort to position aesthetics in such a

way as to seal the integrity of the critical system as a whole, thus reuniting our understanding of nature as a “disenchanted” realm of cause and effect with the demand to acknowledge others as ends in themselves, existing in a “kingdom of ends,” the problem of the aesthetic or reflective judgment as formulated in the third *Critique* is more accurately seen as the frustration of Kant’s integrative project, and Kant’s position is best understood in accordance with the claims articulated in the “Preface” cited above, which promises a clear statement of the “difficulty” of the aesthetic judgment, rather than a resolution of it.³⁰ For Kant, the “difficulty” of aesthetic judgment is meant to excuse the absence of a suitably clear proof of the principles on which it rests:³¹ “to supply a determinate objective principle of taste in accordance with which its judgments might be derived, tested, and proved, is an absolute impossibility,” Kant writes, “for then it would not be a judgment of taste. The subjective principle – that is to say, the indeterminate idea of the supersensible within us – can only be indicated as the unique key to the riddle of this faculty, itself concealed from us in its sources; and there is no means of making it any more intelligible” (*CJ*, sec. 57, pp. 208–09). The subjective principle of “reflective judgment” is the “unhappy consciousness” of the Enlightenment, however, only insofar as reason expects to apprehend the world by means of “determinate concepts.”

In connection with my reevaluation of the Horkheimer–Adorno theorem, my third and perhaps most difficult task will be to determine how the process of subjective self-reflection has con-

³⁰ This is the thesis of Howard Caygill’s *Art of Judgment* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989). As Caygill has argued, however, the aporia of aesthetic judgment is the point of departure for Kant’s third *Critique*, not its solution, as contemporary critical theory has tended to presuppose. See also Caygill, “Post-modernism and Judgment,” *Economy and Society*, 17 (February 1988), 1–20.

³¹ As Kant says, his hope is that “the difficulty of unraveling a problem so involved in its nature may serve as an excuse for a certain amount of hardly avoidable obscurity in its solution, provided that the accuracy of our statement of the principle is proved with all requisite clearness” (*CJ*, Introduction, pp. 6–7). I take up this issue in greater detail in chapter 2. In the *Anthropology*, Kant admits that some readers may admire a certain degree of mystery, but even there it remains clear that reason’s inclination is for the kind of clarity and distinctness that Descartes associated with the truth. See Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, trans. Victor Lyle Dowdell (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1978), p. 21.

tinued beyond the logical point at which Horkheimer and Adorno believed it was destined to cease. As we will see in detail beginning in chapter 2, the principle of reflective judgment models a form of reason that, strictly speaking, does not proceed according to concepts. Instead, it begins from a process of reflection on those relations that resist, escape, or are otherwise lost to conceptual thought, including the so-called “primary” aesthetic experiences of pleasure and pain. For Kant, pleasure and pain are what our conceptual cognitive and moral structures fail to accommodate. Specifically, the *Critique of Judgment* takes its point of departure in the specific element in subjectivity that is “incapable of becoming an element of cognition,” which Kant describes as the feeling that accompanies and qualifies our relationship to cognitive and moral representations. To argue that the experiences of pleasure and pain escape conceptual thinking is not to suggest that one cannot have thoughts about or make statements about pleasurable or painful experiences (although, particularly in the case of pain, such thoughts are notoriously difficult to put into words).³² Rather it suggests that the immediacy of pleasure and pain is lost with any attempt to represent them discursively. For Derrida in *The Truth in Painting*, what Kant describes as pleasure is not an “experience” at all. It is more like the residue (*reste*) of our attempt to conceptualize experience, and it is its residual or remaindered quality that, in Derrida’s interpretation of Kant, incites us to discourse on the beautiful: “it is this remainder which causes talk, since it is, once again, primarily a question of *discourse* on the beautiful, of discursivity *in* the structure of the beautiful and not only of a discourse supposed to happen accidentally *to* the beautiful.”³³ Similarly, it is a particular configuration of pain, very closely associated with the loss of our proximity to nature, that incites us to discourse on the sublime. In Kant, the pleasure and the pain that escape cognition provide special access to human purposiveness. Pleasure and pain lie at the basis of everything that is potentially ethical about the beautiful and the sublime – even if what Kant thinks of as the corporeal basis of ethics must

³² Elaine Scarry gives a remarkable account of the resistance of pain to discourse in *The Body in Pain* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

³³ Regarding the “immediacy” of pleasure, it is true that Kant says that “the beautiful pleases immediately” *Critique of Judgment*, sec. 59, p. 224; but he qualifies that claim to say that this occurs “only in reflective intuition.”

ultimately be placed under judgment and transformed in order for its ethical force to be revealed.³⁴

Consistent with what I think are the concerns at play in Kant's third *Critique*, I take the question of aesthetic reflection to originate not in any inherent disposition of the subject but rather in an awareness of our vexed relationship to all that is invoked in the name of "nature," or in social terms, the "natural praxis of life," the specifically problematical nature of which was formulated for philosophy by the skeptical tradition to which Kant's attempt at a critical philosophy was already a response. And I take Kant's response in turn to have been decisively shaped by his prior notion of the sovereignty of critical reason, which organizes the separation of fact (epistemology) from value (ethics), and both of these from reflective aesthetic judgment, which we bring to bear in the claims we make about the beautiful and the sublime. But at the same time I would argue that the contemporary critical response to the question of Enlightenment points in the direction of a reflective or "aesthetic" critique of reason as a way of acknowledging the survival of the subject beyond the point at which Horkheimer and Adorno envisioned its demise.

These claims are substantially less puzzling than it might at first seem because even in Kant the aesthetic is not just one sphere among others equal to it. When Habermas speaks of aesthetics as equivalent to the sphere of "symbolic" reason, he misses the fundamental point about the indeterminacy of the aesthetic in Kant. Indeed, Kant's own discussion of the "symbolic" relationship between beauty and morality in section 59 of the third *Critique* emphasizes the difficulty of grounding that link in any direct intuition of a concept. Misled perhaps by Schiller's "Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man" and by Weber's thesis of the "separation of the spheres" of modern culture, Habermas takes the term "aesthetics" as coextensive with the socially constituted field of autonomous art. Better, I would argue, to insist with Kant upon aesthetics as the place in which a process of reflection on what is lost or divided by the operations of the first two critiques is begun. To be sure, it may well be Kant's *wish* for aesthetics to reconcile the separate realms of nature and ethical freedom. Similarly, the

³⁴ Regarding "transformation" as the work of ethics, see Geoff Harpham, *Getting it Right* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), especially ch. 3, "From Conversion to Analysis."

desire of reflective judgment may be to advance a “higher” critique of reason by deducing the principle according to which the various faculties are divided from one another and their proper territories secured. But what Kant in fact concludes is that the derivation of this “higher” principle of judgment remains opaque: we know it must exist, we may remember or presuppose it to exist, but we cannot demonstrate to the satisfaction of reason that it does in fact exist. Kant thus admits that aesthetics offers a sign of the *impossibility* of conjoining the worlds of nature and of ethical freedom and explicitly states that “it is not possible to throw a bridge from the one realm to the other” (*CJ*, Introduction, p. 37). Beauty remains a “symbol” of morality, which is to say that morality is something that beauty can at best figure.

For Derrida, the failure of aesthetics to bridge the gulf separating Kant’s two worlds is also its success in revealing the abyss that is created by any effort to delimit a position that is stably inside or outside a given structure. It is in terms of this “parergonal” form that Derrida refashions the Kantian notion of a “critique.” But as I shall argue in chapters 4 and 5, the “failure” of aesthetics to bridge fact and value has social and political implications beyond what any of these thinkers may have recognized. For it is in terms of the particular “difficulty” of aesthetic judgment that we can see how artworks call forth claims of taste that refer to the ideal of a *sensus communis*, the underlying principle of which cannot be derived in theoretical terms, but must be either remembered or presupposed as a condition of judgment. The difficulty inherent in deriving the principle of aesthetic judgment suggests that we are challenged to make binding claims that would preserve and validate the particularity of subjective experience over against the universal categories to which reason in its cognitive operations would otherwise subsume such experience, all the while recognizing that the validity of those claims would have to count on the existence of a community which it is also their purpose to (re)create.

In these and other ways, the determinations we make when confronted with examples of the beautiful and the sublime can provide a model for the kind of critique that goes beyond the aims of cognition or practical reason in order to focus on the subject’s affective response to its non-necessary, purely contingent relation to the natural world. Following Adorno’s analysis in *Aesthetic Theory*, these claims can be reconciled with the role of certain

artworks in modern society because (great) art alone among the socially differentiated spheres of Enlightened modernity – the cognitive, the practical, and the aesthetic – suffers the effects of that differentiation and invites us to reflect upon it as an objective and irrefutable fact. In what may be regarded as Derrida's complementary stance on this point, this is because art is the place in which we discover an "uneconomic" loss, in which what is lost is never fully amortized: if art involves work, this is because art is the place in which the work of mourning never ends.³⁵ Adorno's argument is that while "rational cognition can subsume suffering under concepts" nonetheless "it can never express suffering in the medium of experience, for to do so would be irrational by reason's own standards. Therefore, even when it is understood, suffering remains mute and inconsequential . . . What recommends itself, then, is the idea that art may be the only remaining medium of truth in an age of incomprehensible terror and suffering."³⁶ It may accordingly be argued that any attempt to disown our inheritance of that suffering – either by the purely subjective aestheticization of art, as Adorno sees happening in the privileging of aesthetic "immediacy" by figure "A" of Kierkegaard's *Either/Or*,³⁷ or by subordinating art to the structures of the more "worldly" discourses of history, society, ethics, or politics (as so often occurs in literary applications of critical theory today)³⁸ – suppresses the awareness of that suffering and avoids the very problem that gives rise to it. In *Negative Dialectics*, for instance, Adorno argues that suffering is the condition of truth. This claim must be interpreted in light of the assertion later made in the *Aesthetic Theory*, that "the enigma of works of art is their having been broken off" (p. 184). In Adorno's view, it is the fate of artworks in the modern age to have to refuse the conditions of wholeness whose ethical ideals they would also like us to remember, and which we must

³⁵ For instance, Derrida writes in "Economimesis": "It is in poetry that the work of mourning, transforming hetero-affection into auto-affection, produces the maximum of disinterested pleasure," *Diacritics*, 2, 2 (1981), 18. Similar remarks can be found in *The Truth in Painting*. ³⁶ *AT*, p. 27.

³⁷ See Adorno, *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989). See also Heidegger's struggle to break free from Romanticism in "The Origin of the Work of Art."

³⁸ Cf. J. Hillis Miller, *The Ethics of Reading* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987). See also Derrida's comment in *The Truth in Painting* regarding art criticism as a struggle between history and philosophy, in which history seems naturally superior but is not necessarily so.

also presuppose. Artworks transmit the memory of what it was like to be whole while at the same time resisting the knowledge of what they remember to be true. Artworks bear the trace of aura, the sensuous “this,” the presence of the past, the whole embodied in the particular. And, on Adorno’s account, their burden is to convey that memory in a tangible form.

What is Enlightenment?

Before proceeding further to develop the notion of an aesthetic critique, some clarification is in order regarding the status of the potentially vague and troubling term “Enlightenment,” noting at the outset the peculiar status of this term (*Aufklärung*) in the title of Horkheimer and Adorno’s essay as both the designation of an historical epoch and as the description of a conceptual paradigm. While the issues I am concerned with are specific to the modern European Enlightenment and its aftermath, Horkheimer and Adorno’s critique of the instrumentalization of reason says nothing about whether what lies at stake in the question of Enlightenment is itself historical or theoretical. Is the critical project outlined by Horkheimer and Adorno in the opening essay of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* to be understood as part of an historical analysis of the modern world, or is the critique they initiate meant to address something fundamental in the nature of reason itself? In methodological terms, is “The Concept of Enlightenment” to be regarded as a work of speculative philosophy or is it a work of historical sociology? Is it to be thought of as the statement of a theory valid always and everywhere, true for all human consciousness, or is it to be taken as an analysis of social formations specific to a certain culture at a determinate time and place? What status – historical or theoretical, contingent and context-specific or universal – is to be attributed to the concept of “Enlightenment”?

On the one hand, Horkheimer and Adorno recognize that the self-conscious subject stands for something more qualitative and specific than any conceptual position or construct can articulate normatively or in the abstract. Moreover, the problems of reification and rationalization demand accounting in historical terms. But Horkheimer and Adorno also see that any analysis of the structure of self-consciousness in terms of an empiricist understanding of history would constitute a negation of the possibility

of self-reflection by relegating consciousness to one of Kant's two worlds at the expense of the other. Insofar as the subject is self-conscious, it amounts to something more than an historical positivity to be explained in purely causal terms; as critical theory from Kant and Hegel to Habermas has recognized, the self-conscious subject seeks a stance beyond history from which to reflect upon experience. But at the same time, and with equal force, Horkheimer and Adorno see that a critique of subjectivity that makes no reference to the historical processes through which subjects are constituted can itself only be abstract. This is the dilemma revealed in their seemingly anomalous use of the term "enlightenment": no position for such historico-theoretical reflection can be found, yet such a position must be found.

In the work of Horkheimer and Adorno the concept of "Enlightenment" betrays a struggle both to describe a fundamental structure of reason and to characterize the historical practices that, in modernity, have led to rationalization and reification. But the essay can only negotiate these demands dissonantly and ironically rather than categorically or synthetically. "Enlightenment" is a term that in their hands works consistently against itself, routinely dislocating its own historical and theoretical powers to the point where it becomes less a concept in its own right than the mechanism for unseating the conceptual relations such a term conventionally calls into play. Because of a resistance to theory that would urge an understanding of "Enlightenment" in historical terms, and because of a resistance to a positivist account of history that would embrace a conceptual paradigm they cannot accept, the concept of "Enlightenment" at work in Horkheimer and Adorno's essay marks the site of an impasse at this stage in the development of critical theory.

The antinomy of history and theory can be dealt with, if not resolved, through the resources of reflective judgment that Kant develops in the third *Critique*. Not surprisingly, though, "The Concept of Enlightenment" does not itself articulate a way around this impasse. The essay takes only a glancing look at the emergence of autonomous art in relation to the rise to dominance of cognition-only knowledge, which it theorizes in terms of what C. P. Snow called the problem of the "two cultures."³⁹ It pauses

³⁹ C. P. Snow, *The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959).

only briefly to take up Walter Benjamin's analysis of art in the rationalized world in terms of the loss of art's originary quality or "aura." Moreover, the essay makes no explicit reference to the problem of reflective judgment outlined in Kant's third *Critique*. Rather, Horkheimer and Adorno's essay shuttles back and forth between the historical and the theoretical meanings of the term "Enlightenment." The desire to sustain a critique of the Enlightenment requires Horkheimer and Adorno to think simultaneously on two levels: not only socially and historically, but categorically and "transcendentally" as well. It compels them to find a way of addressing the nature of enlightened reason that would respect the specificity of the modern Enlightenment as an historical phenomenon, while simultaneously advancing a critical comprehension of the history in question.⁴⁰ Accordingly, the essay must be read on two distinct levels in order to be understood.

On the historical level, their notion of "Enlightenment" eschews the Weberian analysis of social differentiation in favor of Marx's critique of "equivalence," which finds its most important articulation in the first chapter of *Capital*.⁴¹ Horkheimer and Adorno argue that what Marx identifies as the logic of equivalence began with the substitution of signs and tokens for things, within the context of myth; this process of substitution gradually produced the much larger problems of abstraction and universal mediation characteristic of modern, capitalist cultures. Under the conditions of commodity capitalism a set of formal equivalences

⁴⁰ Jay M. Bernstein explains this demand in the following terms: "If history matters to philosophy then philosophical forms are also historical forms and events bound up with other historical events; but they are not just historical forms and events since, if they are of philosophical significance in some sense continuous with what philosophy has been, then they 'inform' the events surrounding them in a categorical way. In brief, we appear to require a philosophy of history, where the (teleological) movement of that history takes up the burden of the work previously accomplished through transcendental legislation by providing categorial orientation for the concrete items under review. Yet, finally, such a philosophy of history would not be the full response to the analysis of Kant since on its own it would repeat, and make worse, the suppression of judgment the analysis sought to demonstrate . . . and further, it would contravene the concluding thesis that the transcendental conditions for the possibility of knowing are not fully exponible." *The Fate of Art* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992), p. 67. What Bernstein does not sufficiently explain is that, especially for Adorno, art came to indicate the possibility of a position that is both internal to and critical of social production.

⁴¹ See Jameson, *Late Marxism*, pp. 148-49, on this issue in relation to Horkheimer and Adorno.

came to stand in place of the qualitative relationships of particular subjects to one another and to the products of their labor. Similarly, Horkheimer and Adorno suggest that the Enlightenment's understanding of subjective self-consciousness as standing in opposition to a world of objects defines subjectivity in terms of a system of formal equivalences. In a more contemporary idiom, one might say that the process of modern subject-formation involves subjection, the submission to compulsory norms.

On the theoretical level, by contrast, "The Concept of Enlightenment" can and must be read as an analysis and critique of the structure or *logos* of "Enlightenment" as such. On this plane, the essay aspires to what has since come to be known as a critique of "Western metaphysics," except that Horkheimer and Adorno recognize no particular need to limit their claims to the cultures of the West. At the theoretical level, they argue not just that the Enlightenment is an embodiment of the self-canceling ideals of bourgeois, democratic culture. Indeed, the essay's own lingering and somewhat desperate emancipatory hopes might even be seen as the sign of an affinity with those relatively naive elements in bourgeois culture that regard change as possible on the basis of thought alone.⁴² More devastatingly, perhaps, the essay suggests that enlightened reason is subject to the fundamental form of dialectical contradiction that had been posited by Hegel as inherent to all forms of consciousness – according to which reason is both itself and something other than, opposed to, itself. But whereas Hegel's understanding of the nature of subjective self-consciousness hinges on the transformation of every prior moment of consciousness into some higher or more complex form, Horkheimer and Adorno suggest that self-consciousness is finally canceled by the return of whatever was left behind in the process of its gradual emergence from nature. The later essays in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* argue that the freedom of self-consciousness is negated by the return of the fundamentally brutal passions and instincts of an internal nature that is unable to hide its constitutive fear or to conceal its interest in self-preservation.⁴³ The negativity

⁴² See *ibid.* and Stanley Fish's critique of Roberto Unger in "Unger and Milton," in *Doing What Comes Naturally: Change, Rhetoric, and the Practice of Theory in Literary and Legal Studies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1989), pp. 399–435.

⁴³ For Habermas, this process extends to encompass Horkheimer and Adorno's critical reflections themselves. See Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*.

The consequences of Enlightenment

of desire that fuels Hegel's dialectic – but which in Hegel moves considerably beyond self-preservation – is thus set to work against all that is purified in the Hegelian march toward Wisdom. Hence Horkheimer and Adorno describe a process of reflection that uncovers the image of domination in freedom, that finds reification in every act of reason, and that reveals the Enlightenment's hidden complicity with "myth." They argue that "myth is already enlightenment; and enlightenment reverts to mythology" (Introduction to *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. xvi). Since Horkheimer and Adorno regard Enlightenment rationality as reluctant to recognize its implication in a dialectical process of any sort whatsoever, they find themselves obliged to point out that reason is subject throughout history to a process wherein it appears to assume an absolute and omnipotent stance over and against its objects, only to collapse into new forms of the very conditions it had set out to overcome:⁴⁴ "mythology itself set off the unending process of enlightenment in which ever and again, with the inevitability of necessity, every specific theoretic view succumbs to the destructive criticism that it is only a belief" ("Concept of Enlightenment," p. 11). Hence the essay's affinities with cynical reason.

But this critique of "Enlightenment" is not a dead end. At the very least it calls into question the ways in which the historical Enlightenment has represented itself. Often it has been remarked that the modern Enlightenment was committed to understanding itself as having overcome history, as having achieved a definitive distance from all constraints inherited from the past. In the view of thinkers like Descartes and Kant, the modern Enlightenment was not the *expression* of anything at all – and certainly not the expression of anything fundamentally contingent, particular, or historical – but was the necessary result of reason's self-authorizing acts. As Kant claims in the essay "What Is Enlightenment?" the basis of the Enlightenment – its prerequisite – is the freedom of rational self-assertion; its only obstacles are cowardice, laziness, or the public limitation of this freedom. So seen, the Enlightenment is a consequence not just of reason but of the rational will. Indeed, well before Kant, Descartes had argued that the freedom of the will reveals a fundamental likeness between human beings and God:

⁴⁴ See the very apt formulation of this question by James Bradley in his essay "Frankfurt Views," *Radical Philosophy*, 13 (Spring 1975), 39–40.

"It is only the will, or freedom of choice, which I experience within me to be so great that the idea of any greater faculty is beyond my grasp; so much that it is above all in virtue of the will that I understand myself to bear in some way the image and likeness of God. For although God's will is incomparably greater than mine . . . nevertheless it does not seem any greater than mine when considered as will in the essential and strict sense."⁴⁵

As Hans Blumenberg and other intellectual historians have pointed out, the Enlightenment effort to overcome history was not without substantial contradiction. First, the characterization of that which precedes the Enlightenment as a period of darkness or ignorance marked by superstitions and uncritical beliefs (the "dogmatism," "skepticism," and "intolerance" that Kant describes in the Preface to the first edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*) fails to acknowledge the historical validity of the beliefs and practices of the "pre-Enlightenment" world.⁴⁶ But insofar as the Enlightenment recognizes that it cannot overcome history, it has recourse to the notion of progress, in which reason's "new beginning" is referred to as the originating point of a continuously ascending line. In the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, for instance, Kant maps the progress of enlightened self-consciousness in the form of the unbroken course of "logic": "That logic has, from the earliest times, proceeded upon this sure path is evidenced by the fact that since Aristotle it has not required to retrace a single step" (B, viii). (Oddly enough, Kant also says that "it is remarkable also that to the present day this logic has not been able to advance a single step," *ibid.*) But the Enlightenment notion of progress cannot defend itself against the charge that it may be the product of a distorted reading of the past. The figure of the continuously ascending line does not necessarily afford us a critical comprehension of the history it represents. (In addressing a related issue, the early Kant himself speaks of the "bias of reason"; he invokes the concept of method as the way in which judgment can escape its own bias; but as the discussion of genius in the third *Critique* goes to show, method proves to be an insuffi-

⁴⁵ René Descartes, *Meditations*, iv, in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. II, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 40.

⁴⁶ In this context, one needs to acknowledge the prejudicial nature of the phrase "pre-Enlightenment."

cient guide for judgment's most difficult tasks.⁴⁷) The interpretation of the Enlightenment's progressive stance as an ideological "distortion" is reinforced by the fact that it produces only self-serving explanations of what motivates its rejection of the past. Autonomous reason – reason which is authorized to constitute itself independently – presents itself as both the product and the cause of progress in history. It points to its own success as evidence of the fact that progress has in fact been achieved. Indeed, the historical necessity that Enlightenment rationality invokes for itself might best be seen as a consequence of what Hans Blumenberg has called "rational self-assertion." As Blumenberg says, "reason's interpretation of itself as the faculty of an absolute beginning excludes the possibility that there could be even so much as indications of a situation that calls for reason's application now, no sooner and no later. Reason, as the ultimate authority, has no need of a legitimation for setting itself in motion; but it also denies itself any reply to the question why it was ever out of operation and in need of a beginning. What God did before the Creation and why He decided on it . . . these are questions that cannot be asked in the context of the system constituted by their basic concepts."⁴⁸ Thus while it might be said that the modern Enlightenment understood its claim to having "overcome" the contingencies of history to be a guarantee and safeguard against the potential collapse of enlightened self-consciousness into the imagined "darkness" of its historical antecedents, the narrative of progress appears to be as sharply inflected as the narrative of regression or the return to origins.

"The Concept of Enlightenment" challenges the self-judgment implicit in this stance by contesting the unreflective form in which its self-judgment is rendered. One implication of Horkheimer and Adorno's work is to question the Enlightenment narrative of progress by representing the process of Enlightenment as incomplete, not in the sense in which Habermas intends this phrase (i.e., in order to call for its completion), but rather as a structure that was never fully formed in the separation of reason from myth.

⁴⁷ Kant, *Dreams of a Visionary Elucidated through the Dreams of Metaphysics* (1766), cited in Caygill, *Art of Judgment*, p. 194.

⁴⁸ Hans Blumenberg, *Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, trans. Robert M. Wallace (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1983), p. 145. I discuss the problem of self-assertion at greater length in *The Subject of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

Not only is the Enlightenment's "overcoming" of myth incomplete; myth's "beginning" was not itself originary. As Slavoj Žižek suggests with respect to Schelling, there is something that precedes the Beginning itself – in Schelling's case "a rotary motion whose vicious cycle is broken, in a gesture analogous to the cutting of the Gordian knot, by the Beginning proper, that is, the primordial act of decision . . . 'eternity' is not a nondescript mass – a lot of things take place in it. Prior to the Word there is the chaotic-psychotic universe of blind drives, their rotary motion, their undifferentiated pulsating; and the Beginning occurs when the Word is pronounced which 'represses,' rejects into the eternal Past, this self-enclosed circuit of drives."⁴⁹ For Horkheimer and Adorno, by contrast, the opacity⁵⁰ of the Enlightenment with respect to the insights of history and theory anchors a critical posture that rejects the recuperative gestures that, since Schiller, hoped to find in art a mirror of the finality of nature aligned with human purposiveness; it rejects these in favor of a double vision that sustains the antagonism of mutually opposing terms, exposing each to the pressure of the other within an open-ended, contestatory space. The "dissonant thinking" of their essay represents both the limit and the trace of the Kantian aesthetic of unreconciled reflection in their work – a trace that, in resisting a vision of the subject as synthesis, involves a resistance to Hegel as well as to Kant. According to the Adorno of *Negative Dialectics*, "contradiction is nonidentity under the aspect of identity; the dialectical primacy of the principle of contradiction makes the thought of unity the measure of heterogeneity . . . What we differentiate will appear divergent, dissonant, negative for just as long as the structure of our consciousness obliges it to strive for unity, as long as its demand for totality will be its measure for whatever is not identical with it."⁵¹ The "dissonant thinking" of

⁴⁹ Slavoj Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder: An Essay on Schelling and Related Matters* (London: Verso, 1996), p. 13.

⁵⁰ As an examination of Kant's third *Critique* will help make clear, "enlightenment" can be described in this regard as a "dislocated" or "opaque" structure. The term "dislocation" derives from Ernesto Laclau. See *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time* (New York: Verso, 1990).

⁵¹ *Negative Dialectics*, pp. 5–6. The term "dissonant thinking" is suggested by Adorno's *Dissonanzen: Musik in der verwalteten Welt* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1958). An alternative would be the "logic of disintegration" suggested in *Negative Dialectics*, pp. 144–46. See also Jacques Attali, *Bruits: Essai sur l'économie politique de la musique* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1977).

this essay is the result of a resistance to the separation *and* the synthesis of history and theory carried out in the interest of the subject, whose position likewise resists any categorical separation of these terms.⁵²

To say this much is to suggest that the problems posed by “The Concept of Enlightenment” cannot be resolved either by situating subjectivity historically or by theorizing about our historical situation.⁵³ The following questions nonetheless remain. Where can Horkheimer and Adorno’s practice of “dissonant thinking” lead except to a restatement of the antinomies of Enlightenment in a more densely opaque form? If history and theory as they structure and inform self-consciousness are neither absolutely reconcilable nor entirely unreconcilable, what can issue from the effort to express their dissonance?⁵⁴ My ambition in later chapters is to suggest that such matters can be addressed in terms of the logic of reflective judgment that follows from Kant’s aesthetic critique. In “The Concept of Enlightenment,” however, the dissonance of history and theory is never resolved or reduced.⁵⁵ For this reason, the essay’s critical power may appear muted or obscure. And although Adorno eventually moved to the formulation of an explicitly aesthetic critique wherein art is regarded as the domain

⁵² Cf. *CJ*, sec. 59. p. 224. This is to say that there is indeed an interest in aesthetic disinterestedness.

⁵³ For the Adorno of *Negative Dialectics*, this was impossible for another reason. Citing Benjamin’s *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, Adorno describes the process whereby metaphysics was transformed into history as a process of irreversible secularization: “The transmutation of metaphysics into history . . . secularizes metaphysics in the secular category pure and simple, the category of decay” (*Negative Dialectics*, p. 360).

⁵⁴ These questions might also be asked of the method more properly called “negative dialectics.” For example: “However varied, the anticipation of moving in contradictions throughout seems to teach a mental totality – the very identity thesis we have just rendered inoperative. The mind which ceaselessly reflects on contradiction in the thing itself, we hear, must be the thing itself if it is to be organized in the form of contradiction; the truth which in idealistic dialectics drives beyond every particular, as onesided and wrong, is the truth of the whole, and if that were not preconceived, the dialectical steps would lack motivation and direction. We have to answer that the object of a mental experience is an antagonistic system in itself – antagonistic in reality, not just in its conveyance to the knowing subject that rediscovers itself therein.” *Negative Dialectics*, p. 10.

⁵⁵ On the contrary, their analysis of a text like the *Odyssey* from the perspective of technical-instrumental reason is meant to produce a sense of the absurd that, on Žižek’s analysis, in turn opens actual historical distance to us. Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do*, p. 103.

in which the particular is preserved in the guise of its irreducibility or “non-identity,” in this earlier work the problem of Enlightenment is only heightened by the thesis of the entanglement of Enlightenment with myth, a term of quite foreboding power that appears at first blush to be the nemesis and shadow of all possible Enlightenment.

In its simplest formulation, their argument is that what we recognize as “Enlightenment” begins with the shift from the practices of “specific representation” found in myth and magic to “nonspecific” modes of representation. In an example of specific representation, the lightning bolt was taken as Zeus himself; in “nonspecific” representations the same “x” can stand in innumerable equations for the particular value that might complete each one. We can surmise that the aesthetic symbol or figure occupies a place in between these two: it recalls the quality of a determinate relationship to the world, while it also reveals that relationship as open to contingency, change, and chance. More broadly, their argument rests on the claim that all symbolization, and likewise all conceptualization, involves operations that are general and abstract, and so cannot be anything other than a negation of human experience, the particularity of which resists representation and remains fundamentally unmasterable by concepts.⁵⁶

At the same time, the introduction of the term “myth” and the revelation of its role in the process of Enlightenment involves a direct challenge to the progressive view of history. Consistent with a stance that questions the linear, ascending form in which “progress” has been represented, Horkheimer and Adorno would lead us to conclude that myth was preserved within Enlightenment not just as a vestige or a trace, but as an example of a prior mode of cognition that continues to inhabit enlightened

⁵⁶ This notion is anticipated by, among other thinkers, Hegel, whose *Phenomenology* turns on the idea that, prior to the moment of the Absolute, where thinking and actuality coincide, thought and experience are never one. Indeed, the *Phenomenology* can be read as a systematic account of the ways in which all thinking betrays experience. It is recirculated in Nietzsche, whose barbed style represents an attempt to communicate aesthetically what we would otherwise negate by merely grasping conceptually – that thought negates experience. Cf. Nietzsche’s Zarathustra, who claims that the desire to “make all being conceivable” means that “it must become smooth and subject to the mind as the mind’s mirror reflection,” and who in turn identifies conceptual thought with the “will to power.” Nietzsche, “Of Self-Overcoming,” in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961), p. 136.

reason. "Myth" stands for an ordering of the world that works by cunning, mimesis, and analogy, rather than by "concept." And as Horkheimer and Adorno make abundantly clear, everything relegated by the process of Enlightenment to "mythical thinking," which reason attempts to suppress – ranging from superstition and madness to religion, genius, and art – was at best repressed. This is also to say that myth – or, more deeply perhaps, the fear to which myth was a first response – was never fully eliminated by the process of Enlightenment, but was instead preserved and enveloped; as the driving force behind hegemonic forms of power, myth has revealed itself to be one of the "consequences" of the Enlightenment itself.

To be sure, the Enlightenment sought the "disenchantment" of the world in an effort to uproot "prejudice" and "superstition" and thereby to bring the sources of fear under control. With "disenchantment" came the elimination of purposiveness from nature, the sources of which were subsequently attributed to "animistic thinking" or to "primitive thought." In the ambit of "enlightened" thinking, to model human purposes on the purposiveness of the natural world, even if by a process of imitation or analogy, is to threaten the distinction between nature and culture, or, as Habermas says, to confuse the purposes of agents with the world of nature.⁵⁷ Habermas's views would seem to have a firm foundation in Horkheimer and Adorno's essay. They write that "Enlightenment has always taken the basic principle of myth to be anthropomorphism, the projection onto nature of the subjective . . . the supernatural, spirits and demons, are mirror images of men who allow themselves to be frightened by natural phenomena" ("Concept of Enlightenment," p. 6).

Horkheimer and Adorno nonetheless go on to suggest that myth is *already* Enlightenment. Myth, it would seem, represents an attempt to provide an ordering of particular phenomena and submit them to "universal" rules in order to reduce the fearsome externality of nature to consciousness. Myth on their account

⁵⁷ As Habermas goes on to argue, "myth" invites a fundamental confusion between nature and culture that can only be rectified by a process of critical thinking and additional efforts at disenchantment: "only demythologization dispels this enchantment." Habermas remains faithful enough to his Frankfurt School roots to add that "the process of enlightenment leads to the desocialization of nature and the denaturalization of the human world." See *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, p. 115.

embraces both of what we recognize as science and morality: "Myth intended report, naming, the narration of a Beginning; but also presentation, confirmation, explanation: a tendency that grew stronger with the recording and collection of myths. Narrative became didactic at an early age" (p. 8).⁵⁸ In this respect, Horkheimer and Adorno suggest that Enlightenment is itself a carrying-forward, *Aufhebung*, or sublation of myth. Both represent an attempt to conceal the inconsistency of the symbolic order in which we live. "Just as the myths already realize enlightenment, so enlightenment with every step becomes more deeply engulfed in mythology. It receives all its matter from the myths, in order to destroy them; and even as a judge it comes under the mythic curse . . . The principle of immanence, the explanation of every event as repetition, that the Enlightenment upholds against mythic imagination, is the principle of myth itself" (pp. 11–12).

In sum, Horkheimer and Adorno argue that Enlightenment is not just the result of a process of disenchantment that was left incomplete, but that the Enlightenment's vaunted notion of progress is in fact undermined by the hidden identity of Enlightenment and myth: "Enlightenment *returns to* mythology, which it never really knew how to elude" (p. 27). For instance, Horkheimer and Adorno claim that mathematics is an example of "ritual thought" in which the underlying principles of repetition and equivalence function as fetishes (p. 20). Similarly, they argue that the systematicity of the Enlightenment operates on the same basis as a "universal taboo"; its obligatory inclusiveness demands that "nothing at all may remain outside, because the mere idea of outsideness is the very source of fear" (p. 16). And just as the idea of a categorical difference between Enlightenment and myth is challenged by their claim, so too they suggest that this "identity" is subtended by a difference that could only make sense from an "enlightened" point of view. The existence of myth "prior" to reason serves to prove that human experience is "always already" structured in some rational form, while the consequences of rationalization go to "prove" that Enlightenment is a continuation

⁵⁸ Horkheimer and Adorno's work raises the difficult question of the relative priority of language and social practice (which a thinker like Wittgenstein would resolve by seeing language *as* social practice). According to Lacanian psychoanalysis, it is the entry into the symbol-system of language that marks the fundamental difference between what is human and what is not.

of the work of myth.⁵⁹ Given this analysis, it would seem that the escape from myth and the movement toward autonomy promised by the Enlightenment's attempt at a rational critique of all universal claims through a differentiation of its own powers represents a false and unsustainable hope.

As Habermas reads Horkheimer and Adorno, the problem of the identity and difference of Enlightenment and myth results in an impasse rather than an opening for critical theory, and especially for any theory with commitments to the Enlightenment's progressive social goals. On the Habermasian account, the thesis of the Enlightenment's entwinement with myth leads us into a *cul de sac*. It would seem to mark the movement from one omnipotence to another and to indicate the untransformability of the world by any purposive human action. History would at best be a process of repetition or, as suggested above, a manifestation of cynical reason. Thus, Habermas marks the work of Horkheimer and Adorno in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as the dead end of Enlightenment thought.⁶⁰ Habermas summarizes the consequences of this work as follows: "The suspicion of ideology becomes *total* . . . It is turned not only against the irrational function of bourgeois ideals, but against the rational potential of bourgeois culture itself, and thus it reaches into the foundations of any ideology critique that proceeds immanently. But the goal remains that of producing an effect of unmasking. The thought-figure, into which a scepticism regarding reason is now worked, remains unchanged: Now reason itself is suspected of the baneful confusion of power and validity claims, but still with the intent of enlightening."⁶¹

In part as a response to Horkheimer and Adorno, Habermas has proposed that a new form of rationality, grounded in the theory of communicative action, can sustain all the practical concerns of myth, which he identifies with its integrative role in the "life-world," while resisting any tendency to approach the world and others in it as objects simply to be manipulated or controlled. Habermas puts forward the theory of communicative action as a

⁵⁹ On the continuation of myth, see Blumenberg, *Work on Myth*, trans. Robert M. Wallace (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985).

⁶⁰ See the alliance made in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, pp. 106–30, "The Entwinement of Myth and Enlightenment."

⁶¹ Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, p. 119.

way in which the subject can successfully coordinate the goals of rationality and purposiveness. Specifically, Habermas advances the theory of communicative action as an antidote to conditions in which “the disenchantment of the religious-metaphysical world view robs rationality, along with the contents of tradition, of all substantive connotations and thereby strips it of its power to have a structure-forming influence on the lifeworld beyond the purposive-rational organization of means.” As opposed to this, the communicative-action account of rationality is said to be “directly implicated in social life-processes insofar as acts of mutual understanding take on the role of a mechanism for coordinating action. The network of communicative actions is nourished by resources of the lifeworld and is at the same time the *medium* by which concrete forms of life are reproduced.”⁶² But we shall have ample occasion to see that the Habermasian judgment of Horkheimer and Adorno’s work is, at the very least, premature. First and foremost, it would have to be recognized that “The Concept of Enlightenment” renders suspect Habermas’s own position within the Enlightenment progression from *mythos* to *logos*. For, if nothing else, Horkheimer and Adorno showed that the Enlightenment’s self-conception of “reason” as standing in clear opposition to “myth” is false: no matter which way one chooses to look, myth is already a species of reason and what is offered as “reason” is sustained by a form of myth.⁶³

Suffice it here to say that my own understanding of the consequences of the Enlightenment is substantially different from Habermas’s in part because Habermas’s theory of “communicative reason” serves mainly to recast and neutralize what Kant identified as the specific difficulty of aesthetic judgment by the invocation of a free and spontaneous act of the will, through which a community of peaceable speakers is bound together. And insofar as Habermas simply invites us to derive consensus from the

⁶² *Ibid.*, pp. 315–16.

⁶³ This relationship has direct implications for our concept of the presentness of the present, understood historically. As Jameson notes: “In this sense, the present – the most up-to-date form of the dialectic of enlightenment – produces the past, and more specifically that immediate past of its own present which is now stigmatized as archaic, old-fashioned, mythic, superstitious, obsolete or simply ‘natural’; but this is true as far back into the past as we can see or imagine, and indeed the temporal dialectic proposed here might better be analogized in terms of optics, where with every shift in visual attention a new lateral field establishes itself, forever out of reach.” Jameson, *Late Marxism*, p. 99.

disposition toward understanding said to be implicit in speech his position remains dangerously close to the “dark” Enlightenment thinkers, among whom he includes Machiavelli and Hobbes, whose pessimism he is ostensibly seeking to correct.⁶⁴ One of those writers, Hobbes, had already recommended a political version of something like Habermassian communication (Hobbes’s “civil society”) as a response to the problem of a radical disgregation among the members of society, which produces a mutual, constitutive fear. For Kant, the response to fear was to be derived from the courage of reason itself. *Sapere aude*, “dare to know,” the maxim adopted in 1736 by the Society of the Friends of Truth, was roundly embraced by Kant as the Enlightenment’s motto and standard of virtue in his 1784 essay “Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?” In the *Critique of Judgment* Kant refers to courage as “the maxim of a never-passive reason.” He argues that “to be given to such passivity, consequently to heteronomy of reason, is called *prejudice*,” and elaborates that “the greatest of all prejudices is that of fancying nature not to be subject to rules which the understanding by virtue of its own essential laws lays at its basis, i.e. *superstition*” (*CJ*, sec. 40, p. 152).⁶⁵

If Kant’s response to the question “What is Enlightenment?” is “man’s emergence from his self-incurred immaturity,” or his release from “tutelage” (where “tutelage” indicates “man’s inability to make use of his understanding without direction from another”⁶⁶) then ignorance must be the result not of a failure of knowledge but of a weakness of the will, or the inability to overcome fear. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment* Horkheimer and Adorno revise Kant to say that such weakness derives from a

⁶⁴ See *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, especially p. 106.

⁶⁵ Horkheimer echoes Kant when, at what seemed to be the desperate “end” of the Enlightenment tradition in *The Eclipse of Reason*, he wrote that “faith in philosophy means the refusal to permit fear to stunt in any way one’s capacity to think.” Horkheimer, “On The Concept of Philosophy,” in *The Eclipse of Reason* (1947; rpt. New York: Seabury Press, 1974), p. 162. Horkheimer goes on to argue that, because the only obstacle to Enlightenment is fear, human beings can change their circumstances just as soon as they recognize they are themselves the source of their own oppression: “Until recently in Western history, society lacked sufficient cultural and technological resources for forging an understanding between individuals, groups, and nations. Today the material conditions exist. What is lacking are men who understand that they themselves are the subjects or the functionaries of their own oppression” (pp. 162–63).

⁶⁶ Kant, “What is Enlightenment?” in *Kant on History*, ed. Lewis White Beck (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1963), p. 3.

failure of the instincts of self-preservation, and jeopardizes our ability to survive. And yet it would seem that even for Kant thinking autonomously and independently is not in itself enough to secure the goals of Enlightenment. Thus in the *Critique of Judgment* Kant describes the ethical transformation of fear in the form of a requirement to “think from the standpoint of every one else.” This fundamentally analogical principle of “enlarged mentality” (*erweiterte Denkungsart*), fully endorsed by Hannah Arendt in “The Crisis in Culture” and in her 1970 lectures on the third *Critique*, is for Kant the aesthetic complement to the need to think autonomously and consistently (*CJ*, sec. 40, p. 152).⁶⁷ As for Hume and Rousseau, Kant’s enlarged mentality requires a mutuality of affect, a “thinking with” that is every bit as much a form of “feeling with.”

Humean and Rousseauian “sympathy” aside, the intractability of the fear that underlies rational self-assertion is one of the lessons that Horkheimer and Adorno taught in “The Concept of Enlightenment,” where myth in one of its principal functions, as an ordering of the natural world and an imitation or *mimesis* of its powers, is seen as an organized response to fear that serves to bind together the members of a community in a common life-world: it is a systematic remembering and preservation of the practices that are instituted as the antidote to a fear that can never be entirely overcome. The question of fear returns both in Kant’s account of the sublime⁶⁸ and in Adorno’s posthumous *Aesthetic Theory*, where art is not just an expression of any sort, but something closer to a recollection or remembering of the archaic experi-

⁶⁷ Hannah Arendt, “The Crisis in Culture,” in *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1968), pp. 197–226 (see especially pp. 220–24), and *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, ed. Ronald Beiner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), pp. 42–44, 73–74.

⁶⁸ It is clear nonetheless that the fear Kant speaks of in relation to the sublime is a *faux* fear, and that its main purpose is to prove the power of subjectivity over nature: “The *astonishment* amounting almost to terror, the awe and thrill of devout feeling, that takes hold of one when gazing upon the prospect of mountains ascending to heaven, deep ravines and torrents raging there, deep-shadowed solitudes that invite to brooding melancholy, and the like – all this, when we are assured of our own safety, is not actual fear. Rather, it is an attempt to gain access to it through imagination, for the purpose of feeling the might of this faculty in combining the movement of the mind thereby aroused with its serenity, and of thus being superior to internal and, therefore, to external, nature, so far as the latter can have any bearing upon our feeling of well-being.” *CJ*, “General Remark,” pp. 120–21. See Chapter 7 below.

ences that give rise to fear. Art, Adorno says, registers fear "like a seismograph" (*Aesthetic Theory*, p. 185).⁶⁹

In his work beginning with *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, Habermas has sought through what I would regard as an act of unnecessary and misguided heroism to rescue the constructive dimension of the project of Enlightenment from the "pessimistic" implications of Horkheimer and Adorno's views by recourse to the notion of community as modeled on the ideal speech situation. But whereas Habermas believes that he can complete the constructive process of Enlightenment and solve the problem of rationalization by theorizing "communicative reason" as a non-coercive form of exchange among free and willing subjects, I would suggest that the Habermasian project represents an impoverishing reduction of the dialectic of Enlightenment. This reduction occurs at the very moment the Habermasian project thinks that it can correct reason's understanding of itself by representing rationality as a closed circuit of communication.⁷⁰ Habermas claims that an ethics based on the principles of communicative action ("discourse ethics") relies on no *a priori* structures other than the universals of language.⁷¹ But these remain universals nonetheless, and language, when seen as the fund of such universals, is apt to become nothing more than a substitute for what Horkheimer and Adorno designated in terms of abstract "concepts." As we shall see in chapter 2, Kant's insistence that claims of taste make reference to a pleasure that is *sui generis* suggests the need to theorize communication outside of the presuppositions regarding language universals that govern the Habermasian theory. Indeed, even the notion of a universal "pragmatics" would seem suspect in light of Kant's understanding of communication, since the pleasure at stake in Kant's third *Critique* assumes no interest, hence is divorced from praxis. Similarly, the third *Critique* theorizes a purposiveness whose principal interest lies in its refusal of all practical interests.⁷²

⁶⁹ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 121.

⁷⁰ See Derrida's "Economimesis," and also Jean-François Lyotard, *Dérive à partir de Marx et Freud* (Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions, 1973) and *Discours, Figure* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1971). The question of economy bears directly on the analysis of pleasure and pain in Kant's third *Critique*.

⁷¹ Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, trans. Christian Lenhardt and Shierry Weber Nicholson (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), p. 203.

⁷² Derrida has, of course, challenged Kant's claim on this matter in his essay "Economimesis."

In order to be successful on its own terms, Habermas's theory of intersubjective communication would need to show that neither the self nor the other takes precedence in a given exchange, indeed, that what Emmanuel Levinas has called the "dissymmetry of intersubjective space"⁷³ does not exist, that self and the other are bound together by a (pre-ethical) desire to speak. But in this case one would be hard pressed to imagine what subjects might desire to say, much less account for something as complex as the desire for recognition, which in its classical Hegelian form takes the self and other as divided and unequal parts of consciousness.

As I hope will become clear, my analysis of the problem of Enlightenment is different from Habermas's in a further way, for Habermas claims that the theory of communicative action allows him to "complete" the project of Enlightenment by shifting the basis of rationality away from the field of subject-centered reason. As we have already begun to glimpse, however, the theory of reflective judgment developed in Kant's third *Critique* leads to a concept of the Enlightenment as having no possible completion. Rather, the theory of aesthetic reflection marks affect (pleasure, pain) as evidence that the process of Enlightenment as a mode of systematic critical reflection is necessarily *incomplete*. By contrast, Habermas's attempt to circumvent the logic of reflection by means of an appeal to the image of communication as itself both rational and good⁷⁴ fails to reflect on the way in which the subject affectively apprehends the differences that must exist if one is to risk a conversation in the first place. The same can be said about Rorty's appeal to "shared conversations" as a way to circumvent metaphysics insofar as Rorty wishes to distinguish the role of the (private) imagination from the constitution of the collective (public) sphere. Habermas turns away from the Kantian idea that claims of taste represent a way in which we may apprehend the ethical ideals of purposive action and of reciprocal recognition through the pleasure of the beautiful and the pain of the sublime. In a very tangible way, both Habermas and Rorty leave the problem of the affective basis of the subject, as well as its relationship

⁷³ See, for example, Emmanuel Levinas's essay on Buber in *Outside the Subject*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994), pp. 40–48.

⁷⁴ See Rorty, "Deconstruction and Circumvention," pp. 85–106.

to others and to the world at large, unanalyzed.⁷⁵ In so doing, they forget to ask about the means through which the punctual “I,” whose experiences originate in the discursive and, therefore, historical transformation of pleasure and pain, undergoes a splitting into an “I” that is also a “me,” how this split subject in turn can be shaped by the desire to become part of the “we,” and finally how the “we” is not just the “I” made plural or multiple but is in fact the “I” “ethicized” in response to the desire for recognition by the “you.” For Rorty, there is no significant need for recognition (nor any possibility of achieving it) because the subject is assumed to be split along public/private lines. For Habermas, the social identity of the participants in the ideal conversation (if not in actual, practical conversations) is not just constructed and contingent, it is also presupposed to be an extension of the “I.” But if this is the case, then what is the purpose of Kant’s claim in section 44 of the *Critique of Judgment*, according to which fine art has the effect of “advancing the culture of the mental powers in the interests of social communication” (CJ, p. 166, emphasis added)? What would communicative subjects have to talk about?⁷⁶

The Habermasian theory of communicative action and the Rortian program of edifying conversations represent only one set of possible alternatives that might be offered to the notion of a self-canceling “dialectic of Enlightenment.” A second potential set of objections to the notion of an “aesthetic critique” arises from

⁷⁵ Laclau has identified this as one of the central issues raised by the problem of structural dislocation: “to the very extent that dislocations increasingly dominate the terrain of an absent structural determination, the problem of *who* articulates comes to occupy a more central position. It is this problem of who the subjects of historical transformations are – or, more fundamentally, what being a subject entails – that we must now consider” (Laclou, *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time*, p. 59).

⁷⁶ As far as Habermas is concerned, “art” is the source of a utopian longing that rests on a foundation of uncontrollable excitations. In a typical passage Habermas writes that “since early Romanticism, limit experiences of an aesthetic and mystical kind have always been claimed for the purpose of a rapturous transcendence of the subject . . . In this constellation, which persists from Nietzsche to Heidegger and Foucault, there arises a readiness for excitement without any proper object; in its wake, subcultures are formed which simultaneously allay and keep alive their excitement in the face of future truths [of which they have been notified in an unspecified way] by means of cultic actions without any cultic object.” See *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, pp. 309–10. While renouncing the “aesthetic” basis of contemporary critical theory Habermas fails to appreciate the ways in which the subject presupposed by his own theory of communicative action has its origins in the very aesthetic project he rejects.

classically oriented critics of the Enlightenment, who envision a return to the wisdom of the Ancients as offering the most desirable solution to the problems posed by the Enlightenment. The effort to return to the Ancients may initially be understood as a sophisticated attempt to deny the fact that Enlightenment has consequences for us at all. In its baldest form, the neoclassical argument shares Horkheimer's and Adorno's belief that the consequences of the Enlightenment project are ultimately regressive rather than progressive, suggesting that since reason does not refine and perfect itself over the course of history, then the opposite must be the case – that autonomous, Enlightened reason represents a degeneration or falling way from some earlier moment of fullness, social harmony, or transparent relationship to others in the form of ethical praxis. To adopt this view is to see the Enlightenment as nothing more than a mask for decadence; it is to respond with a radically unhistorical prescription to Hegel's diagnosis of the "peculiar restlessness and dispersion of modern consciousness" offered in the preface to the second edition of the *Science of Logic*.⁷⁷ Motivated strongly by a desire to reclaim what Hegel imagined to be the ethical life of the Greek polis, this critique represents an effort to step back to a moment before the actions of social subjects were differentiated into separate spheres, in order to recover what is imagined as the unitary and binding moment in which cognition and morality were one.⁷⁸ But as I argue in chapter 4, these efforts constitute a failed attempt to reverse the process of Enlightenment if only because they attempt to ignore the process of self-reflection by which their own critical consciousness was produced. They may be able to suggest an alternative to the Enlightenment, but that alternative represents a diminution of the possibilities of self-consciousness precisely because it rejects rather than transforms the dissatisfactions that drive it.

Among contemporary philosopher-critics, both Alasdair MacIntyre and Stanley Rosen have advanced sophisticated versions of the neoclassical critique that go well beyond the mere rejection of

⁷⁷ *Wissenschaft der Logik* (Leipzig: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1951), vol. 1, p.20. Cited in Stanley Rosen, *The Ancients and the Moderns: Rethinking Modernity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), p. vii. Cf. Hegel's comments on the "new age" in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, par. 11, pp. 6–7.

⁷⁸ In psychoanalytic terms, the same critique may be leveled at those who propose a return to the mother as a solution to the problems of domination that have been brought about by the imposition of the father's law.

the Enlightenment. MacIntyre has for instance argued that the vocabulary of modern moral theory is funded by concepts that originally were designed to make sense of the relations implicit in societies that understood themselves through myth. He suggests that Enlightened modernity is the result of an invisible trauma or "catastrophe" in the history of culture by virtue of which the "original content" of ethics (virtuous action) was forgotten or suppressed. On his account, the dilemma that follows from this catastrophic loss manifests itself in the form of an emotivism that has a decisively aestheticist cast. Specifically, MacIntyre identifies the aesthete as living a form of moral perspectivism. The rich Europeans of Henry James's novels, Kierkegaard's "A," and Diderot's Rameau all exemplify "a tradition in which the social world is nothing but a meeting place for individual wills, each with its own set of attitudes and preferences and who understand the world solely as an arena for the achievement of their own satisfaction, who interpret reality as a series of opportunities for their enjoyment and for whom the last enemy is boredom."⁷⁹ MacIntyre nonetheless believes that we can grasp a clear enough understanding of the meaning of the Ancient philosophy of praxis in order to make the possibility of a return to the ethics of virtue possible. More forcefully, MacIntyre posits Aristotelian ethics as the only viable alternative to the Nietzschean perspectivism that underlies modern aestheticism. But since MacIntyre cannot defend the naturalistic teleology that supports Aristotle's ethics, he stakes his hopes for a renewed ethics of the virtues on a reconstruction of the purposiveness of practical reason in narrative form. In the process he nonetheless overlooks the fact that the purposiveness of narrative – and, indeed, narrative's own relationship to ethics – is dependent upon "aesthetic" principles; specifically, the purposiveness of narrative provides an analogue of natural teleology whose form must be apprehended affectively. Moreover, it remains to be seen just what relationship obtains between the narratives of heroism and virtue that MacIntyre has in mind and the novelistic narratives that came to dominance in the Enlightenment world.⁸⁰

⁷⁹ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1980), p. 24.

⁸⁰ Throughout, Georg Lukács's *Theory of the Novel* provides a more subtle account of the transformations of narrative in relation to the fate of heroism and virtue in the modern world.

A rather different critique of the Enlightenment has been offered by Stanley Rosen in a variety of works including *Hermeneutics as Politics* (1987), *The Ancients and The Moderns* (1989), and *The Mask of Enlightenment: Nietzsche's Zarathustra* (1995). Rosen describes a series of "consequences of the Enlightenment" not unlike those predicted by Horkheimer and Adorno. For both, the most devastating effect of the modern establishment of mathematics as the paradigm of rationality is a divorce of truth from goodness that renders reason incapable of establishing its own worth. So seen, mathematics becomes one perspective among many, or another form of myth.⁸¹ The crucial difference is that Rosen believes that an alternative can be found through a Platonic "leap beyond" the internal contradictions of the modern Enlightenment and a recovery of the inherent goodness of reason. For Rosen, a common malady of the Enlightenment and of contemporary critiques of it lies in the attempt to deprive the subject of the pre-discursive forms of intuition necessary to make and implement determinate judgments. (Aesthetic reflection would then become a central symptom of modernity and postmodernism.) On this account, philosophy beginning with the Enlightenment represents a turning away from nature and from the "natural praxis of life." Enlightenment thinking, as instigated by skepticism, denies the givenness or accessibility of ordinary experience, and so amounts to a loss of our *sensus communis* or "common sense." The Enlightenment dream to transform the world into a concept fails not, as in Kant, because pleasures and pains cannot be apprehended by the concepts of cognition or morality, but because such a project requires, but cannot admit, the grounding of reason in the natural praxis of life.

Rosen's critical reassessment of the Enlightenment and its aftermath is one of the most thoroughgoing we have to date, but I would dispute some of the conclusions he draws on the basis that their underlying presuppositions require an alliance between reason and nature that has potentially dangerous political consequences. At the very least, it forces us to sacrifice the commitment to contingency that lies at the heart of modernity and gives undue advantage to those in whom power has come to rest. (Its capacity for resistance against hegemonic power is virtually nil.) Rosen

⁸¹ Rosen, *The Mask of Enlightenment: Nietzsche's Zarathustra* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 249.

nonetheless argues that if we refuse to let reason be guided by and responsive to nature, we will be condemned to inhabit a world of conflicting interpretations and antagonistic perspectives, where judgment is not just difficult but impossible.⁸² As a corollary, he suggests that every program of interpretation must be regarded as a political manifesto or the corollary of one; the loss of true political theory, he contends, is the fate of the postmodern attack upon the Enlightenment and a confirmation of the decadence of the modern age.⁸³

Given the problematic nature of our relationship to the "natural praxis of life" since at least the skeptics to whom Kant was responding, I would argue that the notion of reflective aesthetic judgment provides a more complex and accurate account of the fact that we inhabit a world in which reason and goodness are not connected in any obvious way. Especially in its analysis of "common sense," the third *Critique* portrays the alliance of reason and goodness not just as presupposed, but as something that is yet to be created. According to the third *Critique*, reflective judgment represents an effort to coordinate the purposiveness of human action with the causality of the natural world while nonetheless recognizing the fact that both "purposiveness" and "causality" imply action in accordance with a concept or end that we can know only in hypothetical or fictional terms. The pleasure and the pain felt in response to the beautiful and the sublime provide the subject with only the *semblance* that human actions are conducted in accordance with the purposiveness of nature itself. Not surprisingly, then, the twin affects of pleasure and pain are unlocatable in

⁸² Thus it may not be too surprising to learn that a thinker like Edmund Husserl, whose work was crucial for determining the course of post-Enlightenment thought, produced an account in which judgment was not just difficult but impossible unless we gain access to a stratum of experience that neither logic nor psychology can successfully postulate. In *Experience and Judgment*, Husserl concludes that to reveal the true foundations of predicative evidence would require a return to self-evident experience, which is to say, a recovery of the pre-theoretical ground of experience in the original lifeworld. *Experience and Judgment: Investigations in a Genealogy of Logic*, trans. James S. Churchill and Karl Ameriks (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973).

⁸³ See especially the essays "Theory and Interpretation" and "Hermeneutics as Politics" in the volume *Hermeneutics as Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987). The issue of "common sense" of course has a long philosophical history in continental thought. See, for instance, Hegel's discussion in the "Introduction" to the *Phenomenology of Spirit* and Heidegger, *Hegel's Concept of Experience* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970).

terms of the teleology of cause and effect; they are effects for which there is no determinate "cause"; as Kant freely admits, beauty can be aligned with morality only in symbolic terms.

Deep-structure theory or aesthetic critique?

Kant's formulation of the problem of aesthetic reflective judgment, which concentrates on the ways in which the division of cognition and morality (and the desire for their reintegration) is affectively apprehended by the subject can shed some light on the relationship between the world of appearances on the one hand and the "deep-structures" that are thought to constitute or explain it on the other. Indeed, Kant's formulation prompts us to question the usefulness of "deep structure" theory in prevailing approaches to the problem of subject-formation. Here a word of clarification is in order, in part because deep-structure theory has itself been eclipsed by more recent accounts of social action originating in thinkers as diverse as Althusser, Foucault, Lacan, and Wittgenstein. (I would hope to add the aesthetic reflection that originates in Kant to this list.) What may nonetheless be referred to as deep-structure theory is a form of causal or structural expressivism which suggests that subjectivity can be explained in terms of the effects that some deeply underlying or otherwise concealed "base" has upon phenomena at some other "higher" level, sometimes called a "superstructure." (The orthodox Marxist notion of "expressive causality" as involving a base and superstructure constitutes a prominent example of deep-structure logic.) Deep-structure theory is an example of the ways in which social and historical phenomena can be interpreted by a logic that subsumes the particularities of experience under some general pattern that is assumed to exist independently of them. Deep-structure theory has three principal functions, all of which can be taken to represent examples of the logic of subsumption at work in determinate judgments. To paraphrase Roberto Mangabeira Unger, who has been one of the most articulate critics of deep-structure theory, the notion of a deep-structure serves, first, to organize the social actions of subjects around the differences between conventions, routines, or effects, and underlying causal frameworks. Second, the notion of a deep-structure underpins an effort to represent the interests at work in particular situations as producing a repeatable

and indivisible set of phenomena (e.g., industrial society, the Oedipal complex). Third, it substantiates the appeal to entrenched constraints and to laws that generate a circumscribed range of effects by describing these as somehow constituting the “directed” or “driven” consequences of underlying conditions.⁸⁴

Insofar as deep-structures are thought to play a truly organizing and shaping role in the process of subject-formation, they also lead us falsely to think of society as fully constituted and formed. Unger argues that a strong commitment to deep-structure thought means accepting the belief that the structures so organized are untransformable by any human effort and, indeed, that they cannot coherently be described in relation to any form of human striving at all. Deep-structure theory may be able to explain how the subject is constituted in terms of cause and effect, but it understands little about the affects as pure (i.e., irreducible) effects and can say relatively little about how this same subject can play a role in constituting its world. Deep-structure theory thus tends to reinforce a set of unfounded, naturalistic premises about the untransformable nature of society and the self. As Unger states,

[The naturalistic thesis] takes a particular form of social life as the context of all contexts – the true and undistorted form of social existence . . . The natural context of social life may pass through decay or renaissance, but it cannot be remade. Nor is there, in this view, any sense in which the defining context of social life can become less contextual – less arbitrary and confining. It is already the real thing . . . This authentic pattern of social life can undergo corruption and regeneration. But it can never be rearranged.⁸⁵

The naturalistic thesis is no doubt a product of the desire for the wholeness and transparency of a rational society. But it also fuels the fears articulated in Kant’s third *Critique* – that the world we know might be unalterable by any effort of the will, hence that the purposiveness of moral action might have no bearing whatsoever upon the world.

Given such concerns, it is understandable how the rejection of

⁸⁴ Roberto Unger, *Social Theory: its Situation and its Task* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987). See especially pp. 88–91. Also relevant are the companion volumes to this work, *Plasticity into Power* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), and *False Necessity: Anti-Necessitarian Social Theory in the Service of Radical Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

⁸⁵ Unger, *Social Theory*, pp. 23–24.

deep-structure theory might itself be seen as a sufficient basis for a critique of the Enlightenment. Especially in its neo-pragmatist orientations, the rejection of deep-structure theory can be seen as part of a noble attempt to alert us to Wittgenstein's insight that although praxis may give expression to human purposiveness, there is nothing that should in itself be thought of as the "natural praxis of life." But we do well to recall that it was a suspicion about our relationship to the "natural praxis of life" that motivated the Enlightenment critique of neo-Scholastic essentialism and its skepticism of inherited institutions in the first instance. For Unger, the alliances that are forged between deep-structure theory and the naturalistic thesis are both the intellectual legacy of the Enlightenment's critique of essentialism and the thing that inhibits the transformations the Enlightenment had hoped to achieve. And because Unger holds that deep-structure theory represents the clearest example of the ways in which Enlightenment thinking was crippled by the explanatory paradigms it advanced, he recommends that it be cast aside. Only in this way, he suggests, can the possibility of radical social change originally promised by the Enlightenment be fulfilled. In the case at hand, social subjects would be freed from the difficulty of reflective judgment and readied for true progress. Once "theory" or the drive for reflection is set aside, the tensions between Kant's two worlds – between the causality of nature and the freedom of the will, as between fact and value, epistemology and ethics, "is" and "ought" – would simply wither away. Reflective judgment would become not just difficult but unnecessary, and we would be empowered to transform ourselves by nothing more than an exertion of the will. The Enlightenment dream would be achieved not through the schematization of the world as a concept, but rather through what might be described as *Wunschdenken* (wishful thinking).⁸⁶

Unger's critique of the naturalistic thesis has resonances, albeit in different registers, with a series of neo-pragmatist positions that have been articulated by thinkers like Richard Rorty and Stanley Fish. Insofar as such positions remain indebted to Kant's aesthetic critique, it is largely on account of their insistence upon the primacy of particulars over universals, or as Kant puts it in

⁸⁶ Cf. Drucilla Cornell's remarks on Schopenhauer in *The Philosophy of the Limit* (New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 26 ff.

section 10 of the *Critique of Judgment*, the primacy of effect over cause in determining ends.⁸⁷ To invoke one of Rorty's quasi-aesthetic criteria, these are some of the most "interesting" responses to the Enlightenment that have been invented to date. And yet Rorty himself provides no further account of what this "interest" might involve, and even denies that it might warrant a further account. In this, Rorty relies on a postmodern version of the "aestheticism" that MacIntyre so harshly criticizes in *After Virtue*; as MacIntyre avers, aestheticism risks nothing so much as boredom.⁸⁸

As Horkheimer and Adorno remind us, the dialectic of Enlightenment cannot be brought to a halt merely by wishing it away. History cannot be put to an end simply by claiming that the chains of historical necessity are false. Nor can the problems of self-reflective subjectivity be resolved, as Rorty would seem to suggest, simply by declaring that metaphysics was a bad philosophical idea. As Kant and Adorno both understand, the difficulty that subtends the position of the subject cannot be resolved just by granting the wish to be clarified. Even if the social and historical structures in which subjectivity is set, and which have been in some measure produced by subjects themselves, offered no resistance to modification and change, we could not so easily re-enchant ourselves. Passion and affect, which bear traces of world-division and world-loss, remain a part of the subject and incite reflection even in the case of those strategies that claim to have abandoned all theorizing about subjectivity, or (as in the case of Rorty and some others) that have turned to literature and art as a more ironic substitute for systematic thought.⁸⁹ As I argue below, such strategies need better to understand their own indebtedness to the project of aesthetic reflection outlined by Kant; at the same time they need to appreciate the complications involved in marshaling art or aesthetic reason as an alternative to metaphysical thought.

⁸⁷ Kant: "The representation of the effect is here the determining ground of its cause and takes the lead of it," *CJ*, sec. 10, p. 61.

⁸⁸ Rorty's separation of the public and the private spheres also revokes the fundamental Kantian idea that aesthetic judgments might allow for a transformation of "private feeling" into "public sense." See Kant, *CJ*, sec. 22, p. 84.

⁸⁹ The contrast between Heidegger's understanding of world-decay in "The Origin of the Work of Art" and Rorty's complacency about world-loss in "The World Well Lost" in *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982) is a striking reinforcement of this point.

My goal in the chapters to follow is thus to suggest that the resistance to a deep-structure mapping of the dialectic of Enlightenment can more profitably be replaced by an aesthetic critique that would recognize subjectivity as an expression or effect of conditions that can be traced to no underlying set of causes but that must ultimately be referred back to the subject itself, or perhaps more accurately, to the subjectivity of the subject as an irreducibly particular center of affectivity. According to Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, the task of an aesthetic critique is to establish the validity of claims that originate in the purely subjective, affective realm of pleasure and pain. Phrased somewhat more constructively, it could be said that the task of an aesthetic critique is to arrive at an account of subjectivity that might satisfy the explanatory needs that various forms of deep-structure theory attempted to meet while at the same time saving the contingency of appearances that deep-structure theory found it necessary to suppress. And I would further suggest that affect is, in the realm of the subject, a trace of the contingency of the world itself. In the hope of making these claims more explicit, I turn first to a more detailed discussion of the theory of aesthetic judgment as formulated by Kant in the third *Critique*, and proceed from there to a further account of its implications for contemporary thought.