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INHERITING THE LEGACY OF CRITIQUE:  
DREAMS OF FREEDOM AND NIGHTMARES OF DESPAIR

by

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A Dissertation submitted to the  
Graduate School-New Brunswick  
Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Graduate Program in Political Science

written under the direction of

Drucilla Cornell

and approved by

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New Brunswick, New Jersey

October, 2007

## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Inheriting the Legacy of Critique: Dreams of Freedom and Nightmares of Despair

by KENNETH MICHAEL PANFILIO

Dissertation Director:

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This dissertation takes as its challenge the attempt to vivify the practice of affirmative political philosophy as we try to take up the redemptive work commanded upon us when we inherit the legacy of critique, which is articulated in this project to suggest that human beings are the source of all valuation in the larger world. Accepting such a position recognizes that despite the deep abyss of absurdity that painfully emaciates our subjectivity in the world we must also remember, in the words of Albert Camus, that someone “must give the void its colors.”

Subsequent chapters juxtapose various thinkers whose work is animated to present a dialectical engagement between antonymous forces of progressive dreams for the fulfillment of our shared human freedom (Immanuel Kant and Karl Marx) simultaneously threatened by corresponding nightmares of despair providing ample warning to the pathological catastrophes rampant throughout our modern age (Martin Heidegger and Theodor Adorno).

While each philosophical pairing plays out different mediations between dreams of freedom and nightmares of despair, each engagement is appended by a small reprisal, or return to the original theme, discussing what is philosophically at stake in such an

exploration between two thinkers against a pressing issue of great social, economic, and political importance.

Concluding this dissertation is a meditation on the work of Walter Benjamin and his view of life as a passageway in the circuitous labyrinths of advanced capitalism simultaneously caught between both nightmares of despair and dreams of freedom where we might indeed simply blow away the sands of sleep and rightfully awaken from the slumber of phantasmagoria.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We never wander this world alone; indeed, the very ability to give image to the world depends upon those whose generous company joins us in our own journeys. And, of course, this gambit in the realm of ideas owes many people a debt of thanks for their companionship that gave me the sort of solace of community allowing me to think the world in the first place.

First, the members of this committee deserve special acknowledgement for their unyielding support throughout this ever-evolving project filled more, perhaps, with their uncompromising intellectual guidance than my own erudition. Drucilla Cornell has been both a dear friend and an uncanny mentor; without her lectures that left my mind simply vivified, bringing ethical challenges to the forefront of deep philosophical thought, not a single word in this dissertation could have been even thinkable. Fondly, our time breaking bread and lost deep in thought every Thursday afternoon is one of my most cherished traditions in graduate school. Truly, no words can be animated to express my appreciation for the ways in which she gave me the space to become my own intellectual self.

Gordon Schochet, despite our sometimes-cantankerous hallway conversations, yielded nothing but loving support to push my abilities as a teacher and thinker toward the highest standards of pedagogy and research. Dennis Bathory kept me from falling victim to the easy route of becoming a cannon basher and drew out the inner elegance and perennial beauty of ancient thought while also offering editorial corrections to calm my often-inflamed gambits of prose. Lewis Gordon came to my aid as an outside reader

offering erudite commentary and reflection that made this work far better than its original inceptions, and allowed me to work with one of my long-time heroes.

Stephen Bronner forced me to bring my own political beliefs to bear in my intellectual decisions and our weekly conversations over lunch helped me to frame much of the project. Manfred Steger was been a patient mentor guiding my intellectual grasp of the history of political theory and its critical application in such a dynamic world, helping me to find my way to doctoral school. Jim Marsh tirelessly led me through three years of carefully reading many of the works integral to this project.

Much of the inspiration behind this text and my studies owes a debt to the mentorship of Wilson Carey McWilliams who tragically died during the course of my studies at Rutgers. But, he did not leave this world before impressing upon me his erudite gift to think the whole of theory in its best aspirations for restoring great ideals like fraternity so that we all might struggle to become better men worthy of a place in a humanity that lays infinitely open to all people.

Sheila, Janet, Audrey, and Fabiola were not only department assistants that went above and beyond the call of duty for any small administrative problem in my life, but they were also excellent friends who greeted me warmly each morning with a smile that keep me in good spirits until well past lunch. Many other faculty helped me both formally inside of a classroom and informally over a leisurely lunch throughout my studies, and each is deserving of equal praise: Mike Aronoff, Perle Besserman, Craig Cutbirth, Leela Fernandes, Dale Fitzgibbons, Steve Hunt, Sandra Metts, Jamal Nassar, Carlos Parodi, James Reid, Dan Tichenor, and Cassandra Veeney.

Cape Town, South Africa during the summer of 2006 was a wellspring of inspiration, as every step taken under the graceful watch of the Twin Mountains above was something of a walking meditation. Our reading group with Judge Laurie Ackermann and Alfred Barnard helped me to think through many of the ideas that appear throughout this manuscript in the comfort of fellow shepherds that aspire to do their part to make a better world in both ideas and action. Also, visiting the Constitutional Court of South Africa, a living testament to the possibility of redemptive justice, was nothing short of an inspiring visit with Judges that are true comrades in the struggle to make something of an ethical world in the devastation of colonial legacies.

But, this intellectual journey was not paved by the advice and tutelage of faculty alone; in fact, my best friends often gave me the most amazing ideas embedded in our silly conversations and mutual sessions of therapy. Sally Kwitkowsi and Nino Selvaggio have been my best friends and roommates throughout most of this journey, and without their combined support emotionally, intellectually and otherwise, my body and mind would have collapsed and abandoned this project a long time ago. Sally holds a near magical ability to know my thoughts before they are ever spoken, giving me a feeling of normalcy that resists any simple description. After writing a poem once about how the world contained so little shelter, Nino responded immediately by sending me a package full of interesting clothes that he spent the time to embroider with the words “shelter” so my life would never know such a loss. Such friends, truly, cannot receive enough words of appreciation.

Andrea Boyle and Erin Graves passed along the gift of inspiration and a generosity of spirit that has left me fulfilled on my coldest nights and bleakest days.

Serena Cornell and our late night talks overlooking the ocean in Cape Town were some of my favorite moments spent abroad; she is not only a little sister, but also a brilliant lyricist able to capture hope for the future in the words of a single song. Sean Smith helped me enjoy life and kept depression at bay through endless 30 packs of cheap beer and nights of getting lost in the labyrinthine city streets of New York. 48 Baldwin Street and its constant exchange of house mates from throughout the world filled my time with recipes for amazing food and random conversations exciting my mind with thoughts from many disciplines of thought. Albert gave me a wonderful voyage to imagine and perform when my mind simply could not find shelter any place else.

Lastly, yet of greatest importance, my combined family—Panfilio, Grossman, and Nassar—deserve special appreciation for their lifelong patience with my unwillingness to stop asking questions about the world and persistence for doing things with as much difficulty as possible, and the unconditional shelter they each offered whenever I needed a place to call home.

Although these wonderful people, and many others unmentioned due to space, helped improve this dissertation, its errors remain my only academic property.

-KMP

May, 2007



## DEDICATION

This work, in its entirety, owes its intellectual erudition and conceptual breadth to the mentorship of friend, comrade, and heroine Drucilla Cornell.

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## **Chapter One:**

### **Introduction:**

#### **Inheriting the Legacy of Critique**

There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy. All the rest—whether or not the world has three dimensions, whether the mind has nine or twelve categories—comes afterwards. These are games; one must first answer. And if it is true, as Nietzsche claims, that a philosopher, to deserve our respect, must preach by example, you can appreciate the importance of that reply, for it will precede the definitive act. These are facts the heart can feel; yet they call for careful study before they become clear to the intellect.

Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*<sup>1</sup>

#### ***Abstract***

This dissertation takes as its challenge the attempt to vivify the practice of affirmative political philosophy as we try to take up the redemptive work commanded upon us when we inherit the legacy of critique, which is articulated in this project to suggest that human beings are the source of all valuation in the larger world. Subsequent chapters will juxtapose various thinkers whose work is animated to present a dialectical engagement between antonymous forces of progressive dreams for the fulfillment of our shared human freedom simultaneously threatened by corresponding nightmares of despair providing ample warning to the pathological catastrophes rampant throughout our modern age. However, to begin such a project we must layout a framework articulating more clearly what it means to inherit the legacy of critique. This introduction inaugurates the larger project by reminding us of the deep peril before all of us, and our shared

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<sup>1</sup> Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, Justin O'Brien, trans. (New York: Vintage Books, 1959), 3.

culpability for its arrival in the world. The work of Albert Camus helps to announce such an intellectual journey against various arguments that would purport unreflective pessimism signaling the utter collapse of the world. Instead, Camus provides our theoretical impetus for inheriting the legacy of critique in his remarks on the question of suicide and its double judgment both confirming the abyss of absurdity that painfully emaciates our subjectivity in the world while also reminding us—rather poetically—that, still, someone “must give the void its colors.”

### ***Introduction***

On any given day, a lot happens in the world. And, September 11, 2001 was not an exception. At least 28,000 children died of starvation and some 800 million people went to sleep hungry.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, in the United States, nearly a thousand dollars was spent every second on weight loss, an industry that has taken shape as a \$30 billion dollar market.<sup>3</sup> 115 million children did not get to go to school and probably never will.<sup>4</sup> Yet, denizens of digital literacy spent hundreds of millions of hours—to estimate the matter with great restraint—waiting for content to download on the Internet. 1.2 billion people earned less than a dollar for their work (one dollar less than the subsidy given to cows in Europe),<sup>5</sup> while corporate executives, in this single day, earned on average \$36,000.<sup>6</sup> Terror, it seems, is indiscriminate and makes its home throughout the world.

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<sup>2</sup> United Nations Millennium Development Goals, <http://www.noexcuse2015.org/>

<sup>3</sup> Federal Trade Commission, “Weight Loss Advertising: An Analysis of Current Trends,” (2002), iv. 30 billion dollars spent annually equates to: \$82,135,523.61 per day, \$3,422,313.48 per hour, \$57,038.56 per minute, and \$950.61 per second.

<sup>4</sup> United Nations Millennium Development Goals, <http://www.noexcuse2015.org/>

<sup>5</sup> United Nations Millennium Development Goals, <http://www.noexcuse2015.org/>

<sup>6</sup> “The Corporate Library’s 2006 CEO Pay Survey,” *The Corporate Library* (29 September 2006). The average of 13.51 million dollars in annual salary for corporate executives equates to \$36,988.36 per day.

The memory of September 11, 2001 and the destruction of the World Trade Center are not meant to be excluded from this laundry list of global suffering. On the contrary, there needs to be a place to rightfully levy scorn against the attackers and evince our sympathies for those who were attacked. However, the event of September 11 has become dogmatically trapped in the shared historical memory of the United States and has given each of us a myopic view of world politics, the universal nature of suffering, and political obligation. This tunnel vision toward world events first presents itself in the fact that before the attack by Osama bin Laden most Americans never thought of the day as a memorial to terrorism. Yet, it was on September 11, 1973, when President Nixon, largely via Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, used troops trained at the School of the Americas to install Augusto Pinochet over the existing democratically elected ruler, Salvador Allende, in Chile.<sup>7</sup> 3,000 people were killed in the first month alone, and thousands of “disappearances” continue to haunt the country with undying memories of loved ones torn from their home in the middle of the night by secret police and dragged away to an “unknown” fate.

However, the U.S. government did not respond to the tragedy of September 11, 2001 by drawing out the integral connection between empire and violence as it manifests itself in our lived everyday relations or admit our own historical participation in producing such suffering during our state-sponsored terrorism against Chile. Instead, the “event” of September 11 soon became fodder for a commercial message carrying with it the paltry notion of obligation one would expect from a neoliberal society: shop! The most notorious advertisement produced began with a long camera shot following a

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<sup>7</sup> Steven Volk, “Judgment Day in Chile,” *NACLA Report on the Americas* 36, no. 1, (July/August 2002): 4-6, 43-44.



squeaky shopping cart down a supermarket aisle over-packed with brightly colored boxes of commercial products. With the addition of some flashy digital effects and studio-quality dramatic narration, we are given the words “competition, possibilities, and choice” anchored next to the text “freedom.” After 20 seconds of eerie silence supposedly meant to give us the sort of dialectical pause to evoke somber reflection on what it means to be an American, the commercial ends with a waving, transparent flag and adds the catchy tagline, “Freedom. Appreciate it. Cherish it. Protect it.”

Joining a cadre of public service announcements designed by the Ad Council as a post-September 11 “campaign for freedom,” this particular advertisement deserves special attention.<sup>8</sup> The rhetoric embodied in this supposed public service announcement needs little interpretation and lacks any form of subtlety. Its message: shop for freedom. Without hesitation, the tragedy of September 11 becomes a commodity ripe for purchase. We adulterate the sacred to encourage the masses not to mobilize as active citizens in local communities, but to identify as mindless shoppers with democratic purpose in buying products. Reminiscent of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and his discourse to the Academy of Dijon in 1750 on enlightenment, we live in a society “[w]here everywhere [exists] huge establishments, in which young people are brought up at great expense to learn everything except their duties... we no longer have citizens.”<sup>9</sup>

In this act of commodification we have sublated the ethic of political obligation to the dictates of market capitalism. What is lost in such a conflation of monetary value and

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<sup>8</sup> Ad Council, “Choice”, *Campaign for Freedom* (2 November 2005): [http://www.adcouncil.org/campaigns/campaign\\_for\\_freedom/](http://www.adcouncil.org/campaigns/campaign_for_freedom/); the advertisement has been removed from the original site and is currently commented on at <http://flakmag.com/tv/freedom.html> and available for viewing at [http://boss.streamos.com/real/adccouncil/cff/cff\\_tv\\_choice\\_30\\_rp\\_v2.smi?siteid=adcouncil](http://boss.streamos.com/real/adccouncil/cff/cff_tv_choice_30_rp_v2.smi?siteid=adcouncil).

<sup>9</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, “First Discourse,” in *Rousseau: The Discourses and Other Early Political Writings*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 22, 24.

human experience is the ability to reflectively take in the ways our various configurations of progress and society have clashed, yielding the possibility for a perilous future. This is not meant to suggest that technological advancement and human development are absent in our world. Instead, this analysis chooses to suspend any *a priori* claims about the triumph of human civilization, in order to more seriously evaluate the reality of our social relations throughout the world. If there is anything deeply under attack in this world it is the serious space, materially and psychically, needed for people to come together and negotiate a pluralistic array of cultural and political ethics on how best to allow for a sense of belonging in the world. This project aims to achieve such an end by articulating the means to inherit the legacy of critique and by so doing be able to see our situation in the world in its fullest light; for, we stand before the precipice of two horizons whose unification may yield a single, powerful moral image: an antonymous confrontation between aspiring toward a peaceful future marked by our ethical work in animating grand dreams of human freedom while watchfully attending to the critical warnings of possible worldly ruination abound in various nightmares of despair.

### ***Inheriting the Legacy of Critique***

However, such critical grandstanding is not meant to invoke a self-righteous sense of shame against those who simply went shopping after September 11, 2001, but is, moreover, an act of phenomenological bracketing attempting to dialectically interrupt taken-for-granted appearances of the larger world. Instead, the purpose of such an introduction should be read more strongly in its universal character as an announcement of our shared debt to the tragedies of our age. For this project, atonement for such debts

might appear in our ability to access a redemptive imagination capable releasing us from the catastrophes of the *past* that have been cannibalized to build the progress of the *present* so that we might indeed seek out the possible grandeur of a yet unknown justice for the *future*.

Following the spirit of Charles Baudelaire, captured by the lyrics of his famous poem “Letter to the Reader,” this work situates itself in a brazen, self-implicating acknowledgement of our shared culpability in the varied disasters that have unfolded in history:

Folly and error, stinginess and sin  
Possess our spirits and fatigue our flesh.  
And like a pet we feed our tame remorse  
As beggars take to nourishing their lice.

Our sins are stubborn; our contrition lax;  
We offer lavishly our vows of faith  
And turn back gladly to the path of filth,  
Thinking mean tears will wash away our stains.

On evil’s pillow lies the alchemist  
Satan Thrice-Great, who lulls our captive soul,  
And all the richest metal of our will  
Is vaporized by his hermetic arts.

Truly the Devil pulls on all our strings!  
In most repugnant objects we find charms;  
Each day we’re one step further into Hell,  
Content to move across the stinking pit.

As a poor libertine will suck and kiss  
The sad, tormented tit of some old whore,  
We steal a furtive pleasure as we pass,  
A shriveled orange that we squeeze and press.

Close, swarming, like a million writhing worms,  
A demon nation riots in our brains,  
And, when we breathe, death flows into our lungs,  
A secret stream of dull, lamenting cries.

But there with all the jackals, panthers, hounds,  
The monkeys, scorpions, the vultures, the snakes,  
Those howling, yelping, grunting, scrawling brutes,  
The infamous menagerie of vice,

One creature only is most foul and false!  
Though making no grand gestures, nor great cries,

He willingly would devastate the earth  
And in one yawning swallow all the world;<sup>10</sup>

Baudelaire does not in the slightest suggest that such a condition is itself the unique experience of some spectral herd of those in society who happen to live indoctrinated under a hegemony yielding a deeply emaciated moral and political conscience, but concludes his gripping poem by calling out to the one true figure who stands weighted with the misanthropy of our age; for, “Reader, you know this dainty monster too; - Hypocrite, -fellowman, -my twin!”<sup>11</sup> Similarly, this project, in its entirety, attempts to ruthlessly stand against any complacency with the varied failures of humanity by animating the productive power of our ability to stand as the source of valuation in the world, able to take in the dual possibilities of our dreams of freedom and corresponding nightmares of despair so as to bring about the sort of redemptive work capable of dialectically startling us toward the possibility of a just, future world.

Too much scholarship in recent years has been imbued with an unfettered nihilism in response to the problems of our age—thinkers suggesting the supposed “end of history” or “death of the subject.” Such sentiments, despite their intellectual foundations, not only sound cliché on first glance but their varied renditions have forestalled our movements toward justice itself by unduly eclipsing reason toward unknowable pessimistic ends. If we can no longer dream of freedom and its many possible manifestations in the world beyond liberal notions of equality and fairness embodied in the modern nation state, as scholars such as Francis Fukuyama would have us believe,

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<sup>10</sup> Charles Baudelaire, *Flowers of Evil*, James McGowan, trans. (Oxford, England: Oxford World Classics, 1998), 5 & 7.

<sup>11</sup> Baudelaire, *Flowers of Evil*, 7.

then perhaps Immanuel Kant had it right when he suggested, “If justice perishes, then it is no longer worthwhile for man to live on the earth.”<sup>12</sup>

The 1990s saw a revitalization of “end of philosophy” arguments suggesting that Hegel brought philosophy to its completion such that now our goal is simply the onward development of the liberal state and eventual coming to fruition of the Absolute Spirit of Freedom in the rule of law. This view finds its home in “end of ideology” or “end of history” arguments like those respectively found in Daniel Bell and Francis Fukuyama.<sup>13</sup> These thinkers suggest that moments such as the post-1945 status quo or the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 represent the last serious socialist threat, leaving supposed civilized society with no other option but to succumb to the overwhelmingly rational principles of liberal politics and market ideology. Patience becomes the watchword of the “end game” philosopher who sees the self-correcting advancement of progress as justice itself despite the great suffering so very much alive and well in the present.

Such thinkers might suggest that in the last 300 years we have seen the world spirit embodied in the modern state self-correct some of the most egregious crimes against the dignity of humanity: slaves were freed and eventually led to the same rights of citizenship once monopolized by masters, the suffrage of women found its social revolution as half of the population rightfully received the right to vote and the general safeguarding of their equality, and we continue to contest the legitimacy, albeit slowly, of laws barring the sort of freedom of our sexuate being that should inhere in our rights to both bodily integrity and psychic freedom. Thus, the argument unfolds to suggest that

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<sup>12</sup> Immanuel Kant cited in John Rawls, *Lectures on the History of Moral Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 158.

<sup>13</sup> Daniel Bell, *The End of Ideology: On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000); and Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: The Free Press, 1993).

even though we live in a world where some people are still discriminated against, these transgressions will themselves be sorted out in the near future under the watchful eye of the ever-expanding world spirit. What, then, would such thinkers tell us, is needed of archaic dreams like socialism that failed in its material project and approaches an impending demise when the last strongholds for communist ideology fall under the weight of market dictates?

While Hegel does indeed provide us with a vast architectonic structure whose ultimate goal is to safeguard, both in our individual consciousness and societal institutions, a sort of transformative idealism meant to advance the Spirit of Absolute Freedom, his work also contains an important caveat often overlooked by scholars like Fukuyama. When the concept of Absolute Freedom expands and finds its home in the rule of law it is necessary for the institutions of the state to recognize that spirit of freedom by bringing it into material existence. In the event that there is a fundamental dissonance between the institutions of the state and the expanding consciousness of freedom, then we are threatened with the very real possibility of living under a Spirit of Absolute Terror. Ultimately, Hegel is suggesting that when being “in itself” does not have the institutions “for itself” to struggle with in its sublated becoming in fidelity with the Spirit of Absolute Freedom, then “there is left for it only negative action; it is merely the rage and fury of destruction.”<sup>14</sup>

And so, we are returned to the overwhelming importance of transforming despair as we move closer to such Absolute Terror: a perpetual war against enigmatic enemies labeled under the thin rhetoric of being an axis of evil, increased global poverty under the

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<sup>14</sup> Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Hegel Reader*, ed. Stehpen Houlgate (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999), 116 (Phenomenology, Absolute Freedom and Terror, paragraph 589).

growing consolidation of wealth in both advanced industrial countries and a new strain of international mergers creating monopoly friendly multinational corporations, and a decrease in our civil liberties under the threat of color-coded terrorism alerts that happen to coincide with presidential election campaigns. While we are in no means in a state of Absolute Terror, we must begin to recognize our growing proximity to such Absolute Terror. Truly, it is only by locating the dissonance between the spirit of freedom and its dwindling shelter in the material world that we will be able to think of the necessary transformation of the very despair that continues to take greater shape and deeply reminds us of a how much the world is out of joint.

This is why we need, more than ever, to protect the still living presence of big dreams of freedom capable of dialectically startling ourselves into the sort of revelation that we are tacitly, and sometimes directly, responsible for some of the most brutal forms of suffering taking place on this planet. Dreams cannot be killed off in their accidental or imperfect executions or experienced in the fullest glory of their vision. It is because of the impossibility of actually being able to fulfill something like the big dream of socialism, that we also simultaneously can never successfully bury it in something like a historical graveyard of dead ideologies. Thus, the very inheritance of the legacy of critique demands that we animate our faculties to answer a question of primary consideration: In the wake of the devastation we have unleashed upon ourselves in history—past, present, and possible future—should we live on in this world?

Returning to the prefatory quotation introducing this chapter, perhaps Camus had it right that suicide is the only genuinely philosophical question. We are bequeathed a rather bleak existence and in order to inherit its legacy toward some possible better

ethical constitution of relations among human beings, we must first accept life. The very question of suicide, for Camus, offers a double judgment on the whole of the world acknowledging both our position in absurdity and eventually a possible future filled with deep hope; albeit a seemingly simple question, grappling with the rejection of suicide “poses mortal problems, it sums itself [as] a lucid invitation to live and to create, in the very midst of the desert.”<sup>15</sup> We certainly live amidst some of the worst configurations of human possibility gone awry, however, these particular experiences within such a crippling world is not something we can ever know as fated to our existence.

For Camus, “[w]e get into the habit of living before acquiring the habit of thinking”<sup>16</sup> and forget that “[t]he mind’s first step is to distinguish what is true from what is false.”<sup>17</sup> The result of such an entrance to the world forms an estrangement that questions the place of the subject as a fragmented reflection of the absurdity endured in everyday, anonymous activities of life. The result is an experience of personhood known through negation. We become, as Camus put the matter, simply:

A stranger to [ourselves] and to the world, armed solely with a thought that negates itself as soon as it asserts, what is this condition in which I can have peace only by refusing to know and to live, in which the appetite for conquest bumps into walls that defy its assaults...<sup>18</sup>

The absurd is born of [the] confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world. This must not be forgotten. This must be clung to because the whole consequence of a life can depend on it...<sup>19</sup>

While the world is racked with tumultuous suffering, we have reached a plateau in human development capable offering all people shelter from the state of deep peril we have all participated in creating. We cry out before the world for help. The world responds with

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<sup>15</sup> Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, v.

<sup>16</sup> Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 6-7.

<sup>17</sup> Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 12.

<sup>18</sup> Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 15-16.

<sup>19</sup> Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 21.



deafening silence, a refusal of the very hospitality that gives meaning to our humanity. This silence before the call to hospitality, this failure to provide an answer to the cries of suffering is what speaks the affirmation of our existence. The resulting feeling of estrangement is a seemingly powerful negation of our personhood making the work of moral freedom a feeble enterprise stripped of value and instead something which promises nothing more than further negation.

Thus, the question arises why we should even bother to continue living on in this world. But, such a declaration carries with it a two-fold announcement. On the one hand, we are indeed acknowledging the failure of humanity to see the ethical call of our own humanness, but, on the other hand, we are also confessing a profound philosophical critique of the way the world may seem out of joint and by inverse negation that it may instead be repaired. Summarizing the profundity of such thoughts encapsulated in the very question of suicide, Camus suggests:

In a sense, and as in melodrama, killing yourself amounts to confessing. It is confessing that life is too much for you or that you do not understand it... Living, naturally, is never easy. You continue making the gestures commanded by existence for many reasons, the first of which is habit. Dying voluntarily implies that you have recognized, even instinctively, the ridiculous character of that habit, the absence of any profound reason for living, the insane character of that daily agitation, and the uselessness of suffering... What, then, is that incalculable feeling that deprives the mind of sleep necessary to life? A world that cannot be explained even with bad reasons is a familiar world. But, on the other hand, in a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity.<sup>20</sup>

To inherit the legacy of critique we must, in some reasonable fashion, partake in answering the question of suicide. Either we succumb to such anxiety-filled pressures of absurdity or, instead, we animate the value making character of our own consciousness. While we can certainly give meaning to the consciousness of death in the wake of such

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<sup>20</sup> Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 5.

schismatic anxiety, we can also revalue its form into an aspirational drive toward the moral possibility of a future, just world.

Perhaps, this anxiety, as Camus understood the problem, is the only truth to our existence, the only thread weaving us together in a shared life on a shared planet. For, suffering carries with it a dynamic quality allowing the absurdity of life to evolve and transform as the world grows in its means for alienation, giving new ways to distance us from the actual ends of moral freedom. The complicated character of absurdity and the seeming negation of meaning for life bears full-force when Camus suggests:

The only reality is ‘anxiety’ in the whole chain of beings. To the man lost in the world and its diversions this anxiety is a brief, fleeting fear. But if that fear becomes conscious of itself, it become anguish, the perpetual climate of the lucid man ‘in whom existence is concentrated’... This anxiety seems to him so much more important than all the categories in the world that he thinks and talks only of it. He enumerates its aspects: boredom when the ordinary man strives to quash it in him and benumb it; terror when the mind contemplates death. He too does not separate consciousness from the absurd. The consciousness of death is the call of anxiety and ‘existence then delivers itself its summons through the intermediary of consciousness.’<sup>21</sup>

But, if all of existence is itself concentrated within the lucid person, it becomes possible to think from within this rut that anxiety itself may become a productive force despite its negative manifestations. The absurdity of this world and the call for inheriting the legacy of critique are indeed one in the same:

The feeling of the absurd is not, for all that, the notion of the absurd. It lays the foundations for it, and that is all. It is not limited to that notion, except in the brief moment when it passes judgment on the universe. Subsequently it has a chance of going further. It is alive; in other words, it must die or else reverberate...<sup>22</sup>

Dynamical change, reverberation of consciousness within absurdity, is the call for us to remember “a world remains of which man is the sole master.”<sup>23</sup>

Such reverberation carries with it a similarity to the myth of Sisyphus. While we travel up a rather painstaking path to the top of the mountain—carrying burdens far

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<sup>21</sup> Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 18.

<sup>22</sup> Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 21.

<sup>23</sup> Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 87.

heavier than anyone deserves—we find ourselves in movement toward the apex only to have such burdens suddenly collapse upon us with such force that we roll back down to the base of existence. The allegory at play here might seem, on a superficial reading, that we are fated to experience the absurdity of a world that continues to collapse upon us despite the possibility of reaching a higher summit of human existence. However, what is primary for Camus in this myth is the revelation of life occurring as a process to which we imbue meaning and the impossibility of knowing that we will never reach the zenith that seems beyond our grasp. For, “Man interrogates the absurd and in that communion causes to disappear its essential character, which is opposition, laceration, and divorce. This leap is an escape.”<sup>24</sup> And, of course, “There are many ways of leaping, the essential being to leap... They always lay claim to the eternal, and it is solely in this that they take the leap... In fact, our aim is to shed light upon the step taken by the mind when, starting from a philosophy of the world’s lack of meaning, it ends up by finding a meaning and depth in it.”<sup>25</sup> A constant movement emerges where *the truth of our being is always a matter of our becoming*. Surely, we can condemn ourselves to staying at the bottom of the mount and ignore the challenge before us, but we can also take solace in knowing the movement ever inward and upward carries with it deep value. Our habits, as they derive meaning from our engagement with the experiences of life, are valued through our relation to this task. As Camus suggests, “The regularity of an impulse or a repulsion in a soul is encountered again in habits of doing or thinking, is reproduced in consequences of

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<sup>24</sup> Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 28.

<sup>25</sup> Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 31.

which the soul knows nothing. Great feelings take with them their own universe, splendid or abject.”<sup>26</sup>

Being able to leap out of such misery mired in the decay of the subject from the forces of society is the task inherited with the legacy of critique. Camus, despite the cynical tone of his famous essay, leaves us with a hopeful prospect grounded in simply finding solace in the truth of our lives as marked by limitation as finite, phenomenal creatures. Our mere faculties of reason—empowered by the symbolic character of our ability to wield various forms of language—give us the ability to vivify a light toward hope despite the surrounding darkness of absurdity. “Thinking is learning all over again how to see,” suggests Camus, “directing one’s consciousness, making of every image a privileged place.”<sup>27</sup> By returning the value-making faculty of the world from the externalized reality of absurd relations back into the genitive power of the human mind, we are left with a cogent means of thinking our own world onto hope. For Camus, “It is a way of awakening a sleeping world and of making it vivid to the mind.... There is no longer a single idea explaining everything [that of absurdity], but an infinite number of essences giving meaning to an infinite number of objects. The world comes to a stop, but it also lights up.”<sup>28</sup> Such awakening is not some simple repression of the attendant problems in the social world that led us to contemplate suicide in the first place. Instead, such thinking is a realization of a deeper truth about our the ability to live a happy life despite such problems in tandem with the unknowable possibility that they may some day be erased by our ongoing, unfaltering moral work to climb higher and higher.

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<sup>26</sup> Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 8.

<sup>27</sup> Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 32.

<sup>28</sup> Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 33.

Without making the redemptive move in trying to inherit the legacy of critique we stand instead as pallbearers to a sort of self-made hopelessness that promises to duly fulfill such prophecy with rather cataclysmic results. Aspiring toward the supersensible possibility of redemption promises a sort of lived negation of the absurdity that has come to suffocate so much philosophical thinking and the politics of a long twentieth century marking our era as one filled with pathological forms of violence as we live in a state of perpetual war on terror giving rise to its own enemy. Camus, rather beautifully, suggests, “those redeeming negations, those ultimate contradictions which negate the obstacle that has not yet been leaped over, may spring just as well from a certain religious inspiration as from the rational order. They always lay claim to the eternal, and it is solely in this that they take the leap.”<sup>29</sup> Such leaping can surface in a variety of human activities captured in our aesthetic maneuver to dialectically interrupt the often-unquestioned features of a life full of so much absurdity.

Thus, we all inherit something like a *Myth of Sisyphus* where our lives indeed mirror a seemingly endless trial to push the boulder of human suffering ever higher in hopes that we might reach an elevated plateau of social existence in something like the kingdom of ends. Facing the abyss, as it were, is a rather bleak experience, but Camus rightfully notes that someone must give it its colors:

Art can never be so well served as by a negative thought. Its dark and humiliated proceedings are as necessary to the understanding of a great work as black is to white. To work and create “for nothing,” to sculpture in clay, to know that one’s creation has no future, to see one’s work destroyed in a day while being aware that fundamentally this has no more importance than building for centuries—this is the difficult wisdom that absurd thought sanctions. Performing these two tasks simultaneously, negating on the one hand and magnifying on the other, is the way open to the absurd creator. He must give the void its colors.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 31.

<sup>30</sup> Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 84.

Camus identifies within critique a sensible understanding of the sheer absurdity of the social world and the corresponding need for our individual pledge toward redemptive imaginations, despite the nightmarish backdrop of life, through the open acknowledgement of some possible better future. This is the sort of thinking about critique that must surface against currents of pessimism emerging today.

### *Conclusion*

The remainder of this dissertation will explore the purposeful juxtaposition of thinkers correspondingly symbolizing varied dreams of freedom and nightmares of despair. If we take the allegory of the “Myth of Sisyphus” seriously, then we must offer a special caveat on what is meant by the philosophical framework of dreams and nightmares that poetically guides this dissertation. We must think of these two antonymous forces as asymptotic lines. Both stretch out to an impossible to reach infinity never crossing the axis of human experience. They are simply hypothetical limitations suggesting we can never actually rise to the truth of any dream of freedom and, simultaneously, we can never fall to the depths of any nightmare of despair. A paradox emerges in such a metaphor. While we can find ourselves closer to either end we still remain infinitely distant from either fulfillment; yet, still, we do make meaningful movement toward one of the two ends. Also, such philosophical pairings are not at all meant to contrast each thinker as diametrical opponents. Rather, we must take their work as simply animated to dialectically explore being tethered between the two possibilities.

Ultimately, this project is concerned with how seemingly innocuous beliefs in the way the world works fosters a distortive historical amnesia working against the

necessary, agentic pursuit of the dreams of freedom capable of nourishing our very personhood in the world while consciously working against the nightmares of despair giving us due warning to the currents of devastation adrift in our present age. Such distortion threatens to eclipse the very experience of seeing, understanding, and sympathizing against many of the forms of exploitation and oppression working as the engine of progress in our global, interconnected lives. Thus, what continues in subsequent chapters is itself a project that aims to form thoughtful meditations on thinkers reminding us of the affirmative power of grand dreams of freedom and competing critical warnings of our possible collapse into corresponding nightmares of despair.

By thinking the condition of our modern age as challenged by an encounter between varied dreams of freedom and nightmares of despair we are reminded that our fragile mortal selves should not be seduced by extremists underestimating or overestimating the power of our faculties. We can dream out into the transcendent to capture a glimpse of the big ideals like freedom, but we are also bound in our varied efforts to bring such ideals into practice in a world fraught with problems of justice. However, the purpose for this declaration is as much philosophical as it is political. With the rise of the social sciences in the university during the last century we not only inherited new methodologies and assumptions about the study of human beings but also a language whose parlance tends toward reduction and simplification. This glib approach to understanding a thinker has emaciated our critical sensibilities and left scholarship awash in a new lexicon of jargon making sweeping claims about philosophy only to parse it out into sparsely defined intellectual camps.

Too often we are told that the history of philosophy is itself an epic battle between the realists like Hobbes and the idealists like Plato. Or perhaps, we are offered analyses that condense rich histories of thought with the tag line that they are promoting the tradition of the materialists or ideologists. This tendency toward categorization bares the mark of scientific inquiry which studies the world by trying to contain it in objective conclusions, having failed to take a cue from Wittgenstein who long ago in the *Tractatus* reminded us that our very containers for understanding are themselves, in part, defined by what is being contained. Rather, a more careful, textual return to the thinkers in this work allows us to conjure up the very goal of affirmative political theory.

For, what is lost to us in such simplifications is one of the very touchstones of what sparked profound and widespread interest in political philosophy in the first place: vision. We are deeply indebted to Sheldon Wolin for reminding us that such work is itself epic. This heroic task is one of imaginative grandeur and deep meditation where *theoria* (deep contemplation, moral faculty) meets *poiesis* (bringing forth, creative production). For Wolin, this meant that “...the political philosopher is not confined to criticism and interpretation; he must reconstruct a shattered world of meanings and their accompanying institutional expressions he must, in short, fashion a political cosmos out of political chaos.”<sup>31</sup>

Such a political cosmos will indeed be fashioned out of political chaos in the follow manner. The first section is an engagement between the work of Immanuel Kant and Martin Heidegger. Immanuel Kant weaves together an erudite tapestry in his three volume work on critique which, as ellipsed in the first chapter, is threaded together to

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<sup>31</sup> Sheldon Wolin, *Politics and Vision: Continuity and Innovation in Western Political Thought* (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition) (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 9.



reveal the unique condition of our personhood as integrally linked to the work of moral freedom. Initially, we are reminded that our condition as subjects in the world is fragmented along the axes of space and time, as these sensible intuitions are related through our perceptions and imaginatively fashioned into experience. However, for Kant this means we attain a subjectivity uniquely fractured and only sutured together through the ability to engage in a dual teleological projection. On the one hand, we can think the possibility of our personhood in the figuration of grand ideals giving us hope for a future world, and, on the other hand, we can project out a more immediate maxim capable of bringing us in greater proximity to such grandeur. Ultimately, we stand with the ability to wield our faculty of judgment to either legislate and execute maxims enabling such ideality as much as is possible for a finite, phenomenal creature, or we can succumb to perversions of the heart as we ignore the implicit moral freedom integral to our personhood. The power of our faculty of judgment is a means to demonstrate such morally integral personhood as we are able to subliminally see an object in the truest image of beauty and its corresponding perfect form: humanity.

However, while Kant suggests that we can always legislate and execute maxims of our own making in the aspiration of our moral personality. Ultimately, we are aided by the ability to aesthetically experience the beauty of nature and determine our most valued place in this world as a part of the register of humanity. Heidegger, in contradistinction, poses critical warnings suggesting that the pervasive language of scientific rationality and its perversion of nature cements the movement of our becoming in the world with other beings to a lethal standstill. While many thinkers suggest that Heidegger is a deep-seeded pessimist, his work as animated in the third chapter attempts

to give us a reflective pause to consider the sort of nightmare of despair threatening the dream of freedom realized in Kant. Specifically, chapter three reviews the way our relation to the forces of technological rationality has perverted our being in this world with other beings. This scenario is one in which the means of technology is not seen for its reveling powers and is instead reified as an end making creature. Although we might be able to hold back the spellbinding influence of technological rationality, we are further brought closer to despair by the ways in which the assumptions of modern metaphysics emaciate the register of humanity by fating us to an unknowable ontology. Finally, we stand challenged to be able to think the possibility of a coherent image of ourselves in time only if we can animate a saving power in our combined activity of building, dwelling, and thinking the greatness of Being.

The second section is an engagement between the work of Karl Marx and Theodor Adorno. Marx in many ways attempts to materialize the meaning of freedom and establish the primacy of human beings as the source of valuation in the world. Marx is being articulated in chapter four to simultaneously critique the larger, negative attendances of capital and subsequently announce the ways in which we might try to live in a community outside of the strangling hold of economic relations turned pathological sycophants of our ability to imbue value into the world. Such a project is orchestrated in three movements. First, the combined forces of production, distribution, exchange, and consumption allowing for the reproduction of the larger system of capital making are critically analyzed to reveal the ways in which they operate to enforce a dead pledge of society. Second, the very experience of these four-fold forces is shown to asymmetrically allow for the money circuit to extract its surplus value out of the living

labor derived from the productive capacity of workers caught in the imprisoning constraints of the commodity circuit. Such an analysis speaks to the ways we imbue our very soul into the act of production, which is subsequently siphoned off as the fuel for the reproduction of the larger system of capitalism. Finally, communism is presented as a teleological projection to which we aspire toward in our material activities of the world; it is a regulative ideal, and one that guides our attempts to dare to imagine the possibility of a world outside of the negative attendances of capitalism.

Where our engagement with Karl Marx concluded with the realization that we can figure ourselves as people in union toward the teleological aspiration of the regulative ideal of communism, Theodor Adorno is articulated in chapter five to suggest that the aesthetic world allowing such a figurative transformation of our freedom to seed within our consciousness is slowly being eaten up by the very same powers of commodification that have devastated our material world. This chapter, in turn, considers the threatening nightmare of despair that haunts our experience of life in modernity when we fail to take seriously our role as the source of human valuation in the ordering of the material world. As a consequence of that failure, this chapter traces out three stages in the threatening collapse of the aesthetic within our lives. First, the world, as it were, begins to lose the grandeur of its image as we enter into a time of nearness to catastrophe marked by a life where the aesthetic is bent toward the service of the forces of capital. Second, what little space remains for great aesthetic work too often comes under the attack of canonical objectifications of beauty that systematically eclipse the aesthetic from accessing its true power of imagining the world different from its current state of decay. Finally, the theoretical impetus of both of these arguments are practically united in the attempt to

reveal the ways in which negative forms of the aesthetic as it persists in various layer of our lived, everyday lives encourages a world which can only be known as a growing spectacle of damaged life.

While each philosophical pairing plays out a different mediations between dreams of freedom and nightmares of despair, each engagement is appended by a small reprisal, or return to the original theme, discussing what is philosophically at stake in such an exploration between two thinkers against a pressing issue of great social, economic, and political importance. The first reprisal explores the impending water privatization crisis, while the second reprisal discusses the burgeoning culture industry of plastic surgery. These reprisals are not intended to solve the problem they pose; instead they are reflective moments illuminating the philosophical engagement between thinkers giving us dreams of freedom and nightmares of despair toward a serious global crisis that threatens us with the image of a world teetering on the brink of collapse.

Concluding this dissertation is a meditation on the work of Walter Benjamin and his view of life as a passageway in the circuitous labyrinths of advanced capitalism simultaneously caught between both nightmares of despair and dreams of freedom where we might indeed simply blow away the sands of sleep and rightfully awaken from the nightmarish slumber of phantasmagoria.

## **Chapter Two:**

### **Immanuel Kant**

#### **The Subject of Freedom:**

#### **Our Orientation in Thinking against Perversions of the Heart**

When will we learn that human beings are of infinite value because they have been created in the image of God, and that it is a blasphemy to treat them as if they were less than this and to do so ultimately recoils on those who do this? In dehumanizing others, they are themselves dehumanized. Perhaps oppression dehumanizes the oppressor as much as, if not more than, the oppressed. They need each other to become truly free, to become human. We can be human only in fellowship, in community, in koinonia, in peace.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu, *Nobel Laureate Acceptance Speech (1984)*

#### ***Abstract***

Immanuel Kant weaves together an erudite tapestry in his three volume work on critique which, as ellipsed in this chapter, is threaded together to reveal the unique condition of our personhood as integrally linked to the work of moral freedom. Initially, we are reminded that our condition as subjects in the world is fragmented along the axes of space and time, as these sensible intuitions are related through our perceptions and imaginatively fashioned into experience. However, for Kant this means we attain a subjectivity uniquely fractured and only sutured together through the ability to engage in a dual teleological projection. On the one hand, we can think the possibility of our personhood in the figuration of grand ideals giving us hope for a future world, and, on the other hand, we can project out a more immediate maxim capable of bringing us in greater proximity to such grandeur. Ultimately, we stand with the ability to wield our faculty of judgment to either legislate and execute maxims enabling such ideality as much as is

possible for a finite, phenomenal creature, or we can succumb to perversions of the heart as we ignore the implicit moral freedom integral to our personhood. The power of our faculty of judgment is a means to demonstrate such morally integral personhood as we are able to subliminally see an object in the truest image of beauty and its corresponding perfect form: humanity.

### ***Introduction***

In 2006 the Judges of the Constitutional Court of South Africa proffered a judgment that would seem to defy traditional positivistic, scientific conceptions of the legal in an advanced capitalist world.<sup>32</sup> Judge Albie Sachs, concurring with the majority decision authored by Judge Yvonne Mokgoro, argued that the ongoing influence of indigenous values such as *ubuntu* on the dignity jurisprudence of the Court forces a questioning of the legal conception of harm and the need for restorative justice. Sachs, evoking a more prosaic decision making parlance, at least provides verbal shelter for justice when he suggests:

There is a further and deeper problem with damages awards in defamation cases. They measure something so intrinsic to human dignity as a person's reputation and honour as if these were market-place commodities. Unlike businesses, honour is not quoted on the Stock Exchange. The true and lasting solace for the person wrongly injured is the vindication by the Court of his or her reputation in the community. The greatest prize is to walk away with head high, knowing that even the traducer has acknowledged the injustice of the slur.

There is something conceptually incongruous in attempting to establish a proportionate relationship between vindication of a reputation, on the one hand, and determining a sum of money as consumption, on the other. The damaged reputation is either restored by a higher award, and less restored by a lower one. It is the judicial finding in favour of the integrity of the complainant that vindicates his or her reputation, not the amount of money he or she ends up being able to deposit in the bank.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> *David Dikoko v Thupi Zachararia Mokhatla*, CCT (South Africa) 62/05.

<sup>33</sup> Albie Sachs, *Dikoko v Mokhatla*, paragraphs 109-110.

In a simple set of two paragraphs written by a constitutional judge within a legal system that does not reduce standing to contested parties with an attested legal claim, the entire scientific legal edifice for treating justice as a calculable measurement of harm translated into financial compensation is not obliterated, necessarily, but at the very least partakes in a sort of questioning that might very well become a spark capable of illuminating a saving way in a deep time of peril. Within the pluralistic, democratic society of South Africa such an opinion opens up the possibility for future changes to evidentiary consideration at all levels of the judiciary allowing new renditions of justice to emerge as the concept of repair is detached from monetary reward and instead associated with communal well-being.<sup>34</sup>

Sachs is suggesting that in the Constitution of South Africa and its pluralistic commitment to the achievement of human dignity as interpretable in matters of defamation, and perhaps issues of harm more generally, there is at least theoretically an integral link between the ideality of justice as a matter of philosophical personhood, individual and communal, rather than as a matter of legal conscription. This decision by the South African Constitutional Court stands as an important example reminding us that institutional support for the ideality of our personhood is still very much alive in this world. Not only has this Court complicated the notion of jurisprudence by integrally linking an ideal like dignity with a corresponding ideal from customary law, but it stands as the only court in the world that actually invokes the work of Immanuel Kant and addresses various elements of the categorical imperative as the regulative ideal governing the implementation of justice throughout society, both vertically and horizontally.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Sachs, *Dikoko v Mokhatla*, paragraph 118-119.

<sup>35</sup> Laurie Ackermann, *Buzani Dodo v The State*, CCT (South Africa) 01/01, paragraph 38.

Freedom, then, in this instance appears as a human activity given the space for possible actualization by the institutions of the larger state.

Such a radical instance of a society attuned to the ethical aspiration of something like the kingdom of ends gives us all renewed faith in the possibility of bringing about a just world in the face of increasing alienation, reification, and exploitation rampant in the wake of baseless capitalistic enterprises. The mere presence of this decision, and more importantly the society in which its articulation was possible, demonstrates an interruption in the advancement of positivistic conceptions of the legal somewhere in the world. While our prejudices of modernity usually self-proclaim the “west as better than the rest,” there is little room for contention that the most ethically sophisticated and jurisprudentially demanding legal order—seen as a transformative constitution of society in accordance with the grandeur of the ideal of dignity and the justice to which this ideal aspires—can itself be found in the supposed “Third World.” This judiciary refuses to privilege the location of justice as strictly within the purview of codified law and instead actively suggests that justice is found in the experience of restoration between persons because it recognizes something like an integral link between the well-being of the individual and the health of the state. Thus, justice, and with it our human freedom, may very well be intertwined with our practical experience as a subject given the space to actualize its philosophical possibility. However, arriving at such a moment of theoretical possibility made institutional actuality requires deeper reflection on the work on Immanuel Kant and exactly what such a powerful dream of freedom represents.

Simplifying the whole of pure and practical philosophy articulated in the larger work of Kant allows for a threefold movement to understand the continued possibility,



despite knowable actuality, of freedom not only in this world but also in ourselves as a matter of ideality to which we can aspire. First, as subjects we exist thrown into being along the axis of time and space experiencing the lives of finite, phenomenal creatures through the simultaneously limiting and enabling power of reason. Such a philosophical declaration does much to remove grounding from claims about our supposed ontological truth of being according to imagined constructions of rational interest or risk management and instead initiates a sense of our personhood consonant with a transcendental aesthetic. Second, such creatures must, in order to move through time and space, be able to cast forth a dual teleological projection of both our immediate personhood as well as the sublime grandeur leading up to the possibility of our freedom in a future world. Third, our relationality with one another as we strive either closer to or further away from such a projection of hope must be understood as the power of judgment to vivify our imagination and also allow for the simultaneous legislation and execution of maxims capable of meeting such rational faith toward a supersensible vision. Together, these ruminations suggest that our personhood in the world, as seen through the transcendental imagination, is itself nothing less than the *subject of freedom*.

### ***Our Orientation in Thinking***

Kant, writing in *Religion within the Bounds of Mere Reason*, suggests to us that our relation to a mark of ideality as free persons is a matter of rational belief.

Knowledge, for Kant, of the supersensible—such as the truth of God or the future world—is not itself knowable to us as a matter of fact;<sup>36</sup> yet, how we think about such

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<sup>36</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Bounds of Mere Reason*, Allen Wood and George di Giovanni, eds. (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

matters is itself an orientation in thought whose theoretical possibility might itself practically bring about a humbleness before our shared genitive power to legislate and execute a maxim of the moral law in our varied attempts to bring about something like the transcendent freedom residing in the ideality of a kingdom of ends. For Kant, reason is both an enabling force of the free will and also its limitation, as we stand thrown into the world along the axis of time and space. This limitation creates a peculiar relationship suggesting freedom is a matter not necessarily of institutionally declared, positivistic determinations of law but instead an aspirational ideal as we stand humbled before the moral law in community with other persons.

Kant begins his essay on our “Orientation in Thinking” by suggesting that we navigate an understanding of ourselves in thought that allows for the possibility of a free subject. This orientation, for Kant, is not a solipsistic enterprise but one that is truly human in that it occurs in the presence of other human beings. So long as society preserves some semblance of actual space for people to think and communicate themselves in the world, then we remain in possession of “that single gem remaining to us in the midst of all of the burdens of civil life, through which alone we can devise a means of overcoming all of the evils of our condition.”<sup>37</sup> Throughout all of his work Kant is concerned with the philosophical possibility of our freedom despite not being able to know it as part of our experience and suggests that the condition of our moral personality is a matter of ethical character struggling to articulate ourselves in the world as we postulate our being in accordance with universalizable maxims. This ability to postulate ourselves in the world as a thinking subject through reason, which both enables and limits the thinking of our being free, gives the constitutional decision introducing this

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<sup>37</sup> Kant, *Religion within the Bounds of Mere Reason*, 12.

chapter added importance. Not only does such a decision secure the sort of institutional space of law permitting the questioning of our relationality with other human beings, but it also gives shelter to the thinking subject and also the possibility to usher forth just actions.

In the preface to the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Immanuel Kant sketches for us a systematic attack on the various philosophical schools of thought and their attendant failure to epistemologically ground their understanding of the world and instead mistakenly conflate such views with an unknowable ontology. Kant, in his own words, summarizes the epistemic dilemma rather cogently when he suggests:

Through criticism alone can we sever the very root of **materialism**, **fatalism**, **atheism**, of freethinking **unbelief**, of **enthusiasm** and **superstition**, which can be come generally injurious, and finally also of **idealism** and **skepticism**, which are more dangerous to the schools and can hardly be transmitted to the public. If governments find it good to concern themselves with the affairs of scholars, then it would accord better with their wise solicitude both for the sciences and for humanity if they favored the freedom of such a critique, by which alone the treatments of reason can be put on a firm footing, instead of supporting the ridiculous despotism of the schools, which raise a loud cry of public danger when ever someone tears apart their cobwebs, of which the public has never taken any notice, and hence the loss of which it can also never feel.<sup>38</sup>

For Kant, this elaborate condemnation of the theoretical miseries present in scholastic thinking during his time was a necessary activity. It was not a critique for the purpose of canonical dismissal but a purposeful observation meant to more properly orient us toward the condition of our finite experience in the world through the sensible intuitions of a reason trapped along the axes of time and space. It is the workings of such reason that itself provides us creatures not only with a phenomenal world to encounter but a noumenal subject with the power to stretch such limitation in the work of aspiring to a possible future world of greater justice.

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<sup>38</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, Paul Guyer and Allen Wood, eds and trans. (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 119 (BXXXV).

In preparing his three volume work on critique, Kant inaugurates the larger project by suggesting to us a peculiar facet about reason which will inspire much of his work as presented in this chapter—observations about the transcendental imagination giving rise to our ability to project ourselves as thinking and acting creatures capable of a dual teleology to make its own maxims in accord with the larger end of dignity, the categorical imperative demanding our enactment of a moral personality to keep at bay our innate propensities toward evil that emerge as perversions of the heart so that we might instead live as subjects capable of legislating and executing our own freedom, and finally the grandeur of our ability to judge an object in an aesthetic moment where we must ourselves remake the whole of the world in the faculties of imagination so as to traverse the road of sublimity to see, indeed, the most beautiful image of all creation: humanity. This musing on reason makes clear the complicated nature of our thinking faculties allowing all further speculative inquiry and rational faith to emerge:

For the advantage that has made it so successful logic has solely its own limitation to thank, since it is thereby justified in abstracting—is indeed obliged to abstract—from all objects of cognition and all the distinctions between them; and in logic, therefore, the understanding has to do with nothing further than itself and its own form.<sup>39</sup>

For Kant, then, reason is both enabled and limited by its powers. On the one hand it remains bound by the ability of our sensible intuitions to experience the world along the axes of time and space yet simultaneously is able to suspend judgments about what remains unknowable to us. Kant, writing in the third antinomy, suggests that reason could never be rendered to prove our existence in a state of absolute freedom but also, drawing on its enabling powers, could never be hijacked to suggest our unfreedom in the world: past, present, and future. Thus, critique stands beyond fated determinations and

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<sup>39</sup> Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 107 (B IX).

provides a perpetually open space for the work of pure reason to think the possibility of the world and the resulting need for practical reason to approximate such dreams under the hopeful banner of a broad praxis of deontology.

For Kant, this orientation in thinking we are exploring is something of a complicated model purporting a theory of the subject which in subsequent sections will be taken up to suggest our subjective character is integrally tied to the work of freedom. Such a sense of the subject is one that is constrained by human minds limited to the sensible intuition (*anschauung*) of the world in time and space. These sensible intuitions are then filtered through the schema, which renders our perception (*wahrnehmung*) of the world in symbolic form. Eventually, our experiences (*erfahrung*) of the world are synthetically understood through the sensuous play of the imagination shaping these apriori cognitions. One could suggest that Kant betrays his own critical sensibilities and his overarching distaste of theories purporting an unknowable ontology of human beings by succumbing to the same charge and simply offers us his own theoretical rendition of the meaning of our being. However, the rigorous logic that slowly evolves throughout the three critiques is instead suggesting not an ontological characterization of humanity but instead a deontological explanation of our condition as finite creatures.

While ontology speaks to studies of the nature of being, deontology militantly refuses assigning any particular quality to the nature of humanity except those powers of faculty that give rise to our moral personhood. This work is something like a philosophical treatise returning us to a first order question of what powers of cognition are even possible for us human creatures. Certainly, Kant was himself aware that the model of subjectivity given to us in his three critiques was only a itself applicable to our

current character of humanity, knowing full well that while we are indeed “thrown into the a world” (*geworfen*) in such a present condition it is certainly possible that other creatures encounter the universe along other dimensions of experience or that future humans will evolve to take in different sensible intuitions. However, coherent unity as we understand the matter for a thinking subject occurs along this threefold movement of *intuition, perception, and experience*.

While Kant offers a larger architectonic system cataloguing the inner workings of such pure reason for the purpose of scholastic advancement in the second half of the first critique, what is important for our consideration is the way in which these three facets of our unique sense of subjectivity carry philosophical weight in describing a personhood that can only exist in accord with the work of freedom. Kant, famously misunderstood for his description of the antinomy between the noumenal and phenomenal world, does not seek to privilege subjective or objective experience but instead calls to us to resolve any heavy handed dichotomization of the two by thinking of reason as a matter of limitation:

The concept of a **noumenon**, i.e., of a thing that is not to be thought of as an object of the senses but rather as a thing in itself (solely though a pure understanding), is not at all contradictory; for one cannot assert of sensibility that it is the only possible kind of intuition. Further, this concept is necessary in order not to extend sensible intuition to things in themselves, and thus to limit the objective validity of sensible cognition...<sup>40</sup>

Thus, whatever sense of our subjectivity that might actually exist can only be known through the way in which we are able to engage in a constant work of becoming. The corrective issued by Kant is one that means to suggest we are not ever fated to be known by any determinations of who we are because of past, present, or future actions and

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<sup>40</sup> Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 350 [B310] (emphasis in original).

instead are always engaging in the work of articulating ourselves in the world by constantly (re)presenting the announcement of our very being.

Space, as Kant remarks, is “the ground of all outer intuitions”<sup>41</sup> complimented by time which is “the subjective condition under which all intuitions can take place in us.”<sup>42</sup> Together, these infinite features of our sensible intuition form the first stage of our larger experience as subjects in the world, both internally and externally, and suggests that we mediated creatures are faced with a constant sense of, quite literally, remaking ourselves. Along the dimension of time we are caught in a perpetually recurring iterative paradox to establish our sense of self, as we constantly establish our own subjectivity in each lapse of time, *ad infinitum ad nausea*. Similarly, we are not able to perceive our existence in the world without spatial referents to give shelter to the temporal consciousness in our mind, and such referents are always dynamic and perpetually shifting. For Kant, this fundamental schism suggests that we synthetically project our sense of subjectivity on a future horizon that is always unmet in a sort of constant struggle of articulated personhood unlike anything but the labors of Sisyphus.

Kant is careful to note in his section critiquing the accustomed paralogsms of pure reason that take for granted a stable, naturally occurring sense of the person stemming from subjective determinations about our being due to either material and temporal reoccurrence or the ability to utter statements about the simplicity or doubt of our own existence. As mentioned before, Kant is giving us a model of the subject that must itself be continually threaded through the infinite complexities of our relationship to both time and space:

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<sup>41</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, Paul Guyer and Allen Wood, eds and trans. (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 175 [A24].

<sup>42</sup> Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 180 [A33].

The identity of the consciousness of Myself in different times is therefore only a formal condition of my thoughts and their connection, but it does not prove at all the numerical identity of my subject, in which—despite the logical identity of the I—a change can go on that does not allow it to keep its identity; and this even though all the while the identical-sounding “I” is assigned to it, which in every other state, even in the replacement of the subject, still keeps in view the thought of the previous subject, and this could also pass it along to the following one.<sup>43</sup>

Much of the history of analytic philosophy follows from the Cartesian dictum—*cogito ergo sum*—and to suggest otherwise seems counterintuitive for those brought up within the cannon of western analytic philosophy. However, it should be remembered that such a logic is circuitous, or dialectically illusory as Kant would say, for it was indeed Descartes, when meditating on how to know ourselves in either a waking or dreaming state, who declares his bold dictum only to further suggest such an act of thinking occurs because we have been naturally fitted with light from a first order creation of God. Despite being able to think such a declaration, its conclusion goes well beyond what is possible for a finite creation to know of the supersensible.

Instead, Kant is suggesting something of teleological grandeur about our personhood in that such subjectivity can never be taken for granted but itself is a work of becoming onto our own being as we stand with the potential to remake ourselves in every known successive moment of passage through time and space. This analytic deduction may seem hyperbole on first glance but when coupled with our later ruminations about our own human propensity toward evil and the need to stave off perversions of heart in the willful legislation and execution of maxims in accord with the moral law, this original statement—despite its bewildering perplexity—will come into service in the reinforcement that we are not ever fated beings wholly determined by our activities of the

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<sup>43</sup> Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 423. [A363].



past but indeed maintain the capacity to possibly someday shepherd into being the sort of free personhood that remains unknowable.

However, a second unique feature of human beings is their ability to distinguish reality from possibility and at the same time communicate their varied and similar relationships to the facets of a reason locked in time and space to other human beings through the schemata giving shape to our *perceptions*. Many of the more conservative veins of Kantian philosophy touting an analytic mindset have given a great deal of attention to this area of pure reason in order to form a science of the mind. However, we are duly reminded by Kant in his work on the discipline of pure reason that such efforts violate the very knowability of reason in the world and should be forged with much careful trepidation to avoid speculative errancy. The schema, in Kant, serves as a locus for the perception of our many relationships within the sensible intuitions of time and space. Drucilla Cornell, in a radical reinterpretation and sophisticated engagement with Ernst Cassirer, suggests that it is perhaps more appropriate to see the schemata in the vein of our capacity for symbolic forms, or ability to vivify the infinite temporal and spatial dynamics of experience through the equally infinite pluralistic array of symbolic articulation available to us when we are able to muster a language to literally capture our sense of the world.<sup>44</sup>

*Experience* represents the final stage in the culmination of the peculiar of sense of becoming a subject as articulated in the work of Kant and itself sets the stage for further inquiry into why our sense of personhood is integrally linked to morality and with it freedom. Kant changes his thinking on the role of the imagination from the first critique

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<sup>44</sup> Drucilla Cornell, *Moral Images of Freedom: A Future for Critical Theory* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2008), Chapter 3.

by the time he is writing the third critique where he suggests that the sensuous play of the imagination gives us a feature of integrative coherence and also a subliminal challenge to see our selves connected to the most beautiful image of all splendor: humanity.

However, the power of pure reason can itself seem like an empty purpose without having the ability to use such power for effecting actual change in the world. While we can indeed speculate something like a perfectly straight line unable to cross its own axis when stretched out to infinity, there is no way to bring such speculation into material reality. Similarly, by simply abstracting the speculative, pure possibility of our personhood without animating its moral, practical counterpart we are left, in a deep sense, philosophically unfulfilled.

Kant, concluding his work in the first critique with ruminations on the transcendental doctrine in the workings of the cannon of pure reason hinting at his future work in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, transitions us to a necessary next stage in our thinking the subject in its integral relation to freedom:

“[i]t is humiliating for human reason that accomplishes nothing in pure use, and even requires a discipline to check its extravagances and avoid the deceptions that come from them. But, on the other side, that reason can and must exercise this discipline itself, without allowing anything else to censor it and gives confidence in itself, for the boundaries that it is required to set for its speculative use at the same time limit the sophistical pretensions of every opponent, and thus it can secure against all attacks everything that may still be left to it from its previously exaggerated demands.”<sup>45</sup>

To understand such a seemingly self-defeating statement we need to remember exactly what Kant meant when he suggests to us the notion of purposeful purposeless. It may appear on an ephemeral glance that it is purposeless to think such impossible thoughts, but indeed it is only by being able to engage in the teleological projection of impossible acts of grandeur that we find the very thread cohering the sense of ourselves in the world.

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<sup>45</sup> Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 672, [A795/B823].

For Kant, “Pure reason has a presentiment of objects of great interest to it. It takes the path of mere speculation in order to come closer to these; but they flee before it.

Presumably it may hope for better luck on the only path that remains to it, namely that of its practical use.”<sup>46</sup> While having carefully laid out the complex array of the various facets of our pure reason, Kant concludes such a masterful work with a challenge to himself, and of course all of us, to continue our search for the subject of freedom by securing the very tether capable of suturing together ourselves as subjects of a possible freedom in the world.

Since we are always separated from ourselves—receiving the world through the sensible intuitions of time and space reflected upon through the schema which renders symbolic forms of language that seek to vivify to ourselves and other people a semblance of shared experience—our constitution as a subject is somewhat fragmented and incomplete. There is a schism of temporal and spatial experience that works as a sort of original psychic and material trauma that eternally distances us from ourselves. Yet, the expanse between the projected subject and the actual self is somewhat flexible and always changing. The original trauma of self-separation is something that can be exaggerated or contracted depending upon the experiences of the world we are so very much thrown into in our everyday lived activities.

In this way Kant opens up a new understanding on the whole of political philosophy, suggesting to us that the way various experiences of life attendant on contracting or expanding this distanciation can either comport us closer to or further away from the truer sense of being that is projected. From this view of the subject we could suggest that Karl Marx is arguing that the spatial dynamics of the production of

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<sup>46</sup> Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 672, [A796/B824].

capital influence our sense of subjectivity through estrangement in class exploitative architectural constructions of a city or the alienating production of commodities along the tyranny of an assembly line. Similarly, the symbolic production of money as the moniker of human value enlarges our temporal distance from a projected self when we are made to work in the fast pace of production yielding a nostalgic forgetfulness of our sense of authentic self amid the all encompassing spectral hauntings of exchange value. In this example we are made to see how much of political theory is supporting the subjective implications of a transcendental imagination whereby the experience of life either draws us in toward that projected subject or remove us farther away from its image.

However, we are far from fated to simply experience the attendances of such traumas in our varied symbolic worlds without the hope for achieving some sort of moral obligation yielding a healthy equilibrium both for the state and its citizens. Kant calls us to place ourselves under the moral law as a way to not only regain individual freedom but to begin a project whose true teleology is the achievement of something like perpetual peace. It is only within the philosophical constraints of an understanding of the transcendental imagination that we are able to collectively engage in the work of freedom, something Kant argues in his third antinomy cannot be proven as nonexistent along with God and morality. Freedom is not something we can ever fully know but it is certainly something we can always try to practice, hence why the second critique is labeled *practical reason*.

***Ideality of Freedom made Sutures of Being***

As subjects oriented toward thinking in this world through the transcendental imagination we must engage in a dual teleological projection. On the one hand, we must first be able to postulate a rational faith in the possibility of a supreme holiness of a future just world if there is ever to be any hope for our continued becoming, and, on the other hand, we need to be able to project out a second teleology in the form of a maxim in our daily engagements with life. Freedom, and its possibility, is the force suturing together our peculiar notion of the subject into the sort of coherent unity we take for granted in everyday life. Kant discusses this complex relationship as the idea of our conforming to duty, which can be seen as comportment to a sort of freedom as the ultimate end of reason:

...in the absence of all reference to an end no determination of the will can take place in human beings at all... So morality really has no need of an end of right conduct; on the contrary, the law that contains the formal condition of the use of freedom in general suffices to it. Yet, an end proceeds from morality just the same... And this is indeed only the idea of an object that unites within itself the formal condition of all such ends as we ought to have (duty) with everything which is conditional upon ends we have and which conforms to duty (happiness proportioned to its observance), that is, the idea of a highest good in the world... This idea is not (practically considered) an empty one; for it meets our natural need, which would otherwise be a hindrance to moral resolve, to think for all our doings and nondoinings taken as a whole some sort of ultimate end which reason can justify.<sup>47</sup>

The need for practical reason to animate its pure counterpart into this system of a dual teleology is not merely an aesthetic maneuver but a philosophical necessity if there is to be any possible means for us to think the future configurability of our personhood allowing for the theoretical persistence of our being. Without this projection signaling the possibility of our existence in a future world we would be committing a sort of philosophical suicide against ourselves paradoxically extinguishing our very personhood under the banner of a fated nonexistence. Kant, writing in the introduction to his famous essay on cosmopolitanism, captures this absurdity well when tells the story of an old

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<sup>47</sup> Kant, *Religion within the Bounds of Mere Reason*, 34.

innkeeper who had a sign above his residence painted with a macabre image of endlessly outstretched graveyard of humanity underscored with the title perpetual peace.

At the time of its writing, this somber recanting was being delivered to an audience enmeshed in the much remembered horrors of the 30 Years War. However, perhaps this example stands with even greater gravity to us in the present, as our lives are ones advanced enough in development to fashion the means of our own extinction with none of the foresight any simple animal carries to abandon such a task for the sake of its own preservation. For, if misanthropy is made the end of reason, then we have willfully succumbed to a sort of evil that threatens to extinguish the very lived future of rationality itself. This end of reason, Kant remarks, is the ability to figure a realm of grace where the ultimate happiness of all of humanity can itself be enshrined, preserved, and lived through the moral figuration of the categorical imperative as a veritable kingdom of persons harmoniously living out there own autonomy without also sacrificing the rights of others. Such work, however, requires our obedience in the form of a living duty to the moral law, as we stand humbly inspired onto greatness by its profound beauty. The argument here is asymptotic, suggesting that we can never truly eclipse the endless array of activity capable of instilling the sort of hospitality to all others, including ourselves, that might indeed bring about the kingdom of ends.

Kant gives us an elaborate articulation of the categorical imperative, which itself carries more than a pedestrian resemblance to the golden rule and is not some moral codex prescribing just actions, but is itself the intelligible human receptivity giving guidance to the most ethically demanding and morally sophisticated touchstone begging us to achieve a way of life allowing for a more just articulation of humanity embodied in

our very enactment of an unknowable freedom. Kant was troubled by the tendencies of his colleagues to privilege experience in such a way that suggests morality is relative to context and circumstance. The problem with this sort of approach for Kant, and others, is that it is very easy for people to justify their immediate actions that when later reflected upon would seem abhorrent and barbarous. For instance, it would be easy for someone during the time of westward expansion in the United States to justify the murderous genocide of indigenous people on the grounds that there was a valued culture of manifest destiny rationalizing such behavior, citing perhaps the work of John Locke which suggests that the natives were below the register of humanity because of their inefficient use of natural resources. For Kant, this type of thinking ignores the fact that we need universalizable maxims to guide our will toward actions of good moral consequence. Further, what is involved in moral action is the process of figuring a world in which the very register of humanity is not solipsistically projected, but instead universally configured with respect to the plurality of our otherness.

Thus, Kant begins his quest for a moral duty capable of leading us to human freedom with his famous first rendition of the categorical imperative, which boldly claims we ought to act in such a way that our maxims might themselves be universalizable.<sup>48</sup> Abiding by the categorical imperative suggests the need for people to hold reverence for a universal law that stands above what is codified in civil law and appears in popular rules of social exchange. Also, our commitment to moral duty is not to be spoiled by self-interest. Instead, Kant suggests that our commitment to moral duty must be actualized for genuine reasons, which take fuller shape after the final formulation

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<sup>48</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork on the Metaphysics of Morals*, Mary Gregor, ed. and trans. (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 15 [4:402], emphasis in original..

of the categorical imperative in the figuration of the kingdom of ends. Kant brings this conception of moral duty back to the question of freedom by reformulating his thesis on the categorical imperative several times, always enlarging the very space for its execution and also the demand of its ethical character.

The second evolution of the categorical imperative suggests that we take this moral law as a law of nature. While this might seem to be a strange request, it is one that stands against the undue assumption about a human state of nature that appears in thinkers like Hobbes that would suggest we are nothing more than an anarchistic, barbarous group of people without the aid of a civil state codified in law. Instead, Kant is suggesting that what is natural, or ontologically true about human beings, is their ability to abstract something like the categorical imperative and instead make it the guiding maxim for ethical character and the eventual constitution of society in accord with the kingdom of ends.

Kant, in what some would call the third evolution of the categorical imperative, suggests that we must act to treat humanity in other people, including ourselves, as an end in itself and never merely as a means.<sup>49</sup> Extending this maxim through illustrative examples Kant continues by suggesting, “it is not enough that the action does not conflict with humanity in our person as an end in itself; it must also *harmonize with it*.”<sup>50</sup> At this juncture a radical democratic moment appears in Kant. To take seriously the categorical imperative by treating people as an end instead of a means under the practice of harmonizing our wills requires a civic society that provides the necessary space for all encompassing democratic engagement. It is a sort of engagement that does not come

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<sup>49</sup> Kant, *Groundwork on the Metaphysics of Morals*, 38 [4:429], emphasis in original.

<sup>50</sup> Kant, *Groundwork on the Metaphysics of Morals*, 38-39 [4:430], emphasis in original.



under the banner of a particular social code, cultural milieu, or governmental form but instead allows any pluralistic constellation of people to perform the sort of work of acknowledgement that sees, defends, and gives shelter to the inherent dignity of humanity.

The figuration of this complicated notion takes its highest image in the grandeur of the kingdom of ends where Kant suggested that we are the literal source of all meaning and valuation bringing forth the very ethical world we wish to call home in communion with other people. At times, the word Kant uses in German for world citizen (*Weltgebrachter*) helps to illuminate the importance of this figuration. The term carries special etymological meaning deserving introspection. *Welt* refers simply enough to the English equivalent of “world.” However, the suffix making up this compound noun can be linguistically traced back to the past participle *gebracht*, which means, more literally, “brought.” While Kant could have used any number of other conjugated words to indicate something like world citizen, choosing a peculiar phrase such as this one instead suggests the highest ideality of our communion with others is a duty of our personhood to literally bring forth the very moral world we want to take shelter in both for ourselves and all others.

The final formulation of the categorical imperative weaves this complicated argument into something that promises to lead us to a social constitution of humanity that protects our moral freedom in our constant work to bring about a peaceful world. The categorical imperative as unfolded here is suggesting that it is our moral duty to act in the world in such a way that articulates a universalizable maxim acknowledging ourselves and other people as human beings sharing a common dignity, and that such actions must

be negotiated with one another in order to harmonize our wills. Kant confirms this complicated evolution of the categorical imperative in its final figuration, and gives important caveats to the actualization of a will that does not fall prey to simple notions of obligation, suggesting:

Rational beings all stand under the *law* that each of them should treat himself and all others, *never merely as a means*, but always *at the same time as an end in himself*. But by so doing there arises a systematic union of rational beings under common objective laws—that is, a kingdom. Since these laws are directed precisely to the relation of such beings to one another as ends and means, this kingdom can be called a kingdom of ends (which admittedly is only an Ideal)...

Thus morality consists in the relation of all action to the making of laws whereby alone a kingdom of ends is possible. This making of laws must be found in every rational being himself and must be able to spring from his will...

Reason thus relates every maxim of the will, considered as making universal, to every other will and also to every other action towards oneself: it does so, not because of any further motive or future advantage, but from the Idea of the *dignity* or a rational being who obeys no law other than that which he at the same time enacts himself...

A will whose maxims necessarily accord with the laws of autonomy is a *holy*, or absolutely good, will. The dependence of a will not absolutely good on the principle of autonomy (that is, moral necessitation) is *obligation*. Obligation can thus have no reference to a holy being. The objective necessity to act from obligation is called *duty*.<sup>51</sup>

Here, Kant provides us with a beautiful image of freedom in this ellipsed passage if we reflect on his work as a whole. What Kant is suggesting in his use of the term kingdom of ends is an ideal of a society whereby people feel the weight of the moral law in the realization that the making of the world springs from the qualities of our will allowing us to legislate and execute maxims toward a the dignity of humanity. Kant is not calling for obligation to such freedom through necessitation, as such a demand would invoke the rule of heteronomy over the sort of autonomy he is trying so desperately to articulate. Said differently, it is the internalization of autonomous action in congruence with the categorical imperative in its fullest profundity that promises to bring about a state of

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<sup>51</sup> Kant, *Groundwork on the Metaphysics of Morals*, 101-102, 106-107.

social grace, while the externalization of such autonomy into a principle of social action devalues the term of its ethical character simplifying it into a mere execution of duty.

Too often, scholars have suggested that Kant gives us an impossible antinomy between autonomy and heteronomy. If we, as Kant suggests, must put ourselves before the moral law in order to be a free person for whatever grandeur end, some might claim that such a commandment intrinsically limits the very freedom of our personhood. However, we must remember that our enactment of the categorical imperative in its multifaceted iteration leaves open an innumerable array of possible moral responses to the world that respect our freedom caught in the disciplining powers of society.

Human beings, for Kant, are not ontically creative. That is to say, we are not able to simply think into existence our experience, which should stand as a sound warning to relativists who mistakenly take such critique to unreachable conclusions of a subjective ontology. Instead, this thinking subject iteratively caught in a paradox of temporalizing and spatializing itself in relation to the world instead achieves such ontic character only in our capacity to express experience both to ourselves and to others through symbolic forms. In the deceptively simple example of lying we would agree under the moral law that such a valuation is not universal in character, as people would not want to live in a world of liars. However, many have devised hypothetical experiments in the imagination meant to test the limits of our ability to pursue a universal world when its immediate results yield dire consequences. At stake is the very moral content of our experiences derived *posteriori* from our actions.

However, suppose that a confederate soldier, during the apex of tensions between North and South before the burgeoning Civil War, was searching through the countryside

looking for blacks being given safe haven from the cruelties of *ante bellum* slavery in the Underground Railroad. The soldier asks if my home is harboring slaves against the legal command of the state because the nearby town is going to lynch any blacks that escaped their so-called masters as an example to all others who might dare to think of their own freedom. My answer, surely, will carry deep ethical significance regardless of its form. On the one hand, if my answer confirms that blacks are indeed being harbored in my home then innocent people will face the abhorrent fate of a murderous, racist society, while, on the other hand, lying to the soldier would violate the categorical imperative and its aspiration to bring about an ideal kingdom of ends. Yet, it is in such a moment where we confront the beauty of our human creativity and ability to literally represent the meaning of the world in our own minds. To the soldier, one could say in some variation, “My friend, there are no blacks in this home, just us human beings.” To simply lie and say that no blacks were in my home, would have lost, at least on a symbolic level, the opportunity to perform the higher moral work of reconfiguring the register of humanity beyond particularistic classifications of people along ephemeral notions of the self embodied in race and, as a result, deepen our collective moral freedom in this moment allowing temporary juncture of pure and practical reason. Admittedly, Kant would not be comfortable with the conclusion offered in this example; the categorical imperative as exposed in Kant would demand that we answer the soldier affirmatively. But, the point being articulated in this example is one that means to suggest we indeed have at our disposal an infinite variety of ways to creatively articulate the truth and at the same time defend what we know to be just.

Readers of the political writings of Kant may be quick to point out that in his essay on enlightenment we are told that one may, in society, “*argue as much as you like about whatever you want, but obey!*”<sup>52</sup> However, Kant is clear that the world demanding our obedience is the world of an ideal kingdom of ends. And, of course, we should all recall that Kant carried much ambivalence in his attempts to speak to that in which “[n]owhere does practice so readily bypass all pure principles of reason and treat theory so presumptuously as in the question of what is needed for a good political constitution.”<sup>53</sup> Kant was, however, very clear that whatever cannot be autonomously imposed by the people on itself cannot, in similar fashion, become the purview of the legislator.<sup>54</sup> The timidity in Kant to question a constitutional order against its attendant failure to reach the height of ideality aspired to in actions of the state stems, perhaps, from a fear to give uninhibited license to social chaos in the name of political morality; however, while his steadfast commitment to our ethical constitution of society against its private imposition demands obedience to the “generally valid laws within the mechanism of the constitution” we must also, perhaps in greater measure, provide for a “*spirit of freedom*, for in all matters concerning universal human duties, each individual requires to be convinced by reason that the coercion which prevails is lawful, otherwise [we] would be in contradiction to [ourselves]. Obedience without the spirit of freedom is the effective cause of all *secret societies*.”<sup>55</sup> Kant continues this vein of thought to boldly suggest that if the constrained expectations of citizens do not command immediate

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<sup>52</sup> Immanuel Kant, “What is Enlightenment?,” in *Kant: Political Writings*, H.S. Reiss, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 59 (emphasis in original).

<sup>53</sup> Immanuel Kant, “On the Common Saying: ‘This may be True in Theory, but it does not Apply in Practice’,” in *Kant: Political Writings*, H.S. Reiss, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 86.

<sup>54</sup> Kant, “On the Common Saying,” 85.

<sup>55</sup> Kant, “On the Common Saying,” 85 (emphasis in original).

respect through reason, then no influence may justly restrain freedom in the name of society.<sup>56</sup>

Surely, there is no universalizable space for indiscriminate violence in such an aspired kingdom. And, while we might feel that the limitation against lying is itself an infringement of our freedom in terms of autonomy what is missing in such a declaration is that there still exists an infinite pool of possible truths awaiting animation that are capable of ethically reconciling our difficult situations. Much of our life is spent under the rote machinery of one-dimensional thinking that mires such creativity in a stagnation of carnal and psychic spectacles distracting us from the very fitness of the creative capability enshrined in our faculties. Thus, for Kant, the universal character of the categorical imperative is itself capable of taking on an infinite fecundity, but its application is no defense of relativism; instead, such an instance speaks to a moment of genuinely feeling the weight of the moral law as we are changed by the experience of seeing humanity as the truest image of beauty and are left unable to do no other but the work of justice.

If we take the categorical imperative seriously and vow to engage in the harmonization of wills that might bring about the kingdom of ends, then surely one must stand with a radical openness to dialogue, knowing that we may indeed be convinced by any other, including ourselves, to refit our sociality despite our conservative tendencies to remain faithful to traditional habits. Kant, himself, once remarked:

You know that I do not approach reasonable objections with the intention merely of refuting them, but that in thinking them over I always weave them into my judgments, and afford them the opportunity of overturning all of my most cherished beliefs. I entertain the hope that by thus

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<sup>56</sup> Kant, "On the Common Saying," 86-87.

viewing my judgments impartially from the standpoint of others some third view that will improve my previous insight may be obtained.<sup>57</sup>

The foil, however, to this well executed defense of the integral connection of our personhood to morality, and therefore freedom, lies in the moment where we might realize that “...there are in humanity predispositions to greater perfection, which belong to the end of nature with respect to humanity in our subject; to neglect these might admittedly be consistent with the *preservation* of humanity as an end in itself but not with the *furtherance* of this end.” Accessing the infinite configurations of our freedom is a difficult challenge as we try to ethically negotiate our way through situations that pose serious threat to the larger preservation of humanity. However, mistakes are often made in the failure of achieving our capacity to legislate and execute maxims bringing us closer to the ideality of the kingdom of ends as a result of thoughtless habituations that do not seriously take up the challenge of bringing about the sort of world that could shelter our humanity. For, surely, our ability to legislate maxims in congruence with the moral law is not itself guaranteed and it is possible for human beings to pervert such maxims. The moral character of our relation to such ideality is a necessary third step in understanding the philosophical preservation for freedom in our personhood.

### ***Against Perversions of the Heart***

Finally, Kant suggests that the activity of people willfully legislating and executing their being in the world in accord with maxims is itself the exercise of our

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<sup>57</sup> Immanuel Kant, cited in Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989) 44 [seventh session], referring to Letter to Marcus Herz, June 7, 1771, in Kant, *Selected Pre-Critical Writings*, trans G. B. Kerferd and D. E. Welford (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1968), 108.

moral personality and the site at which human beings remain tethered between good and evil. To quote Kant, at length:

The depravity of human nature is therefore not to be named *malice*, if we take this word in the strict sense, namely as a disposition (a subjective *principle* of maxims) to incorporate evil qua evil for incentive into one's maxim (since this is *diabolical*), but should rather be named *perversity* of the heart, and this heart is then called evil because of what results. An evil heart can coexist with a will which in the abstract is good. Its origin is the frailty of human nature, in not being strong enough to comply with its adoptive principles, coupled with its dishonesty in not screening incentives (even those of well intentioned actions) in accordance with the moral guide, and hence at the end, if it comes to this, in seeing only to the conformity of these incentives to the law, not to whether they have been derived from the latter itself, i.e. the sole incentive.<sup>58</sup>

Although one could suggest as a matter of pessimistic criticism that the advancing ruination throughout the world might indicate that “world lieth in evil,” such commentary goes against the epistemological groundwork consistent throughout the work of Kant who suggests in his text *Religion within the Bounds of Mere Reason*, citing a prefatory quotation from Seneca found in *Émile* by Jean Jacques Rousseau, “we are sick with curable diseases, and if we wish to be cured, nature comes to our aid, *for we are born to health*.”<sup>59</sup> Indeed, for Kant our predispositions are toward the good even if our possible freedom means that we can forever yield to the propensity to evil. Thus, evil, for Kant, is not an ontological condition of personhood or a legitimate declaration of the state of the world but instead a willed failure of a human being in the lackadaisical refusal to engage in the very activity of justice that gives symbolic representation to our freedom as persons.

In short summary, we have discussed how we are able to think the world, how we are able to act in the world, and now are confronted to discuss how we might be able to render ourselves in the world with true figuration respecting the integral connection between our subjectivity and the moral work of freedom. The attendant problem at this

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<sup>58</sup> Kant, *Religion within the Bounds of Mere Reason*, 60.

<sup>59</sup> Kant, *Religion within the Bounds of Mere Reason*, 46.



juncture is to discuss exactly how we might be expected to understand making the judgment to act in consonance with the moral law as a matter of our personhood. The bridge between the ends of pure reason and practical reason is itself built with the faculty of judgment and its sensuous play in the imagination. Judgment, for Kant, is a concept integral to his later philosophical work in the third critique and some of his more explicitly politically oriented essays. For Kant, judgment “in general is the faculty for thinking of the particular as contained within the universal.”<sup>60</sup>

However, to be clear we are not talking about the sensible intuition of the natural world contained within pure reason but the sensible intuition of our personhood, which has a place in the work of freedom as articulated by practical reason. Kant develops a very clear chasm separating the realms of nature and freedom, suggesting without deviance that “[t]he concept of freedom determines nothing in regard to the theoretical cognition of nature; the concept of nature likewise determines nothing in regard to the practical laws of freedom: and it is to this extent not possible to throw a bridge from one domain to the other.”<sup>61</sup> The purpose in this declaration is to drive a wedge fracturing thought that would suggest we could naturally determine freedom or freely determine nature. Moreover, Kant is suggesting that the teleological ends of such domains can only be transcendently deduced within their own system of reason. There is, however, an important appendage to this declaration, as Kant ubiquitously remarks that the “incalculable gulf” between the domains of nature and freedom—one of the sensible and one of the supersensible—may only be traversed by the former having real material presence in the later as the ideality contained within the domain of freedom is brought to

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<sup>60</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, Paul Guyer, ed., Allen Wood, trans. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 66 [5:179].

<sup>61</sup> Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 81 [5: 196].

bear its ends as real laws such that nature is conceived of in a way respecting that larger ideality.<sup>62</sup> This is not, as it were, a conflation of morality and science. Instead, it suggests the very ordering of our natural world as we understand it within the faculties of our pure reason must be able to withstand the ethical rigor of what is demanded by us through practical reason.

If science were to suggest that there is a natural worth in the quality of human beings according to particular characteristics such as sexual orientation, Kant would respond by suggesting that such a declaration is unknowable. No technological apparatus can determine the quality of our enacted personality as scientifically present, nor should science dictate the moral standard for our personhood, which must always be treated in absolute equality. However, it is possible for our the ideality of our practical reason to suggest what is natural about the world in terms of the ends we should pursue in communion with each other.

Truly, the work of judgment is both tireless and complicated. However, because we are not fated to the character of a single bad action but instead eternally open to the possibility of morality, we might indeed bring into the fold of ourselves as the subject of freedom. It is through carefully crafted actions toward freedom and creative reflections of moral worth that allow us to articulate the configuration of a just world aspired to in the kingdom of ends. What exactly is entailed in such judgment must be gleaned elsewhere in the work of thinkers like John Rawls or Amartya Sen. While Rawls develops a theory of justice outside of the transcendental imagination articulated in this chapter, his activation of the moral law as a hypothetical experiment in the imagination at least gives us a powerful means to begin to imagine the work of freedom as it should be

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<sup>62</sup> Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 63 [5:176].

made real in the laws of society. Also, Sen has stood committed to a broad praxis of deontology in his suggestion for a social, economic, cultural, and political development respecting the pluralistic arrays of our human capability, never reducing his work to a dangerous particularization. Such thinkers both represent the practical reach of activating this conception of judgment. However, what remains for this chapter is the need to philosophically reveal the ways in which judgment works to orient our thinking, as sutured through the ability to postulate maxims toward an ideal end, away from perversions of the heart by subliminally helping us to command a totalizing vision of what is at stake in the ultimate image of beauty.

The more imaginative faculties of judgment which help to cohere our lived experience in the world according to both our sensible intuition and our schematized perceptions provides a necessary psychic space to seriously consider what has been articulated thus far in its entirety as beautiful. Kant establishes this possibility by considering:

Now there belongs to a representation by which an object is given, in order for there to be cognition of it in general, **imagination** for the composition of the manifold intuition and **understanding** for the unity of the concept that unifies the representations. This state of a **free play** of the faculties of cognition with a representation through which an object is given must be able to be universally communicated, because cognition, as a determination of the object with which given representations (in whatever subject it may be) should agree, is the only kind of representation that is valid for everyone.<sup>63</sup>

Writing in the third critique, Kant is suggesting that the architectonic whole of his work finds its final formulation in the moment when we can animate our imagination to take notice of a beauty that itself can defy all difficulties of communicating with other people across experience. The sensuous play of our faculties is particularly important for

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<sup>63</sup> Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 102-103 [5:217].

understanding a deeper, more rigorous sense of our imagination and ultimate power of judgment.

Being able to see something as beautiful, for Kant, means seeing something as that which “pleases universally without a concept.”<sup>64</sup> Despite the peculiar quality of this definition, it resonates with tremendous importance. Taste is a matter of what we particularly view as pleasing to ourselves as an individual and can itself be loaded with measures of interest that would violate the dicta of the moral law in its command that we learn to act universally without collapsing into action determined by personal gain. Instead, being able to see an object as beautiful does something to melt away our socially determined sense of the world by seeing a beauty that itself can have no boundaries and when spotted in an original interest ripples throughout the rest of our sense of the world into its highest figuration in the ideal of humanity. Within the framework of stereotypical assumptions of beauty we are all well aware of the ways in which individual taste, either socially constructed or personally crafted, serves to belittle a grand ideal like beauty into the passing *recherché* of fashion. The effect of this poor generalization comes to full force in the litany of self-image problems plaguing people who do not feel as if they could ever live up to imagined conceptions of an impossible perfection.

Yet, to arrive at seeing a liberating beauty and its relation to our moral freedom requires us to traverse a difficult path of sublimity, which is “that which is absolutely great.”<sup>65</sup> Engaging something “absolutely great,” for Kant, is important because “[t]he feeling of the sublime brings with it as its characteristic mark a movement of the mind

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<sup>64</sup> Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 104 [5:219].

<sup>65</sup> Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 128 [5:248].

connected with the judging.”<sup>66</sup> Seeing the sublime is a simple, yet grand phenomenological enactment. It is the ability to postulate an object of the world and understand it as conceptually limitless. Nature is an obvious sublime instance as Kant writes in the third critique. One need simply climb to the top of a mountain and take in the panoramic vista where light from the most distant, unreachable horizon collects to form an image of something infinite. Stargazing is itself another moment where one can take in some sort of amazement at the limitless bounds of space stretched out beyond great distances. Whether or not these things are actually infinite is not necessary to the experience of sublimity. Certainly when taking in the view atop a mountain the horizon we see is reachable as a physical location, but it figures as a conceptual metaphor for the unreachable.

It is not a magnitude that is monstrous, which for Kant meant that something is so big that it “annihilates the end which its concept constitutes,”<sup>67</sup> but instead is “**a faculty of the mind that surpasses every measure of the senses.**”<sup>68</sup> Thus, the sublime, for Kant, involves an experiential relation to limitlessness, which carries a purposiveness in its form such that “the mind is incited to abandon sensibility and to occupy itself with ideas that contain a higher purposiveness.”<sup>69</sup> While it is easy to feel miniaturized when standing in contemplation before such overwhelming sublimity, there remains a possible escape from any sense of nihilistic grandeur in that we are indeed a part of this higher purposiveness. While this experience begins with a sensation, it is in many ways a unification of the whole of transcendental philosophy pointing toward the integral

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<sup>66</sup> Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 128 [5:127].

<sup>67</sup> Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 136 [5:253].

<sup>68</sup> Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 134 [5:250] (emphasis in original).

<sup>69</sup> Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 129 [5:246].

connection between subjectivity and moral freedom. There is a way in which such a feeling is something like an emotional spark giving universal character to our intelligible grandeur:

Thus that subjective unity of the relation can make itself know only through sensation. The animation of both faculties (the imagination and the understanding) to an activity that is indeterminate but yet, through the stimulus of a given representation, in unison, namely that which belongs to a cognition in general, is the sensation whose universal communicability is postulated by the judgment of taste.<sup>70</sup>

For Kant, such a sublime experience animates our faculties of understanding and imagination so that we might not only be able to creatively access the experience of seeing a beautiful object but also find the equally creative means to communicate the universal quality of such beauty, conceptually speaking:

That being able to communicate one's state of mind, even if only with regard to the faculties of cognition, carries a pleasure with it, could easily be established (empirically and psychologically) from the natural tendency of human beings to sociability. But that is not enough for our purposes. When we call something beautiful, the pleasure that we feel is expected of everyone else in the judgment of taste as necessary, just as if it were to be regarded as a property of the object that is determined in accordance with concepts; but beauty is nothing by itself, without relation to the feeling of the subject.<sup>71</sup>

Perhaps, this may sounds like a communicative fantasy, but when read along with the larger tenor of thinking shaping the three critiques one finds greater solace in thinking the possibility of achieving the impossible. For, what about our present world would make one think that it would be a simple task to articulate a felt passion of the beautiful as we see this thing called humanity—so broad to erase the distinctions of enemy and friend and question the sophistry in rhetoric about an imaginary, and indeed impossible in the language of Kant, axis of evil—and not find ourselves labeled an ignorant idealist, or worse yet a terrorist? However, for Kant, being able to see the beautiful is the means made ends of figuring a feeling for the moral law because it stands to protect that which

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<sup>70</sup> Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 104 [5:219].

<sup>71</sup> Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 103 [5:218].

is most precious in the defense and furtherance of the very freedom of our humanity integrally tied to both ourselves and all others.

The concepts of good and evil are not themselves ontological classifications of what it means to be human, but instead conditions of our moral personality in the simultaneous enactment of a sort of justice that is necessarily as a synthetically projected teleology of personhood fraught with a complicated sort of predisposition integral to a finite, phenomenal creature. Kant suggests:

Hence the ground of evil cannot lie in any object determining the power of choice through inclination, not in any natural impulses, but only in a rule that the power of choice itself produces for the exercise of its freedom, i.e. a maxim... and that he holds this ground qua human, universally—in such a way, therefore, that by his maxims he expresses at the same time the character of his species.<sup>72</sup>

This practical world is one in which we are able to employ the highest ideality of our humanity in the formulation of the kingdom of ends. However, we are able to succumb to perversions of the heart where we recess to a moral holiday as we fail to legislate and execute a maxim toward this more noble grandeur. Since, for Kant, evil is simply a human propensity we are never fatalistically determined by our misdeeds but instead continually challenged to enact better ones in our ongoing becoming in this world. Kant, aware of the obvious nightmare that may ensure when we fail to recognize this larger splendor of our personhood, leaves us a final measure of thought to disrupt such perversions of the heart as we stand able to feel the beauty of the moral law in whatever sublime passageways one travels in life. While one could stand before such magnitude and feel awash in an abyss of nothingness it is also possible to take notice of such ultimate beauty, realizing our shared place in the magnanimity of the world in the profound image of our humanity.

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<sup>72</sup> Kant, *Religion within the Bounds of Mere Reason*, 46-47.

## *Conclusion*

Threading together the challenging architectonic of Kant we have arrived at the double meaning of the subject of freedom. On the one hand, freedom in its grandest splendor is the topic of this investigation, yet, on the other hand, our very experience as subjects in the world is itself the living embodiment of freedom should we choose to stave away perversions of the heart and work to legislate and execute maxims in aspiration toward the kingdom of ends. Otherwise, the chasm separating ourselves from the teleological projection of our self may widen to a maddening abyss and find itself filled with the innumerable, boundless forms of violence of our advanced industrial world threatening, but never eclipsing, the possibility of a just future world. Surely, as our world stands mired in great peril the greatest dream of freedom we must remember boldly pronounces that we are the ones who bring value and meaning to our experiences and have the capacity to transform the world accordingly. To do otherwise, to be transformed instead by the world, reminds us that great dreams of freedom carry with them threats, perhaps, of equally great nightmares of despair.

What happens when the larger attendances of capital make the gulf before our teleological projection of personhood seem immeasurable such that the authenticity of our being slows to a mere flicker on some future horizon of being? What happens when the very words we rely on in our schematic presentation of the world captured through our sensible intuitions start to ossify, collapse, or simply find themselves erased from the plurality of our symbolic forms? What happens when perpetual wars on terror smack of the sort of fascistic authoritarianism—murderous actions without moral, reflective



thinking—that begin to allow the meaning of peace to fall from a state of grace into the famous macabre image of the graveyard of humanity? What happens when our perversions of the heart swell in number and frequency leaving us to believe that at such a time in history humanity has itself become the most horrible weapon of mass destruction? What, then, is left of the experience of seeing the beautiful and all of its saving powers?

Despite such very real despair, we still have many a flickers of hope, no matter how small, casting light toward the inextinguishable possibility of a future just world. Archbishop Desmond Tutu, in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech cited in the prefatory quotation to this chapter, relates to us the integral connection between our freedom as persons and our moral relations in union with other people in this world. The message might appear deceptively simple, but the theoretical insights of Kant constellated in this chapter are meant to similarly draw out the fundamental movement of ourselves as subjects in our perpetual motion of becoming. Similarly, the reflections introducing this essay on the Constitutional Court of South Africa do well to remind us of our transformative powers when our creative and material faculties are realigned with nobler ends. It has become hyperbole for white, liberal politics to chastise the so-called “Third World” in its attendant failures to enact our ubiquitous sense of socioeconomic progress. Yet, it must be said that South Africa is the one of the few countries that has responded to the horrible racism of apartheid and taken seriously its own duty to confront lingering colonialists inheritances. Certainly, many problems still plague South Africa and equality, freedom, and dignity still remain a necessary teleological challenge. However, if ever there were a glimmer of a hopeful world appearing as a beacon across that chasm

before our teleological projection of subjectivity it may indeed be the hopeful light of the aspired community. Judge Ackermann, reflecting on the meaning of the dignity jurisprudence that his time on the Constitutional Court of South Africa helped to develop, provides deeper reflection on what exactly it means to constitute society, especially in aspiration to ideal ends, worthy of closing this chapter:

But the ultimate fate of the Constitution, a bridge with a very long span, will not be decided by the jurisprudence of its courts alone, however devoted and inspired that may prove to be. A transforming Constitution such as ours will only succeed if everyone, in government as well as in civil society at all levels, embraces and lives out its vales and its demands. It will only succeed if restititional equality becomes a reality and basic material needs are met, because it borders on the obscene to preach human dignity to the homeless and the starving. This must, however, be achieved in a manner consonant with the human dignity of all. We are, after 10 years, only at the end of the beginning.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Laurie Ackermann, "The Legal Nature of the South African Constitutional Revolution," *New Zealand Law Review* 4 (2004), 678-679.

### **Chapter Three:**

#### **Martin Heidegger**

### **Being without Motion:**

#### **Dwelling in the Speechlessness of Ensnarement**

Now the whole world had one language and a common speech. As men moved eastward, they found a plain in Shinar and settled there. They said to each other, “Come, let’s make bricks and bake them thoroughly.” They used brick instead of stone, and tar for mortar. Then they said, “Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth.” But the Lord came down to see the city and the tower that the men were building. The Lord said, “If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other.” So the Lord scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city. That is why it was called Babel—because there the Lord confused the language of the whole world. From there the Lord scattered them over the face of the whole earth.

*Genesis 11:1-9*<sup>74</sup>

#### ***Abstract***

Immanuel Kant suggests that we can always legislate and execute maxims of our own making in the aspiration of our moral personality. Ultimately, we are aided by the ability to aesthetically experience the beauty of nature and determine our most valued place in this world as a part of the register of humanity. Heidegger, in contradistinction, poses critical warnings suggesting that the pervasive language of scientific rationality and its perversion of nature cements the movement of our becoming in the world with other beings to a lethal standstill. While many thinkers suggest that Heidegger is a deep-seeded pessimist, his work as animated in this chapter attempts to give us a reflective pause to consider the sort of nightmare of despair threatening the dream of freedom realized in Kant. Specifically, this chapter reviews the way our relation to the forces of

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<sup>74</sup> *Old Testament* (New International Version), <http://www.biblegateway.com/>

technological rationality have perverted our being in this world with other beings. This scenario is one in which the means of technology is not seen for its reveling powers and is instead reified as an end making creature. Although we might be able to hold back the spellbinding influence of technological rationality, we are further brought closer to despair by the ways in which the assumptions of modern metaphysics emaciate the register of humanity by fating us to an unknowable ontology. Finally, we stand challenged to be able to think the possibility of a coherent image of ourselves in time only if we can animate a saving power in our combined activity of building, dwelling, and thinking the greatness of Being.

### ***Introduction***

Martin Heidegger is a rather controversial theorist, having leveled the field of philosophical discourse with critical insights foreshadowing the worst instances of society turned its own harbinger of destruction. Like the Tower of Babel, an entire way of living our life in aspiration to certain ends can itself unfold from our very technological practices. It began when the shelter provided by mud was not good enough and humanity decided to bake bricks and cement them with tar for the construction of homes. Marveled by the power represented by being able to wield a mastery over nature, one may subsequently wonder what realm of natural grace can be conquered next and made of use to the world of man. The parable of Babel can be interpreted to present just such a conundrum. The evolution of a line of thinking taken to its fullest execution suggests that within the concept of technology, as it is understood by human beings, is one where we begin with simple manipulations of the natural world and may indeed find

ourselves soon building mechanical monstrosities meant to conquer the heavens for all of their power.

Such concerns should carry deep salience for us in the world today. As we have become accustomed to harnessing power from nature—ranging from the level of invisible particles to the burning of fossil fuels—what sorts of measures will we implement next and what sort of catastrophe might follow when such vain towers of achievement crumble upon their baseless foundations? What would happen when theoretical scientists and entrepreneurial capitalists choose to harness the gravitational energies caught up in eddies giving orbit to our planet and the moon? What would happen when the mitochondria in our very cells are tapped as microscopic power plants? What would happen when particle physics turns to harness the energy of neutrons and a mistaken explosion leaves organic matter throughout the world ionized? While these examples may seem too distant, we are already facing the brink of environmental devastation as a result of a long century of production that takes little interest in its impact on the world.

For example, manufacturing microchips results in serious impacts on the environment. As the staple product of an information economy, however, media sources have largely ignored this problem in spite of sporadic discourse surfacing in trade and academic journals. Studies reported in a journal of the American Chemical Association suggest that microchips actually require more grams of energy in the form of fossil fuels and chemicals than the actual weight of the finished product by a factor of 160.<sup>75</sup> The resources needed to make a two-gram, 32-megabyte silicon chip requires 1,600 grams of

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<sup>75</sup> Eric Williams, Robert Ayres, and Miriam Heller, “The 1.7 Kilogram Microchip: Energy and Material Use in the Production of Semiconductor Devices,” *The Journal of Environmental Science and Technology* 36, no. 24 (December 2002): 5504-5510.

fossil fuels, 32,000 grams of distilled water, 700 grams of miscellaneous elemental gases, and involves over 10,000 chemical compounds with nearly unreadable, polysyllabic names—both inert and toxic.<sup>76</sup> Admittedly, the microchip is an essential component in our increasingly connected digital society. These clever devices process the many digital forms of our social interactions across computers, phones, and other machines used daily by billions of people. But there are environmental costs associated with this technological benefit, as the “[e]missions of these chemicals have potential impacts on air, water and soil systems and potentially pose an occupational risk for line workers.”<sup>77</sup>

Ultimately, these facts and figures are quickly drowned out of public discourse. Stories about places like Endicott, New York, the birthplace of computer giant IBM, are known only by the families effected by the chemical tragedy plaguing local residents. After half a dozen spills and leaks involving thousands of gallons of poisonous chemicals, the town was unknowingly transformed into a toxic dump. Environmental officials have designated the town as a class two pollution site and consider the area a serious threat to the environment and the health of people living in the town. The size of chemical mishap is large—“320 acres encompassing the downtown and stretching across the village, all of which were polluted by industrial toxic substances. The chemicals contaminated soil and leached into groundwater. And they continue to produce vapors that waft into hundreds of basements.”<sup>78</sup>

This sort of careful questioning of technology and its broader impact on society begets a type of critical reflection on the modern world, one that seeks to engage in a

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<sup>76</sup> Williams, Ayres, and Heller, “The 1.7 Kilogram Microchip,” 5504-5510.

<sup>77</sup> Williams, Ayres, and Heller, “The 1.7 Kilogram Microchip,” 5504-5510.

<sup>78</sup> Samme Chittum, “In an I.B.M. Village, Fears of Air and Water Pollution,” *New York Times*, (15 March 2004): Section B, Page 1, Column 2.

more comprehensive discussion of global ends and means. Jerry Mander considers the introduction of the automobile at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to suggest that if people had known about the consequences of this revolutionary invention, then perhaps there would have been meaningful local and national discussion about both alternatives to automobiles and sensibly limiting their proliferation in society.<sup>79</sup> Rationalizing this claim, Mander reminds us that people were only sold on the idea of the automobile because it promised to revolutionize “personal freedom and democracy” by providing “private transportation that was fast, clean (no mud or horse manure), and independent.”<sup>80</sup> Of course, what was missing was consideration of a future defined by urban sprawl, tens of thousands of deaths from car accidents each year, skylines covered by dense smog, a new breed of carcinogens, increased global warming, and the deep sense of alienation and family problems stemming from the introduction of the assembly line and mechanization of the workplace.<sup>81</sup>

What follows delves into the way Heidegger saw the act of questioning technology as a saving way of resurrecting our being in a time of deep peril. First, we are reminded that willfully allowing technology to unfold toward its implied ends without limitation sabotages humans as the end making creatures that govern their own being in the world with other beings. Ultimately, our own by becoming onto Being finds itself enframed in a labyrinthine discourse of technological rationality that should have no place in the ordering of our social systems. Second, while we may indeed find saving ways out of the strangling hold of such technological rationality we must also remember

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<sup>79</sup> Jerry Mander, “Technologies of Globalization,” In *The Case Against the Global Economy & for a Turn Towards Localization*, eds. Edward Goldsmith and Jerry Mander (London: Earthscan Publications, 2001), 49.

<sup>80</sup> Mander, “Technologies of Globalization,” 49.

<sup>81</sup> Mander, “Technologies of Globalization,” 49.

that conventional notions of metaphysics can also become ensnared as a mere matter of *techne*. For, metaphysics ascribing positive attributes of the person to our sense of something as grand as humanity can only succeed in further distancing ourselves from creating a just future world. Third, the threat of despair presents itself in full force when we fail to realize an ethical relation to the four-fold in our building, dwelling, and thinking of the place of Being in the chain of beings.

### *Savings Ways and our Nearness to Peril*

“All ways of thinking,” Heidegger tells us, “lead through language in a manner that is extraordinary.”<sup>82</sup> However, the pervasive grasp of life ensnared by technological constraints tends to cement that thinking, stalling it from continuing its unfolding.

Heidegger does not mean to suggest we are talking about the appearance of technology as manifested materially in our world. But, we are talking about what the essence of such a concept means, as it becomes an eclipsing limitation on the free unfolding of our Being.

Heidegger boldly believed that our life in the modern world is one where we are “unfree, and chained to technology... delivered over to it in the worst possible ways.”<sup>83</sup>

Moreover, we regard technology with a dangerous sort of neutrality, relieving it of any blame for the perils of the world, and worse yet give it homage as we stand blind before its pervading essence in all ways of our life.<sup>84</sup> The despair that emerges is one that suggests we are no longer the makers of value in the world, which is instead delivered to us through technological procedure.

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<sup>82</sup> Martin Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology,” in *Martin Heidegger: Basic Writings*, David Krell, ed. (New York: Harper Collins, 1993), 311.

<sup>83</sup> Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology,” 311.

<sup>84</sup> Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology,” 312.



Heidegger, using the example of a silver chalice, carefully traces the traditional views on technology captured in the four famous causes presented in the work of Aristotle.<sup>85</sup> The *causa materialis* of such an object is the matter making up its composition (the silver). The *causa formalis* is the appearance of such an object (the shape of a chalice). The *causa finalis* represents the symbolic value of the object in its relation to social tradition (the rite of a sacrificial vessel). The *causa efficiens* discloses the subject responsible for making the object (the silversmith). The utility of such differentiation is suspect, and tends to reveal only the particular details of technology in simple distinctions rather than unearthing its more systemic impact on our being in the world. Merely attributing various causes to the formation of an object limits our ability to see the ways in which actual objects in the world take on a life of their own:

But suppose that causality, for its part, is veiled in the darkness with respect to what it is? Certainly for centuries we have acted as though the doctrine of the four causes had fallen from heaven as a truth as clear as daylight. But it might be that the time has come to ask: Why are there only four causes? In relation to the aforementioned four, what does 'cause' really mean? From whence does it come that the causal character of the four causes is so unifiedly determined that they belong together?

So long as we do not allow ourselves to go into these questions, causality, and with it instrumentality, and with this the accepted definition of technology, remain obscure and groundless.

Circumscribing gives bounds to the thing. With the bounds the thing does not stop; rather, from within them it begins to be what after production it will be. That which gives bounds, that which completes, in this sense is called in Greek, *telos*, which is all too often translated as 'aim' and 'purpose,' and so misinterpreted. The *telos* is responsible for what as matter and what as aspect are together co-responsible for the sacrificial vessel.<sup>86</sup>

This is not to suggest a vulgar determinism at play whereby objects and their signification dictate our orientation in life. Rather, Heidegger is challenging us to question the ways in which the simple means of technology has been unduly transformed into an end. Truly, when we are displaced as end-making creatures and willfully allow objects to become the

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<sup>85</sup> Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," 313-314.

<sup>86</sup> Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," 314.

repository for such genitive power, the world becomes bankrupt of human valuation. And so, the possibility for changing the world, as it were, becomes veiled as a foreign concept.

We take these causes as a matter of fact and in so doing adopt the assumption that we stand indebted to something else for the type of world that results from technological artifacts. Some might suggest that *causa efficiens* is the indication that human beings are indeed makers of the objects of this world. But, we must remember that the *causa efficiens* is not a person in the sense of a subject, but rather a type of manufacturer. In the example of the silver chalice and its technological causes, the *causa efficiens* is a silver smith and not a human being seen for the grandeur of their relation to the world as a person. Truly, the etymological derivation of the word “cause” carries a troubled meaning for Heidegger. In Latin the term (*causa*) suggests something is fallen into existence, while the Greek equivalent (*aition*) suggests that a result is indebted to something else.<sup>87</sup> In both instances we fail to realize the true essence of technology as a something that “brings forward into appearance” (*legeien*).<sup>88</sup> Heidegger suggests that only by realizing this truth can one ascertain that “the possibility of all productive manufacturing lies in revealing.”<sup>89</sup>

Keynoting that in ancient times there was a link between the terms *episteme* and *techne* we are led by Heidegger to understand that “technology is therefore no mere means” and the possibility exists whereby “the essence of technology will open itself up to us. It is the realm of revealing, i.e. of truth.”<sup>90</sup> As such, however, the modern

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<sup>87</sup> Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology,” 314.

<sup>88</sup> Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology,” 314-315.

<sup>89</sup> Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology,” 318.

<sup>90</sup> Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology,” 318.

conception of technology “does not unfold into a bringing-forth in the sense of *poesis*. The revealing that rules in modern technology is a challenging, which puts to nature the unreasonable demand that it supply energy which can be extracted and stored as such.”<sup>91</sup> A rather dire predicament unfolds whereby humanity becomes ensnared in a language of technological rationality that cannot see beyond the limitation of its symbolic order. In a world where we have given up our end-making abilities to technology itself we must think according to the dictates of empirical evidence and utility maximization. While Kant suggested, in our meditations on nature, it is possible for an aesthetic experience to emerge comporting us toward the realization of our shared humanity and the truth of our freedom wedded to moral personality, Heidegger paints the picture of a nightmarish world where nature is stripped of divine purpose and “the instrumental conception of technology conditions every attempt to bring man into the right relation to technology.”<sup>92</sup>

Ultimately, Heidegger suggests that by questioning technology in this way we have revealed the ways in which it has hijacked our ability to act as beings in the chain of Being, but also implies we share co-responsibility for such revelation. For, technology holds the power to “[reveal] whatever does not bring itself forth and does not yet lie here before us.”<sup>93</sup> While manifestations of modern technology may have ensnared our world into a framing caught up in the chains of standing reserve, we should also remember “The four ways of being responsible bring something into appearance. They let it come forth into presencing [*Anwesen*]. They set it free to that place and so start it on its way, namely, into its complete arrival. The principal characteristic of being responsible is this

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<sup>91</sup> Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology,” 320.

<sup>92</sup> Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology,” 312.

<sup>93</sup> Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology,” 319.

starting something on its way into arrival.”<sup>94</sup> The concept of a standing reserve carries a peculiar meaning. It suggests both our being enframed by the dicta of the language of scientific rationality, but also that we have gained a wayward perspective which sees the whole of the universe as standing in reserve for our past, present, or future utility.

The four causes, ultimately, are merely responsible for bringing an object into appearance, as it lies ready before us. If those causes are used in simple accord with standing reserve, then we have allowed the world to be fashioned by mere means instead of resonating with the aspiration of our own ends. Thus, technology in Heidegger offers up two types of power: reveling and enframing. It is because of the ways we become foreclosed from the former—which indeed may yield a saving way in a time of deep peril—that we find deep despair in the abundant presence of the former type of power situated in every crevice of our lived, everyday relations. “Only the true brings us into a free relationship with that which concerns us from its essence.”<sup>95</sup> However, the deeper meaning of such trueness deserves further exploration as we attempt to understand not the essence of technology but the essential character of those who would wield such technology.

### *Toward the Height of Humanitas*

In a famous essay, *Letter on Humanism*, Heidegger suggests, “Homelessness is the symptom of the oblivion of Being.”<sup>96</sup> At stake for Heidegger throughout the breadth of his writing is an attempt to reveal that the way we are oriented away from our freedom

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<sup>94</sup> Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology,” 316.

<sup>95</sup> Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology,” 313.

<sup>96</sup> Martin Heidegger, “Letter on Humanism,” in *Martin Heidegger: Basic Writings*, David Krell, ed. (New York: Harper Collins, 1993), 242.

because of the way in which the language of scientific rationality—monolithically present in all of our discourses—eclipses our ability to access a more authentic way of organizing life. Heidegger engages Jean Paul Sartre on a rather enigmatic aphorism meant to figuratively define the truth of Being. Sartre argues that the truth of *existence* is our *essence*, while Heidegger reverses the claim and suggests that the truth of our *essence* is *existence*. Where Sartre privileges being as an individual existential experience of life, one Adorno will later call the jargon of authenticity, Heidegger makes explicit that the essence of our being is very much the lived, everyday experiences of the world. The problem, for Heidegger, is that we stand ensnared within a world that eclipses our possible relations of unconcealment toward Being that are available to us so that we might find a way for our being in the world that has not been over-determined by existing metaphysical orientations.

Thinking the truth of our Being with other beings is the most meaningful task philosophy can perform. Heidegger was fascinated with earlier Greek thinkers such as Heraclites because his philosophy was such that one sought to ask questions about the nature of Being, rather than try to project outward answers that serve to freeze the teleology of our becoming. Heidegger is always careful to remind us that there is a temporal trajectory for our being which must always resist definitional terms fating its character to an unknowable ontology. While Being is thrown into its existence in the past, life in the present stands out as a projection toward our possible orientation in the future. This ecstatic character of Being is one that sheds much needed light on any metaphysical orientation that would stifle our future existence, a future existence that carries with it the possibility of becoming. As Heidegger suggests:

Metaphysics closes itself to the simple essential fact that man essentially occurs only in his essence, where he is claimed by Being. Only from that claim 'has' he found that wherein his essence dwells. Only from this dwelling 'has' he 'language' as the home that preserves the ecstatic for his essence. Such standing in the clearing of Being I call the ek-sistence of man. This way of Being is proper only to man. Ek-sistence so understood is not only the ground of the possibility of reason, *ratio*, but is also that in which the essence of man preserves the source that determines him.<sup>97</sup>

As a result, Heidegger attacks the tradition of humanism not because his own thinking wishes to stand against such deeper aspirations but “because it does not set the *humanitas* of man high enough.”<sup>98</sup> His hesitation to align his own thinking with the tradition of humanism is certainly understandable seeing how the practice of ascribing positive attributes to transcendental ideals like dignity pollutes the noumenal glory of such a concept with the dullness of human constructions rooted in advancing a particular view of self-interest.

The effect of imbuing particular attributes to transcendental concepts like humanity begins in the failure to think. As Heidegger suggests, “When thinking comes to an end by slipping out of its element it replaces this loss by procuring a validity for itself as *techne*, as an instrument of education and therefore as a classroom matter and later a cultural concern.”<sup>99</sup> Thus, we are returned to the first part of this essay and the realization that thinking too can become ensnared as standing reserve, giving us less prodigious means for articulating ourselves in the world according to more just relations. Allowing our way of thinking to be eaten up by baser notions of technological rationality emaciates our efforts to reveal the possibility of our being in the world. To quote Heidegger:

The widely and rapidly spreading devastation of language not only undermines aesthetic and moral responsibility in every use of language; it arises from a threat to the essence of humanity. A

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<sup>97</sup> Heidegger, “Letter on Humanism,” 227-228.

<sup>98</sup> Heidegger, “Letter on Humanism,” 234.

<sup>99</sup> Heidegger, “Letter on Humanism,” 221.

merely cultivated language is still no proof that we have as yet escaped the danger to our essence. These days, in fact, such usage might sooner testify that we have not yet seen and cannot see the danger because we have never yet placed ourselves in view of it.<sup>100</sup>

The only way to alleviate ourselves of this problem, and perhaps achieve something like a genuine understanding of the *height of humanitas*, means that we must begin again to live in the nameless.

While Heidegger might give us a rather obscure sounding vocabulary by which to talk about modern philosophy, the gesture toward disruptive discourse is indeed purposeful and deeply necessary. Remember, that much of what Heidegger is unveiling is how we have become ensnared within the totality of a larger system whose attendances have us enframed in a particular worldview that seems to stall the enactment of our unique genitive faculties. Heidegger, famous for the disastrous debate with Ernst Cassirer at Davos, is very much a follower of Kant. Much of what he tries to return us to is the realization that we are indeed phenomenal creatures, yet ones that have the unique ability to determine the content of the world through our imagination. This does not mean that we can simply engage in vapid declarations that everything before us in the world is truly an artifact of nothingness in any simple sense. Instead, Heidegger is suggesting, “if man is to find his way once again into the nearness of Being he must first learn to exist in the nameless. In the same way he must recognize the seductions of the public realm as well as the impotence of the private. Before he speaks he must first let himself be claimed again by Being.”<sup>101</sup> Animating this namelessness suggests that we must learn to question our orientation in the world and the way certain systems of thought have shackled our thinking abilities into certain totalizing ways that distance us from the

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<sup>100</sup> Heidegger, “Letter on Humanism,” 222.

<sup>101</sup> Heidegger, “Letter on Humanism,” 223.

truth of being able to temporally project the possibility of our being in future just world different from the one we inhabit so mindlessly in the present.

The problem, of course, has much to do with the dictates of modern metaphysics, and the dominance of scientific rationality as one of those metaphysics, which attempts to lay greater symbolic claim to reality than is possible. Again, to return to the example of the Tower of Babel, life in the modern world has fallen prey to a monolithic language of scientific rationality in pursuit of rather vulgar, defiling ends. Such a monolithic language has virulently spread into many of our lived relations toward Being. The problem that arises for Heidegger is that such thinking—and he would not call it thinking in the strictest sense—conflates the end making powers of human beings with technological means. Of course, the language of scientific rationality is but one of our many means for aesthetic representation. Like trying to fit the proverbial square peg into a round hole, this particular language has been stretched far beyond its field of metaphysical influence. However, Kant reminded us in the last chapter that science should be conceived of in such a way that its ends are themselves commensurate with the lawfulness of freedom.<sup>102</sup> Similarly, Heidegger remarks:

Every humanism is either grounded in a metaphysics or is itself made to be the ground on one. Every determination of the essence of man that already presupposes an interpretation of beings without asking about the truth of Being, whether knowingly or not, is metaphysical. The result is that what is peculiar to all metaphysics, specifically with respect to the way the essence of man is determined, is that it is 'humanistic.'<sup>103</sup>

Simply put, while science certainly has its place in the world of intellectual thought, in the calculation and representation of phenomenon, it does not however has the same standing and place in the ethical ordering of human life. When such scientific rationality

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<sup>102</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, Paul Guyer, ed., Allen Wood, trans. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 63 [5:176].

<sup>103</sup> Heidegger, "Letter on Humanism," 226.



begins to tread its influence in human affairs, dangerous manifestations begin to take place: people become reduced to mere things countable in study and turned into variables for prediction.

However, the unfortunate tendency of our world has been to spread the thinking of scientific rationality into realms beyond the measure of its philosophical influence, giving reified power to abstract entities that have no human corporeal counterpart. Such thinking tends, in its worst forms, to adulterate the sacred place of nature, which is too often bent for more maniacal purposes. This does not mean that metaphysics has no place in our world or that human beings are not symbolizing creatures. The problem with metaphysics, *per se*, is much more subtle and divisive. As Heidegger tells us:

Metaphysics does indeed represent beings in their Being, and so it thinks the Being of beings. But it does not think the difference of both. Metaphysics does not ask about the truth of Being itself. Nor does it therefore ask in what way the essence of man belongs to the truth of Being. Metaphysics has not only failed up to now to ask this question, the question is inaccessible to metaphysics as such. Being is still waiting for the time when it will become thought-provoking to man.<sup>104</sup>

The ability for metaphysics to adequately take note of the difference between the representation of beings in their Being and the thinking of the Being of beings is not easily accomplished. On the one hand, metaphysics is useful in helping us represent the plurality of manifestations that might describe some sense of beings in their Being, yet, on the other hand, metaphysics cannot at the same time disclose a way to think the truth of the Being of beings.

If we were to represent beings in their Being through metaphysical discourse, then we would have *a priori* symbolically limited thinking the Being of beings into a representational prison. If we were to metaphysically think the Being of beings, then we

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<sup>104</sup> Heidegger, "Letter on Humanism," 226-227.

would not be able to limit the profundity of such an activity within the constraints of representational characteristics giving definition to beings in their Being. Heidegger is seriously laying universal claim against all metaphysics. However, it is possible to revise his critique to suggest one must be wary of the incomplete nature of metaphysical assumptions. Metaphysics, or at least a metaphysics that would appeal to Heidegger in a limited fashion, must be seen as a teleological projection. Truly, it is quite impossible to think the world outside of a metaphysics and one can rightly accuse Heidegger of offering a critique which itself is embedded in a metaphysics about the truth of Being. However, we can separate the critique being made by Heidegger from the errancy of his strongly fashioned position, which would seem to defy its ultimate purpose. Although no metaphysics can adequately represent beings and think the truth of Being, we can attempt to postulate metaphysics in a more careful rendition that serves purpose in illuminating the ways we can symbolize humans in the chain of beings and at the same time attempt to think the truth of such Being. Surely, if Heidegger was himself somehow posed to think the greatness of Being, then we too stand with the possibility of following suit and taking seriously the full profundity of his critique of modernity.

The answer, perhaps, lies in the practice of a broad deontology, which was the heart of the project for Kant in the *Critique of Pure Reason* and was similarly the goal for Heidegger in his treatise on *Being and Time*. A practice of broad deontology suggests that we suspend any claims to the truth of human nature in a fated sense and instead grapple with the fundamental faculties along with the enabling limitations of reason making up any transcendental subject that must itself navigate a way through the phenomenal world. Such an approach makes peace with what cannot be contained by

mere metaphysical language, and instead takes solace in keeping open the horizon for how we represent the register of humanity while perpetually standing in aspiration to the possible truth of our essence through thinking.

The only way for any metaphysic to adequately encounter Being is to keep open the truth of Being as a teleological aspiration. Thus, no simple model of rational choice or game theory can ever serve justice in its pursuits. Such metaphysics, to use the term loosely, only achieve vapid representations of human beings frozen in a moment of time and space. One cannot reasonably generalize the truth of humanity by observing a specific instance of certain human beings acting in particular ways. To put the matter more boldly, Heidegger suggests:

Are we really on the right track toward the essence of man as long as we set him off as one living creature among others in contrast to plants, beasts, and God? We can proceed in that way; we can in such fashion locate man within being as one being among others. We will thereby be able to state something correct about man. But, we must be clear on this point, that when we do this we abandon man to the essential realm of *animalitas* even if we do not equate him with beasts but attribute a specific difference to him. In principle we are still thinking of homo *animalis*—even when *anima* [soul] is posited as *animus sive mens* [spirit or mind], and this in turn is later posited as subject, person, or spirit [*Geist*]. Such positing is the manner of metaphysics. But then the essence of man is too little heeded and not thought in its origin, the essential provenance that is always the essential future for historical mankind. Metaphysics thinks of man on the basis of *animalitas* and does not think in the direction of his *humanitas*.<sup>105</sup>

So much of what we have as descriptions of humanity are birthed from rather vulgar comparisons of human beings to animal counterparts. Even the famous claim by Aristotle decreeing man as a political animal does little to give us an adequate understanding of our being in this world, but, instead, sacrifices the possibility that might indeed become other. Of course, Heidegger would be quick to suggest that making our being in the world a bead on some theoretical abacus meant to calculate and predict social experience is not much more than a moment when we become the pallbearers to

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<sup>105</sup> Heidegger, “Letter on Humanism,” 227.

our own philosophical funeral. Such an act willfully forecloses our becoming by imposing an impoverishing self-limit on our faculties on imagination, fating ourselves to an unknowable ontology.

In his attempts to protect us from fating ourselves to an unknowable ontology, Heidegger is trying desperately to defend *Dasein* as a metaphysical fact rather than a metaphysic. In his discussions of the essence of our character, Heidegger suggests that our destiny is that of *Ek-sistence*. Conceptually speaking, Ek-sistence is the innate faculty of our being human in the ability to symbolically create the world. As Heidegger comments to us:

Ek-sistence can be said only of the essence of man, that is, only of the human way 'to be.' For as far as our experience shows only man is admitted to the destiny of ek-sistence. Therefore ek-sistence can also never be thought of as a specific kind of living creature among others—granted that man is destined to think the essence of his Being and not merely to give accounts of the nature and history of his constitution and activities.<sup>106</sup>

Thus, the true faculty of our being in the world outside of the constraints of metaphysical declarations and the ensnarement of technological standing reserves, we have but one true ability that makes up our humanity. The ability to think the essence of our Being is something we share in common and brightens the register of humanity to its fullest light. This metaphysical fact, the ecstatic character of our Being, reveals that while the material, phenomenal world has its hold on us, we are still able to temporally project the possibility of a just future existence in commune with all others.

Truly, for Heidegger when we relinquish this fact of our personhood and instead take up rather banal causes to announce the truth of humanity in any metaphysical parlance, we adulterate that which is most sacred. “The bizarre effort to prove the

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<sup>106</sup> Heidegger, “Letter on Humanism,” 228.

objectivity of values,” suggests Heidegger, “does not know what it is doing.”<sup>107</sup> Taking this thinking to its fullest extension:

When one proclaims ‘God’ the altogether ‘highest value,’ this is a degradation of God’s essence. Here as elsewhere thinking in values is the greatest blasphemy imaginable against Being. To think against values therefore does not mean to beat the drum for valuelessness and nullity of beings. It means rather to bring the clearing of the truth of Being before thinking, as against subjectivizing beings into mere objects.<sup>108</sup>

As Heidegger explains, this is not a mere nullification of the world as an abyss of valuelessness allowing us to subjectivize the world according to a deconstructive wasteland allowing for unfettered pessimism. Rather, we are reminded that we have something like a highest duty to uphold the truth of Being. By defending the possibility of our future selves and questioning the world for its attendances that would fate us to an unknowable ontology through technological means that overstretch themselves as human ends determining our very world, then, and only then, might we find that it is we who would have to give any pessimistic abyss its very colors. The world, as it were, might be collapsing under the weight of our inaction, as Being has become stalled without the motion of its own becoming; however, in the face of such possible devastation we still remain obliged to take up moral work as shepherds of Being.

Perhaps what is needed to see this situation in its fullest light is some sort of philosophical ascension through deep questioning of our ways in the world to envision just how high our own hubris has climbed. It is almost as if we take pride in our ability to wield a mastery over nature before we actually accomplish such a task. There is a way to alleviate the problems of standing reserve as it enframes and the social claustrophobia that emerges when one becomes limited by incomplete metaphysical assertions. The

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<sup>107</sup> Heidegger, “Letter on Humanism,” 251.

<sup>108</sup> Heidegger, “Letter on Humanism,” 251.

possibility for redeeming this world comes in our collective movements toward hospitality. This is not the mere gesture of care for all others, but instead the very folding of the essence of care into the essence of our Being. To quote Heidegger:

Man is not the lord of beings. Man is the shepherd of Being. Man loses nothing in this 'less': rather, he gains in that he attains the truth of Being. He gains the essential poverty of the shepherd, whose dignity consists in being called by Being itself into the preservation of Being's truth. The call comes as the throw from which the thrownness of Da-sein deserves. In his essential unfolding within the history of Being, man is the being whose Being as ek-sistence consists in his dwelling in the nearness of Being. Man is the neighbor of Being.<sup>109</sup>

What we have gleaned thus far is a pivotal warning of the ways in which our world teeters on the brink of both material and existential collapse. Without taking ourselves seriously as the shepherds of Being, then we have indeed somehow impossibility fated ourselves to a future that can already be called a history. Such a world will find its people scrambling upon this earth as miniaturized subjects in some unfettered battle to achieve an impossible metaphysical standard, as rats would battle for a scrap of bread on a sinking ship.

To bring any sense of closure to these claims we must remember and expand upon what Heidegger discussed as the namelessness of Being. This is not meant to suggest that human beings can experience the world before language. Instead, this is to suggest that there is a subject behind the wielding of any vocabulary and that subject can indeed change the terms of debate. In many ways this is exactly what happened in colonial struggles. While on the one hand, blacks were told they were nothing but a problem to the whites who determined the depth of the register of humanity—a register which systematically excluded both symbolically and materially blacks as human beings—on the other hand, the revolutionary movement was indeed a moment of not only

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<sup>109</sup> Heidegger, "Letter on Humanism," 245.

restructuring the tools of the master but giving equal valuation to the tools of the supposed slave.

Many people throughout the world have suffered from a colonial worldview propping up western traditions and the preference for evaluating life via the lens of enlightenment values privileging empirical calculation. While such thinking has indeed helped to secure grand achievements of technological progress it has also presented us with a pathological tendency to favor social, political, and cultural orientations of being in the world that bear a maniacal, egotistical character which strips nature of its beauty toward more defiling ends. Ultimately, Heidegger resisted humanist language out of concern for contributing to a teleological stagnation of our ability to pursue a truer notion of Being. Such stagnation occurs because of the larger, infectious quality of scientific language with its tightening grip over our dwelling in the world.

### ***Dwelling against the Speechlessness of Ensnarement***

Thus far, we have questioned the ways in which rationality and metaphysics, both materially and conceptually, have cast human beings into a sort of philosophical blindness to the essence of our Being. Such a movement has articulated how the principles of our freedom have been neglected, in fact inverted, and made to usher forth a modern world that teeters on the brink of despair. What follows is a final area for our questioning that reveals the way our freedom is currently overwrought by dangerous forms of building, dwelling, and thinking against the higher purpose of this important trinity of human activity. If we are to move beyond the nightmare of cemented being in the speechlessness of ensnarement, then we must, for Heidegger,  *dwell so that we can*

*think about how we build the world and we must build so that we can think about how we dwell in world.*

Building, for Heidegger, resonates with the German word *Bildung*, which encompasses a broad symbolic meaning ranging from education to creation; too often, this term has been mistakenly translated as simple notions of culture that are better captured by the German equivalent *Kulture*. Again, taking an etymological perspective, Heidegger traces the word *Bildung* back to its roots in Old Saxon in the form *Wuon*, which he suggests has its connection to the older form of building in the word *bauen* and can be translated as “to be at peace.”<sup>110</sup> Despite the seemingly pedantic reliance on linguistic framing, what we are given in this unearthing is something like a reprisal against those thinkers that would suggest myths about an anarchistic human state of nature that must be controlled through the implementation of a codified social contract. Rather, for Heidegger, our natural state is not only unknowable in a phenomenal sense but something that can only be understood through thinking about our faculties of Being.

“To be a human being,” Heidegger tells us, “means to be on earth as a mortal. It means to dwell.”<sup>111</sup> The return to simple words to describe our very essence should not be underestimated. Again, the problem with the modern world has to do with the ways our daily practices become reified as ends in and of them selves, fundamentally eclipsing our ability to self-determine the course of our world. While thinkers such as Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau have been animated by many scholars to mythologize the idea of a human state of nature that should be taken for granted and guarded against, we are, through Heidegger, returned to question such an ontological declaration and its meaning

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<sup>110</sup> Martin Heidegger, “Building Dwelling Thinking,” in *Martin Heidegger: Basic Writings*, David Krell, ed. (New York: Harper Collins, 1993), 351.

<sup>111</sup> Heidegger, “Building Dwelling Thinking,” 349.



in the unfolding of our being in this world. Philosophically speaking, the *a priori* assumption of an anarchistic state of nature, regardless of the details coloring its mythological origins, fates humanity to remain blind to a deeper question about the essence of our very nature which in this etymological lineage associated with the idea of building suggests the possibility for human beings, naturally speaking, to simply be at peace before we encounter the disciplining effects of society distancing us from the truth of Being.

Instead, our state of nature is to dwell. “To dwell, to be set at peace, means to remain at peace with the free, the preserve, the free sphere that safeguards each thing in its essence.”<sup>112</sup> Truly, how could any state of nature, as such, be known before the unfolding of language? In what terms, other than those set forth after the forging of a particular type of social contract, have we been given the symbolic means to understand such a concept? What stake, as it were, does a western, liberal conception of *the* (to use the definitive article purposefully) social contract have in keeping us from thinking the truth of our Being? While Heidegger is indeed making a complicated philosophical point about the essence of our actualization of Being, its implications are simple enough to carry deep salience for all of us in the world. Truly, the activities of building, dwelling, and thinking are unified for Heidegger who tells us:

Building and thinking are, each in its own way, inescapable for dwelling. The two, however, are also insufficient for dwelling so long as each busies itself with its own affairs in separation, instead of listening to the other. They are able to listen if both—building and thinking—belongs to dwelling, if they remain within their limits and realize that the one as much as the other comes from the workshop of long experience and incessant practice.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Heidegger, “Building Dwelling Thinking,” 351.

<sup>113</sup> Heidegger, “Building Dwelling Thinking,” 362.

Thus, if there is any state of human nature for Heidegger, then it lies in an understanding of our faculties apprehending our being in time. The state of our nature lies in the ability to temporally project the possibility of our being in a future iteration of the world. Not only do we exist now, but we also will exist in some changed version of the world.

Perhaps, then, our concern about the modern world through Heidegger is about the quality of life for that persistent subject. While it is not possible for technological rationality or metaphysical inaccuracies to completely deprive us of our end-making faculties and the possibility of dwelling so that we bring about a state of peace, we can indeed live in a world that is wrought by forces of our own making that serve to miniaturize ourselves. Certainly, many scholars have postulated the work of Heidegger as a pessimist and such misgivings carry the weight of truth and falsity. However, as we have seen throughout this essay Heidegger specifically rallied against describing the world as valueless and some empty abyss. To the contrary, his writing need also be read as warnings toward the slippery slope marking our descent into this modern world, which relieves us of the moral duty making up our person. The trouble, then, is with the ways in which our discourse, to wield the term in its fullest sense in both material and aesthetic symbol, keeps us from revealing the truth of Being. “It is language,” says Heidegger, “that tells us about the essence of a thing, provided that we respect language’s own essence.”<sup>114</sup> But, as Heidegger continues on in his aphoristic foreshadowing of the way things are in the world and also sadly the ways things might still remain, we must remember:

In the meantime, to be sure, there rages round the earth an unbridled yet clever talking, writing, and broadcasting of spoken words. Man acts as though he were the shaper and master of language, while in fact language remains the master of man. Perhaps it is before all else man’s

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<sup>114</sup> Heidegger, “Building Dwelling Thinking,” 348.

subversion of this relation of dominance that drives his essential being into alienation. That we retain a concern for care in speaking is all to the good, but it is of no help to us so long as language still serves us even then only as a means of expression. Among all the appeals that we human beings, on our part, can help to be voiced, language is the highest and everywhere the first.<sup>115</sup>

Language, then, is something of a double-edged sword. It carries the force to cut through the appearances of the world in the activity of questioning, such that we might reveal, as Heidegger did for us, something of the essential truth of Being. Yet, on the other hand it carries with it the ability to clothe such essence in alien garbs that would have us mistake our being in the world as nothing more than a fashionable trend.

As we draw to a conclusion on the work of Heidegger as it is animated for this project, we are left with a rather peculiar notion of despair. Throughout this engagement we have articulated the ways in which the world has fled from the freedom of humanity through vulgar means of commanding nature as an end in and of its self and also through the annunciation of metaphysical declarations that would fate us to an unknowable ontology. Yet, we have also attempted to bear the unalterable truth of our freedom despite such dire circumstances. Indeed, much of what is contained in this chapter can be read in its inverse as a defense of the possibility of freedom as a metaphysical fact. Such readings should occur, but only with the concurring realization that we currently stand without the fullness of such freedom, a depraved fulfillment that is perhaps better described as impoverishment.

Heidegger, standing against such miniaturization, suggests that our hope might lie in the saving of the fourfold—an ethical relation of us mortal creatures with the grace that lay in the earth, the sky, the divinities, and ourselves. While admittedly this is a rather enigmatic proposition, some careful reflection illuminates its deep importance. The

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<sup>115</sup> Heidegger, “Building Dwelling Thinking,” 348.

divinities, for Heidegger, are the “beckoning messengers of the godhead,” or perhaps the remainder of transcendental residue that exists within any reflection on our phenomenal limitation and the possibility for change in the world. The earth and the sky are themselves the perceptible, and also invisible, realm of our material stage for the enactment of Being. Mortals, us creatures capable of announcing our own death, represent the player in this drama. This is not meant to conjure an imagined orchestration egotistically placing us at the center of all things. Instead, we are left to think these four elements of the universe as a symbolic whole. Cartesian dualism has no place in this rumination and, as Heidegger tells us, this fourfold is itself a meditation on saving ourselves from ourselves:

Saving does not only snatch something from a danger. To save properly means to set something free into its own essence. To save the earth is more than to exploit it or ever wear it out. Saving the earth does not master the earth and does not subjugate it, which is merely one step from boundless spoliation.

Mortals dwell in that they receive the sky as sky. They leave to the sun and the moon their journey, to the stars their courses, to the seasons their blessing and their inclemency; they do not turn night into day nor day into a harassed unrest.

Mortals dwell in that they initiate their own essential being—their being capable of death as death—into the use and practice of this capacity, so that there may be a good death.<sup>116</sup>

If there is to be a noble death for us human creatures, a passing that is not marred by the presence of our debt at the moment of our exit, then saving is what we must do in all of our works. No game theory can properly calculate a relationship between these sacred four things, and no metaphysic can adequately describe it with ontology. This fourfold is what simply exists. Of course, this does not mean we must live romanticized lives in nature. But, we must find a way to harmonize our being in the world with the fourfold. Gods, earth, sky, and humanity do not exist in instrumental fashion.

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<sup>116</sup> Heidegger, “Building Dwelling Thinking,” 352.

Science has its place in this fourfold, but not as a hungry demon that would swallow up the four in its appetite for theorizing an impossible absolute truth. Science is just a means of representing an understanding of the way this fourfold lives together. Religion, too, is but a mere representation of such things. Language, as it were, is the only conduit we have to express any value for that which is most holy. If these precious four are rendered impotent by the many forces of the modern world that have reeked such havoc on earth, sky, humanity and even the Gods, then our becoming in the world will indeed slow to a frightful stillness.

### *Conclusion*

While it has been important to discuss the ethical moments within Heidegger which are rarely brought to light in academic discourse, it is equally important to conclude rather bewildered about the way in which he gravely failed to implement such ethical becoming in his own life rather unapologetically. While famous for his radical contributions to modern philosophy, Heidegger is also rather infamous for his awkward relationship to the Third Reich when he inexcusably fired the entirety of the Jewish faculty during his Rectorship at the University of Freiburg. No words or excuses can release Heidegger from the debt he owes to those whose fullness of Being he betrayed. One can only hope he has some intellectual part in the continued journey of enlarging the specter of humanity, such that we are haunted to bring its phantasmal echoes into actual existence.

Certainly, the writings of Heidegger carry a sort of elitism that may encourage dangerous complicity. One might wonder how we are to think in such a world so

overwrought by seemingly deterministic forces that so successfully whittle us down into miniaturized creatures. How, though, did Heidegger release himself from such forces enough to glean the insights presented in this chapter? On the one hand, it is possible to excuse the entirety of his work as intellectually elite, suggesting Heidegger announced for himself a special intellectual place fit for a great man to divine truth that few would later understand and perhaps none would ever be able to confront seriously. Yet, on the other hand, it is more reasonable to suggest that, given the affinity Heidegger held for the possibility of our temporal projection of being in the world, like him, we can begin by deeply questioning the world in order to find some fit saving way for the unfolding of our trinity of experience: building, dwelling, and thinking the truth of Being and its attempted fulfillment.

Our thinking and acting within finitude can take two directions: freedom or despair. In the case of the later, it is possible for a nightmarish sentiment on the strong enframing power of technological rationality to keep us in a perpetual unconcealment from the truth of Being and practically paralyzed until we are greeted by divine intervention. In the case of the former, a dream like belief in the ideality of freedom and our ability to access glimpses of a transcendental beyond suggest the possibility for transforming, albeit slowly and certainly amid the brutality of human progress gone awry, our lived relations toward something like justice. Serious philosophical investigations into our finitude must ultimately address the ever-present reality of both truths in a constant dialectical unraveling that does not promise progress, but keeps open the possibility of an unknown future and ultimately makes our present, lived everyday relations the stage for the unfolding of a living history of humanity that both fails and succeeds to live up to the

grandeur of its name. Certainly, there is a great deal of elitism in Heidegger, but perhaps even greater elitism in scholarship that has emerged on Heidegger. Such work, however, only advances the ways in which the modern world has stalled the motion of our becoming.

Heidegger, in his fascination with *poesis*, was a deep admirer of Friedrich Hölderlin. In an aphoristic fragment from his famous poem *Patmos*, Hölderlin gives us deep repose to think about our condition on the brink of despair along with the lived possibility of freedom:

Near is  
And difficult to grasp, the God.  
But where danger threatens  
That which saves from it also grows.<sup>117</sup>

Thus, we must remember the double-edged character of the work of Heidegger.

Technology is both a revealing power and an enframing power. Metaphysics is both a means to think the truth of Being for beings and represent beings in their Being, yet never completely both at the same time. One could see these postulations as schizophrenic, or instead warnings to the sort of nightmare that may emerge when we stop questioning our combined building, dwelling, and thinking in the world and with it the ways we have participated in allowing the very motion of our being to slow before the speechlessness of ensnarement.

What follows in the next chapter, explores the dream of freedom in Karl Max for us to find a way to become a community capable of living outside of the negative attendances of capital. Such work, very much tries to manifest the saving power already present in a time of deep and ever growing danger. While it might seem chronologically

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<sup>117</sup> Friedrich Hölderlin, "Patmos," in *Friedrich Hölderlin: Poems and Fragments*, Michael Hamburger, trans. (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1967), 463.

mistaken to move from the warnings of despair threaded together from the work of Heidegger to another dream of human freedom derived out of the work of Marx, the next chapter answers many of the problems regarding technology and metaphysics so that we can indeed live in harmony with the fourfold.

Certainly, the work of Marx not only means to animate our material freedom as subjects in the world, but also seeks to wield the very creative and material productivity available to us in a modern world, which itself is set upon a paradoxical precipice before a chasm of ruination at a time of revolutionary possibility. Learning to become the masters of technology rather than its slave, and with it reclaim our end making faculties, suggests that what we have available to us in this particular moment in the unfolding of historical materialism might actually bring about the transcendental freedom argued for in the work of Kant. Where Heidegger was deeply dismayed by the ways in which our language has been inverted to give value to the inane features of modern life, Marx is convinced of the possibility of finding a way to live with the forces of capital making so that we again see value in terms that allow it to exist without price.



## **Reprisal I:**

### **Commodifying Survival**

When the realities of free investment agreements, such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), allow corporations to take legal action against governments in pursuit of a stronger bottom line, life comes dangerously close to favoring profits at the expense of people. A 2001 *New York Times* article reported that the Mexican government was ordered by a secret international tribunal to pay \$16.7 million dollars because it violated Chapter 11 of NAFTA, or the infringement on the right to profit for a corporation.<sup>118</sup> Specifically, the Metalclad Corporation felt that it had a right to build a toxic waste dump outside of a small town, claiming that disgruntled villagers and the local environmental laws blocking the construction of the nuclear facility endangered the profitability of the company. The same article reported that the Methanex Corporation is sued the State of California because of a state decision to eliminate a methane additive from gasoline. Although the chemical was originally used to reduce air pollution, recent tests link the additive with serious health risks because emissions were poisoning water supplies. The Methanex Corporation sought \$976 million in compensatory damages since its stock price plummeted after the decision made by the State of California.<sup>119</sup> Although these challenges to state sovereignty were made possible by NAFTA, the entire world is at risk under the rubric of a more powerful partnership between policy and institution.

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<sup>118</sup> Anthony DePalma, "Nafta's Dirty Little Secret," *The New York Times* (11 March 2001): Section 3; Page 1; C 1; "North American Free Trade Agreement (Chapter 11),"

<sup>119</sup> DePalma, "Nafta's Dirty Little Secret," Section 3; Page 1; C 1

In 1995, the General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs was reborn as the World Trade Organization (WTO), signaling a powerful rhetorical shift into its global role in regulating international trade and commerce. Now the WTO serves as the most pervasive global free trade agreement to date and seeks to liberalize markets at the risk of destroying necessary government provided social services. And the WTO accomplishes its task of ensuring the expansion of free markets by working closely with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank to use the power of draconian sanctions to force governments from returning any social services to a public, not-for-profit operation. Although the titles of each of these institutions or policies make them appear global or international, they are each connected under a central political order—the Washington Consensus.<sup>120</sup>

With worldwide water supplies beginning to dwindle as quickly as international commercial markets emerge to regulate this precious resource, water promises to become a key political cornerstone in the coming years. Former vice president of the World Bank, Ismail Serageldin, said “the next World War will be over water.”<sup>121</sup> Controlling water is so serious that today human-made reservoirs and impoundments have a combined storage capacity of over 10,000 cubic kilometers or more than five times the amount of water in all the rivers in the world combined.<sup>122</sup> It is odd to think that our planet is experiencing the beginning of a water shortage considering that two thirds of the planet is itself made up of water. But, most of that is salt water, as only 2.5 percent of

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<sup>120</sup> See for example, Manfred Steger, *Globalism: The New Market Ideology*, (Rowman and Littlefield, 2001), Chapters 1 & 3.

<sup>121</sup> Ismail Serageldin cited in Jeffrey Rothfeder, “The Next World War Will be Over Water,” Boston Globe, 26 April 2003, [http://www.boston.com/globe/editorials/bigidea/water\\_rothfeder.shtml](http://www.boston.com/globe/editorials/bigidea/water_rothfeder.shtml).

<sup>122</sup> Rothfeder, *Every Drop for Sale*, 20.

water on the planet is fresh water.<sup>123</sup> This situation of impending water scarcity presents the context for what Jeffrey Rothfeld explains is “the emergence of a strong private market where water is being bought and sold as a commodity.”<sup>124</sup> As of now, we stand without much in the way of legal protection of water as a natural right essential to the survival and well-being of all human beings and instead face the very real prospect of an emerging water industry. Water has a complicated history in many countries and various cultures. Shari’a law has etymological roots meaning the sharing of water, and, in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, “codified the then somewhat revolutionary idea that all living beings have a right to water.”<sup>125</sup> Sadly, today, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and other relevant documents, make no mention of water as a need or right—our most precious resource, then, is left to the highest bidder.

Most World Bank and World Health Organization data on the amount of water needed for survival only consider drinking and sanitation, while others like Peter Gleik, a cofounder of the Pacific Institutes for Studies in Development, Environment, and Security, includes bathing and cooking as equally important. With these considerations in mind, environmental engineers have calculated that we need fifty liters of water a day to live safely. A sad state of affairs emerges when one realizes that Americans routinely send 23 liters of water down older toilets with every flush. Rothfeder rightfully reminds us:

Nearly 2.2 billion people spread out among sixty-two countries—one-third of the world’s population—live below that minimum water level. Some quite a bit low... 10 million deaths per year, mostly among the young and elderly, are caused by water related diseases, chiefly cholera and dysentery. Nearly 250 million new cases are reported annually. The leading cause of infant death worldwide is unsafe water.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> Rothfeder, *Every Drop for Sale*, 8.

<sup>124</sup> Rothfeder, *Every Drop for Sale*, 11.

<sup>125</sup> Rothfeder, *Every Drop for Sale*, 53.

<sup>126</sup> Rothfeder, *Every Drop for Sale*, 4-5.

This imbalance of resources is characteristically split along the borders of cliché distinction demarcating the Global North from the Global South. People in countries like Haiti and Gambia struggle to survive on only 3 liters of water each day, while people in countries like India, Kenya, Bolivia, and the Dominican Republic only live moderately better by spending over a quarter of their salaries to afford between 30 and 50 liters per day.<sup>127</sup> In stark contrast, Americans and Canadians easily consume more than 500 liters of safe, uncontaminated water per day at a nominal cost.<sup>128</sup> This disparity between people and places is described by Gleick as “a human tragedy, which could explode into a human bloodbath.”<sup>129</sup>

Sadly, many of the recent conferences on natural resources continue to produce documents referring to water as a product, never mentioning its values as a human need or even a human right. During the 2000 World Water Forum held at The Hague, water was referred to as something that “should be priced to reflect the cost of their provision,” while even earlier officials at the 1992 International Conference on Water and the Environment claimed that “water has an economic value in all its competing uses and should be recognized as an economic good.”<sup>130</sup> Even the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights makes no mention of water as a human need, or more importantly, a human right. Without a juridical base establishing the primacy of water in the life of people, it becomes increasingly difficult to challenge the legitimacy of transnational corporations using their industrial might to extract a profit from a thirsty world. An examination of the water privatization problem in Bolivia will help to concretely tease

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<sup>127</sup> Rothfeder, *Every Drop for Sale*, 5.

<sup>128</sup> Rothfeder, *Every Drop for Sale*, 5.

<sup>129</sup> Rothfeder, *Every Drop for Sale*, 5.

<sup>130</sup> Rothfeder, *Every Drop for Sale*, 87-88.

out how this problem both advances structural poverty and threatens democratic traditions.

In 2000, the city of Cochabamba, Bolivia became a powerful site of resistance armed with active citizens prepared to fight against the privatization of their water services. Under a struggling economy people were outraged when the government decided to privatize water services by selling those rights to Aguas del Tunari, a subsidiary of Bechtel and a company based in the United States. Arguably, however, citizens were excited at the possibility that a company promised to invest millions of dollars into the repair of the dilapidated water distribution system that wasted 50-60 percent of the water supply through holes in corroded pipes.<sup>131</sup> In exchange for this multi-million dollar restoration project, Aguas del Tunari had negotiated for itself an exclusive 40-year contract with the Bolivian government complete with “sweetheart clauses” promising that “[Aguas del Tunari] would be allowed to raise water rates each year to match the increase in the U.S. consumer price index. Additionally, the agreement guaranteed the company an average 16 percent annual return on its investment.”<sup>132</sup> As a result of this arrangement, Bolivia experienced mass protests when the exclusive supplier of water increased prices dramatically.<sup>133</sup> The Bolivian government responded violently to these protests, claiming that “it must guarantee the rights of foreign investors.”<sup>134</sup>

As soon as Aguas del Tunari had officially opened for business, monthly bills more than doubled or tripled. For most people this translated into a payment change from

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<sup>131</sup> Jeffrey Rothfeder, *Every Drop for Sale*, (New York: Penguin and Putnam, 2001), 108.

<sup>132</sup> Rothfeder, *Every Drop for Sale*, 108.

<sup>133</sup> Staff Writer, “Violence Erupts in Bolivia,” *BBC World News* (8 April 2000): [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/english/world/americas/newsid\\_706000/706770.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/english/world/americas/newsid_706000/706770.stm)

<sup>134</sup> Staff Writer, “Violence Erupts in Bolivia,” [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/english/world/americas/newsid\\_706000/706770.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/english/world/americas/newsid_706000/706770.stm)

\$5 to \$17, or almost 20 percent of a monthly salary averaging \$100. Tanya Paredes, mother of five children living in a “clapboard shack,” described the effects of the billing increase by saying, “I would have to cut down on my expenses for food, clothes, medicine, and the other things I need to buy for my children.”<sup>135</sup> In trying to solve the problem of modernizing the water system, the Bolivian government had created a greater problem. 10,000 people referred to as the Coordinator for the Defense of Water and Life, or La Coordinadora, organized a four-day strike. The government soon declared the protest illegal and used the force of a 1,000 troops and plastic bullets to disperse the crowd. As the skirmishes became violent, over 1,000 soldiers and protesters were injured, and two teenagers blinded by the force of the carbon dioxide discharged plastic bullets.<sup>136</sup>

Deciding to destroy the resistance in March 2000, the Bolivian government established martial law. Curfew violators were “shot on sight,” while suspects of sabotage to private property or anyone refusing to pay the rate increases “would be subject to prosecution and beatings.”<sup>137</sup> Conservative estimates suggest that six people were murdered and over 10,000 people were injured.<sup>138</sup> Even worse, some people were kidnapped and never returned, and the government soon arrested major leaders of La Coordinadora who were meeting in a secret location. Under increased pressure from local protests the government released the leaders from prison and decided to cancel the contract with Bechtel. But just as quickly a local leader, Oscar Olivera, shouted “We have proved the water is ours—we the people own it,” the government broke their

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<sup>135</sup> Rothfeder, *Every Drop for Sale*, 108-109

<sup>136</sup> Rothfeder, *Every Drop for Sale*, 110

<sup>137</sup> Rothfeder, *Every Drop for Sale*, 111

<sup>138</sup> Rothfeder, *Every Drop for Sale*, 111

promise to the people and “whatever was left of civil rights in Cochabamba was suspended: gatherings of more than four people were outlawed, and severe limits were imposed on press freedom.”<sup>139</sup> Under unrelenting pressure from activists, both internal and abroad, on April 10 2000, the Bolivian government finally acquiesced by canceling its contract with Aguas del Tunari and agreeing to compensate the families who had suffered from state brutality. Olivera, when reflecting on the victory, said, “We are proving by protecting our water that we have higher human values. We understand that water is a shared right and is not for sale.”<sup>140</sup>

Understanding why people became activated is more complicated, and best captured in a short story by Rothfeder:

...the struggle over water represented something much more basic. It exemplified nostalgia for a time when Cochabamba had been primitive yet economically balanced enough to attempt to supply adequate resources, and at the same time defiance, however vain, of a world that had clearly careened out of the local residents’ control. This schizophrenia—part description and part rage—was captured in the shivering, defeated tone of one old Inca, who was marching behind a man forty years younger than he, brandishing an ice pick. Plaintively and maniacally, as if he were begging the gods to remember, the Inca screamed at the top of his lungs over and over, ‘Water is sacred.’ With each repetition, his voice grew a little weaker.<sup>141</sup>

This story represents several important features of the protest by La Coordinadora. First, it questions the meaning of progress, noting that whatever one may think about the so-called uncivilized character of the past at least during such a time fundamental rights were favored over economic relations associated with modernization. Second, people expressed the definitive power of resisting such relations of modernization and instead brought to bear the full force of democratic protest before a world that too often things the power of the people is nothing but mere hyperbole. Third, fighting for water as a sacred right has allowed for the strengthening of relationships across generations,

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<sup>139</sup> Rothfeder, *Every Drop for Sale*, 112

<sup>140</sup> Rothfeder, *Every Drop for Sale*, 113

<sup>141</sup> Rothfeder, *Every Drop for Sale*, 110-111

brandishing a bond akin to the Turtles and the Teamsters at the Battle of Seattle. Fourth, the old man screaming repeatedly that “water is sacred,” even as his voice grew weaker, represents the fierce passion within resisters to globalization and the determination to achieve a sovereignty of the people, not a despotic rule by Transnational Corporations.

This struggle, however, is not a problem that only faces the people of Bolivia. In fact, water is slowly becoming the most precious commodity in the world and, even now, tugboats carry large plastic bubbles of freshwater from Canada to Kenya.<sup>142</sup> While most Canadian environmentalists oppose such plundering of natural resources, they seem agreeable to the construction of a multi-million dollar Evian factory poised to ship water using small bottles to the richest countries in the world.<sup>143</sup> Thus, the issue of water privatization becomes blurry and it is difficult to locate the many ways this complex issue is interwoven throughout the most basic activities in our lives. Ultimately, as transnational corporations continue working to secure the land rights to water sources throughout the world, and are preparing multibillion dollar distribution systems that will bring much needed freshwater to billions of thirsty people, we must pause to evaluate the meaning of this growing resource scarcity and its multitude of political consequences on the state of democratic affairs both abroad and at home.

The birthplace of the institutions and policies mentioned at the beginning of this essay originated at the Bretton Woods conference in 1944 and slowly evolved for more than half a century. But the problems associated with structural adjustment and the regulation of global trade has another historical origin. The contemporary regulation of global trade and the long history of colonization cast remarkably similar shadows of a

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<sup>142</sup> Rothfeder, *Every Drop for Sale*, 120.

<sup>143</sup> Rothfeder, *Every Drop for Sale*, 135.



centralized, totalitarian authority restricting the economic activities of a supposedly developing country for an imperial gain. Therefore, scholars like Edward Goldsmith remark that *development* is not a new idea, but rather a new word to replace more rhetorically charged speech like *colonialism*. Resembling the policies produced by the IMF and World Bank today, Cecil Rhodes, one of the most active proponents of British colonialism during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, said:

We must find new lands from which we can easily obtain raw materials and at the same time exploit the cheap slave labour that is available from the natives of the colonies. The colonies would also provide a dumping ground for the surplus of goods produced in our factory.<sup>144</sup>

Trying to find a distinction between the practices of 19<sup>th</sup> century colonialism and the conditionality agreements forcibly implemented by the IMF and World Bank is a challenging task. Today, transnational corporations work with political institutions to carve out Free Trade Zones that allow for untaxed import and export of products into an area in a developing country overpopulated with cheap labor.

Relating this situation back to the antinomy of dreams of freedom and nightmares of despair reviewed in the work of Immanuel Kant and Martin Heidegger, we find ourselves at a stage of technological confrontation that tries to make something like water a mere object standing in reserve for the ends of capitalistic advancement. And, for Kant, what becomes of the magnitude of sublimity before nature that might aesthetically move us to see the truth of beauty as the moral image of humanity? For, in both predicaments the value of nature is being assigned a price—it is being taken out of the transcendental realm of which a grand object like nature is meant to carry a profundity that lays beyond the touch of practical human reason—and, instead, becomes a serious threat to the

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<sup>144</sup> Edward Goldsmith, “Development as Colonialism,” In *The Case Against the Global Economy & for a Turn Towards Localization*, eds. Edward Goldsmith and Jerry Mander (London: Earthscan Publications, 2001), 20.

survivability of the people of this planet; if drawn to its logical conclusions we may be left, then, with a survivability that knows peace only in the aftermath of some future world that finds quieted rest in the fabled macabre image of the graveyard of humanity.

How, instead, though do we animate the moral components of both Kant and Heidegger that, when taken together, are able to spot a nightmare of despair forming before our eyes and in response move us closer to a dream of freedom? In Kant, we are called to place ourselves under the moral law and harmonize our ends toward a state of social grace, while, in Heidegger, we must find a way to turn our use of nature away from mere standing reserve and instead toward the reveling power of technology which brings forth into existence something that was not yet present.

Amartya Sen, Nobel Prize winning economist, writes of a different view on human freedom, releasing us from the dogmatic debates usually held in private conversations between intellectuals, and instead gives such a term immeasurable practical force for our ethical building of the world. Sen would have us instead try to develop for all people in this world the capability of freedom. Speaking of freedom as capability is not at all contradictory to the work of Kant and very much takes the position of ascribing a broad deontology to the demand for justice. There is nothing in Sen that reduces the call to such development to particular, enumerated conditions that mirror freedom as a vision of western, liberal principles.<sup>145</sup> Instead, we must see, as Sen explains, that any impoverishment of the world is itself an experience that deprives the capability of human beings to live in this world according to a freedom of their own collaborative creation.<sup>146</sup> The activity of developing our capability for achieving human freedom is very much a

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<sup>145</sup> Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (New York: Anchor Books, 1999), Chapter 2.

<sup>146</sup> Sen, *Development as Freedom*, Chapter 4.

way we might inherit the legacy of critique and try to address both the ideality of our freedom in the wake of a catastrophic situation of our own making.

However, without reasonable access to safe drinking water we stand at the precipice of a world teetering on the brink of collapse. This reprisal is not meant to be anything more than an illumination, an attempt to indicate deep relevance of a serious global problem to the work done in thinking through two thinkers giving us much to consider in the ways of our dreams of freedom and nightmares of despair. The task of repairing such a problem or cataloguing its solutions could never be faithfully accomplished in these pages of text. The demand for such moral repair, ultimately, stands open to each one of us.

## **Chapter Four:**

### **Karl Marx**

#### **Against the Dead Pledge of Society:**

#### **Imagining the Community Outside of Capital**

Humanity has become so rich in the bourgeois period, and has at its disposal such natural and human auxiliary powers, that it could exist united by worthy objectives. The need to veil such affairs, which is transparent in every respect, gives rise to a sphere of hypocrisy which not only extends to international relations but penetrates into even the most private of relations; it results in a diminution of cultural endeavors (including science) and a brutalization of public and personal life, such that spiritual misery is compounded with material. At no time has the poverty of humanity stood in such crying contradiction to its potential wealth, at no time have all of the powers been so horribly fettered as in this generation where children go hungry and the hands of the fathers are busy turning out bombs. It appears as if the world is being driven into a catastrophe—or rather, as if it already finds itself in one—which can only be compared, within known history, to the fall of antiquity.

Marx Horkheimer, “Materialism and Morality”<sup>147</sup>

#### ***Abstract***

Karl Marx in many ways attempts to materialize the meaning of freedom and establish the primacy of human beings as the source of valuation in the world. Marx is being articulated in this chapter to simultaneously critique the larger, negative attendances of capital and subsequently announce the ways in which we might try to live in a community outside of the strangling hold of economic relations turned pathological sycophants of our ability to imbue value into the world. Such a project is orchestrated in three movements. First, the combined forces of production, distribution, exchange, and consumption allowing for the reproduction of the larger system of capital making are

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<sup>147</sup> Max Horkheimer, “Materialism and Morality,” in *Max Horkheimer: Between Philosophy and Social Science: Selected Writings*, Frederick Hunter, Mathew Kramer, and John Torpey, trans. (New York: MIT Press, 1995), 35.

critically analyzed to reveal the ways in which they operate to enforce a dead pledge of society. Second, the very experience of these four-fold forces is shown to asymmetrically allow for the money circuit to extract its surplus value out of the living labor derived from the productive capacity of workers caught in the imprisoning constraints of the commodity circuit. Such an analysis speaks to the ways we imbue our very soul into the act of production, which is subsequently siphoned off as the fuel for the reproduction of the larger system of capitalism. Finally, communism is presented as a teleological projection to which we aspire toward in our material activities of the world; it is a regulative ideal, and one that guides our attempts to dare to imagine the possibility of a world outside of the negative attendances of capitalism.

### ***Introduction***

Before the American Revolution, the English Monarchy used the power of corporations “to secure the development of the colonies, a public purpose, through the stimulation of private interest by grants of political and commercial privilege.”<sup>148</sup> This manipulative use of corporate influence left a soured perspective with the newly liberated colonialists, leaving many people hesitant about granting incorporation charters. But, after ratifying the United States Constitution many state governments found that they lacked the organizational ability and strategic resources necessary to manage complex projects needed to ensure the public good—building roads, bridges, and eventually railways. As industrialization began to take root in the United States, the need for such instruments of modernization increased dramatically. Many state governments were

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<sup>148</sup> Citing John Davis in Ralph Estes, *Tyranny of the Bottom Line*, (San Francisco, California: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 1996), 24.

interested in building industry as a means to recruit settlers westward and modernize their workforce, and therefore began offering large numbers of incorporation charters allowing corporations to take responsibility for accomplishing these varied tasks.

Lawmakers expected corporations to adhere to a model of stakeholder accountability by demonstrating behavior that benefited a more comprehensive constituency beyond the narrow field of shareholders. People, at the time, viewed corporations as a means to enhance the public good without augmenting the bureaucracy of government. Charters allowed corporations to form a limited entity capable of wielding investor capital under the temporary privilege of first person rights. In fact, when companies abused their stakeholder charge state governments would revoke incorporation charters and amass all corporate holdings. In an 1815 case, Justice Joseph Story decided to revoke an incorporation charter citing that “a private corporation created by the legislature may lose its franchises by a misuser or nonuser of them... This is the common law of the land, and it is a tacit condition annexed to the creation of every such corporation.”<sup>149</sup> But, this democratic model of accountability slowly eroded and corporations became first person entities without the same responsibilities expected of ordinary citizens.

The penultimate defeat came on May 10, 1886, when the United States Supreme Court ruled in favor of Southern Pacific Railroad against the initial charge by the people of Santa Clara County. This case, among others, has served as legal precedent establishing that “Corporations are persons within the meaning of the Fourteenth

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<sup>149</sup> Richard Grossman and Frank Adams, *Taking Care of Business: Citizenship and the Charter of Incorporation*, (Yarmouth, MA: Red Sun Press, 1999), 11.

Amendment to the Constitution of the United States.”<sup>150</sup> In 1881 the California State Board of Equalization assessed Southern Pacific Railroad taxes for enhancements along the railroad it had constructed. When those taxes went unpaid, the state attempted to seize control of the company. However, Southern Pacific argued that it was protected by the 14<sup>th</sup> amendment, which explained by the Supreme Court, “forbids a State to deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.” Thus, the same law used to free black slaves less than 25 years prior was appropriated to establish corporations as equal, first person right holders. Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century judges recognized corporate profits as a form of property that were untouchable by citizens or government. Whereas society once had a complex system of accountability designed to allow the efficient ordering of corporate entities to work for the common good of society, now a growing presence of transnational corporations threatens many of the important features of democracy in an open society.

Following the deeper political impetus captured in the prefatory quotation by Max Horkheimer, we are immediately turned toward an often-neglected side of the larger purpose of critique for Marx. Certainly, there is much to say in the larger tradition of historical materialism that speaks to the scientific elements of capitalistic reproduction and need for revolution to emancipate human beings from the strangling grip of economic forces that miniturize our freedom in the world. However, much of what is missed in these declarations is the subtle point suggesting that the advancements and features of the industrial world that are most grotesque exist only because of the fact that we have all of the necessary richness in our technological efficiency and social institutions to offer much needed hospitality to nearly erase the poverty that exists in a

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<sup>150</sup> Santa Clara County v. Southern Pacific Railroad Company, 118 U.S. 394 (1886).

world defined by class differentiation. Indeed, we find that many of our greatest accomplishments—such as the dignified extension of freedom embodied in the fourteenth amendment to those enslaved for so long—become mangled into the service of capitalism.

Deep angst and dialectical confusion should persist upon the realization that no less than a quarter of a century after jurisprudence in the United States finally declared equal personhood a matter of law, such legal advancement was soon after manipulated to grant corporations status as first person entities. Where human beings should be seen as the sole subject of value, we now persist in a state where abstractions of capital are given legal status of subjective merit. What follows in this chapter reveals the ways in which the material possibility of human freedom and the truth of human beings as the source of all value making is disrupted by capitalism, and that upon such revelation we can indeed access the dream of freedom that speaks to the inverse truth of such a world made upside-down.

### *Against the Dead Pledge of Society*

Throughout the body of his academic work, Karl Marx evaluated life from the perspective of “critical philosophy.” For Marx, this meant seeing things as they really were devoid of any complex illusions, claiming that “[t]he reform of consciousness consists *only* in enabling the world to clarify its consciousness, in waking from its dream about itself, in *explaining* to it the meaning of its own actions. Our whole task can consist only in putting religious and political questions into self-conscious human form.”<sup>151</sup>

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<sup>151</sup> Karl Marx, “For a Ruthless Criticism of Everything Existing,” In *The Marx Engels Reader*, eds. and trans. Robert Tucker, (New York: W.W. Norton, 1978), 15.



Following the impetus given to us by Marx, the task at hand, so to speak, is to critically evaluate the pervading logic of capital to condemn its virulent forces and also, by implication, suggest the ways in which we live amidst another dream of freedom bound up in the truth of our ability to bring value into the world.

Writing in his notes that will lead to the development of the three-part volume on *Capital*, Marx presents something of an architectonic in the *Grundrisse* giving us a complex, calculated account of the ways in which money works in modern bourgeoisie society. Marx, citing book 5, chapter 5 of the *Nicomachean Ethics* by Aristotle, discusses the etymological significance of the Greek word for money (*nomisma*) as connected to the word for law (*nomos*). In this work, Aristotle suggests that such an observation carries deep salience “because [money] exists not by nature but by law and it is in our power to change it and make it useless.”<sup>152</sup> Such a bold annunciation not only brazenly critiques the thoughtless, uninhibited role of money in the larger system of capital but also does much to reclaim our selves as the progenitors of value in the larger world. The dead pledge of society, then, represents the way the very exchange of money, as if it were a natural law instead of one generated by our own faculties of the imagination, works to decay the very source of value necessary to give meaning to communal bonds; thinking against the dead pledge of society, then, is a fundamental attack against the belief in political economy that suggests “the existence of money presupposes the objectification of the social bond.”<sup>153</sup> Similarly, we are also reminded that the value of money is inimically bound to a larger, circular system of capital making that carries its own logic of production, exchange, distribution, and consumption.

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<sup>152</sup> Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*, David Ross, trans. (New York: Oxford, 1998), 119.

<sup>153</sup> Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, Martin Nicolaus trans. (New York: Penguin Classics, 1993), 160.

The work of political economy, as it has developed in major figures ranging from Adam Smith to David Ricardo, takes for granted the presence of a community naturally posed toward such a dead pledge, forgetting:

It can never exist other than as an abstract, one—sided relation within an already given, concrete, living whole... The totality as it appears in the head, as a totality of thoughts, is a product of a thinking head, which appropriates the world in the only way it can, a way different from the artistic, religious, practical and mental appropriation of this world. The real subject retains its autonomous existence outside the head just as before; namely as long as the head's conduct is merely speculative, merely theoretical. Hence, in the theoretical method, too, the subject, society must always be kept in mind as the presupposition.<sup>154</sup>

The abstract totality that appears in the analysis of economic relations is a politically contestable category in a deep way. Marx, following his own disagreements with the work of Hegel, is suggesting that seemingly concrete manifestations in the world are not necessarily brought into being as a “product of thought concentrating itself, probing its own depths, and unfolding itself out of itself, by itself.”<sup>155</sup> Rather, the becoming of a subject for Marx is something that is found in our autonomous existence, and the conceptual claim about communities made by theories of political economy can never be anything other than speculative concerns derived as a priori assumptions about the organization of human beings in the abstract. By first understanding that there is not given community of people fated to live out their lives as simple cogs in the larger machinery of capital, it next becomes possible to begin to distinguish the larger system responsible for mythologizing money and its exchange as the origin of our existence.

Marx orchestrates a detailed understanding of the virulence of capital in its simultaneous and circuitous movement from *production* to *distribution* to *exchange* to *consumption*, which then collapses back on itself into a dialectical sublation of each upon one another in the combined alienation, exploitation, reification, and objectification

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<sup>154</sup> Marx, *Grundrisse*, 101-102

<sup>155</sup> Marx, *Grundrisse*, 101.

contained within the entire experience. The four are interconnected in their self-justification and their self-reproduction, such that:

...production appears as the point of departure, consumption as the conclusion, distribution and exchange as the middle, which is however itself twofold, since distribution is determined by society and exchange by individuals. The person objectifies himself in production, the thing subjectifies itself in the person; in distribution, society mediates between production and consumption in the form of general, dominant determinants; in exchange the two are mediated by the chance characteristics of the individual...<sup>156</sup>

While these four facets integral to the logic of capital are indeed distinct, yet also overlapping, they require, fundamentally, willful participation from human beings to give them meaning to refuel the larger system with its perpetual continuation and constant expansion. While capital making on any superficial examination seeks to produce material things in the world, for Marx the thing that is produced is an objectified subject: the consuming laborer enmeshed in the webs of impoverishing class distinctions.

Truly, it can be said that the unitary logic of capital is carries a currency of coherence within society, as “...production, distribution, exchange and consumption form a regular syllogism; production is the generality, distribution and exchange the particularity, and consumption the singularity in which the whole is joined together.”<sup>157</sup> However, while “this is admittedly a coherence,” Marx concedes, it is ultimately “but a shallow one.”<sup>158</sup> Despite the complex interchange between these various forces, it is still important to unearth the particular features of each component in the larger system of capital. Production, as a somewhat artificial starting point in such an analysis, is captured by Marx in his writings on the division of labor between two competing classes and the ways in which the development of forces of production have, over time, dialectically

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<sup>156</sup> Marx, *Grundrisse*, 89.

<sup>157</sup> Marx, *Grundrisse*, 89.

<sup>158</sup> Marx, *Grundrisse*, 89.

engaged relations of production to slowly flatten out the gross inequality between masters and slaves.

Yet, the idea of production carries a deeper importance for Marx as well. It is the asymmetrical signification of what counts as productive labor, and what it means to evaluate life from the perspective of economic indicators. The divorce between economic valuation and moral activity is a rather profound chasm. While economic indicators such as gross domestic product are used regularly in the world of international trade and finance to discuss the assumed productivity, and thereby worth, of a country in terms of the total dollar value of the products it makes in a given period of time, such an indicator is indifferent to what is actually produced and what effect such products have on the world. Thus, when a murder occurs the gross domestic product of a country rises. Guns were bought and manufactured. Doctors provided medical care to wounded people and funeral parlors provided services of burial to those who may have perished. Police were paid overtime to investigate the incident and dispatch additional patrols to keep the surrounding neighborhood safe. One could hardly suggest that indicators such as gross domestic product are adequate to evaluating whether anything about an economy is of substantive moral character.

In a somewhat bold characterization of the problem of production, Marx brazenly points out how the concept of productive labor is so utterly bankrupt that “modern economists have turned themselves into such sycophants of the bourgeois that they want to demonstrate... that it is productive labour when somebody picks the lice out of his hair.”<sup>159</sup> The complaint about productivity announced here is not to be taken as a trite matter. Rather, what is at stake is the battle over whether or not human beings shall value

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<sup>159</sup> Marx, *Grundrisse*, 273.

their work in the world or if the world, as a system of advanced capital, will evaluate it a priori in their stead. Upon critical investigation, the dynamics of production within capital force us to realize this antinomy and, at the same, understand that the articulation of such relations of production carry deep political ramifications. Marx, discussing the experience of production for both bourgeoisie and proletariat, glibly remarks:

The fact is that these workers, indeed, are productive, as far as they increase the capital of their master; unproductive as to the material result of their labour. In fact, of course, this 'productive' worker cares as much about the crappy shit he has to make as does the capitalist himself who employs him, and who also couldn't give a damn for the junk. But, looked at more precisely, it turns out in fact that the true definition of a productive worker consists in this: A person who needs and demands exactly as much as, and no more than, is required to enable him to gain the greatest possible benefit for his capitalist.<sup>160</sup>

Thus, not only does the larger dead pledge of society a priori assume the world to be a community of producers ripe to reproduce the system of capital, but it also establishes such a community along class divisions ensnaring workers in the perpetual enlarging of the wealth for the bourgeois at the expense of the very impoverishment of the proletariat. The next section will consider in greater detail and elaboration the meaning of the commodity circuit and its understanding as a means to break through the illusory veil of capitalism; however, the next step in revealing the dead pledge of society lies in unearthing the function of distribution.

It is, perhaps, not that the world does not have enough richness to share with all people equally, but that the system of distribution itself forbids us from using our technological affluence to feed an impoverished humanity. Such a problem appears often throughout the history of political thought. Plato, dialoguing Socrates with Glaucon in Book 2 of *The Republic*, builds a perfect city of harmonious equality. People have shelter, sustenance, and a general well being of life. While the dialogue could end at this

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<sup>160</sup> Marx, *Grundrisse*, 273.

moment having achieved a rather utopian view of justice in the material formulation of society, Glaucon retorts that he wants more figs with his dessert and spices for his stew. It is at that this moment when Plato takes the turn toward imagining the controversial city in speech. Similarly, today, we could easily fashion a world that gives people what they are owed to live out the development of their freedom, at least until the first Glaucon of our age asks for fast food and a SUV. Thus, while we hold the power to ease the ailments of production by at least providing some semblance of well being to all people in equity, our manufactured desires for trivial luxuries form the disciplining bond that keeps the system of distribution in the service of those who wield the power of capital.

“The structure [Gliederung] of distribution,” Marx tells us, “is completely determined by the structure of production.”<sup>161</sup> The two forces of the larger systematicity making up capital share an integral link. Ultimately, the fundamental inequity that occurs within the system of distribution and exchange can be best described by the asymmetry separating the commodity circuit from the money circuit, which is the focus of the second section of this chapter. For now, we are meant to understand that the system of distribution further asserts itself, taking its cue from the determinations of production, to enforce the larger system of class hierarchy at play within the capitalist world. Marx discusses distribution as an intermediary step separating the phases of production and consumption, which are ultimately linked in the final analysis.

*Distribution*,” Marx suggests, “steps between the producers and the products, hence between production and consumption, to determine in accordance with social laws what the producer’s share will be in the world of products.”<sup>162</sup> Thus, the dead pledge of

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<sup>161</sup> Marx, *Grundrisse*, 95.

<sup>162</sup> Marx, *Grundrisse*, 94.

society is further inscribed into the rudimentary logic governing capital making, as the will of people no longer bears any strong influence on the world of law, but instead the world of law is itself a reflective mirror to the relations dictated by capital.

Money is a peculiar facet of exchange. Its logic is both self-perpetuating and also self-negating. First, Marx is deeply aware of how money as symbolic token is merely an expression of arbitrary value that does not have a real connection to human need. Surely, money is used to mediate the very exchange of goods and enforce a particular system of distribution; however, money also seems to carry a strange life of its own that surpasses its utility as a means and slowly becomes an unquestioned end in the game of capital making. Marx, in his own words, suggests:

We see, then, how it is an inherent property of money to fulfill its purposes by simultaneously negating them; to achieve independence from commodities; to be a means which becomes an end; to realize the exchange value of commodities by separating them from it; to facilitate exchange by splitting it; to overcome the difficulties of the direct exchange of commodities by generalizing them; to make exchange independent of the producers in the same measure as the producers become dependent on exchange.<sup>163</sup>

In some ways we are genealogically presented with a question of the origin of the entire process, since the circuit returns to itself in the continued reproduction of both the individual components and the larger totality. However, what is clear is the way in which people and their relations among one another are utterly thingified in the systematic operation of capital. To this end, Marx explains that:

In exchange value, the social connection between persons is transformed into a social relation between things; personal capacity into objective wealth. The less social power of the medium of exchange process... the greater must be the power of the community which binds individuals together, the patriarchal relation, the community of antiquity, feudalism and the guild system.<sup>164</sup>

What slowly erodes as the systematicity of capital is unraveled before our eyes is nothing less than the disintegration of the integral fabric of community engagement and

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<sup>163</sup> Marx, *Grundrisse*, 151.

<sup>164</sup> Marx, *Grundrisse*, 157.

democratic deliberation necessary for any free society; people are semantically wrapped up into the language of the very production they are destined to produce and become themselves an artifact of exchange. Surely we are still the holder of valuation in such a world, but within the confines of this system we may unknowingly grant such power of valuation to the dictates of market capitalism.

Truly, as Marx understood the matter, “The exchange value of a thing is nothing other than the quantitatively specific expression of its capacity for serving as a medium of exchange.”<sup>165</sup> Money is not meant to be anything other than a means of trade, but it surpasses its role as a symbolic token and becomes something like a symbolic logic of inverting the way things ought to work in the world. Rather than serve as an artifact of trade, it defines instead the ways in which trade is deemed possible and projects outward valuation onto all things suggesting that nothing is outside of the reach of trade. Something of a universal prostitution, to use a famous phrase from Marx, emerges where we all sell ourselves to the larger system, which stands as a whorish wasteland presenting humanity to the highest bidder as a paltry satisfaction for putrid fantasies. To this end, Marx reminds us that “the exchangeability of all products, activities and relations with a third, *objective* entity which can be re-exchanged for everything *without distinction*—that is, the development of exchange value (and of money relations) is identical with universal venality, corruption.”<sup>166</sup> Thus, in summation, there is a venal character to the larger act of exchange whereby money symbolically apprehends itself as a subject in the world and displaces the subjective worth of actual people as mere things for the purposes of trade which money itself was supposed to represent.

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<sup>165</sup> Marx, *Grundrisse*, 199.

<sup>166</sup> Marx, *Grundrisse*, 163.



Finally, the act of consumption appears as a figurative end in the circuit of capital making; however, Marx is clear in his belief that the system is circuitous in that “consumption produces in production in a double way, (1) because a product becomes a real product by being consumed,” going on to add, “(2) because consumption creates the need for *new* production, that is it creates the ideal, internally impelling cause for production, which is its presupposition.”<sup>167</sup> The system requires those who produce to participate in the chain of capital making at each stage in its iteration even at the point of consumption, which returns the circuit to its origination. The question becomes how we value things in a world wrought by the dictates of commodification.

Wealth, for Marx, can only be posited as an ideal form that is impossible to actually realize, and suggests that money performs a specious role when it tries to actualize what is merely an abstraction. Worth, as Immanuel Kant defined dignity, is something that is itself without price. The point here returns us to the realization made in our discussion of production that suggested there is no place for the language of economy to delve into the realm of moral valuation. Such an act would defy the chasm separating nature and freedom made explicit in critical philosophy as it was articulated in Kant. Still, when money is wedded with wealth and people consume a product for the purposes of mere survival, that is to continue reproducing the larger system by having gained the bare material sustenance to begin again the work of production, we encounter something like philosophical cannibalism.

To understand the philosophical cannibalism at play we must remember that we are talking universally about what is occurring in the larger system of capital. “The individual,” according to Marx, “produces an object and, by consuming it, returns to

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<sup>167</sup> Marx, *Grundrisse*, 94.

himself, but returns as a productive and self-reproducing individual. Consumption thus appears as a moment of production.”<sup>168</sup> Since, workers are the ones who imbue their use value through labor into products they manufactured, then the very act of consuming that original product—only after it has run its strange course through a labyrinthine ritual of exchange according to the hierarchies of a system of distribution in the service of capitalism—is indeed an estranging moment of philosophical cannibalism. We stand beguiled to traverse a long course to receive that which we originally made ourselves, imbued, as it were, with something of our selves. This double act is something of a slight of hand that allows the exploitation of use value released in the process of production, then traded through a system of alienating exchange that distributes goods in a rather askew manner throughout society, to find its reproductive energies in the reified moment of consumption which makes people mere things in the service of capital. What follows in the next section takes serious what it means to participate in this reproductive system of capital making, as the proletariat are confined by the impoverishing features of the commodity circuit against the ways in which the bourgeoisie extract surplus value according to the privileges of the money circuit. We are left to realize that we forsake ourselves in failing to remember that human beings are the source of all valuation in the world capable of conjuring up some grandeur ideal and nobler harmonization of the ways we constitute humanity.

### ***The Soul of a Thing***

Marx, in many ways, works to provide a material account of the sort of transcendental freedom found in Kant. This is not suggesting that his work was

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<sup>168</sup> Marx, *Grundrisse*, 94.

specifically a response to Kant; instead, one can draw out a hermeneutic sort of beauty unearthing the ways in which the materialism in Marx does go beyond mere analysis of political economy and, indeed, dares to not only think toward the utopian possibility of a classless society but also, along every step in his thinking, pays careful attention to the importance of preserving the dignity of humanity.

We have explored the larger systematicity of capital making and its circuitous reproduction of the world, one impoverished by a hierarchy enforcing the dead pledge of society. Yet, at the same time we revealed the ways in which Marx believed that we can never be totally eclipsed from the true source of value making which resides in ourselves. What follows next continues to develop the ways in which Marx believed in human beings as the source of all valuation and meaning in the world, yet find themselves confronted with the challenge of a circuit of exchange forcing us into a peculiar, alienating relationship with what is produced in the service of capital. While the larger systematicity of capital may indeed work to impoverish the truth of our central role as the source of all valuation of the world, the forces of the market also veil the truth of its experience as one where we imbue our very soul in the making of a thing. Marx was an avid follower of the complex debates in political economy developing throughout Europe at the time of his writing and, of course, well before in the works of many canonical thinkers. To that end, it is prudent to begin this next section with a minor review of the work of John Locke for the purpose of articulating his views on the origin of property as they relate to the subsequent critique found in Marx. What will become more obvious after fulfilling such a task is the deep reproductive ensnarement of the commodity circuit, as it forces us to place a little bit of our selves in that which is made in the world.

Locke, writing in his “Second Treatise,” establishes the origin of property as that which came from nature and was mixed with out labor; such a thing has been annexed from the natural, common world and made unique because it has been imbued with something uniquely our own—life itself. However, before arriving at such conclusions, Locke suggests that we return to a first order question on the nature of property in the world before being touched by the habits of human society, a theoretical move that is certainly fueled by his religious opinions but could easily be read in a secular context as a simple hypothetical experiment in the imagination. “God,” says Locke, “who hath given the world to men in common, hath also given them reason to make use of it to the best advantage of life, and convenience. The earth, and all that is therein, is given to men for the support and comfort of their being.”<sup>169</sup> The argument, as it were, is actually very humane and somewhat cosmopolitan at this stage in its iteration when read in its fullest light. We are given no reason to think that property could exist in this world according to idol ceremonies, to borrow a phrase from Jean Jacques Rousseau, where planting a flag at the edge of a river could somehow announce the ownership of a continent. Instead, we are told that the natural world exists in common for all people toward the support of society.

The next move in uncovering the origin of private property is still rather ethical, though begins its move down a slippery slope. It is at this second iteration in the formula for private property that Locke suggests we mix our labor with nature in order to create something of private ownership:

Though the earth, and all inferior creatures, be common to all men, yet every man has a ‘property’ in his own ‘person’: this no body has any right to but himself. The ‘labour’ of his body, and the

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<sup>169</sup> John Locke, *The Second Treatise on Civil Government*, (New York: Prometheus Books, 1986), 19 [§25].

‘work’ of his hands, we may say, are properly his. Whatsoever then he removes out of the state that Nature hath provided, and left it in, he hath mixed his labour with, and joined to it something that is his own, and thereby makes it his property. It being by him removed from the common state Nature hath placed it in, it hath by this labour something annexed to it, that excludes the common right of other men: for this ‘labour’ being the unquestionable property of the labourer, no man but he can have a right to what that is once joined to, at least where there is enough, and as good, left in common for others.<sup>170</sup>

While people are able to mix their labor with the natural world and claim the alchemical result as their own, such production may only occur so long as enough, and as good, is left for all others in the world. Again, we are left with some ethical semblance within the formula announcing the origins of private property; however, Locke continues his treatise on property with two additional and important iterations to this formula, which together announce a sickly—almost pathological—fetish with efficiency veiled in the rhetoric of progress.

First, for Locke, property making must remain faithful to the original state of a world that exists in common for all people. Thus, the utility of property making must have some sort of salience for the rest of society, which appears for Locke in something like the efficacy supposedly found in any division of labor. “To which let me add,” says Locke, “that he who appropriates land to himself by his labour, does not lessen, but increase the common stock of mankind: for the provisions serving to the support of human life, produced by one acre of inclosed and cultivated land, are (to speak much within compass) ten times more than those which are yielded by an acre of land of an equal richness lying waste in common.”<sup>171</sup> Efficacy becomes the ethical gauge justifying the original formula guiding property making, and we have in some measure lost sight of the original beauty of seeing the whole of the world as something that lay in common to the benefit of all people. While such controlled efficiency can indeed yield much to the

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<sup>170</sup> Locke, *Second Treatise*, 20 [§26].

<sup>171</sup> Locke, *Second Treatise*, [§37].

world, it does so in a way that holds the concept of productive labor prisoner to the dictates of social desires.

Second, the making of private property is limited by a demand to avoid spoilage. Since the natural world exists common to all people, and the person who made an artifact of private property is bound to do so for some increased utility to the common stock of humanity, then any waste of such common resource for personal privation is an assault against all others within the register of humanity. Locke explains the caveat on spoilage, suggesting:

But if they perished, in his possession, without their due use—if the fruits rotted, or the venison putrefied, before he could spend it, he offended against the common law of Nature, and was liable to be punished: he invaded his neighbour's share, for he had no right, farther than his use called for any of them, and they might serve to afford him conveniences of life.<sup>172</sup>

Again, such a limitation appears to hold a sort of appreciable ethical beauty. However, by this point in the formulation offered by Locke we have traveled down too many slippery lines of argumentation betraying the original foundation of viewing the world as something in common to all people.

Locke continues to suggest that the exchange of money can circumvent any problem of spoilage, since that which is traded in symbolic representation is itself unable to decay. Yet, what is more concerning is that if these two caveats are threaded together, then the result is a logic of imperialism which was itself used as justification for the brutal genocide landed against indigenous people throughout the world in the many abhorrent colonial projects that have taken shape too often in history. Locke continues later in his treatise to lambaste those nations of people that would allow their share of what is natural to go untouched by the powers of efficiency supposedly inherent in the

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<sup>172</sup> Locke, *Second Treatise*, 25 [§37].

liberal project of property formation. In something like a tirade on the supposed savagery of indigenous nations, which curiously enough only reveals the barbarity of so-called civilized thought, Locke suggests:

There cannot be a clearer demonstration of anything, than several nations of the Americans are of this, who are rich in land and poor in all the comforts of life; whom Nature, having furnished as liberally as any other people with the materials of plenty—*i.e.*, a fruitful soil, apt to produce in abundance what might serve for food, raiment, and delight; yet, for want of improving it by labour, have not one hundredth part of the conveniencies we enjoy, and a king of a large and fruitful territory there, feeds, lodges, and is clad worse than a day labourer in England.<sup>173</sup>

Something like a command to progress emerges alongside the formula for declaring private property. What originally involved something of an ethical concern to protect the social state of grace imagined in the original moment where nature was endowed to all people equally has slowly eroded to allow for colonial conquest fueled by the efficacy and machinery of mass production.

The proposition that we build the concept of private property by mixing ourselves with nature is both peculiar and deserves deeper exploration. On first glance, such a claim would seem to stand in fidelity with Hegelian notions of achieving freedom through work found in his discussion of the master and slave. However, given the absence of any real slavery in this imagined origin of property we have instead a moment where we willfully place part of ourselves into the making of an object for the purpose of acquisition, rather than emancipation. A seed, as it were, of deep corruption emerges in the moment where we define objects of production through a systematic loss of the self, which can only be explained by Marx in his treatise on the commodity circuit. While Marx does not directly address the meaning of such a formula for labor in the arguments that follow, his work certainly does speak to the notion that in the making of property we

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<sup>173</sup> Locke, *Second Treatise*, 26 [§41].

imbue a thing with our very soul. There are two arguments that unfold to develop this perspective. The first traces out the ways in which Marx thought about the commodity circuit and augments such thinking by suggesting its mathematical toll in the extraction of surplus value from living labor. For, what results is in an impartial, incomplete reproduction of the worker, a person that has been drained something of the very force of life. The second considers how once we realize the ways in which our very soul is being imbued into the things made in this world in the service of capital, we are struck by a subliminal moment of grasping the immense creative and productive power of our faculties, and at the same time stand jarred by the way in which the magnitude of such power is being spent on mere banality.

The commodity circuit [C-M-M-C] and the money circuit [M-C-C-M<sup>+</sup>] are formulaic representations of the larger system of capital as it works both externally to us and internally within us to reproduce itself and a particular hierarchy of class distinction. On the one hand, the commodity circuit represents life from the perspective of the proletariat, while, on the other hand, the money circuit reveals life from the perspective of the bourgeoisie as they are able to wield the force of surplus labor to cement their position in the larger social, political, and economic order and continue to reign as owners of the means of production. By contrast, in the commodity circuit workers produce a commodity with their labor power, which is traded for money and then spent in a circuit of exchange in order to buy the necessary commodities to subsist in the capitalist world.

The exchange of labor power for commodities within the market is hardly a simple act of buying the bare means of survival, but entails the purchase of the food,



shelter, and articles of imagined necessity that come with living out the capitalist dream of opportunism—all things that mimic the impossible achievement of a manufactured dream of individual wealth decorated by menagerie of simulacra trying to paint over the poverty of our existence with the color of brightly distracting things. Of course, the ability to purchase these manufactured needs is itself only possible because of the socially entrapping and financially augmenting powers of credit, which keep the larger system of capitalism from crumbling before the threat of a crisis of overproduction.

In the money circuit, owners of the means of production use their existing wealth to purchase commodities made by workers for an undervalued price and then sell such commodities within a market, giving them appreciably more money based on the extracted surplus value. In total, such discussion foreshadows later critique by Marx of our experience as subjects of class within a system of capital whose attendances structurally determine our bare ability to reproduce ourselves as products for the work of further production. Yet, such a circuit of exchangeability is not simply a material extraction but indeed also carries the force to symbolically impoverish our value as a subject.

Marx provides a complex, formulaic understanding of the ways in which we participate in the ongoing reproduction of capital as we remain embedded within class distinctions. Marx sees the use value within labor as a capacity of bodily existence, one that is required to sustain our self in the material production of our existence within the larger system of capital. The exchange of our labor power allows us to merely acquire commodities to trade in the circularity of exchange. Marx describes the event by suggesting:

For the use value which he offers exists only as an ability, a capacity [*Vermögen*] of his bodily existence; [such value] has no existence apart from that. The labour objectified in that use value is the objectified labour necessary bodily to maintain not only the general substance in which his labour power exist, i.e. the worker himself, but also that required to modify this general substance so as to develop its particular capacity.<sup>174</sup>

If the “general substance” of capital lacks coherence until our use value is able to “develop its particular capacity,” one could suggest that the forces making up the larger system of capital remains lifeless until we imbue into it our very life force. Indeed, for Marx it is the very capacity of our bodily existence that stands as the source of all valuation within the systematic reproduction of the commodity circuit, which then, in turn, alchemically transforms such valuation according to the dictates of the hierarchies making up market capitalism.

Belief that the system of capital is a freely reproducing system *ad infinitum*, *ad nausea* is something of a misnomer. Only when the capital is viewed on a level of its larger social, universal reproduction, does such a claim carry coherence when we neglect the ways in which the system impacts people on an individual level. Indeed, the analysis of capital on a social level ignores the life force of our powers of valuation and suggests instead that the production of the commodity is itself the genitive force enabling the forces of exchange. To this end, Marx suggests:

If the point of departure in circulation is the commodity, use value, as the principle of exchange, then we necessarily arrive back at the commodity, since money appears only as coin and, as a medium of exchange, is only a vanishing mediation; while the commodity as such, after having described the circle, is consumed as the direct object of need.<sup>175</sup>

The vanishing mediation of money as a form of exchange masks the true source of valuation, which can only be generated by the forces of human production: the use value that arrives in the world through the labor power of the worker. Instead, the symbolic

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<sup>174</sup> Marx, *Grundrisse*, 282-283.

<sup>175</sup> Marx, *Grundrisse*, 295.

obscurity of money performs a peculiar function as a form of exchange mediating, and also veiling, the role of labor in a capitalist system as a means to bare subsistence and enriching the coffers of owners of the means of production.

In his cryptic, fragmented notes on the topic of labor, Marx speaks of a living labor and its subjective existence:

As such it is not-raw-material, not-instrument of labour, not raw-product: labour separated from all means and objects of labour, from its entire objectivity. This living labour, existing as an abstraction from these moments of its actual reality (also, not-value); this complete denudation, purely subjective existence of labour, stripped of all objectivity.<sup>176</sup>

These words, coming to us from his work in the *Grundrisse*, hint at the way in which labor is something that cannot be defined by the systematicity of capital and its dictates directing the means and ends and the larger world. Labor simply does not achieve its characteristic meaning from the chore of production or the very things it produces. Why would Marx suggest such a bold statement and one that, at least in these aphoristic fragments, remained so challenging for him to articulate in a more coherent sentence? For Marx, we are given a sense of labor as integrally tied to our living force. What we are describing is forced submission, then, into the machinery of capitalistic production—following the imprisoning logic of the commodity circuit—which is itself a moment of subversive slavery that sycophantically siphons away the very force of our ability to exist in the world. Considering labor as a living force is not meant as a phrase of esoteric poetry but, instead, suggests that the very means by which we human beings have to live in the world bears integral importance to the livelihood of our existence.

Marx continues his critique of the ways in which capitalism transforms living labor into both a commodity and a part in the process of the reproduction of a

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<sup>176</sup> Marx, *Grundrisse*, 295-296.

commodified world by discussing the way in which labor is made to be the very engine of capital making by a process of displacement. To this end, Marx suggests:

Since capital is the antithesis of the worker, this merely increases the *objective power* standing over labour. The *transformation of labour* (as living, purposive activity) into *capital* is, in *itself*, the result of the exchange between capital and labour, in so far as it gives the capitalist the title of ownership to the product of labour (and command over the same). *This transformation is posited only in the production process itself*. Thus, the question whether capital is productive or not is absurd. Labour itself is *productive only* if absorbed into capital, where capital forms the basis of production. The productivity of labour becomes the productive force of capital just as the general exchange value of commodities fixes itself in money. Labour, such as it exists, *for itself* in the worker in opposition to capital, that is, labour in its *immediate being*, separated from capital, is not productive. Nor does it ever become *productive* as an activity of the worker so long as it merely enters the simple, only formally transforming process of circulation. Therefore, those who demonstrate that the productive force ascribed to capital is a *displacement*, a *transposition of the productive force* of labour, forget precisely that capital itself is essentially this *displacement*, *this transposition*, and that wage labour as such presupposes capital, so that, from its standpoint as well, capital is this *transubstantiation*.<sup>177</sup>

The displacing power of capitalistic relations is one that subverts the true value of labor as the force behind all relations and impoverishes it as a mere thing to be bought and sold. First, labor is treated as only a productive force if it works in the service of capital making. Second, labor is treated as a means to the exchange of commodities rather than as an end-making force. Third, having veiled the genitive power of labor and objectified it as a category in the process of exchange, rather than as a living force, it is possible to displace it as a substance defined by its appearances. Since capitalism has defined the conditions by which we understand the experience of labor and wedded it to being known as a concept in the formulaic reproduction of capitalism itself, it is possible to obscure further its emancipatory power as a living force through a displacement Marx speaks of as an act of transubstantiation.

An object should, properly in the realm of phenomenological discourse, be a substance not known by its particular characteristics. A body of water is not known as wetness, but is a concept in-and-of-itself. The semantic slip is made when we mistakenly

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<sup>177</sup> Marx, *Grundrisse*, 308.

take for granted the appearance of a thing as its essence. Transubstantiation occurs, in this context, when those appearances are symbolically obfuscated with something beyond the essence of the object, i.e. capitalism. The productive force of our labor is made to be the body of capital and the interiority of our experience in the world is treated as its soul. Marx was indeed careful with his choice of words in this critique and is very much suggesting that capitalism makes a deity out of itself for our worship and genuflection. The critique offered to us by Marx, then, bears some resemblance to a moment of spirited economic and political reformation; the power of such reformation is the power to resist capitalism, certainly in its particularistic denigration of the value of a worker, but also as a stand against the universal venality of capitalism to suggest that we are not the source of its valuing power.

In total, these meditations on labor combine to realize that the experience of the commodity circuit deserves an additional notation. We are aware that in the experience of the money circuit the owner of the means of production is yielded with a greater amount of wealth than what was originally put into the system by the notation of money prime found at the end of the formula:  $[M-C-C-M^+]$ . Similarly, but in inverse manner, we must recognize that, as a matter of entropy, the commodity circuit must account for that gain realized by the bourgeoisie in the fundamental extraction of surplus value out of our living labor power represented in the final acquisition of the commodities necessary for both survival and the reproduction of the larger system. Thus, symbolically speaking, the commodity circuit deserves a negating notion in its final articulation:  $[C-M-M-C^-]$ . Energy in the universe, regardless of its form—social or natural—cannot be created or destroyed, but simply altered. For the appreciable gain to appear on the side of the

money circuit we must in reciprocation take notice of the obvious loss within the commodity circuit. And, given the way in which we have already discussed use value as derived from a living labor, it can be said that we imbue into a thing a small bit of our very soul. Marx did not specifically put the matter in these terms, but the oeuvre of his writings stands in fidelity to such a claim:

What he obtains from the exchange is therefore not exchange value, not wealth, but a means of subsistence, objects for the preservation of his life, the satisfaction of his needs in general, physical social, etc. It is a specific equivalent in means of subsistence, in objectified labour, measured by the cost of production of his labour. What he gives up is the power to dispose of the later.<sup>178</sup>

In the end, what we gain from this realization is twofold, yet stands on the side of trying to announce a dream of our material freedom. First, the system of capital certainly veils in complex illusions the ways in which we are integrally beguiled into reproducing its larger system. However, such a critique, for Marx, was not accomplished for the purpose of further emaciating our sense of agency in the world but, instead, stood out as a way of articulating inversely the truth of our existence as the source of all valuation. We are still the subjects of freedom, and we remain—no matter how clouded by the negative attendances of an advanced industrial world—capable of not only dreaming, but also deeply aspiring to the ideality of a world that operates outside of capital.

### ***Imagining the Community Outside of Capital***

At this juncture we have unearthed many of the ways in capital distorts the possibility for human beings to come to conscious awareness of their possible material freedom and see the truth of humanity as the source of all valuation in the world. Such a task has achieved fruition by noting the ways in which the four-fold forces of capitalism

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<sup>178</sup> Marx, *Grundrisse*, 284.

seek to institute, as a natural fact, the a priori existence of a dead pledge of society whereby we exist for the fundamental reproduction of the larger totality of capital making, and the truth of how surplus value is formed by extracting the living labor we imbue into the making of a thing. What follows in such critique, whose inverted purpose it to reveal ourselves as the makers of any possible dream of material human freedom, is to finally articulate the project of communism as regulative ideal by which we dream, and attempt both successfully and mistakenly to enact, the possibility of living in accord with an imagined community outside of the negative attendances of capital itself. Such a task is the work of a teleological projection. One can never achieve the material truth of utopia, a term whose etymological roots reach back to a word of double meaning in that utopia is both a good place (*Eutopia*) and no place (*Outopia*).

Marx in his own writings on the possibility of a communist world gave us deceptively simple, though philosophically complex, illustrations of what such a dream could possibly mean to the world. “*Communism*,” as Marx writes, “is ultimately the *positive* expression of private property as overcome [*aufgehoben*]. Immediately, it is universal private property.”<sup>179</sup> The specific demands of achieving such ideality take contested shape in later writers reflecting on how we might forcibly achieve such an end, forgetting that ideality is something which announces our responsibility to perpetually engage in the work of freedom. Marx continues in this enumerated description of the features of communism by suggesting three additional points. We must overcome the ways in which the state, and perhaps with it all social institutions, operate in the service

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<sup>179</sup> Karl Marx, “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts,” in *Karl Marx: Writings of the Young Marx on Philosophy and Society*, Loyd Easton and Kurt Guddart, eds and trans. (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1997), 301.

of capital making.<sup>180</sup> We must achieve the “*positive overcoming of private property as human self-alienation*, and thus as the actual *appropriation of the human essence* through and for man.”<sup>181</sup> Finally, in similar measure, we must positively appropriate the sensuous experience of human essence for the enjoyment of all people—something like constant effort to provide the people of the world with the capability to develop their own freedom.<sup>182</sup>

To positively overcome the negative attendances of capitalism and its obsession for the unfettered pursuit of private property means we must posit the possibility of a better world and seek to allow our very essence of experience to freely cohere away from those fragmenting forces of capital that would break our subjectivity into elements of utility, but instead remain whole whereby we live out the truth that “every one of [our] *human* relations to the world—seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling, thinking, perceiving, sensing, wishing, acting, loving—in short, all of the organs of [our] individuality, which are immediately communal in form, are an appropriation of the object in their objective relation [*Verhalten*] or their *relation to it*.”<sup>183</sup> Such a fullness of our possible experience of the world in community with all other people is obfuscated by the idea of private property which suggests people can only taste the food that they own, hear the music that they own, or love the family that they own. Such things are not meant for ownership in the abstract sense. To suggest otherwise conjures up an image of people as collectors of the world and meant to slowly acquire human experiences for careful preservation in some museum of private display. Thus, the spirit of Marx and critical

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<sup>180</sup> Marx, “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts,” 303-304.

<sup>181</sup> Marx, “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts,” 304.

<sup>182</sup> Marx, “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts,” 307-314.

<sup>183</sup> Marx, “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts,” 307.



inquiry attempts to dialectically startle us into seeing the realization of our own possible material freedom amid the imprisoning forces of capitalism and the moral duty toward revolutionary change amid a world mired in a stagnation we have indeed helped to fashion.

However, the revolutionary character of critique is hardly one that must adopt the motif of a violent uprising, but instead can very well take the form of more peaceful renegotiations of our social, political, and economic constitution. To that end, Marx, in a short speech to the congress of the First International in 1872, suggested that it was possible for the future of socialism to come into existence under the banner of a non-violent revolution.<sup>184</sup> This admission is most relevant for any thinking about the supposed death of the big dream of socialism, and gives renewed force to the idea that we can in fact bring about at least the semblance of change resembling higher ideals. Marx locates this possibility, in his speech to the First International, by suggesting that cultural transformations of socialism can come about within the space for public dissent and social evolution in advanced, liberal institutions:

You know that the institutions, mores, and traditions of various countries must be taken into consideration, and we do not deny that there are countries—such as America, England, and if I were more familiar with your institutions, I would perhaps add Holland—where the workers can attain their goal by peaceful means. This being the case, we must also recognize the fact that in most countries on the Continent the level of our revolution must be force; it is force to which we must someday appeal in order to erect the rule of labor.<sup>185</sup>

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<sup>184</sup> Karl Marx, “The Possibility of a Non-Violent Revolution,” in *The Marx-Engels Reader* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition), Robert Tucker, ed. (New York: Norton, 1978), 522-524.

<sup>185</sup> Marx, “The Possibility of a Non-Violent Revolution,” 523.

While some committed to the ideals of socialism certainly followed a path of tremendous violence to elicit radical change, others deviated from such ends and sought instead to pursue progressive transformation through more evolutionary means.<sup>186</sup>

Returning, again, to the prefatory quotation meant to thematically relate the deeper spirit of Marx guiding this chapter, we stand with all of the creative and productive powers necessary to enrich the very poverty of humanity. By following the ruthless critique offered by Marx on the systematicity of capital—along the forces of production, distribution, exchange, and consumption—and its varied efforts at masking the fundamental ways it siphons our very living labor out of a circuitous prison of commodity making so as to provide surplus value to those privileged to experience the circuit of money making, we are able to dialectically startle ourselves toward remembering that it is our productive powers and ability to generate valuation that act as the very spark igniting the system of capitalism. Truly, we stand able to dream the ideality of something like socialism in the continued aspiration for achieving a world that slowly eradicates the venality of class distinction. One final point will help to illuminate why such a realization remains possible, and the truth of why it is so difficult to notice.

Previously, in chapter one while discussing Immanuel Kant and his writings in the *Critique of Judgment*, we reviewed the importance of sublime moments that brought us to see the truest image of beauty as the splendor of humanity. With brevity one could pose the argument in a rather simple way. When people experience something like nature we are brought before a moment of sublime reflection. The experience is one where peering above past the firmament we see, without all of the pollution of lights emanating from

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<sup>186</sup> See generally, Eduard Bernstein, *The Preconditions for Socialism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

large cities, the grandness of space stretched outward to infinity. From a position of safety, we are able to deeply think about the way in which something so grand dwarfs the usual ways we might think of our lives as the limit of all experience in the world.

However, such magnitude is not at all ridden with despair that miniaturizes our view of the self into mere nothingness. Instead, such magnitude reminds us that we too are a part of that which is beyond our finite comprehension, yet is still thinkable by our transcendental imagination. Thus, the only truly beautiful object in the world, one that does not itself carry value because of particularistic qualities, is something universally appreciative and imbued throughout all of existence. Though no single word could ever capture this idea of beauty, we can posit an ideality meant to approximate such beauty in the image of humanity. It is, conceptually speaking, that which connects us all: nature, creature, and God. A similar moment, though, of inverse sublimity emerges in the experience of capitalism that distorts such ideality, but when confronted may be the very ideological fissure in the larger foundation of capitalism needed for revolutionary change.

Life in modern capitalism also provides people with a realization of their smallness within something seemingly beyond themselves. There is a something of a sublime moment that emerges when one realizes that the combined creative and productive faculties of people are able to make marvelous creations. One need only ponder the veritable magnitude of something like the military industrial complex to realize the countless hours of creative and material productive that go into the making of such a thing. Those millions upon millions of effective hours of work by numerous people bent toward the production of something so trite, so destructive—instead of toward more noble ends like the curing of diseases, providing shelter to the homeless, or

salvaging the slowly eroding environment—can make one feel dearly miniaturized. But, it is not the same sort of experience of magnitude as we find with nature, which represents the feeling of smallness before universal grandeur beyond our finite existence. Still, the confusion carries the weight of presenting us with an inverted sublimity; such a moment is one whereby what is truly something small (the particular manifestation of the military industrial complex) is veiled to us as something universally grand (in the sense of the infinite) and of which we creatures of humanity (the actual universal agent) are mere cogs in its larger machinery. But, it is a smallness that bears the proverbial effect of a double-edged sword. The thing made, the military industrial complex, certainly exists as a force beyond our selves and is indeed something large. On the one hand, we can feel overwhelmed by the disciplining effects of capitalism as it dictates for us the ends of productive labor, while, on the other hand, it can be a moment of revelation startling us to move away from a world where the paltry efforts of our affairs are spent in the service of something other than an end of our own making.

Such, to my mind, is the spirit of Marx and his erudite thinking captured in the larger oeuvre of his writings. As we have said, the very act of critique is meant to confirm that “[t]he reform of consciousness consists *only* in enabling the world to clarify its consciousness, in waking from its dream about itself, in *explaining* to it the meaning of its own actions. Our whole task can consist only in putting religious and political questions into self-conscious human form.”<sup>187</sup> The critique of capital is not a strong measure of announcing our simple happenstance in a world of false consciousness requiring intervention by an enlightened intelligentsia. Instead, critique sheds light, for certain, on the oppressive features of life entangled in the larger web of capitalism, so as

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<sup>187</sup> Marx, “For a Ruthless Criticism of Everything Existing,” 15.

to instead reveal the very truth of our possible material freedom in the world when we take seriously that we remain, as a metaphysical fact, the progenitors of all valuation in the world.

### *Conclusion*

To this dream of freedom, we will turn to a further nightmare of despair. The work of Theodore Adorno will discuss the ways in which we might aesthetically arrive at such a critical revelation of our freedom only to find it too is being eaten up by the forces of capitalism, which not only seek out material conquest but also turn its control toward the interiority of our subjective experience of the world. However, following this pairing of a dream of human freedom against the threat of our collapse into a nightmare of despair, this dissertation will find its conclusion in the meditations of Walter Benjamin; such concluding reflections will consider the belief that we can indeed awaken from the nightmarish slumber of capitalism knowing that we owe it to all of us to take seriously our moral debt—one that cannot be settled cheaply—to continue struggling to escape the perils of the world in aspiration to an impossible to know freedom.

## **Chapter 5:**

### **Theodor Adorno**

#### **The World without Image:**

#### **Aesthetic Loss and the Spectacle of Damaged Life**

The more rational, productive, technical, and total the repressive administration of society becomes, the more unimaginable the means and ways by which the administered individuals might break their servitude and sieve their own liberation.

Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man*<sup>188</sup>

As things are, the intelligent are infected by a gross mental disorder, which makes them defend the irrational workings of their minds as if they were logic and truth itself, even when the evidence has been put before them as plainly as humanly possible.

St. Augustine, *City of God*<sup>189</sup>

#### ***Abstract***

Where our engagement with Karl Marx concluded with the realization that we can figure ourselves as people in union toward the teleological aspiration of the regulative ideal of communism, Theodor Adorno is animated in this chapter to suggest that the aesthetic world allowing such a figurative transformation of our freedom to seed within our consciousness is slowly being eaten up by the very same powers of commodification that have devastated our material world. This chapter, in turn, considers the threatening nightmare of despair that haunts our experience of life in modernity when we fail to take seriously our role as the source of human valuation in the ordering of the material world. As a consequence of that failure, this chapter traces out three stages in the threatening collapse of the aesthetic within our lives. First, the world, as it were, begins to lose the

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<sup>188</sup> Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 6.

<sup>189</sup> Augustine, *City of God*, Henry Bettenson, trans. (London: Penguin Classics, 1984), Book II, Chapter 1.

grandeur of its image as we enter into a time of nearness to catastrophe marked by a life where the aesthetic is bent toward the service of the forces of capital. Second, what little space remains for great aesthetic work too often comes under the attack of canonical objectifications of beauty that systematically eclipse the aesthetic from accessing its true power of imagining the world different from its current state of decay. Finally, the theoretical impetus of both of these arguments are practically united in the attempt to reveal the ways in which negative forms of the aesthetic as it persists in various layer of our lived, everyday lives encourages a world which can only be known as a growing spectacle of damaged life.

### ***Introduction***

We live in a paradoxical reality simultaneously interconnected on the global level through advanced communication technology, yet people still suffer from forms of alienation as our sensuous relations with one another become *shorter*, more *superficial*, and more *virtual*. Just a few years ago a family actually tried to put itself up for auction on EBay.<sup>190</sup> And, instead of volunteering their time for service in the community, predictions estimate that by 2006 nearly 26 million adults and children have flocked to online video games like the SIMS—a virtual reality game that literally mimics life.<sup>191</sup> The cost, however, for this virtual connectivity to a digital landscape and disconnection

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<sup>190</sup> Leslie Walker, "What's Next on EBay?," *The Washington Post* (19 January 2003): Financial, H07.

<sup>191</sup> Winda Benedetti, "Games Help Players Connect on a New Level," *The Seattle Post-Intelligencer* (8 October 2003): Life and Arts, E1

from the material world has been a plummeting decline in social capital—the bedrock of democratic citizenship.<sup>192</sup>

And so, we find that our spaces in this world are less *public*, less *political*, more *private*, and more *commercial*. In 1998, high school senior Mike Cameron became a short-lived celebrity for his one-day in school suspension at Greenbrier High School. The suspension made Mike a casualty in the war of corporate branding when he decided to wear Pepsi T-shirt on Coke day.<sup>193</sup> School officials remarked, “the shirt was an insult to visiting Coca-Cola executives and ruined a school picture in which students lined up to spell out Coke.”<sup>194</sup> When high school students are suspended because their expression of free speech threatens to blemish a relationship with a corporation, it becomes clear that our democratic spaces are losing their openness and becoming infected with limitations imposed by the dictates of global capitalism.

However, this is not just a problem for denizens of the Internet and rebellious school kids. When we fail to make space for aesthetic reflection, we comport ourselves toward reliving new incarnations of some of the worst moments in history. Global production chains relying on exploited labor in so-called third world countries becomes the new economic bondage sanctioning forms of human slavery. Security defense walls jutting chaotically throughout Palestine take on an all too ominous shape reminding us of similar barriers separating Berlin after World War II. And, while the U.S. bombing of Iraq and its wake of absolute devastation is quieted by the rhetorical smoothing of being

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<sup>192</sup> Scott McLean, David Schultz, and Manfred Steger, *Social Capital: Historical and Theoretical Perspectives on Civil Society* (New York: New York University Press, 2002); Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001).

<sup>193</sup> Staff Writer, “A Pepsi Fan Is Punished in Coke's Backyard,” *New York Times* (26 March 1998): Business, Section D, Page 5, Column 4; Kenneth Saltman, *Collateral Damage: Corporatizing Public Schools—A Threat to Democracy* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000), Chapter 3.

<sup>194</sup> Staff Writer, “A Pepsi Fan Is Punished in Coke's Backyard,” Section D, Page 5, Column 4.



called a campaign of “shock and awe” bringing the light of civilized governance, we can hear an echo of history that resonates with the demagoguery of the Ancient Greeks as they laid waste to the Melians in the empiric advance of democratization. However, what remains so troubling about such massive failures to live life in harmony with a higher ideal of human belonging is that such failures take place mired in the willful manipulation of our reflective, aesthetic capacity to see such atrocities—global and local, particular and universal, ordinary and outlandish—in their true light.

Both prefatory quotations depict what is philosophically at stake for a world that is slowly losing its ability to think its own image, an aesthetic loss that has given rise to a world marked by sheer spectacle ushering forth nothing less than a damaged life. Herbert Marcuse spoke of the pervasiveness of a one-dimensional logic, claiming “[a] comfortable, smooth, reasonable, democratic unfreedom prevails in advanced industrial civilization, a token of technical progress.”<sup>195</sup> Life, then, follows a certain type of all-encompassing logic—a way of thinking that limits the imagination from other ways of understanding, perceiving, and living otherwise. Marcuse argues that such one-dimensional thinking socializes people to believe in false needs, “which are superimposed upon the individual by particular social interests in his repression: the needs which perpetuate toil, aggressiveness, misery, and injustice.”<sup>196</sup> The situation is of the order of an aesthetic catastrophe whereby the surrounding world operates under the reigns of advanced industrial logic at odds with the reproductive capacity of our very imagination. Surpassing such one-dimensional logic requires instead that we be able to

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<sup>195</sup> Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 1.

<sup>196</sup> Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 4-5.

rely on our imaginative capacities in the space for aesthetic reflection to tease out the multiplicities, ambiguities, and contradictions within such a world.

Similarly, St. Augustine, in his critique of Rome Augustine suggests, “as things are, the intelligent are infected by a gross mental disorder, which makes them defend the irrational workings of their minds as if they were logic and truth itself, even when the evidence has been put before them as plainly as humanly possible.”<sup>197</sup> In this world preference is given to “those disgusting spectacles of frivolous immaturity” in honor of “those gods that were less worth than their pontiff.”<sup>198</sup> Recalling the struggles for piety made by his friend Alpyius, Augustine remembers that his friend was once dragged to a circus—having previously sworn off such carnal spectacles—and immediately “imbibed madness. Without any awareness as to what was happening to him, he found delight in the murderous contest and was inebriated by bloodthirsty pleasure. He was not the person who had come in, but just one of the crowd which he had joined, and a true member of the group which had brought him.”<sup>199</sup> Under the empiric advance of the Roman Empire—something that should resonate with deep familiarity to those of us living under similar domination—Augustine gives us a vision of the world where imperial politics subverts our introspective, aesthetic gaze, which instead becomes synonymous with the external affairs of outwardly pressing military conquest.

There is nothing about this state of the world along aesthetic dimensions that is fated to be our present experience or future condition. The idea of a nightmare of despair is one whereby we must confront the truth of our human abilities to act as the source of all valuation in the world and take note of the ways where our failure to acknowledge

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<sup>197</sup> Augustine, *City of God*, Henry Bettenson, trans. (London: Penguin Classics, 1984), Book II, Chapter 1.

<sup>198</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, Henry Chadwick trans., (New York: Oxford Press, 1998), Book II, Chapter 32.

<sup>199</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, Book VI, Chapter 8.

such a truth begins to unfold into an image of a bleakly colored world. Such bleakness, or at least the possibility of our continued slip toward such a nightmare of aesthetic loss whereby we lose the means to think the image of the world, is revealed in the work of Theodor Adorno via three careful movements. First, what follows will discuss the ways in which the larger, negative forces of capitalism have indeed slowly commodified the space for aesthetic reflection. Second, we will turn our attention to the ways in which remaining great artistic works are *a priori* conceived of as failed projects whose form and content are ugly renditions of expected notions of beauty; such is a philosophical slippage that fundamentally devalues the true power of the aesthetic as something capable of reaching beyond the finite experience of the world and allowing our mind to think in fidelity to larger idealities. And, finally, these two observations are threaded together to reveal the totality of an experience of the world where the aesthetic is reduced to mere spectacle propping up the order of a damaged life.

### ***The Situation of Catastrophe***

Despite the tremendous pessimism usually associated with Theodor Adorno, his work bends and weaves between critically dissecting the larger attendances of the culture industry in the service of an ethically baseless system of capital yet also reminds us, rather poetically, how we might still animate ourselves before a truer form of aesthetic grandeur capable of accessing its powers of authenticity. Evoking a tone similar to the work of his long-time friend Walter Benjamin, Adorno remarks that it is, “in the image of catastrophe, an image that is not a copy of the event but the cipher of its potential, the magical trace of art’s most distant pre-history reappears under the total spell, as if art

wanted to prevent the catastrophe by conjuring up its image.”<sup>200</sup> This power of illumination inherent within aesthetic work carries with it a veritable reprieve from the external forces of the world emaciating our subjectivity and a sort of youthful play that gives us the necessary space to experience art as a matter of dialectically forestalling the ordinary movement of time so that we might instead evoke a more reflective understanding of ourselves and the larger world.

However, this attempt to reconfigure our sense of the world is itself paradoxical and can be easily assimilated by the culture industry once it becomes a matter of fetish for novelty. Demonstrating this simultaneity of possibility and collapse, Adorno aphoristically presents the problem and in it an imbedded solution:

The relation to the new is modeled on a child at the piano searching for a chord never previously heard. This chord, however, was always there; the possible combinations are limited and actually everything that can be played on it is implicitly given in the keyboard. The new is the longing for the new, not the new itself: That is what everything new suffers from.<sup>201</sup>

By an inherent tendency, important artworks annihilate everything of their own time that does not achieve their standard. Rancor is therefore one of the reasons why so many of the cultured oppose radical modern art: The murderous historical force of the modern is equated with the disintegration of all that to which the proprietors of culture desperately cling... Only those works that expose themselves to every risk have the chance of living on, not those that out of a fear of the ephemeral cast their lot with the past.<sup>202</sup>

Aesthetics, despite the sometimes-elitist character of Adorno in his writing, is not a moment of privation allowing for purposeless enjoyment of aristocratic frivolity, but is instead a necessary human experience integrally relating our being in the world. What is subject to loss in aesthetics is a precious human experience where we stand subjectively comported to genitively conjure in our minds a literal imagining of the world and with it the fact that we exist within such a world as subjects with the material and creative

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<sup>200</sup> Theodore Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, eds, Robert Hullot-Kentor, trans. (New York: Continuum, 2004), 42.

<sup>201</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 41.

<sup>202</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 44.

faculties to effect its change. The growing absence of such aesthetic experience ushers with its loss the gain of our alienation for, as Adorno remarks, “As soon as artworks make a fetish of their hope of duration, they begin to suffer from their sickness onto death: The veneer of inalienability that they draw over themselves at the same time suffocates them.”<sup>203</sup>

The situation at hand, despite the possibility of awakening, is indeed dire. In the wake of a nostalgia for our own uniqueness, virulently stripped away as we stand mechanistically caught in the cogs of a social totality bending the forces of exchange to a capitalization that robs us of our personhood, we are presented with the all too familiar image of the circuitous cooptation of capital:

Those who have been duped by the culture industry and are eager for its commodities were never familiar with art: They are therefore able to perceive art’s inadequacy to the present life process of society—though not society’s own untruth—more unobstructedly than do those who still remember what an artwork once was. They push for the deaestheticization of art. Its unmistakable symptom is the passion to touch everything, to allow no work to be what it is, to dress it up, to narrow its distance from its viewer.<sup>204</sup>

Such masquerading is indeed a complicated sentiment where the very faculties of our imagination may themselves be turned sycophant as they are leached onto by the drive for exchange. For Adorno, this complication is itself ambiguous and “[w]hat helped make this possible is the fact that the imagination, the course taken by the object through the subject, does not, as Stockhausen pointed out, have a fixed focus but can adjust to degrees of acuity. What is hazily imagined can be imagined in its vagueness. This is a veritable balancing act for the experimental comportment.”<sup>205</sup> Imagination is itself taken over by the reigns of a dictatorial logic of experimentation suppressing the drive to unify

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<sup>203</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 37.

<sup>204</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 22

<sup>205</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 31.

the world through aesthetic imagination and instead become slavishly lost in an iterative activity of shameless, perpetual production.

Thus, the mechanistic reproduction of aesthetic experience no longer stands out as a teleological end toward the ideality of subliminal movements toward beauty, but instead collapses into the service of being a means to the end of capital. Adorno captures this philosophical slippage rather cogently, suggesting:

What is left in an abstract unity shorn of the antithetical element by virtue of which art becomes unity in the first place. The more successful the integration, the more it becomes an empty spinning of gears teleologically, it tends toward infinite tinkering. The power of the aesthetic subject to integrate whatever it takes hold of is at the same time its weakness. It capitulates to a unity that is alienated by virtue of its abstractness and resignedly casts its lot with blind necessity.<sup>206</sup>

However, such mindless tinkering, for Adorno, is not at all a fated determination of our character in the world and instead may be critically revealed and eventually transformed by great works of art.

Capital is indeed culpable for the fact that “art is no longer self-evident.”

However, the strangling grip of scientific rationality also shares blame for this grave situation in the ways in which the newness of exchangeable art soon loses its value as it fades into old-age and requires replacement. “For the most part,” Adorno reminds us, “experimentation takes shape as the testing of possibilities, usually of types and species; it therefore tends to degrade the concrete work to mere example: This is one of the reasons for the aging of new art.”<sup>207</sup> When art is left to the forces of mechanical reproduction it stands stalled within the dictates of a science that must discover new ways to communicate the logic of commodification in its attempt to quell the masses from reflective thought on the condition of our age.

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<sup>206</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 37.

<sup>207</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 47.

What emerges in experimentation is a game of finding new symbolic containers that allow us to project out our interiority into the shelter of commercial symbolism; we are given the space to derive aesthetic meaning for the self—eliding ourselves through subjective affiliations with brand names and popular entertainment—in a world that literally stands to buy and sell all of its contents, including ourselves:

The consumer arbitrarily projects his impulse—mimetic remnants—on whatever is presented to him. Prior to total administration, the subject who viewed, heard, or read a work was to lose himself, forget himself, extinguish himself in the artwork. The identification carried out by the subject was ideally that of making himself like the artwork. This identification constituted aesthetic sublimation.<sup>208</sup>

However, Adorno is clear to make distinctions between avant-garde aesthetic commercialism and the continued presence and possibility of more redemptive forms of authentic art capable of dialectically startling us back to the true nature of the aesthetic. Such great works are indeed timeless and do not themselves age like their ephemeral counterparts, instead:

Authentic art of the past that for the time being must remain veiled is not thereby sentenced. Great works wait. While their metaphysical meaning dissolves, something of their truth content, however little it can be pinned down, does not; it is that whereby they remain eloquent. A liberated humanity would be able to inherit its historical legacy free of guilt. What was once true in an artwork and then disclaimed by history is only able to disclose itself again when the conditions have changed on whose account that truth was invalidated: Aesthetic truth content and history are deeply meshed.<sup>209</sup>

Thus, returning to his original sentiments on the desire for aesthetic images to reveal the deeper truth of catastrophe and with it the location for our work toward freedom, Adorno concludes his sentiments on the situation we have been thrown into by assigning a peculiar character to the experience of a disintegrated world.

While, certainly, the commodification of aesthetic work stands to further alienate ourselves in a dizzying fragmentation of our interiority and ultimate relation to the

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<sup>208</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 23.

<sup>209</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 51.

external world, there still exists much hope in the obvious dialectical counterpart to such disintegration in the polemic drive for unification. For, as Adorno concludes his chapter on our situational loss of genuine aesthetic experience, "...the truth of such disintegration is achieved by way of nothing less than the triumph and guilt of integration. The category of the fragmentary—which has its locus here—is not to be confused with the category of contingent particularity: The fragment is that part of the totality of the work that opposes totality.”<sup>210</sup>

The world, then, stands at the brink of aesthetic catastrophe. As varied forms of artistic expression are slowly made to be the handmaid to the pursuit of capital, we find that much of the natural artistic talent in the world is exhausted in a vacuum of meaningless productivity: creating symphonic overtures to heighten the emotional experience of trite films for the motion picture industry, illustrating magazine pages with fancy logography and digitally manipulated pictures, or painting entire virtual worlds for people to explore as we project the very interiority of our consciousness into a computer screen. In total, there are simply countless examples where the world we inhabit employs talented, creative artists in the service of capital productivity, and, at the same time, erodes the aesthetic of its true purpose: being able to figuratively project out, and subsequently in the aesthetic experience subjectively interiorize, a regulative ideality giving us critical, reflective means to think the aspiration to higher ends.

Truly, for Adorno, the world we inhabit is one where “It is self-evident that nothing concerning art is self-evident anymore, not its inner life, not its relation to the world, not even its right to exist.”<sup>211</sup> This aesthetic loss of what should be self-evident

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<sup>210</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 57.

<sup>211</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 1.



carries gravity only because it is miniaturized to the point of appearing extinct as if we inhabit a world that bears no image. The world, surely, exists in material reality. But, the valuation of that material reality bears, always, a symbolic quality. Thus, without being able to aesthetically depict the world, we stand robbed of the very means needed to free ourselves into revolutionary imagination. Such possibility, for Adorno, stands entangled with the enchanting, mimetic quality of the aesthetic:

Art is motivated by a conflict: Its enchantment, a vestige of its magical phase, is constantly repudiated as unmediated sensual immediacy by the progressive disenchantment of the world, yet without [it] ever being possible finally to obliterate this magical element. Only in it is art's mimetic character preserved, and its truth is the critique that, by sheer existence, it levels at a rationality that has become absolute. Emancipated from its claim to reality, the enchantment is itself part of the enlightenment: Its semblance disenchant the disenchanted world. This is the dialectical ether in which art today takes place. The renunciation of any claim to truth by the preserved magical element marks out the terrain of aesthetic semblance and aesthetic truth. Art inherits a comportment of spirit once directed toward essence, and with it the chance of perceiving mediately that which is essential yet otherwise tabooed by the progress of rational knowledge.<sup>212</sup>

And so, the mimetic character of art, opposed to the diegetic form of narrative meant to mirror truth, is something of a playful engage of sensual expression meant to call our attention to a higher, transcendental reflection. It truly is a magical quality, an engagement with something that is beyond human, finite experience where the imagination can play out what is not obviously present in reality and still bring back after such engagement the possible reconfiguration of the whole of the world. This space of the beyond is where the image of the world must exist. It is an untouched place that resists all means for scientific classification and, thus, any discursive category that would place a limitation on possibility.

An enchanted world is not meant to conjure fairy tale like imaginings, but instead speaks to the ways in which we carry the symbolic force to consider the existing state of affairs against a powerful otherness protecting the powers of our reproductive

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<sup>212</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 75.

imagination. Surely, such enchantment is an engagement with the beyond and the preservation of utopian splendor able to give image to the world in the infinite form of possibility. Despite our inability to ever truly actualize such utopian reflections, that is the impossibility of ever bringing true fidelity between figurative representations of grandeur and their implementation in material experience, the image of the world can never truly fade from the horizon of our imagination; it might seem distant, twisted, or faint, but it will always be available to those with the creative courage to speak it—and thereby ourselves—into existence. However, when those with such bravery do gift to the world their creative splendor in great works of art we are confronted with a further problem deserving our consideration, as such great works of are sadly too often received as ugly renditions of what is *a priori* expected as beautiful—a sense of beauty which itself also operates under the dictatorial logic of capital.

### ***Ugliness made Beautiful***

The aesthetic in Adorno does not preclude itself merely to the realm of formal art. Surely, aesthetic thinking carries great import to understand more deeply great works of art: the dissonant harmonic adventure of *Le Sacre du Printemps* by Igor Stravinsky, the poetic malaise made critique of *Les Fleurs du Mal* by Charles Baudelaire, the wicked prose and sense of tragic humor in *Waiting for Godot* by Samuel Beckett, or the image of devastation painted with the disaggregate style of cubism found in *Guernica* by Pablo Picasso. But, the idea of the aesthetic also lends itself to speak of the ways in which our very imagination comprehends the totality of our situation in the world and the possibility of its transformation. Thus, the aesthetic becomes a complex term whose symbolic reach

touches the furthest depths of the ways our subjective interior connects with the material world. And so, the menagerie of images layered throughout our lived, everyday lives—the jutting architecture of a city, the digital landscape of virtual worlds, or the ways we relate the news of imperial affairs taking place far from home—all persist imbued with deep aesthetic meaning.

For Adorno, these aesthetic images—both in great works of art but also in the seemingly mundane manifestations of life in an advanced capitalist society—have been

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the matter bluntly, rather ugly. Yet, t



*Guernica* by Pablo Picasso (1937, Museo Reina Sofia, Madrid)

war within the United Nations, and, for Picasso, expressed his deep “abhorrence of the military caste which has sunk Spain in an ocean of pain and death.”<sup>213</sup>

Before these proverbial great works of art were considered great—a denotation of approval asserted within the realm of public punditry—their introduction was often met with great outrage. Such great works violate traditional techniques and canonical customs with daring forms and reflective content. Against these avant-garde expressions of social ruination in the image of an aesthetic play, the mainstream genre of aesthetic expression had given the world works mythologizing bourgeoisie frivolity as the pinnacle of artistic beauty. There are all too many paintings, orchestrations, and literary works that would have us believe the entire world is a lovely afternoon tea party while the rest

<sup>213</sup> Colm Tóibín, “The Art of War,” *The Guardian*, (29 April 2006).

of the world suffers the growing atrocities of violence embedded in a so-called civilized world with a sickening taste for warmongering acts of empiric advancement and capitalist exploitation that makes the term slavery seem an impossibly inadequate descriptor.

The power of great aesthetic works are first attacked for their mere appearance as an ugly depiction of socially acceptable understandings of what makes something beautiful in form and content. Such an attack, Adorno rightfully reminds us, is full of philosophical misgivings, as such labels are simply inadequate to the task of understanding the full power of aesthetic work:

The definition of aesthetics as the theory of the beautiful is so utterly unfruitful because the formal character of the concept of beauty is inadequate to the full content [Inhalt] of the aesthetic. If aesthetics were nothing but a mere systematic formal catalogue of whatever is called beautiful, it would give no idea of the life that transpires in the concept of beauty.<sup>214</sup>

The life, as it were, that might transpire in the concept of the beautiful is one which brings symmetry to both content and form for a deeper purposes of praxis which stands beyond the account of mere tradition. The realm of aesthetic reflection is one, as we have discussed, that allows a person to literally remake the whole of the world in the faculty of the imagination, which must at some level bear serious critique on the existing finite phenomenal experience of human beings in the world against the backdrop of the unknowable otherness that functions as a regulative ideal beyond such limitation. Aesthetic works do not necessarily represent such ideality but merely serve as a reflective bridge of sorts laid over the vast chasm separating the ways things are from the way things might yet become. Adorno, expounding on the role of aesthetics, explicates its dialectical and reproductive character in greater detail:

The perpetually recurring becomes that antithetical other without which art, according to its own concept, would not exist: appropriated through negation, this other—the antithesis to beauty, whose antithesis beauty was—gnaws away correctively on the affirmativeness of spiritualizing art.

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<sup>214</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 66.

In the history of art, the dialectic of the ugly has drawn the category of the beautiful into itself as well; kitsch is, in this regard, the beautiful as the ugly; taboo in the name of that very beauty that it once was and that it now contradicts in the absence of its own opposite. That, however, only formal definition may be given to the concept of the ugly, as well as to its positive correlate, is internally related to art's immanent process of enlightenment.<sup>215</sup>

The term *kitsch*, here, carries something of a double meaning. Traditionally, the term refers to that which appears in supposed bad style or is something of an inferior copy of what is seen as the penultimate technique. However, it is used in this context to signify something of a genre of avant-garde work that counters traditionalist approaches by inverting that which is seen as superficially ugly in the eye of popular appraisal and instead is a beautiful work for its ability to return aesthetics to its proper plateau in the dialectical engagement with otherness as an immanent process of enlightenment.

The praxis of critique in the larger oeuvre of work by Adorno confronts the ways in which the ideological totality of thought serves as a limiting power on what might be considered beautiful and, thereby, able to give us universal analysis in a moment of particular expression. In this vein, the semantic confusion of ugliness and beauty in the realm of aesthetic inquiry bears something of a divine appropriation, giving the particular qualities of a artistic work within the familiar cannon of traditional style impossible authority as representative figurations of teleological perfection. That is to say, not only have we confused the deeper philosophical meaning of what should be connoted as beautiful and ugly, but we have also gone the accidental distance in giving what is wrongly seen as beautiful something of a untouchable presence that is made to foreclose future possible dialectical revelation toward what is indeed beautiful and what exactly constitutes the beautiful in aesthetic work. To quote Adorno:

Among the human rights of those who foot the bill for culture is one that is polemically directed against the affirmative, ideological totality: That the stigmas of degradation be directed to

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<sup>215</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 62-63.

Mnemosyne in the form of an image. Art must take up the cause of what is proscribed as ugly, tough no longer in order to integrate or mitigate it or reconcile it with its own existence through humor that is more offensive than anything repulsive. Rather, in the ugly art must denounce the world that creates and reproduces the ugly in its own image, even if in this too the possibility persists that sympathy with the degraded will reverse into concurrence with degradation.<sup>216</sup>

Mnemosyne involves the personification of memory as an act of adulterating the divine in the mixing of its qualities with what is merely human. Those kings that would claim divine authority with a birthright bound in mythological stories of a lineage whose origin comes from the seed of the Gods themselves is itself an act of mnemosyne. Similarly, the supposed beauty of bourgeoisie forms of the aesthetic lay an impossible claim to a lineage of form genealogically presented to have its foundation in previous great works. A simple, yet powerfully spurious, line of historical ancestry is drawn connecting the work of such contemporary artists to noble traditions from the time of the Renaissance or Ancient Greece. Thus, the purported ugliness of avant-garde works—expressions meant to stir our imagination and restore the transcendental quality of the aesthetic—are simply disregarded because of their supposed impoverished family history.

Instead, Adorno recasts this distinction by reminding us that the supposed ugly work instead involves the transformation “...of what is hostile into art’s own agent, which thus extends art’s concept beyond that of the ideal.”<sup>217</sup> What is present in the power of the aesthetic is very much the power of taking symbolic control over this rhetorical game of inversion and reasserting the primacy of what indeed makes artistic works beautiful in the coherence of their form and content wielded for greater purposes. Truly, Adorno remarks, “Art need not defend itself against the rebuke that it is degenerate; art meets this rebuke by refusing to affirm the miserable course of the world

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<sup>216</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 63-64.

<sup>217</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 65.

as the iron law of nature.”<sup>218</sup> Aesthetics, then, holds a deep importance for politics. While many would discredit aesthetic analysis as outside of the realm of the political, artistic works are powerful forces capable of collapsing the image of the world into a single, totalizing imago justifying the interests of the powerful. Nothing in aesthetics, naturally speaking, should become the rhetorical apologia for the unfettered pursuits of capital or military dominance. Instead, again as Adorno remarks, “because art has the power to harbor its own opposite without slackening its longing, indeed because it changes its longing into this power, the element of the ugly is bound up in art’s spiritualization.”<sup>219</sup>

And so, by reconfiguring ourselves out of the polemical inversion of mistaking the beautiful as merely ugly we arrive at a truer notion of the aesthetic as something that stands beyond the reach of the superficial expectations of society and, instead, becomes a powerful force for reconciling the human imagination to call forth the powers of creativity in attempt to think the whole of the world. Such a power is itself derived from the ability to reach out toward the entirety of nature, a force beyond the happenstance of human assertions, and bring back with it a redemptive image of what might yet still be other in our lives. Adorno remarks:

The image of beauty as that of a single and differentiated something originates with the emancipation from the fear of the overpowering wholeness and undifferentiatedness of nature. The shudder in the face of this is rescued by beauty into itself by making itself impervious to the immediately existent; beauty establishes a sphere of untouchability; works become beautiful by the force of their opposition to what simply exists.<sup>220</sup>

This sphere of what is untouchable, what stands beyond absorption into any corrupt system, is the ability to release art from the dogmatic constraints of objective

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<sup>218</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 65.

<sup>219</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 65.

<sup>220</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 67.

expectations. Instead, form and content are permitted a freedom beyond expectations of semblance that unknowingly strip the aesthetic of its illusory quality. Adorno goes so far to suggest that, “Artworks themselves destroy the claim to objectivation that they raise,” which is itself:

...a measure of the profundity with which illusion suffuses artworks, even in the non-representational ones. The truth of artworks depends on whether they succeed at absorbing into their immanent necessity what is not identical with the concept, what is according to that concept accidental. The purposefulness of artworks requires the purposeless, with the result that their own consistency is predicated on the illusory; semblance is indeed their logic.<sup>221</sup>

The necessary absorption that must occur is something internal to the experience of the aesthetic which does not seek to make simple representations of signification, but instead holds out an illusory quality capable of allowing the mind to consider what is not present—both in the artwork itself and in the larger world. By contrast, aesthetic work that engages in objectification mistakenly constricts the imagination by forcing one to experience the aesthetic according to a dogmatic symbolic code of representation. If we are to assume that manipulations of light in certain patterns of brushstrokes or the atonal quality of a symphonic overture carry meaning *a priori*, then the hermeneutic task of literally building an experience of possibility remains foreclosed before it is ever initiated.

Instead, aesthetic work carries the power to literally dissolve the world at hand and instead allow the subjective interiority of our consciousness to prepare a symbolic dissonance that lays waste to the sense of harmony in typical artistic work justifying the existing order of the world. Harmony, here, refers to the ways in which a genre of style creates a superficial sense of balance and symmetry not only in its form but also in its content so that the larger image constructed seems natural. For example, models posing

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<sup>221</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 134.



for an advertisement speak to such an ephemeral sense of harmony, one present in anorexic figures and manicured faces purporting an impossible to achieve image of socially determined beauty. In contrary fashion, Adorno considers the importance of dissonance for true artworks attempting to reveal truth at the expense of extinguishing such expected harmony:

According to their internal constitution, artworks are to dissolve everything that is heterogeneous to their form even though they are form only in relation to what they would like to make vanish. They impede what seeks to appear in them according to their own apriori. They must conceal it, a concealment that their idea of truth opposes until they reject harmony... Dissonance is the truth about harmony.<sup>222</sup>

Thus, to put the matter simply, aesthetic work must have the ability to speak. Its language cannot be preformed by societal expectations for acceptable content or archaic traditions limiting the possibility of form. Again, returning to our earlier discussion suggesting the importance of seeing aesthetic work as much broader than the realm of formal art, it becomes evident that far too many of the images surrounding us in our lived everyday experiences are truly ugly monstrosities; yet, they are garbed in the fashion of acceptability allowing them to feign a rather vulgar sense of what is beautiful. We stand, then, at such a moment in a world losing its image.

The image of the world can only live in the symbolic. It must have shelter, in the highest sense of that word, in the varied layers of our experiences in the material world. At this juncture, we have discussed the ways in which the forces of capitalism insidiously encroach on the very space for aesthetic grandeur to take place. Secondly, we have also observed how the great works of art are made diminutive as simply ugly manifestations almost rhythmically out of synch with that which is *a priori* defined as beautiful; indeed, we can even suggest further that very bombardment of our lives with fabricated images of

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<sup>222</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 144.

commercial stupidity does immeasurable damage to our ability to even think along with what truly aesthetic work aims to accomplish in its attempts to reach out into a beyond and bring back a dialectically startling manifestation of a world deeply out of joint and simultaneously always open to the possibility of repair. What is missing in this world is the chance for aesthetic work to become expressive, to be able to speak against the cementing of ideas that would cripple the world from enacting its own redemption. As Adorno put the matter:

Art is expressive when what is objective, subjectively mediated, speaks, whether this be sadness, energy, or longing. Expression is the suffering countenance of artworks... Yet expression here become doubly puzzling because the sedimented, the expressed meaning, is once more meaningless; it is natural history that leads to nothing but what, impotently enough, it is able to express. Art is imitation exclusively as the imitation of an objective expression, remote from psychology, of which the sensorium was perhaps once conscious in the world and which now subsists only in artworks.<sup>223</sup>

To this end, we see the importance of the aesthetic as the continued existence of our reflective capacity to think the whole of the world in our imagination, an exercise meant to allow us to take note of those oppressive forces that have no place in a society professing to believe in the big dreams of freedom and at the same time critique such inadequacies against the possible future transformation of all things toward nothing less than justice.

Of course, the great peril before society presents itself in the moment when we willfully engage in an aesthetic inversion, granting shameful images synonymous with mere spectacle reified place in the forefront of popular imagination. Much of what is great, aesthetically speaking, has been bled from the world. What remains are a litany of images that uphold supposedly inviolable rules of idiotic form meant to satiate slowly eroding attention spans with meager sound bites that flash before our mind. No true

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<sup>223</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 146 & 147.

cultural institution remains to give any one of us the room for aesthetic performance. Instead, the landscape of our imagination has been populated with advertisements. “The emancipation of society,” Adorno tells us, “from the supremacy of its relations of production has as its aim what these relations have to date impeded—the real establishment of the subject—and expression is not simply the hubris of the subject but the lament over its miscarriage as a cipher of its possibility.”<sup>224</sup> One cannot even lead a graduate seminar these days without standing in a room decorated with advertisements shadowing our lectures with personifications of the capitalistic world. “If the subject is no longer able to speak directly,” Adorno painfully concludes, “then at least it should—in accord with a modernism that has not pledged itself to absolute construction—speak through things, through their alienated and mutilated form.”<sup>225</sup> While the possibility of aesthetic works that could give us the ability to speak the truth of our subjective and material freedom still persists, the growing nightmare of a world without image moves into its most dire manifestation when the images populating our social imagination purport nothing less than the spectacle of a damaged life.

### *The Spectacle of Damaged Life*

So far, we have explored the threatening nightmare of living in a world, no longer easily able to think its larger image as we lose the very means to wield the aesthetic because of the disciplining powers of objective standards regulating the beautiful. Such an aesthetic loss brings us closer to the rise of a society whose life is, simply, damaged. This damaged life is one where few spaces give shelter to the presence of truly great

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<sup>224</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 153.

<sup>225</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 154.

artistic works and instead gives far too much shelter to those images of the aesthetic which are nothing more than venal spectacle: banal images of commercial idolatry saturated in public discourse that would make us unwilling prostitutes in the furtherance of the culture industry. For Adorno, we are left with a sort of civil barbarism still awaiting its extinction by the enlightening, magical, mimetic power of true aesthetic works:

A humanity to which progressive spirit fails to bequeath what humanity is poised to liquidate would disappear in a barbarism that a reasonable social order should prevent. Art, even as something tolerated in the administered world, embodies what does not allow itself to be managed and what total management suppresses. Greece's new tyrants knew why they banned Beckett's plays, in which there is not a single political word.<sup>226</sup>

The new tyrants, those that spectrally haunt our existing world uttering echoes of the despotism of the past, keep humanity—in the fullness of its civilizing prowess—from ushering us forward. Instead, they fill the world with noisy, stupefying messages meant to distract our faculties of emancipation with empty promises of commercialism.

For, we live in an age of total administration full of mindless aesthetic rituals that do little to remind us of what does not exist, indeed what must exist, if we are to save ourselves from the throes of empire. In rebellion, we amass great rage but too often fail to animate aesthetic power for the sort of transformation of consciousness needed to dialectically startle each of us toward necessary worldly redemption and with it emancipation. Adorno, taking the matter further suggests:

In the age of total administration, culture no longer needs to humiliate the barbarians it has created; it suffices that by its rituals it strengthens the barbarism that has been subjectively been sedimenting over centuries. That art stands as a reminder of what does not exist, prompts rage; this rage is transferred to the image of that otherness and befouls it. The archetypes of the vulgar that the art of the emancipatory bourgeois held in check, sometimes ingeniously—in its clowns, servants, and Papagenos—are the grinning advertisement beauties whose praise of toothpaste brands unites the billboards of all lands... Because aesthetic vulgarity undialectically imitates the invariants of social degradation, it has no history; its eternal return is celebrated by graffiti.<sup>227</sup>

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<sup>226</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 306.

<sup>227</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 313.

The barbarism that has sedimented over the centuries represents both the material injustices that linger throughout time, but also the barbarism of how we represent such a world in history to ourselves. Such sedimentation cannot be fought easily and demands our full commitment, which Adorno tells us, “aims at the transformation of the preconditions of situations, not at merely making recommendations.”<sup>228</sup> Those aesthetic spectacles that pervade society—those trivial, distracting images of commercialism—are not only forces that purport the status quos but are also forces of temporal consciousness that infect our subjectivity with a virulent stopping force that interferes with our ability to project out an image of ourselves in the world differently than what stands sedimented before us. Truly, it is impossible to calculate the full profundity of such an aesthetic loss and the living time spent giving the many spectacles making up our damaged life more attention than is undoubtedly deserved; however, perhaps further illustration will offer assistance.

Today, more than 25 percent of children trying to study in our nation’s schools are forced to watch news about the world brought to them by the people at Channel One.<sup>229</sup> As a result, the combined 50 million children in our school systems are not seen as students, but an untapped, lucrative market ripe for the type of communicative exploitation that will build brand loyalty for the rest of their lives. Education, then, becomes a willful participant in the production, distribution, and consumption of a stupefying cultural language that numbs the human mind of any critical tendencies while atrophying our ability to distinguish form from reality.

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<sup>228</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 320.

<sup>229</sup> Constance Hays, “Commercialism In U.S. Schools Is Examined In New Report,” *New York Times* (14 September 2000): C01.

When statistics report that brand identification and loyalty appear as behavioral traits in toddlers, it becomes obvious that there is little escape from the influence of a one-dimensional thinking indoctrinated at the most formative moments of our development. Such brain washing demonstrates its attack as young children, on average, are exposed to a minimum of 20,000 to 40,000 advertisements each year: a fact that helps account for why children spend 60 percent more time watching television than attending school.<sup>230</sup> Even worse, such unending exposure to commercial culture has positioned children around the world between the ages four and twelve as a 35 billion dollar niche market with the ability to influence 60 percent of their parents purchasing choices, an estimated 188 trillion dollars.<sup>231</sup> If the infectious nature of commercial culture has already altered the habits of children away from activities of social capital and toward atomistic interest in television programming, then it is indeed possible that the growing decline in civic engagement in the United States is at least partly indebted to the growth of commercial culture. Nothing more true could be said about the waning participation of a people who reportedly took the time to cast a combined 100 million votes in the television show *American Idol* which, at the time, was only slightly less than the 111 million Americans that voted during the 2000 presidential election.<sup>232</sup>

Sadly, such statistics are but meager, incomplete representations of the real damaged life we encounter every day. What should be sufficiently understood by such an example is that far too much of our lived life is spent entangled in the distracting web of such spectacles—the endless barrage of advertisements now presented in increasingly

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<sup>230</sup> Simon Caulkin, “Business & Media: A Brand New Kind of Advert: Kids are King and Schoolyards the New Marketplace,” *The Observer* (6 April 2003): 9.

<sup>231</sup> Caulkin, “A Brand New Kind of Advert,” 9.

<sup>232</sup> Lisa de Moraes, “The Pop Vote; 'American Idol' Fans Agree With Judges: Kelly Clarkson Wins,” *The Washington Post* (5 September 2002): Style, C01.

innocuous media, the debitage of entertainment that competes for our attention during the small bits of time we have to rest from the daily doldrums of production, or the news media that has taken to abandoning the demands of objectivity and meaningful content for brightly colored logos and flashy digital effects. Instead, we require works of artistic quality, messages to fill our lives with aesthetic reflection that “are fully formed in themselves,” as Adorno tells us, “[and] are objectively less chaotic than innumerable works that have orderly facades somehow slapped on while underneath their own structure crumbles.”<sup>233</sup>

What is at stake in such a battle, as Adorno understood the matter, stands in reasoning:

The semi-educated consciousness insists on the “I like that,” laughing with cynical embarrassment at the fact that cultural trash is expressively made to dupe the consumer: As leisure-time occupation, art should be cozy and discretionary; people put up with the deception because they sense secretly that the principle of their own same realism is the fraud of equal exchange. It is within this false and at the same time art-alien consciousness that the fictional element of art, its illusoriness, develops in bourgeois society: *Mundus vult decipi* [the world wants to be deceived] is the categorical imperative of artistic consumption.<sup>234</sup>

When the aesthetic becomes nothing more than an act for the advancement of consumption, then perhaps Adorno has the matter right when he suggests the world wants to be deceived. Statements about how the cultural trash of our lives is expressively meant to dupe the consumer is not meant to infuriate the whole of the world and assume each of us to be mindless social degenerates without an understanding of the finer things in life. Instead, such critique aims to signify the ways in which much of what surrounds us in the world carries with it the force of a promoting a consciousness that is alien to art. For, the true power of the aesthetic is not some obvious world changing force, but instead its effect is more restrained, more subtle. “That artworks intervene politically is doubtful;

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<sup>233</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 307.

<sup>234</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 308 [translation in brackets added by the author].

when it does happen,” Adorno quips, “most often it is peripheral to the work; if they strive for it, they usually succumb to their own terms. Their true social effect is extremely indirect participation in spirit that by way of subterranean processes contributes to social transformation and is concentrated in artworks.”<sup>235</sup>

### *Conclusion*

And so, while we may have explored the ways in which the aesthetic—and with it the possibility of giving an image to the world capable of protecting the possibility of a just future—has fallen prey to the forces of commodification, such a nightmare is not the fate of our lives. While the emergence of great artistic works is met with outrage and disdain inverting the categories of the beautiful and the ugly so as to strip the aesthetic of its powers of reflective judgment allowing us to think beyond the dictates of social objectification and move instead toward revolutionary consciousness, such a nightmare is not the fate of our lives. Still, while what remains of the aesthetic offers up fewer and fewer great works and instead an increasing army of spectacles ushering forth a society that teeters on the brink of a damage life, such a nightmare is not the fate of our lives. Fate, as Walter Benjamin will remind us, is “the guilt context of the living.” And, the redemption required to answer such guilt is a debt that certainly cannot be settled cheaply.

This dissertation has explored two dreams of possible freedom worthy of our aspiration if we take the seriously the truth that we are the source of all valuation in the world and, correspondingly, we have also considered the possible collapse into two nightmares of despair that may emerge when such a truth is not heeded. The concluding

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<sup>235</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 315.



chapter of this work will remind us of the ways in which we are to be forever caught between such dreams and nightmares, as we live out our shared lives in something of a liminal space between the two possibilities. Surely, as finite human creatures we cannot achieve the full profundity of such dreams of freedom; however, the genius of such a condition stands in the realization that we will also never realize the full terror of such nightmares of despair. Like an asymptotic slope we may indeed climb progressively closer to one of the two dialectical possibilities; the paradox in such an example is that no matter how far such a line draws closer to its axis it still remains infinitely distant from its reach. Truly, then, dreams of freedom and nightmares of despair are nothing more than teleological projections; what is promised by such a metaphor is that whatever world we inhabit, the bad of the nightmare or the good of the dream, is always something of our own making, changing, and ultimately becoming.

## **Reprisal II:**

### **Death by Culture**

It is easy to see that in the wake of globalization social relationships are undergoing dramatic transformations. For some, these transformations seem to take on a hegemonic quality that threatens to supplant our future with a homogenous identity. For instance, African doctors in Senegal have begun calling for a ban on harmful cosmetic agents for skin bleaching used by some Africans wanting to mimic “those top fair-skinned models in women's magazines.”<sup>236</sup> Meanwhile, Japanese schools are considering the addition of “morality” into the classroom and requiring public service in a desperate effort to curb what is seen as an erosion of Japanese culture replaced by Western values. This usurping of Japanese culture is marked by waves of young teenage girls dyeing their hair stark blonde in commemoration of their favorite American singers.<sup>237</sup> Equally disturbing is the fact that Chinese women venture the risks of plastic surgery to remove the appearance of “slanted” eyes in spite of the fact that a lack of trained doctors and poor medical conditions result in surgeries that often “mutilate, inflict pain and demoralize patients.”<sup>238</sup>

Not only do transnational corporations receive federal funding from the United States government to advertise abroad, but the idolatry of Brittany Spears in Pepsi

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<sup>236</sup> Staff Writer, “Senegal Doctors Demand Skin Cream Ban,” *BBC World News*, (3 September 2000), available online at: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/908882.stm>

<sup>237</sup> Staff Writer, “Battle over Morality Lessons,” *BBC World News*, (9 February 2001) available online at: [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk\\_news/education/1162199.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/education/1162199.stm)

<sup>238</sup> David Steingard & Dale Fitzgibbons, “Challenging the Juggernaut of Globalization: A Manifesto for Academic Praxis,” *Journal of Organizational Change* 8, no. 4 (1995): 37.

advertisements pushes cultural commodification to such limits that we, quite literally, have begun to see the “whitening” of the world. This is an astonishing point considering that world population statistics place the 194 million Caucasian Americans as a global minority within a world population of over six billion; yet, simultaneously, “whiteness” seemingly remains ideologically dominant.

However, the cultural significance of these events is up for contention. Making the claim that such “Third World” women are the victims of the juggernaut of globalization is mistakenly reductionistic, ethnocentric, and works to perpetuate the otherizing logic of western hegemony. Although the progressive intention of such analyses is indeed admirable, they carry the baggage of second wave, liberal feminists determined to “save brown women from brown men.” It has become commonplace in liberal feminism to make claims about the subjugation, oppression, and general state of unfreedom experienced by women in the supposed “Third World.” Representatively taken from scholars like Susan Moller Okin, these claims challenge cultural practices of an elusive “other” seen as traditional, barbaric, uncivilized, and religiously bound in instances of veiling, female genital mutilation, and dowry practices.<sup>239</sup> However, while these sorts of academic analyses might portend to harbor emancipating sentiments, such work simultaneously perpetuates an otherizing logic that scholars like Chandra Talpade Mohanty have described as locking “Third World” women into stereotypical imaginings that ultimately strip them of their agency in the most debasing ways.<sup>240</sup>

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<sup>239</sup> Susan Moller Okin, *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999); Susan Moller Okin, “Feminism, Women’s Human Rights and Cultural Differences,” in Uma Narayan and Sandra Harding eds., *Decentering the Center: Philosophy for a Multicultural, Postcolonial and Feminist World* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2000).

<sup>240</sup> Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2003).

Uma Narayan locates the sort of violence against women seen in social practices such as dowry murder in India as something also present in the domestic violence murders in the United States.<sup>241</sup> Narayan clarifies this position in stronger terms by suggesting that “‘culture’ is invoked in explanations of forms of violence against Third World women, while it is not similarly invoked in explanations of forms of violence that is not similarly invoked in explanations of violence that affect mainstream Western women.”<sup>242</sup> For Narayan, such western “explanations of culture” are so damaging that they literally project a sense that “Third World women” are subject to “fatal forms of violence” forcing them to suffer a “death by culture.” The impetus for such a claim is more purposeful, which Narayan describes as the belief that “transnational cooperation and solidarity among feminists depends on all of us better understanding such issues of ‘context’ and ‘comparative understanding,’ as well as on attending to asymmetries in ‘cultural explanation’ that contribute to problematic pictures of ‘our similarities and differences.’”<sup>243</sup> What is being suggested here is that the cliché images of the perpetually suffering “Third World” woman can instead become a moment where we stray away from such otherizing logic and instead force ourselves to become a question to ourselves in the wake of the multiplicity, contradictory, and complex array of global images of cultural life. For, truly, there is much to see in terms of the ways in which we stand before the threat of a death by culture within the violence of the plastic surgery industry here at home in the United States.

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<sup>241</sup> Uma Narayan, “Cross Cultural Connections, Border Crossings, and ‘Death by Culture,’” in Uma Narayan, *Dislocating Cultures* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

<sup>242</sup> Narayan, “Cross Cultural Connections,” 84.

<sup>243</sup> Narayan, “Cross Cultural Connections,” 88.

There is a purpose in seeing the violence done by cosmetic surgeries and procedures as an industry. This sort of violence is not implicating cosmetic surgery as an evil practice but instead is demanding that we begin to acknowledge the violence embedded within such practices as it takes on both a material and psychic forms and dwells on both individual and social levels. The American Society of Plastic Surgeons reports people in the United States underwent, at a minimum, 1.9 million cosmetic surgeries and 7.4 million cosmetic procedures in 2003.<sup>244</sup> Proportionally, women were the primary candidate for such surgeries and procedures by 82% and 86%, respectively.<sup>245</sup> However, 4% of the people undergoing such surgeries and procedures are under the age of 18 and statistical projections suggest that this trend is only going to increase, as there was a 950% surge in the number of children receiving Botax injections in 2003.<sup>246</sup> The cost of being worked on by such doctors, on average, ranges from a \$165 cellulite treatment to a \$4,641 tummy tuck; however, the total revenue generated by such work nationwide in 2003 was at least \$8.3 billion.<sup>247</sup> Combined, these statistics speak to how the practice of cosmetic medicine comprises an industry, but whether or not it is an industry of violence demands further explanation.

Referring to cosmetic surgeries and procedures as an industry of violence is an attempt to draw out the way in which such practices have often unnoticed and damaging

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<sup>244</sup> American Society of Plastic Surgeons, *2000/2001/2002/2003 National Plastic Surgery Statistics* (Arlington Heights, IL: American Society of Plastic Surgeons, 2004), available online at: <http://www.plasticsurgery.org>

<sup>245</sup> American Society of Plastic Surgeons, *2003 Cosmetic Surgery Gender Distribution (Female)* (Arlington Heights, IL: American Society of Plastic Surgeons, 2004), available online at: <http://www.plasticsurgery.org>

<sup>246</sup> American Society of Plastic Surgeons, *2003 Cosmetic Surgery Age Distribution (18 and Younger)* (Arlington Heights, IL: American Society of Plastic Surgeons, 2004), available online at: <http://www.plasticsurgery.org>

<sup>247</sup> American Society of Plastic Surgeons, *2003 Average Surgeon/Physician Fees* (Arlington Heights, IL: American Society of Plastic Surgeons, 2004), available online at: <http://www.plasticsurgery.org>

impacts on both individuals and society, which at the same time is encouraged through problematic configurations of our social values for beauty. Admittedly, this investigation is not challenging whether people are electing to undergo cosmetic transformation or passing judgment on those undergoing such transformations; instead, this essay is attempting to critically reflect on the ways in which the a deeper examination of the industry of cosmetic surgery genealogically reveals the presence of multiple forms of violence not only on the bodies and minds of the patients undergoing such procedures, but also speaks to the larger cultural sickness embedded in our social practices in ordinary life. Thus, the violence that inheres within the nick of the scalpel incision marking the beginning of an operation and the inauguration of a host of technological procedures promising to transform the landscape of the body is not the origin of the sort of violence this investigation is seeking to reveal. Examining the violence of the cosmetic surgery industry is a genealogical encounter that seeks to reveal no origin of violence, but instead attempts to illuminate the configurations of heteronormative matrices of power relations woven in the very fabric of our larger social relations and shared meaning of beauty.

Perhaps, however, the best place to begin is by revealing the violent nature of such surgeries and procedures. Often, because invasive cosmetic surgeries and procedures are performed in a sterile medical environment we do not initially think of it as a violent experience. Modern medicine is seen from an anesthetized position that conflates its technological capacities with a sort of rationale efficiency that masks the very presence of our body during the course of such medical interventions. Cosmetic medicine becomes something “performed” inside of an “operating theater” where

increasingly robotic instruments serve as an extension of the doctors who merely watch their movements on a computer screen as incisions are marked on a virtual subject ultimately distanced in our minds from its corporeal counterpart.

In her book, *Flesh Wounds*, Virginia Blum documents several years of ethnographic interviews with doctors of cosmetic surgery and their patients. Trained not as an anthropologist but in the realm of literature and critical theory, Blum gives a gruesome reading of the operating room experience:

The surgeon made two incisions in the patient's hairline, each approximately an inch and a half long. He gently pried the skin apart from the periosteum and, with a drill, made what he called a bone tunnel to define the endoscope's route; he then inserted a wire to make sure the tunnel went all the way through. A periosteal elevator raised the skin from the forehead. Hearing the scalpel rasp against bone unnerved me. In this aestheticized technological space of television screens and monitors soothingly flickering orange data and a table full of harmoniously arrayed metal instruments in an unrecognizable variety of curves and angles, body sounds seemed out of place.<sup>248</sup>

Although such violence is veiled by the sanitizing practices of modern medicine, there are very real risks of death involved in cosmetic surgery, albeit one that is growing smaller. Blum reports that in 1995 mortality rates were about 1:5000 and have improved to 1:4700 in 2000, but reminds us that there is something outrageous about being willing to risk death "for smaller thighs or a sleeker abdomen."<sup>249</sup>

This sort of carelessness for life speaks to the way we view our bodies as disaggregated parts separated from the larger whole. An entire vocabulary is created to document and map our body according to its supposed imperfections. Blum recalls one doctor preparing for surgery on a patient with an ordinary enough looking mouth that he

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<sup>248</sup> Virginia Blum, *Flesh Wounds: The Culture of Cosmetic Surgery* (Berkeley, California: Berkeley University Press, 2003), 69.

<sup>249</sup> Blum, *Flesh Wounds*, 60.

said “suffered from what he calls incomplete oral closure, meaning that the teeth touch each other before the lips meet.”<sup>250</sup>

It is in this way that our bodies become landscape for marking our imperfections while inversely suggesting that some imagined person exists with all of the right parts, or worse that we operate with a mental catalog that actually holds a memory of different people and their collection of perfect features that we resentfully desire for ourselves. Of course, models have come to represent the epitome of the sort of beauty we all supposedly secretly desire for ourselves, yet there is something peculiar about their physical proportion that warrants a closer examination. Nancy Etcoff considers the social construction of beauty as a learned behavior. Etcoff, a practicing psychologist, reminds us that when if we take the facial proportions of the usual “covergirls from Vogue and Cosmopolitan” and feed them into a computer “it guestimates their age to be between 6 and 7 years of age.”<sup>251</sup> Etcoff is suggesting that the actual “geometry of their facial features is so youthful that the computer, extrapolating its best guess, vastly underestimates their age.”<sup>252</sup>

A strange sort of appreciation for timelessness seems to enter our collective consciousness that reifies youth in an almost unhealthy way. Coupling this finding with the litany of images of half-naked adolescents in Calvin Klein advertisements and the increased sexualization of adolescent television programming, suggests that we live in a culture comfortable with edophilia—not a lust for young children as in pedophilia, but instead a fetish for the image of teenage adolescents. Before advancing this argument a few caveats are in order. The edophilia exposed in this investigation is not seriously

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<sup>250</sup> Blum, *Flesh Wounds*, 69.

<sup>251</sup> Nancy Etcoff, *Survival of the Prettiest: The Science of Beauty* (New York: Anchor Books, 2000), 151.

<sup>252</sup> Etcoff, *Survival of the Prettiest*, 151.



trying to suggest that all people have some secret criminal sexual infatuation with underage adolescents; however, this observation is suggesting that our public space is saturated with a deluge of images that undeniably promote our gazing at young bodies while gesturing to the sexual fantasies implied within such ubiquitous messages.

Perhaps, it is worth remembering at this point that the financial success and technological expansion of the Internet relied heavily on the multibillion-dollar success of the pornography industry as one of the motivating factors for seducing early adopters of the new technology in the first place. A PBS Frontline documentary on the subject attempts to untangle the larger web of corporate profiteers that rely on the depth at which pornographic images pervade traffic on the World-Wide-Web.<sup>253</sup> We must realize that the pervasiveness of sexual images embedded within society and so frequently communicated is one of the many locations of social pressure participating in the creation of the idea that someone might even seriously consider undergoing cosmetic surgery and the risk of death in order to take a step closer to that imagined social image of what it means to be beautiful.

In fact, the very linguistic turn from the term “plastic surgery” to its more politically correct variant “cosmetic surgery” is a telling semantic maneuver. The word plastic is a bit more revealing about the intention of such surgeries as they attempt to actually shape the body by inscribing it with new social meaning based on heteronormative standards of gender and culture. Pippa Brush draws out the cultural significance of such changes to the landscape of our bodies by reminding us:

The metaphor of inscription becomes alarmingly literal as the surgeon’s knife carves socially endorsed yet essentially arbitrary ideals of beauty on to the plastic bodies of women who ‘choose’ to conform more closely to the norms or ideals society constructs, effacing the material reality of

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<sup>253</sup> Michael Kirk and Peter Boyer, “American Porn,” *PBS Frontline* (February 7, 2002).

women's bodies for the sake of conforming to one of a limited set of culturally specific inscriptions.<sup>254</sup>

Yet, when our bodies are somehow transformed into landscapes capable of being rewritten by surgical inscriptions leaving behind heteronormative markings we are ultimately left with a specious aesthetic result that belies the larger connection between our bodies and our minds. Brush continues to unfurl our thinking of the body as a landscape that is itself intricately connected to our psychic well-being. For Brush, cosmetic surgery “separates the experience of material and lived body from the formation of self and subjectivity, and often creates a hierarchy in which the mind is privileged and the body relegated to the position of object.”<sup>255</sup> And so, the science of cosmetic surgery creates a language of diagnosis loaded with an aesthetic judgment whose gaze compartmentalizes the body into disparate parts capable of being purged of their deformities.<sup>256</sup> However, questions of embodiment, or the complex connections between the body and the mind, are left unattended. Ignoring such important questions fails to address larger questions about the psychic well-being of our society and the pervasiveness of unhealthy discipline compelling us to perform bodily maneuvers in the first place.

Taken together we have before us a serious problem reminding us of the confrontation we encountered in the works of Karl Marx and Theodor Adorno. The dream of human freedom in Marx reminds us of our primacy for bringing value into the world despite the forces of capitalism that would extract such value making as the very lifeblood of the larger system of capital making. However, Adorno reminds us of the

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<sup>254</sup> Pippa Brush, “Metaphors of Inscription: Discipline, Plasticity and the Rhetoric of Choice,” *Feminist Review*, no. 58 (Spring 1998), 24.

<sup>255</sup> Brush, “Metaphors of Inscription,” 26.

<sup>256</sup> Brush, “Metaphors of Inscription,” 30.

ways in which the logic of commodification does not merely take over our material lives but also threatens our aesthetic ability to give the world its larger transcendental image as we strive to aspire to the regulative ideality of teleological projections like communism. The very industry of plastic surgery is one that presents people as nothing more than projects ripe where we can buy and sell the image of ourselves in rather venal ways.

Perhaps, we need a phenomenological curiosity that would allow us to explore our bodies throughout life with wonder. Wonder, following Luce Irigaray in an essay reworking the use of the word by Descartes in his “The Passions of the Soul,” suggests that such a feeling is itself the first of all the passions and a fundamental drive for life viewing supposed deficits stemming from our sexual difference with awe inspired surprise for what might instead still become.<sup>257</sup> This type of phenomenological curiosity removes us from the usual relations of alterity condemning physical appearance to metaphors of decay and instead allows such an experience to become yet another moment of our shared becoming in this world in ethical solace with those who would share it with us. Only in such an ethical constitution would relations between people operate through a sort of solace of being upsetting the usual relational deficit that occurs when people see those below the so-called register of attractiveness under superficial attendances of blame for not living up to socially constructed and utterly unachievable ideals of health and beauty.

Again, this reprisal is meant to serve as an illuminating exposition on the ways in which we stand before a serious global problem that can be understood through our previous engagement with thinkers giving us dreams of freedom and nightmares of despair. Such work, then, toward the necessary moral repair capable of solving such a

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<sup>257</sup> Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1984), 72-82.

dilemma is nothing more than yet another challenge we must adopt if we are to take seriously what it means to inherit the legacy of critique.

## **Chapter 6:**

### **Walter Benjamin**

## **Conclusion:**

### **Awakening from the Nightmarish Slumber of Phantasmagoria**

Human nature, essentially changeable, as unstable as the dust, can endure no restraint; if it binds itself it soon begins to tear madly at its bonds, until it rends everything asunder, the wall, the bonds, and its very self.

Franz Kafka, "The Great Wall of China"

#### ***Abstract***

Walter Benjamin is animated in this concluding chapter to speak to the dual character of our life in a world caught between the dialectical possibility of dreams of freedom and nightmares of despair. While we may indeed be trapped in the slumber of phantasmagoria and all of its nightmares of despair, it is still possible to blast away the sands of sleep and awaken to morally redeemed world fashioned through our engagement with various dreams of freedom. First, this chapter will figuratively explore the concept of phantasmagoria, which is a symbolically rich term used by Benjamin to speak to the complex ways in which we are mired within the combined material and aesthetic trappings of an advanced capitalist world. Such an exploration will consider three archetypes of character and their corresponding experiences giving us a sense of the ways we are spectrally haunted by phantasmagoria. Second, we will consider the possibility of becoming dialectically startled before the angel of history, which might animate our weak messianic power to awaken from such a phantasmagoric slumber. Finally, this work will conclude by articulating the importance of building constellations toward a redemptive

imagination as a final attempt to speak the truth of our place as the makers of value in the world challenged to make sense of our position between various dreams of freedom and nightmares of despair.

### ***Introduction***

Franz Kafka, in his work *The Trial*, writes of a pitiable world of total administration that would choke the very life force of humanity to a dying last gasp. One stands perplexed from the first pages of this novel when Joseph K. wakes to find agents of the elusive system eating breakfast in his home and ready to usher him off on a barbaric, surreal journey through the invisible passageways of a bureaucratic world that has condemned him for an unknown offense. The journey is certainly maddening and only matched in insanity by the macabre outcome. However, there is a moment in the story where the protagonist encounters a myth about the law inside of a cathedral worth further reflection. The story presents something of a dialectical crossroads signaling that the collapse of the world may indeed present itself to us, but solace from such ruination persists in our animation of a way out through the faculty of our own awakening to the truth of our powers to bring value into such a world.

Inside the cathedral, a mysterious priest ominously watches Joseph K. Eventually, the priest calls out to the distraught banker from the pulpit to question him on his troubles with the Court. The conversation is terse and jarring. But, eventually the priest decides to tell Joseph K. a story of a man who is made to wait before a doorway to the Law guarded by an obedient gatekeeper. The story is fairly simple, yet its interpretation weaves a tapestry of meaning that is infinitely rich. A countryman finds

himself before this doorkeeper and begs for admittance to the Law. The doorkeeper shrugs and says that he may not enter at this moment, but perhaps later. The countryman is certainly frustrated and tries to secretly peer past the portal toward what might be on the other side of the threshold. The doorkeeper, laughing at such a sight, suggests, “If you are so strongly tempted, try to get in without permission. But note that I am powerful. And I am only the lowest doorkeeper. From hall to hall, keepers stand at every door, one more powerful than the other.”<sup>258</sup>

The countryman decides he should not cross the doorkeeper and is somewhat fearful of the figure dressed in fancy robes and boasting noble features. So, taking a stool offered to him by the doorkeeper the countryman decides to sit for many years, exchanging information about his life with the guardian. However, many years slowly slip by until a lifetime has disappeared. At the moment of his death, the weary countryman asks the doorkeeper a final question, “how does it come about, then, that in all these years no one has come seeking admittance but me? The doorkeeper perceives that the man is nearing his end and his hearing is failing, so he bellows in his ear: ‘No one but you could gain admittance through this door, since this door was intended for you. I am now going to shut it.’”<sup>259</sup>

The priest and Joseph K. quibble about the meaning of the story. The priest, who we learn is the Prison Chaplain in the service of the Court, presents many different interpretations of the ancient myth. Joseph K. thinks upon first hearing the story that the doorkeeper is engaging in deception. But, the priest carefully points out how the doorkeeper was pleasant enough to offer a stool and entertain the “insatiable” questioning

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<sup>258</sup> Franz Kafka, *The Trial*, Willa and Edwin Mur (New York: Schocken Books 1984), 213.

<sup>259</sup> Kafka, *The Trial*, 214.

of the countryman, even estimating his own power before the other guardians with much compass and humility. Truly, the doorkeeper fulfilled his duty, denying admittance through the door and keeping his post until the dying breath of the countryman.

However, the priest also reports that there are other opinions about this myth. How, truly, can such a doorkeeper staged on the outside of the threshold know anything about what is beyond the door? He is a figure whose “ideas of the interior are assumed to be childish, and it is supposed that he himself is afraid of the other guardians whom he holds up as bogies before the man.”<sup>260</sup>

So, what is the point of such a story? Are we left to think that our lives are nothing more than maddening exchanges before doorkeepers, always eternally distanced from the Law? Is the world, then, by allegorical extension some labyrinthine maze that keeps us wandering in circles never able to find exit? Or, are we to think that agents of the world are simply cruel monsters barring us from any sort of true justice? Or, as the priest coyly reveals, are we to think there is indeed a way out—one of our own making—proverbially right in front of our face? “When he sits down on the stool,” suggests the priest to Joseph K., “by the side of the door and stays there for the rest of his life, he does it of his own free will; in the story there is no mention of any compulsion.”<sup>261</sup> The figure, then, that remains trapped and does not know freedom is that agent of human law that ignobly stands guard to an infinite number of doorways before the impossible to reach natural Law. Such an agent of human law has many faces in our lives—social, economic, political, and cultural manifestations of the way we human beings try to play lord and watchman over the transcendental that remains beyond our reach. Although the

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<sup>260</sup> Kafka, *The Trial*, 217.

<sup>261</sup> Kafka, *The Trial*, 218.



countryman certainly may not be able to simply walk through a door and find himself before some transcendent beyond, the rest of the world remains eternally open should he simply refuse to sit on the stool.

We must remember there are two stories being played out in the *The Trial*: one of real absurdity and one of absurd reality. Joseph K. is fraught by his engagements with the system leading him through endless corridors of bureaucracy that oddly take shelter in ordinary buildings. But, the other major focus in the story is one where we capture a glimpse of the deeply alienating experiences of a job that beats down the troubled man as he works in the doldrums of middle management for a bank. One could read the impossible *real absurdity* of the trial which leaves Joseph K. for dead in the final chapter as a way to explain the *absurd reality* of a work life that leaves us for dead in ways that forgoes simple description. Perhaps, then, the story would have ended with some redemption if the Joseph K. could have, simply enough, gotten up from the stool.

Similarly, Walter Benjamin is animated in this concluding chapter to speak to the dual character of our life in a world caught between the dialectical possibility of dreams of freedom and nightmares of despair. While we may indeed be trapped in the slumber of phantasmagoria and all of its nightmares of despair, it is still possible to blast away the sands of sleep and awaken to morally redeemed world fashioned through our engagement with various dreams of freedom. First, this chapter will figuratively explore the concept of phantasmagoria, which is a symbolically rich term used by Benjamin to speak to the complex ways in which we are mired within the combined material and aesthetic trappings of an advanced capitalist world. Such an exploration will consider three archetypes of character and their corresponding experiences giving us a sense of the ways

we are spectrally haunted by phantasmagoria. Second, we will consider the possibility of becoming dialectically startled before the angel of history, which might animate our weak messianic power to awaken from such a phantasmagoric slumber. Finally, this work will conclude by articulating the importance of building constellations toward a redemptive imagination as a final attempt to speak the truth of our place as the makers of value in the world challenged to make sense of our position between various dreams of freedom and nightmares of despair.

### ***Specters of a Haunted World***

Walter Benjamin, a critical theorist loosely affiliated with the Frankfurt School, spent more than a decade studying the Arcades in Paris, resulting in a magnum opus of aphorisms etched with concentrated wisdom alongside a codex of illuminating quotations taken from scholars, artifacts, and literature abound at the time of its writing. Benjamin offers both aesthetic and material interpretations of ordinary everyday practices to better understand the way in which the ordering of life under advanced capitalism spectrally infects every social crevice of our lives and the reproduction of the larger world. What evolved in these convolutes on life under capitalism was a careful execution of aesthetic-materialist thinking stemming from the tradition of Marxism. While it would be intellectually ingenious to whittle a work of this magnitude down to a single, central idea, it is faithful to the larger spirit of this manuscript to suggest that Benjamin was deeply interested in tracing out the phantasmagoric experience of our lives caught within the spectral hauntings of capital. However, this phantasmagoria is not itself simply a material condition but carries with it serious psychic violence. “Corresponding to these

phantasmagorias of the market, where people appear only as types,” Benjamin suggests, “are the phantasmagorias of the interior, which are constituted by man’s imperious need to leave the imprint of his private individual existence on the rooms he inhabits.”<sup>262</sup> The combined material and psychic dissonance of advanced industrial capitalism against the larger ideality of humanity is so severe that we stand on the brink of being schizophrenically splintered; the spectral hauntings of phantasmagoria is a complicated, layered term trying to give voice to such a spectacle of worldly collapse.

However, meditation on the phantasmagoric character of the world is not meant to be a totalizing treatise reporting our perpetual condition under the dictates of capital. The title of *Arcades Project* in the original German is *Das Passagen-Werk*, suggesting to us perhaps that Benjamin is speaking to the liminal passages ways we travel in the larger work done in the world in the epoch of an advanced industrial capitalism; the wandering that occurs through the labyrinthine material and symbolic machinery of such capitalism reveals a conflicted subject, one caught under the oppressive thumb of fetishistic practices of commodity exchange that keep us perpetually trapped in a state of purgatory: neither in a redemptive heaven or a suffering hell, but constantly struggling against our own self-abandonment. No compass will ever lead one out of such an endless maze, save the dialectical awakening to the truth of progress as the history of catastrophe.

The spirited use of a word like phantasmagoria leaves us bewildered before a term impregnated with a cornucopia of symbolic meaning. Benjamin aphoristically reveals three metaphors throughout his convolutes that can be taken as an allegorical image of what it means to wander amidst the slumberish nightmare of phantasmagoria. Such

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<sup>262</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, Howard Elland and Kevin McLaughlin, trans. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 14.

images are allegorical in that they are imbued with a sense of our limitation as finite subjects, and such limitation always simultaneously comports us to the possible transience of brining into being a more ethically constituted world where the splendor of our humanity is not only recognized but routinely safeguarded. These metaphoric images, in the words of Benjamin, are integrally linked to our relationship with time, suggesting:

Rather than pass the time, one must invite it in. To pass the time (to kill time, expel it): the gambler. Time spills from his every power.—To store time as a battery stores energy: the flâneur. Finally, the third type: he who waits. He takes up time and renders it in altered form—that of expectation.<sup>263</sup>

It is the *gambler* who confuses idolatry and idleness, choosing to kill time by collapsing the gift of life with statistical chance, letting the possibility for achieving something like a better world die off against the backdrop of speculative ventures for ephemeral happiness. The *flâneur* stores time, idly wandering about the larger architecture of advanced capitalism withholding the temporal power for worldly transformation. The third image remains nameless but appears as the *collector* who works to accumulate a menagerie of commercial artifacts as a symbolic substitute for some deeper temporal loss. In turn, these three major archetypes of phantasmagoria—the gambler, the flâneur, and the collector—find their experiential origins within this spectral world and can be representatively discussed by simultaneously exploring convolutes by Benjamin on *fashion, boredom, and the interior*. While these paired phantasmagoric archetypes and experiences help to triangulate the lost subject wandering through the circuitous passageways of a ruined world, they also comport us to the possibility of awakening to a redeemed world.

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<sup>263</sup> Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 107 [D3,4].

For Benjamin, the image of the gambler is integrally bound up with the image of the prostitute in a rather complicated web of transcendental reification, such that “love for the prostitute is the apotheosis of empathy with the commodity”<sup>264</sup> while the complementary trope of the gambler “is the infernal counterpart to the music of heavenly hosts.”<sup>265</sup> On the one hand, the draw to prostitution represents a stage in human history pathologically rampant with a genuflection before the logic of commodification drawn out to its natural ends in the cannibalistic devouring of all that is human for the extraction of monetary value, while gambling, on the other hand, is a self-annihilation of the weak messianic power imbued in human beings to see beyond the throes of the spectral hauntings of phantasmagoria and act toward the good of redemption. The thread between the gambler and the prostitute is one that reveals the way in which we continue to exist in this world unreflectively aware of the ways we fundamentally participate in debasing our own subjectivity. Prostitution is not at all an attack on womanhood but, as with the gambler, is something of a vivification of a trope of human experience that means to speak to the ways in which we have learned to prostitute ourselves and gamble away ourselves before the forces of phantasmagoria.

The loss experienced by the gambler is one of annihilating time in the sense of squandering the combined possibility of our powers for emancipation. Citing Ludwig Börne in the *Gamblers Banquet*, Benjamin joins in imagining:

What if one were to store up all the energy and passion... which every year is squandered at the gambling tables of Europe—would one have enough to make a Roman people out of it, and a Roman history? But that’s just it. Because each man is born a Roman, bourgeois society aims to de-Romanize him, and thus there are games of chance and games of etiquette, novels, Italian operas and stylish gazettes, casinos, tea parties and lotteries, years of apprenticeship and travel, military reviews and changing of the guard, ceremonies and visits, and the fifteen or twenty close-

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<sup>264</sup> Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 511 [O11a, 4].

<sup>265</sup> Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 509 [O10 a,6].

fitting garments which daily, with a salutary loss of time, a person has to put on and take off again—all these have been introduced so that the overabundant energy evaporates unnoticed!<sup>266</sup>

And so, the lament expressed by Benjamin is for the combined waste of our immense human productivity. The image of the gambler, then, is one of our toying with speculative chance for material nothingness at the loss of the temporal power to think the world differently and, in so doing, bring about a change to the material order of things that would yield the enduring happiness that is the counterpart to ephemeral pleasure ventured in games of prospect.

However, such games are not meant to simply refer to literal ventures in casinos. Instead, Benjamin is referring to the ways in which the gambler ventures their temporal power in idol substitutes meant to fill the chasm of our own inaction in the world. “Money,” Benjamin reflects, “is what gives life to number; money is what animates the marble maiden.”<sup>267</sup> The number is then a sort of cipher relating to us the way in which we remain trapped in phantasmagoria through a fetish with the statistical representation suggesting that the whole of the world can be captured in a process of valuation by assigning everything a mere price. The outcome, of course, is a world of gambling: a constant, unnatural management of risk that expends all of our weak messianic power in hopes that the odds of fate will strike in our favor and yield some fictive sense of happiness in a world that feels so direly empty of meaning. As Benjamin reminds us:

The proscription of gambling could have its deepest roots in the fact that a natural gift of humanity, one which, directed toward the highest objects, elevates the human being beyond himself, only drags him down when applied to one of the meanest objects: money. The gift in question is the presence of mind. Its highest manifestation is the reading that in each case is divinatory.<sup>268</sup>

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<sup>266</sup> Ludwig Börne cited in Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 514 [O13a, 5].

<sup>267</sup> Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 514 [O13a, 3].

<sup>268</sup> Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 513 [O13, 3].

Again, Benjamin is concerned about the way in which such phantasmagoric engagements with the world sap our divinatory power, which will be explained more fully in the next section of this chapter as we explore the power of being dialectically startled before the angel of history. However, the temperament of the gambler and its location of experience in the larger world is our task at hand as we continue to give tropic character to the force of phantasmagoria. The gambler, as we have discussed the archetype thus far, can be said to have its roots in an experience of fashion. As Benjamin reminds us, “the gambler is driven by essentially narcissistic and aggressive desires for omnipotence”<sup>269</sup> and truly it can be said “only the future that has not entered as such into his consciousness is parried by the gambler.”<sup>270</sup> One way we can understand a world where the future has not entered into our consciousness coupled with the narcissistic drive for omnipotence is through the experience of fashion. This may seem like a strange representational pairing; however, the dressing up of ourselves in the garbs of fashion, in all that such an activity encompasses, is something of an attempt to make ourselves something we are not, as something of an imagined greatness.

For Benjamin, fashion is something where we “imitate a body that never knows full nakedness.”<sup>271</sup> Thus, the phantasmagoric experience of our lives in the modern world is one where we constantly expend our energies to dress ourselves up in the simulacra of human subjectivity. The gambler is an ideal trope to think through such an experience, for we dress ourselves up in a great variety of ways. Certainly, we don the garments of authority in vestments of social power, we paint our selves with makeup

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<sup>269</sup> Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 510 [O11, 1].

<sup>270</sup> Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 513 [O13, 2].

<sup>271</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, Howard Elland and Kevin McLaughlin, trans. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 68.

meant to arose desirability, and we adorn ourselves with countless accessories to reflect the inner presence of a unique personality; in all of these attempts to dress ourselves up, quite literally, we still stand bankrupt of what these symbols are meant to represent and know all too well that such “fashions are a collective medicament for the ravages of oblivion. The more short-lived a period, the more susceptible it is to fashion.”<sup>272</sup> Thus, a world ravaged by oblivion in which authentic expressions of our personhood are laid to waste by a larger system that fundamentally devalues anything outside of the reach of commodification, is a ripe metaphor giving rise to the image of the gambler who must always expend themselves for the chance of receiving the adornments of the world that would dress ourselves up with enough meaning to live on in a time marked by its disdain for subjective uniqueness.

“If a woman of taste,” Benjamin sadly reflects, “while undressing at night, should find herself constituted in reality as she has pretended to be during the day, I’d like to think she’d be discovered next morning drowned in her on tears.”<sup>273</sup> Such an example certainly carries a vein of sexism deserving our careful amendment. On the one hand, Benjamin might indeed be correct in making such a bold claim to help us realize the asymmetrical experience of structural forces at play in the world that would whittle down sexual difference as knowable through our attempts to fashionably approximate socially determined norms of an impossible to achieve beauty. Yet, on the other hand, we can indeed suggest that this example should be reinterpreted to speak to the ways in which all people would find themselves wrought with self-loathing melancholia if we were to ever

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<sup>272</sup> Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 80 [B9a, 1].

<sup>273</sup> Alphonse Karr cited in Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 63 [B1, 6].



capture a glimpse of ourselves as we pretended to be so direly other to ourselves throughout the day.

Thus, for Benjamin, the attendances of fashion impact society throughout time, suggesting:

Each generation experiences the fashions of the one immediately preceding it as the most radical antiaphrodisiac imaginable. In this judgment it is not so far off the mark as might be supposed. Every fashion is to some extent a bitter satire on love; in every fashion, perversities are suggested by the most ruthless means. Every fashion couples the living body to the inorganic world. To the living, fashion defends the rights of the corpse. The fetishism that succumbs to the sex appeal of the inorganic is its vital nerve.<sup>274</sup>

Truly, then, the image of the gambler and the fetishistic quality of fashion are but a means to relate the ways in which life captured within the forces of phantasmagoria are slowly necrotized. As our lives become increasingly distanced from actual organic experience and slowly, instead, made to tarry with inorganic substitutes that can indeed be bought and sold through market forces, we find that “fashion is the *recherche*—the always vain, often ridiculous, sometimes dangerous quest—for a superior ideal beauty;”<sup>275</sup> and it is this quixotic quest that seeks to hide what is beneath the veneer of fashion: a rotting corpse which perhaps never has seen the light of human experience. Perhaps, such a corpse was indeed once a living, breathing human being soon suffocated by the many layers of clothing meant to hide the splendor of our selves. Truly, the forces of commodification can never fully transform the material and subjective grandeur of what makes us human into a thing ripe for the logic of exchange powering the larger system of capitalism. Instead, such forces can only attempt to approximate subversive means for us to be made into a thing, trying to dress up that which always resists objectification.

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<sup>274</sup> Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 79 [B9, 1].

<sup>275</sup> Du Camp cited in Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 66 [B2, 3].

Despite the pessimistic undertones rampant within such an analysis, we should indeed be left with a sense of critical repose. The deeper forces of phantasmagoria certainly carry the power to cause great harm to the authenticity of our experience in the world, but still something in us will always resist such forces. The trick, as it were, is to realize we are simply caught between the nightmarish slumber of a phantasmagoric world and the possibility of a redemptive dream onto awakening. Benjamin, giving us a bit of hope in closing our meditation on the gambler and fashion, suggests that “the less a man is imprisoned in the bonds of fate, the less he is determined by what lies nearest at hand.”<sup>276</sup>

The flâneur is another symbolically rich and philosophically complicated archetype of our experience in phantasmagoria for Benjamin. The term flâneur is etymologically derived from the French word “to stroll” and should conjure in our imagination a figuration of idle people seemingly lost wandering about a world of idolatry; “Man as civilized being,” Benjamin reflects, “as intellectual nomad, is again wholly microcosmic, wholly homeless, as free intellectually as hunter and herdsman were free sensually.”<sup>277</sup> The flâneur, temporally speaking, lives almost as an amnesiac: vanished into time and forced to traverse a path through the present brought on by a history never lived. Childhood has been stolen from the flâneur who never really had the chance to grow up, to live out a life that was not infected by the dogmatic dictates of an illusory capitalist world that would tell each of us who we are in the things we buy before ever having the chance to think our selves in the first place. As Benjamin remarks:

The street conducts the flâneur into a vanished time. For him, every street is precipitous. It leads downward—if not into the mythical Mothers, then into a past that can be all the more spellbinding

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<sup>276</sup> Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 515 [O14, 3].

<sup>277</sup> Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 806 [M5, 6].

because it is not his own, not private. Nevertheless, it always remains the time of a childhood. But why that of the life he has lived? In the asphalt over which he passes, his steps awaken a surprising resonance. The gaslight that streams down on the paving stones throws an equivocal light on this double ground.<sup>278</sup>

Thus, the flâneur is something of an “observer of the marketplace. His knowledge is akin to the occult science of industrial fluctuations. He is a spy for the capitalists, on assignment in the realm of the consumers.”<sup>279</sup> The tropes of personhood bought and sold within the fashion of our epoch are certainly the garments dressing up the flâneur, but the strolling—the storing of time as one places energy into a battery—is the result of having an almost alien unfamiliarity with our selves. For, as Benjamin aphoristically remarks, the deeper phantasmagoric experience of the flâneur is the ability “to read from faces the profession, the ancestry, the character.”<sup>280</sup> Thus, the flâneur sees the personality of people as a conflation between profession and ancestry: sedimentation of the fate of our personality with class distinction and familial lineage. In the face of such fated hopelessness for becoming more than the family trade, what else would one do but wander?

Home for the flâneur is found throughout the vast, sprawling architecture of the streets and the surrounding panoramic landscape of artifacts of exchange value. While the flâneur may have never known the luxuries of the bourgeois in all of the richness of taste that decorate their homes with ornaments of lavish fancy, the streets gives something to the flâneur of a simulated fortune:

Streets are the dwelling place of the collective. The collective is an eternally unquiet, eternally agitated being that—in the space between the building fronts—experiences, learns, understands, and invents as much as individuals do within the privacy of their own four walls. For this collective, glossy enameled shop signs are a wall decoration as good as, if not better than, an oil painting in the drawing room of a bourgeois; walls with their “Post No Bills” are its writing desk,

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<sup>278</sup> Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 416 [M1, 2].

<sup>279</sup> Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 427 [M5, 6].

<sup>280</sup> Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 429 [M6, 6].

newspaper stands its libraries, mailboxes its bronze busts, benches its bedroom furniture, and the café terrace is the balcony from which it looks down household. The section of railway where road workers hang their jackets is the vestibule, and the gateway which leads from the row of courtyards out into the open is the long corridor that daunts the bourgeois, being for the courtyards the entry to the chambers of the city. Among these latter, the arcade was the drawing room. More than anywhere else, the street reveals itself in the arcade as the furnished and familiar interior of the masses.<sup>281</sup>

There is much in this world to capture the attention of the flâneur who strolls the aisles of the metropolis hypnotically ensnared by the siren song of distractions layered upon distractions. Truly, the artifacts of the city emulate a powerful, alluring luxury many of us will never fully know, but the overall effect is one of deep intoxication or felt anesthesia that numbs our revolutionary senses:

An intoxication comes over the man who walks long and aimlessly through the streets. With each step, the walk takes on greater momentum; ever more irresistible the temptations of shops, bistros, of smiling women, ever more irresistible the magnetism of the next street corner, of a distant mass of foliage, of a street name. Then comes hunger. Our man wants nothing to do with the myriad possibilities offered to sate his appetite. Like an ascetic animal, he flits through unknown districts—until, utterly exhausted, he stumbles into his room, which receives him coldly and wears a strange air.<sup>282</sup>

Appropriately, Benjamin poetically reminds us that the flâneur is a figure that is starved and exhausted by the endless wandering through the labyrinthine passageways of the larger phantasmagoric, capitalist world. The source of such wandering, an aimless pursuit that leaves one emaciated in soul despite being a temporal storehouse, is boredom. As Benjamin discusses the matter, such boredom can be seen as a something like philosophical treatise on our apathy. While we hold all the necessary power to fundamentally change the world for the good, the forces of phantasmagoria veil us from action and work so that we forget “only revolution creates an open space for the city.”<sup>283</sup>

Experientially, one must remember that the motif of boredom in Benjamin is discussed simultaneously with the idea of the eternal return. For Benjamin, the

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<sup>281</sup> Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 423 [M3a, 4].

<sup>282</sup> Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 417 [M1, 3].

<sup>283</sup> Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 422 [M3, 3].

experience of boredom is politically charged and is nothing less than the very “threshold to great deeds”<sup>284</sup> and represents to us “an index to participation in the sleep of the collective.”<sup>285</sup> Thus, the nightmarish, slumbering quality of phantasmagoria presents itself again and boredom is yet another sedative bringing about the sands of sleep despite our ability to awaken onto redemptive justice. Benjamin describes the matter further, suggesting:

Boredom is a warm gray fabric lined on the outside with the lustrous and colorful of silks. In this fabric we wrap ourselves when we dream. We are at home then in the arabesques of its lining. But the sleeper looks bored and gray within his sheath. And when he later wakes and wants to tell of what he dreamed, he communicates by and large only this boredom. For who would be able at one stroke to turn the lining of time to the outside?<sup>286</sup>

The flâneur takes its shelter in the infinitely repeating pattern (arabesque) of boredom lining the fabric of our existence in a world that slumbers before its own revolutionary potential. This infinite railway of world-weariness that locks us into an endless maze of eternally repeated banality has each of us lost in something like a prison cell of our own making multiplied to infinity for “boredom is always the external surface of unconscious events.”<sup>287</sup> Nothing about the parade of sycophants that would siphon value from the empty rituals of the streets—made bourgeois palace peddling the goods of exchange—can release us from such eternal imprisonment save our own moral work.

“The universe,” Benjamin suggests, “is a site of lingering catastrophes.”<sup>288</sup> In our next section we will explore such a thought in its larger profundity while thinking about the act of becoming dialectically startled before the angel of history. However, we must remember again the dual nature of phantasmagoria and the reason why Benjamin links

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<sup>284</sup> Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 105 [D2, 7].

<sup>285</sup> Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 108 [D3, 7].

<sup>286</sup> Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 106 [D2a, 1].

<sup>287</sup> Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 106 [D2a, 2].

<sup>288</sup> Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 111 [D5, 7].

boredom to the eternal return. In his convolute on boredom and the eternal return, Benjamin collects a litany of quotations from Louis-Auguste Blanqui in his work *L'éternité par les asters* [*Eternity through the Stars*] deserving our reflection. “He thus inscribes his fate,” writes Geffroy reflecting on Blanqui, “at each instant of its duration, across the numberless stars. His prison cell is multiplied to infinity. Throughout the entire universe, he is the same confined man that he is on this earth, with his rebellious strength and his freedom of thought.”<sup>289</sup> The world, then, is pitiable. As gamblers we spend all of our temporal power in acquiring the chimerical promises of an impossible personhood imbued in the trinkets of fashion. As wanderers we store all of our temporal power as we travel through the vestibules of the streets meant to mirror the palatial wealth of the affluent as we instead find ourselves imprisoned in an eternally recurring boredom. To know these figurations and corresponding experiences of phantasmagoria as symbols of our future life, indeed to divine the future in the first place, is to be trapped. To know the future, is to succumb oneself to fate. To know the future, is to relieve ourselves of hope. To know the future, is to leave ourselves with one last archetype and experience of phantasmagoria. For, if the fate of the future world is already known as an eternal return of the present, then we have no sense of coherence making sense of the meaning of the larger world and ourselves in that world. Without the possibility of becoming other than figurations caught in the experiences of phantasmagoria, we become nothing more than the broken down matter of the commodity; we become destined to collect fragments of such débris to repair a broken, fragmented *imago* by giving it coherence in a collected menagerie of things meant to mirror a healthy interiority.

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<sup>289</sup> Geffroy cited in *The Arcades Project*, 113 [D6, 2].

The collector is a peculiar figure that has great difficulty constituting a sense of the self in a deeply fragmented, incoherent world. Such a world works in many ways to break any sense of a whole imago for the subject into atomized form, meaning we must collect the inorganic matter of the world to find some semblance of subjective coherence for our organic life. Collection, then, is the act of trying to restore our imago by creating something of a menagerie of personhood out of the various artifacts of the capitalist world which, when fashioned together, “form a whole magical encyclopedia, a world order, whose outline is the *fate* of his object.”<sup>290</sup> The act of collection is physiologically reductive to something of the order of a pavlovian behaviorism reminiscent of nest building.<sup>291</sup> However, philosophically we are talking about an archetype of phantasmagoria that takes up time and renders it in altered form; waiting for the world, and us in that world, to make sense seems to be an eternal task. Until then, we must give semblance to ourselves by inviting objects of the world in into our psychic space to fashion a semblance of wholeness. “The true method of making things present,” Benjamin remarks, “is to represent them in our space (not to represent ourselves in their space).”<sup>292</sup> Thus, for the collector the things of the world are received in the interiority of our mind, such that we do not “displace our being into theirs; they step into our life.”<sup>293</sup>

However, the act of collection carries a deep detachment from the organic world and the original function of the objects collected are also detached from ordinary use value and instead made to reverberate subjective meaning that not only gives dramatic

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<sup>290</sup> Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 207 [H2, 7; H2a, 1].

<sup>291</sup> Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 210 [H4, 1].

<sup>292</sup> Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 206 [H2, 3].

<sup>293</sup> Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 206 [H2, 3].

character to the larger world but also functions as a substitute to practical memory.

Benjamin, in a lengthy passage, explains the matter rather cogently when he suggests:

What is decisive in collecting is that the object is detached from all its original functions in order to enter into the closest conceivable relation to things of the same kind. This relation is the diametric opposite of any unity, and falls into the peculiar category of completeness. What is this 'completeness'? It is a grand attempt to overcome the wholly irrational character of the object's mere presence at hand through its integration into a new, expressly devised historical system: the collection. And for the true collector; every single thing in this system becomes an encyclopedia of knowledge of the epoch, the landscape, the industry, and the owner from which it comes. It is the deepest enchantment of the collector to enclose the particular item within a magic circle, where, as a last shudder runs through it (the shudder of being acquired), it turns to stone. Everything remembered, everything thought, everything conscious becomes solce, frame, pedestal, seal of his possession. It must not be assumed that the collector, in particular, would find anything strange in the *topos hyperouranios*—that place beyond the heavens which, for Plato, shelters the unchangeable archetypes of things. He loses himself, assuredly. But he has the strength to pull himself up again by nothing more than a straw; and from out of the sea of fog that envelopes his senses rises the newly acquired piece, like an island.—Collecting is a form of practical memory, and of all the profane manifestations of 'nearness' it is the most binding. Thus, in a certain sense, the smallest act of political reflection makes for an epoch in the antiques business. We construct here an alarm clock that rouses the kitsch of the previous century to 'assembly.'<sup>294</sup>

Collection is more than merely trying to find a way to speak an image of our self to the larger world but also enacts something like a quixotic search to reach out to a place beyond the heavens where the perfect form of things lay unknown by the world of human beings. There is something deeply irrational, to be sure, about the objects collected but is a fetish that occurs because the larger world, perhaps, is even more irrational. So, with the broken-down matter of the world we scramble to paint an image of ourselves through a private language of the things that have stepped into the space of our minds, which is an act that represents the "the elevation of the commodity to the status of allegory."<sup>295</sup>

There is something obscene and pitiable occurring in the act of collecting making it a doubly important phenomenon. On the one hand, we have fallen victim to becoming a mere trope in the language of exchange relations that gives us identity through the things that we buy, yet, on the other hand, there is something of a desperate attempt by

<sup>294</sup> Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 204-205 [H1a,2].

<sup>295</sup> Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 207 [H2, 6].



people to reach beyond the psychically limiting and subjectively encroaching forces of the culture industry as we try to divine a transcendental sense of ourselves made from the debris of the world. “Private property,” says Benjamin quoting Karl Max, “has made us so stupid and inert that an object is *ours* only when we have it, when it exists as capital for us, or when... we *use* it.”<sup>296</sup> However, the collector is trying to accomplish something much more secret, much more pitiable:

Perhaps the most deeply hidden motive of the person who collects can be described this way: he takes up the struggle against dispersion. Right from the start, the great collector is struck by the confusion, by the scatter, in which the things of the world are found... On the other hand, the allegorist—for whom objects represent only keywords in a secret dictionary, which will make known their meanings to the initiated—precisely the allegorist can never have enough things. With him, one thing is so little capable of taking the place of another that no possible reflection suffices to foresee what meaning his profundity might lay claim to for each one of them.<sup>297</sup>

Fashioning a secret dictionary that can give meaning to the self for those who have been initiated to such a private language is a desperate plea to rise out of the sinking sand of an incoherent world and draw some semblance of salvation for our selves on a private island of meaning. The experience of such collection as an archetypal figure lost in the slumber of a phantasmagoric world is derived, in part, from the experiential ways in which the world constantly threatens to collapse itself upon our very interiority.

Such a bout of protecting our self from the infectious elements of the larger world that would make our subjectivity synonymous with the dictates of market capitalism can be something of a maddening battle:

World exhibitions glorify the exchange value of the commodity. They create a framework in which its use value needs recedes into the background. They open a phantasmagoria in which a person enters in order to be distracted. The entertainment industry makes this easier by elevating the person to the level of the commodity. He surrenders to its manipulations while enjoying his alienation from himself and others... He ends in madness.<sup>298</sup>

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<sup>296</sup> Marx cited in Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 209 [H3a, 1].

<sup>297</sup> Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 211 [H4a, 1].

<sup>298</sup> Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 7.

As the person is elevated to the level of the commodity, which becomes something of a pathological infection where the world of external objects lives not only in their material distribution in society but simultaneously take shelter in the interiority of our minds, we are reminded that such an experience is one that can rightly end in madness. The infection of the interior is indeed pathological, as Benjamin reminds us of the way banal artifacts and events of capitalism are something of a germ cell giving rise to the works by figures like Kafka.<sup>299</sup> Once such a germ begins to spread and the external world takes up space in our interiority, we have not only let the logic of capitalism into our minds but also invited in the very artifacts that will block our mental escape from the subjective prison walls of the culture industry. The need to collect becomes an affront to the symbolic, to the ability for human beings to wield a language capable of giving voice to transcendent possibility. Just as the flâneur was able to retreat from a materially impoverished life by experiencing the richness of the streets as an imagined facsimile of the bourgeois life never once lived, the collection of things in this world to bring coherence to our imago is a similar imagined facsimile of a healthy subjective state. One need only find the appropriate artifact to speak the truth of their personhood: correlates of the body, mind, heart, and soul that veil the impoverished state of the four-fold in the imagined decoration of artifacts dressing them up in the subjective richness of the epoch at hand. Melancholy may indeed become the shelter for authenticity, a cage to hold the strange figure that would dance to the music of ideas no one hears and pray to a future never seen in history. Then, again, we cannot forget that these are but archetypal figurations caught in perverse experiences meant to give conceptual shape to the meaning

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<sup>299</sup> Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 218 [I3, 3].

of a world shrouded in the sleep of phantasmagoria. And, such slumber can indeed be blasted away in the moment of becoming dialectically startled before the angel of history.

Thus, in this triply layered image of phantasmagoria we can indeed find some sort of hope for a future that itself might contain the very spaces for belonging we so desperately need in order to give shelter to something like a dream of freedom. Toward such redemption, Benjamin suggests:

In every true work of art there is a place where, for one who removes there, it blows cool like the wind of a coming dawn. From this it follows that art, which has often been considered refractory to every relation with progress, can provide its true definition. Progress has its seat not in the continuity of elapsing time but in its interferences—where the truly new makes itself felt for the first time, with the sobriety of dawn.<sup>300</sup>

This poetic fragment taken from some of the writings produced by Benjamin on methodology suggests the importance of confronting such troubling images of a society failing to live up to its larger ideals, which Benjamin suggests is an aesthetic window that reveals to us the very condition of our life in a given historical epoch. Therefore, the dialectical images of the lived experience of suffering in this world should call attention to the pervasiveness of certain forms of inequality, unfreedom, and injustice alive and well throughout our supposedly advanced society. It is only when we confront such images that we are reminded of the larger ideals making up our society. If such issues are left unattended, then we face living in a world where dialectics comes to a standstill and the true possibility of a peaceful world is reduced from its utopian splendor to a mere shadow.

### *Dialectically Startled before the Angel of History*

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<sup>300</sup> Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 474 [N9a,7].

Benjamin was steadfast in his intellectual commitment not only to the ideals of socialism but, more generally, to unearthing the many ways our lived everyday reality is mechanistically caught up in the larger machinery of industrialization that sows and reaps the surplus of exchange value out of our humanity, leaving catastrophe and suffering as a byproduct of its extraction. Benjamin, in one of his more powerful aphorisms, offers a bit of poetic explanation for some commonly used intellectual terms:

Definitions of basic historical concepts: Catastrophe—to have missed the opportunity. Critical moment—the status quo threatens to be preserved. Progress—the first revolutionary measure taken.<sup>301</sup>

Giving aesthetic life to this declaration Benjamin famously describes an image of the



angel of history inspired by the painting “Angelus Novus” by Paul Klee.<sup>302</sup> The angel has spread its wings and is looking towards us yet spies out of the corner of its eye a tragedy of the past that cannot be ignored. It is indeed a catastrophe of the highest magnitude, of which subsequent catastrophes continue to pile upon this original foundation. This angel, representing the weak messianic power

inherent in all human beings, stands motionless but aware of the original catastrophe. It is an image raked with guilt for both what the angel has noticed and the stillness that has become its prison.

However, this catastrophe is not something for the simple fodder of critical analysis but is very much the content of our redemptive projects if we are to ever to

<sup>301</sup> Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 474 [N10,2].

<sup>302</sup> Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in in *Walter Benjamin Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autographical Writings*, Peter Demetz, ed. (New York: Schocken Books, 1978), 257 [ix].

awaken from the nightmarish slumber of phantasmagoria. Benjamin suggests to us that if it is our obligation to correct such catastrophes of present-history, then we must forge what some have called an *anamnestic solidarity with the dead*. The words in this curious phrase are indeed purposeful. We must animate a memory of solidarity that stretches out beyond time to all people (dead, living, and perhaps not yet born) that acknowledges the redemptive duty we inhere in this world if we are ever to be free, either in death or life.

The angel of history is showing us that the sort of grandeur we live in today is very much only possible because of the continued wreck of catastrophes that has bequeathed to us the many privileges of life that come with living in empire, which Benjamin calls "...the style of revolutionary terrorism, for which the state is an end in itself."<sup>303</sup> Instead, we are called to awaken to our deeper ethical obligation to enact redemption. Without such redemption we are not ever **living free** but simply **living freely** atop the catastrophic suffering of our fellow human beings. If we examine this image from afar we are, metaphysically speaking, objects made by the context of an original catastrophe of suffering playing master over our objective experience of the world; the only solution to such slavish relations, following Hegel, is to perform the sort of work of redemption that would authentically expand our lived consciousness of freedom.

The angel of history stands motionless because "a storm is blowing from Paradise; it got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer use them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm," Benjamin tells us, "is

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<sup>303</sup> Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 4.

called progress.”<sup>304</sup> The novelty of such progress is simply a reinvention of the old that ossifies our being, historicizing tragedy with the promise of being aligned with those who would usher forward the next coming epoch without attending to the ailments needing repair in the previous generation. Yet, the power of the dialectical images contains within it a somewhat sublime, and perhaps even divine, quality that gives us the chance to release the shackles of the long chain of history leading back to the original catastrophe. Benjamin speaks of how our receptivity to dialectical images can indeed promise such sought after redemption:

The Messiah comes not only as the redeemer, he comes as the subduer of antichrist. Only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that *even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he wins. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious.<sup>305</sup>

The antichrist Benjamin speaks of is perhaps our stillness before dialectical images. Such images are themselves experiences that rupture through the veil of progress and reveal to us the world-weariness that haunts our lives. The angel of history is the archetype of such a dialectical image, but perhaps clarity can be gained from further example. Another possible image would be something like the televised open-casket funeral of Emmett Till, which itself was a sort of triggering event spreading a gruesome and realistic picture of the apartheid so very much alive in the 1950s and justifying the coming rebellion of the civil rights movement.

Emmett was a fourteen-year-old boy who received the fatal backlash of the combined resentment and fear of white supremacy just over a year after the US Supreme Court voted for desegregation. Two men kidnapped and beat this young child to death because rumors around the town had spread that he had, simply, “whistled at a white

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<sup>304</sup> Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 257-258 [ix].

<sup>305</sup> Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 255 [vi].

girl.” The police found the body three days later abandoned in a nearby river. The Till family choose to have an open-casket funeral and many came to mourn this personal loss and public betrayal, including the media. Television had only recently gained its popularity among the masses and carried a strange sort of credibility to the families watching its moving pictures that seemed to (re)present the truth of the world in its images. What people saw was gruesome, horrifying, and certainly dialectical.

The mutilated body of Emmett Till spoke volumes about catastrophe, and the image bore great confusion. We are given the picture of a murdered child whose appearance carries with it no symbol of youthful innocence, but instead seems ravaged by a sort of hatred, terror, and pain that no human being could ever imaginably suffer and still remain human. Yet, Emmet did. His face is gone to us from the series of concussive



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blows those men fired upon his small body and eaten up by the decomposition that quickly took place when he was abandoned in the river. This sort of confusion makes us wonder: are we looking at the face of a child, or instead do we see a monster represented in the failure of our humanity to offer the kind of shelter any child deserves?

Benjamin believed that dialectical images carry such force that they are able to awaken within us a weak sort of messianic power to transcend and the nightmarish trappings of phantasmagoria toward some higher ideal of justice always looming on our future horizon:

Fate is the guilt context of the living. It corresponds to the natural condition of the living, that illusion not yet wholly dispelled from which man is so far removed that, under its rule, he was never wholly immersed in it, but only invisible in his best part. It is not, therefore, really man who has a fate; rather, the subject of fate is indeterminable.<sup>306</sup>

Indeed, the unbearable guilt one inheres when seeing such a dialectical image is so potent that we must be reminded of our need to further the work of redemption. Dialectical images such as the mangled body of Emmett Till are not giving us a representation of our fate to live forever trapped in some frozen reality of apartheid. Our relationship to dialectical images is indeed quite complex, as Benjamin suggests:

It's not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation... For while the relation of the present to the past is a purely temporal, continuous one, the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: is not progression but image, sudden emergent.—Only dialectical images are genuine images (that is, not archaic); and the place where one encounters them is language. Awakening.<sup>307</sup>

Rather, these dialectical images are constantly comorting us to the realization that we should, and certainly must, form an *anamnestic solidarity with the dead* giving life to yet another chance to awaken into a new world of more just relations between human beings.

It is curious that Benjamin ended the previous convolute with the word *awakening*. Benjamin believed that we must not loose hope and wallow in despair; instead, our engagement with dialectical images must “fan the spark of hope” and learn to use the varied forces of advanced capitalism against itself so as to arrive to the sort of *awakening* outside of the slumberish nightmares of life ruled under phantasmagoria.

Benjamin confirms this sentiment in his mediations on historical epochs:

Every epoch, in fact, not only dreams the one to follow but, in dreaming, precipitates its awakening. It bears its end within itself and unfolds it—as Hegel already noticed—by cunning. With the destabilization of the market economy, we begin to recognize the monuments of the bourgeoisie as ruins even before they have crumbled.<sup>308</sup>

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<sup>306</sup> Walter Benjamin, “Fate and Character,” in *Walter Benjamin Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autographical Writings*, Peter Demetz, ed. (New York: Schocken Books, 1978), 308.

<sup>307</sup> Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 462 [N2a,3].

<sup>308</sup> Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 13.



While Benjamin would have certainly criticized television as some sort of bully pulpit giving commodities center stage in our interior spaces, he would have also marveled at the way the transmission of the dialectical image of Emmett Till played its part in triggering the social revolution of the civil rights movement. Such a widespread consciousness-raising should be enough creative inspiration and historical testimony to not only “fan the spark of hope” but to set it brightly ablaze.

### *Constellations toward a Redemptive Imagination*

In the wake of such combined meditations on the spectral hauntings of phantasmagoria and the possibility of becoming dialectically startled before the angel of history, this chapter moves toward its conclusion by thinking about building constellations toward a redemptive imagination. Benjamin suggests that history might itself be best illuminated to us through a methodological approach that draws constellations of theory and practice out of various instances of history for the purpose of vivifying the possibility of justice lying as a teleological projection on a future horizon of being.

Benjamin, citing correspondence from his long-time friend Theodor Adorno, describes the notion of thinking by means of constellation and its integral relation to a dialectically startling redemptive imagination:

Dialectical images are constituted between alienated things and incoming and disappearing meaning, are instantiated in the moment of indifference between death and meaning. While things in appearance are awakened to what is newest, death transforms the meanings to what is most ancient.<sup>309</sup>

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<sup>309</sup> Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 466 [N5,2].

In this section of his massive magnum opus Benjamin collects numerous citations from dialecticians, including Marx, reminding us that “primal history groups itself anew in images appropriate to that century”<sup>310</sup> for history is “not that what is past casts light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words, image is dialectics at a standstill.”<sup>311</sup> Paradoxically, Benjamin suggests to us that it is only by suspending motion and time that we are able to replete ourselves with the critical sensibility to truly observe, at least in part, the inner workings of history and progress—which, for Benjamin, radiates an inimical relationship to catastrophe—so that we might begin to think, finally, the imaginative workings of redemption. “For while the relation of the present to the past is a purely temporal, continuous one,” Benjamin continues, “the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: is not progression but image, suddenly emergent.—Only dialectical images are genuine images (that is, not archaic); and the place where one encounters them is language.”<sup>312</sup> Puncturing time is not a wound to the temporal but instead a dialectical incision to stave away the infectious, pathological automaticity of a world obedient to the march of an assembly line rhythm of produced life. However, it is a maneuver requiring one to call forth our combined creative and material faculties to a task of perhaps impossible proportions, but one that must be addressed if we are to ever live even a moment of a free life.

Encountering dialectical images in language is a peculiar feature of what it means to develop constellations and deserves a bit of elaboration. St. Augustine, confessing publicly his private moment of piety before God, mused about a curious conundrum. If

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<sup>310</sup> Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 463 [N3a, 2].

<sup>311</sup> Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 462 [N2a, 3].

<sup>312</sup> Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 462 [N2a, 3].

God is an omnipotent force within all of our lives, then how could our small, finite bodies give shelter to such infinite grandness? After several chapters chronicling the ways in which the logic of empire have spatially and temporally polluted the combined consciousness of Rome, Augustine returns to this original question in his work on time and memory. Remembering the first words of the Old Testament—"In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God"—Augustine concludes that language, in all of its profundity, is the one true human capacity that might indeed be a divine gift where we are able to ponder the infinite within the confines of a finite creature. Finding a means to access the full force of such a profound gift is precisely what Benjamin means when he speaks of the genuine quality found in images derived from constellations. This conjuring of a constellation represents the depth of human creativity in relationship to language, or what keynotes our true capacity for symbolic form in the ability to name, think, and (re)make the very image of the world.

At times, Benjamin invokes a more spiritual tone meant to comport us to a truer model of history and further communicate his belief in our capacity as agents surely capable of relating to history and progress differently. "Like every generation that has preceded us," suggests Benjamin, "we have been endowed with a *weak* Messianic power, a power which the past has a claim. That claim cannot be settled cheaply. Historical materialists are aware of that."<sup>313</sup> As we stand thrown into the larger world, we are chained to a past marking our privilege in the present. Benjamin suggests that despite our phenomenal character, and following our profound ability to think in language, we indeed hold a "weak Messianic power" to divine our debt to the past, which surely, in his own words, "cannot be settled cheaply." Without finding a way to bring life to these past

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<sup>313</sup> Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," 254 [ii]

tragedies we risk being slavishly imprisoned by the larger attendances of history, as proverbially doomed to repeat the unlearned lessons of the past. “To be sure, only a redeemed mankind receives the fullness of its past—which is to say, only for a redeemed mankind has its past become citable in all of its moments.”<sup>314</sup> Reminiscent of conjuring up what Hans-Georg Gadamer called effective history, or the attempt to build horizons of knowledge reaching back into past experiences with a hermeneutical understanding of the present, Benjamin is suggesting that without such a fullness of the past we lose the chance to live a redeemed life, a free life.

Speaking of the past is a precarious enterprise, and Benjamin is clear that this is no small task of simply reporting facts captured in the annals of history, but instead recognizes that “[t]o articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it ‘the way it really was’ (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger. Historical materialism wishes to retain that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to man singled out of history at a moment of danger.”<sup>315</sup> History, then, is not itself entirely disaggregated from the present nor simply seen as a temporal index confirming the progress of our current epoch; rather, history is a haunting feature of our very lived lives in the current age, or, to invoke Benjamin more directly, “[h]istory is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogenous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now [*Jetztzeit*].”<sup>316</sup> Such thinking is itself somewhat counterintuitive to our accustomed relation to history as a narrative appearing in schoolbook summations, yet those skilled in articulating the past know better, for:

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<sup>314</sup> Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” 254 [ii]

<sup>315</sup> Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” 255 [xi]

<sup>316</sup> Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” 261 [xiv]

Historicism contents itself with establishing a causal connection between various moments in history. But no fact that is a cause is for that very reason historical. It becomes historical post-humously, as it were, through events that may be separated from it by thousands of years. A historian who takes this as his point of departure stops telling the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary. Instead, he grasps the constellation which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one. Thus he establishes a conception of the present as the 'time of the now' which is shot through with chips of Messianic time.<sup>317</sup>

Thus, thinking according to constellations opens up the possibility of effectively communicating our shared debt to the tragedies of the past, which anchor us with a heavy haunting from being able to even think of the sort of freedom always open to us in the future. Perhaps, it is in such constellations shedding light on our need for redemption which can cut through the eight-second sound bite attention span robbing us of the very need to seriously consider our ethical relation—both along the dimensions of time and space—within the larger world. However, giving voice to such redemption is itself a challenging task given the myriad, complex layers of bureaucratic doublespeak foreclosing the possibility of speaking the truth of history and with it the present condition of our world through dialectical images. Benjamin is offering us a complicated tension between hope and despair, ultimately siding with the perpetual possibility of hopeful change as “the past carries with it a temporal index by which it referred to redemption.”<sup>318</sup>

## *Conclusion*

We have taken a broad look through the work of Benjamin at the ways in which our personhood stands caught between two diametric forces challenging how we might indeed animate our ability to bring value into the world. First, we have seen three

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<sup>317</sup> Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” 263 [A]

<sup>318</sup> Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History” in *Illuminations*, Hannah Arendt, ed. (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 254.

figurations of our character and corresponding experiences enmeshed in the forces of phantasmagoria: the gambler who kills time for the purchase of fashion, the flâneur who stores time traveling through the eternally recurring boredom of life, and the collector who changes time in trying to give coherence to an imago before a world that leaves us fragmented. However, these tropes and their experiences are not at all fated determinations. For, secondly, we have explored the way in which we still harbor the power to become dialectically startled before the angel of history so that we might, finally, build constellations of theory and practice toward moral redemption.

For Benjamin, the pedagogic force of such dialectical challenge demands that we “educate the image-making medium within us, raising it to a stereoscopic and dimensional seeing into the depths of historical shadows.”<sup>319</sup> Truly, our faculty for bringing value into this world, the image-making medium of our symbolic profundity that would allow such a gift, wields the full force of dialectical, stereoscopic dimensional seeing. The image of a world faced by both dreams of freedom and nightmares of despair can never privilege one dialectical position at the expense of eclipsing its counterpart. Indeed, the two possibilities can only be stereoscopically superimposed upon each other to yield something like a third image marking our progress in the world. It is a progress that announces both the failure of our humanity to bring about a peaceful world marred by catastrophes so totally alien to the idea of peace, but also, and at the same time, reminds us of the tremendous achievements we have indeed all made with respect to enlarging the register of that humanity in both subjective and material form.

The combined image we are left with can never deny the double possibility of our ascent to the ideality that persists in both dreams of freedom and nightmares of despair.

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<sup>319</sup> Borchardt cited in Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 458 [N1, 8].

Throughout this dissertation we have discussed the two forces as asymptotic lines that stretch out to their respective infinities, yet never cross the axis of practical experience. We must, in some thoughtful manner, return the work of political philosophy to its place in the work of affirming the powers of us finite human beings. Our reason is both a force that enables and limits. We can think the finite truth of our empirical experiences in the world and at the same time imaginatively think beyond such limitation in aesthetic engagement with the transcendental beyond. Such ideality, however, can be all to the good of dreams of freedom or all to the bad of nightmares of despair. However, the work of inheriting the legacy of critique means that we must take both possibilities with equal gravity when choosing to live in this world and taking up the proverbial labors of Sisyphus as we move the boulder of human suffering ever upward in aspiration to something beyond. The slipping of that boulder and the way it returns us to the base of human experience is not a fatalistic moment signaling hopelessness. Instead, we are to think of such a paradoxical eternal return as the truth of our enabling and limiting power of reason.

The whole of this work, then, attempts to illuminate a sort of intellectual honesty about our condition as human beings. Truly, this has been an attempt to think alongside various thinkers in effort to draw out a sort of hermeneutic beauty; such beauty is animated to give their work shelter in a horizon of knowledge that does not attempt to stretch metaphysical and empirical reflection beyond the boundaries of its appropriate influence. And so, the image we conjure in the contestation between dreams of freedom and nightmares of despair is not meant to evoke the vision of a battle. Rather, we are left to think the two stereoscopically combined into a single image calling us to inherit the

very legacy of critique. Truthfully, there is one fate we cannot escape and that is the fate of our extremism seen in three lights; we may indeed be marked by either apathetic pessimism before nightmares of despair or enthusiastic optimism before dreams of freedom. However, the third option that emerges takes the two positions in absolute dialectical seriousness, allowing our moral action toward redemption to move ever upward the mountain that haunts Sisyphus; the choice, regardless, is ours to make.

Finding the proverbial last word to culminate any work is a daunting task. For, after such a long, and at times quixotic, intellectual journey we find our selves prepared to offer final ruminations, secret culminations in thought meant to vivify the larger idea guiding this project. If we are to fashion anything like a political cosmos out of political chaos, as mentioned by Sheldon Wolin in the introduction to this dissertation, then the last word is one that weaves together the chapters of this work in poetic fashion:

When work is made invisible  
     we are left only to see magic,  
 allowing the world to age  
     by fading into illusion:  
 classes of capital magicians  
     performing for a society of spectators.

Desires arrive by way  
     of a slight of hand:  
 scientifically legitimate,  
     ethically suspicious,  
 fabricated in novelty,  
     originated in counterfeit.

The soul of humanity  
     becomes ensnared by an elusive,  
 spellbinding imprisonment  
     under the machinery of extraction  
 where the entanglements of exchange  
     ascend to play friendly executioner.

We stand befuddled  
     before the way the world works,  
 infected with strange habituations whose workings  
     can only be explained with words  
 that sound like the muttering of a spell  
     chanted out in technical abstraction.



Magic holds sway,  
     with trance like force,  
 breathing life into fantasies  
     allowing us to imbue value  
 into reality made virtual  
     under an egotism of creation.

Yet, gods we are not;  
     giving birth to such goods  
 is hardly a feat  
     but merely a strategic collapse:  
 of idleness upon idolatry,  
     of idiocy upon utility.

We have forgotten how much  
     such illusory words devastate,  
 anesthetized by the  
     insidious curses  
 littering the landscape  
     of everyday speech.

Language is a platted steel cage  
     holding back  
 the sublime truth,  
     save the thin veils of light  
 escaping its  
     broken seams and rusted grates.

The grandeur of such holiness is  
     always infected  
 with the virulent impossibility  
     of matching essence with existence,  
 leaving us sickened  
     with a melancholia of what is silenced.

Silence becomes  
     a mask of death  
 giving no face  
     to the hospitality of meaning:  
 a graveyard of the never said emerges  
     to monuments of regret.

But, if you listen,  
     simply listen,  
 you can hear through  
     the deafening silence  
 to ancient echoes  
     of a heartbeat  
 bowing to the rhythm of truth.

Humanity dwells in a nightmarish slumber  
     building taller the tower of progress  
 as it slowly collapses beneath  
     the quicksand of catastrophe,  
 a history of terror lost

to a present of amnesia.

Such is the nature of catastrophe,  
     to forget  
 our beginnings  
     built with the spectral fabric  
 of the ones who died  
     in ancient tyrannies for the future empire.

We cannibalize the dead  
     to feed the living,  
 inscribing the past  
     in a tome of catastrophe read as simple tragedy  
 inheriting to all generations  
     a debt that can never be repayed.

It is but a noble race wandering lost  
     within the labyrinthine tower  
 and its confusion of the interior  
     painting brightly the banality of a bought world  
 with mythic importance and epic distraction  
     from a past that must be found.

Without such redemption  
     we are presently fated to live  
 as slavish pawns  
     to a game we never started  
 where we live not freely  
     but freely upon others.

This is our truth as a race of angels  
     imprisoned by our own stillness  
 before the catastrophe  
     whose image should startle us  
 to our shared weak messianic power  
     promising to pay all debts.

Nightmares of this failed humanity  
     can only threaten ruination,  
 a supposed future lost  
     to habits of the past:  
 purgatory as abandonment  
     of the world to itself.

The future world slumbers until called  
     by the voice of release:  
 a sincere obliteration  
     of resentment rotting in we brethren hypocrites,  
 the seven songed trumpet blast  
     that can blow away the sands of sleep.

For, the tower need not be our home  
     and a spirited exodus  
 from its sinful foundations  
     is the militant command of freedom  
 soldiering us forward to the world that could be

where tombstones do not make foundations.

Such hope is always possible,  
if only we remember in practice  
the humble grace,  
the solace of being,  
gifted to ourselves in trinity:  
slumber, dream, awaken.<sup>320</sup>

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<sup>320</sup> Kenneth Michael Panfilio, "Awakening" (16 April 2007).

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**Appendix 2:**  
**Curriculum Vitae**

Kenneth Michael Panfilio

**Education**

- **Ph.D., Rutgers University (October, 2007)**  
Fields: Political Theory, Comparative Politics, Women and Politics
- **M.A., Illinois State University (May, 2003)**  
Fields: Political Theory, Comparative Politics, and International Relations
- **B.A., Illinois State University (May, 2001)**  
Majors: Speech Communication and General Studies
- **A.A., College of DuPage (May, 1998)**  
Major: Liberal Arts

**Positions**

- **Research Assistant**  
Drucilla Cornell, Department of Political Science, Rutgers University (2004-2007)
- **Doctoral Fellowship**  
Department of Political Science, Rutgers University (2003-2007)
- **Graduate Assistant**  
Department of Politics and Government, Illinois State University (2003)
- **Graduate Assistant**  
Department of Communication, Illinois State University (2002)