Adorno's concept of the good: peaceful tensions and the precipice of paradise

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ADORNO’S CONCEPT OF THE GOOD:

Peaceful Tensions and the Precipice of Paradise

by

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Dedication

To Tim, Lynette, Amy, and Kim McKeever,

whose love, support, and foundation are irreplaceable
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Abstract

Interpretations of Adorno have been dominated by the puzzle of his own theory. The dominant questions center on the internal consistency of his project. Detractors claim that thinking in general and Adorno’s project in particular relies on the same foundations—concepts like instrumental reasoning—that his theory itself seeks to criticize. This means that Adorno himself becomes implicated in his own critique and his entire project is neutered. Many interpreters have sought to come to Adorno’s aid to show that his project is consistent and potent, in part, because it shows us another way of thinking. Proponents of both sides, though, often realize that the next step in this debate is coming to understand what Adorno’s concept of the good is. The challenge is that this concept of the good must 1) be present in Adorno’s texts and 2) must not contradict his theory. This dissertation seeks to meet this challenge.

In accomplishing this goal, I ground Adorno’s own gesture toward the good by linking it to past conceptions. I genealogically trace the concept of the good through the dialectical tradition—making stops at Plato, Aristotle, and Marx. In doing this, I emphasize the often undertheorized “negative” elements of each of these concepts of the good to show that, at their best, they do take seriously dialectic’s negative core. Then, I pivot in the dissertation and provide an analysis of Adorno’s own gesture toward the good. In doing this, I show the similarities between his gesture toward the good and the previous dialectical conceptions that we analyzed but also the important differences between them. I claim that Adorno self-consciously celebrates the negative elements at the core of dialectics and makes them the center of his gesture toward the good, which is the negative movements of tensions made peaceful. This gesture matters politically because, among other things, it forces us to reconsider identity and identity politics and suggests a renewed role for humility as a political virtue.
## Table of Contents

**Acknowledgements** ........................................................................................................... iii

**Abstract** .............................................................................................................................. v

**List of Figures** ....................................................................................................................... ix

**Introduction: Good, Neutered, or the Devil?** ........................................................................ 1
  - What Good Is It? .................................................................................................................. 1
  - Two Criticisms and How to Rescue a “Devil” .................................................................. 6
  - Where’s the Good? .............................................................................................................. 12
  - Plan of the Dissertation ..................................................................................................... 17

**Chapter 2| Plato: Moving with the Divine** ............................................................................. 25
  - Introduction ....................................................................................................................... 25
  - Plato’s Epistemological Line ............................................................................................ 29
  - The Good in Timaeus’ Voice ............................................................................................ 33
  - The Philosophic Look at the Good ................................................................................... 42
  - The Good and Politics ....................................................................................................... 64

**Chapter 3| Aristotle: Define Me** ............................................................................................ 75
  - Introduction ....................................................................................................................... 75
  - Causing the End: The General Concept of the Good ....................................................... 79
    - The Good as End and Cause ......................................................................................... 79
    - Consequences of the Good as a Cause ....................................................................... 81
  - Limit ................................................................................................................................ 82
  - Qualitative Movement/Change ....................................................................................... 87
  - Necessity ........................................................................................................................... 89
  - Being ................................................................................................................................ 91
  - Substance .......................................................................................................................... 94
  - Complete .......................................................................................................................... 103
  - Excellence ........................................................................................................................ 104
  - Movement and the Negative Elements of Aristotle’s General Conception of the Good .. 105

**Chapter 4| Aristotle: Deviantly Good** .................................................................................... 110
  - Introduction ....................................................................................................................... 110
  - The Human Good ............................................................................................................ 113
  - Achieving the Human Good ............................................................................................ 123
  - Politics ............................................................................................................................... 128

vi
### Interlude 1| Plato and Aristotle ................................................................. 143
- Introduction......................................................................................... 143
- Clustering Plato and Aristotle.......................................................... 143
- Unknown............................................................................................. 144
- Indefinite Deferment.......................................................................... 146
- Movement............................................................................................ 147
- Negative............................................................................................... 148
- Memory............................................................................................... 150
- Moving Marx ..................................................................................... 151

### Chapter 5| Marx: Sing Me a Human......................................................... 154
- Introduction......................................................................................... 154
- Acting Human, Being Human............................................................. 158
  - Human Being, Human Labor: Productive, Conscious, and Free ........ 158
  - Human Needs.................................................................................. 163
- Labor: Sing Us a Human and You’re the Piano Man ....................... 170
- Economic Conditions and Labor......................................................... 179
  - Labor Under Capitalism................................................................. 180
  - Changing Economic Conditions, Changing Labor ....................... 191
  - The Negative Elements of Revolution and Its Results.................. 197
- Politics................................................................................................. 200
- Humanized Society............................................................................ 211

### Interlude 2| Marx ....................................................................................... 216
- Introduction......................................................................................... 216
- Movement............................................................................................ 216
- Negative............................................................................................... 218
- Indefinite Deferment.......................................................................... 219
- Unknown............................................................................................. 221
- Memory............................................................................................... 221
- Adorno ............................................................................................... 223

### Chapter 6| Adorno: To Be an Enigma ....................................................... 226
- Introduction......................................................................................... 226
- The Good: Recollected Chords in the Key of Not Yet ....................... 229
  - Succinct Gesturing.......................................................................... 229
“Itself”........................................................................................................................................232
Anticipating the “Would Be” .........................................................................................................240
“Form” ..........................................................................................................................................243
Two Implications ..........................................................................................................................250
Conclusion ....................................................................................................................................253

Chapter 7| Adorno: Clowning Around on the Precipice .................................................................256
Introduction ....................................................................................................................................256
The Dialectical Life: Commotion Under the Microscope ..............................................................262
   The Dialectical Life .......................................................................................................................267
The Aesthetic Life: Imagine Music ................................................................................................268
   Peacefully Subject/Object ............................................................................................................270
   External Tension ..........................................................................................................................272
   Internal tension ............................................................................................................................278
   The Aesthetic Life .......................................................................................................................287
The Good Life: Clowning Around .................................................................................................290
Politics ...........................................................................................................................................296

Conclusion: Identifying Hubris or Humility as a Political Virtue .............................................300
   Introduction .................................................................................................................................300
   Humility .......................................................................................................................................301
   Beyond Identity, Beyond Identity Politics? ................................................................................305

Selected Bibliography ................................................................................................................308
List of Figures

Figure 1: Aristotle’s Dialectic of the Good................................................................. 113
Introduction: Good, Neutered, or the Devil?

What Good Is It?

There are many places in Adorno’s theory where we can find his pessimistic view toward the good, but Minima Moralia is perhaps the most natural place to begin. In the “Dedication” to Minima Moralia (pg. 15), Adorno claims that the book “relates” to that “melancholy science” that is “the teaching of the good life.” As if Adorno’s melancholic relationship to the good was not, therefore, obvious, the book is subtitled “Reflections from Damaged Life,” and in it Adorno catalogs the brokenness of society and all who are in it. He explains this approach, writing, “He who wishes to know the truth about life in its immediacy must scrutinize its estranged form, the objective powers that determine individual existence even in its most hidden recesses” (pg. 15). In this, we already begin to see that there is a larger purpose to Adorno’s melancholy, but, still, Adorno contends that any study of the good life is going to be a dark process. If we have any hope that we can come to know what life really and truly is, we need to become intimately acquainted with what exists, which is untrue and broken. We must come to really know the broken, estranged life that is all around us and that is us. We must know this even down to the hidden recesses. This is a melancholy endeavor, indeed.

However, in spite of this and contrary to many interpreters of Adorno, the desire to know the true life does not drop out. We must scrutinize estranged life, but that is out of the hope that we could know life that is not estranged. In order to come to know the truth of life—in order to understand the good—we must come to know all of life in its current estranged form. We must come to understand how life is currently constructed, so that we can uncover the hidden recesses of that life. In doing so, we will come to see that what is allowed to be life, indeed what life
people are forced to live, hides what life could be. Even more, we will come to see what life is, or at least we will be able to gesture at it.

In *Minima Moralia*’s concluding aphorism, Adorno explains how we can gain the “Perspectives” needed to “displace and estrange the world” so that we can “reveal it to be, with its rifts and crevices…indigent and distorted.” (*Minima Moralia*, pg. 247). In order to properly view the world so that we can see it for what it is and then can show it to be what it is, we need to take a certain vantage point or perspective. This standpoint would give us leverage that we need to criticize the broken world. In this conclusion, he explains what this standpoint is: “The only philosophy which can be responsibly practised in face of despair is the attempt to contemplate all things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption. Knowledge has no light but that shed on the world by redemption” (*Minima Moralia*, pg. 247). In order to see the brokenness of the world, we need light. Knowledge is always enlightenment after all. However, the proper “messianic light” of a useful knowledge that encourages criticism can only come by taking the standpoint of redemption (*Minima Moralia*, pg. 247). We need to stand from the perspective that this world is not as it should be and that life is not good life. We need to see that humans have not yet lived the good.

This presents a problem for Adorno, though. Taking this standpoint of redemption “is also the utterly impossible thing, because it presupposes a standpoint removed, even though by a hair’s breadth, from the scope of existence” (*Minima Moralia*, pg. 247). We need the standpoint of redemption in order to gain leverage to criticize the world, but this is already to admit that the good which would allow us to stand in such a place is not existent.

Adorno, contrary to popular interpretation, does not lose hope there. He does not neuter his philosophy in either of two ways. He does not admit in self defeat that his theory does not
allow space for the good and so is incapable of providing the kind of robust criticism that is its very foundation. Nor does he manufacture the utterly impossible thing by impossibly coming to understand and explain some positive concept of the good so that he can save his theory’s critical core. Instead, he ends the book by writing, “Even its own impossibility it must at last comprehend for the sake of the possible. But beside the demand thus placed on thought, the question of the reality or unreality of redemption itself hardly matters” (*Minima Moralia*, pg. 247). In these two final sentences, Adorno lays the framework for his stance toward the good. Whether or not the good is actually achievable in reality is beside the point. In fact, coming to understand the reason why the good is impossible—why its attainment must always be indefinitely deferred—is precisely the beginning step for coming to think in impossible ways. Understanding that the good will remain incomprehensible is the beginning of our comprehension of the standpoint of redemption, so we can take that perspective and use it as the foundation for criticism.

This is the puzzle of this dissertation. What is the incomprehensible gesture toward the good that is Adorno’s standpoint of redemption? How does this gesture act as a platform from which he can criticize without harming the critical core of his theory? In solving this, we will see that Adorno’s theory is not neutered, but that it can teach us how to live and even how to live according to the good life. This good life is only complete when we fully embody the good itself, but even though understanding let alone fully attaining the good remains indefinitely deferred, we can still live a good life now.

In order to come to grips with this important element of Adorno’s theory, we must move away from *Minima Moralia*, even though that is the book that is ostensibly about the good. Indeed, in the book’s “Dedication,” Adorno himself demands that we expand our search when he
writes, “The concluding aphorisms of each part lead on thematically also to philosophy, without ever pretending to be complete or definitive: they are all intended to mark out points of attack or to furnish models for a future exertion of thought” (*Minima Moralia*, pg. 17). Amidst the pile of aphorisms that expound on contemporary society’s damaged lives, Adorno, on three occasions, grounds those thoughts with three concluding, philosophical aphorisms. These conclusions seek to begin to gesture at the good and at the approach we need to take to begin to gesture toward the good. These aphorisms are not meant to be his final statement on the good, but merely models for future thought.

I argue that *Negative Dialectics* and *Aesthetic Theory* are those future exertions of thought. These are the magnum opuses of Adorno’s work that bring together everything that he was doing in all of his works. But these works also provide models for taking the standpoint of redemption. *Negative Dialectics* provides the philosophical model that shows us what dialectics from the standpoint of redemption would look like, and *Aesthetic Theory* is the aesthetic model that shows us what the redeemed form itself would look like. Neither model is the perfect embodiment of the good, but they gesture toward what perfect embodiment of the good would be.

While these models end up being the best gesture toward the good that Adorno provides, in these books he also most explicitly lays out what he thinks the good is. As we will fully explicate in the chapters on Adorno, in each of his most complete statements on the good, Adorno argues that the good is a tension that acts in the proper, peaceful way. This understanding of the good is important. First, in gesturing toward the good in this way, Adorno does place himself in the philosophic tradition of the study of the good. He too links the good with existence. The good is proper—true and complete—being. However, he also completely
he overturns this philosophic tradition by entirely rethinking what being is. He does not conceptualize being as a positive state that we can achieve. Instead, he understands the existence of reality (i.e., being) as a negative movement of relationship. In short, being = peaceful tension. However, by peaceful tension, he means the proper movement between the related tensions being/becoming, identity/nonidentity, universal/particular, and the like. So being = the peaceful tension that is proper movement between being/becoming, for example. This fundamentally rethinks the study of the good. Traditionally this meant that we needed proper becoming so that we could eventually get being. In the era leading into and especially following Adorno, this often shifted to the idea that our only being was in constantly becoming (i.e., becoming different). Adorno, however, argues that the good is the state of existence that privileges neither being nor becoming but that embodies the peaceful relationship between the two of them.

It turns out that this is exactly the underpinning of the two models that he provides in *Negative Dialectics* and *Aesthetic Theory*. Dialectics, if it is done properly according to its negative core, would be thinking according to the tension. Dialectical thinking, when done right, is neither thinking synthesis nor thinking antithesis with regards to the tension. Instead, it is a peaceful thinking of the tension itself. Likewise, to be art, artworks must embody the aesthetic form, and the aesthetic form is the form of tension. It is the form that constantly resists one side of the tension dominating the other. It is the form that peacefully incorporates subject/object, being/becoming, identity/nonidentity, etc. This means, then, that art is the best model for the good.

Explaining what this all means is the purpose of this dissertation. This is a challenge in its own right. However, as the historical development of Adorno interpretation has shown, this is even more challenging to do while remaining true to Adorno’s theory. As the above has already
indicated, I believe that my explication of the good in Adorno rescues him from the criticisms he has received. However, in order to further see the difficulties that await us, we need to briefly summarize Adorno’s reception by the theoretical world.

**Two Criticisms and How to Rescue a “Devil”**

In carving out a space in the world of theory for their own ideas, Habermas (1990) and Lyotard (1974, 1984) leveled a set of mutually reinforcing criticisms against Adorno that have dominated the Adorno literature. Both claim a contradiction in Adorno’s thought, which contributes to a normative vacuum in his theory that makes him politically irrelevant. They argue, then, that rather than offering a theory of scathing criticism, as was clearly his intent, Adorno is left with a neutered, aporetic theory that offers no way forward for society.

Habermas criticizes Adorno for engaging in a performative contradiction that ultimately leaves him with no normative leverage to either claim what is wrong with the world or to offer anything better. He charges that Adorno claims that all reason has been corrupted by the dialectic of enlightenment, but making this claim relies on reason to determine that reason is corrupted, so there is a performative contradiction. He claims that Adorno recognizes this and so makes the normatively bankrupt move of “uninhibited scepticism” (Habermas, 1990, pg. 129) whereby “instead of weighing the grounds that cast doubt on this scepticism itself” (Habermas, 1990, pg. 129) he chooses to “eschew theory and practice determinate negation on an ad hoc basis” (Habermas, 1990, pg. 128). In other words, Adorno resists building a theory, and resists making his own thoughts into a theory, in favor of ungrounded, ad hoc criticism of whatever exists. In doing this, Habermas claims, Adorno foregoes anything that would ground his criticism and anything that would allow him to claim any redemption that would give him the high ground needed to justify his criticism. Habermas concludes that Adorno, therefore, chooses to embrace
the aporia by being skeptical even of his own work and so he thereby surrenders his claim to theoretical and, more importantly, political relevancy.

Similarly, Lyotard accuses Adorno of maintaining a hope for the future and so of slipping back into the same modernist framework that he is criticizing (Lyotard, 1984). However, since Adorno is not Hegelian because he rejects Hegel’s notion of a closed system with an absolute truth, he is in the position of hoping for a good that he cannot claim exists and that, in fact, he explicitly claims cannot exist (Lyotard, 1974). This leaves Adorno’s theory in a bad place: “Totality is missing=there is no god to reconcile=all reconciliation can only be represented in its impossibility, parodied=it is a satanic work” (Lyotard, 1974, pg. 132). Despite his persistence of hope, Adorno’s theory, Lyotard claims, must claim that there is no good that can possibly be obtained and so there actually is no, and can be, no hope. If a satanic theory preaches hope for the world all the while knowing that it cannot come, then “The devil is the nostalgia of God, impossible god, therefore possible precisely as a god” (Lyotard, 1974, pg. 133). If satanic theory evilly promises hope before taking it away, it only does it so the devil can take the place of the god it criticized. Adorno, Lyotard concludes, must be that devil (Lyotard, 1974, pg. 136-137). Adorno, then, ends up reproducing the same problems that his theory is meant to criticize.

In short, in both cases, Adorno is accused of using the enlightenment tools he criticizes, so all he is left with is a useless project which he cannot use to create a better society. Since Habermas’ project saw him try to redeem critical theory from the contradictions Adorno beset upon it while Lyotard only sought to appropriate what was salvageable from critical theory before throwing the rest aside, it is the Habermasian legacy that weighs most heavily on the Adorno literature. Much of the literature lined up to either outright support Habermas’ assertions that Adorno’s critical theory destroyed the possibility of overcoming the brokenness of society
(Honneth, 1979; Benhabib, 1989) and that there is a performative contradiction in Adorno’s work (Finlayson, 2002, 2003a, 2003b) or to agree with Habermas in his account of Adorno and then use the same notion of performative contradiction (Benhabib, 1981, 1986; Wellmer, 1991; Jay 1992) or normative vacuum (Schmidt, 1979; Benhabib 1981, 1986; Finlayson, 2009) to criticize or advance Habermas’ own theory as the alternative to Adorno’s.

Those who have come to Adorno’s aid have largely done so to extricate him from internal contradiction, though, some have embraced it. His supporters have largely claimed either that 1) determinate negation itself means that the totality is not as total as it proclaims, so there can be correct reasoning even inside a society that has become ever more total or 2) that reason itself is not static, as Adorno himself proclaims in works like the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, and aesthetics offers the way to redeem the current iteration of oppressive reason and replace it with a reason that is without oppression or that is at least less oppressive. A third set of supporters has admitted that there is a performative contradiction, but they have defended this as a more productive political strategy than the one offered either by Habermas or by postmodern thinkers.

The first group (Rose, 1976; Cook, 2000, 2003, 2005, 2011; Vaki, 2005) claim that determinate negation is the negative quality of dialectics that Adorno (*Negative Dialectics*, pg. xix) sought to redeem. It recognizes that there is always a contradiction between the concept and the thing being conceptualized, because the thing is always more than the concept can capture. No totality is ever really total, then, even though it purports to be. Since this is the case, it is possible to conceptualize while seeing the gap that it creates. Thinking is still identity thinking, because it still seeks to identify objects to make them known and convert them into a form that is useful, but as long as the contradiction is seen, the thinking continues to develop. And it continues to develop precisely because the contradiction is seen. Seeing the contradiction
necessitates negation of the contradiction. Determinate negation, then, can be “rational identity”
thinking (Rose, 1976). It is thinking and so continues to create identities, but it constantly
recognizes that and continues to negate them. This is negation that is determinate.

The other group (Hullot-Kentor, 1989; Rocco 1994a; Schoolman, 2005a, 2005b) argues
in various ways that Horkheimer and Adorno endorse and utilize a new kind of reason, an
aesthetic reason, which is not implicated in the same problems of domination and identification
of the dialectic of enlightenment’s reason. Hullot-Kentor argues that the Dialectic of
Enlightenment was not meant as a “repudiation” of reason but instead is “throughout explicitly
concerned with the recuperation of reason” (Hullot-Kentor, 1989, pg. 13). This reason can be
redeemed through art itself. This is not only because there is no art without reason (pg. 24) but
also because art can provide semblance, a knowingly false picture that illuminates the falsity of
the picture provided, (pg. 17) which allows room for the dialectic to continue moving (pg. 25). In
other words, art can tell the story as reason can, but then it can also mourn that story (pg. 25). Art
shows that reason cannot deliver on the promises it made, but in doing this it is a form of reason.
Art’s ability to demonstrate both sides of the various dialectics involved is what makes it a
redeemed reason. Rocco (1994a, pg. 77-78) too follows the line of reasoning that art is a tragedy
that tells a story by juxtaposing the past with the present in ways that show the promise of the
past to be a broken one. He further claims that Horkheimer and Adorno’s account in the
Dialectic of Enlightenment is a performance of this tragedy both because they use this
juxtaposition to tell the story of enlightenment and because they write as two voices combined as
one and so enact a dialectic of unity and diversity (pg. 89-90). Schoolman (2005a, pg. 339) self-
consciously follows these two projects. He (2005a, 2005b) further fleshes out how this aesthetic
reason works by emphasizing art’s ability to continue to move in order to continue to orient it
toward what is still unknown. Art, then, acts as a negative enlightenment. The movement of this negative enlightenment allows art to continue to orient itself toward difference, so it can continue to reconcile it. He too recognizes that montage (Rocco’s juxtaposition) can generate the movement that art needs to be a reconciled, that is negative, reason. He calls this negative reason aesthetic reason.

A third group (Phelan, 1993; Rocco, 1994a) accepts the aporiae of Adorno’s thought but see them as necessary for politics itself. Both recognize that Adorno’s project is a political as well as a theoretical one and the tensions of the contradiction in his thought are necessary for productive politics. Rocco claims that Horkheimer and Adorno never abandon reason but that they remain skeptical of reason: even of their own version of it. They are using damaged reason, but the recognition of that can lead to the skepticism needed to keep their theory from becoming the new totality while providing enough questioning to cause people to challenge the supposed unity and totality of the present system. At the same time, then, they seek to redeem enlightenment a la Habermas while at the same time remaining skeptical that it can be done a la Foucault (pg. 91). This theory “points the way” to the “middle road between modernism and postmodernism” if there is one (pg. 91). Phelan argues more strongly that Habermas and Lyotard try to redeem Adorno by taking parts of his theory while abandoning the rest and that this leads to their inability to speak to a political world riddled with tensions and limitations. A theory that is politically operative must be able to incorporate these political tensions, which will produce tensions within the theory itself.

My argument touches on all three of these approaches. I must state up front, that I am convinced by those who attempt to rescue Adorno through an appeal to determinate negation and aesthetic reasoning. I will reference both in this dissertation, but I will not provide a robust
justification of them and will, instead, rely on the arguments of those who came before. This
dissertation’s thrust is an explication of a notion of the good in Adorno’s thought. I believe that
this discussion buttresses the arguments of those who find determinate negation and aesthetic
reasoning in Adorno’s theory. Indeed, I believe that my conception of the good shows that these
aspects of Adorno’s theory are not contradictory to his overall theory at all. As we will see, I
argue that his notion of the good, like those that come before him, is a claim to human being but
that this being is of a completely different sort. Being, for him, is the tension between
being/becoming; that is what existence is. The good would be the peaceful tension between
them. As we will see, if this is true, it is the logical justification for determinate negation and the
foundation of the possibility of engaging in aesthetic reasoning. Stably embodying the good is
not possible because every thought (or action) destroys it, but this is what existence is/could be,
so it is within us even if we cannot fully access it. Remembering this spurs us to engage in
determinate negation, and remembering this is a kind of aesthetic thinking. We always end up
betraying the promise of this remembrance, but this too provides the occasion for a further
remembrance. In other words, this gesture toward the good shows the fundamental coherence of
Adorno’s work rather than some overarching contradiction that must be overcome. To this point,
Adorno explicitly ties the good in with tension, but this is precisely what destroys contradiction
as such, since for Adorno contradiction is the gap between any concept and the thing “itself” that
the concept is seeking to define. The good is the proper motion between various tensions
(being/becoming, identity/nonidentity, etc.) that eschew concepts and hence contradiction. This
means that Adorno’s theory is predicated on the tensions within us, but they are not exactly the
contradictions that Phelan, for example, describes. They are, however, important so that we do
not seek to resolve thinking/acting in either a modern or postmodern direction. To do so would
be to engage in the performative contradiction in that it would be the performance of a new identity creation that is incomplete/false (i.e., Adorno’s understanding of contradiction).

**Where’s the Good?**

As this discussion already shows, understanding Adorno’s gesture toward the good is the next argument to make in terms of understanding Adorno and hence rescuing him from his detractors. Despite the attempts to extricate Adorno from the claim of performative contradiction, few have taken the next step and defended a notion of the good in Adorno. Benhabib (1986, 1989) and Wellmer (1991, 2000, 2007) want to find a notion of the good in Adorno, but they ultimately cannot find it without doing some violence to Adorno’s text itself. Finlayson (2002, 2003a, 2003b, 2009) accepts Habermas’ claims against Adorno, but he argues that the only way to save Adorno is to reject Adorno’s claim that there is no positive good. This good is ineffable, but it can provide maxims for us to follow. Cook (2000, 2003, 2005, 2011) and Vaki (2005) agree that determinate negation is enough to save Adorno from performative contradiction, but they disagree on whether or not this is sufficient for a theory that is meaningful politically. Finally, Chrostowska’s recent article seeks to defend a notion of the good in Adorno, but she ultimately ends up with the same good that is not really a good that Buck-Morss (1972) disparages Adorno for adopting.

Despite the nuances in their approaches, all are seeking to redeem modernity and all use Adorno as either an important touchstone for their own thinking or as a foundational stone to help them tease out what exactly is needed to welcome a better future. Benhabib (1986) is searching for a correctly functioning subject to fulfill the enlightenment promise of utopia. Though she does not find this in Adorno’s theory, she does offer that art may teach healing to subjects so they can “let the otherness within ourselves and outside be” (Benhabib, 1989, pg.
Though she rejects that this subject is powerful enough to bring about utopia, it is a more fruitful approach than the postmodern approach with its “celebration of the death of the subject,” which leads it to “status quo thinking in avant-garde garb” (Benhabib, 1989, pg. 1448).

Wellmer too, realizing that postmodernity abandons without regret the possibility of reconciliation, tries to find something redeemable in Adorno even though Adorno’s modernist project only differs from the postmodern one in that he maintains regret in not finding reconciliation (Wellmer, 1991, pg. 43). Wellmer (1991; 2000, 2007) turns to Adorno’s aesthetics and tries to find the discursive potential of communicative action even though he recognizes Adorno’s text does not always support it. Nonetheless, he finds enough in Adorno to try to transform and rescue his thought more on his own terms (Wellmer, 2007, pg. 135). Doing this requires us to move beyond his “messianic-materialism” and its best attempts to take “literally” the “idea of reconciliation” (Wellmer, 2007, pg. 142), and to focus on reconciliation as a “loosening up—as when a facial expression softens up, or stiff joints become supple…” (Wellmer, 2007, pg. 146). If, as in the case of the former, Adorno’s “strong theses” (Wellmer, 2007, pg. 148) are taken seriously, Wellmer (2007, pg. 142-148) contends, then he ends up engaging in the same kind of instrumental-reasoning project that seeks the absolute positive—the good—and sinks into barbarism. Instead, we should reject these theses in Adorno, so his critical core can be saved. This rescue of Adorno requires that we understand reconciliation, “when measured by empirical reality,” as “something that is radically transcendent” (Wellmer, 2007, pg. 142, emphasis his). In other words, reconciliation for Adorno shows that “ideas of truth, of freedom, of justice—also that of democracy” will always transcend any empirical reality, so we must always criticize anything empirically existing that claims to be them (Wellmer, 2007, pg. 142).
This reconciliation is a loosening up of the oppression and may perhaps give us “a glimpse of freedom” (Wellmer, 2007, pg. 146).

Finlayson (2002, 2003a, 2003b, 2009) argues that Adorno’s critical theory is only possible if there is some notion of the good. He (2002) believes that Adorno rejects the idea that there can be a good, but he tries to tease one out anyway. To retain some semblance of coherence for Adorno’s theory, Finlayson argues that this good is ineffable; it cannot be articulated or explained. At best, we can have experiences that lead to an “ineffable insight” (Finlayson, 2002, pg. 16) that would allow us to normatively live morally valuable lives. These experiences will show us that we need: “Mündigkeit”/“thinking for oneself,” “humility”/“modesty,” and “love”/“affection” (Finlayson, 2002, pg. 18-20). These maxims cannot bring utopia—which is always impossible (Finlayson, 2002, pg. 16)—or even “prevent Auschwitz’s reoccurring,” but they are maxims that “should be performed for their own sake” and they can lead, beyond the employer’s will or intention, to the “prevention of a greater evil” (Finlayson, 2002, pg. 19).

These ineffable insights are not mystical like Nicholas of Cusa’s negative theology—which itself also involved thinking—but is a kind of thinking in its own right (Finlayson, 2002, pg. 12-15). Pursuing truth is still valuable, then; even if we can never know the good, it still stands against the evil that we do know (Finlayson, 2003a, pg. 90). The best that we can do is “shudder” in the face of Auschwitz, but this too shows that there is always a tension between pure identity and pure non-identity, being and non-being and this offers us a way forward (Finlayson, 2003a, pg. 88-90). Here Adorno uses and opposes Hegel to show that in the worst situation redemption is possible because it forces itself to be overcome. In other words, the evil, pure identity of Auschwitz shows that identity is broken to the core and requires us to transcend our current standards of morality. In this, pure identity already contains its opposite: nonidentity. Or to put it
another way, evil is what exists, but this already shows us that there is a good which does not exist. This is the “metaphysical experience” of the shudder (Finlayson, 2003a, pg. 79). It both identifies the unknown—and so is identity-thinking—and it intimately relates to the other in its pre-identity form (Finlayson, 2003a, pg. 80). The result of this experience is to show us that the world is evil. Art’s mimetic quality is in aping the metaphysical experience, so metaphysics and not art is the “normative basis” of Adorno’s theory (Finlayson, 2003a, pg. 88). Putting it altogether, then, there is a good, but it is ineffable. The best that we can do is know of the possible (utopia) that is always impossible and gain experiences that give us ineffable insights that we can use to live morally even in a world that is evil and will not become good.

Chrowstowska (2013) is hardly more optimistic about the good in Adorno. Her account of utopia in Adorno is one “of solitude (verging on solipsism) in which reflection, purposeful activity, and civilizational laws no longer apply, and which, if extended to a collectivity, could form the good totality of ‘distinctness without domination’” (Chrostowska, 2013, pg. 109). Essentially the utopia is the complete solution of the dialectic, so the subject/object distinction is dissolved in favor of the object whose existence is, as Chrostowska notes, the equivalent of Rousseau’s *Reveries of a Solitary Walker* or, if more complete, of the “‘utopian animal’” that “is happiest when it does not need—especially when it does not need to think” (Chrostowska, 2013, pg. 110, 116). Since this is impossible, philosophy as dialectic is resigned to “circular labors of critique” (pg. 117) until death brings the final happy end. Chrostowska, then, celebrates, where Buck-Morss (1972) decries, Adorno’s rejection of praxis in favor of a solitary existence in a utopia that is as it is literally translated: No-Man’s Land (Chrostowska, 2013, pg. 94, 108ff; Buck-Morss, 1972, pg. 143). Following Thomas More’s pun, Chrostowska sees for Adorno eutopia (the happy life) in utopia (no existence) (Chrostowska, 2013, pg. 94), whereas Buck-
Morss just sees a neutered theory that “is not yet a theory for revolutionaries” (Buck-Morss, 1972, pg. 144).

Cook (2000, 2003, 2005, 2011), on the other hand, is content that the determinant negation is enough to rescue Adorno’s theory from this charge. She believes that it does allow society to progress, and she is leery of any positive notion of the good, because this is to quote Adorno “identification” (Cook, 2011, pg. 80). The good can only be “glimpsed” (pg. 81) and “at best, positivity, is only indirectly outlined by critique” (pg. 80). She too, though, recognizes the need for some notion of the good, which she links with a redemption of liberalism’s aims (Cook, 2000) before settling on “eternal peace” as the “concept closest to a fulfilled utopia” (Cook, 2011, pg. 119). Anything more definitive than this, though, would undermine the negativity of the dialectic that is determinate negation and so must be avoided.

Vaki defends Adorno, but she admits that there must be a good in Adorno in order to provide direction to the change that determinate negation brings. Vaki (2005, pg. 114-115) calls the “odd mixture of enlightened liberalism and secularised theology” a “blurred and vague utopia” that undermines the “normative basis of [Adorno’s] critical theory of society.” This is a result of Adorno’s wish to appropriate determinate negation from Hegel’s thought while expelling his notion of the Absolute Idea. Vaki rejects the notion that Hegel’s Absolute Idea leads to a closed system that contradicts the determinate negation, and she thinks that Adorno’s misunderstanding of this caused him to miss the value of utopia in his work. Her paper does not layout what the good is but it does issue an implicit challenge to find one in Adorno’s thought without doing violence to the text.

Vaki is correct to argue that Adorno’s theory cannot provide direction for change without some notion of the good. Since this question of direction is largely a political question,
understanding Adorno’s notion of the good is necessary to understand his political relevance. As will become clear, I am unsatisfied with any of the accounts of the good offered here. Though I do believe that many of them, at times, hint at my account of the good, I believe that each of their approaches already starts the discussion in the wrong place and so disallows proper analysis. My project, then, will take up Vaki’s challenge to flesh out the notion of the good in Adorno’s thought, a notion which must come from his theory itself and which must not contradict it, and to begin thinking through the relevance this theory has on the realm of politics. In short, we will find that Adorno does have a notion of the good, but that it is a negative one based around movement rather than a positive conception. Since this is the case, the guidance for politics is, probably to the consternation of thinkers like Finlayson and Benhabib, less a series of positive maxims that a subject can actively utilize to redeem politics, than a model to get us to move according to the motions of the good. Nevertheless, this model does give us leverage to act politically. At the very least, it provides the ability to engage in the kind of robust criticism that Adorno terms determinate negation, and at most, it offers us a negative way to approach the political embodiment of the good, which Adorno is skeptical is achievable but does not completely forsake.

Plan of the Dissertation

In order to tackle this monumental task, in this dissertation I seek to situate Adorno in the dialectical tradition’s understanding of the good before showing how his own notion of the good is very much like it but is also, in important ways, quite distinct. To this end, I will flesh out concepts of the good in Plato, Aristotle, and Marx. In doing this, I read them with an eye toward Adorno. As such, we will see that their conceptions of the good are not merely positive but that they exhibit more negative qualities than may be at first is appreciated. Since they believe that
any positive manifestation of the good is always indefinitely deferred, they too rely on movement and incorporate it into their conceptions of the good. This analysis, though, seeks to follow these thinkers rather than to do violence to their text.

This approach takes inspiration from Adorno himself. He argues that his understanding of dialectics is the correct one, but that it is also the one that has always been there. In various places throughout his works, Adorno argues things like: “The newly created Plato is more Platonic than the authentic one, who at least in his middle period attached its proper idea to everything…” (*Jargon of Authenticity*, pg. 125), “This makes clear why, Aristotle notwithstanding, the modern concept of dynamics was inappropriate to Antiquity…” (*Negative Dialectics*, pg. 26), “…the positive blue-prints of socialism, resisted by Marx, were rooted in barbarism” (*Minima Moralia*, pg. 156), or “As early as the Introduction to *Phenomenology of Mind*, Hegel comes close to a sense of the negativity of the dialectical logic he is expounding” (*Negative Dialectics*, pg. 156). In passages like these, Adorno argues that dialectical thinkers like Plato or Hegel properly understood (or almost did) the dialectic at one phase of their thought. Through the rest of Adorno’s theory, though, we also see that he believes they went wrong when their theory pivoted away from this properly dialectical core, which offered such promise. When they did so, they ended up disowning the only thing that could have saved their thoughts.

I seek to take Adorno at his word and to see if there are moments in Plato, Aristotle, and Marx where they employ what Adorno sees as the core components—the negative components—of the dialectic and, more specifically, whether or not they use those components to formulate their own conceptions of the good. In other words, I read their texts to see where their notions of the good already tend in the direction of Adorno’s own gesture. It turns out that each of these thinkers have a much less defined and positive conception of the good than is often
assumed. Instead, their concepts of the good remain unknown, even to the thinker’s themselves. This means that achievement of the good is always just out of reach and the good is always indefinitely deferred. Each thinker, then, comes to understand the good, and in particular the good life, according to negative movements.

However, while this is true, they all still seek to ground these movements according to a positive conception of the good. As such, in the chapters on Adorno, I seek to emphasize where Adorno’s gesture toward the good is different. These differences exist, I argue, because he not only takes seriously the ideas of the unknowability of the good, its indefinite deferment, and its negative motion, but he makes them the center of his analysis, and, indeed the center of his gesture toward the good.

We begin this analysis in the next chapter by examining the works of Plato. We will see that even though Plato has an idea of what the good is, he never fully elaborates it, because even he does not fully know what it means. Plato does believe that the good is being that is beautifully proportioned according to the truth, but whenever he is asked to explicitly and succinctly delineate the good as such, he always hedges. He recognizes that even his thinking is less than perfect and so even his understanding of the good is incomplete. Since knowledge of the good is never complete, Plato also consistently contends that living according to the good is just out of reach. In other words, attainment of it is always indefinitely deferred. He famously pushes achievement of the good into the afterlife, and, at one key moment in his dialogues, he even suggests that there are an indefinite number of realms beyond the afterlife, each of which offers the ability to live a life that ever more completely embodies the good. Instead of focusing on positive attainment of the good, then, Plato seeks to uncover the movements of becoming that could help us achieve the good. These are the movements up the epistemological line and the
dual movements of the dialectic itself. In that in order to live the good a person must align with
the dialectic, which is understanding of the truth, and that the dialectic is a series of movements,
Plato at least suggests that the good itself is also a life of proper movements. This would push
him very close to Adorno indeed. In this case, proper existence (being) is proper moving.
However, that these movements are circular and according to sameness already implies that any
movements of becoming must already be according to being in such a way that becoming is
subservient to being. If this is where he lands, then he does, in the final analysis, end up removed
from Adorno, because being dominates becoming. In either case, at the very least, Plato is
interested in the ways that becoming leads to being and so movements of becoming that move
toward being are part of the good life itself. The political payoff to this is that politics—whether
it is a more pastoral politics of a city of pigs or the ideal city of philosophers—is to create the
conditions that best facilitate these proper movements. This can be done, for example, by
eliminating attention to bodily desires and providing a philosophic education.

Our discussion of Aristotle will span two chapters. The first, is a theoretical exploration
of the concept of the good and the second shows how this concept applies to humans both
individually and collectively. We will see that Aristotle calls the good both an end and a cause. It
is that which causes becoming and the end (being) that limits the becoming. It is this duality that
compels Aristotle to reconceptualize definition. For Aristotle, definition must encompass the
entire process of becoming being and not merely explain being itself. In part this is out of
necessity since we, the not-yet truly-and-completely human being, cannot know what true and
complete being is, but in part this is because the good is this movement from becoming to being.
Due to internal and external constraints, true and complete being will never be stably reached, so
the movements of becoming are perpetual and being is indefinitely deferred. The human good
life, then, is the life of movement to come to better understand and embody being. Aristotle’s well-known ethical principle of living according to the mean encapsulates this. This principle does not teach people how to live in any positive sense, instead it seeks to structure the proper kind of negative movements of becoming that constantly push people toward the being that they never quite fully achieve. Likewise, Aristotle’s political project follows this same pattern. Since we cannot know the good political constitution, Aristotle privileges the proper connection of two bad political constitutions precisely so the proper movements of becoming can begin to teach and enact the being that would be the true political constitution. Even though Aristotle does privilege being over becoming, the movements of becoming are part of the good even as they remain part of his understanding of “definition” itself.

After our discussion of Aristotle, we will take a detour through the first of two interludes. In these interludes we will pause to take stock of where we are and to organize our explications according to Adorno and the overall thrust of this dissertation. In the first interlude, after the long, dense explication of Plato and Aristotle, it is worth returning to the big idea of the overall approach of the dissertation, namely that pre-Adorno dialectical thinkers go a great deal of the way toward understanding the negative components of the dialectic and that these components are highly visible in each thinker’s conception of the good. To do this, we will repackage the analysis of Plato and Aristotle according to the concepts that are important to Adorno. This will help us to see their connections with these concepts but also where they differ from Adorno’s own understanding. We will see that even though Plato and Aristotle wish to stably live according to true and complete being, they cannot. Indeed, they do not even fully know what that would look like. As such, achievement of the good is always indefinitely deferred. In its stead, they both privilege negative movements that move us toward the good, but that also, then, are
included in their concepts of the good. For both of them, memory allows us to begin to move in these directions even though our current, incomplete, false being makes it impossible for us to know what the good is.

Marx argues that labor is what distinguishes humans from all other species. In particular, humans, through their labor, are capable of a special kind production: the production of their species-being. All labor, in fact, creates individual human beings—with certain senses and with certain biological, mental, and psychological characteristics, for example—and the human species as a whole, but the good makes this production the goal. The good is about creating a humanized species-being, and the good life is the life that freely and consciously labors to produce a humanized species-being. This means that what it means to be human is to continue to become in ways that create and evolve that very understanding and living of being. Human being is free and conscious human becoming. The good, then, is a series of negative movements; it requires continued labor as it is only the movements of labor that embodies the humanized species-being, which is free and conscious evolution of species-being. In this sense, the good is never stably embodied and, in that it requires further movement, is always deferred. In order for this kind of labor to be possible, we need an economic system—communism—that allows for the kind of labor that can be humanly productive. However, while Marx believes that communism is the economic system that allows for the kind of humanized labor that can freely and consciously create humanized nature, at a few moments in his theory he leaves open the possibility that the continual evolution of species-being may unveil other, more human economic systems in the future. In any case, Marx privileges the negative movements of revolution that lead to communism (even if there are no further revolutions) as a special example of the negative movements of free and conscious creation of a more humanized species-being.
In the second interlude, we will summarize the ways that Marx’s good is negative movement that eschews complete knowability or definite achievement. The good must continue to move or it ceases to be the good. We will also see that Marx more strongly holds to these concepts than Plato and Aristotle did, who, only because of life’s realities, were forced to admit that the good was unknowable and hence indefinitely deferred. This meant that they also had to find a way to incorporate the movements of becoming into their conception of the good. Marx celebrates these movements of becoming as the process of the good itself. In this way, Marx’s conception of the good moves closer to the Adorno’s own version. However, he too ends up with identity thinking but from the opposite direction. His being is grounded in becoming, so becoming different (nonidentity) becomes identity.

Given all of this context, we reach the climax of the dissertation where we examine Adorno’s gesture toward the good. The goal of the dissertation to this point was to show the ways that the various dialectical conceptions of the good were actually more similar to Adorno’s version than is sometimes perceived. However, at this point, we need to see how Adorno’s gesture toward the good is also, importantly, different. His conception of the good still relates to being—it is still about living according to the true and complete human existence—but this understanding of being is completely different. He takes being to be the movements between the tension being/becoming and the related tensions identity/nonidentity, subject/object, etc. Existence is the negative movements between these tensions. Existence as it currently stands (and, indeed, as it has always been) consists of dominating tensions. Either being or becoming, identity or nonidentity, etc. comes to be more powerful than the other half of the tension. When this happens, being/identity gets defined either in terms of being/identity or in terms of becoming/nonidentity. In other words, being is defined in the way that it has always been
defined, or becoming different by taking the side of nonidentity comes to be understood as being. In either case, the tension is dominating, and humans are forced to live according to some incomplete conception of being/identity. Existence that would be according to the good, however, would be existence according to tensions that maintain a peaceful relationship where neither being/identity nor becoming/nonidentity dominate. Adorno cannot know what this looks like—so the good still remains unknown and indefinitely deferred—but this negative understanding of the good can still provide the impetus for the criticism that undergirds Adorno’s political project. That human existence is peaceful tension and that this peaceful tension has never been allowed to exist, means that we are capable of remembering this, our already/not yet existence. This remembrance is the critical impulse that Adorno references in his most political works. Memory of the good, or more precisely that the good is already/not yet, spurs determinate negation. This determinate negation is useful for politics, even if Adorno cannot yet know if a redeemed politics is possible let alone what that redeemed politics would look like.

In the dissertation’s conclusion, I seek to think along with Adorno to see if there are any political principles that we can use to build a better world. I try to examine these in Adorno’s context, so these are not positive maxims but instead principles that ensure that we continue to move according to the good life, or at least in ways that would make it possible for the good life to emerge. Remembering our own complicity in creating and upholding domination in the tension should keep us humble. This will encourage us to continue to move rather than to become comfortable with our identity, even if that identity is the result of determinate negation whose purpose was to destroy other, oppressive identities. Taking this seriously causes us to completely reconsider identity politics.
Chapter 2 | Plato: Moving with the Divine

Introduction

As will be a recurring theme throughout, in general, the good is the achievement of what humans, both individually and collectively, are supposed to be. Most simply, for Plato, this “supposed to be” means that we are fully ruled by our reason, so we are capable of living and acting in accordance with the truth. When we act according to the truth, we live beautiful, well-proportioned lives. These lives rhyme with or are in harmony with the truth. When this proportion is perfectly achieved, we have achieved the excellent human life, which is to say that we have ordered our lives to be in accordance with what it means to live a human life. For the first time, we have human being. For the first time, we are capable of living the human life.

While this simple explanation is correct, it misses much of what Plato is really arguing. All across his dialogues, he discusses the concept of the good and every time he does so he discusses some combination of truth, reason, being, beauty, proportion, and the like. However, he ends virtually every discussion of the good with a reservation, a qualification, a hedge. With each iteration of this, he further cements his belief that a complete and precise understanding of what is meant by the true, beautiful, proportioned life of being is just out of reach. It is always just unknowable.

That it is unknowable already hints at the fact that its achievability is also always just out of reach. Rather than explaining in detail what the human good is and how to live it, Plato spends most of his time explaining how we can move toward achievement of the good. He explains the process of becoming. As we will see, each stage of becoming creates a new stage of being, but Plato never gives us more than a hint at what the final stage of being—the good life which is superior to being in rank—actually is.
It turns out that this process of becoming is a series of analogous movements. Humans must move up the epistemological line in order to understand the truth of everything including the truth of human being. The top of this line—the point of true understanding—is another series of movements: the dual motions of the dialectic itself. Even this process of ascension to true understanding is, in actuality, an iteration of movements of ascension. It is a kind of circularity of ascensions rather than a singular, linear movement to the top of understanding. At the end of these nearly infinite iterations is an understanding of the truth of every individual thing and ultimately of how every individual thing fits together with every other thing. Finally achieving both aspects of understanding would be complete understanding, and complete understanding is understanding of the good and how to live according to it.

Philosophers have the best chance of achieving this. People become (are made to be) philosophers when they at least approximate this understanding that comes from numerous ascensions up the epistemological line. When they achieve the status of philosopher, they earn the right to remain disembodied souls in the afterlife where they will philosophize with the gods in a more perfect motion of truth. Though he does not emphasize it, in admitting that the afterlife is a more perfect motion of truth shows that he takes seriously the idea that philosophers too only approximate true understanding during their earthly lives. Their approximation is honed in the afterlife. This matters, because Plato leaves open the possibility that this improved motion of truth in the disembodied afterlife will open up improved comprehensions of being and improved ways of living it. As such, at one crucial moment, Plato admits that there may be more complete, true realms of being beyond the afterlife as well.

Seen in this way, then, people may continue to move from realm to realm where each realm affords them more true being with a more complete understanding of that being. Plato
recognizes that this is so far beyond his understanding that he hesitates to even hint at what the end result of this process would look like. However, he does—in the voice of Timaeus—speculate that this end result is superior to being as we know it, because it is participation in the pure, divine being of the Framer. Seen in this light, Plato’s discussion of reincarnation in the Myth of Er makes more sense. All people—philosophers and non-philosophers alike—are always engaged in an indefinite set of movements each of which helps them become fuller being.

As all of this shows, even though Plato clearly favors being and clearly means being in his discussion of the good, the movement itself is good. It turns out that the movement is not merely about becoming but is about being too. The movement itself is what enacts a more complete being and unlocks access to ever higher realms and stages of being. To take just one example, the movements of the epistemological line are what actually constitute philosophizing. People become (i.e., come to be…this is the nexus of becoming and being) philosophers as they philosophize, which is to say as they move. At the height of this movement, philosophers come to be disembodied souls in the afterlife. The movement is the enactment of fuller being. As we can see, then, the movement itself is good and this is so precisely because the movement is the enactment of being.

Plato does argue that the movement of any perfect thing inevitably leads to its imperfection (Republic, pg. 1019, ln. 380e; pg. 1158, ln. 546a). However, all throughout his dialogues, he recognizes that nothing is its perfect being, and he at least hints that this is true in every possible realm that he can even begin to understand or imagine. Plus, as he also makes clear, the best approximations of true being that he can even begin to understand—the gods and the disembodied souls—are always engaged in the motions of truth.
Finally, the fact that nothing is perfect means that all of this movement that he discusses starts in the negative space of non-being and moves toward the positive space of being. The movement of the epistemological line begins in the shadows of the non-reality of the visible realm. However, as we saw, the completion of each movement leads to a fuller being but not to full being. It leads instead to less non-being even as it orients those who reached it toward the next series of movements needed to reach more being. As such, the positive remains indefinitely out of reach and Plato merely teaches us how to move in the negative. This is why Plato believes that true education is not a filling up of the soul but is its reorientation (Republic, pg. 1135-1136, ln. 518b-d). It must be reoriented so that it can move in the right direction in the right way, which is to say so that it can ascend the epistemological line (Republic, pg. 1138, ln. 521c). This, and not some filling of the soul with knowledge of what being is in any positive sense, is the goal of education, because this is what encourages the kinds of movements that qualify people as philosophers. They are the kinds of movements that enact the good.

Throughout his writings Plato justifies all of these claims in two primary ways. True to his epistemology, his strongest argument is based in the invisible realm: in the philosophizing in the mind itself. This is the argument that he puts in Socrates’ voice. However, the secondary claim, the claim based in the visible realm and put in the voice of Timaeus, is prescient as well. Combining these two accounts, we can flesh out what he means by the good, what the good life is, and how this all affects politics. However, as this methodology itself already begins to show, this also attests to Plato’s constant penchant to push full discussion and understanding of the good indefinitely into the future. He would not need to rely on the visible-realm account of Timaeus otherwise.
Our plan for this chapter, then, is to trace out both halves of Plato’s argument. To be true to his epistemology and for the sake of historical chronology, we will start with Plato’s second claim. This is a somewhat controversial move for two reasons. First, it reverses the chronology of Plato’s writing and second it gives the first word—the word that sets up the account—to Timaeus rather than to Plato’s true interlocutor, Socrates. I justify this move, because the account in *Timaeus* is not, aside from a few minor points that we can easily reject in favor of Socrates’ iteration, contradicted by the arguments Plato makes in Socrates’ voice but on the contrary is a more direct illumination of what Plato has Socrates orate elsewhere. Starting with the account in the *Timaeus* has three advantages, then. First, it provides a clear base that will help illuminate Plato’s more theoretical iteration that I will layout next; second, it provides one smooth account that follows normal, historical chronology; and, third, and most convincingly, it follows Plato’s own epistemology. Starting with the *Timaeus* allows me to tell one historical narrative from “creation” to final incarnation and beyond, but it also allows me to climb the epistemological line rather than slide down it. To illuminate this point, I will begin with a brief description of Plato’s epistemology before I show how Plato follows this epistemology when he seeks to come to an understanding of the good. This will help us see what Plato thinks the good is and what it would mean for people and political communities to live according to it.

**Plato’s Epistemological Line**

As famously laid out in Book VII of the *Republic* (pg. 1130-1132, ln. 509dff), Plato’s epistemology follows four stages. Humans’ first encounter with truth and falsehood comes in the visible realm. They begin to know the world around them through experience via their physical senses. They see a desk, for example, and recognize that it is separate from other objects around it. Humans’ first encounter with the desk, though, is perplexing. They do not know that it is a
desk or what they should do with it. All that they have to go on is the information relayed to them through their senses.

However, as humans encounter more desks and more types of desks, they start to draw conclusions about what counts as a desk. This gives them a base to be able to begin communicating with other humans about what their senses have perceived. They begin talking about it, and arguing about what it is and what its purpose is. Eventually, they will even name it as a desk. As they have these discussions, they begin to form opinions or beliefs about it. They not only believe that it is a desk, but they also believe that it is correct and right to sit at it and to use it as a writing surface.

Plato argues that this is the realm of politics, and it is the realm in which most people remain. As Glaucon lays out in the Myth of the Ring of Gyges (Republic, pg. 998ff, ln. 357aff) and as Plato affirms in the Allegory of the Cave (Republic, pg. 1132ff, ln. 514aff), politics is the realm whereby people use rhetoric and persuasion to justify their actions. In other words, people try to convince others that their life plan is just. In doing so, they convince people to create laws and norms that legitimize the behavior that they seek to enact. Since people are not concerned with the truth of the matter, what justice really is, they merely seek to shape people’s beliefs. They argue over what counts as a desk and how a desk should be used based only on their own sense perceptions and the images, shadows, and beliefs that they form through the use of those senses. In doing so, they are sure to propose definitions that, if acted upon, would create a world that would benefit them. For example, they define desks as furniture if they are academics and they define desks as stages if they are actors.

Despite Plato’s negative analysis of this reliance on beliefs in general and of politics in particular, the sense perceptions that lead to beliefs are important. Beliefs are the only place that
philosophers can begin in their quest to find the truth. Only once they have the base that these beliefs provide can philosophers even hope to enter the invisible realm, the realm of philosophy, so they can test whether their opinions and beliefs are true or false. Only after codifying beliefs can they test those beliefs with hypothetical thought and ultimately with the dialectic. Both of these forms of judgment are based entirely in the mind, philosophers do not need to rely on their senses at all.

To again take the example of the desk, by using hypothetical thought, philosophers can begin to prove that the thing in front of them is a desk by going through a logical argument. They can start to provide criteria that are necessary for a thing to be a desk (it must have four upright supports, its uppermost plane must be a horizontal surface, etc.), and then they can engage in a series of if/then proofs to determine whether what is in front of them is a desk or not (if it has four upright supports, then it still qualifies as a desk, if its uppermost plane is a horizontal surface, then it still qualifies as a desk, etc.). At the end of this inquiry, they can draw some conclusions about the thing in front of them: namely they can conclude whether or not it is a desk.

This is still not adequate, however. Hypothetical thought still relies on the opinions and images of the visible realm. In order to have true knowledge, philosophers must find a way to prove that a desk is a desk by relying on nothing other than the true essences of the desk and not opinions and images of those essences. To do this, philosophers must use the dialectic. This process allows them to determine whether or not the object in front of them conforms to the form of the object. In other words, philosophers can determine what the true, excellent version of the object is and then see how closely the actual object conforms to that true, excellent version. Philosophers must embark on a “journey” (Republic, pg. 1148, ln. 532b). They must start with
hypotheses (as does hypothetical thought) but must also treat these as hypotheses that must be proven (Republic, pg. 1132, ln. 513b-c; pg. 1149, ln. 533c-d). Through asking a series of questions, philosophers can begin to determine what the form or the essence of each thing is. The completion of the dialectic is an understanding of this form.

This is not the end of the process, however. Philosophers must then repeat this process with every other object/concept until they have understood the form of every individual thing. In other words, they must constantly go back to the bottom of the line and work their way back up to the top. In order to understand every single thing in the universe, the ascending movement of the epistemological line must be repeated an almost infinite number of times. The process of understanding any one thing is itself not as linear as it at first appears. In going through hypothetical thought or the dialectic, philosophers may discover that they do not understand one of the fundamental components of the concept in question, so they must go back to the beginning of the line and ascend it in hopes of coming to an understanding of that fundamental component. Only upon completion of that can they return to their examination of the original concept itself.

It is clear, then, that even philosophers do not come to a complete understanding of everything. To do so requires infinite time and space, which embodied philosophers do not have. Theoretically, though, it is possible to come to an understanding of every individual thing. At this point, philosophers would be capable of the final stage of understanding. They would be capable of combining all of the forms into one final, perfect, ultimate dialectic. This dialectic is the “moving on from forms to forms, and ending in forms” (Republic, pg. 1132, ln. 513b).

Philosophers only utilize forms; they have left the visible world completely behind. Again, this is only possible in an infinite, invisible realm. If completed, though, the end result of this dialectic is that the philosopher “grasps the good itself” (Republic, pg. 1148, ln. 532a).
If we are to have any hope of grasping even an approximate understanding of the good itself, then, we too must follow the epistemological line. We must begin with the visible in the visible realm so that we have some hope of grasping the invisible, so we can engage in the dialectic ourselves and approach an understanding of the good itself.

But before we do that, there is one thing to note here, which we will return to throughout and which will become important in our analysis. Plato’s epistemology includes within it two kinds of movement: 1) the upward movement that is the ascension of the epistemological line and 2) the dual circular movements of the dialectic. Both of these movements will end up being fundamental to humanity’s rediscovery of its true nature and to its living out that true nature. In other words, movement will be fundamental to both the discovery and the enactment of the human good.

Even more strongly, as we will see in various ways, Plato will implicitly describe these movements themselves as good. He already begins to do so here in his discussion of epistemology. Each stage leads to qualitative changes in humans. Each ascension is not only an ascension of knowing but also an ascension of being (Republic, pg. 1149, ln. 533e-534a), and it is the epistemological movements themselves that produce more good humans. Movement up the line produces philosophers, and, as we will see, eventually produces philosophers with a completely new and disembodied existence in the afterlife. The movements themselves bring about humans that are more good.

**The Good in Timaeus’ Voice**

Following this epistemology, then, I have chosen to begin with the account that Plato gives Timaeus to recite. This has the benefit of allowing us to follow Plato on his journey up the epistemological line. Before we can encounter Plato’s hypothetical thought or his dialectic, we
have to encounter his belief. The *Timaeus* gives us just that belief. Plato sets up this dialogue as occurring the day after the dialogue that is found in the *Republic*. He has Socrates say, our discussion “yesterday…had to do with the kind of political structure cities should have and the kind of men that should make it up so as to be the best possible” (*Timaeus*, pg. 1225-1226, ln. 1c; emphasis mine). Yesterday, Socrates says, we constructed a city in speech. Following that, today he wants to hear about an actual city: “I’d love to listen to someone give a speech depicting our city…” (*Timaeus*, pg. 1227, ln. 19c; emphasis mine). He wants to move down from the invisible realm back into the visible realm. In giving an account of Plato’s understanding of the good, I have decided to begin in the visible realm, so we have the tools to be able to ascend to the invisible realm and understand it properly.

Plato picks the perfect interlocutor to give us this account of the visible realm. Of Timaeus, Socrates claims that “By nature and by training you take part in both philosophy and politics at once” (*Timaeus*, pg. 1228, ln. 19e). Timaeus is conversant with politics, so he understands the visible realm. Yet, he is also by nature and training a philosopher. His understanding of the visible realm is going to be colored by his understanding of the invisible realm. He will be able to give a precise account of the visible realm, but he will also be able to give that account in a way that it will be useful for approaching the invisible realm.

All of this is important. Plato knows what he is doing here. This is the rare occurrence in Plato’s writings where someone has the opportunity to provide one, long, uninterrupted monologue. That someone other than Socrates has the honor of orating that monologue is even rarer. Plato knows that he must give some kind of justification for preserving a monologue rather than the usual dialogue and for honoring someone other than Socrates with delivering the monologue. He provides these details of Timaeus’ nature and training and of the occasion for his
speech so we recognize that this is an account of the visible realm but that it is an account that has bearing on the invisible realm and the thoughts of Plato himself.

Plato wants to preserve this account, and he wants his readers to link it to the *Republic*, but he also does not want to implicate Socrates in it, because it is not a purely philosophical account. Timaeus makes clear that he is only providing the “most likely” account (*Timaeus*, pg. 1247, ln. 44d). He repeats a version of this claim at least a half dozen times throughout his account. He has to make clear that this is an account of an unremembered remembering. His story is an origins story whose beginning cannot be remembered by humans, because they were not yet existent. As we will see and as will become important in a number of ways, humans are capable of getting glimpses of remembrance, but they are, at least at present, never complete pictures and never completely understood. As such, Plato has to pick an interlocutor who bridges the gap between politics and philosophy, between the visible and the invisible realm, between belief and the dialectic. He cannot speak in the voice of Socrates; he must speak in the voice of Timaeus. But in doing so, he wants us to recognize that this is an important foundation for his own theory. It provides the beliefs that can then be examined philosophically.

Timaeus’ account is an account of the beginning of the universe and of humanity. In this account he explains why the Framer¹ (*Timaeus*, pg. 1236, ln. 29c) made humanity. The Framer of the universe “wanted everything to become as much like himself as was possible” (*Timaeus*, pg. 1236, ln. 29d-e). Indeed, the visible world, the universe, is the “image of the intelligible Living Thing” (*Timaeus*, pg. 1291, ln. 92c). The Framer created the visible world in order that the visible world could approximate, as closely as possible, the invisible world. In particular, the

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¹ Timaeus calls this being many things: “father” (ln. 28c; ln. 37c; ln. 42c), “the maker” (ln. 28c), “the craftsman” (ln. 29a), “the builder” (ln. 32c), “the eternal god” (ln. 34b). I use Framer, however, because he opens his extended monologue with a reference to “he who framed” (ln. 29c).
Framer wanted humanity to embody his being and reasoning, and he wanted that embodiment to be able to participate in the truth found in his own being.

To begin this creation process, the Framer created souls—the created place of reason—but not yet bodies (Timaeus, pg. 1238-1239, ln. 34b-c). It is important to note this fact. Souls are older than bodies. All of the souls of humanity existed before any were embodied. All humans, then, have the “same initial birth” (Timaeus, pg. 1245, ln. 41d-e). This means that our true humanity lies in our souls. Human bodies only come after the creation of these souls, but Timaeus credits the birth of all humans at the creation of their souls. Humans all have the same initial birth, because their souls were all berthled at the same time.

This is not all, however. After these souls were created, all were shown “the nature of the universe” and the “laws that had been foreordained” (Timaeus, pg. 1245, ln. 41d-e). All souls had an equal education. All souls glimpsed the truth and were educated in the truth. This education was necessary if participation in the truth had any chance of being embodied as the Framer desired.

However, this embodied participation in the truth could not be perfectly enacted. Embodying being and reasoning would always lead to a reduction of it. The nature of the visible itself keeps the Framer’s purpose—the interjection of participation in the truth into the visible realm—from being fully realized.

Due to this inevitable and unenviable fact, the Framer cannot complete the creative process himself. The Framer cannot be responsible for evil (Timaeus, pg. 1244ff, ln. 41aff), so the Framer cannot make bodies. But at the same time the bodies are necessary to accomplish the Framer’s original goal: embodying the image of himself. However, the bodies themselves keep the souls from accomplishing their purpose or at least of accomplishing it excellently.
Since the Framer could not craft the bodies himself, this job fell to the gods, who were themselves created beings (*Timaeus*, pg. 1243, ln. 39e-40a). In order for the gods to create well, which is to say to create embodied beings in the image of the Framer himself, they themselves had to be created to be as perfect as possible. To accomplish this, the Framer “placed [the gods] in the wisdom of the dominant circle [i.e., of the Same], to follow the course of the universe” (*Timaeus*, pg. 1243, ln. 40a). The gods were created so they were in harmony with the truth of the universe. To maintain this harmony, the Framer gave the gods two types of motion. The first motion was “unvarying movement in the same place, by which the god would always think the same thoughts about the same things” (*Timaeus*, pg. 1243, ln. 40a). This is the visible representation of the dialectic itself. The gods must continue to understand the form of every concept, every thing in existence. To do this, they—their very physical being—must engage in the unvarying movement of the dialectic. The second motion is “a forward motion under the dominance of the circular carrying movement of the Same and uniform” (*Timaeus*, pg. 1243, ln. 40b). This is the visible representation of the ultimate or perfect dialectic that moves only from forms to forms. This only becomes possible as a result of all of the other iterations of the dialectic, each of which prove a particular form. The ultimate dialectic becomes possible when each particular dialectic proves every single form.

The visible representation of the physical being of the gods resembles the two motions of the dialectic here described. The first motion is as a spinning top. The top spins but its motion is unvarying and it appears not to move at all. The perfect dialectic only becomes possible when all of these spinning tops join in a forward circular motion of its own. The physical representation of the gods is made up of these two kinds of motions. Their internal DNA, as it were, is these two kinds of motions; motions that are in harmony with the motions of truth. These two motions
place the gods in harmony with the dominant circle of the actual truth of the universe, and it makes the gods as perfect as possible. As Timaeus orates, in this way, “The gods are devoid of motion and stand still in respect of any of the other 5 motions, in order that each of them may come as close as possible to attaining perfection” (Timaeus, pg. 1243, ln. 40b). In order for the gods to be as perfect as possible, they must have no motion other than the motion of the perfect dialectic made possible by the motion of all of the other iterations of the dialectic. The motion does not stop, but the motion is a perfect, unchanging circular motion that understands all. In order for the gods to be as perfect as possible, the Framer created them with this motion.

However, the gods are not perfect. Their circles wobble, and they do not think the truth all of the time. In their imperfection, they are incapable of creating perfect bodies. This inevitable imperfection of those bodies combined with the inevitability that the soul (which wishes to reside in the invisible realm) will be warped as it is embodied (forced to reside in the visible realm), means that the perfect order desired by the Framer is broken when the gods create embodied human beings.

There is still a glimmer of hope here. When the Framer created souls, he placed all three kinds of circles—the circle of the Same, the circle of the Different, and the circle of Being—into souls (Timaeus, pg. 1239, ln. 34b-c). This is related to the education in the truth that the Framer gave to all souls at the moment of creation. Unfortunately, when the gods shoved these circles into a body, all of the circles became “twisted” and the order of the circles was broken (Timaeus, pg. 1246-1247, ln. 43d-44d). Instead of the circles revolving in harmony with each other and with the truth, they “moved without rhyme or reason, sometimes in the opposite direction, sometimes sideways and sometimes upside down” (Timaeus, pg. 1247, ln. 43e). In this state, humans are incapable of excellently fulfilling their purpose. They cannot revolve with the
dialectic to understand the truth of the universe. The motions of their bodies disrupt the potentially excellent motion of their souls.

Further, this disorder causes them to forget the education of the truth that their souls received pre-body. The unrhymed revolutions produce discordant desires: desires of the body (food and the like) versus desires of the soul (wisdom) (Timaeus, pg. 1287, ln. 88a-b). The result is that “the motions of the stronger part will predominate, and amplify their own interest. They render the functions of the soul dull, stupid and forgetful, thereby bringing on the gravest disease of all: ignorance” (Timaeus, pg. 1287, ln. 88a-b). The desires of the body will win out and the soul will be unable to rhyme with the truth of the universe and will be an ever less perfect image of the Living Thing. The end result is that this poor and stupid soul will “limp his way through life and return to Hades uninitiated and unintelligent’ (Timaeus, pg. 1247, ln. 44c). When the soul becomes disembodied in the afterlife and is forced to choose a new embodiment, the soul will not be able to choose a body that allows the soul to more closely resonate with the motions of truth, because the soul lacks remembrance of its true, initial education.

The fact that, even though they become twisted, the soul contains the motions of the dialectic—i.e., the motions of truth—there is hope for humanity. The only way that the circles can become untwisted so that humans can fulfill their true function is through proper nurture and education (Timaeus, pg. 1247, ln. 44b-c). The gods had this in mind when they created humans. They created them in ways that would aid in this education. So while “Necessity” required that gods use certain materials to create materiality, they were also free to use their “Intelect” to create in ways that would allow humans to put themselves back in harmony with the truth—to untwist the circles to use the visible reference (Timaeus, pg. 1250, ln. 47e-48b). The gods created humanity with senses. With sight, humans “might observe the intelligence in the universe and
apply them to the revolutions of their own understanding” (*Timaeus*, pg. 1250, ln. 47b). With hearing, humans can perceive harmony and rhythm, so they too may be able to rhyme with the truth in perfect harmony (*Timaeus*, pg. 1250, ln. 47c-e). In anticipation of Plato’s epistemological argument in the invisible realms, Timaeus claims that the “supreme good our eyesight offer us” is philosophy (*Timaeus*, pg. 1250, ln. 47b). Humans’ physical senses allow them to enter at the bottom of the epistemological line so that it becomes possible for humans to complete their education by ascending (the first important movement) the line so that they may eventually reach true understanding through use of the dialectic (the second important movement). Through this understanding, they might be able to align their souls with it and so live the dialectic. In other words, they may be able to untwist the circles and participate in the motions of truth.

In this way, the particular version of the visible body given to humanity by the gods allows humans to overcome the corruption of the visible and to reach the truth of the invisible realm. The gods have provided humanity with a way to overcome the limitations of their embodied existence and this solution requires the double movement of Plato’s dialectic. “So once we have come to know [the revolutions of truth] and to share in the ability to make correct calculations according to nature, we should stabilize the straying revolutions within ourselves by imitating the completely unstraying revolutions of the god” (*Timaeus*, pg. 1250, ln. 47c). By utilizing the “gift” of philosophy that the gods have given to humans (*Timaeus*, pg. 1250, ln. 47b), humans can fulfill their purpose by realigning the revolutions of their existence with the truth. They can move up the line of understanding, so they can remember how to move around the dialectic, which is the motion of truth itself. The gods decided that the best way to fulfill the
Framer’s mandate of creating bodies that could still participate in his being was to orient humans toward a life of movement. In moving in the proper ways, humans can imitate the gods.

By imitating the gods, humans become immortal and divine. “[I]f a man has seriously devoted himself to the love of learning and to true wisdom, if he has exercised these aspects of himself above all, then there is absolutely no way that his thoughts can fail to be immortal and divine, should truth come within his grasp” (*Timaeus*, pg. 1289, ln. 90b). Through philosophy, humans can reorganize their visible existence in ways that mirror the visible existence of the gods. Since the visible existence of the gods is the best representation (image) of the true being of the Framer, this divine attainment helps humanity to achieve the goal of the Framer.

*Timaeus explains:*

And the motions that have an affinity to the divine part within us are the thoughts and revolutions of the universe. These, surely, are the ones which each of us should follow. We should redirect the revolutions in our heads that were thrown off course at our birth, by coming to learn the harmonies and revolutions of the universe, and so bring into conformity with its objects our faculty of understanding, as it was in its original condition. And when this conformity is complete, we shall have achieved our goal: that most excellent life offered to humankind by the gods, both now and forevermore (*Timaeus*, pg. 1289, ln. 90c-d)

By aligning their lives with the truth of the universe, humans have achieved their goal, their purpose. They live an excellent life by living the truth. This, though, requires continued motion. The gods must maintain the two motions of the dialectic in order to continue to rhyme with the truth. Humans must do the same. Their physical birth—their embodiment—keeps them from moving in these ways. But through philosophy, through the ascension of the epistemological line, they are able to overcome this. They are able to stabilize their internal movements, their DNA so to speak, to resonate with the motions of the truth.

To see what this means and how this is possible, we need to exit the visible realm and transfer ourselves to the invisible realm itself. We will need to turn our attentions away from *Timaeus* and toward Plato’s normal interlocutor: Socrates.
The Philosophic Look at the Good

Plato’s most concise formulation of the good comes at the end of *Philebus*. There he has Socrates proclaim:

Well, then, if we cannot capture the good in one form, we will have to take hold of it in a conjunction of three: beauty, proportion, and truth. Let us affirm that these should by right be treated as a unity and be held responsible for what is in the mixture, for its goodness is what makes the mixture itself a good one (*Philebus*, pg. 454, ln. 65a)

It is important that Socrates formulates the definition in this way. In the *Republic*, Socrates claimed that the “knowledge and truth” are “goodlike” but that they are not the “good” (*Republic*, pg. 1129, ln. 508e-509a). While truth is not the good, it is part of the good. The best single encapsulation of the good that Socrates can give is that it is the mixture of “beauty, proportion, and truth.” This mixture is the “supreme good,” and it can only be such as this mixture (*Philebus*, pg. 454, ln. 65b).

What is this mixture, though? What is the supreme good really? Socrates provides this particular conceptualization of the good in order to determine whether reason or pleasure was closer to the supreme good. In finishing the train of thought of his argument, he ranks a list of concepts according to how closely they approach this supreme good. This ranking illuminates how he views this conceptualization of the good as mixture. Socrates’ ranking is as follows (*Philebus*, pg. 455-456, ln. 66a-d):

1) “The measured and the timely”
2) “The well-proportioned and beautiful”
3) “Reason and intelligence”
4) “Right opinions”
5) “The soul’s own pleasures”
6) Pleasure

The three most highly ranked concepts are the concepts that comprise the mixture of the good itself. As such, it is important to note how Socrates ranks these pieces of the mixture. The closest single concept to the mixture that is the supreme good is the measured and the timeless. In other
words, proportion is the closest approximation of the supreme good. This makes sense with regards to Socrates’ formulation of the good in *Philebus* but also with his larger theory. As to the former, the fact that the good is a mixture, necessitates that the mixture must be properly mixed for the good to exist. Proper proportion—the correct measurement and the timely inclusion of each ingredient—is foundational for creating the proper mixture.

Proportion, though, also plays a vital role in Plato’s larger theory as told by Socrates. As famously recounted in the *Republic* (see especially Books IV-VI), it is proportion that puts the parts of the soul, the parts of the city, and the virtues of the soul and of the city into the proper harmony that allows for justice, truth, beauty, and overall virtue. The soul can only function as it is supposed to function if each of its three parts are in proportion. The measurement and timeliness that comprise proportion ensure that the will supports reason to fulfill the proper desires in the proper way, which is to say with the proper balance. Socrates is so interested in the proper proportion of pleasures and pains that he elsewhere calls the right “measurement, which is the study of relative excess and deficiency and equality,” of “pains and pleasures” to be humanity’s “salvation” (*Protagoras*, pg. 786, ln. 357a-b). The soul can only be saved, can only function as it was supposed to function if each of its three components are measured properly so they can act in a timely manner so that improper pleasures are suppressed and proper pleasures are satisfied. When the soul functions in this manner it is acting virtuously, it is fulfilling its function excellently.

Just as the soul must be in the proper balance, so that it can balance pleasure in a person’s private life, the city must be properly measured to ensure that the classes fulfill their functions in the proper way and at the proper time. The auxiliaries must be properly aligned with the ruling philosophers in order to properly order and rule the artisans, so the city as a whole fulfills the
proper desires in the proper way. This proper order is justice. The city as a whole must be in proper proportion for the city to be ordered justly. Whenever a soul or a city is organized with the proper proportion, all of the virtues are also properly proportioned. When reason rules and courage supports, then moderation (i.e., proper proportion) is achieved across the city and justice comes about.

As we can see, then, proper proportion brings about justice and virtue, which for Plato is that thing that allows each thing to fulfill its function excellently. In doing so it brings about truth and beauty as well. The just and the virtuous is that which aligns with the truth, and this alignment is beautiful. This is why Socrates can claim “that the good life, the beautiful life, and the just life are the same” (*Crito*, pg. 42, ln. 48b). It is no wonder, then, that Socrates places proportion as the closest approximation to the mixture that is the supreme good. Achieving proper proportion brings into existence, gives being to, both beauty and truth.

Socrates’ further rankings of concepts that approximate the mixture that is the good reflect this point. Second on his list of approximations of the good is the beautiful, which he links with the well-proportioned. Beauty gets listed second, behind proportion, because, as he informs us in the *Republic* (pg. 1120, ln. 498d-e), a person can “rhyme” with “virtue” through pure “chance.” Just as someone can have an opinion (which by definition is unexamined) that is true, someone can be beautiful without intending it or truly knowing it. Socrates makes clear (*Republic*, pg. 1103ff, ln. 477aff; pg. 1130ff, ln. 509dff; pg. 1132ff, ln. 514aff), that having a true understanding of the truth is superior to having an opinion that has not been validated by the dialectic and so has not been truly understood. This remains true even if that opinion is exactly identical to the truth. In the same way, here, true proportion is superior to beauty, which can be an accidental, unexamined, and poorly understood proportion. Because of this, Socrates places
proportion itself as the closest approximation to the supreme good and beauty, which is one of the results of proper proportion, as the second best approximation.

Socrates validates this interpretation later on in his rankings. He ranks right opinion directly below reason and intelligence. Even opinions that are right are less good approximations of the supreme good, precisely because they are unexamined. The move that he makes there—ranking right opinion below reason and intelligence—is the same move that he makes in ranking beauty just below proportion.

We should notice something else here too. Plato is praising movement itself. The dual movement of epistemology is good; it is better than accidentally achieving the same result. Engaging in that movement produces understanding of the truth, so participation in the movement is better than not participating in it. The movement itself is part of the good.

We see, then, that proportion brings about beauty. It also brings about truth. Socrates’ third ranked approximation of the good is “reason and intelligence.” He says that with these “you cannot stray far from the truth” (Philebus, pg. 455, ln. 66b). When reason is measured and timely—which is to say when it is in the proper proportion, it is possible to understand the truth and to organize one’s personal (soul) and collective (city) lives around that truth. Truth, then, is an approximation of the supreme good, but it is a less good approximation than proportion itself.

After ranking the three components of the mixture of the good, Socrates includes three further concepts in his rankings of the approximation of the good: right opinions, the pleasures of the soul, and all other pleasures. Ostensibly, Socrates does this to bury as deeply as possible the popular notion that pleasure is the supreme good. However, this drive gave Socrates the space to make an important move, which subtly shows what he means by the supreme good in the first place.
Pleasures that are not of the soul, which is to say “pleasures that are forever involved with foolishness and other kinds of vice” (*Philebus*, pg. 453, ln. 63e-64a) only seek to lead the soul away from the proper balance (proportion) that leads to beauty and truth. In the *Republic* (pg. 1188ff, ln. 580dff), Socrates claims that there are “three pleasures corresponding to the three parts of the soul,” namely the pleasures that satisfy “philosophic, victory-loving, and profit-loving” people. Each of these pleasures create different kinds of people with different kinds of qualities.

Those who are profit loving are ruled by the appetitive part of their soul. They are ruled by the foolish pleasures. Some of these pleasures, “food, drink, sex” (*Republic*, pg. 1180, ln. 580e), are necessary for personal and species survival, but since the person finds these pleasures to be the highest human pleasures, they are ruled by these pleasures rather than by reason. There is no way to curb these pleasures, so the pleasures themselves rule the soul and the city. These out-of-control pleasures lead not to a healthy satisfaction of these desires to reproduce life but to an unhealthy accumulation of experiences and resources to satisfy these pleasures. The end result is the desire for more and more money, so these pleasures can be satisfied to an ever greater degree. As people make pursuit of money their ultimate aim, conflict is inevitable.

The victory lover is ruled by the spirited part of the soul. These pleasures are more honorable than the appetitive pleasures desired by the money lover, but they are still not ruled by reason, so they still do not lead toward the good. Instead of following reason, honor lovers come to love honor above all else, and this leads them to a never ending quest for victory, which brings honor with it. Since victory requires a loser, these quests for honor lead to competition and strife in just the same way that the love of money does.
In both of these cases, false pleasures distract the soul from seeking to climb the epistemological line out of the cave to find the truth. They keep the soul imprisoned, forced to satisfy any desire that arises with no criteria by which to judge whether the desire is beneficial or not. These desires, as the Myth of the Ring of Gyges (Republic, pg. 999ff, In. 358bff) combined with the Allegory of the Cave (Republic, pg. 1132, In. 514aff) demonstrate, cause people to engage in a power struggle to control the laws and norms of society so that the satisfaction of those desires are justified, which is to say made just. This creates a city run not by the truth but by desires. In the end, both the soul and the city are ruled by desires rather than by reason, which means that truth, beauty, and proportion cannot come into existence. Without the truth, it is impossible to examine whether or not something is beautiful—well-proportioned—and neither the soul nor the city can be properly proportioned. Instead of engaging in the movements of truth, they move according to any whim of deviant desires.

While these pleasures are foolish and lead away from the good, there are good pleasures. The third kind of pleasure truly encompasses all of the pleasures of the soul that Socrates mentions in Philebus. These pleasures are the pleasures garnered by “knowing where the truth lies” (Republic, pg. 1189, In. 581d). The person who experiences these pleasures experiences “always being in some such pleasant condition while learning” (Republic, pg. 1189, In. 581e). The pleasure of the soul is the ecstasy of philosophizing itself. It is the pleasure of climbing the epistemological line in pursuit of the truth. Rather than leading to the accumulation of material resources or honor, these pleasures lead a person to accumulate the truth.

As the epistemological line shows, the first way that people can accumulate truth is to form opinions, so that these can be tested through hypothetical thought and ultimately by the dialectic. It is no accident, then, that Socrates ranks right opinion just above the pleasures of the
soul. These opinions are necessary for entering the invisible realm so truth can be found, lives can be organized beautifully, and the proper proportion of the soul and the city can be achieved. It is important too that Socrates privileges right opinions here. The process of moving up the epistemological line from opinions to hypothetical thought and eventually to the dialectic is not a singular process. Once an opinion is proven to be right, it must be combined with other opinions, which themselves must be tested by hypothetical thought and ultimately the dialectic. To reach the dialectic, all of these particular dialectics must be completed.

It is no accident, then, that Socrates organized his rankings of approximations of the good in the way that he did. Foolish pleasures will lead humans away from the good, but good pleasures will give them the impetus to enter the epistemological line in search of truth (through right opinions to truth itself). Finding truth, allows them to make their lives beautiful—well-proportioned—and this proportion will not be through pure chance but will be known and intentional. Once this occurs, the three elements of the good: proportion, beauty, and truth are present and the good has been achieved. And this achievement comes about because of the dual movement of the dialectic.

Now we are in a position to evaluate what this means to see what the good truly is. As we just saw, the first piece of the puzzle is the ascension of the epistemological line, which is to say philosophizing itself. Socrates defines philosophers as those who love “all kinds of learning” (*Republic*, pg. 1102, ln. 475c), those “who love the sight of truth” (*Republic*, pg. 1102, ln. 475e). Philosophers must love all truth and must “readily and willingly” (*Republic*, pg. 1102, ln. 475c) philosophize to find all of it.

Finding the truth is important, as we saw, but it turns out that love is also an important element to this equation. Socrates’ discussion with Diotima, “a woman from Mantinea…who
was wise about many things” (Symposium, pg. 484, ln. 201d), on love provides an added layer of complexity to Socrates’ understanding of philosophy, philosophizing, and the good. Diotima provides the meat of the discussion, but Socrates agrees with her all the way through the conversation, and at the end, he proclaims “I was persuaded” by Diotima’s words (Symposium, pg. 494, ln. 212b). In fact, he was so persuaded that he constantly tried to persuade others of the truth that he learned from her (Symposium, pg. 494, ln. 212b). From the perspective of Plato, then, we can assume that, in this context, the words of Diotima carry the same weight as the words of Socrates.

Following Socrates’ general pattern, Diotima begins with a discussion of the visible world before moving onto a discussion of the invisible world. She discusses Love personified to show us what love is. Love personified is the child of Poros and Penia, and he draws on this mixed heritage. He loves what is beautiful and good as did his father, but he is also always “living in Need” as did his beggar mother (Symposium, pg. 486, ln. 203bff). As such, Love “desires [good and beautiful things]—because he needs them” (Symposium, pg. 485, ln. 202d). Love desires the good and the beautiful, but Love desires these because he needs them. In other words, Love desires what he does not have. He is always desiring and never possessing.

This unfortunate state of affairs tells us something about what Love is. Since he desires what is beautiful and wise, he cannot be said to be ugly or ignorant, but since he is still desiring them and does not possess them, he cannot be said to be beautiful or wise. As such, Love is between the beautiful and the ugly and the wise and the ignorant (Symposium, pg. 487, ln. 204b). But Love is also “in between mortal and immortal” (Symposium, pg. 485, ln. 202d).

Though this seems like an unfortunate existence, this state of being “in between” is important. This in between is where “Everything spiritual” lies (Symposium, pg. 485, ln. 202e).
Those who have their existence in the in between play a unique and valuable role. These in betweeners “are messengers who shuttle back and forth between the two” worlds: immortal and mortal (Symposium, pg. 486, ln. 202e). They are what link the mortal with the immortal. They are what educate humans to pass from the mortal to the immortal. This is an analogous but an even more complete shift than the movement from the visible to the invisible realms that the philosopher achieves by engaging in the dual movements of epistemology. As we will see even more clearly in a moment, the movements there are meant to teach philosophers how to move from the mortal realm to the immortal one.

Diotima tells this myth of Love personified not to explain what this being Love is like but to explain what human love and human lovers are like and to show how humans can pass from the mortal to the immortal. Human love, which is to say love that “is common to all human beings,” is the “desire for happiness” where happiness is the possession of all “good things” (Symposium, pg. 487-488, ln. 204e-205a). Human love goes further than this, though. It not only wants to possess the good; “love is wanting to possess the good forever” (Symposium, pg. 489, ln. 206a). Human love shares with Love personified in that it desires all that is good and beautiful and to do so stably forever. However, human love also shares Love’s maternal inheritance in that it is always in need of what it desires. Human love is always searching for the good that it cannot possess. Human love is always searching, always questing and never reaching.

This deepens our understanding of Socrates’ definition of a philosopher. Philosophers love the truth, which means they always quest after the truth, but they never possesses it. Philosophers always push to understand the truth but that they never quite grasp it.

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This quality of love—that it is always unfulfilled—means that desiring the good and the beautiful is not enough. “A lover must desire immortality along with the good” (*Symposium*, pg. 490, ln. 207a). Immortality provides the lover with infinite time to quest for what is desired. Since loving is a constant quest, it is important that the lover have constant time to continue the quest.

Philosophers, then, require immortality, so they can continue the quest for—the movement of—truth forever. Since philosophers love the truth and since this love for truth can never be fulfilled, philosophers must also learn immortality and seek to attain it. This is why Socrates claims that “those who practice philosophy in the proper manner” also “practice for dying and death” (*Phaedo*, pg. 55, ln. 64a). On the one hand, this reaffirms Plato’s account of reincarnation in the *Republic* (pg. 1218-1223, ln. 614b-621d). Philosophy educates the soul, so that the soul can choose to be reincarnated in a body that is less twisted by foolish pleasures, so that in its next embodied life it can more fully ascend the epistemological line and more completely understand truth. On this reading, philosophy educates the soul to choose its re-embodiment wisely, and this education is the “practice for dying and death.”

However, when Socrates says that philosophy is practice for dying and death, he means something else as well. Philosophers recognize that death is not “anything else other than the separation of the soul from the body” (*Phaedo*, pg. 56, ln. 64c). Death provides the philosopher with the opportunity to become immortal. The philosopher’s quest, then, is a quest for truth, but it is also a quest for immortality. Philosophers are trying to discern truth, but they are also trying to discern how to remain in the state of separation from the body. They are trying to ascertain

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2 This is the one place of significant divergence between the *Republic* and the *Timaeus* (pg. 1245, ln. 42a-c). Plato’s account in the *Republic* is more consistent with the rest of his theory, so we may chalk up the divergence between it and Timaeus’ account to the fact that Timaeus’ account is less precise since it is an account of the visible realm. Clearly, then, we must accept the account as recited by Socrates in the *Republic.*
how they can skip the choice of reincarnation altogether, so they can remain a soul totally
disencumbered by a pleasure-wracked body.

It turns out that these two pursuits—truth and immortality—are related. Socrates attests
that none “may join the company of the gods” except for those who have “practiced philosophy”
(Phaedo, pg. 72, ln. 82b-c). If philosophers are to have any chance of becoming immortal as are
the gods, they must practice philosophy. Philosophizing leads to the truth as we have seen, but it
also leads to purity. The “lover of learning” is “completely pure” (Phaedo, pg. 72, ln. 82b-c). In
fact, philosophers attain purity precisely by understanding the truth and organizing their lives
according to it. Philosophers “have purified themselves sufficiently by philosophy” (Phaedo, pg.
97, ln. 114c) when they have “rid” their soul “of confusion, ignorance, fear, violent desires, and
the other human ills” (Phaedo, pg. 71, ln. 81a). Purification is an enlightenment to the truth that
eliminates confusion and ignorance, but it also is the elimination of desires and human ills. As
we have already seen, this is only possible by making oneself beautiful and of the proper
proportion. Purity is achieved, then, when philosophers properly proportion their souls and attain
beauty, and this can only happen when they pursue truth. They must move properly in order to
align their souls according to the movement of truth.

Diotima seconds this account but adds more detail. She explains that immortality is
achieved through reproduction, because “reproduction goes on forever” (Symposium, pg. 490, ln.
206e-207a). This reproduction includes physical reproduction: children can carry on the social
standing, legacy, and honor of their parents (Symposium, pg. 491, ln. 208cfft). However, there is
an even higher form of reproduction: the reproduction of the soul (Symposium, pg. 491, ln.
208eff). The “pregnant soul” brings forth “[w]isdom and the rest of virtue” (Symposium, pg. 491,
ln. 209a). Immortality is achieved when wisdom and virtue are impregnated in the soul.
Immortality is achieved when the philosopher finds the truth and is able to keep reproducing that truth. This is achieved by understanding a new body of knowledge or a new piece of knowledge, or by putting “back a fresh memory” of a knowledge or a piece of knowledge that has departed (Symposium, pg. 490-491, In. 208a). Immortality is already in the process of being achieved (a process of movement of becoming) when the soul understands truth. The more that the soul reproduces this truth, the more it reproduces itself.

To understand what this means, we need to see that immortality is not just linked to truth but that it is linked to beauty and proper proportion as well. Diotima claims that since love seeks what is good and beautiful, it is most fertile when it is in the presence of the beautiful (Symposium, pg. 206-207, In. 206c-ff). When lovers come into the presence of that which they seek, they become pregnant. Since the loving soul seeks beauty, beauty itself plays a part in the soul’s impregnation. Beauty is the object of the soul’s desire, but it is also the means through which that desire is fulfilled and made fruitful. When a soul glimpses beauty—that which is well-proportioned—it begins to understand what is true and what is beautiful. All at once, the quest is consummated and the soul is impregnated. Remaining in the presence of beauty calms the impregnated soul and allows it to bear its child, to reproduce. Beauty allows the soul to reorganize itself and perhaps the world around it to align with the beautiful and the true. The soul becomes “beautiful and noble and well-formed” and “cities and households” are “properly order[ed]” (Symposium, pg. 491-492, In. 208e-209e). In one sense, then, the soul gains immortality through creating poetry, crafts, and political systems that align with the truth and continue to teach others to align with the truth long after the creator has died (which is to say the body of the creative soul has departed) (Symposium, pg. 491-492, In. 208e-209e). However, this
is a metaphorical immortality. Diotima, and Socrates too, believe that the understanding of truth and beauty leads to a properly ordered soul that leads to a literal immortality as well.

The more that the soul understands truth, ascertains beauty, and makes itself and its world proportional to that truth and beauty, the more the soul reorganizes itself to the immortal form itself. The soul reproduces itself but not as it was but as it could and should be. The soul creates itself over in the image of the true and beautiful that it is beginning to understand. It begins to give birth to a new self. This reproduction of the soul brings the lover ever closer to the beautiful itself, the good itself. Diotima marvels at how wonderful the complete consummation of this would be: “But how would it be…if someone got to see the Beautiful itself, absolute, pure, unmixed, not polluted by human flesh or colors or any other great nonsense of mortality, but if he could see the divine Beauty itself in its one form?” (*Symposium*, pg. 494, ln. 211e-212a). The ultimate desire of love is to see the actual good and the actual beautiful. This is what love always desires and never has. However, if lovers follow proper love long enough and continue to impregnate themselves and reproduce themselves, eventually, they themselves can become fully immortal:

Or haven't you remembered...that in life alone, when he looks at Beauty in the only way that Beauty can be seen—only then will it become possible for him to give birth not to images of virtue (because he's in touch with no images), but to true virtue (because he is in touch with the true Beauty). The love of the gods belongs to anyone who has given birth to true virtue and nourished it, and if any human being could become immortal, it would be he (*Symposium*, pg. 494, ln. 212a-b).

Lovers who understand truth also begin to understand beauty. When they understand truth well enough they catch a glimpse of the beautiful itself. When they do, they give birth to “true virtue.” They reproduce that which is excellent, and this is not just an image of the excellent but is that which is actually excellent. In other words, they reproduce that which is ordered as it was supposed to be ordered; they reproduce the proper proportion. They reproduce themselves as they, as humans, were truly meant to be.
When philosophers attain this beauty or purity of themselves through sufficient understanding of the truth, they attain the proper proportion within themselves. They, as closely as possible given their embodied state, reorder their lives as they were originally intended to be ordered. When they do this, they are ready to “live in the future altogether without a body” (*Phaedo*, pg. 97, ln. 114c). They are ready to simultaneously throw off their body, the object of their soul’s imprisonment, and to attain full immortality. In this new state, they “truly spend the rest of time with the gods” (*Phaedo*, pg. 71, ln. 81a). They attain immortality and live forever in the invisible realm where movement that rhymes with the truth is possible. This is why Socrates does not fear his death sentence. He looks forward to philosophizing with the gods forever (*Apology*, pg. 35-36, ln. 41a-b).

Indeed, this is why all philosophers are “eager for” death (*Phaedo*, pg. 55, ln. 64a). Philosophers are so eager for death, because it gives them the opportunity to finally live as they were meant to live. They can throw off their body and the foolish pleasures that accompany it. This freedom from the body provides freedom for their soul to exist in the proper proportion in which it was always meant to exist. Philosophers spend their lives understanding the truth, so they can organize their lives according to the beautiful, so they can achieve their proper, human proportion. When they do this completely enough, they are ready to live in the afterlife forever. And they are ready to live there in the proper proportion with the proper movement of truth. The good has been achieved, because the mixture of truth, beauty, and proportion has gained existence.

The good, then, is true existence. It is true human existence. The good is having human *being*. The good is achieving the human balance, which is in perfect harmony with beauty and truth. The good is the fulfillment of the Framer’s original purpose. The soul had to overcome its
visible existence in order to achieve this purpose, but it had to use the visible to climb the epistemological line so the soul could participate with true being. That means, then, that the dual movement of epistemology was itself good. It was that which taught the philosopher to remember truth and truth’s movement. It was the process itself that allowed the philosopher to philosophize, which is to live according to a love and desire for truth above all else. The movement itself, then, enacted human being.

What is true being, though? Socrates proclaims that “the nature of the soul, whether divine or human” is that it is “immortal” (Phaedrus, pg. 523, ln. 245c). This immortality comes with a condition: “whatever is always in motion is immortal” (Phaedrus, pg. 523, ln. 245c). True human existence is a life of movement. However, it is not the movement of physicality; it is a divine movement. It is not a movement of becoming; it is a movement of being. The motion of the human soul must mimic the movement of the divine soul. Human existence is living the dialectic forever as the gods do. Human existence, like divine existence, means that the soul must resonate with the twin movements of the dialectic. It is the existence that grasps the truth of the universe and organizes a beautiful, stable being around those truths. It is the existence of proportion, beauty, and truth. This existence is the excellent human existence. This is the existence that humans were meant to have. It is the existence that the Framer intended when he gave human souls existence.

True human being is being free from foolish pleasures. The good human life is the life free from the enslavement of the pleasures of the body and free from the internal and external competition, strife, and conflict that inevitably come from attempts to satisfy those foolish pleasures. It is an existence that is free to understand truth forever and to live lives in accordance with that truth, lives that are harmonious, beautiful, and pure.
If the good is this true human existence, then it must be possible for all humans to achieve this existence. At first blush, it appears that Socrates does not believe that this is possible. The Myth of the Metals (Republic, pg. 1050ff, ln. 414ff) indicates that only some souls are philosophic. However, reading the rest of the Republic reminds us that this myth is just a noble lie whose purpose is to approximate the truth for those who do not ascend the epistemological line themselves (Republic, pg 1020ff, ln. 382aff). As the Myth of Er—Plato’s final word in the Republic—shows, the truth, or at least a closer approximation of the truth, is that all but the worst tyrants are allowed to choose a reincarnated body, so all but they have an opportunity to re-emboby their soul in a body less enslaved by foolish pleasures and more capable of philosophizing (Republic, pg. 1218ff, ln. 614bff). People are given the possibility of near infinite iterations of embodied existence until they learn to orient themselves toward the life of near infinite iterations up the epistemological line. When they do this properly, they too become philosophers and earn another existence of disembodied being in the afterlife.

A full philosophic education is the best ally in choosing this next life, because “the soul goes to the underworld possessing nothing but its education and upbringing” (Phaedo, pg. 92, ln. 107c-d). In that sense, the one who is more philosophic has a better chance of choosing a new body conducive to ascending higher up the epistemological line. However, every soul can depend on the education that it received from the Framer. Everyone, even a slave, can “recollect” the truth (Meno, pg. 880ff, ln. 81aff) that the Framer taught to every soul. The body may cause humans to forget the truth by creating stronger, foolish desires within them, but the soul is immortal, and it longs to remember (Phaedo, pg. 63ff, ln. 72eff). This is what Socrates refers to when he argues that “the power to learn is present in everyone’s soul” (Republic, pg. 1136, ln. 518c-d). No matter how faint it becomes, all have the desire for truth within them that draws
them to philosophize. All people desire to fulfill the purpose for which they were created and to come into existence as a human with true human being.

Everything, then, is leading up to the conclusion that the good is true human being and that almost everyone—if given enough time—can achieve this, but then Socrates proclaims that “the good is not being, but superior to it in rank and power” (Republic, pg. 1130, Ln. 509b). What is going on here? There are two answers to this challenge that work in tandem. The first answer is quite simple. In the Philebus (pg. 453, Ln. 64a), Socrates distinguishes between “the good in man and in the universe” and the “nature of the good itself.” This tracks what Socrates argues in the Republic. The good for humans is true human being, but this still differs in “rank and power” from the good itself. The good itself, the sun in the Allegory of the Cave, is the thing that brings this human good into existence. As Socrates says, “their being is…due to it” (Republic, pg. 1130, Ln. 509b). The human good and the nature of good per se differ. The former relies on the latter.

The question, then, is which good is Socrates describing in the Philebus and in the corresponding passages across the dialogues? All throughout, Socrates hints at the answer. In the Philebus, he purports to be arguing about the supreme good when he describes the good as the mixture of truth, beauty, and proportion. However, he immediately hedges on that. He says that “The good therefore must be taken up precisely or at least in outline…” (Philebus, pg. 450, Ln. 61a). He continues, “Have we not discovered at least a road that leads toward the good?... It’s as if, when you are looking for somebody, you first find out where he actually lives. That would be a major step towards finding him” (Philebus, pg. 450, Ln. 61a-b). Socrates proclaims that he must take up what the good itself is, then he admits that he can only take us to the neighborhood of the good. He cannot explain the good precisely, he can only give us an outline. In fact, the Philebus ends with Protarchus imploring Socrates to get him closer to an understanding of the good.
Everywhere that Socrates takes up the good, he hedges in nearly identical ways. For example, in the *Republic*, Socrates proposes to “abandon the quest for what the good itself is for the time being,” because even if the discussion was limited merely to “my own view about it” it would be “too big a topic for the discussion we are now started on” (*Republic*, pg. 1127, ln. 506d-e). Instead, he proposes to look at “what is apparently an offspring of the good and most like it” (*Republic*, pg. 1127, ln. 506e). Even in the hedge, Socrates’ hedges: the topic of discussion is only “apparently” an offspring of the good. Socrates cannot explain to us what the good is or even what the offspring of the good is. He can only give us a glimpse into what an apparent offspring of the good is.

This evasion, though, turns out to be the second, related, answer to the challenge that being is not the good per se. When Socrates begins to hedge on what the good itself is, Glaucon exclaims in exasperation that the good is “an inconceivably beautiful thing” (*Republic*, pg. 1129, ln. 509a). Unwittingly, Glaucon grasped the point. When the discussion finally nears its end, Socrates proclaims, “You won’t be able to follow me any longer, Glaucon, even though there is no lack of eagerness on my part to lead you, for you would no longer be seeing an image of what we’re describing, but the truth itself” (*Republic*, pg. 1148, ln. 533a). The good itself cannot be taught. It can only be experienced, lived. Seeing “the sun itself,” understanding what the good is, is “the song that the dialectic sings” (*Republic*, pg. 1147-1148, ln. 532a-b). The only way to grasp the good is to complete the ultimate dialectic for oneself. The only way to see what the good is, is to have true human existence in the afterlife. The only way to understand the good itself is to live the dialectic itself. Only when human essence resonates with the motions of truth, can humanity grasp the good itself.
This is why Socrates again hedges when discussing the disembodied life of the soul in the afterlife. He says, the disembodied souls “make their way to even more beautiful dwelling places which it is hard to describe clearly, nor do we now have the time to do so” (*Phaedo*, pg. 97, ln. 114c). Socrates speaks of dwelling places, plural. Even Socrates, he who the Oracle proclaimed to be wisest in the world (*Apology*, pg. 20-21, ln. 20cff), can only begin to glimpse what the next stage is like: the disembodied existence of the afterlife. However, he knows, as we already saw, that the movement must continue in the afterlife. This movement may move us ever closer not only to the human good but also to the good itself.

Since the good itself is beyond comprehension, Plato does not even have Socrates hint at what it could be. In the *Republic* (pg. 1129, l. 508d-509a), Socrates begins to give the contours of what the “form of the good” is. He describes it as the sun, which illuminates truth and knowledge but is even more beautiful than it (*Republic*, pg. 1129, ln. 508e). When Glaucon pushes for more details, Socrates proclaims: “Hush! Let’s examine its image in more detail as follows” (*Republic*, pg. 1129, ln. 509a). Socrates knows that the good is beyond understanding, at least at this stage of being.

Later in the dialogue, he circles back to this idea and explicitly explains what he means by this. He says that the philosopher who “sings the dialectic” “doesn’t give up until he grasps the good itself with understanding itself” (*Republic*, pg. 1147-1148, ln. 532a-b). The philosopher’s goal is understanding or knowledge, which is above thought as well as opinion (e.g., *Republic*, pg. 1149, ln. 533d). However, the acquisition of understanding leads to a change in state. After the philosopher grasps the good itself by using understanding, “he reaches the end of the intelligible, just as the other reached the end of the visible” (*Republic*, pg. 1148, ln. 532b). Reaching understanding takes philosophers to a point of qualitative change, just as reaching
thought qualitatively changed their standing. In the latter, they moved from the visible realm to the intelligible realm. In the former, they will move from the intelligible realm to a disembodied realm in the afterlife. Maybe there philosophers will live according to the good itself rather than according to the “goodlike” (Republic, pg. 1129, ln. 509a). But that it literally beyond understanding: Socrates will need another category to describe what is happening. In this disembodied afterlife, there is some more pure movement of the dialectic—a truer singing of the dialectic—that can take place there and teach disembodied philosophers even more completely.

As we saw, since this realm and this education is beyond understanding, Socrates speculates that there may be some indefinite number of other realms with an indefinite number of other methods of comprehending the dialectic. Since, he takes seriously that he cannot know these things in his present condition, he refuses to describe what the good itself is.

However, through Timaeus, whose account need only be the one that is “most likely,” Plato does speculate what the good itself is:

This being so, we have to go on to speak about what comes next. When the maker made our world, what living thing did he make it resemble? Let us not stoop to think that it was any of those that have the natural character of a part, for nothing that is a likeness of anything incomplete could ever turn out beautiful. Rather, let us lay it down that the universe resembles more closely than anything else that Living Thing of which all other living things are parts, both individually and by kinds. For that Living Thing comprehends within itself all intelligible living things, just as our world is made up of us and all the other visible creatures. Since the god wanted nothing more than to make the world like the best of the intelligible things, complete in every way, he made it a single visible living thing, which contains within itself all the living things whose nature it is to share its kind (Timaeus, pg. 1236, ln. 30c-31a).

Maybe the ultimate goal is participation in the Living Thing itself. The Framer crafted everything out of this Living Thing. And all things that are living things are parts of that Living Thing. Maybe the ultimate good is some kind of participation in, some kind of existence with, some kind of being in that Living Thing. Maybe that kind of being is not being at all, in the way that we think of being, and so is superior in rank and power to being as we conceive of it. Maybe there is something Eastern in this conception where all melds into an ocean of existence. Or
maybe this conception of the thing that is superior to being maintains its Western roots and
individual existence remains, but yet this existence is something altogether different from being
as we conceive of it.

What this Living Thing actually is, is left intentionally vague. Whether this Living Thing
is the Framer or is another perfect representation of the true, beautiful, and proportioned is
unclear. However, maybe the good is this incomprehensibly wonderful thing. Perhaps humans
can participate in this after they achieve the human good in the afterlife. Perhaps, then, humans
can participate in the actual good and not merely in the inferior human good. It is uncertain what
this would look like or if we would have to give up our individual existence to attain it. It really
is unknown to us given our present conditions. It is the unremembered that we are slowly
remembering with each new stage of our movement to being.

But from all of this we can see a few more important points. First, Plato admits that the
good is unknowable, even to philosophers. Philosophers can begin to see what it is, but it
remains opaque in its particulars.

Second, this means that even philosophers must continue to move in order to ever better
discover what the good is in hopes that they may be able to better live it. This means that they
must continue to utilize the dual movements of epistemology in order to ever hone their
understanding of the good. If they are successful enough in these dual movements, they will be
able to remain in the disembodied afterlife. However, this existence itself is merely a more
perfect enactment of the dual movements of the dialectic itself. Though he never explicitly
comments—because it is so unknowable to him that he cannot even speculate—Plato also hints
that there may be another realm after the disembodied afterlife. If true, then the movements of
the dialectic also act as upward movements. These upward movements are no longer the
movements of ascension of the epistemological line, but they are analogous to it. They are the movements of ascension of whatever more precise version of philosophizing a disembodied existence allows. As such, these movements would then lead to another kind of existence (iteration of more perfect being) in some other realm after the realm of the disembodied afterlife. In this reading, then, each realm itself is an ascension of ever greater knowledge of the what the good is and how to live it. We have the movements in the visible realm leading to movements in the invisible realm of the mind, which then lead to movements in a literal invisible realm in the afterlife and the movements there likely lead to another as yet unknown realm. Any realms after that are completely opaque to Plato.

Third, since each movement leads to a more true, beautiful, and proportioned existence, the movement itself must be good. Each movement is the thing that enacts the next stage of being. On this earth, philosophers become philosophers by philosophizing, which is just to say by engaging in the dual movements of epistemology. Once they complete these movements enough—and they are never fully completed, Plato cannot finish the ultimate dialectic which is why he does not know what the ultimate good, the form of forms, is—they change states of being by becoming a disembodied soul in the afterlife.

Lastly, this movement is good even though it starts in the realm of non-being. The philosopher’s journey starts in the bottom half of the line, which is the realm of shadows and politics and all that is not real. It is the movement itself that creates the being. This means that we start in the negative space of non-being and move. This movement enacts the positive space of being. However, as we have made clear a number of times now, the ultimate iteration of this positive space is always just unknowable and just out of reach of enactment. It is possible that
this existence is some kind of participation with the Framer himself. This existence would truly be “superior” to being “in rank and power” (Republic, pg. 1130, ln. 509b).

The Good and Politics

Plato’s extended discussion of politics in the Republic is setup by the Myth of the Ring of Gyges (Republic, pg. 998ff, ln. 357aff). Glaucon and Adeimantus tell the story of the shepherd Gyges as a way strengthening Thrasymachus’ argument of political justice that he made and then abandoned in Book I. This myth, then, advances two interrelated arguments: one about justice and one about government. Glaucon and Adeimantus do not believe these arguments, but they advance them because they want Socrates to precisely defeat them. It turns out, however, that a false conception of the good underpins this entire myth. Plato’s ultimate defeat of Thrasymachus’ argument, then, must also be a defeat of the popular conception of the good. Conversely, Plato’s conception of the good is the very thing that underpins and so explains his own understanding of politics.

The Myth of Gyges explains why most people think the unjust life is the instrumentally superior life vis-à-vis the just life. Most people do not care about truth, as Glaucon and Adeimantus’ claim goes, so most people do not ever consider whether the unjust life is intrinsically better than the just life.

It turns out, though, that this view of justice leads humanity to the need for government (Republic, pg. 1000, In. 358e-359c). Glaucon purports that humans want to have “the freedom to do whatever they like” (Republic, pg. 1000, In. 359c), which means being able “to do injustice” while avoiding having “to suffer injustice” (Republic, pg. 1000, In. 358e). This freedom, then, inevitably brings them into conflict with other people for two reasons. First, in order to effectually have the freedom to do absolutely whatever they like, people need to both “outdo
others” and “to get more and more” (Republic, pg. 1000, ln. 359c). In other words, in order to
effectually have the power to exercise the freedom to do whatever one likes, that person would need to have relative and absolute prosperity. People need to amass for themselves a large and ever expanding quantity of goods and resources (they must reap the absolute prosperity of acquiring more and more), but they also need to make sure that this stash of goods and resources also outdoes others (they must have prosperity relative to all those around them), so that their goods and resources maximize their true value and potential. This dual prosperity is useful not only for the resources that it provides, but even more importantly for the ability to turn those resources into power, which can be used to freely do whatever one wants. To have true effectual power to freely do what one wants, then, people must succeed at the expense of everyone else. To truly have the resources to do whatever they want, they require that no one else has those resources, because then they too could turn those resources into power and could check the power that others have to freely do whatever they want.

There is a second reason, however, why people’s desired freedom will inevitably bring them into conflict with others. In order to effectually have freedom, people must be free to follow their desires regardless of how it effects other people. True freedom to do what they want inevitably entails my treating everyone else around them as objects. This objectification inevitably leads to the physical, emotional, and psychological harm of those other people. The freedom to do whatever I want must entail the freedom to do injustice to those around me.

People quickly realize, then, that if everyone pursued their natural understanding of the human good, only the strongest, most powerful person would actually be able to achieve it, and even that person could not achieve it absolutely. People, then reject total pursuit of the good life out of their own weaknesses. Aside from a few “godlike characters,” people reject the good life
because of “cowardice or old age or some other weakness” (ln. 366c-d; pg. 41). Since people are powerless to effectually achieve the freedom to do what they want and since the pursuit of that impossible goal leads to conflict, domination, and harm, people agree to abandon this life and create government, whose job is to keep people from conflict and to keep everyone from dominating and harming others.

Government does this through the creation of laws. These laws define what justice is. The laws determine what behavior must be limited or abolished in order to stave off conflict, domination, and harm and what behavior is permissible. Government and its laws, in this interpretation, are nothing more than arbitrarily agreed upon fetters of people’s freedom. Freedom to do whatever we like is maintained in the realm of acceptable behavior, but that freedom is absolutely extinguished in the realm of unacceptable behavior. Political communities, then, are nothing more than compromises that limit freedoms in return for security. And these compromises are not based on the truth of the matter—what behavior is truly just or unjust—but on arbitrarily agreed upon standards of what, in this community at this time, counts as just or unjust.

It turns out, however, that this creation of government does not really solve the problem; it merely changes the nature of the arena of combat. Laws limit people’s ability to both acquire resources in any way they see fit and to commit acts of injustice against other people. In light of these laws, people must find new ways to increase their power so they have the ability to do whatever they want. Instead of relying on personal strength (whether physical, persuasive, or the like), now people must find political methods to expand their effectual freedom vis-à-vis the other members of society. People now must convince others in society to agree upon certain arbitrary laws of justice that favor them at the expense of others. These laws allow people to gain
absolute and relative prosperity while at the same time they allow people to justifiably act
towards others as they wish. These actions, whether or not they are actually objectifying,
oppresive, and harmful, are agreed to be just because the laws have arbitrarily been set to call
them just. Politics, then, is about using the metaphorical ring of invisibility to give a façade of
justice to any act of injustice that the ruling people wish to commit. It becomes nothing more
than a power struggle around competing visions of desirable worlds; the rulers get to get their
version of a desirable world. Politics is a power game organized around who gets to do what and
what remains defined as shameful for the protection of others.

As we already hinted at, however, this entire account has its foundation in a very
particular account of the good. Glaucon and Adeimantus claim that people—even those who
purport to be just—will commit acts of injustice. “The reason for this is the desire to outdo others
and to get more and more. This is what anyone’s nature naturally pursues as good” (Republic,
pg. 1000, ln. 359c). People believe that the good is living the life of injustice where they acquire
more and more regardless of the consequences and in the process they outdo others. Further,
agreeing to live in community with an organized government does not shift most people’s
understanding of the good life. The good human life, in most people’s estimation, remains
becoming what Glaucon and Adeimantus dub the completely or perfectly unjust person. Most
people effectually live their life in the belief that the good life, the life that is instrumentally and
intrinsically best, is the life where a person is free to commit any act of injustice while
maintaining a reputation for being just. The intrinsically and instrumentally good life is, as
Thrasymachus contended in Book I, the life where you are the strongest and you get to rule to
the advantage of you, the stronger. This is indeed why Glaucon and Adeimantus wish to buttress
Thrasymachus’ original justice claim in the first place. They contend that most people
fundamentally agree with Thrasymachus, even if they have not thought it out as carefully as he has. Whether they have thought it out or not, this misguided conception of the good life leads to a misguided view of politics that must inevitably lead to oppression and conflict. Given these stakes, they believe that Thrasymachus’ argument must be defeated. Defeating this argument of justice and politics requires that Plato also defeat the underlying argument about the good. His foundation of the good, then, is foundational to the way that he conceives justice and the good, just politics.

Socrates affirms Glaucon and Aidemantus’ account that most people do indeed believe that the good life is the life of freedom to do what one wants. In the Allegory of the Cave (Republic, pg. 1132ff, ln. 514aff), Socrates metaphorically describes politics as a puppet show that persuades people to accept certain laws of justice as truth. The puppet-holders project puppets that create a world whereby they get wealth, power, privilege, pleasure, and whatever else they desire. He buttresses this claim in his defense as recorded in the Apology (pg. 23-24, ln. 24dff), Socrates claims that the city, through its people, its politicians, and its laws, teach falsehoods that corrupt the minds of the youth. He affirms that politics is a game constructed to create a world that justifies certain kinds of behaviors and that this world creates winners and losers. Since people take this to be what politics is and should be about, they are willing to “fight over shadows and struggle against one another in order to rule” (Republic, pg. 1137, ln. 520d). Since controlling the laws would allow them to end the struggle and live the life that they want to lead, they believe that ruling is a “great good” (Republic, pg. 1137, ln. 520d).

However, even if people are not successful in crafting the laws, they still seek to live a life of domination. Even in the shadow world of politics, the people create games for themselves so they can continue to dominate those around them within the confines of the rules of the
political game (*Republic*, pg. 1134, ln. 516e-517a). They still seek to garner power for themselves so they are free to act as they want.

Plato puts all of this in very graphic terms later in the *Republic* when he explains why he can be so sure that the pleasures of philosophers is better than the pleasures of everyone else:

> Therefore, those who have no experience of reason or virtue, but are always occupied with feasts and the like, are brought down and then back up to the middle, as it seems, and wander in this way throughout their lives, never reaching beyond this to what is truly higher up, never looking up at it or being brought up to it, and so they aren’t filled with that which really is and never taste any stable or pure pleasure. Instead, they always look down at the ground like cattle, and, with their heads bent over the dinner table, they feed, fatten, and fornicate. To outdo others in these things, they kick and butt them with iron horns and hooves, killing each other, because their desires are insatiable. For the part that they’re trying to fill is like a vessel full of holes, and neither it nor the things they are trying to fill it with are among the things that are (*Republic*, pg. 1194, ln. 585e-586a).

Non-philosophers desire absolute and relative prosperity—they seek to feed, fatten, and fornicate—and relative prosperity—they seek to outdo others. Plato, then, clearly accepts Glaucon and Adeimantus’ claims about what people take to be the good.

However, as we also see in this quote, Plato argues that this conception of the good is wrong on two grounds. First, it is false on instrumental grounds. The unjust life may seem the best life, but it always leads to conflict, strife, disharmony, and ultimate unfreedom. But he also argues that it is wrong on intrinsic grounds. Even if it were possible for one person to completely win the power game as Gyges himself fantasized about, that person would be unhappy precisely because the popular conception of the good is wrong. Absolute and relative prosperity is like trying to fill a bucket full of holes. It will never lead to contentment let alone happiness, because human nature is otherwise. Only philosophers are in a position to know this because they are the only ones who have moved in all the ways discussed in the previous section, and so they are the only ones who have experienced each kind of pleasure. At the end of the day, they recognize that true pleasure comes from the love of truth that leads to the true, beautiful, well-proportioned life, and this is so precisely because that is what the human good is.
It is clear, then, that in arguing for a particular understanding of the good Plato is simultaneously arguing against the popular conception of the good. It is also clear that changing people’s conception of the good would have drastic political consequences. For Plato, the good life is not the life to freely satisfy all of your pleasures. Instead, it is the life that is free from the enslavement of those foolish pleasures in the first place. The good life is not the ruling life where you are able to construct a world that justifies your behavior. The good life is organizing your personal and collective existence to the rule of truth, beauty, and proper proportion. This constricts our behavior rather than enlarges it, but it constricts us to those behaviors that are truly human. This leads to a politics that is both instrumentally—it is lacking in conflict, war, exploitation, disharmony, etc.—and intrinsically—it corresponds with the truly human life—better than a politics based on the false conception of the good. A politics that would be a human politics would be a politics that itself resonated with truth, beauty, and proportion. It would be a politics organized around a proper understanding of the truth with laws and institutions that were themselves proportioned in true and beautiful ways. As a beautiful structure it would educate citizens to properly organize their own lives in true and beautiful ways. In other words, a good politics would be a politics organized around the human good that facilitated movement toward understanding and living that human good.

Given our understanding of Plato’s conception of a good, this kind of politics would be a politics that would facilitate memory of the unremembered truth of human existence. As we also saw, the best way to do that is to eliminate the lusts of the body, since they turn the soul away from love for the truth and toward love for shadows. Plato thinks that he knows exactly what kind of city can do this, but his audience is not so sure.
The first move that Socrates makes to meet the challenge of the Myth of the Ring of Gyges is to construct a city. The city that he chooses to construct is of a very particular kind. It is a city that provides the bare necessities. When pushed, he reluctantly agrees that this city should also have some delicacies beyond just the bare necessities: things like “salt, olives, cheese, boiled roots, and vegetables…desserts, too…” (*Republic*, pg. 1011, ln. 372c-d).

However, this city should be as basic as possible. This is the “healthy” city (*Republic*, pg. 1011, ln. 372e). As is clear in the context of the rest of his theory, this is the city that least suppresses our memory of the truth, of beauty, and of proportion. This is the city that is as devoid of foolish pleasures as possible, so that all people have the best chance possible of hearing and following the pleasures of the soul, which would spur them to engage in the dual movements of epistemology. And Plato seems sincere in his belief that all people could remember the truth in this city. This city has craftsmen, but there are no auxiliaries or rulers to be found. A simple city devoid of foolish pleasures may be just the conditions necessary so that all people reconnect with the proper desires for truth and so willingly choose to move according to that truth. Given the right conditions even Meno’s slave remembered truth (*Meno*, pg. 880ff, ln. 81aff), so maybe this city can universally provide those conditions.

However, maybe most people are already too enslaved by their bodily passions to be convinced by this city. Glaucon dubs this city “a city for pigs” (*Republic*, pg. 1011, ln. 372d) and calls for a city in which humans rather than pigs can live. Socrates satisfies him by creating a “luxurious city,” but this is “a city with a fever” (*Republic*, pg. 1011-1012, Ln. 372e-373a). This is a city that contains all of the foolish pleasures, which include prostitutes but also art, that cause us to forget truth (*Republic*, pg. 1012, Ln. 373a-c). Instantly, the pleasures of this city lead to the

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3 I am indebted to Richard Matthews for pointing out to me the importance of the City of Pigs in larger context of the *Republic*. Of course, any error in interpretation is my own.
oppresion that is normal of politics. In order to acquire and protect the resources necessary to satisfy these pleasures, the city must raise an army and engage in offensive wars (Republic, pg. 1012, ln. 373d).

Plato gives in and agrees to setup a “feverish” city and see if he can find justice and injustice (this latter is a new addition to the search) there. As always, he is willing to start in the negative space of nonbeing in order to find ways to move toward the positive space of being. The rest of the Republic proceeds as if this feverish city is the baseline from which Socrates must work.

Given the constraints, Plato famously concludes that the best way to facilitate proper movement is to construct a politics where philosophers rule, the auxiliaries support, and the craftsmen produce (Republic, Books III-V). It is only under these conditions that the city can have the proper moderation of desires that allow all needs to be met without allowing undue lusts distract the city as a whole from truth. Philosophers would find ways to translate the truth into political laws, institutions, and norms so that they city was constructed in the true, beautiful, well-proportioned way. And as the city reached this state of being, it would subsequently constrain people so that their lives as well corresponded with the true, beautiful, well-proportioned human life.

Ultimately, Plato hopes that given the good politics of a good city, people would eventually freely choose to engage in the dual movements of the dialectic. It is immediately following his discussion of the Allegory of the Cave that Plato asserts that true education is a reorientation of the soul that spurs it to engage in the movement of the dialectic itself (Republic, pg. 1135-1136, ln. 518b-d; pg. 1138, ln. 521c). Plato hopes that when philosophers go back into the cave and try to reorganize politics that they can educate people in these ways. However, he is
not optimistic about this. Instead, he believes that the people of the city will more eagerly try to kill the philosophers than learn from them (*Republic*, pg. 1134, ln. 517a).

Even if, by some miracle, the people were sufficiently persuaded to philosophize their politics, Plato understands that the good city could not last. Even if philosophers became politicians (*Republic*, pg. 1100, ln. 473c-e), the end result would be tyranny (*Republic*, pg. 1155ff, ln. 543aff). In the midst of ruling, philosophers would make mistakes and these mistakes would ultimately ruin the true, beautiful proportion of the city. Again, Plato takes seriously the idea that the complete understanding of the good remains just out of reach, even to philosophers.

Given these conditions, Socrates believes that it is impossible to bring about good politics. The best we can do is, on the margins, make changes that marginally improve human education. The best we can do is hold up puppets and placards that more approximately resemble a noble lie that teach non-philosophers something of the truth. If this is successful, perhaps we can construct political institutions and laws that more approximately resonate with the true and beautiful, so they act as a model for the soul to emulate. However, none of this has ever been or ever will be successful.

Democracy may be the negative space that gives philosophers the most hope. This constitution does offer freedom (*Republic*, pg. 1168, ln. 557d). Most people use this freedom to pursue the false conception of the good, but philosophers may be able to move in their understanding so that they learn how to utilize freedom in pursuit of the true good. Maybe they can, then, teach others to move in similar ways and ultimate bring about a more good politics. Plato, of course, is not optimistic. Just as the Allegory of the Cave predicted, when democratic Athens was confronted with philosophy—with Socrates himself—they killed it rather than listened to it.
In reality, he’s not looking for possible cities at all, but the actual, ideal good city *(Republic, pg. 1098ff, ln. 471cff).* If reality does not conform to the ideal that is too bad for reality. Besides, since actually good humans are not possible in this realm, maybe actual good politics is not either. Philosophers are the best approximation that we have, and Socrates is clear that if given the chance, they would not be able to maintain a good political community either. Maybe true politics also has to wait for the disembodied afterlife—or even some realm after that.

There is perhaps another possibility, though. Maybe we can strip the city down to its bare essentials. We can live simple lives devoid of most material luxuries. We can organize our politics around upholding that simple, pastoral system. Under these political conditions, politics tamps down foolish pleasures rather than creating them and constructing oppressive laws and institutions to enforce and protect them. Under these conditions, it may be possible for humans to hear the pleasures of the soul, to begin to form right opinions that invite them to ascend the epistemological line through proper philosophizing, so they can see the beautiful and ultimately understand the proper proportion. This, then, would be human politics (not politics for pigs as Glaucon claimed), because it would be a politics that would allow humans to develop themselves so that they can, for the first time, exist as humans with a true human *being.*
Chapter 3 | Aristotle: Define Me

Introduction

Aristotle’s well-known conception of the good is that it is an end, and, in particular, a final end. It is the thing for the sake of which persons and things do everything that they do, and hence is the purpose of that person or thing. Like Plato, he links the human good with the ability to excellently fulfill the human function so people can live the truly human life. The good life, then, is the truly human life; it is the end that concludes true human being.

However, as we will see more fully, this conceptualization also allows Aristotle to classify the good as a cause. Since the good is the final destination which is for the sake of which everything else is done, it is also the thing that spurs persons and things to do what they do. It turns out, then, that the good is also a cause that causes the movement and action that ends in the final purpose of the person or thing. In short, the good is both the cause of becoming and the being that limits or ends that becoming.

That the good is both a cause and an end has a number of consequences, which we will trace out in the next section, but it turns out that, in the final analysis, Aristotle actually privileges the good as a cause over the good as an end. Even though the good is an end and so a limit, this limit or end, Aristotle surprisingly argues, is always unknowable to us. Instead, all that we can know is the cause or the actions of becoming that may—if done correctly—end in being, or in the attainment of the good. Since the actions of becoming rather than the final being is the thing that can be known, the good (as an end) is only potentially attainable for a fleeting moment; otherwise, it (as a cause) is a pursuit, which is to say that it is an action of becoming. This is true even for those who have the proper nature, education, and habituation which would allow them to realize complete and excellent human being.
Action, then, is privileged for Aristotle. He privileges movement of becoming toward being. Even his conceptualization of the good as an end gestures toward this emphasis on the good as a cause. The good is the thing that is the culmination of movement. The process of becoming is crucial and even temporary achievement of the good requires continual action. However, this is not to underplay being. Indeed, human being is the goal. Aristotle argues that actual achievement of being (i.e., attainment of the good) is better than potentially being (i.e., on the road to the attainment of the good). However, given the constraints of this world, Aristotle recognizes that he must often settle for human becoming toward being rather than for true human being. In the end, he does more than merely settle, however. He recognizes that potential being is still being and so is linked with the good. This is true of the individual human good and the collective, political human good. As such, he argues that humans can be good with true human being even if they commit actions that are not truly and completely good. He can call them good nonetheless, because when they are organized properly, even these less-than-completely-good actions move humans toward true and complete good actions and hence toward true and complete human being. Likewise, he classifies bad political constitutions as good if they are organized in such a way that they move becoming in the direction of true political being even though the political constitutions themselves are not realizations of the good political constitution.

This means that in the case of both individual humans and collective human communities, Aristotle calls the process of achieving the final end good. Even as he recognizes that the movements themselves are not the final end—and so the ultimate good—they are good, because they are the things that are bringing about the good.
All throughout his discussion, Aristotle argues that human action (both individually and politically) is action in the negative, which is, in the first analysis, the space of privation of true human being. Action is always—except in certain fleeting moments—action that is not in the positive space, which is to say in accordance with the human good. Every action that is committed is an action not in accordance with the good and so is movement in the negative space. Seen from this direction, the negative space is leading up to—causing—the positive space.

Aristotle’s quest, then, becomes a journey to find ways to structure action so that it propels people and political communities toward the good, which ultimately consists of complete and excellent positive actions that are in accordance with true human being. However, this then, is a second usage of the term “negative,” which examines the concept from the opposite direction of the causal chain that ends in the good. That complete and excellent being is not-yet existent means that it itself is in the negative space.

These two conceptions of negative seem to be opposites, but that is only because they are viewed from opposite ends of the same causal chain. At the beginning of the chain, the negative space is non-being. At the end of the chain, it is being, which as yet does not exist. We can see that movement is movement that starts in non-being and ends in being. It starts in the negative space of non-being and in doing so actualizes the negative space of not-yet being. As is clear, then, action must always begin in the negative space of non-being, and it is action that must be committed even given our incomplete knowledge of what the complete positive space of complete and excellent being actually would be if it were brought into existence. This action, which is an action of non-being or at least less-than-complete-and-excellent being, is an action that through its movement itself actualizes being, which is as yet latent (i.e., in the negative space as seen from the ultimate end of the causal chain). As we will see, this is the conclusion from
Aristotle’s extended discussion of definition. Definition is ultimately about movement toward actualized being, which does not yet exist. Aristotle’s unique conception of definition allows him to use definition of being to describe the entire process of movement.

We see then that Aristotle, like Plato, conceptualizes the good as being, but that, also like Plato, he recognizes that actualization of this being involves the movement of becoming in two important ways. First, and more obviously, movement is required to reach being. Humans must become in order to be. And, in fact, the movement itself is what brings being into existence. But second, in order to maintain being, movement is necessary. If for no other reason, the imperfect world around us continues to move and become and as it does so it creates new challenges that must be met and overcome. As we will see, part of what it means to be good for Aristotle is to use our reason to learn how to act good in every moment. Since the world constantly becomes, people—even if they have managed to actualize true human being—must continue to move in the first sense so that they can maintain the human good. Movement, then, is a double movement in that it both teaches and actualizes being and then maintains being.

There is another factor here that again draws Plato and Aristotle together. They both recognize that it is impossible to gain a precise understanding of what the complete and excellent actualization of the good is. While they can hint at it, complete knowledge of it is just out of reach. Further, just as knowledge of it is just out of reach so is the lived actualization of it. At best, people can fleetingly attain it. As such, then, for both Plato and Aristotle, the entire process of becoming that—at least theoretically—ends in being is good, even if complete actualization of being remains just out of reach in some indefinite future attainment. That the process of becoming teaches more about being and since it is the only thing that actualizes being, the movements of becoming themselves are good.
I will more fully tease out all of the flashpoints that Plato and Aristotle have with each other and with Adorno in a brief interlude following our discussion of Aristotle. But first, over the next two chapters, I must carefully layout Aristotle’s argument. In this chapter, I will meticulously flesh out a cluster of core concepts that Aristotle uses to explain the general concept of the good before I briefly draw a few conclusions about the concept of the good in general. This will necessarily be a tedious process, but the payoff will be worth it. This chapter will lay the groundwork for the next chapter where I will explain Aristotle’s conception of the human good and of the political good. In that chapter, I will draw some stronger conclusions before embarking on a comparison of Plato and Aristotle in a brief interlude. This interlude will take stock of where we are so far, will allow us to more explicitly see some of the important flashpoints with Adorno, and will set us up to discuss Marx’s concept of the good.

Causing the End: The General Concept of the Good

The Good as End and Cause

Aristotle famously begins his Nicomachean Ethics with an explicit definition of what the concept of the good in general means: “Every art and every inquiry, and similarly every action and choice, is thought to aim at some good; and for this reason the good has rightly been declared to be that at which all things aim” (Nicomachean Ethics, pg. 1729, In. 1094a1-3). The good, then for Aristotle, is that thing toward which everything is building. It is the sake for which everything is done. It is, in short, the purpose behind everything. When this purpose has been realized, the end state of that thing has been actualized. The good, then, is the end of a causal chain. Humans are not the only species with a good. Aristotle claims that everything has a good, because everything has a purpose. In every case, the good is achieved when that thing’s ultimate purpose is fulfilled.
It is clear from the preceding quote that Aristotle considers the good to be an end, but he also, paradoxically, classifies it as a cause. Throughout his writings, he constantly references four different senses in which we can talk about a cause. He gives extended discussion of them in both *Physics* (e.g., pg. 332-333, ln. 194b16-195a3) and *Metaphysics* (e.g., pg. 1555, ln. 983a23-983b5). In this classification of cause, Aristotle describes the fourth, and final, conception as “that for the sake of which and the good (for this is the end of all generation and change)” (*Metaphysics*, pg. 1555, ln. 983a31-32). There is a lot going on in this short quote, which I will unpack over the next several subsections, but it is readily apparent that the good is a particular type of cause. As we will also see, the fact that the good is a cause has several consequences in its own right.

As he already alludes to here, Aristotle often calls this fourth sense of “cause” the final cause or the final end. This seems contradictory. The cause and the end seem to be at opposite ends of a spectrum. It seems that one starts an action while the other completes it. So how can Aristotle argue that the good is both the final cause and the final end simultaneously?

In one sense, the good is the final end goal toward which each thing is aiming. It is the final end, because it is the ultimate end at which all other ends aim. It is the end “for the sake of which” everything else is done. It is the end for its own sake rather than for the sake of something else, which is to say that it is the final end of a causal chain of ends and actions whose purpose is the achievement of those ends and in particular of the final end. This much is clear from the opening quote of the *Nicomachean Ethics* that was referenced previously.

This final end, though, is also a cause, Aristotle argues, because it is the thing that drives “generation and change” in each thing. For example, a human keeps developing and changing until true human being (as we will see the final end of human action is to actually *be* human) is
reached. Once it is, then change stops. But this change stops because the goal or the end, which was the motivation of the movement, has been reached. To say that the end is the motivation of the movement, which culminates in the end, is to also say that it is the cause of that movement. The movement that begins by the motivation of the final end is the final or ultimate cause of the entire chain of movement, and so the final end is the final cause. It turns out, then, that the good is both the final cause and the final end.

Later in *Metaphysics* (pg. 1600, ln. 1013a33-1013b4), Aristotle gives an example that clarifies and illustrates this abstract principle that equates the final end and the final cause. He argues that health, which in this case is the final end, is the cause of walking because people walk in order to achieve the purpose (the end “for the sake of which,” which is to say the good) of health. Even though walking brings about (causes) health (the end); health causes the walking to happen in the first place, because walking achieves health, which is the purpose of the action. That the person who seeks health chooses to walk means that health is the cause of walking, even as walking then brings about (causes) the end of health. Walking is one conception of a cause, but health, as the final end, is another conception of cause. In particular, health is the final cause. It is the final or the ultimate cause that brings about the end. Health itself, then, brings about (causes) the movement of generation and change that ultimately ends in the final end, which is health. The final cause, then, is the final end, and this final cause/end is the good, which is “that for the sake of which” every action is committed.

*Consequences of the Good as a Cause*

It turns out that classifying the good (the final cause/end) as a cause has a number of consequences. In Book V of the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle catalogs a series of interrelated definitions, many of which have a direct bearing on his conceptualization of the good. This
section begins with a discussion of “origin,” which is, among other things, the point “from which the movement or the change naturally first proceeds” (Metaphysics, pg. 1599, ln. 1013a8). Since “all causes are origins” (Metaphysics, pg. 1599, ln. 1013a17), this beginning at origins leads him to then again give his fourfold definition of “cause.” In defining and exploring these terms, a whole host of other terms are introduced and then defined. These definitions are often provided in connection with each of the four conceptions of cause. As a result, the whole series of definitions allows us to better understand what Aristotle means by cause and, more importantly, by the final cause, which is his general concept “good.”

Most applicable to our discussion of the good, we can see that, for Aristotle, the good is: 1) a cause (and, in particular, a final cause) and so an origin; 2) an end (and, in particular, the final end and that for the sake of which); 3) a limit; 4) a qualitative movement or change; 5) a necessity; 6) being and so truth; 7) substance and so essence, formula, and definition; 8) a completion; and 9) an excellence. Each of these qualities are interrelated as we already began to see when Aristotle argued that the cause (or origin) is an end, so to say that the good is a final cause and a final end is, in one sense, to say the same thing but to do so in a way that illuminates another aspect of the good. The same is true of the rest of the qualities listed here. It turns out that each is, in many ways, a restatement of many of the other qualities, but each restatement adds something to the discussion and to our understanding of the good. As such, while we will take each in turn, our discussion of each individual quality of the good will necessarily require us to discuss one or more of the other qualities of the good.

Limit

Aristotle explains what he means by limit when he writes:

Further, the final cause is an end, and that sort of end which is not for the sake of something else, but for whose sake everything else is; so that if there is to be a last term of this sort, the process will not be infinite; but if there is no such term there will be no final cause. But those who
maintain the infinite series destroy the good without knowing it. Yet no one would try to do anything if he were not going to come to a limit. Nor would there be reason in the world; the reasonable man, at least, always acts for a purpose; and this is a limit, for the end is a limit (Metaphysics, pg. 1571, ln. 994b9-15).

The good—the final cause, which is the final end—is a limit. To have an end is to have a cutoff.

As we already briefly saw in the quote about the fourth and final definition of cause, the final cause is an end, which is the cessation of movement or change; it is a limit beyond which no more development or change is desirable, because it would frustrate the completion of the end (i.e., the actualization of the purpose that set off the chain of events and so was, in the final analysis, the cause of the chain of events).

Aristotle here explains that if something existed that had infinite becoming (an “infinite series” of movement and change), that thing would have no good. There would be no final end for the sake of which all of the change took place. There would be no final cause that brought about the final end (i.e., true being). In other words, ceaseless change does not lead a thing to the excellent, complete version of itself (i.e., true being). With ceaseless change, there would be no limit to the actions or changes of the thing that would have been the final cause of all action that would have led to the final end, which would have been the being of that thing. Constant becoming closes off the possibility of being, which is to say of reaching some final end. The good—as the final end—then, is a limit. It limits becoming and change, and it is the limit that sets off, delineates, and defines the complete, excellent being of a thing.

Aristotle makes this explicit later in the Metaphysics when he writes that limit is “the last point of each thing, i.e. the first point beyond which it is not possible to find any part and the first point within which every part is” and is that which “is applied…to the end of each thing…and to the substance of each thing, and the essence of each…” (Metaphysics, pg. 1613-1614, ln. 1022a4-9). In many ways, this quote encompasses all nine of the concepts Aristotle uses to
explain the good that we are in the process of exploring, so this quote will not be completely understood until the end of our discussion. For now, though, we need to see that the limit is the point of completion of a thing. It is the boundary that delineates what counts as the thing as opposed to every other thing, and it ensures that every bit of the thing is present and actualized so that nothing could be added to it to make it more complete or excellent in its being and essence. This limit is necessary, because each thing has a particular substance and being, so any movement toward the actualization of them must be limited by them. It is not pure becoming, but becoming being, and this being always limits the movement and change of becoming.

As we already began to see in the first quote on limit, this linkage of the good to limit has at least three important consequences. First, the good as a limit is tied explicitly to reason. Without a limit—which is to say without an end or the good—there can be no purpose and so no reason for acting. Humans can only be reasonable insofar as their thinking and acting progresses them toward some goal. Ultimately, to be reasonable, all thinking and acting must progress humans toward their ultimate goal, which is the final end or the good. Without a limit that sets off the final end—that places a boundary on the change by defining what counts as complete change—there can be no reason for thinking or acting and so no reasonable thinking or acting. This is the epitome of instrumental reasoning where all thinking and acting aims at some final goal and are causal links in the chain to achieve that final end. For Aristotle, the final cause that ultimately brings about the final end is the good. The final link in the chain was the reason for the entire chain to be built and so is the ultimate cause as well as the ultimate end in that chain. Without that final link, there is no reason why the chain should be built the way that it is (why must the first link be first, the second link second, etc.? or again why must it end where it does?). Without a limit, there could be no ultimate end and without an ultimate end there could be no
reasoning (thought) or reasonable actions because there would be no final end to provide justification (i.e., reasons) for that thinking or acting.

As we will see over and over again in Aristotle’s theory, he ultimately will privilege the movements that cause the end over complete knowledge of the end. In this way, his instrumental reasoning is softened slightly, since knowledge of the end of the chain is always just beyond reach. However, it remains true that people must utilize their reason to construct movement that progresses humanity (personally and collectively) toward the final end even if, at present, that end remains incompletely known.

Second, and related to this, that the end is a limit means that there is a finite rather than an infinite or indefinite process of change. This distinguishes Aristotle from Plato. As we saw in our discussion of Plato, Plato believed that humans ascended to different realms of existence each of which made it ever more possible to fully live the dialectic (i.e., to be more fully a human being). At one key moment, Plato (Phaedo, pg. 97, ln. 114c) even hinted that the afterlife was not the final stage of existence but that there were probably unknowable realms beyond that. As such, he hinted at an infinite (or at the very least indefinite) series of change. For Plato, there was an ultimate end to change (an ultimate human being), but there was at least an indefinite number of iterations of us needed to get us there. It took an indefinite number of reincarnations to get us to the state of being that was able to stay in the afterlife, and the afterlife was probably not the last stage of our journey in any case. Aristotle, however, constantly seeks to modify this element in Plato’s thinking. He focuses his discussion to existence on this earth with all of its physicality and finiteness, which causes him to focus on working with what currently exists to facilitate movement toward the creation of good people and politics in this terrestrial realm. As such, any achievement of the good must take place here on earth in our normal, embodied
existence. He, unlike Plato, provides a hard limit to the process of change toward that good: death or, for non-living things, destruction more broadly. If a thing does not achieve its final end before death or destruction, it never will. Of course, change could cease before death as well. Even if some thing does achieve its final end before death, that achievement would act as a cessation of change. Any further change would result in change away from the final end. Either way, the good, then, is a limit to change. However, as we will see, existence in an imperfect realm with imperfect knowledge of the final end will allow him to privilege continued movement. Still it is important for his theory of the good that there be a limit (even if unachievable) whose achievement (actualization) would limit change.

Third, and last, we see that, since the end is the cessation of movement or change, it also requires a process of movement or change until the limit is reached. In other words, the end is the culmination of change, but it does indeed require change to come about. Aristotle makes this explicit a few pages after his discussion of limit:

For how can a principle of change or the nature of the good be present in unchangeable things, since everything that in itself and by its own nature is good is an end, and a cause in the sense that for its sake the other things both come to be and are, and since an end or purpose is the end of some action, and all actions imply change; so that in unchangeable things this principle could not exist nor could there be a good-in-itself (Metaphysics, pg. 1574, ln. 996a21-29).

Here, he equates “the nature of the good” with the “principle of change.” The good is the end, and, being an end, it is a limit on change. However, this implies that something moved, changed, or became in order to be what it could and should be. Reaching an end is only possible through movement and change. It is an act of becoming that is ultimately limited by being. In these respects, then, achieving an end requires change. It entails a series of causes and effects (or ends), which ultimately culminate in (i.e., are limited by) the final effect or end. As we will see all throughout our discussion of the good, that it is an act of becoming is significant.
Qualitative Movement/Change

Aristotle expands on this notion of change later (*Metaphysics*, pg. 1611-1612, ln. 1020a7ff) when he distinguishes between quality and quantity. From this discussion, we can see that the changes that culminate in the final end are movements that result in *qualitative* rather than quantitative changes or movements.

Aristotle summarizes the definition of quantity thus: “We call a quantity that which is divisible into two or more constituent parts of which each is by nature a one and a ‘this’. A quantity is a plurality if it is numerable, a magnitude if it is measurable” (*Metaphysics*, pg. 1611, ln. 1020a7-9). A quantitative movement or change would divide a thing into its parts, each of which has a distinct existence. For example, he argues that “the line is a quantity by its own nature” since a line is made up of discreet units (pg. 1611, ln. 1020a16). A line is made up of so many inches or so many meters, for example, which are parts in their own right. A quantitative movement or change would entail dividing out these discreet units, which is why “modifications” such as “long and short” are quantitative modifications. Cutting a string in half, for example, is a quantitative change, because it reduces the number of discreet units (inches, for example) that comprise the string without altering what the string is.

Likewise, time, Aristotle (*Metaphysics*, pg. 1611, ln. 1020a26-32) argues, is a quantity, so movement through time (like movement through space) is a quantitative movement, since it is a movement through discreet units (seconds, minutes, etc.). This is a shorthand version of the extended account of quantitative time that he gives in Book IV of *Physics* (pg. 369-378, ln. 217b29-224a17) where he describes time as a series of “now” points. The movement called “time” is measured by counting (quantity) discreet units (seconds, minutes, etc.) between two
“now” points. Since moving through space and time, for example, entail moving through discreet parts or units, this movement is a quantitative movement.

This is not the kind of movement or change, however, that he has in mind when he references the series of changes that culminates in the good. The movement or change that Aristotle has in mind with respect to the good is a qualitative one. He summarizes the conceptions of quality thus:

Quality, then, seems to have practically two meanings, and one of these is the more proper. The primary quality is the differentia of substance…Secondly, there are the modifications of things in motion qua in motion, and the differentiae of movements. Excellence and badness fall among these modifications; for they indicate differentiae of the movement or activity, according to which the things in motion act or are acted on well or badly; for that which can be moved or act in one way is good, and that which can do so in another—the contrary—way is vicious. Good and bad indicate quality especially in living things, and among these especially in those which have choice (pg. 1611-1612, ln. 1020b14-25).

Quality can be reduced to two different conceptualizations. By the first of these, quality refers to distinctions of substance. Humans have a certain substance with certain qualities that separate or differentiate them from horses, for example, which have different substances with different qualities. There is a qualitative difference between humans and horses. However, there is a secondary conception of quality as well and this is with respect to internal modifications, which are themselves qualitative changes or movements. These indicate qualitative differences within the same thing as it itself changes or moves. Qualitative movements within a single person or thing are movements that are good or bad. They are changes that bring about excellence or badness. They are movements that culminate or frustrate the excellent completion of the substance or qualities of the thing. That is to say that it is movement toward or away from the true being of the person or thing’s substance and its particular qualities. We will flesh this argument out in our discussion of substance below, but it is already clear that qualitative changes have to do with the achievement or frustration of the good.
The achievement of the good, then, according to this conceptualization, is obviously a qualitative change. The good is the ultimate aim at which and for the sake of which everything else is done. It is a movement from an undeveloped or less good conceptualization and utilization of one’s substance and actions to a more developed and more good conceptualization and utilization of them. Achievement of the ultimate good (i.e., the final end), is a movement that culminates in excellent substance of excellent quality of the thing in question. Since achievement of the good changes the quality of the substance of the thing (i.e., makes it more excellent), the achievement of the good is a qualitative change. As we will see in our discussion of the human good, the qualitative change that constitutes the human good changes (or moves) someone from something less than fully human (a qualified human of a sort) to someone who is fully and without qualification human. It brings out the true qualities (excellent substance of excellent quality) of a human.

Necessity

The good—the end—then, is the result of qualitative change, which means, as we saw, it is not unending change. The end is a limit; it is the result of or the cessation of change. Achieving the end requires becoming, but it ends in being, which is the bringing about of true substance of excellent quality. Before tackling the implications of being and then substance, we should see that there is direction and purpose to the change. In other words, there is a necessity to the change.

Aristotle defines “necessary” in five ways, but three of them are most applicable to our discussion:

We call necessary…(2) The conditions without which good cannot be or come to be or without which we cannot get rid or be freed of evil, e.g. drinking the medicine is necessary in order that we may be cured of disease…(4) We say that that which cannot be otherwise is necessarily so. And from this sense of necessary all the others somehow derived…similarly as regards the conditions of life and of good, when in the one case good, in the other life and being, are not possible without
certain conditions, these are necessary, and this cause is a kind of necessity.—Again, (5)
demonstration is a necessary thing, because the conclusion cannot be otherwise, if there has been
demonstration in the full sense; and the causes of this necessity are the first premises, i.e. the fact
that the propositions from which the deduction proceeds cannot be otherwise” (Metaphysics, pg.
1603, ln. 1015a20-1015b7).

From this quote, we can draw a number of conclusions. First, there are certain conditions that are
necessary for the good to come about. In the same way that there are necessary conditions for
maintaining life, there are necessary conditions for maintaining a good life. Without certain
conditions—availability and intake of oxygen and food, for example—human life cannot
continue. In the same way, without certain necessary conditions (e.g., as we will see, education,
habituation, nature), the good human life cannot be attained.

There is another element of the necessary, though, that pertains to our discussion of the
good. As Aristotle argues “that which cannot be otherwise is necessarily so” (Metaphysics, pg.
1603, ln. 1015a34-35). A person or thing’s substance is qualitatively distinct from other things—
a person is qualitatively different, in substance, from a horse—which means that it cannot be
other than what it is: a human. It becomes necessary, then, to engage in qualitative movement
that realizes the complete and excellent attainment of that substance, which is uniquely and
necessarily human. As Aristotle writes here, there is something “compulsory,” some “compelling
force,” that makes it necessary to act in certain ways. As he notes, this underscores all of the
conceptualizations of “necessary,” and it undoubtedly includes a compulsion to excellently act in
accordance with one’s substance (which, as we will see momentarily, is linked with being or
essence). Acting in this way would be the final achievement or final end of one’s nature.
Achievement of that final end, then, requires (which is to say is constrained by necessity)
movement in accordance with what cannot be otherwise than one’s nature and in particular
complete and excellent actualization of that nature.
We see, then, that there is a double necessity here: the first due to the good being a cause and the second due to the good being an end. The good as a cause necessitates movement, and the good as an end necessitates movement in a certain direction, namely toward the final, ultimate, or true being of the thing. Once the final cause begins a series of events, the movement toward final end “cannot be otherwise.” As we will see, each particular thing can and must move in unique ways in order to bring about the end, but the point remains that the movement of becoming toward being must be movement in a certain direction in order for complete and excellent being to be achieved.

Indeed, just a few pages later in the *Metaphysics* (pg. 1622, ln. 1027a29-1027b16), Aristotle explicitly links necessity with causal chains. He explains how something is of necessity by virtue of a string of cause and effect relationships. He writes, for example, that a man will do something if he is thirsty, and he will be thirsty if he eats something “pungent,” and so on. There is a whole series of past events that led to the necessity of the present. Since the good is both the final end and the final cause, the good is that thing that starts off the causal chain, which is to say starts off the string of necessary changes, and it also acts as the final end that ultimately gives direction to all of the changes. Both points of this movement are bound by necessity.

*Being*

As we have alluded to all along, the end of the qualitative change that 1) must (i.e., by necessity) move the thing in a set direction and 2) is limited (i.e., by necessity) by the end, is a movement or change that culminates in being. To see what this means, we have to understand what Aristotle means by “to be.” In summary, he, claims that “to be” can have three senses. It can mean: 1) “what a thing is or a ‘this,’” 2) that “…a thing is of a certain quality or quantity or has some such predicate asserted of it,” or 3) that a thing is a “‘what,’ which indicates the
substance of the thing” (Metaphysics, pg. 1623, ln. 1028a10ff). Aristotle claims that this third conceptualization—substance—is “primarily” what it means “to be” (Metaphysics, pg. 1623, ln. 1028a13-15). He supports this claim by arguing that “we think we know each thing most fully, when we know what it is, e.g. what man is or what fire is, rather than when we know its quality, its quantity, or where it is; since we know each of these things also, only when we know what the quantity or the quality is” (Metaphysics, pg. 1624, ln. 1028b1-4). In other words, before we can know whether the thing is good or bad, which relates to quality, or if the thing is tall or short, which relates to quantity, we have to know what the thing is. We have to know its being, which means that we have to know what the substance of that thing is. This substance is the “what” of the thing.

This, of course, relates to our discussion of necessity. In order to determine whether something is good or bad (i.e., a claim to its excellence) and whether or not it has reached its final end (i.e., a claim to its completeness), we need to know what the thing is. In order to judge the quality (good or bad) of the thing, we have to know what the thing is, which is to say that we need to know what kind of substance it is and so what a complete and excellent realization of that substance would look like. To be good, then, each thing must (i.e., by necessity) become in a certain way toward a certain end to take on the qualities of being that are determined by the substance of that thing. In other words, “Everything, therefore, that is to be, will be of necessity…” (Metaphysics, pg. 1622, ln. 1027a8). That is just to say that coming to be (fully realizing the correct or full qualities, quantities, etc. of the “this,” which is a thing with a certain substance) must (i.e., by necessity) follow a certain path to the attainment of that being, and it must stop that path of change once being is completely and excellently achieved.
This journey toward attainment of being leads to two more important aspects of being. First, “‘Being’ and ‘is’ mean that a statement is true” (Metaphysics, pg. 1606, ln. 1017a31). Being is connected to truth. When something has fully come to be, it has realized the truth of itself. It has become the true representation of itself. It has fully taken on the most excellent version of its substance and so has returned to its “true” self.

This leads naturally to a second aspect of being: “Again, ‘being’ and ‘that which is’, in these cases we have mentioned, sometimes mean being potentially, and sometimes being actually” (Metaphysics, pg. 1606, ln. 1017a35-1017b1). As he argues later in Metaphysics (Metaphysics, pg. 1653-1654, ln. 1046b29ff), potentiality without yet actuality does not preclude being. If potential being did not count as being, then builders would no longer be builders when they went home from work for the night, because they would have ceased the action of building and would no longer be actualized as those who build (i.e., as builders). They would merely be potential builders. But Aristotle thinks that this is ridiculous. Since these builders have the potential to begin building again tomorrow, they maintain their classification (i.e., to be building or builders) even if their actions do not at the present actualize their being status as builders.

In fact, Aristotle claims that “actuality in the strict sense is identified with movement” (Metaphysics, pg. 1653, ln. 1047a31-32). As we have already seen, actualization of being is the result of movement or change. But any action that is incomplete, means that being is only present potentially (when the causal chain reaches its final end) rather than actually, because the chain is moving toward being but has not yet actualized it. It is true for Aristotle that actualization (the action of movement of true being itself) is superior to potentiality (Metaphysics, pg. 1660, ln. 1051a4ff), but still potentiality does not preclude being. As we will see, this discussion of actuality and potentiality will have great consequences for the concept of the good.
There is one qualification to this assertion that potential being qualifies as being, though. Something must have the capacity to change into true, actualized being. For Aristotle, a capacity is either a source or perfection of movement or else it is the state of stable existence of true being which is unchangeable (*Metaphysics*, pg. 1609, ln. 1019a15-32). Incapacity or the privation of capacity is the absence of this kind of movement. This incapacity can be temporary (as in the case of boy who is incapable of reproduction) or permanent (as in the case of a eunuch who is perpetually incapable of reproduction) (*Metaphysics*, pg. 1610, ln. 1019b16-21). As may seem obvious, permanent incapacity closes off the possibility of qualitative changes and so precludes the actualization of being. In these cases, there is no possibility (potential) for complete and excellent being. As we will see, this will have important political implications, particularly as it relates to qualified humans and to slavery.

*Substance*

Being, then, is what something is, and coming to be is the process (which requires capacity) of realizing (actualizing) being. Aristotle claims that the ‘what’ that determines the ‘is’ indicates the “substance” of the thing (*Metaphysics*, pg. 1623, ln. 1028a14-15). In short the stuff of being is substance.

Aristotle expands on this general notion of substance by providing four conceptualizations of “substance”: 1) those “simple bodies” that “are not predicated of a subject” but of which “everything else is predicated,” 2) “[t]hat which…is the cause of [things’] being,” 3) that which “limit[s]” things and “make[es]” them as individuals, and by whose destruction the whole is destroyed,” and 4) “[t]he essence, the formula of which is a definition” (*Metaphysics*, pg. 1606-1607, ln. 1017b10-22). Each of the first three of these conceptualizations tie into our discussion of the rest of Aristotle’s concepts that relate to a description of the good and so
requires less explication here. In short, in these first three definitions of substance, we see that it is the stuff (the ‘what’) of each thing. It is the stuff that comprises the being of that thing and, more importantly, makes that thing what it is in contradistinction from everything else. It is the stuff that both causes the movement toward being (i.e., true actualization of substance) and limits that movement by determining what counts as the true actualization of that being. It is the stuff that forms the essence of the thing. In short, the substance is the stuff that determines what the thing’s ultimate being is, which is to say the end (i.e., the good) that being seeks (by necessity) to reach.

However, in the last of the four conceptualizations of “substance,” Aristotle adds something new to the discussion: substance is tied to the definition of a thing. For Aristotle this turns out to be a problem, albeit a subtle one. He has a difficult time figuring out what a definition really is, and his discussion and ultimate solution to the problem of “definition” shows why his conceptualization of both being and substance are crucial to our understanding of his conception of the good.

Aristotle spills a lot of ink in *Metaphysics* trying to disentangle what “definition” is. He does so because, at first blush, he thinks that the way that he has conceptualized things has caused him to conclude that nothing is definable (*Metaphysics*, pg. 1640, ln. 1039a14-23). In particular, it appears, Aristotle argues, that neither substances as universals nor particular individuals can be defined. However, he does not like this supposed conclusion.

Aristotle explains this twofold problem of the definition of substances. In the first instance, he argues that substance is not a universal, because a substance must remain a particular “this” rather than a general or a universal “such,” and so every substance remains unique, particular, and incomposite (*Metaphysics*, pg. 1639-1640, ln. 1038b1-1039a23). In other
words, if substance is the stuff that limits each particular thing, each substance must be particular to that thing. In this case, then, “substance” cannot be universal; it cannot be the stuff that makes up a general or universal class of things. It is not a “universal attribute” ([Metaphysics], pg. 1639-1640, ln. 1038b35-1039a1). Substance, then, is not the stuff that makes up “turtle;” it is the stuff that makes up *this* turtle. If that is true, though, it seems that any resulting definition would be tautological at best. Thought of in this way, substance would merely explain that this particular turtle (“a”) is made up of (is the “what” of) the substance of this particular turtle (“a”). This understanding of definition, then, would explain that “a” is defined as “a.”

Further Aristotle argues, we cannot solve this problem by making the substance a composite. Substance is always incomposite, which is to say that it is simple, or irreducible, which “means that the thing itself has a certain nature” ([Metaphysics], pg. 1694, ln. 1072a34-35). In other words, it itself is not composed of anything else, so we cannot say that the substance of *this* turtle is composed of the universal substance “turtle” combined with something else that makes this particular turtle unique. If substance was a composite of “turtle” and whatever makes this turtle *this* turtle, the latter thing(s) would itself alone be the substance. Substance must be the most basic property or quality of the thing, so it cannot be composed of anything more basic than itself. We cannot say that this particular (“a”) turtle (“b”) has a substance of “a” and “b,” since whatever makes up “a” is “what” this turtle “is,” and so “a” alone is its substance.

If substance (and the resulting definition) is not a universal, we may think, then, that we can instead define the individual *being* (i.e., this particular turtle) that the substance composes, which is to say that we can provide all of the substance that comprises the particular thing and let that compilation stand as the definition of the thing rather than seeking to define substance in some universal way. However, this too is problematic for Aristotle, precisely because there is no
actualized individual *being*. Individual things are always becoming, since they are always “perishing” if nothing else (*Metaphysics*, pg. 1641-1642, ln. 1040a1-5). Since the individual thing is always changing, “when one of those who aim at definition defines any individual, he must recognize that his definition may always be overthrown; for it is not possible to define such things” (*Metaphysics*, pg. 1642, ln. 1040a5-7). Without fully actualized individual *being* there is nothing stable to define, so every movement or change of the individual thing will always overthrow whatever definition was used to attempt to define it in its unique particularity. The definition must constantly change to keep up with the constantly changing individual thing.

Aristotle is not satisfied with this state of affairs, however. He wants to provide definitions. In order to do so, he must propose a new definition of “definition” itself, and this definition must solve the apparently intractable twofold problem of definition that he just laid out, namely that nothing, in either its universal or in its particular form, is definable.

To solve this problem of definition, Aristotle comes up with a very particular conceptualization of definition. He argues that “definition” is a formula that is a composite of form and matter (*Metaphysics*, pg. 1647ff, ln. 1043a2ff). In order to define a particular thing while overcoming the problem of defining a constantly becoming thing, his conceptualization of definition allows him to encapsulate both the potential (matter) and the actualized (form) elements of being. Since this conception of definition can encapsulate all of the change, it can also focus on the individual’s substance instead of some abstract universal substance even as the particular substance is coming to be in accordance with true (universal) substance. So this conception of definition can solve both problems that Aristotle posed for himself. To understand what this means, we need to analyze both “formula” and “the composite of form and matter.” We will take each in turn.
As we already saw in the fourth conceptualization of substance, definition, for Aristotle, is a formula of essence, which “belong to substances either alone or chiefly and primarily, and in the unqualified sense” (Metaphysics, pg. 1628, ln. 1031a12-13). As we saw too, this essence, which constitutes a thing’s substance, must be something unique to the particular thing. As such, “the definition is the formula which comprises the differentiae” (pg. 1638, ln. 1038a8) of the thing. The definition must be a formula that includes the difference that makes the essence, and so the substance, of this particular thing unique from all other things. In particular, the formula must proceed in its construction until it finally does include the element of difference that separates out the substance of this particular thing from the substance of all other things. “If then a differentiae be taken, at each step, one differentiae—the last—will be the form and the substance…Therefore, it is plain that the definition is the formula which contains the differentiae, or, according to the right method, the last of these” (pg. 1639, ln. 1038a25-30). In other words, the formula that is the definition of a thing (i.e., its substance) is only complete when it includes the final bit of difference that resides in the essence. In a broad sense, the definition of substance is the entire formula of differentia, but in its strictest sense, the definition of substance is the final difference, because that is the thing that separates this thing from every other thing. It is, then, the qualitative difference that makes this substance distinct from all others. For example, according to this method, the definition of this turtle would be: animal (which distinguishes its difference from plants, for example) + reptile (which distinguishes its difference from mammals, for example) + four-footed (which distinguishes it from bipeds, for example) + … all the way until all of the elements that make this turtle unique from everything else has been included in the formula. This would solve the first half of the problem of definition. The last difference, properly speaking, is the substance. The last of the differentia is
the thing that separates this individual thing from all else. It is what provides the substance of the thing. This formula, which includes all differentia including the final differentia, is the definition of this particular thing. The larger formula will include universals (in this case the substance that makes up “turtle” as a general category), but the essence of substance is something more than this; it is the thing that is particular to this turtle and to this turtle alone.

But this still leaves us with the same problem that Aristotle broached earlier. If the particular turtle that we just defined is still in the process of becoming, the formula that ends in differentia will continue to change and so the definition, which is the completed formula that incorporates all difference, will constantly be overthrown.

This is where the second part of Aristotle’s conceptualization of definition comes into play. The definition is a composite of form and matter. As to the first half, Aristotle tells us what he means: “By form I mean the essence of each thing and its primary substance” (Metaphysics, pg. 1630, ln. 1032b1-2). The form is the actualized being; it is the formula of the thing after it has completely and excellently fulfilled its becoming and brought into existence its true, complete, excellent being. This is to say, it is the formula of the thing after it has realized its true substance, which would set off (limit) any further movement. This is the form of that thing. In this form, its particular substance mirrors that of every other thing with the same qualities if those other things also completely and excellently realized their qualities and achieved their true substance. Form, then, is actuality (e.g., Metaphysics, pg. 1647, ln. 1043a30; 1650-1651, ln. 1045a7-1045b24). It is actual bringing-into-existence of true substance.

We now have half of the “composite of form and matter.” We must now turn to the second half of this composite. Whereas form is actuality, matter is potentiality (e.g., Metaphysics, pg. 1647-1648, ln. 1043a29-1044a14; 1650-1651, ln. 1045a7-1045b24). It is the
physical stuff that is not yet but can potentially become, so that it corresponds with the form, which is actualized being, which does not yet exist but could exist with the right movement.

Ultimately, then, the formula of form and matter, as a composite, describes the process of movement. Aristotle gives an example to demonstrate what he means here. He says that “house” has a particular formula. This formula consists in a composite of form and matter. For “house,” the form is “‘a covering’” and the matter is “‘bricks and stones laid thus and thus’” (Metaphysics, pg. 1647, ln. 1043a31-32). The composite of form and matter would be “‘a covering consisting of bricks and stones laid thus and thus’” (Metaphysics, pg. 1647, ln. 1043a31-32). When a house has reached its complete and excellent state of being, it acts as a covering or a shelter. There is a universal quality here; all houses have this form. However, this actualized being requires matter: the house must be constructed of something, and every particular house will have particular matter that makes it unique. In the case of a house, this “something” of matter is brick, stone, wood, or the like, which are held together by mortar, nails, screws, or the like. A house is not a house, though, until matter and form come together (i.e. become) a composite. The matter has to undergo a process of becoming until it aligns with the being of the form. The stones have to be chiseled, the mortar has to be mixed to the proper proportions and consistency, the stones have to be laid in such and such an order, etc. The pile of stones and the buckets of mortar are potentially a house, but they must undergo the process of becoming until they align with the form that is “house.” Until they do so, the pile of stones is not an actualized house. However, it is still potentially a house, so we can speak of it as a house (i.e., define it as a house) even though it has not yet actually become a house. If we look at the pile of stones and try to define what they are currently, we would have to change our definition of them as they moved from “mountain” to “pile of unhewn rocks” to “chiseled rocks” to “rocks
mortared together,” etc. But we can define that pile of rocks based on its final end in its process of movement of change. They are a house, but they have that being only potentially and not actually. Aristotle’s conception of definition encompasses this entire process of change; it is the formula of the movement of that qualitative change. This means that the definition never changes even as the particular thing changes.

This also subtly shows something that Aristotle makes more explicit in his discussion of the human good. Each particular thing must actualize its substance differently. This means that something of the uniqueness of each particular thing remains. For example, not every stone can be chiseled the same way and not all mortar is mixed exactly the same way. In short, not all houses move in the same way in their quest toward actualization. Since definition describes movement, this means that each definition remains unique to each particular thing even as each particular thing is moving toward some universal standard of substance. Each house, to be considered a house, must satisfy some substance that is the substance of house; however, each house will move toward that ultimate form in different ways and will need to move in different ways at different moments in time (as matter) in order to bring about that form. These differences in movement preserve the uniqueness of the definition of every instance of “house” even as each instance strives to move toward a singular (universal) excellence of form of house.

There is however, a second implication to be drawn from Aristotle’s discussion of the house that is just as important to our present discussion. By linking definition of house to both potentiality and actuality, Aristotle solves the second of his two problems of definition: namely that no individual thing, which is always becoming, can be given a stable definition. Aristotle’s new understanding of definition is able to organize all of the qualitative changes of a thing into a formula. It organizes these changes by linking all changes to the final end. The matter
(becoming, potentiality, change) is linked with the form (being, actuality, stability/sameness). The resulting formula, then, groups this altogether to explain how the final movement that actualizes potentiality (and so finally links matter and form) creates the final difference that makes this thing unique. In doing so, this definition is able to describe the thing’s substance. This remains true even if this particular thing has not yet actualized its being and so is still in the process of becoming. As a result, the definition remains the same even as the thing continues to change, precisely because the definition takes into account the qualitative changes that must (by necessity) occur in a particular direction until the limit is reached and the end—actualized substance—is realized.

This ends up being a further solution to the first half of Aristotle’s problem of definition as well. This notion of definition encapsulates and ultimately explains the movement from potentiality to actuality. In doing so, it anticipates the thing’s final, complete, and excellent attainment of its true substance and being. When it fully actualizes itself in this way, it becomes what it was always supposed to be. As such, the definition of this turtle will be the same as the definition of turtle (in the universal sense) when the being (and so the resulting substance) of this turtle is fully actualized. However, in order for this turtle to actualize what its existence as turtle (in the singular excellence of turtle) is, it must act with specific movements that are unique to this particular turtle; thus the definition, which explains this movement toward actualized being, remains about this particular turtle rather than about the universal “turtle”.

This relates to our earlier discussion where we saw that Aristotle believes that potentiality is still a kind of being. But we can also see here why actuality is superior to potentiality. A pile of stones that are completely and excellently hewn and put together into a house is superior to an unhewn and haphazard pile of stones. In the same way, an actualized human—one who has
excellently and completely realized human substance—is superior to a human who has not yet become human in the true, excellent, complete sense. We can still define the human with incomplete human substance as human, but this human has not yet fully attained a human substance, which is to say has not yet acquired a substance that has excellently and completely developed every differentia between the human substance and all other substances. This too will become clearer later in our discussion of qualified human beings. As we will see, qualified human beings have not completely and excellently actualized human substance, so they are incapable of acting human in the most distinctly human qualities and so are relegated to activities that are less than excellently human.

Complete

Before we see the larger implications of this understanding of definition and substance, we need to complete our discussion of the important qualities of the good by discussing completeness and excellence. Since we have been discussing these two components of the good throughout, our discussion here will be brief.

As we saw above, the definition of a thing already anticipates the actualization of that thing. This is the same as to say that the thing has actually achieved its final end. This means too that the thing has actualized its substance. This actualization or realization of substance is the complete and excellent attainment of the thing’s being. Actualization, then, is completeness.

Aristotle gives us three conceptualizations of “complete”: 1) “that outside of which it is not possible to find even one of the parts proper to it,” 2) that which lacks “nothing in respect of their proper kind of excellence” and “goodness,” and 3) “The things which have attained their end” (Metaphysics, pg. 1613, In. 1021b12-1022a13). That which is complete, then, is that which has incorporated all parts of itself into its being; it has actualized all of being. This being, though,
is actualized rather than potential, because to be complete, a thing must have actually attained its end. It must have reached the limit and so become complete. The final action that brings into existence that for the sake of which (i.e., the end) completes a thing. It is the action that fully brings a thing into being (so that there is no part of its being that is outside of its current existence), which means that completion is the same as actualized being.

In *Nicomachean Ethics* (pg. 1856, ln. 1174a19-27), Aristotle returns to the building analogy that he used earlier to give an example of completeness:

> For every movement (e.g. that of building) takes time and is for the sake of an end, and is complete when it has made what it aims at. It is complete, therefore, only in the whole time or at the final moment. In their parts and during the time they occupy, all movements are incomplete, and are different in kind from the whole movement and from each other. For the fitting together of the stones is different from the fluting of the column, and these are both different from the making of the temple; and the making of the temple is complete (for it lacks nothing with a view to the end proposed), but the making of the base or of the triglyph is incomplete; for each is the making of a part.

A thing is complete when movement reaches the limit and actualizes being like when the building of every part of the temple culminates in the completed temple. It is at that moment that the being of every part of the temple is made excellent—in accordance with true substance—and is excellently arranged into a complete whole that actualizes the substance of “temple”.

**Excellence**

As the above definition of completion shows, completion is also linked to excellence. Actualized being that comes with the completion of substance is the life of true being. This life of true being is the life of excellence. As we remember from our discussion of Plato, excellence or virtue is the best usage of a thing’s true function. This is precisely Aristotle’s argument here. A life of true being, which is to say a life of attainment of the true end, is the excellent actualization of this life. It is a life of action according to the function of its being.

In fact, a life of excellent actions is what actualizes substance and brings into existence true being. As Aristotle argues in *Nicomachean Ethics* (pg. 1743, ln. 1103b26-1103b2), we get
“excellences…by first exercising them,” which means that “we become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, brave by doing brave acts.” Acting excellently actualizes excellence, literally brings excellence into existence, and actualized excellence is the life of actualized being. We “by nature…acquire potentiality,” but it is not until we “later exhibit the activity” that it becomes actualized (Nicomachean Ethics pg. 1743, ln. 1103a26-27). In other words, excellence is the movement that brings qualitative change, which ends in actualized being. In short, excellent acts actualize our nature, which is to say our true being. Attainment of the good is complete when excellent actions bring into complete existence true human being, which is the necessary limit of qualitative change that begins at origin and proceeds to final end.

**Movement and the Negative Elements of Aristotle’s General Conception of the Good**

As our discussion of the Metaphysics has shown, Aristotle begins his discussion at the origin and continues it through the complete and excellent realization of the true end. The origin, as we saw, is the point where movement or change is first caused and the end is the limit or the cessation of that movement or change. Definition gives formula to this entire process of change. Aristotle’s discussion, then, is a discussion of qualitative change or movement from the first to the last. The good itself is both the final cause that is the origin that begins the qualitative change in a person or thing and the final end which ends this change. The process of change or movement, then, is the process of the realization of the good.

The qualitative change that moves people and things from their origin to their end, then, is of the utmost importance to Aristotle. This is why “cause” dominates his discussion of the good, which he originally describes as an end. It is, of course, true that he argues that “actuality is the end, and it is for the sake of this that potentiality is acquired” (Metaphysics, pg. 1658, ln. 1050a9-10) and that good actuality is better than good potentiality (Metaphysics, pg. 1660, n.
It is true, in other words, that the end state of actually being good is primary for Aristotle. However, this state is impossible without the movement and change that brings it about. The change itself is very important, then. This point is only magnified when we realize, as we will examine in our discussion of the human good, that Aristotle does not believe that a stable end state that is the unmoving realization of the good is even possible for humans to achieve.

That Aristotle focuses on the change more than the end (true substance) is why he can argue that opposites are “in some sense the same form” or the same substance of each other just as health, for example, is the substance of disease (*Metaphysics*, pg. 1630, ln. 1032a3-5). At first blush, this seems absurd. However, Aristotle explains (*Metaphysics*, pg. 1630, ln. 1032a5ff) that opposites are actually on the same continuum. The one is brought about by the privation of the other. Health is the absence or privation of disease and disease is the absence of health. In other words, the one is brought about through movement or qualitative change from one state into the other, opposite state. When this movement proceeds from disease to health, the qualitative change is excellent and toward the realization of the true substance, which is the good. When the movement is from health to disease the qualitative change is bad and away from excellence of substance and so away from the realization of the good. In this way, both health and disease have the same form; the form is just excellent or not. Further, the matter that is healthy or diseased is defined as either healthy or diseased based on the quality of the movement (the cause, which is the form) with respect to the true essence or substance (the end, which is the form) of that thing. In other words, the thing’s definition depends on the movement toward or away from complete and excellent actualization of the form of that thing.

This, then, brings into sharp relief the importance of Aristotle’s definition of “definition” and why we spent so much time elaborating it. Aristotle’s understanding of definition focuses on
the qualitative change that occurs in a thing. It focuses on how the matter is being changed with respect to the form. His understanding of definition is able to account for both elements—matter and form—and to track the qualitative change that is occurring within the thing.

This means that Aristotle’s focus in conceptualization of “definition,” which remember is the formula of subs- tance, is on the negative. He is tracking how that-which-does-not-yet-exist is being brought into existence, and he is tracking the causes that are facilitating the movement that brings into existence these negative elements. The focus with respect to the good, though, is on what does not yet exist but what will exist when the true form is realized. The focus, then, is on the negative.

Further, the focus is on the movement from the negative toward the positive. The movement itself is the thing that actualizes being. It is the thing that brings that which is not yet in existence into existence. It is that which brings about qualitative changes that end in complete and excellent actualized being.

This idea of movement and negative space is where Aristotle focuses his inquiry into the good as well. In order to bring about health, physicians must focus on the causes, so that they can build causal chains that bring about the good, which is the end—true substance—in this case, health (Metaphysics, pg. 1630, ln. 1032a5ff). Ultimately, Aristotle concludes that focusing our inquiry on matter is meaningless; the only meaningful inquiry is into that which causes the form (Metaphysics, pg. 1643-1644, ln. 1041a6ff). To ask about matter is to ask why “man is man,” which is a meaningless question. Asking about causes, however, allows us to inquire into the formula that moves matter to the realization of its true substance (form). A question of this kind is “why are certain things, i.e. stones and bricks, a house?” (Metaphysics, pg. 1644, ln. 1041a27-28) or again why are certain humans who have organized their parts into a proper unity actually
human (Metaphysics, pg. 1644, ln. 1041a33ff)? These kinds of questions allow us to inquire into the movement or change—to inquire into the cause—that brings about the good—the actualization of true being—which is as yet invisible in its latent state of privation.

In both his formulation of the good and his presentation of the proper way to inquire into the good, then, Aristotle focuses on the negative. He focuses on the causes that will bring about the realization of the good, which is just the same as saying that he focuses on the privation (the elements of the good—true substance—that are as-yet latent, invisible, and hidden) and the movement towards the elimination of the privation through actualization (the elimination of the negative through the creation of the positive), which culminates in the realization of the good (completeness or entirety of the positive in the elimination of all that is negative). He focuses on how we can move in our present state of non-being to bring about the negative or missing qualities of true being.

As we will see in our discussion of the human good and the good in human political communities, Aristotle takes this even a step further. As we will see in the coming sections, Aristotle will explain how we can live (individually and collectively) in the negative space (i.e., in non-being) even when we do not understand the opposite, which would be true substance or the good (that-which-does-not-yet-exist and so is in the negative space in the second sense). In other words, he will explain how to live wherever we happen to find ourselves so that we can facilitate qualitative change toward the being that is, at present, non-existence (i.e., the negative space when viewed from the ultimate end of the causal chain) even when the content of the true substance is incompletely known by us. Further, he argues that this movement itself is already the living of the good (the actualization of true human being). Actions in the negative space of
non-being are the only things that can create the complete definition of the thing, the positive space that is as yet only potential being and so is in the negative space of the not-yet-existing.

Actions that facilitate movement so that people can be other than they are at present are the actions of movement that definition itself explains. When these actions are completely excellent, the movement of the definition is completed and true being (form) is brought into existence. In other words, when actions are structured properly, they move in ways that actualize being. They are actions of potential being that lead to actual being. They are actions in the negative space, in the first sense i.e., of non-being, that bring into existence that which is latent, the negative space in the second sense i.e., as seen from the perspective of the end of the causal chain.
Chapter 4 | Aristotle: Deviantly Good

Introduction

As we saw in the preceding chapter, Aristotle’s general definition of the good privileges movement, even movement in the negative space of privation. Even though this movement of becoming is not actualized being, the process is considered good if the movement is moving in the necessary direction. This movement constitutes the causal chain that will ultimately end in actualized being, so the movement itself is potential being, which is still being for Aristotle. As such, Aristotle can consider the good to be both the final cause and the final end. It is both the origin and the completion of the causal chain. The movement that constitutes the rest of this causal chain is also good. This remains true even if the particular contours of the final end remain unknown to us and the actualization of this end is indefinitely deferred.

Aristotle makes all of this even more clear in his discussion of two particular kinds of good: the human good and the political good. As we will see, these two goods are related, because the final end of politics is the creation of good citizens who are also good humans. In each case, Aristotle again privileges movement—particularly movement in the negative space—and he does so precisely because the final end is unknowable and perhaps unachievable. Since he takes the latter seriously, he always begins with humanity where it is and seeks to devise a strategy to facilitate the proper kind of movement that would, at least theoretically, lead to the actualization of the final end.

The end of human beings, as for all things, is linked to the human function. Following his conceptualization of definition, Aristotle determines the human end by discovering the one thing that differentiates humans from all else: rationality. The human good, then, must utilize rationality. In particular, humans must use reason to discover what the true definition of
happiness is and then how to actualize the happy life. It turns out that the happy life is the life of human excellence, which is the same as saying the life of virtue. This means that humans must use reason to determine how to live excellently in every moment, which is the same as saying how to excellently and completely utilize virtue to meet every challenge posed at every moment of our terrestrial existence. The complete actualization of a life of virtue would be the actualization of true human being. However, since the process of discovery of what counts as excellence in every particular moment requires the utilization of reason—that thing that differentiates humans from all else and so is their function—the process of discovery is itself an actualization of the human good. This is the same as saying that since this process of discovery entails movement from origin to final, complete, excellent end the process itself is good. Even more strongly, the movement itself is already an actualization of the end.

Further, this movement of discovery remains good even if along the way less-than-completely-good actions are committed and so the movement is a less-than-completely-good actualization of being. The movement will end in actualization of the good—at least theoretically, even if actualization is indefinitely deferred—and so the whole process is part of the movement of actualization. This is important, because the complete actualization of the good is unknowable and is unachievable. As such, rather than focusing on fully fleshing out actualized human being, which he cannot do in any case, he describes how humans can organize their lives to facilitate movement in the necessary direction. He gives a formula for discovering virtue, rather than explaining each individual virtue and how to utilize it in every life situation. Finally, he also provides a method for structuring non-good acts so they too facilitate movement toward the good even though they themselves are explicitly not good. As such, he again privileges existence in the negative space—the space of privation, the space that is not good—and
movement that has its origin there. That origin will eventually lead to the actualization of the being that is as-yet not present (the negative space seen from the opposite direction). The movement will start in non-being in order to actualize that which does not exist (that which is in the negative space) and so bring about the end: being. Since the end will be the positive space of the actualization of the good and since the movement is all that brings about that positive space, the origin and the movement are good too. The movements in the negative space of non-being are the very things that move the not-yet-present actualization of being from the negative to the positive.

Likewise, Aristotle’s description of the political good follows a very similar pattern. He begins with the notion that we do not fully know what a good political community looks like and we are incapable of actualizing that good political community. This is true precisely because fully actualized human beings do not exist, so there is no one who can 1) know or 2) actualize the good political community. So rather than seek to flesh out the completely good political community, Aristotle seeks to find a way to start where humanity is and then to structure it in such a way that each of their particular political communities move toward actualization of the complete and excellent political community.

It turns out that the best way to do this is to structure the political community around two deviant constitutions. Surprisingly, explicitly employing non-good political communities is the best origin for the causal chain that will end in the actual good political community. But this is a reasonable (i.e., according to rationality, which is the uniquely human characteristic) claim, because since virtue is the mean between two extremes and since present-day politics works as a game of power, combining two extremes that then have to fight and compromise will slowly move the political community toward the mean and hence toward political virtue and the good
political community. One final time, then, we see how Aristotle privileges movement in the negative space of the privation of the good to facilitate actualization of the good, which is at present not in existence. Since the origin leads to the end, it and the whole process of actualizing the end is good even if it begins in deviance.

**The Human Good**

In *Politics* (pg. 2056, ln. 1295a35-1295b1), Aristotle summarizes his discussion of the human good from the *Nicomachean Ethics*: “the happy life is the life according to excellence lived without impediment, and that excellence is a mean.” As we can see in Figure 1 below, this quote and the larger context that it summarizes can be simplified in a kind of dialectic.
As this dialectic shows, Aristotle wants to find the thing that is “complete without qualification,” because this would be the thing at which all of our life would aim and so would be the ultimate end and so the good (Nicomachean Ethics, pg. 1734, ln. 1097a34). We have already dealt with Aristotle’s conception of “complete” but his “qualification” here is a new adjective that he uses to describe the good. The qualified/unqualified distinction is one that he frequently uses. Those things that are “without qualification” (i.e., that are unqualified) are those things that completely and excellently embody their substance. Those things that are qualified are things that do not completely and excellently embody their substance. As we will see, Aristotle has quite a lot to say about qualified human beings and their prospects of achieving the good. Here, though, he is interested in laying the framework for the human good for those humans who are capable of achieving it. In short, the unqualified actualization of the good is the complete realization of all of human substance and of the true being that comes with it. Aristotle’s aim, then is to find the complete, unqualified good, which is the end and realization of human being.

To begin this quest, he asks himself what people take to be the good. What do people actually organize their lives around? What is that thing at which most people aim in life? He quickly finds his answer: “Verbally there is very general agreement; for both the general run of men and people of superior refinement say that it is happiness, and identify living well and faring well with being happy…” (Nicomachean Ethics, pg. 1730, ln. 1095a16-19). Upon empirical inspection, it turns out that people organize their lives around happiness. Every action that people commit has the final purpose (i.e., the end and so the good) of happiness.

Since people believe happiness to be the ultimate goal, they actually act that way. Depending on how they define happiness, people seek a pleasurable life, a political life, or a
contemplative life, but in the final analysis the ultimate purpose of each of these lives is the attainment of happiness (Nicomachean Ethics, pg. 1731-1732, ln. 1095b13ff). Again following Plato, Aristotle recognizes that people define happiness in three ways: pleasure, honor, and study. Since Aristotle takes the good to be the end at which people aim, he affirms that happiness is the ultimate goal since it is the thing, empirically, at which people ultimately aim. Happiness is “held to be” (Nicomachean Ethics, pg. 1731-1732, ln. 1097a36) the thing that is “complete without qualification” (Nicomachean Ethics, pg. 1734, ln. 1097a34) and so “for this we choose always for itself and never for the sake of something else” (Nicomachean Ethics, pg. 1734; ln. 1097a36-1097b1). Happiness is taken to be the complete and excellent life and so is made to be the thing for the sake of which everything else in life is done.

Aristotle here affirms the general opinion and practice that happiness is the good: it is the ultimate end toward which humans strive. But he is not completely satisfied with this popular answer, because it does not confirm what happiness is. He writes, “Presumably, however, to say that happiness is the chief good seems a platitude, and a clearer account of what it is is still desired” (Nicomachean Ethics, pg. 1735, ln. 1097b22-23). Even if everyone agrees that happiness is the final aim of life and even if they generally agree that happiness means living well and faring well; they still disagree on the specifics. As Aristotle recognizes, people “differ” in what they take to be happiness (Nicomachean Ethics, pg. 1730, ln. 1095a19). Happiness, then, is a kind of platitude that can mean whatever the speaker wishes it to mean. Aristotle is not satisfied with this and wants to flesh out what happiness actually is.

To come to a conclusion as to what happiness, as the good, is, Aristotle returns to his general definition of the good. The good entails actualizing—completely and excellently—true substance and so it is related to the function of the subject in question. For example, “the
function of a lyre-player is to play the lyre, and that of a good lyre-player is to do so well” (Nicomachean Ethics, pg. 1735, ln. 1098a11-12). Happiness, then, as the human good must be tied to allowing humans to perform their function well. This is the same as saying that the human good is being human and being so completely and excellently. If happiness is the human good, then it must be the thing that allows for the actualization of complete and excellent human being; it must be the thing that allows humans to function humanly.

Happiness, then, has to be a virtue, which again is by definition an excellence that allows us to excellently do what we were meant to do. Aristotle so concludes, saying, the “human good turns out to be activity of the soul in conformity with excellence, and if there are more than one excellence, in conformity with the best and most complete excellence” (Nicomachean Ethics, pg. 1735, ln. 1098a16-18). Happiness has to be an activity that brings about excellence and in specific it must conform with the most complete human excellence, which is to say to the most complete and excellent human life. Whatever happiness is defined as—pleasure, honor, or study—that version of happiness must be the thing that when acted upon allows for human beings to actualize their true, complete, and excellent existence. Happiness, as he summarizes in Politics (pg. 2113, ln. 1332a9), “is the realization and perfect exercise of excellence.” As such, happiness relates to qualities, substance, and function (Nicomachean Ethics, pg. 1859, ln. 1176a4-29). The “good man” of “excellence” is the “measure” of the true pleasures of true happiness. For example, the healthy person rather than the person with a fever should determine the level of sweetness that is pleasurable.

Aristotle had already addressed all of this in shorthand form in his Metaphysics (pg. 1694, ln. 1072a19ff). There he distinguished “the apparent good” from “the real good.” The former is based merely on “appetite” while the latter relies on “wish,” which is always
determined by “substance,” which is the thing’s true “nature.” The real good is the satisfaction of fulfilling what your substance’s true nature was intended to be; it is the actualization of the good. This satisfaction could be categorized as happiness as long as that means real satisfaction (according to our nature) and not a merely apparent satisfaction. In short, while humans do take happiness to be their final end, if their conception of happiness does not align with their true substance (i.e., with human nature), then that happiness is only apparent happiness and the good merely an apparent good.

To determine what real rather than apparent happiness is, then, Aristotle must determine the human function (in substance, by nature), so he can see what it would mean to excellently fulfill that function and so actualize complete and excellent being. Doing this would provide the definition of “human.” As we saw, this definition is a formula that ends in differentia. He must build the formula for “human,” then, until he finds that quality that differentiates “human” from everything else. This difference would provide the substance of the thing and so would also delineate the function of “human” that is such by nature and the actualization of which would result in complete and excellent human being that would produce real rather than apparent satisfaction.

Aristotle begins his quest to determine the definition of “human” by defining life, which includes “nutrition and growth” (Nicomachean Ethics, pg. 1735, ln. 1098a2), to see if that will teach us the nature of human substance and so of the human function. It turns out that this cannot be the function of humans, since nutrition and growth is not the difference in “human” that separates it from everything else. Even though life is a part of the formula for “human,” the qualities of life—like nutrition and growth—are not distinct to humanity since even plants share
in these qualities of life. As such, the mere functions of life cannot be the most complete human function.

Next, Aristotle hypothesizes that “perception” may be the thing that differentiates “human” from everything else and so provides the framework for the human function. Humans are sentient beings, so maybe it is their sensuous awareness that distinguishes them from every other being. He quickly concludes, however, that this cannot be the human function either since animals share in this quality (*Nicomachean Ethics*, pg. 1735, ln. 1098a3).

This leads Aristotle to settle on the only choice that “remains” open to him: the human function must be “an active life of the element that has a rational principle,” (*Nicomachean Ethics*, pg. 1735, ln. 1098a3-4), which is to say it “is an activity of the soul in accordance with, or not without, rational principle” (*Nicomachean Ethics*, pg. 1735, ln. 1098a8). This qualifies as the human function, because it is a function that is unique to the human species; nothing else uses rationality to spur thoughts that lead to actions. This ability 1) to understand causal connections and where they lead and 2) to actively build causal chains that end in the good is possible due to the distinctly human mental capacity of rationality. This rational principle, then, is the final difference that distinguishes “human” from everything else. Human substance, Aristotle concludes, must be this rational principle and the human function must be life and actions in accordance with this rational principle. As we will see, part of what the human good entails is using the reason that comes from rational thinking to learn what the human good is and how to actualize it in every situation as the opportunity arises.

Aristotle discusses human’s ability to think causally elsewhere. Though he does not specifically link that conversation to the good, Aristotle, in distinguishing between “memory” and “recollection,” does again confirm that humans alone have the capacity to think rationally
and in causal chains. In defining these terms, Aristotle links memory to images in that when we remember something, we are remembering an image that is imprinted on our soul like the imprint of an object onto wax as in a seal (On Memory, pg. 715, ln. 450a27-450b1).

Recollection, however, is the tracing of a series of movements “until finally we experience the one after which customarily comes that which we seek” (On Memory, pg. 717, ln. 451b17-19). Whereas memory is merely remembering something that made an impression on us, recollection requires active reasoning to trace out a series of rationally and causally connected actions. Recollection requires higher mental cognition than memory. Though memory is “incidentally” about “thought,” it “essentially…belongs to the primary faculty of sense-perception” (On Memory, pg. 715, ln. 450a13-14). Recollection, on the other hand, is linked to “inference” and “deliberation” (On Memory, pg. 719-710, ln. 453a5-14). This is why animals—which are like humans in that they have sense-perception but are unlike humans in that they do not have reason—have memory but no recollection (On Memory, 714, ln. 449b24-30; pg. 719-710, ln. 453a5-14). Recollection, then, connects to reason as a uniquely human function. Further, recollection, like reason, links to cognitive processes that comprehend causal chains that proceed from some origin to final completion at some end. The mental capabilities to learn and recollect these chains are uniquely human qualities that allow humans to undergo actions that correspond with the causal chain, the completion of which would be the actualization of the human good, so here again Aristotle affirms reasoning as the distinguishing human trait.

Happiness, then, must be “activity in accordance…with the highest excellence” (Nicomachean Ethics, pg. 1860, ln. 1177a11). It is activity that actualizes complete, excellent substance. It turns out, as we have seen twice now, that happiness is an activity. It is an activity of excellence, and it is an activity that is “obedient” to the rational principle, which is to say
according to reason (Nicomachean Ethics, pg. 1735, ln. 1098a4). Happiness, then, is not only excellence; it is an excellent life of action. Happiness requires action in an active, excellent life. Happiness is the satisfaction that comes from committing excellent and noble actions that are in accordance with the rational principle that comprises the substance of “human.” Actualization of that substance in complete and excellent human being would be to commit all of the excellent and noble actions befitting of the rational principle at every moment in time. It would be to utilize the “most complete excellence” in every moment (Nicomachean Ethics, pg. 1735, ln. 1098a16-18). This makes sense, since, as we saw, excellence itself can only come into existence through excellent action (Nicomachean Ethics, pg. 1743, ln. 1103a26-1103b2).

The rest of the Nicomachean Ethics, and its counterpart the Eudemian Ethics, is a catalogue of virtues (i.e., of excellent actions) that the actualized human being would excellently and completely fulfill in every moment in life as the opportunity to fulfill each of them presented itself. Aristotle’s ethical works carefully catalogue and explain dozens of these virtues and provide examples of how to completely and excellently utilize them given the right opportunity. For example, the human being who has actualized the human good would be completely and excellently courageous every time an opportunity presented itself that called for courage. Likewise, virtuous actions include justice, liberality, wisdom, temperance, modesty, gentleness, and the like. The person who actualized complete and excellent being would act justly, with liberality, wisely, etc. as each situation in life called for it.

However, more than giving us every excellent action and guidelines for when and under what circumstances to commit these actions, these works give us the framework for determining what counts as excellent actions. While he does provide a catalog of excellences, he does not and cannot precisely define how these excellences ought to be applied completely and excellently in
every situation; instead he explains how excellence in general functions. Excellence, he explains, is usually (though not always) the mean between two extremes. There are exceptions to this. For example, he argues, human excellence requires humans to abstain from committing adultery (Nicomachean Ethics, pg. 1748, ln. 1107a9-18). There is no act of adultery that would strike some perfect mean qualifying it as an excellent act. In general, however, the excellent act is the one that is the mean between two extremes. Courage, for example, is the act that is the mean between two extremes: 1) cowardice, which is the extreme deficit of courage and 2) brashness, which is the extreme excess of courage (Nicomachean Ethics, pg. 1748, ln. 1107a32-1107b4).

Here at the crucial moment of his description of the human good, Aristotle refrains from giving us a precise and complete answer. In order to flesh out what the human good is, he gives a formula or poses a question rather than providing the precise answer, especially for precisely every moment in time. He does this with good reason. Indeed, part of the life of excellence is the ability to use the rational principle to determine exactly which virtue is appropriate at every given moment and how the virtues ought to be connected in a causal chain that brings about the end which is the complete and excellent actualization of true human being. To be human, we must utilize reason to discover excellent action, and to be a good human, we must act in those excellent ways. Both of these require particular humans to move in unique ways and the result of this unique movement is fully actualized (universal) humanity. Here again, then, we see Aristotle’s conception of definition at work. The formula of form and matter encapsulates movement in the right direction, which is a unique process for each particular person even if those actions will always lead each particular person to share in the universality of “human” and the good that flows from it.
Aristotle explains this process of each person uniquely discovering the good

(Nicomachean Ethics, pg. 1751, ln. 1109a24-29):

Hence also it is no easy task to be good. For in everything it is no easy task to find the middle, e.g. to find the middle of a circle is not for every one but for him who knows; so, too, any one can get angry—that is easy—or give or spend money; but to do this to the right person, to the right extent, at the right time, with the right aim, and in the right way, that is not for every one, nor is it easy; that is why goodness is both rare and laudable and noble.

Good people are considered laudable and noble precisely because they overcome the challenge of discovering what counts as the completely excellent action in the opportunity of every given moment and then they act according to what their reason has discovered to be the truly human action. The process of discovering what counts as complete excellent actions is just as much a part of the truly actualized human life as acting in accordance with that discovery.

Throughout Politics, Aristotle adds something to the excellent life of actions, which he already hinted at in the quote above. He emphasizes that the good life is not only a life of excellent (i.e., of virtuous actions) but is also a life of noble actions. Noble acts are those things done in leisure not for the sake of something else but for their own sake (Politics, pg. 2113-2114, ln. 1332a7-37, pg. 2123ff, ln. 1338a1ff). Excellent people—those who have actualized complete and excellent human being—know how to live lives according to human ends (Politics, pg. 2116ff, ln. 1334a11ff). In other words, the actions of their lives actualize the end, which is for the sake of which everything is done. These actions are good precisely because they are the actualization of the good rather than actions that lead to that ultimate end sometime in the future. These actions that are good for their own sakes, rather than for the sake of some other end, are noble actions. Drawing, music, politics, and philosophy are all actions that Aristotle includes in the category of noble actions (Politics, pg. 1992, ln. 1255b35-39, pg. 2123ff, ln. 1338a1ff). These noble actions are ends in themselves; they exist not to fulfill some necessity but are done merely because they are the things that actualized human beings do. Since these are acts that do
not end in the satisfaction of something else (i.e., some necessity) but are ends in themselves, they are acts that must be done in leisure, or time for its own sake (Nichomachean Ethics, pg. 1861, ln. 1177b1ff), which is time that does not require you to act in certain ways in order to satisfy some necessity. Leisure, then, is not the absence of actions but only of actions that are for the sake of some other end. Leisure is the time of true human acting. This is why the correct usage of leisure must be cultivated through education and habituation; only actualized human beings can actualize leisure (Politics, pg. 2123ff, ln. 1338a1ff).

Achieving the Human Good

From the above, we can see that not everyone will actualize their true human being. In fact, in the Nicomachean Ethics (pg. 1742-1743, ln. 1103a14ff), Aristotle claims that certain people are disqualified from living a virtuous life, which is to say a life of complete and excellent being. Just as the nature of a rock is that it will always succumb to gravity no matter how much you try to habituate or educate it to fly, so the nature of some people will always keep them from being educated or habituated into a life of complete excellence. Some people, then, are incapable of attaining the human good and so of attaining true human being.

This point is made more strikingly in Politics (e.g., pg. 1990, ln. 1254b16-25) where Aristotle argues that some people are naturally slaves even if some slaves are slaves by law rather than by nature (Politics, pg. 1992, ln. 1255b3-15). Natural slaves are merely qualified human beings (Politics, pg. 1989, ln. 1254a13-17) that will never be able to achieve unqualified human being (e.g., Politics, pg. 1990, ln. 1254b15-25, pg. 1992 ln. 1255b22-23), which is to say the complete and excellent definition of human being or of true human substance (e.g., Politics, pg. 1991, ln. 1255a21). As qualified human beings, they fall within the category of “human,” but they do so incompletely; they satisfy the definition of “human” but only incompletely. For
Aristotle, some people will only ever be qualified human beings. These humans are “maimed as regards excellence” (Nicomachean Ethics, pg. 1737, ln. 1099b18-19) so they will never be able to act in ways that actualize true human nature. Instead, they must fill their lives with actions that allow other people to actualize their complete and excellent human being, so those people can achieve their end. Slaves’ (and their free person equivalents: “vulgar craftsmen and hired laborers”) actions must take care of the necessities of the state and of all of the people within it (e.g., Politics, pg. 1990, ln. 1254b15-25, pg. 2028, ln. 1278a7-12), so that people with the correct nature can have leisure time which they can use to educate and habituate themselves into the virtuous life (i.e., discover what is excellent), commit actions of excellence, (e.g., Politics, pg. 2109, ln. 1328b40-1329a2) and commit noble actions such as art, politics, or philosophy (e.g., Politics, pg. 1992, ln. 1255b35-39, pg. 2113-2114, ln. 1332a7-37, pg. 2123ff, ln. 1338a1ff), so they can actualize the human good. This means that without qualified humans who by nature are incapable of actualizing the human good, it may not be possible for anyone to realize the human good.

As we will see, Aristotle does seek to create a politics that is as egalitarian as possible. One of his primary political goals is to create a government with laws and institutions that educate and habituate as many people as possible into the life of actualized human being. However, not all will have the nature to be able to be so educated and habituated.

Aristotle’s argument does not end there, though. Even given the right nature and the right conditions (i.e., a state with the requisite composition, including slaves to provide leisure time, that can educate and habituate citizens) and even given people with the desire and ability to educate and habituate themselves into the good human life, they will not be able to do so, or at least not permanently. In Metaphysics (pg. 1695; ln. 1072b24-25), he claims that “God is always
in that good state in which we sometimes are.” None of us ever stably reach our end or
permanently achieve complete and excellent actualization of our human being. At best, we reach
our end only momentarily and fleetingly. This means that we can only fleetingly embody the
positive (universal) definition (*Metaphysics* pg. 1694-1695; ln. 1072a19-1073a13). Most of our
lives is spent living in the negative (privation), which is to say that most of our lives is spent
moving to try to understand and complete the positive definition, which is the good of
actualization of true human being.

Actualizing the good human life requires discovery: of which excellence to use when,
how, in what proportion, in what combination with other excellences, etc. What the complete and
excellent good looks like—the life that constantly acts in accordance with the correct excellence
in the correct way—is unknown, even to Aristotle. Part of the good for him, then, is the
movement or action that discovers more of the good and that, theoretically at least, ultimately
ends in complete and excellent actualized human being, which is constant action that is excellent
action according to the rational principle that is the final difference that defines the human
substance.

This means that, at the crucial moment, Aristotle again focuses on cause rather than end.
He again emphasizes movement in the direction of the good, which is in any case unknown to us
at least in all of the particulars, than in precise definition of what that good (and so human
function given their substance) is. And part of the cause that moves us to the human good entails
discovering what actions will cause us to actually achieve our end.

This also means that Aristotle does not believe that we will ever stably actualize human
being within ourselves. We must constantly move and act in ways that push us in the direction of
the good. In other words, we must constantly act in the negative. We must constantly act
according to a substance that is as yet invisible and not yet actualized. This tracks with his notion of definition that we recounted earlier. The excellent person must always act in the privation in order to stimulate the cause that brings into actual, realized existence that which is not yet actualized. These actions must (i.e., by necessity), of course, be in a certain direction and be bounded by certain limits, Aristotle makes that clear throughout, but there must be constant movement and action nonetheless. Every new action creates a new reality (within ourselves if not in the world at large) and so requires new kinds of excellent actions to excellently meet this new reality. What excellences are necessary (necessity again), in what proportion and in what combination, etc. is again unknown and the would-be complete and excellent, unqualified human beings would need to further educate and habituate themselves into what exactly the excellent actions are, the performance of which would actualize their true human substance.

What is more, Aristotle is willing to allow imperfect actions (i.e., actions that are not completely excellent), precisely because they facilitate movement toward the perfect actualization of the good, which is to say complete and excellent human actions. He recognizes that all humans have tendencies toward certain vices at least in certain circumstances and that these tendencies are different in every human being (Nicomachean Ethics, pg. 1751-1752, In. 1109a1ff, ln. 1109b2ff). In order to move in ways that allow us to more truly and completely discover excellence, we need to recognize those tendencies within ourselves and adjust our actions accordingly. In order to achieve the mean of courage, for example, the person who tends toward cowardice (the extreme deficiency end) must risk overcompensating and acting rashly while the person who tends toward rashness (the extreme excess end) must risk overcompensating in the opposite direction and sometimes act cowardly. Overcompensation more successfully educates us to correct our natural tendencies than undercompensation. These
overcompensated actions are not completely excellent, but they are acceptable for Aristotle because they teach the person performing them to better discover what excellent actions are. This education moves people toward more excellent actions that allow them to more completely live according to true human substance when overcompensation will no longer be necessary. Overcompensation ensures that the two opposing extremes are put in tension with one another. The extreme tendency of a person is put in tension with its opposite extreme. This tension leads to education, since it forces people to reconsider every action, which forces them to utilize the rational principle to try to determine the mean between the two extremes. This is precisely what it means to discover what counts as excellent action. Everyone must utilize reason to discover their individual path to the good and their individual movement toward its actualization.

The tension created from opposing extremes, then, compels education into what counts as the excellent and then excellent actions that correspond with that resulting understanding. This means two things. First, and most obviously, the tension compels people to realize the human good. Second, however, the tension itself is part of the human good, because it is the thing that forces usage of the rational principle in search of the truth about excellence, excellent actions, human substance, etc. In this way, if organized properly, human actions that are not completely excellent and so do not completely and excellently actualize human substance can be part of the process of discovery of complete and excellent actions that is the human good, and, further, this process of discovery is itself a part of the human good or at least proof that the human good is in the process of being caused. For Aristotle, though, to say that something is part of actuality or is proof that there is movement toward actuality is actually to say the same thing. As he argued in *Metaphysics* (pg. 1653, Ln. 1047a30-32), “The word ‘actuality’, which we connect with fulfillment, has, strictly speaking, been extended from movements to other things; for actuality in
the strict sense is identified with movement.” As we remember from our general discussion of the good above, potential being is still being even if it is not actualized, because potential being is existence where movement is bringing about actualized being. The very concept of definition, for Aristotle, is the description of this very movement. This same principle applies to our discussion here. In short, it can be good to perform actions which are not completely excellent and so are not part of the complete and excellent actualization of human substance, as long as those actions help us to move in ways that allow us to more fully actualize that complete and excellent human substance.

In the final analysis, “The man, however who deviates little from goodness is not blamed, whether he do so in the direction of the more or the less, but only the man who deviates more widely; for he does not fail to be noticed” (Nicomachean Ethics, pg. 1752, ln. 1109b18-20). Some deviation from the mean, which is to say some deviant actions, are acceptable for purposes of education, as long as the actions do not become too deviant. Significantly, Aristotle again leaves unanswered the question of how deviant is too deviant aside from the obvious moment when deviance becomes detected by others who themselves are also not good (Nicomachean Ethics, pg. 1752, ln. 1109b18-26).

Politics

As with the good human life, Aristotle rejects the idea that we can stably achieve the good political life. This leads him on a quest to discover the best possible political community given the current deviant conditions of each actual, existing political community. As he has done all along, he will ultimately choose a politics that facilitates proper movement rather than constructing the best political community ex nihilo.
Aristotle agrees with Plato (as far as Plato thinks that political rule is necessary) that good political rule is an aristocracy where those humans who best understand truth rule according to that truth and so align as closely as possible both the political community as a whole and the individual human beings that individually comprise it to the truth (Politics, pg. 2053, ln. 1293b1ff). Aristotle believes that a kingship could be a good constitution if the king was an excellent human; however, an aristocracy will usually be even more ideal since there are more excellent people who can act as a check on each other, especially on matters concerning themselves, to ensure that all of their actions are completely excellent all of the time (Politics, pg. 2043, ln. 1287a40-1287b7; pg. 2044-2045, ln. 1288a32-1288b5). However, he, also like Plato, quickly asserts that this kind of politics that requires rule by excellent humans is unrealistic precisely because humans never realize a stable achievement of the complete excellence that is the good life (Politics, pg. 2056, ln. 1295a31-34). Indeed, they never even attain complete understanding of the truth, which is to say that they never come to a complete understanding of what comprises the good life.

Instead of completely describing this most complete and excellent politics, which he himself could not fully know in any case, Aristotle seeks to explain:

the best constitution for most states, and the best life for most men, neither assuming a standard of excellence which is above ordinary persons, nor an education which is exceptionally favoured by nature and circumstances, nor yet an ideal state which is an aspiration only, but having regard to the life in which the majority are about to share, and to the form of government which states in general can attain (Politics, pg. 2056, ln. 1295a25-31).

In short, he seeks a politics that is within the reach of normal, ordinary people and their normal, ordinary political circumstances.

It turns out, Aristotle argues, that the best constitution for less-than-good humanity is a politics of the middle class, because the middle class is the mean between the rich and the poor
classes and so is analogous to the happy life of excellence as a mean that he outlined in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (*Politics*, pg. 2056, ln. 1295a34ff).

Aristotle argues that both extremes—wealth and poverty—are bad. Too much wealth leads to violence, lack of obedience, and crime; whereas too little wealth leads to “rougery,” degradation, and crime (*Politics*, pg. 2056-2057, ln. 1295b2ff). The rich use their wealth to buy strength, influence, power, culture, etc. and so they never learn to obey anyone or anything other than their own desires. They do not even obey reason, a fact which solidifies that they have not actualized true human being. These rich, then, become too ambitious and haughty and seek to garner what they desire no matter the violent or criminal costs of doing so. The poor, on the other hand, lack basic necessities and so are forced to play the role of “rogues” and “petty rascals” just to survive. Their lack of wealth and the questionable life that it compels them to live abases them and keeps them from being capable of ruling or of being confident enough to seek the qualities necessary to do so. Furthermore, governments that are based on either the principles and desires of the rich or of the poor will only lead to the further problem of class warfare (*Politics*, pg. 2057, ln. 1295b30-32). For all of these reasons, Aristotle classifies both oligarchy, which he defines as rule by the rich, and democracy, which he defines as rule by the poor, as deviant constitutions that are incapable of producing a politics that stirs individuals and communities to the realization of the good (*Politics*, pg. 2030, ln. 1279b4-9).

The middle class, on the other hand, has the proper moderation of wealth and so the proper moderation of the principles needed to govern well. They are the mean between haughtiness and debasement, between exorbitance and want, between desire for rule and aversion to it, between extreme obedience and extreme rule, and the like (*Politics*, pg. 2056, ln. 1295b5-13). All of this moderation is itself an obedience to rational principles (which are the
mean states of each of the above pairings of extremes), but the moderation also allows the middle class to be sober-minded and learn (i.e., education) to more completely and excellently understand and live according to (i.e., habituation) the principles of complete excellence that rationality (i.e., the distinctly human quality which both is a quality of the human good and facilitates movement toward a more complete and excellent actualization of the human good) is teaching them (Politics, pg. 2056, ln. 1295b5-13). For example, they are neither so wealthy that they succumb to every passion nor are they so destitute that they justify any action that alleviates their want. They are able to live in the mean, which is the life of excellence. In total, the middle class, as the life of movement toward the mean, is the life of movement toward excellence, so a government of and by the middle class would be an excellent government as well. Rule by a middle class would spur people individually and collectively to actions that would end in the realization of the good. In theory, the middle class life can teach the majority of people excellence and true realization of the good life, so that living in that condition and its resulting government creates good people. In this way, a middle class government is more likely to be produced in a real-world political community than an aristocracy, which requires people to become excellent and then create a government that models their understanding of the true, good life.

However, Aristotle recognizes that this government will only succeed if a large middle class actually exists in society. Absent this, the government tends to tilt toward either extreme democracy or extreme oligarchy as either the rich or the poor factions of the state are able to gain power and wrest the government from middle class control (Politics, pg. 2057, ln. 1295b35-1296a6). Unfortunately, Aristotle observes that “the middle form of government has rarely, if ever, existed, and among a few only” (Politics, pg. 2058, ln. 1296a36-37) since a large middle
class rarely, if ever, existed. As such, rule by the middle class fails Aristotle’s requirement that he should find the best government possible given the ordinary circumstances of ordinary people.

As such, Aristotle’s search for a more likely alternative to the completely good politics must continue. This continued search leads him to explore various mixed constitutions, which he calls politeia (Politis, pg. 2053, ln. 1293b23ff). The first politeia is actually an imperfect “aristocracy,” which means that it is a constitution that mixes a less perfect version of aristocracy, where humans who have not quite achieved the human good share in the rule, with a democracy and an oligarchy (Politis, pg. 2054, ln. 1294a24). In this scenario, people whose lives most closely approximate the human good can make laws that constrain the masses who have not gotten close to actualizing their human being. However, at the same time, the masses still have a political voice, so they can check the aristocrats who in any case have also not fully actualized their true human being and have not even come to a complete understanding of what that true human being is. Unfortunately, the checks that try to mask and sanitize these imperfections, fail. In short, the aristocrats are often also of the wealthy class since they have the wealth necessary to create the time that, through education and habitation, can be turned into true leisure time. Actions in this true leisure time would be noble and excellent and so those actions would actualize human being and would thus create people who as citizens would approximate aristocrats. At the end of the day, then, imperfect aristocracies will manifest their imperfections when aristocrats end up erring on the side of the rich, and so this kind of politeia will eventually slide into an oligarchy (Politis, pg. 2059, ln. 1297a7-12). Since extreme oligarchies do more harm to the middle class than extreme democracies (Politis, pg. 2057, ln. 1296a12-18), this outcome leads away from, rather than toward, both the actualization of a good politics and the general advancement and teaching of the human good.
After rejecting this first kind of politeia, Aristotle finally settles on the constitution that is both within the reach of most political communities filled with average people and that facilitates the right kind of movement that ends in the good human community that both is the good of the collective and that helps individual people achieve the human good. This community is a politeia consisting of oligarchic and democratic elements. A politeia combining democracy and oligarchy is a good constitution when any of three combinations is present: 1) when it “is a combination of both” democracy and oligarchy whose “union” creates “a common or middle term between them,” 2) when it is “a mean between them,” or 3) when it has “one element…taken from each” of them (Politics, pg. 2054-2055, ln. 1294a30-1294b41). In all three of these cases, the resulting politeia is either a mean between the two extreme points of oligarchy and democracy or movement toward that mean. This kind of politeia cannot be established outright since if we knew the proper mean and how to achieve it, we would have constructed that political community from the beginning. Knowing that, however, requires human beings who have achieved the human good and understand how to organize their personal and political lives according to it, and it is the absence of those people that has spurred Aristotle on this quest in the first place.

Since it is not possible to construct the good constitution per se, Aristotle has to find a way to facilitate movement towards it. He does this by organizing a constitution that forces oligarchy and democracy to share the same government space. The natural progression of the resulting political struggle is toward this good politeia that is the proper mean between the two extremes of oligarchy and democracy. The logic of oligarchy will propose certain extreme political positions and the logic of democracy will propose equally extreme political positions from the opposite extreme. In order for the mixed constitution to survive, these two extremes
will have to figure out a way to compromise with each other. These compromises will take one of the three forms that Aristotle proposed above and will move the constitution toward the proper government mean. Once this mean is reached, a completely virtuous (i.e., excellent) constitution will have been constructed and citizens, who are always defined as those who both rule and are ruled (Politics, pg. 2037, In. 1283a41-1284b1), will have been taught how to properly live in this constitution as excellent citizens. Through the compromises that led to the creation of good laws and institutions, citizens as rulers would have been taught how to rule and citizens as those ruled would have been taught how to obey the laws and institutions that resulted from those compromises.

In other words, Aristotle will have been able to move a political community from the deviant constitution from which it began to the good community at which it ends. The origin of this movement is two opposing deviant political constitutions, but the end of this movement is the actualization of the one true, good political constitution that is the mean between these two deviant extremes. In this way, Aristotle believes that he has found a way to complete the necessary movement from origin to ultimate end, which is what actualization of the good always is. Given his earlier argument, it is likely that this final government (i.e., the constitutional mean) will be an ideal aristocracy consisting of a large and vibrant middle class of individually virtuous people who have actualized their human good. So this movement leads to both the best political arrangement (aristocracy) and to the widespread actualization of the human good (creation of a large middle class and the various resulting means between the extremes that it entails, which we discussed above).

While at first blush, it is surprising that a politeia consisting of the dual deviant constitutions of democracy and oligarchy is Aristotle’s final, commonly-attainable good
constitution, on closer inspection and taking into account Aristotle’s larger theory that we have elucidated so far, it should not be at all surprising. As always, Aristotle’s focus is on action and movement toward some end which is not completely known to us. Even wrong actions, if structured or controlled properly, can move toward proper or right being. When people use reason to understand causal chains, they can structure political communities that, given their internal logic, must (i.e., by necessity) move the collective community and the individuals within it toward their respective true, complete, and excellent ultimate ends. This remains true even if those people do not fully comprehend what that end is or how to get there. Further, that they can structure a political community to move toward that incompletely known end signifies that these people are already on the path toward the actualization of their true end.

There is one final piece to this political puzzle that we have as yet glossed over. In our preceding argument, we slid between excellent citizens and excellent humans, sometimes arguing that the creation of an excellent constitution will create excellent citizens and sometimes claiming that it will create excellent humans. Aristotle in fact argues both things, but there is a particular relationship between these three elements that give Aristotle the leverage he needs to necessitate correct movement toward the ultimate end even if he begins at a deviant origin.

As we saw, the education that comes from a democratic/oligarchic politeia teaches people how to be good citizens and how they can construct the truly good government of aristocracy. It teaches oligarchs how to compromise with democrats and vice versa. As this compromise happens, the constitution moves toward the mean, but, as we saw, so do both the political rulers and the politically ruled. In this way, the movement toward the construction of a good government also entails the movement toward the construction of the good citizen. Aristotle, near the end of Politics (pg. 2114, ln. 1332a33-38), summarizes this position:
A city can be excellent only when the citizens who have a share in government are excellent, and in our state all the citizens share in the government; let us then inquire how a man becomes excellent. For even if we could suppose the citizen body to be excellent, without each of them being so, yet the latter would be better, for in the excellence of each the excellence of all is involved.

A city can only be excellent when the citizens are excellent. The excellent politeia—the one that is the mean—is only achieved when the oligarchic citizens and the democratic citizens both abandon their extremes for the mean, which is the excellent citizenship of aristocracy whose creation brings the excellent politeia into existence. Citizens, in this case aristocrats, who rule according to complete excellence according to their substance of citizen create excellent constitutions, in this case an aristocracy. Further, this aristocracy will be the best aristocracy when the number of excellent citizens is high, since, as we saw, an aristocracy is better than a kingship in that more excellent people are more likely to maintain and propagate their excellence than is one excellent person. Since the democratic/oligarchic constitution will end in a large middle class, the aristocracy will have a large excellent-citizenship pool and will be a most excellent aristocracy.

Aristotle, though, is arguing more than this. The creation of the excellent politeia itself is only possible if there exists excellent oligarchic citizens (i.e., citizens who follow the logic of oligarchy and reproduce it) and excellence democratic citizens (i.e., citizens who follow the logic of democracy and reproduce it). The only way that the proper kinds of compromises—those compromises that lead away from the extremes toward the mean—can come about is if excellent citizens follow their substance excellently. In other words, Aristotle is counting on citizens of the deviant constitutions of democracy and oligarchy to completely and excellently perform their deviant substance (i.e., their substance as a citizen of their respective deviant constitutions). In order for necessary movement to occur, people must play their role excellently and then they
must be organized properly so that their excellent citizenship actions lead to movement that leads to the proper kind of excellence of citizenship.

However, this quote (Politics, pg. 2114, In. 1332a33-38) also subtly introduces a problem. Aristotle begins by writing about the excellence of citizens, but then he seamlessly shifts to discussing “how a man becomes excellent.” This subtle shift is actually quite important. As Aristotle discussed earlier in Politics (pg. 2025-2026, In. 1276b16ff) and as should be obvious from our discussion so far, excellence of the citizen and human excellence are two different things. As we saw, excellent oligarchic citizenship, for example, entails living human lives that are not excellent since excellently maintaining the rule of the rich perpetuates all of the extreme living that rich life brings.

Aristotle explains why this distinction between human excellence and excellence of citizenship exists. As he argues, “one citizen differs from another” so that “the excellence of the citizen must therefore be relative to the constitution of which he is a member” and since “there are many forms of government, it is evident that there is not one single excellence of the good citizen” (Politics, pg. 2026, In. 1276b28-33). In other words, the excellence of the citizen depends on the constitution. An excellent oligarch is defined according to the qualities and excellences of an oligarchy whereas an excellent democrat is defined according to the qualities and excellences of a democracy. Further, within each constitution, the citizens each have differing functions and so have different excellences. Each citizen has a different role to play and so must rely on different excellences in different proportions actualized in different situations to play that individual role excellently. All of this remains true even though all citizens are bound by the singular political excellence of justice. Aristotle defines justice as treating equal people (ultimately citizens) equally and unequal people (ultimately noncitizens) unequally (Politics, pg.
2031, In. 1280a10-15). All citizens, then, are bound by the singular excellence of giving other citizens their due; however, what this “due” looks like differs for each citizen as they play out their different functions. In short, then, the excellence of the citizen differs based on 1) the differences of constitutions and 2) the differences of function within each kind of constitution.

Human excellence, however, is different from the excellence of a citizen. “[T]he good man is he who has one single excellence which is perfect excellence” (Politics, pg. 2026, In. 1276b33-34). Human excellence is tied to being an unqualified human, so, unlike with constitutions, there is only one option. This singular excellence that applies to all humans, then, must be the complete excellence. This complete excellence is the excellence that we described at great length above when we discussed the human good.

It is precisely this distinction between human excellence and the excellence of a citizen that Aristotle exploits to spur movement toward the creation of a good constitution. As we saw, it was the lack of human excellence that hindered Aristotle from creating ex nihilo the excellent constitution. However, as we also saw, Aristotle was able to use excellent oligarchic citizenship to create the truly excellent citizen of the truly excellent constitution when he mixed excellent oligarchic citizenship with excellent democratic citizenship to create the mean of excellent aristocratic citizens. Now we are sufficiently prepared to understand how Aristotle can make the further claim that an excellent constitution that was created by excellent citizens of deviant constitutions is then able to create excellent citizens of the excellent constitution and also able to help create excellent human beings.

As we saw, excellent citizens create excellent constitutions, and when the proper mixture of excellent citizens is mixed properly, they are able to move both themselves and the constitution toward true excellence. Saying this, however, already implies movement toward the
singular and complete excellence, which is the human excellence. Aristotle is no longer arguing about the various citizen excellences of various deviant constitutions. Instead, he is explaining the most complete and excellent excellence of the true citizen—the aristocratic citizen. Excellent citizenship is moving toward a singular excellence, which is the most excellent excellence. However, it is not citizen substance that determines that this excellence is the singular excellence, it is human substance that does so. Aristocratic citizens are not more excellent than democratic citizens because they are more complete or excellent in their substance of citizen; they are more completely excellent because their excellence of citizenship, in the case of the excellent constitution, corresponds with human excellence. In other words, the excellence of an aristocratic citizen is also the human excellence, so that the actions of someone who has actualized excellent aristocratic citizenship are also the actions of an actualized excellent human being.

This means that the human excellence of the residents of aristocracy is created as excellent aristocratic citizens act and bring into existence the excellent political community that is aristocracy. As always, the good entails action. In this case, excellent citizens actualize their complete excellence as aristocratic citizens when they create the laws and institutions of an aristocracy. This is the same as saying laws and institutions that correspond with the mean. These laws and institutions that are the mean between two extremes must be obeyed, and indeed will be obeyed by excellent citizens who by definition are the ruled as well as the rulers. As these laws and institutions are obeyed, the residents of the aristocracy are educated and habituated to be good aristocratic citizens. However, these laws and institutions are ultimately the completely true mean. They are actually the mean with respect to human action and not merely with respect to the more narrow political action. Obedience to these laws and institutions, then, do not only
actualize good citizens, they also actualize good humans, since obeying these laws entails not only excellent actions of the citizen but also excellent actions of the human being.

In this way, the excellent political community can educate and habituate people into being not only good citizens but also good humans, which ultimately is the goal of politics. Though the exact nature of an excellent aristocracy is unknown, Aristotle does give a number of examples of how excellent laws and institutions can help educate and habituate citizens into being good humans (e.g., Politics, pg. 2114ff, ln. 1332b13ff). For example the government and its officials (i.e., citizens) can provide institutions, structures, and laws that provide the leisure time and peace necessary for its citizens to avoid slavery and to strive for noble and excellent actions. A good political community can provide the conditions that allow humans to educate themselves on what counts as excellent human action. Absent this community, humans will not have the conditions necessary to embark on this journey of discovery and so the actualization of their true human being—which is the discovery of what counts as excellent actions and the subsequent acting upon them—will be thwarted. The good political community can help educate and habituate citizens into being good humans in other ways too. Laws (of marriage, of education, of censorship, etc.) can be made that educate and habituate citizens—even from childhood—to live noble and excellent lives. These laws can stimulate humans to commit excellent acts and can habituate them into these excellent acts, even as they are teaching people what counts as excellent acts and how they can be committed completely and excellently. In these and other ways, then, Aristotle explains how excellent citizens can be educated and habituated into being excellent humans. This education and habituation, however, can only take place in an excellent constitution. Indeed, it is only “in the good state” where “all the citizens” are “good” that all with the right nature can have human excellence (Politics, pg. 2026, ln.
Excellent citizenship, when defined by the good constitution, creates excellent humans.

This is the ultimate purpose of politics: “for we stated the end of political science to be the best end, and political science spends most of its pains on making citizens to be of a certain character, viz. good and capable of noble acts” (*Nicomachean Ethics*, pg. 1738, ln. 1099b29-32). Political science, like all fields of inquiry, tries to create people who excellently act in accordance with the end of that field of study. Political science, however, has the best end of all of the fields of inquiry, because ultimately its goal is to create excellent citizens (i.e., those who excellently embody the end of politics) who also act as excellent human beings who engage in excellent and noble acts. This is why “the student of politics” 1) must study happiness, which is the “complete excellence,” 2) “must study…human excellence,” and 3) “must study the soul” (*Nicomachean Ethics*, pg. 1741, ln. 1102a5-25). Those who create political communities must understand the human good, because, ultimately, politics tries to create human beings who possess the complete, human excellence and so are happy in the truly human way and live truly human lives.

By examining Aristotle’s struggle to find a workable government, we can see what he is up to and why he is comfortable defining the political community merely as “a community of equals, aiming at the best possible life” (*Politics*; pg. 2108, ln1328a36-37; emphasis mine). The purpose of politics is to bring about the human good, so politics has an educative purpose. However, Aristotle also recognizes that politics is an action. Government is about movement; it moves people either toward or away from the good at the same time that it moves the government toward or away from the good. Aristotle’s goal, then, is to find the political arrangement that facilitates people and governments to move toward the good, even though they
currently have not realized their good and do not even fully understand what it is or how to live it. This is why Aristotle is comfortable accepting deviant political arrangements (similarly to his comfort in accepting deviant individual actions), because they can be organized to facilitate movement toward the good. He is willing to work with a broken world, if it gets us closer to the human good, which in any case, is not fully knowable. In short, Aristotle is less concerned with fleshing out true being (in this case, the true substance of the good political arrangement) than he is with understanding the causes of movement that push us toward actualization of true substance (i.e., attainment of the good). He is less concerned with describing in great detail what a perfect aristocracy would look like and how to implement it than he is in describing how humans can start with the political and human material that they have to facilitate political movement that ultimately will end in the political community understanding 1) what a perfect aristocracy looks like and 2) how to implement this perfect aristocracy. So again, at the crucial moment, Aristotle favors viewing the good as the final cause over the good as the final end. He is interested in movements from the negative that move us ultimately toward the positive actualization of the true political end, even if the complete and excellent substance of that end is as yet unknown to us.
Interlude 1| Plato and Aristotle

Introduction

Before moving on to Marx and his conception of the good, we need to stop and take stock of where we are. This will help us to see the broad, categorical similarities between Plato and Aristotle even as we highlight each chapter’s main argument as it relates to the dissertation as a whole. This will set us up to more intentionally see how Marx moves the dialectical tradition as it relates to the discussion of the good and how this movement evolves closer to Adorno’s own iteration.

In this interlude, I will briefly summarize the core arguments that we have made in Plato and Aristotle. Following this summation, I will briefly introduce the Marx argument that we will explore in the next chapter. In this interlude, I will highlight how Marx fits in the dialectical tradition of the good as it was constructed up to his time and how he shifts the emphasis and so begins to steer it in a new direction. After more fully explicating Marx’s conception of the good in the next chapter, we will return with a second interlude that will solidify Marx’s connection with and expansion of Plato and Aristotle and will also begin to examine how these arguments form the touchpoints of Adorno’s argument, even as he too seeks to modify them.

Clustering Plato and Aristotle

As we have seen, both Plato and Aristotle’s conception of the good surprisingly deals with a cluster of concepts and ideas that are important for Marx and, as we will see, will be central for Adorno. Both Plato and Aristotle address the idea of the unknown, perpetual deferment of being and hence of the good, movement, the negative, and memory. Adorno explicitly makes this cluster of concepts the core of his analysis. However, as we have seen, both Plato and Aristotle also address the ideas of these concepts even if they do not always discuss
them using the same terms as Adorno will. For them, complete being is unknown and is perhaps unknowable, which also means that the attainment of complete being is always deferred. At the end of the day, then, we are, at best, becoming toward being since complete attainment of being is always deferred. Both Plato and Aristotle, in different ways also describe the movement of becoming itself as good. Indeed, even though being is more important to both of them, they both end up privileging the movement toward the political and human good and explain how that movement is itself part of the good. Despite all of this, they do both hint at what true and complete being is, but this is an important and necessary move. For them, the existence of an unknown being must be combined with fleshing out that being as clearly as possible. The latter is necessary to define the direction and content of the movements of becoming so they can be deemed good. Without knowledge of being, it is hard to do this, but Plato and Aristotle have a solution for this. For both, remembrance can help us get at the contours of being, which we do not and cannot ever completely know. In the rest of this interlude, we will examine more closely how Plato and Aristotle compare in their ideas on each of the concepts in this cluster, which will help us put them in conversation with Marx and, ultimately, with Adorno.

**Unknown**

For Plato and Aristotle, the unknown is the idea that draws this entire cluster of concepts together. If they understood true and complete human being in every respect, then they would not, by necessity, have to conceptualize the rest of these concepts. Knowledge of the good does not necessarily entail achievement of it, but indefinite deferment of the good would not be a necessary part of their theories. Likewise, they would not need to emphasize movement, the negative, or memory. Indeed, both Plato and Aristotle long for this state of affairs; it is only out of frustration with reality that they move their theories in the direction of these concepts.
As we saw, both Plato and Aristotle admit much more unknowability than they are often credited. Plato always gives a constellation of concepts that argue around what the good is, but in every instance he hedges at the crucial moment of explaining it. As such, he always gives us something that is “goodlike” rather than the good itself. It turns out that this goodlike is important in that it does provide the contours of the good and so of true and complete human being. However, just when it seems that Plato elucidates what true human being is, he suggests that there is a still yet higher and greater being that is superior in rank and power. It seems that the philosopher has achieved true and complete human being, but then Plato gives us a description of the disembodied afterlife. It seems that this existence is true and complete human being until he hints at some indefinite number of realms after the afterlife. In each case, he concludes that there is some higher level of education that will teach humans more fully what the good is. Hypothetical thought allows us to move beyond the shadows of the visible realm, and understanding allows us to comprehend all of the intelligible realm. But then he explains that something more than understanding is needed to comprehend the good. This undefined level of cognition comes through the perfect (or merely more perfect?) movements of the dialectic in the disembodied afterlife. But in suggesting the existence of a realm beyond the afterlife, he also opens the possibility that an even more perfect understanding—a perfect kind of philosophizing—would be possible. This shows that for Plato, comprehension of the good is always just out of reach.

Likewise, Aristotle privileges being over becoming, but then he argues that all we can really inquire into are the causes that move us toward being. Indeed, he completely re-conceptualizes definition—which deals with the essences of being—as the process of movement from origin to ultimate end. He privileges the movements of becoming. To facilitate this
movement, humans need to act virtuously. But in describing how to do this, Aristotle provides a formula rather than a list of clear and precise directives. He does not presume to understand what the good in general looks like let alone what it looks like in every moment. That is unknown, even to him. Instead, he gives a formula that helps people figure out how to act according to true and complete being in every moment. Aristotle wants each human to utilize reason to figure out what it would mean to live the good in every moment even though he realizes that no one will ever actually come to that knowledge. The process of ever more fully understanding how to utilize the formula is part of the requirement to act human, which always requires reason. This means that Aristotle privileges the process of becoming toward knowledge of the good.

**Indefinite Deferment**

As is obvious from the previous section, that we can never fully know what the good is already determines that we will not be able to fully live according to it. For Plato, mastering each stage of education allows us to access ever higher stages of being where we can ever more perfectly live according to the good. However, again, at the crucial moment he always suggests that there is an ever higher state of existence that humans must reach before being able to live as true and complete human beings according to the human good.

Aristotle abandons this notion of indefinite realms of existence and limits his analysis to this terrestrial realm. In doing so, he perhaps even more strongly argues for indefinite deferment of the good. Since, if nothing else, this realm is imperfect and constantly changing, humans too must constantly move to meet constantly changing conditions. This means that even if they were able to achieve true and complete being and actualize the human good, they would only be able to do so fleetingly before conditions again changed, which would force them to refigure what it means to live the complete, true human life. But even that is a best-case scenario. Normally,
humans will merely be more or less advanced through the becoming from origin to ultimate end, which is complete and true human being. Most humans will spend their whole lives in education and habituation without ever even approaching true, complete human being. And others will not have the nature to ever even begin this process at all.

Movement

If true and complete being is indefinitely deferred, then Plato and Aristotle have to find an alternative way for humans to get at the good or at least to get closer to it. For both, movement is the thing that destroys the state of non-being and brings into existence the state of being that is always unknown and just out of reach. Since complete being is always just out of reach, continued movement is needed. Every movement moves out of one state of non-being and into another one, because the state of being is perpetually elusive. Movement, then, is the thing that facilitates the progressive manifestation of the good. That movement is the thing that brings the good into existence means that the movement itself is part of the good. Living in an existence of true being only happens with movement.

For Plato, the dual movements of the epistemological line simultaneously reveal the shadows as non-being and teach us more what the forms of being are and how we can live according to them. The second of these two movements—the dual movements of the dialectic itself—is the specific movement that finally brings into existence true human being and allows the philosopher to live according to the true human purpose. The movement, then, constitutes the end. It is only when humans are moving that they become philosophers. Subsequently, it is only as the philosophers continue to move that they become disembodied souls in the afterlife, which allows them to more completely and truly take on human being. Further, Plato hints that it will be movement in that next stage of being that will unlock some future realm with an even more
complete human being. In every case, movement is the thing that produces being and produces being ever more completely. Being requires movement. The movement itself, then, is good.

For Aristotle too, we saw that movement was the thing that connected origin with ultimate end. Movement also was movement in the negative space of non-being (in the sense that being is absent in the present), but as soon as this movement began, the negative space of being (in the sense that being did not exist at the beginning of the movement) came into existence. Movement—as long as it was in the right direction—constituted potential being, which, when completed, resulted in actualized being. Movement teaches what constitutes non-being and starts to teach what constitutes being. As this movement moves according to this education, non-being is eliminated and being is brought into existence, even though this process will never be fully completed. Again, then, we see that movement itself is the thing that constantly produces being and constantly creates it more completely and so is itself good.

As we can see, then, in each case, movement is the thing that 1) exposes non-being as non-being and 2) actualizes being. Movement is the thing that brings into existence the conditions necessary to realize the human good. Even more, movement itself is the bringing about of the good, so it itself is the process of the good.

Negative

As is clear from the above, then, Plato and Aristotle both realize the importance of the negative. Actions begin in the negative space of non-being (again, in the sense that being is absent), and those actions (movements) themselves make positive the state of being, which up until that moment was latent and so in the negative space as seen from the opposite direction. In other words, movement shows two things. First, the state that currently exists is a state of non-being and so of non-existence (because being is not complete being). Second, the state of
existence (being) does not exist. Since the state of being is indefinitely deferred, movement always occurs in a negative space. It always shows that what exists is not complete being and that complete being does not (yet) exist.

For Plato, ascension of the epistemological line must always start in the shadows. Movement always begins in the state of non-being. But the movement of the ascension of the line is already turning that negative into a positive, though this is never made complete. Once the top of the line is realized, we see that the afterlife is a more complete being and that even a realized being that has reached the top of the line is an incomplete being. So the movement from non-being to more complete being, which also turns out to be non-being because it is not complete being, continues indefinitely. Though, the complete positive is always deferred, so the movement continues to move from non-being to (less complete) non-being.

Aristotle makes this point explicitly. He conceptualizes definition—which is the description of being and so of the good—as the movement from origin to ultimate end. It is the movement from the negative space of non-being to the as-yet non-existent space of being (the negative as seen from the opposite direction). Again, the movement itself brings the good into the positive, which is as yet in the negative space, but, again, this process is never completed.

Plato and Aristotle, then, recognize the need for continued movement, but only because the positive is never completely and truly reached. They are perfectly happy categorizing the movements as good or bad depending on how close they take someone to the ultimate end of being that they have both conceptualized—even if that conceptualization is never fully known, even by them. Though it is perpetually deferred, it remains possible that the positive will finally and completely close off the negative. It is always possible that non-being will be overcome by being.
As we saw, both Plato (Timaeus, pg. 1225-1226, ln. 1c) and Aristotle (Politics; pg. 2108, ln1328a36-37) explicitly describe their conceptualization of the good political community as the “best possible.” They can do this, because they both utilize a kind of linearity in their thinking and in the movements that they require for realization of the human and political goods. It is true that they both indefinitely push off realization of the end into the future, and this means that there is a great deal of circularity to their required movements. Indeed, Plato’s philosophers must constantly circle back and re-ascend the line, and the movements of the dialectic are themselves circular. Aristotle too describes a kind of circularity in his description of the process of constantly discovering and rediscovering what the actualization of virtue would look like in every moment. However, in the final analysis, both of them do privilege a kind of cause and effect linear motion from the current state of non-being toward some theoretically attainable end state of being. Since they take seriously the unknowable nature of this end state they do not conceptualize the absolutely true answer but instead give the best possible manifestation of the good as their final answer. Aristotle, of course, is more satisfied with this since he thinks that the best possible can continue to teach and move people toward the actual best. Plato, however, is disturbed by this necessity, but sees no good option, at least for this terrestrial realm. But, in the end, they both do argue that the given solution for living on earth is the best possible one.

Memory

The problem, then, is: how can people know that they are moving in the right direction if they do not completely and truly know what the end state of being is? Both Plato and Aristotle agree that remembering is the key to understanding this problem, but they have different ways of conceptualizing this.
Plato, as was clear in the *Timaeus*, believed that all humans could access memory of an event in the primordial past. He argued that if humans could remember the education given to their souls by the Framer at the time of creation, they would be able to reorient their souls toward proper education, which would mean an ascension of the line and the bringing about of true human being. Memory, then, makes it possible for any human at any time to remember the truth (i.e., human being) and take steps to understand it more fully so that they can better live it. Ultimately, Plato believes that each level of comprehension unlocks new possibilities of education, which will teach truth and being more completely, so no one ever fully remembers the education until going through an indefinite number of stages of existence. However, memory is the key to unlocking this whole process of education.

On this point, Aristotle explicitly disagrees. He believes that recollection rather than memory is the distinctly human act. Memory is a mere impression of a past event—much like memory for Plato. Recollection, though, is the ability to follow causal chains from origin to end, where the end is the thing that the person is trying to recall. This is distinctly human, because the process of recollection requires rationality. The goal is to understand the entire chain from beginning to end. Recollection itself is a microcosm of movement in the negative. Recollection is the process of moving each individual human to the complete and true being that was originally intended. It is the process of realizing definition, and so of realizing being.

**Moving Marx**

Since both complete knowledge of and attainment of human being is indefinitely postponed, both Plato and Aristotle encourage a life that moves in the direction of being. This movement begins in the absence of being and it continually negates this absence of being (i.e., negates the state of non-being) even if it never does so completely, which is to say even if the
negation of the negative never becomes the true and complete positive (i.e., true and complete being). To ensure that this movement proceeds in the proper direction, people must remember. This remembrance illuminates (i.e., provides knowledge even if the complete truth is never fully known) that 1) the current state is not as it should be and so is some form of non-being and 2) being is yet in the future because it does not yet exist.

As we will see, Marx takes up these same themes (though the concept of remembrance largely drops out), but he reprioritizes and modifies them. The action of labor is central to Marx. He argues that human labor is unique among species labor because it engages in human production. In short, human production entails the production of individual humans, the human species as a whole, and the entire world—including the non-human species in it—in which those individuals and the species reside. This means that, for Marx, living a human life according to a complete, maximal human being requires the free and conscious production of that being. Action, then, is more dynamic than it was for Plato or even for Aristotle. Action does not merely entail movement toward being, as it does for them. Action for Marx entails actually creating and evolving that being.

This means that movement becomes the organizing concept for Marx. The concept of the unknown does not drop out of his account, but it is not the privileged concept as it is for both Plato and Aristotle. They start with the unknown and reluctantly conclude that the good will never be fully known. Only then do they reluctantly privilege movement and the other concepts that we summarized above. Marx, however, begins with the recognition that being human means acting (laboring) human. He begins with movement.

This movement still occurs in the negative. Marx recognizes that the world and the being that exists is false and must be negated. Communism, he argues, is to be the negation of the
negation. However, since every movement creates new being and creates new understanding of new possibilities of further evolutions of being, the movement must always continue. It is always necessary because being only exists as humans labor—move—to create it. The movement is always a movement that negates what exists because it is not maximally human, and this must be done continually because maximally human being only exists as the labor moves to produce it.

It is clear, then, that the human good maintains an element of the unknown. Marx does claim to know what it means to be human: people must labor humanly. However, every human labor creates new human being. Knowing the completeness of this being is impossible, because that being is constantly evolving.

Likewise, achieving being’s completeness is impossible, because it is constantly evolving. What is more, being requires this constant evolving. This is why movement—laboring—must be constant. As soon as it stops, human being disappears. The continued movement keeps being in existence (keeps creating it). Further, the movement of labor keeps being growing and evolving to be ever more maximally human, because every labor opens new understandings of new ways to labor in new ways. This new labor is itself newly human (with a labor that is a new manifestation of human being) and it allows for the production and evolution of new kinds of being. This means that people must constantly live in the negation. They must constantly labor in ways that negates the being that exists, and this process—movement—of labor brings into existence new kinds of being. As soon as this movement stops, however, new movements are needed or human being—which, again, requires human production—disappears. Communism seeks to be the system that facilitates this constant negative movement, but it itself may not be the system of ultimate negation. It may be possible to evolve even more systems to more fully facilitate negative living.
Chapter 5 | Marx: Sing Me a Human

Introduction

In the “German Ideology” (pg. 31), Marx very clearly states his view of being as it relates to humans: “As individuals express their life, so they are” or again “…the being of men is their actual life process” (pg. 36). As if this is not clear enough, he makes similar claims throughout his works. For example, in his Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 (pg. 276), he equates “essential being” (throughout this chapter all emphases are Marx’s unless indicated otherwise) with “life activity.” It is clear then for Marx, that human being is directly connected with human acting. Acting creates and evolves being. Different kinds of actions create different kinds of evolutions leading to different kinds of being. In this way, he privileges the life of action.

While Marx is like Aristotle in that both privilege action in their account of the good, Marx’s version of action is distinct. In particular, Marx is interested in the action of labor. This particular action is even more effectual than action was for Aristotle. For Aristotle, action was movement that actualized human potentialities (or were incorrect actions that frustrated those actualizations). For Marx, the action of labor determines all of reality. He argues that “the entire so-called history of the world is nothing but the creation of man through human labour” (Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, pg. 305). Labor drives history; the world evolves as labor does. What world exists depends on what kinds of labor humans engage in precisely because different kinds of labor create different kinds of humans who then build different kinds of worlds. Labor facilitates the evolution of humanity. Different actions create different existences. Actions of one kind create human beings of one kind, but different actions would create different human beings altogether. Human nature, then, is pliable, depending on
what kinds of actions—labor—are present. This moves Marx a step further than Aristotle. Aristotle admitted that no one, including himself, could understand everything that entails human nature and so action was an action of discovery as well as of actualization, but he still presumed a stable conception of human being. Marx too has an idea about what human being could be at its best, though he too privileges its unknown character, but he emphasizes that being is always constructed by material conditions and so is different depending on what those material conditions are. The goal is to create the right kinds of material conditions that facilitate human-being evolution at its best.

This malleability of being is what leads Marx to criticize claims both to human essences and to general claims about that which is natural (e.g., German Ideology, pg. 462-463). Indeed, the German Ideology as a whole is a long winded, sarcastic, screed against German thinkers precisely because they 1) relied on abstract theoretical thought rather than lived experience and 2) this led them to think up human essence out of thin air rather than reading the economic conditions that led to the creation of current-day humanity and how different conditions could lead to different kinds of humanity. Marx, on the other hand, does not believe that there is any essence outside of historical context and material conditions. The kind of humanity that we have at any moment in history is the creation of the economic system and the labor that system creates.

Additionally, Marx argues that thinking in terms of human nature is problematic, because it implies that humans will naturally realize their potential (German Ideology, pg. 474-483). A la Kant, if there is some human nature, history should be the natural progression toward the achievement of this nature. History should move in this positive direction. The essential humanness should progressively reveal itself. Marx completely disavows this notion. For Marx,
the being of humanity will evolve differently given different material conditions, which means that only certain material conditions will allow humanity to develop in ways that maximize its humanness—which would be to develop what Marx calls “humanised nature” (Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, pg. 302). Rather than waiting for history to naturally move humanity in the correct direction, humans must intentionally engage in revolutionary acts that will bring about the correct kinds of conditions that allow for the kinds of actions—labor and otherwise—that create “humanised nature.” Thinking in terms of essences that are natural will only frustrate the catalysts needed to spark the revolution that will bring about the economic and material conditions that allow these kinds of truly human actions.

This, of course, begs at least two important questions. First, what are the correct material conditions and how can the current conditions change so that they correspond to that ideal, and second, and more fundamentally, what counts as maximum humanness, or “humanised nature,” especially in light of Marx’s eschewal of natural human essence? In short, the specific action of labor plays an important role in the answer to both questions. Throughout his works, Marx explains what he means on both counts. We will begin this chapter by examining Marx’s answer to the second and more foundational question: what would it mean for humanity to maximize its potential and to live fully human lives? Since labor is so foundational, in the second section, we will explore in more detail Marx’s understanding of labor and why he thinks that labor in particular creates certain kinds of humans. Then we will return to the first question in sections three and four before concluding, in section five, with Marx’s suggestion that there is the potential to create even better material conditions that would lead to even more highly developed “humanised nature.”
As we already began to see and as we will see more fully as we answer these questions, since human being is a constant creation through activity that corresponds to living humanly, the good human life (i.e., the life of maximally “humanised nature”) is not a positive concept that can be known. Instead, the good life comes into being through the movement of activity. The activity negates the being that exists at the beginning of the movement and the activity itself is the bringing into existence of a new kind of being. If the action is a human action, this activity will freely and consciously be an act of human production in this way, and the being that this human activity produces is a human being with a maximally “humanised nature.” However, this human being that the action creates requires continued human activity in order to maintain its existence. Activity that is maximally human is activity that produces—and continues to evolve in its production of—“humanised nature.” The human good, then, is not a positive state that can be known beforehand; it is the movement in the negative space that corresponds to what it means to exist as a human. The good of “humanised nature” is humanized activity. Since this activity produces maximized humanity, the human good is ultimately living humanized labor.

In order for labor to be humanized, though, humanity needs to live in the right kind of economic system that allows and even facilitates that kind of labor. Communism, Marx argues, is this economic system. It too is not a positive state but a negative one. Communism is the economic system that negates, criticizes, and eliminates everything from previous economic systems that kept labor from being humanized. This elimination provides laborers with the space necessary to labor humanly, which is to say to freely and consciously produce maximally human species-being.

Whether or not this economic system is the final one cannot be known by Marx. Humanized labor must proceed in the communist system before humanity can determine whether
or not a more humanized economic system is required for even more humanized labor to take
place and therefore even more maximally “humanised nature” to be evolved. In fact, throughout
his theory, Marx privileges acts of revolutionary struggle—politics—that criticize and tear down
the existing structure rather than fully develop a positive conception of the ideal society. This
society cannot be known; it can only be created through humanized labor. This must be a
continual act that has its genesis in history and continually reoccurs in history. This negative
process of creation is all there is, so there cannot be a fully developed, positive conception that
precedes this humanized action. Since this is true, Marx cannot be sure that communism is the
economic system that facilitates maximally humanized labor. He leaves open the possibility that
there will be yet other, more humanized societies with other, more humanized economic
structures after communism.

**Acting Human, Being Human**

*Human Being, Human Labor: Productive, Conscious, and Free*

Like those before him, Marx builds his conception of what it means to be human by
contrasting humans with animals. For Marx, there are a number of distinctions between humans
and animals (e.g., *German Ideology*, pg. 31-32; *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*,
pg. 275-277), but the first distinction—and the one that ultimately undergirds the other major
distinctions—is that humans “produce their means of subsistence” (*German Ideology*, pg. 31).
Human labor differs from animal labor in that humans can be productive in their labor. Marx
admits that animals also produce—they build nests and dams and the like—but this production is
qualitatively different from the production of human labor (*Economic and Philosophic
Manuscripts of 1844*, pg. 276-277). Animal productivity merely satisfies their means of
subsistence as it relates to their material, bodily needs while human productivity also produces
(or, more precisely, has the capability to produce) a certain “material life” (*German Ideology*, pg. 31). Labor that is human labor would allow humanity to live “in a world” that they themselves have “created” (*Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, pg. 277). In other words, animals produce for their own individual existence whereas humans produce—or can produce if they are living according to their maximum human potential—“universally,” (*Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, pg. 276) which is to say with their and all other species in mind. Humans can produce even when their individual existence is not at stake. They can produce with an eye toward changing the material conditions of their and the rest of humankind’s (and the rest of the species) existence. They can produce in ways that changes reality and creates worlds. They can produce humanity and even non-human species. Animals cannot.

Humans, then, have a consciousness that animals do not possess. They are conscious of their individual existence but also of the ways in which that individual existence is tied to the wider, universal existence of the larger species (e.g., *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, pg. 275-277). Human beings are capable of understanding how their own actions are both shaped by and contribute to the shaping of the human species. Further, they can understand how the human species relates to and can shape the various non-human species. Fully living according to this consciousness, then, would allow humans to labor and to produce in ways that develop the human species (and even non-human species) as a whole.

Humans, then, have a conscious species-existence even as they have a conscious individual existence. Marx speaks of species-existence in much the same terms that he speaks of the individual human existence. He says that “conscious activity is man’s species-character” (*Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, pg. 276). Just as activity, and labor activity in particular, creates certain individual being, it also develops certain characteristics in the species
that creates certain species being (existence). When the life activity—the labor—of humanity is properly human, which is to say that it is conscious of the ways that the labor produces individual and species character or existence, then that labor is itself the conscious evolution and development of the characteristics that comprise human-species existence. As we will see in the second section on labor, human labor always creates and evolves both species and individual being. Labor that is maximally human consciously produces in this way.

This is the centerpiece of Marx’s perhaps most crucial concept: species-being. Humans have a certain consciousness of their own individual existence (and recovering a true, humanized individuality remains a central part of Marx’s project), but—and this is what separates them from animals—they also have a consciousness that they are a part of a species. Further, they understand the relationship between the two. Namely, that the two are mutually constitutive. Each is shaped by and evolves the other. This consciousness is what gives humans the capability to produce in ways that animals cannot. Consciousness of the relationship between the species and the individual being allows humans to consciously labor in ways that develop and evolve their own individual existence but also the development and evolution of the existence of the species and the world in which both live.

This means, then, that human consciousness also holds the promise that humans can freely labor according to their own wills. Throughout his works (Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, pg. 236; German Ideology, pg. 77; etc.), Marx remains committed to true individuality. He wants humans to lay hold of their ability to act according to their individual wills. However, this is always done in the context of the concept of species-being. Indeed, the individual independent of society is a myth (Economic Manuscripts of 1857-1858, pg. 17-18), so individuality must always recognize the collective elements of even their individualness, but
Individuality also makes up elements of the collective, the species. Indeed, Marx celebrates the fact that truly human labor rewards “all the natural, spiritual, and social variety of individual activity” (Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts, pg. 236). This difference and variety in individual labor must flourish if the collective species is to thrive, because it allows for the constant evolution of the species in new and different ways (Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, pg. 300; Note by Marx).

Individuality, then, remains an important component of species-being and of Marx’s larger project. Here, this manifests itself in the human ability to labor according to their own wills. Animals cannot labor in such ways, so this individual willing is a uniquely human trait. Since humans have a species-being consciousness, they can see both species and individual objectives and they can will them in different ways. Animals labor to satisfy their individual needs alone, but humans can will actions, even if those actions do not immediately further their own individual objectives. They can will actions that further the objectives of the species and can even labor “in accordance with the standard of every species” (Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, pg. 277). Humans can freely will acts of production that further the objectives of all species, which, of course, is to the benefit of the individual in the long term if not in the short term. They can become conscious of the values that underpin this inter-species development, and they can will according to those standards. Humans can, for example, labor according to the standards of beauty to create a beautiful world (Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, pg. 277). Creating this beautiful world may force individuals to labor in ways that are outside of their immediate individual needs, but in laboring in ways that create beauty, the human species (and perhaps non-human species as well) benefit from living in the
created beautiful world. In benefiting the human species in this way, the individual will benefit too.

Humans with a species-being consciousness can will labor to be productive in these ways. Productivity in this case is a human productivity because it produces certain kinds of human being and certain kinds of human worlds (we will see how this works in the next section). Animals, which lack the species-being consciousness, cannot labor in these productive ways. They cannot freely will in the same way that humans can.

Humans, then, in contradistinction with animals, have the capability of free, conscious life activities. Given Marx’s foundational conception that activity—and in particular labor—creates certain kinds of being, then, they have the capability of freely, consciously willing into existence both their own individual being and the greater species being. Since this is what sets humans apart, this conscious, free life activity that creates the world that they live in and creates the kind of people (and other species) who then live in it, is exactly what it means to live humanly (German Ideology, pg. 82). Animals cannot evolve themselves in such free and conscious ways. This is what distinguishes them from humans. Humans can only live as humans—as distinct from animals—when they freely and consciously labor in ways that produce new kinds of individual and species being. Otherwise, their distinctly human existence devolves into an animal one, a condition that is particularly degrading because it could be otherwise (Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, pg. 274-275).

This means that the human good is both an active and an iterative process. True human being is only created when labor actively brings it into existence. That is to say, when humans act humanly. And the human good entails constantly laboring in free and conscious ways. Since labor is always being-creating, this labor constantly changes the meaning of species-being
existence. Labor constantly evolves what it means to be human (in a species sense) as well as what it means to be an individual member of that species. Completing the feedback loop, then, each new evolution of species-being leads to new, more maximally human consciousness and so new capabilities to freely will new forms of labor, which then themselves will evolve the species-being in new ways. This means that “humanised nature” only exists in movement, in action. Further, every action already creates new conditions that must be met with new actions in order to continue to be conscious, free actions that are according to “humanised nature.” There is never a stable, positive definition or manifestation of human being. It is always the condition that is created through the truly human actions and these actions constantly change the conditions and hence the actions that count as truly human.

The continued movements of action are critical. “Humanised nature” comes into existence in the negative space of movement that is activity that consciously and freely is changing the conditions and the being in which the movements started. The activity between two distinct kinds of human being is where “humanised nature”—as realization of conscious and free labor that evolves being—is brought into being. Each new iteration of being requires ever further labor activity to continue the realization of “humanised nature,” and this continued laboring continues to evolve, develop, and create ever new iterations of human being.

**Human Needs**

Because humans can freely and consciously labor, they have different needs than do animals. Both humans and animals need to eat, drink, and procreate in order to preserve themselves individually and as a species, but humans have the capability to do it differently *(Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, pg. 274-275)*. They can eat, drink, and procreate in human ways. Humans can think beyond individual preservation and they can take
the species (and other species) into account. They no longer need to eat or procreate just to perpetuate their life or their DNA. They can freely and consciously choose to eat or procreate in ways that develop the species and their individual lives in ways that they wish. Laboring in this way, then, is a truly human need. Both humans and animals need food, but humans have the further need—if they are to manifest maximal humanity—of creatively engaging in the process and creatively changing themselves in the process. Humans can labor and produce a human meal. Eating is no longer merely an exercise of calorie intake, it can be an activity of human labor. This human labor creates new kinds of human being.

How humans labor really does change everything…down to the very senses they possess and the ways in which those senses are sensitized. For Marx, the goal is to create a humanized nature with humanized senses. These would be senses with “human sensibility” that “are capable of human gratification” (*Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, pg. 301). This is only possible with truly human labor as described above (and which we will elaborate in the next section). When that labor occurs, the human senses change and become different from the senses of animals. The ear becomes a human ear and the eye becomes a human eye. It is now possible to have “a musical ear” and “an eye for beauty of form” (*Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, pg. 301). Humans can develop senses that detect and appreciate ever more beauty. These senses can become more acute. Likewise, cooking in human ways would produce heightened culinary senses of taste, sight, and smell. Cooking can be productive in the animal sense. In that case, it would meet the physical need for food. But cooking can also be productive in the human sense. The chef can freely and consciously labor with the specific intent of evolving species-being in specific ways. In this case, the material need for food is still met, but species-being has also been produced, so the human need has been met as well.
This evolution of senses is not limited to the “five senses,” however; it extends also to the “mental senses, the practical senses (will, love, etc.)” (Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, pg. 302). For example, instead of merely procreating, humans can labor to produce heightened senses of loving and being loved. This can include creativity in the act of sex itself, but it extends well beyond that. Humans can treat other people in ways that are about more than merely wooing them to engage in sex. They can fully develop themselves so they love and care for others and so others wish to love and care for them. This love, then, can extend beyond the realm of sex altogether and can be extended to people who are not and never will be sexual partners. Now people can labor not merely to fulfill a need by buying sex (through prostitutes or, more benignly, through gifts and the like), but they can labor with the specific intent of developing love. Keeping with the cooking example, they can labor on a meal, not because the way to the heart is the stomach, but because cooking and eating together can be a uniquely human experience where all parties enjoy the social activity and the ways that the activity develops their individual character as well as the general species character. When we examine labor in depth in the section below, we will see how all of this works, but what is clear now is that, in the case of both kinds of senses (physical and mental), humanized labor can create humanized senses: a “humanised nature.” Since humans have the ability to labor in this way, they have the need to do so. Otherwise they are not truly existing as humans.

As was already hinted at, underlying this, though, is a second category of needs that are distinctly human. Of course, individual humans need to eat, drink, and procreate in order to survive, but they, unlike animals, have a further need, because, as we saw, humans have a universal consciousness of and connection with their and other species that animals lack. As
such, humans have a social need that is different from an animal’s need, which is always individual.

Developing the senses, as the cooking example showed, is never a merely individual endeavor, and, in fact, often requires social interaction. Taste, for example, requires a relationship between the taster and the thing being tasted. Likewise, love must occur in a relationship. Further, developing these human senses to be more human often requires social interaction. The sense of love, for example, cannot evolve except through the interaction between two or more people.

This means that the evolution of human relations creates new kinds of human being and new kinds of human worlds. Human relations—“seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling, thinking, observing, experiencing, wanting, acting, loving” (Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, pg. 299-300)—produce different realities; they are “the manifestation of the human reality” (Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, pg. 300). As individuals evolve, the way they relate (through taste, love, etc.) to both individual members of human and non-human species and to those species as a whole also changes. The way they taste or love changes. This changes the human species as a whole: that is to say, how the species experiences love, taste, etc. This further changes the individual’s taste, love, etc. In this way, individual being and species being co-evolve. Humans cannot engage in this process singly; they need social interaction. As such, humans have a collective, social need that animals do not have.

This is why Marx claims contra Feuerbach that “the essence of man is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of the social relations” (“Theses on Feuerbach, pg. 4). Human essence is not some positive category to be conceptualized and adopted in some particular, abstract sense. Instead, essence is the “ensemble” of all interactions
of individuals in the human species. It is the activities of individual humans committed in conjunction with other individual humans; it is social. Essence, then, is a kind of blended harmony that comes about through the combined iterated actions of all of the members of the species. Acting according to “humanised nature” is not an individual action; it must be communal. Human actions must always be done in community in order to be truly human actions.

This means that the overall “development” of humanity—how far it actually is freely laboring and hence achieving “humanised nature”—can be determined by looking at the social relationships between human beings, particularly those between men and women (Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, pg. 296). Since the species-being is the underlying component of human nature or essence—it is the underlying component that separates humanity from other species, the most natural or essential existence of humanity must include relations with other members of the species (and eventually with all species). And these relations must be human ones, which means according to the standards of human being. That means that the relations must be in accordance with the standards of the species-being themselves. The relationships must promote the free and conscious laboring that develops the species-being. How far humanity has come in developing its human being is mirrored in the kinds of relations that exist between humans. These relationships must promote human beingness (free labor) in all parties, so that all are freely and consciously working to develop the being of both halves of the species-being. The individual cannot take on “humanised nature” without also working to develop “humanised nature” in the species as a whole and all of the individual members of it. Humans, then, cannot develop individually. They must do so in the context of the species. Their needs, likewise, are not merely individual but also social.
Marx provides an example of what he is talking about when he looks to French communists who gather together in order to discuss “theory, propaganda, etc.” (Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, pg. 313). At first the theory, propaganda, etc. is the end or goal of the associating. However, the “smoking, drinking, eating, etc.,” while at first being the mere means that facilitated the associating so that the end—theory—could be produced, quickly became the end itself (Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, pg. 313). In the course of their time together, comradeship kicks in and the “[a]ssociation, society, and conversation” becomes the end. These communists with “their work-hardened bodies” are able to relax in the presence of their fellow human beings, and when they consciously and freely labor on that associating, they produce “the brotherhood of man” and so “the nobility of man shines upon” them (Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, pg. 313). They recognize that labor that is truly human labor needs to produce human relationships. The socializing is the nobility; it is the “humanised nature.” They no longer drink in order to loosen the tongue and grease the philosophical wheels; they drink so they can experience human existence with fellow human beings. Now the eating, drinking, etc. is no longer animal but human. It no longer is the means to fulfilling a need; it is made the end need itself. It has been humanized.

This is the difference between microwaving some hot dogs and spending the evening collectively and creatively cooking a gourmet meal with friends. In both cases, the physical need of nourishment is met, but only in the latter is the distinctly human need for human community also met, and only in the latter is labor developing new manifestations of human species-being (new culinary tastes or smells, for example). Now the goal is not to satisfy some base need, the goal is to live human lives with other human beings so that all involved adapt a more “humanised nature.” As a result, the labor is free—it is no longer confined by the realm of
necessity, whereby nature and other external forces determine the ends; now individuals can live in a realm of freedom where they posit their own aims aside from any necessity—and humanity is produced (Economic Manuscripts of 1857-1858, pg. 530).

This is what Marx means by the “new mode of production” and the “new object of production” that creates “a new manifestation of the forces of human nature and a new enrichment of human nature” (Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, pg. 306). Humans labor in new ways—in human ways—and these new labors explicitly and consciously lead to the creation and evolution of new kinds of human beings (with new culinary smells and tastes, for example, or with new social sensibilities). Different kinds of production (the human kind of production that comes from humanized labor) produce different kinds of humans.

In short, labor creates new kinds of humans and these new kinds of humans can relate to the world and all that is in it in new and different ways. This allows them to then again labor in new and different ways thereby creating new and different humans. This is what Marx means when he claims that “The forming of the five senses is a labour of the entire history of the world down to the present” (Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, pg. 302) or again “the entire so-called history of the world is nothing but the creation of man through human labour” (Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, pg. 305). Throughout history, human beings are created and human senses are developed, and the shape that this development takes depends on what kind of labor exists. It is clear, then, that human needs and human senses are anthropological rather than ontological (Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, pg. 322). They evolve and develop according to laboring activities that exist in particular moments of history with particular material conditions. There is not some positive conception of human being that is fully known; it is not ontological. Instead, human being constantly develops as
humans constantly act (labor) humanly in ever changing ways; it is anthropological. Ever changing labor leads to ever changing production and ever changing human nature (*Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, pg. 306).

In the next section, we will explain what it is about labor in particular that gives it this power, then we will examine how different kinds of labor come into being and how we can create a world that facilitates human labor. So far, however, we can see that human being is not an ontological concept. It is not a positive category that can be conceptualized in advance. Instead, it is an anthropological concept that must be worked out through the movement of action. What “humanised nature” actually is remains unknown, and in fact, it can always be further developed through the further achievement of human labor. Indeed, truly human labor is always the movement of negation and criticism. It is always eliminating the being that exists and creating a more developed “humanised nature” in its place. And this creation is always an act of labor.

**Labor: Sing Us a Human and You’re the Piano Man**

Everything from the preceding section is summarized by Marx: “This sum of productive forces, capital funds and social forms of intercourse, which every individual and every generation finds in existence as something given, is the real basis of what the philosophers have conceived as ‘substance’ and ‘essence of man’” (*German Ideology*, pg. 54). Everything—including what is taken to be the real essence of humanity—comes about as a result of intercourse between humans. In particular, Marx is concerned with the productive forces at work in this intercourse; he is interested in labor. Productive forces go to work “reshaping” humanity at large and particular individual human beings (*German Ideology*, pg. 50). Different kinds of labor produce different kinds of human being. This active development and evolution is the
unique element of human productivity. This much we already established in the previous section. But what is it about labor that gives it this incredible power? That is what we must take up next. Doing so will clarify the specifics and explain how Marx believes that human being is created and how it can be evolved.

In his discussion of alienation (a concept that we will elucidate in the next section), Marx makes clear that “the act of production”—or the activity of labor itself—is complicit in the process of alienation (Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, pg.273-274). Throughout the Manuscripts, Marx discusses at length the alienating relationship between objects and people, but here he is introducing a new idea: that labor itself—the process of laboring—is complicit in alienation. In general, he means that labor, as an active process, has a “direct” relationship with the worker, production, and the object produced (Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, pg. 274). This direct relationship is one of constitution. Labor itself is constitutive.

Before we can see how alienation enters the equation, we need to explore how Marx thinks the process of labor is involved in the lives and the evolution of workers. In his works, he often explains this process as it relates to alienation, because he usually elaborates on labor under capitalism. However, the general principles behind it are applicable for all kinds of labor in all kinds of economic systems, because the crux of the relationship between labor and alienation deals with Marx’s definition of labor itself. Marx gives—albeit somewhat implicitly—his best definition of the general concept “labor” here in this context in the Manuscripts. Here he argues that “the labour process” entails the expulsion of “physical and mental energy” (Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, pg. 275). Marx equates this action of energy expulsion to the worker’s “personal life—for what is life but activity?” (Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, pg. 275). This is the core of Marx’s analysis, but its deceptive brevity conceals much
that needs explicating. On the surface, in this quote, Marx argues that life is nothing more than a series of activities. To live is to act. Labor, like any other activity, is expression of life.

But Marx is saying quite a bit more than just that. A few pages later he claims that “When one speaks of labour, one is directly dealing with man himself” (Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, pg. 281). Labor is not merely about the life that the worker builds; it is about the worker’s being as well. Marx explains this when in a brief interlude in the Economic Manuscripts of 1857-1858 (pg. 530), he allows himself a bit of a “philosophical” rather than “economic” discussion of Adam Smith’s conception of labor. In doing so, he argues that labor that is conscious (has its “social character posited”) and free (where the laborer is truly a “subject”)—i.e., labor that is truly human rather than the “slave labour, serf labour and wage labour” that is prevalent throughout history—can “be the self-realisation of the individual” (Economic Manuscripts of 1857-1858, pg. 530). Labor is always constitutive, but maximized human labor always produces the realization of the individual; it produces a “humanised nature,” which is to say humans that are freely and consciously producing—realizing—their human potential. This human labor may not always be fun or amusing or easy, but it is related to liberty and happiness precisely because it allows for the realization of “humanised nature.” Labor always creates a certain kind of being. The right kind of labor creates the best kind of being.

This is implicit in Marx’s use of physical and mental energy rather than physical or mental activity. Labor, like any activity, requires the expenditure of energy. In the process of labor, pieces of the worker—the worker’s physical and mental energies, which are “his personal life” leave the body and are exerted on the object. This is what Marx means when he says that there is a direct relationship between the worker (through labor) and the object. In another context, he claims that instruments of labor, which include the human body (Economic
Manuscripts of 1857-1858, pg. 23), are “destroyed”—i.e., “transferred to the product and transcended in its original form”—in the process of production and thereby become part of the value of the product (Economic Manuscripts of 1857-1858, pg 239). Labor, through expulsion of energy, entails the transfer of the worker into the object. The worker’s physical and mental self transfers into the object being produced. Earlier in the Economic Manuscripts of 1857-1858 (pg. 226), Marx explicitly ties his account of this process to the exertion of energy:

On the other hand, labour is likewise being consumed by being employed, set in motion and so a definite quantity of the muscular strength, etc., of the worker is spent, whereby he exhausts himself. But it is not merely consumed; at the same time, it is converted from the form of activity and fixed, materialised, into that of object, of rest; as change of object, it changes its own form and from activity becomes being.

In the process of labor, the worker expends physical and mental energy—this energy is consumed and a part of the laborer is “destroyed.” This consumption of energy, though, is what creates the material. Energy is consumed, but this consumption leads to production of the object. In this way, energy is converted into matter. The activity of labor produces being.

This idea, of course, was the foundation of Locke’s description of labor and also of his justification for the acquisition of private property. Marx goes further than Locke, though. He explains how labor changes the object and its being, but he also explains how labor changes the workers and their being. The demeaning labor of capitalism creates “deformity” and “stupidity” and “cretinism” in the worker and makes the worker “more barbarous” (Economic and Philosphic Manuscripts of 1844, pg. 273). The labor changes not only the life activity, life prospects, etc. of the worker, it also changes the life, the being, of the worker. The worker’s body and mind are altered by the labor. While Marx discusses this in terms of the alienated labor of capitalism, the principles can be generalized, because all labor—and indeed all activity—involves the release of physical and mental energies and so has similarly powerful effects.
Indeed, Marx gives examples of this change in workers’ being when he implicitly acknowledges two general categories of corporeal changes that any kind of labor brings (Economic Manuscripts of 1857-1858, pg. 248-249). His description of it shows that this is a very corporeal process. First, human beings require daily sustenance to maintain bodily integrity. Marx states, “he must consume a certain quantity of provisions, replace the consumed blood, etc.” (Economic Manuscripts of 1857-1858, pg. 249). This need to replenish that which is lost is always true, but with the increased energy expulsion of labor, this need is heightened. As labor transfers the worker’s body and mind into the object, that body and mind must be replenished. Marx acknowledges this on a very corporeal level: even the blood that is consumed must be replaced. Bodies and minds change shape through the labor process.

There is a second way that this process is corporeal, however. Labor has a general “wear and tear” (Economic Manuscripts of 1857-1858, pg. 216, 249) on bodies and minds. Labor, particularly the habitual, repetitive, homogenized labor of capitalism, changes the body and mind in additive ways. Carpal tunnel is but one obvious example, but sitting and typing at a desk all day changes the body and mind in many ways beyond the injury to nerves. Obesity from physical inactivity or degenerative eyesight from staring at a computer screen are but two other possible changes of the body and mind that come from the wear and tear of repetitive activity. Though not wear and tear per se, we can extend this logic out and see that it is possible, though Marx would not predict this kind of benefit from labor under capitalism, that increased mental creativity could come from the constant overcoming of new challenges that certain deskwork—graphic design, perhaps—brings. In any case, the process of labor—no matter what kind it is—changes bodies and minds. They take different shapes and they become more or less capable of acting in certain ways.
Marx discusses the ways that labor can change humanity in a different way, though. Whereas this first effect of labor changes individual bodies and minds, this next effect of labor changes the bodies and minds of both the individual and the species. In his discussion of the economic debate over what counts as productivity in labor, Marx introduces an example of a pianist that indirectly illuminates his thoughts on labor’s ability to produce humanity. In figuring out whether or not the piano player is productive in the labor of piano playing, Marx draws a distinction between production and production “in the economic sense” (*Economic Manuscripts of 1857-1858*, pg. 231). The pianist’s labor can be indirectly productive in the economic sense, as some economists have argued, by creating a new need in the hearers of the music, which capitalists can capitalize on through new “material production” (*Economic Manuscripts of 1857-1858*, pg. 231). For example, a new song could inspire the creation of a new genre whereby both the song and the genre can be packaged in physical or digital forms that consumers can buy or download. In this case, the pianist is economically productive because increased economic gain was produced.

However, the pianist can be productive in another sense. The musician can “produce music and satisfy our musical ear” (*Economic Manuscripts of 1857-1858*, pg. 231). More than this, in playing this new music, it is possible that the piano player “gives a more positive, vital tuning to our individuality” (*Economic Manuscripts of 1857-1858*; pg. 231). Again this can be a manufactured tuning, which is merely the artificial creation of a new need for capitalists to exploit for their own gain at the expense of the ones whose needs are being manipulated. He makes that clear here and elsewhere (e.g., *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, pg. 306). In itself, this would still show the productive power of labor: a certain kind of human is created. However, it is also possible that labor can be done properly and so positively tune
individual and species being to create a more completely “humanised nature.” Without playing the song, the pianist will never train the ear to hear the musical beauty of that song. The human ear is deprived of developing in that distinctly human way. Neither the piano player nor those that hear the song could train the ear through some theoretical contemplation of the song. The pianist had to labor to compose and then play the song. Only through the labor could the human ear be trained to be more musical. Through this musical labor, the pianist produces a more humanly musical ear. This kind of humanized labor is producing a certain kind of human being. Again, this is what is unique about human productivity; it can produce humanity.

The example of the piano player introduces something else, though. Labor is constitutive of being not merely because energies are being expended and bodies and minds are being changed. In this case, one person’s labor can change another person’s being and even the being of the species as a whole. The pianist’s playing of new music can tune the ear of the listener and make it a more musical ear. This might be possible because the new song was played with a new kind of mastery or was played on a better instrument, so a familiar sound was played more beautifully than ever before. Or, more dramatically, this new song could be a new sound that was played in such a way that the sound was accepted as beautiful for the first time. This raises the question whether dissonance is actually unappealing or if musicians have not yet produced music that has sufficiently tuned the ears of the listeners to recognize the beauty of it. In either case, both individual listeners and the species as a whole are taught how to better hear more of the beautiful. A new kind of humanity—a humanity of increased musical sensitivities—is produced.

This kind of consciously free production of human being that comes from truly human labor, though, is only possible if production in the economic sense is absent and human production becomes the explicit and conscious goal (Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of
Humans must freely and consciously choose to labor humanly. As Marx notes, on the one hand, “It is obvious that the human eye enjoys things in a way different from the crude, non-human eye; the human ear different from the crude ear, etc.” (Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, pg. 301). As we have seen, humans have human eyes and ears with different possibilities and needs than non-human eyes and ears. However, on the other hand, in order to function in maximally human ways—in other words in order to fully manifest “humanised nature” with humanized sense organs with humanized sensitivities that are maximally different from non-human sense organs and sensitivities—these particularly human eyes and ears must be cultivated (i.e., produced):

Only through the objectively unfolded richness of man’s essential being is the richness of subjective human sensibility (a musical ear, an eye for beauty of form—in short, senses capable of human gratification, senses affirming themselves as essential powers of man) either cultivated or brought into being (Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, pg. 301).

Humans do not naturally acquire human eyes or ears. They must be created through the process of human labor. This can only be done, however, if they, and not economic aggrandizement, are the goal of production. If acquisition of private property is the goal cultivated (Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, pg. 300) or if worries about subsistence is the focus (Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, pg. 302), then the musical ear will never be cultivated. Labor will have different aims; it will not be about the free and conscious evolution of species-being. The pianist must be freely and consciously laboring to produce a sense of the musical and the listener must be freely and consciously laboring to produce a sense of the musical or a musical ear will not be produced. As Marx argues, assuming “man to be man and his relationship to the world to be a human one,” then there is only one course of action: “If you want to enjoy art, you must be an artistically cultivated person” (Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, pg. 326). If human beings are acting according to a fully “humanised nature,” then they
will be laboring to produce these maximally human elements within themselves. The only way to develop themselves as maximally human is to labor at it. You cannot buy a musical ear; you must labor at it. When all parties (piano makers, pianists, piano listeners, etc.) are consciously and freely laboring to develop and evolve human being, then that labor is truly human labor. As we saw before, this, then, sets off a feedback loop. Truly human labor creates new kinds of humanity—in this case a humanity with a more musical ear—and this new kind of humanity can creatively find new ways to consciously and freely labor and thereby produce new kinds of human being. In this case, evolving the ear to be more musical opens the possibility for pianists to freely and consciously labor in new ways—maybe even in ways that are today heard as dissonant—that will produce an even more musical ear. And the process continues without end.

When this labor is completely human, the pianist starts to engage in labor with the explicit purpose of 1) meeting needs and 2) evolving people to better realize “humanised nature.” Pianists create music not merely to satisfy their own needs—either physical through the production of music that is traded for the means needed to acquire food or human through the production of music to evolve their own musical ears—but to satisfy the needs of the species-being. It is about developing themselves and those around them. It is about encouraging others to do the same. Fully humanized labor is labor that is freely and consciously species-being labor.

Marx notes that laboring in this way does not guarantee the desired results. For example, he argues that love can be unrequited no matter how much people labor to make themselves lovable, but this is a “misfortune” (Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, pg. 326). In any case, the only hope people have of living humanly is to consciously and freely labor toward their own individual and the general species development.
It is no wonder, then, that Marx denounces philosophers for theorizing essences. Both individual human beings and the species as a whole are physically and mentally constructed and they act and live as they do because of the kinds of labor that they are engaged in. What appears to be unchanging essence is really the product of the activity of labor. The goal, for Marx, is to have labor that freely and consciously (i.e., humanly) produces species-being. For this to happen, though, there must be certain economic conditions, and these economic conditions do not currently exist.

**Economic Conditions and Labor**

As the ending of the previous section already began to show, labor is not always human labor. In other words, different economic systems and material conditions produce very different kinds of labor. Marx argues that all previous economic systems failed to facilitate human labor. Communism will be the economic system that will, for the first time, facilitate humanized labor. This system will be the elimination of everything in the previous systems that disallowed humanized labor. Before briefly examining what communism needs to eliminate and why, we must examine what labor under capitalism—the current economic system—looks like and why the characteristics of capitalism disallow humanized labor. Illuminating Marx’s theory on the connection between capitalism and dehumanized labor will further concretize our understanding of his theory of labor and human development. Our elucidation of the revolution that will overthrow this economic system will also introduce another important component to the discussion: the process of laboring to change the economic system is itself an important component of truly human labor and so itself is an important component of truly human production. This will set us up to examine the political components of Marx’s theory.
Labor Under Capitalism

Under capitalism, economic productivity is the only real productive power of labor: the “use value of labour exists only for capital;” “Labour is mere exchange value for the worker” (Economic Manuscripts of 1857-1858, pg. 232). Laborers exchange with capitalists, and this is an economic exchange. They trade their labor for money, so their labor per se is no longer of use to them, only the money is. Through the trade, capitalists gain the use of labor; though they too limit this use to economic production. For a set price, laborers give the capitalists complete authority over the activity, production, and objects of all of their labor for a set period of time (Economic Manuscripts of 1857-1858, pg. 234, 248).

It turns out that the laborer loses on both halves of this exchange, but as we will see, capitalists are not really winners either. It is obvious that laborers lose something in the first half of the exchange—exchange always requires people to give something up in order to get something in return—but they lose much more than the surface of the exchange promised. By giving capitalists complete authority over their labor, laborers completely surrender all of labor’s “creative power” (Economic Manuscripts of 1857-1858, pg. 233). Labor is no longer a conscious and free activity by the laborer that creatively evolves and produces new kinds of species-being. In other words, it is no longer a human activity. Now labor is merely about producing capital increase for the capitalists in exchange for money to be used by laborers to meet their needs. Labor as exchange value, then, also exchanges human productivity for economic productivity. That component that distinguishes humans from animals is erased. Laborers—and, as we will see, to a lesser extent capitalists—cease living according to “humanised nature.”

In this exchange, the laborer is reduced to a “human commodity” (Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, pg. 284) rather than a human being. The laborer becomes
another component of the production of goods that are then sold for a profit, and their labor is nothing more than a commodity that adds to the value of the goods produced (e.g., Economic Manuscripts of 1857-1858 pg. 239). Lacking capital, however, they are forced to labor in these ways in order to ensure that their material needs are met. Knowing this, the capital owners take full advantage of the situation and laborers become akin to slaves (e.g., Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, pg. 237) and prostitutes (Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, pg. 294-295; see especially, fn. pg. 295). They labor as the capitalists’ desire for the capitalists’ gain. Under capitalism, there is no choice, however; workers’ options are either destitution or subordination (Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, pg. 236). They either exchange their labor—and the control over their labor—for the money that they need to subsist or they perish.

As was already suggested, the situation is much more dire than this, though. Not only do laborers give up control of their labor and not only are they forced to labor as animals rather than as creative humans, the laborers also give up control over their bodies and minds. Since labor produces certain kinds of humans and since the capitalists and not the workers control the labor of the workers, capitalists and not workers control the bodies and minds of the workers and, what is even more sinister, how the bodies and minds of the workers develop and evolve. This is ultimately why Marx uses the metaphors of the slave and the prostitute. It is not merely because laborers are subordinated; it is because someone else decides what happens to their bodies and minds. Since the goal of labor under capitalism is economic production rather than human production, the resulting evolution of laborers’ bodies and minds is predictably poor. As we saw, under alienated labor, workers are deformed and made stupid and barbarous (Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, pg. 273). They are not allowed to utilize labor creatively, so
they cannot creatively evolve their being. Laborers mindlessly produce for capitalists and slowly but surely lose all that is distinctly human in them until they devolve into a “mentally and physically dehumanized being” (*Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, pg. 284). And, since all they produce is economic production, they further devolve into animals (*Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, pg. 275-275, 308). Human beings are not productive in human ways but, like animals, produce merely to satisfy material needs.

This, then, is the crux of Marx’s idea of alienation (e.g., *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, pg. 270ff). First, workers, through their labor, transfer pieces of their body and mind into the objects that they produce, yet the capitalists alone control what happens to those objects. Parts of the laborers’ bodies and minds become separated off from them and they lose control over them. Those pieces of themselves become alienated from them. Second, someone else controls workers’ labor. Since labor is life activity, laborers are alienated from their activity and their life. Third, and even more problematic in the long run, the worker “does not develop freely his physical and mental energy but mortifies his body and ruins his mind,” which means that in the alienated labor of capitalism “he belongs, not to himself, but to another” (*Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, pg. 274). In controlling the workers’ labor, someone else determines what happens to workers bodies and minds and how those bodies and minds develop. This means that the bodies and minds belong to another; they are alienated from the true possessor. This means that workers are alienated from their being. This alienation turns “Man’s species-being, both nature and his species-property, into a being alien to him, into a means for his individual existence. It estranges from man his own body, as well as external nature, and his spiritual aspect, his human aspect.” (*Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, pg. 276). In giving up control of the creative power of their labor, they give up creative
control of the development and evolution of both their individual and the species being. Both halves of species-being are alienated. Someone else controls the development of the laborer’s individual evolution and someone else controls the evolution of the species. Fourth, this alienates humans from each other. The species is no longer a social club of mutual evolution through free and conscious activity; instead it is a collection of people alienated by and alienating each other. In short, then, alienation is an alienation of species-being development. Someone else controls the process of evolution and this evolution is not a humanized evolution.

Under capitalism, capitalists are the ones who control this labor, and they use this control to maximize their economic gain. While it seems like this is to their benefit, it turns out that capitalists lose too. Rather than realizing “humanised nature” through labor that evolves species-being to be maximally human, the capitalists who control the evolution do so according to the standards of economic production. This type of labor maintains certain qualities of human production (certain kinds of humans are produced), but this is not maximally human, because human production is the not explicit aim of labor and so labor is not maximally free and conscious. The result is the creation of individual beings and a species as a whole that is not maximally human.

This means that even though the capitalists control the process of the evolution of species-being, they still do not do so as maximum humans. Their goal is economic rather than human production, so they organize labor to maximize profit rather than humanness and do not themselves engage in truly human labor and so do not evolve their own individual being (let alone the larger species-being) in maximally human ways. The capitalists too lose in this, though not nearly so much as the laborers. They are the ones in control of the labor process, so they are not alienated in all of the ways that laborers are. However, since they control labor to produce
capital, they too experience some of the species-being alienation. The species as a whole devolves away from “humanised nature” rather than evolves toward it. Capitalists cannot emerge from this unscathed (e.g., *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, pg. 284).

In fact, the logic of capital itself ensures that this is the case. Whereas human labor celebrates variety, as we saw; capital is “dead” and “always keeps the same pace and is indifferent to real individual activity” (*Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, pg. 236). Capital requires uniformity and sameness. Everything must keep the same pace, and nothing can be unique or varied. Everything, including laborers, must remain stable cogs in the machine in order for the machine to run properly and efficiently so that capital can be reproduced. In maximizing economic production, though, human production is curtailed. Homogenized labor ensures production of capital, but it stymies continued and varied evolution of species-being.

Capitalism has a number of features that ensures that this uniformity is produced. First, though division of labor precedes capitalism, capitalism requires a highly developed division of labor. Division of labor ensures that all of the variety of labor is curtailed. Laborers are forced to perpetually play a singular role (as “a hunter, a fisherman, a shepherd, or a critical critic,” for example) and to play that singular role in the same way day in and day out (*German Ideology*, pg. 47). This division of labor relies on a highly developed labor exchange. Laborers must be willing to exchange their variety of labor for something stable and uniform, and they must be willing to stably exchange their labor for long periods of time. To ensure that this happens, money is introduced. Money helps to make all that is incommensurable in exchange—including the labor exchange—commensurable (e.g., *Economic Manuscripts of 1857-1858*, pg. 78ff). Laborers no longer need to exchange today’s labor for apples and wonder what they can
exchange their labor for tomorrow when apple season is completed. Instead, everything is given a price in relation to money. This is convenient, because the “chief characteristic of price” is “uniformity” (Economic Manuscripts of 1857-1858, pg. 142). Now labor and all of the goods that laborers buy from the money gained from the labor exchange is reduced to a single value system: money. Everything works at the same unchanging pace and capitalism can be easily reproduced.

Under this system of uniformity, the changes made to the individual’s being are aggregated in very homogenized ways. This means that the changes to being made on the individual level are seamlessly transferred to the species as a whole. Difference has been eliminated, particularly in the labor process, so the species will never evolve in new or unexpected ways. The species will maintain the same stable, predictable characteristics, which is needed for capital to continue to be reproduced. In this way, even though capitalists wield some control over the process of species-being evolution, their focus on economic production—the increase of capitalism—disallows them from being truly free and conscious in their decision making. Instead, they must stably reproduce the same species-being. Their labor, then, becomes just as static as everyone else’s, and they too become alienated. They too are barred from fully living according to “humanised nature.”

While it is expected that laborers would lose on the first half of the labor exchange—after all, that is the half of the exchange in which they explicitly give up something—even if they lose much more than they bargained for, they also lose on the other half of the exchange, and again this loss entails a movement away from “humanised nature.” They are willing to give up authority over their labor, because they receive money in exchange. However, this ends up being a very poor compensation, which leads to further devolution of their species-being. Workers must use the money they gained from the exchange to buy goods that meet their needs (e.g.,
That means that these commodities are only good for “immediate consumption” (Economic Manuscripts of 1857-1858, pg. 213); they cannot be turned into capital or real wealth (Economic Manuscripts of 1857-1858, pg. 233-234). Laborers expend most of their physical and mental energies laboring for capitalists and in return all they get are the commodities necessary to replenish those energies so that they can continue laboring for capitalists. As we saw, the worker “can repeat certain life processes every day, as soon as he has slept and eaten sufficiently” (Economic Manuscripts of 1857-1858, pg. 220). However, the capitalists seek to exploit this as much as possible: “the capitalist desires nothing more than that the worker should expend his dosages of life power as much as possible without interruption” (Economic Manuscripts of 1857-1858, pg. 220). The capitalists are happy to provide laborers with those products that are necessary to replenish their energies (as long as they make a profit in the exchange), but this is merely so the laborers can get back to working as soon as possible. At the end of the working day, then, laborers have exchanged complete control over their labor and the products of their labor, which means they have also surrendered complete control over the evolution of their species-being, and all that they get in return are the goods necessary to refuel themselves for another day of alienated labor.

The system of exchange itself is rigged to make sure that is all that workers can ever acquire in the exchange. Capitalists need to make a profit or they will no longer be capitalists, so they make sure that the money-labor exchange produces surplus value for them (e.g., Economic Manuscripts of 1857-1858, pg. 246-251; Capital, Vol. 1, pg. 239ff). Absent this surplus value, capitalists would never turn a profit and would rapidly deplete their capital and no longer have the funds needed to purchase raw materials, alienated labor, etc. and their businesses would fail. As such, they make sure that the value of goods created by laborers and then sold by capitalists is
greater than the combined value of 1) raw materials, 2) instruments of labor, and 3) labor itself (Economic Manuscripts of 1857-1858, pg. 246-247). Since the first two are fixed costs, capitalists must exploit the third component. They make sure that the value of the goods produced during the laborers’ shifts is higher than the goods that the laborers must buy with the money that they gained from the labor exchange even after the sunk costs of materials and instruments is deducted. This means that laborers essentially work some portion of their shift for free.

This alone, though, is not enough. There is always the danger, from the capitalists’ perspective, that laborers could somehow skimp and save enough money to be able to turn it into capital and thus throw off their economic chains and turn themselves into competitors. Even as they always hold this potential reward out to laborers to keep them working hard (e.g., Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, pg. 309), capitalists ensure that laborers can never realize it. Laborers’ thriftiness is bad for business; capitalists must always discourage laborers from saving and must encourage laborers to keep buying their goods (e.g., Economic Manuscripts of 1857-1858, pg. 217). Capitalists have an ingenious way of ensuring that this happens. They, in particular, are interested in “creating a new need in another, so as to drive him to fresh sacrifice, to place him in a new dependence and to seduce him into a new mode of enjoyment and therefore economic ruin” (Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, pg. 306). Capitalists cannot rely on natural needs to keep laborers using their money to buy commodities that are immediately consumed; they must manufacture new needs that will keep laborers from saving. Advertisements constantly claim that you need this product in your life, but also systems (the power grid, for example) are created that produce new dependencies (and therefore needs) that cost money to use and maintain. Capitalists create new psychological and material needs within
consumers. Further, some production itself is meant specifically to produce unproductive consumption. Marx gives the example of tobacco to illustrate that production that is very productive in the economic sense can be quite unproductive consumptively (Economic Manuscripts of 1857-1858, pg. 231-232). The consumption of tobacco produces nothing. In fact, due to the addictive qualities that spark new needs within the consumer that force them to continue or even extend their alienated labor, the consumption is rather counterproductive to the consumer.

In short, the capitalists ensure that laborers continue to use money on needs—natural or otherwise—and nothing else. Life becomes entirely about needs. Focus on satisfying needs precludes laborers from freedom; necessity binds them and forces them to continue in their alienated labor rather than laboring in the free and conscious ways of human labor. Worse, a life focused on needs is the life of animals. Again, laborers lose the ability to live according to “humanised nature” and must live as animals.

More is at stake here then increased profit for capitalists and impoverishment for laborers, then. The creation of new needs changes the psychologies and minds of individual humans, and when completed on a mass scale, of the species as a whole. Species-being is changed. Labor—and its effects—again change being, and, again, it is not for the better. Human life is reduced to animal life, because all of life becomes about meeting needs. The increase in the amount of needs further destroys the space whereby free and conscious labor activity could take place and species-being could be freely and consciously developed.

Money, that which laborers presumably gain in the labor exchange, makes this devolution of species-being possible. “Money is the procurer between man’s need and the object” (Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, pg. 323). Money is merely the pimp or slave
auctioneer that facilitates this exchange of creative power of labor for need creation and satisfaction. Money facilitates human degradation into the merely animal.

Again, in this case, capitalists do lay claim to some of the consciousness and freedom of human production. They are consciously and freely laboring (through advertisements and the like) to create and evolve certain kinds of species-being. However, this is no maximal human production, because it does not allow for the continued free and conscious evolution of species-being by all parties. In fact, even capitalists quickly lose this ability, because their psychologies are changed too and they also end up increasing their own realm of necessity and thereby shrink their own realm of freedom.

This means that in this second half of the exchange, laborers lose, but again so do the capitalists. Capitalists and laborers, if they buy into the capitalists’ promise that they can save money and eventually turn it into capital, either rely on saving money so that it produces or reproduces capital or use money as a kind of power. In both cases, they lose and species-being suffers. If they save money, then they “think, love, theorise, sing, paint, fence, etc.” “less” and so they “are” “less” (Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, pg. 309). In this case, economic productivity is all that matters and capitalists and laborers alike cease being productive in maximally human ways and the process to achievement of “humanised nature” stagnates. Rather than engaging in maximally human labor activity, they engage in activity that makes money and avoid activity that prevents them from saving money. This causes them to avoid truly human activities that would create maximally “humanised nature.” They do not play the piano, for example, so they cannot develop a musical ear. Instead, they labor exclusively for money and this money is used to satisfy needs or to create capital so they can force others to work for them.
If, on the other hand, they use money on things other than their material needs—whether natural or artificial—they unduly rely on it as a kind of power. In this case, money is relied upon to fulfill a role that it cannot fulfill. People use money as a “power” to turn ugliness into beauty, unloveableness into loveableness, lameness into mobility, dishonesty, fraud, and stupidity into honor, and the like (Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, pg. 324). At its crassest people buy sex (in buying prostitutes) or brains (in buying laborers with PhDs) rather than developing the characteristics necessary to procure them in human ways. More mundanely, people buy gifts to placate family members rather than treating them humanly and cultivating mutual love and respect. This, of course, is never truly successful, because love, for example, must be cultivated and cannot be bought. In any case, the focus on money again distracts people from acting humanly and thereby evolving humanly.

No matter what form it takes, in this kind of economic system that creates this kind of labor, both capitalists and laborers alike occupy themselves with developing a bank account rather than consciously and freely developing their human being, and as a result, their species-being is devolved and degraded rather than humanized.

If laborers lose on both halves of the labor exchange why do they continue to go along with the system as constructed, and if capitalists also lose something in both halves, why do they continue to perpetuate the system? Marx believes that the answer is false consciousness. As we have seen throughout, the current economic system promotes labor that destroys rather than fosters human consciousness. Labor is not free and conscious in species-being ways, so humans no longer labor humanly. They lose consciousness of human labor. Further, the products of labor produce animality rather than humanity. People are no longer conscious of those elements that separate them from animals. In other words, the system destroys human consciousness. This is
replaced by a false consciousness. People become convinced that the system is good and that they are benefiting from it. Again, we have seen this too. The system promises the possibility of capital production or reproduction, that money will not only meet material needs but will also create better humans (because it promises that they can buy love, art appreciation, etc.), and the like. When people buy into these promises, they adopt a false consciousness. They adopt a consciousness of what it means to labor and live as humans, but this is a false consciousness of what it means to be a human. The conception of “human” that false consciousness convinces people to adopt is closer to the conception of “animal” than it is of “human.”

Capitalists are particularly good at perpetuating this false consciousness—even if they end up adopting false consciousness themselves. They produce advertisements, offer better working conditions or wages, offer political concessions, and the like. All of this keeps people—laborers in particular but capitalists too—distracted from the fact that they are losing their humanity and their ability to evolve and create it back. They are losing the ability to freely and consciously labor in ways that bring about maximally “humanised nature.” False consciousness replaces human consciousness all the while blinding people to the fact that the exchange has taken place. False consciousness is the acceptance and adoption of the alienated life rather than the creation, through conscious and free human activity, of the human life including the human consciousness inherent in it. Adopting this false consciousness ensures the adoption of false humanness (i.e., less than maximally “humanised nature”).

*Changing Economic Conditions, Changing Labor*

Capitalism, then, makes human labor impossible and therefore makes it impossible to realize “humanised nature.” While free labor is the conscious and free creation and evolution of human beings, labor under capitalism, which the preceding has made obvious, is the opposite.
Other people control the worker’s labor, so the labor is not free, and both parties of the labor exchange are focused on economic rather than human productivity, so neither party consciously understands or freely controls the process of species-being change that the labor produces.

Marx, obviously, finds this to be unacceptable. In order to change labor to the kind of labor that creates humans, certain elements of the economic system must change. Even though at one point in the *German Ideology* (pg. 52) Marx argues that communism always works to abolish labor rather than to reform it, it is clear from his works as a whole that he is really arguing that wage labor that produces private property (and that does so in particular for the elite class), an economy of exchange—including the exchange of labor, and the division of labor is what needs to be abolished (e.g., *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, pg. 279-280; *German Ideology*, pg. 46-48; “The Poverty of Philosophy, pg. 142-144). In other words, it is the economic conditions that shackle and deform labor rather than labor itself that needs to be abolished. It is the animal, alienated labor that must be eliminated so that human labor becomes possible. We will briefly look at each economic condition that leads to false labor in turn and see how changing those conditions and thereby creating the new economic conditions of an entirely new economic system would allow for human labor with human production to arise and the human good to be realized.

In short, each part of the described labor exchange needs to be overcome. First, labor, and in fact the economy as a whole, cannot be a matter of exchange. Marx describes the history of exchange as it moves from superfluous goods to all goods until it finally fully matures and includes goods that should never be sold—“virtue, love, conviction, knowledge, conscience, etc.” (“The Poverty of Philosophy,” pg. 113). Our descriptions above showed how things like love have been included in exchange with money as the go between. But for Marx, labor is the
ultimate culprit behind this, because at its core, it is labor and not goods that are exchanged
(“The Poverty of Philosophy,” pg. 142-144). Goods can only be exchanged because labor was
already exchanged, in the case of capitalism, for money. If labor is no longer a matter of
exchange, then it will no longer be possible to exchange goods let alone core human
characteristics. So labor exchange must be overcome, which would allow for the elimination of
exchange altogether. If labor is no longer exchanged, exchange value disappears and the human
use value of labor can return. Labor can be about human production rather than economic
production.

Wage labor, then, is also a problem for Marx. Wages are the part of the exchange that
entice laborers to exchange their labor and that give laborers the purchasing power necessary to
drive the totality of the exchange system. As we saw, wages ultimately further enslave laborers
and so the wage ends up being a less-than-bad compensation for the loss of control of labor’s
creative power. Marx argues, then, that increasing or even equalizing wages would only succeed
in “better payment for the slave,” because wages always come from alienated labor (Economic
and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, pg. 280). Wage labor “presupposes capital;” it is the
impetus behind capitalists’ ability to extract the surplus value they need to reproduce capital
(Economic Manuscripts of 1857-1858, pg. 235). Eliminating capital production and the system
of alienated labor behind it requires the elimination of wage labor. A system of capital cannot be
overcome without the concurrent elimination of wage labor. The only solution, then, is the
elimination of wage labor altogether.

Ultimately, the exchange of labor and the wage labor structure that enables it, is only
possible because the mode of production is merely economic production ("The Poverty of
Philosophy," pg. 142-144). Labor only becomes an exchange for money if economic rather than

193
human production is the goal. Overcoming both requires the elimination of private property, which would eliminate it as the goal of labor and allow the space for labor’s aim to shift toward human production. Property transcendence allows space for human production of “humanised” individual and species nature (Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, pg. 296-302). When property can no longer be privately appropriated, it is no longer possible for labor to be a matter of exchange for the means to secure needs. Labor can now be an act of human production.

All of this would lead to a new economic system—communism—that is no longer a system of classes that fight over control of private property (e.g., “The Poverty of Philosophy,” pg. 143-144; German Ideology, pg. 46-48, 59-62). Economic systems have always been defined by what counts as property and who has control over that property. In these systems, labor was always something for the property owners to exploit in order to increase their property ownership. Classes were always pitted against each other in this quest for private property. When property is no longer privately owned and labor is again about human production and so is no longer an exchange value but a proper use value, then classes are no longer needed. In their place, there would be one united bloc of humanity that are mutually working to evolve species-being. This is possible because labor rather than property is the focus. Unlike property, everyone possesses labor. All are equal and all belong in a single, human bloc. This new economic system would be one that benefits all humans. Since all of humanity would benefit from this system and therefore no one would be enslaved, this would be universal human emancipation. All of society would be built on the variety and difference of human labor, so all of humanity could freely and consciously labor on the evolution of “humanised nature” in the species-being. All of humanity would be free.
When all of this is achieved, the division of labor would also fall away. Labor that is no longer for economic production no longer has to be organized and divided. Rather than the homogenized labor stemming from division of labor, as we saw above, now the full richness of difference and variety of labor can be realized. People can “hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner” (*German Ideology*, pg. 47). Human beings are no longer the stationary, unchanging nouns of commodities (“a hunter, a fisherman, a shepherd, or a critical critic”) that are moved around as pawns to the capitalists’ benefit (*German Ideology*, pg. 47). Now they are active verbs that consciously and freely labor according to their will. Since labor—which is about difference—is about human production, all humans can labor in all of their difference and so all humans can freely and consciously evolve species-being. This focus on difference ensures that species-being continues to evolve. This universal and continual activity of human production is the realization of “humanised nature.”

As humans get used to this kind of labor, they will slowly learn how to labor in ways that maximize human production. They will learn how to freely and consciously evolve species-being. Under the current system, people begrudgingly and painfully labor when they are on the clock, because they are forced to do so in order to provide for their physical needs (*Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, pg. 274). People never engage in unpaid labor, because labor has been confined to mere economic production. Labor, as we saw, is a completely enslaving endeavor, so people feel most human (i.e., able to consciously and freely act) when they are not laboring (*Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, pg. 274-275). Under the new system, however, the opposite would be true. Labor would be about human production, so it would be a conscious and free activity. People would labor how they want, when they want. Under these conditions, people do not demand something in return for labor, because labor itself
is rewarding. Labor allows for the free and conscious development of humanity. When this happens, the species and the individual develop a more “humanised nature.”

For example, under the current system, a chef making a hamburger would require payment for the hamburger. A chef in the new system will make hamburgers out of the love of making hamburgers, in part, because creatively making good hamburgers develops humans’ sense of taste. However, this only works if people eat the hamburgers. Under the new system, an exuberant chef, no longer laboring under a system of exchange, who makes 100 gourmet hamburgers may decide to give the excess hamburgers to paralyzed neighbors who cannot cook for themselves in order to fully realize the pleasures and fruits of labor. In doing this, the chef not only develops the physical senses of humans (now humans experience new culinary beauty), but their mental senses (in this case love) as well. The chef learns how to better love paralyzed neighbors and both the chef and the neighbors learn how to taste in new and different ways. Everyone develops a more “humanised nature.” This is only possible when labor—in this case the chef’s labor—freely and consciously takes on the aim of human production. Labor must become human labor.

When labor is allowed to be free human labor, humans are allowed to explore and satisfy the distinctly human need of human society and species evolution. Movement away from private property and the unfree labor conditions that it produces means movement away from “the real appropriation of the human essence” (Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, pg. 296). This appropriation is the false consciousness of animality. It is labor that is for economic production that meets subsistence needs. It is the replacement of human essence with an animal one. The new economic system built on human labor allows for “positive transcendence of…the appropriation of human life” and “the return of man…to his human, i.e., social, existence”
If the improper conditions of the current economic system are removed, then humanity can take up true human essence. They can then live as social beings that are mutually evolving the species-being nature to be more “humanised,” so that all humans can likewise live humanly and freely and consciously evolve species-being.

The Negative Elements of Revolution and Its Results

This, though, can only happen if conditions change. In a passage from the German Ideology (pg. 58) where he expands on his criticism of Feuerbach’s notion of being, Marx argues that communists’ goal is to bring the conditions of existing reality into “harmony with” human “essence.” It is about changing economic conditions so humans can live and act according to “humanised nature.” This reordering of society requires struggle and ultimately revolution.

This process of changing the system is itself a crucial element in human productivity, which Marx makes clear: “Of all the instruments of production, the greatest productive power is the revolutionary class itself” (“The Poverty of Philosophy,” pg. 211). It is revolution that creates an entirely new economic system, which allows for entirely new kinds of labor and the production of entirely new kinds of human being. Revolution, then, is quite productive in the human sense, and the revolutionaries that engage in it are acting quite humanly.

Revolution, then, is distinctly human labor; it is the most humanly productive instrument. Current conditions provide obstacles to free and conscious human labor, but revolution overcomes those obstacles. This labor process of overcoming is human:

…the overcoming of these obstacles is in itself a manifestation of freedom—and, moreover…the external aims are [thereby] stripped of their character as merely external natural necessity, and become posited as aims which only the individual himself posits…they are therefore posited as self-realisation, objectification of the subject, and thus real freedom, whose action is precisely work (Economic Manuscripts of 1857-1858, pg. 530).
Revolution is free and conscious labor. When false consciousness is overthrown and people see
the economic system as a series of obstacles to human labor, human consciousness can be seized.
When this happens, revolutionaries labor under this newfound consciousness. The
revolutionaries posit the aims of the labor and they do so on the basis of self-realization and
therefore species-being evolution. They freely labor and this free labor is accomplished as a
conscious decision to create certain kinds of species-being. True revolution—revolution that
replaces one economic system with another one, particularly the maximally human revolution
that replaces capitalism with communism—is about creating different kinds of humans and not
merely about creating different kinds of economic relationships. It is a human labor. Indeed, the
process of creating a new economic system is already the bringing into existence of humanized
labor and therefore more maximally “humanised nature.”

Revolution is a negative activity of criticism, then. It is the movement that tears down the
old system and this movement produces the new one. This has been true of every economic
revolution. However, the communist revolution is distinct (e.g., *German Ideology*, pg. 59-62),
because it is a revolution that produces an economic system that not only allows but facilitates
the continued free and conscious labor activity that formed the backbone of the revolution and
this activity can be acted upon by all members of the society.

That is why Marx argues that communism is not about giving humans anything other
than a “brief critical elucidation” (*German Ideology*, pg. 208). Communism is not so much about
creating a system as it is about teaching people to adopt the critical attitude necessary to throw
off false consciousness and the false society that creates it and to grab hold of human
consciousness so that they can labor humanly and therefore bring “humanised nature” into
existence. When this revolutionary spirit maintains itself after the revolutionary phase concludes
and when it forms the backbone of the resulting economic system, then a humanized economic system can be continually produced.

It is telling that throughout his works, Marx describes fully developed communism by what it does not have (because it has eliminated it) rather than by what it does have. This is because humans do not need anything other than the space to labor in maximally human ways in order to engage in human production and act “humanised nature” into existence. When they have this space, they will labor humanly and this will constantly produce the world (including the economic system) that they need in order to continue laboring humanly. Communism is the economic system that codifies the critical element that the revolution itself captured. The only positive element of communism is the “positive transcendence of private property” (Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, pg. 296). The positivity is the elimination of all that was in the way of humanized labor. The positivity is in the negative. In other words, communism is an actually existing economic system (the positive element) that comes about through negation (criticism and elimination of private property and its natural consequences as discussed above). Communism is the extension of the communist revolution, because it is the codification of critical attitude and action. It is the economic system of continued movement. It is the system that facilitates the continual movement of human labor, and it is the system that encourages the elimination of everything that gets in the way of the continual movement of human labor.

Communism is the “negation of the negation” (Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, pg. 306); it is not a positive state. It exists, so it is an “actual phase” of history (Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, pg. 306) with an “actual act of genesis” in history (Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, pg. 297), but this phase is only brought into existence when “thinking consciousness” comprehends and knows the “process of its
becoming” (Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, pg. 297). In other words, communism only comes into existence as an actually existing economic system when the people in the system actively embrace human consciousness and thereby recognize that their labor constantly creates and recreates (i.e., becoming) both species-being existence and the world (i.e., communism) that it lives in.

The communist revolution that births communism is the first maximally free and conscious human labor, because it is the first moment of maximal human consciousness that comprehends and knows human production and acts on it to evolve species-being to become “humanised nature.” Communism, as the resulting economic system of this movement of becoming, allows this becoming to continue. The system is explicitly setup for that purpose. It is the system that facilitates continued human labor that the communist revolution entailed. It is the space necessary for continued movement. It is the system that codifies the revolution’s own negative activity.

Politics

While the structure of the economic system is central to all that Marx is doing because it influences the rest of reality including politics, he does see an important place for politics in the current order. Indeed, revolution is a political act. In particular, politics is the historical unfolding of struggle. These political struggles arise because of the contradictions in the current economic system. Occasionally, these struggles lead to revolutions that remake society while promising that this the new society will solve the contradictions of the old one. Ultimately, political struggle will end in revolution that brings communism, the economic solution—though as we will see perhaps not the final one—to history’s riddle. When communism comes, it solves the economic riddle, which means it is without contradictions (or, as we will see, at least without
contradictions of the same ilk as those in all of the previously existing economic structures).

Marx is unsure what this human economic system means for politics, since this economic system would no longer be about struggle, but at the very least communism ushers in a new kind of politics if it does not eliminate it altogether. As such, though he does so to a much lesser extent than he did with the history of economics, Marx traces out the history of politics and tries to read the tea leaves as much as possible to shine light on what “state” and “politics” would mean in a communist world.

Marx’s truest and most useful views on humanized politics and the humanized state perhaps come from those works where he ravages the political programs of his fellow communists. These passages more closely conform to his early theoretical foundations than his more positive political programs as laid out in works such as the *Communist Manifesto*. In any case, it seems that much of that positive political program had to do with the struggle under the current order that is necessary to usher in communism rather than the final form of the state that he hoped would develop when a humanized society emerges.

To understand why this is so, we must start by remembering Marx’s general theory and then see how it touches on his theory of politics. Marx’s early theory praised the “ruthless criticism of all that exists” (“Letter to Ruge, September 1843,” pg. 142). In particular, he found it laudable that the radical communist reformers had “no exact idea of what the future ought to be” (“Letter to Ruge, September 1843,” pg. 142). Indeed, he affirmed his own stance: he, alongside them, would “not dogmatically anticipate the world;” instead, they “only want to find the new world through criticism of the old one” (“Letter to Ruge, September 1843,” pg. 142). Just as Marx did not want to dream up communism and seek to create it, he did not want to dream up the ideal state and seek to create it. Instead, the only productive path was to follow the criticisms
of society to their logical conclusions, which would entail fighting the powers that be. He wanted to see how the contradictions functioned and watch how they naturally destroyed the state as well as the rest of society. Only by understanding the contradictions and criticisms could Marx or anyone like him begin to see the contours of some possible future state that would arise in response to those contradictions and the destruction they caused.

This is not to say that Marx thought himself completely blind. As with the economic history, he believed that he could trace out the general direction of the state. Indeed, he believed that “the political state is a register of the practical struggles of mankind” (“Letter to Ruge, September 1843,” pg. 143). The history of politics is a kind of catalog of the struggles against broken societies and their contradictions. Marx thought it was his job to understand and read that catalog. He thought this was possible, because the political struggles are never random but are according to reason (“Letter to Ruge, September 1843,” pg. 143). Every state purports to be that which rules over a world of actualized reason (“Letter to Ruge, September 1843,” pg. 143). Every state believes itself to be an order—driven by the economic structure but upheld by the political one—that is the correct order or the order of human existence. Criticisms and contradictions only arise in these societies because there is a gap between that which is believed to exist (a world of reason) and that which actually exists (a world yet to be organized according to reason). The resulting political struggles (i.e., revolutions) exist precisely as the acknowledgement of those contradictions (i.e., throwing off false consciousness) and the attempt to eliminate them arise (German Ideology, pg. 74; “The Poverty of Philosophy,” pg. 175). In other words, political struggles are the attempts to bring about of a world of reason, which is the world where true human consciousness is realized (“Letter to Ruge, September 1843,” pg. 143-144).
The problem, then, becomes gaining true human consciousness so the right kind of political struggle can commence, the right kind of revolution can arise, and the right kind of society can be built. This understanding is the political project that Marx gives to philosophy. It is the philosopher’s “task” to understand the “criticism of politics” so that “human self-estrangement” can be “unmasked” (“Introduction” Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Law, pg. 176). Philosophers should criticize the current world. This criticism means that philosophy has a political component. This political component is necessary because the current world is not according to reason, which means that human being is not according to “humanised nature” but is instead an alienated humanity with a false consciousness. A philosophy of politics, then, ultimately is not a philosophy that understands what the state should look like when a humanized society arises. Instead, it is a philosophy of criticism. It is thought that brings false consciousness to light, highlights alienation, and makes sense of the physical historical struggle. This kind of philosophy will show that humanity is alienated, in all the ways discussed above, and ultimately oppressed.

It is with this backdrop that we must approach Marx’s philosophy of humanized politics and ultimately his philosophy of the humanized state. His clearest summation of both comes from some notes which were a screed against Bakunin’s latest book. In them, he writes, when “class rule has disappeared there [will] be no state in the present political sense” (“Notes on Bakunin’s Book Statehood and Anarchy” pg. 519). Politics is always about the struggle, and ultimately this struggle exists because there is an incorrect and unreasonable economic system organized around classes. In this economic setting, society works for the benefit of a single class rather than for humanity as a whole. As we saw, this, then, privileges economic production rather than human production and the resulting society is not according to “humanised nature” and so is
unreasonable. When communism comes and eliminates the class structure, there will be no more struggle and hence no more politics, at least not as politics is currently understood. The resulting condition is something completely different from today. The fact that Marx refuses to definitively call it a state or not (it is merely not a state according to the currently politically charged understanding of “state”) suggests the open-endedness of organization once a truly communist society emerges. All he knows is that the new politics—or whatever it ends up being—will be without domination and hence without struggle. It will be completely different than politics under the current system.

Understanding this does not mean that Marx wants to avoid politics in the meantime. The history of the world to this point has always required political engagement, so to assume otherwise is utopian (“The Poverty of Philosophy,” pg. 209-212). Since politics is the struggle as the history of politics is the catalog of this struggle, revolutionaries must use politics. That is what it is to struggle; its ultimate goal is revolution and the creation of a new order. This is true even if politics (at least as it has always been constructed) is not the end goal of the revolutionaries, because the struggle itself takes place under the old order and not the new, which is yet to be established. Indeed, the proletariat’s “struggle leading to the overthrow of the old society” is done “on the basis of the old society and hence [the proletariat’s struggle] still moves within political forms which more or less correspond to it” (“Notes on Bakunin’s Book Statehood and Anarchy,” pg. 521). As such, the rules and structures of the old order are in place and must be utilized. This is necessary for overcoming those rules and structures.

That political struggle is still necessary is why Marx wrote the Communist Manifesto. This is why even in “Letter to Ruge, September 1843” (pg. 143) he argues that “nothing prevents us from making criticism of politics, participation in politics, and therefore real struggles, the
starting point of our criticism, and from identifying our criticism with them.” The ruthless criticism of everything sometimes requires taking positive stances precisely because the old order that is being criticized still exists. “Political emancipation is, of course, a big step forward. True, it is not the final form of human emancipation in general, but it is the final form of human emancipation within the hitherto existing world order” (On the Jewish Question, pg. 155).

Political emancipation is crucial given the existing conditions. However, in the grand scheme of things, it is not sufficient emancipation. Positive political stances must be seen for what they are. They are merely the beginning point, not the final ground. The purpose of these positive stances are to facilitate revolution; they are not to determine the society that emerges from that revolution.

With political emancipation comes the expansion of civil society, and civil society existence is complete individual existence where everyone becomes their own separate, individual “monad” (On the Jewish Question, pg. 164). Everyone works and lives for their individual development, but the development of the species is ignored. Everyone is allowed to practice their religion, conduct their business affairs, etc. according to their own, private desires, but this does not allow humans to grow and develop as a species. In fact, it cannot, because political emancipation does not actually emancipate humans from the things that they need to be emancipated from—religion, business, property—it only provides them with the freedom to engage in those things in their own private ways (On the Jewish Question, pg. 167). In the end, “The political revolution resolves civil life into its component parts, without revolutionising these components themselves or subjecting them to criticism” (On the Jewish Question, pg. 167). Political emancipation is not that revolutionary, because the political revolution must always operate under the existing world order. Political revolution does not allow proper space for
criticizing the old order, so the old order stays in place. It turns out that political emancipation is not sufficient for creating a new world whereby we can freely labor and hence can freely develop our species-being, and in fact it, if seen as the ultimate struggle, frustrates this aim.

This is why Marx argues that a “merely political revolution” is always a “partial” revolution that “leaves the pillars of the house standing” (“Introduction” Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Law, pg. 184). Politics, particularly the positive stances of it, is not enough. Utilizing politics to revise the political structure will not overcome the old order. A more complete revolution is needed. The revolution can only be completely “radical”—that is can only create a truly new order—if it provides “general human emancipation” (“Introduction” Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Law, pg. 184). Human emancipation frees each human to “become a species-being in his everyday life, in his particular work, and in his particular situation” (On the Jewish Question, pg. 168). Human emancipation frees human to act and therefore to be human. Politics cannot bring this emancipation; a more complete emancipation is needed. As we saw, human emancipation is only possible if the “economic foundation” itself changes (“Notes on Bakunin’s Book Statehood and Anarchy,” pg. 519), and these conditions must change “from top to bottom” (“Poverty of Philosophy,” pg. 192). It is not enough to change politics and change ordinances and decrees (“Poverty of Philosophy,” pg. 192); the actual underlying conditions must change. The economic system itself must be revised. This would be the ending of the old order and the creation of a new one. Since this new order—as we saw—promotes “humanised nature,” it will be according to reason; all of humanity rather than a single class would benefit. This new order, then, is the elimination of the need to struggle (at least in its current, revolutionary form) and hence of politics, or at least politics as it has
always been done: according to domination. This new order without political struggle is only possible when the revolution breeds human rather than political emancipation.

This, however, is a slow process. The proletariats can only begin to create the proper economic system after they have won the political struggle, and this struggle was according to the logic of the old system and not the true reason of the classless system being ushered in. The immediate result of this struggle will not be a communist society, but a communist society as it emerged from capitalism (“Critique of the Gotha Programme,” pg. 85-87). This movement to a new order that is completely free of the old order’s influence is a “prolonged” process (“Critique of the Gotha Programme,” pg. 87). An actual communist society only exists after the last vestiges, memories, and consciousnesses of capitalist society are washed away.

The first sign that this has happened is that “labour has become not only a means of life but life’s prime want” (“Critique of the Gotha Programme,” pg. 87). When this happens, as we saw above, people will develop themselves in new ways, but as he adds here too true productive forces will create abundance (“Critique of the Gotha Programme,” pg. 871). Material needs will have shrunk to natural sizes and society will be able to meet these needs. As we saw, this allows for as much freedom as possible.

Under these conditions, core features of politics: justice, laws, norms, etc. become qualitatively different from the features of politics as it has always been done. Communism can definitively leave “bourgeois right” behind and can, for the first time, unfurl its own banner and inscribe society with its own organizing principles, the foundational one being “From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs!” (“Critique of the Gotha Programme,” pg. 87). This new societal ethic is possible because people have adopted “humanised nature.” As we saw, this is only possible because the economic conditions changed, which allowed labor to
be a human labor that can produce humanity with a “humanised nature.” Humans in this state of being love labor and this love of labor changes their will and their ability to love and ultimately makes them happy to share the fruits of their labor with anyone in need. Social relations have become humanized. When the economic system changes and it in turn facilitates people to change in these ways, it is possible for politics to change too. “From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs!” is now a possible societal ethic, because justice has been humanized. Politics has been humanized. But this new world order is so different from the old that it is virtually impossible to imagine, this side of the revolution, exactly what it will look like or how it will function.

Instead, this is a process that has to be worked out in actual history. The struggle continues at least until reason reveals itself in an actual communist society. This reasoning, however, comes in the struggle that takes place in history, and the struggle can show where even the reasoning of the communist revolutionaries was wrong or incomplete. In the Communist Manifesto’s “Preface to the 1872 German Edition” (pg. 175), Marx recognizes this fact. After witnessing the Paris Commune, which resulted from the “February Revolution” “where the proletariat for the first time held political power for two whole months,” Marx recognizes that the political “programme” laid out in the Communist Manifesto “has in some details become antiquated…because the political situation has been entirely changed, and the progress of history has swept from off the earth the greater portion of the parties there enumerated.” When Marx observed actual, historical revolutionary struggle and how that struggle changed the political landscape, he discovered that parts of his theory were incorrect or at least incomplete. He could not fully predict or comprehend the process of political struggle or the end state that the struggle would create. He believed the general principles of the Communist Manifesto remained sound,
even if the actual practical political prescriptions and prognostications became rather passé. He refused to alter the text, though, because it had itself become “a historical document” (“Preface to the 1872 German Edition,” pg. 175). It had become part of the political catalog that others can read and learn from. But it also alerts those would-be revolutionaries that even Marx could not predict the entire revolutionary path. All must learn by engaging in the struggle. All positive political stances are open to revision in the course of actually creating the new order. Indeed, as we have seen throughout, action itself has always been the crucial part of the process toward “humanised nature.” Marx’s works—including the *Communist Manifesto*—were to spur action that would criticize and tear down the existing order. Any vision of what the new order would look like would remain blurry at best. Here Marx explicitly recognizes this aspect of even his own prognostications.

It is illuminating what, in particular, Marx learned from the Paris Commune. He learned that “the working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made State machinery, and wield it for its own purposes” (*The Civil War in France*, pg. 328). The “organs” of “centralized State power”—things like the “standing army, police, bureaucracy, clergy, and judicature”—needed to be completely rethought or even abolished altogether (*The Civil War in France*, pg. 328ff). In other words, actual historical struggle taught the proletariat revolutionists that politics needed to be completely reshaped. Any politics or state that would remain would be radically different from those of the old order. Unfortunately for Marx, the Commune was quickly recaptured, so he was not able to learn how the political landscape would develop given continued historical evolution. The revolution-sparked, historical unfolding of reason was not allowed to blossom into a full-fledged communist society, so it remained unclear to him what humanized politics under a humanized state would look like.
Still, the Paris Commune was a good case study for Marx. The Commune, which was “the political form at last discovered under which to work out the economical emancipation of Labour,” was the “working-class government” that would at last usher in the communist society (The Civil War in France, pg. 334). This actually-existing political community had to struggle in actual, historical ways against other actual historical forces. In other words, it had to engage in a political struggle. This struggle taught the communist revolutionaries how to do politics better and began to teach them what the political community could look like. The struggle was not allowed to continue, so the education was never completed. Marx did learn, however, that communist politics cannot operate according to the rules and functions of the state. His idea that communism would end politics and the state as we know it—and maybe end them altogether—was validated.

Here again we see many of the same themes that we have seen throughout. Marx cannot envision what maximally humanized politics looks like because “humanised nature” requires the conscious and free development of it, and this labor activity must be conducted in lived history. Marx is sure that politics and the state—if they remain at all—will be wholly other than they are currently, but he cannot, this side of the revolution, predetermine how. The movement of the revolution and the more humanized labor that is allowed on the other side will be the educative and constitutive force. In an iterative process, it will create “humanised nature” through humanized action and this new being will further educate people how to humanize nature even more. As human being becomes ever more humanized, people learn how to organize principles of justice, the state, politics, etc. in ever more humanized ways. These too become ever more in conjunction with reason, which means that the contradictions decrease and the need for justice, the state, politics, etc. as struggle declines until it—or at least the old uses of it—ceases.
**Humanized Society**

However, while Marx usually ends the story there; he also hints that the story actually goes on and that ultimate realization of completely “humanised nature” in a completely humanized economic and political society is indefinitely postponed and perpetually less-than-fully known. Indeed when he tells this story elsewhere, he does declare communism to be the solution to history’s riddle (*Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, pg. 294-297). However, he also hints that there may be a story yet to be comprehended, a reason yet to be revealed, and a consciousness of “humanised nature” yet to be understood:

> Communism is the position as the negation of the negation, and is hence the actual phase necessary for the next stage of historical development in the process of human emancipation and rehabilitation. Communism is the necessary form and the dynamic principle of the immediate future, but communism as such is not the goal of human development, the form of human society (*Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, pg. 306).

As we saw, communism’s positive existence comes from its continued negation and elimination. This is what makes communism the first economic system that promotes humanized labor and species-being evolution. However, while he, on the one hand, suggests this is the negation of the negation and so the ultimate and final development, he also, on the other hand, describes communism as merely “the next stage of historical development.” This tracks with his comments in both the preface to the *Communist Manifesto* and the *The Civil War in France*. What he thought was a solid prescription of political progress was, in some ways, undermined by the actual historical struggle. The historical unfolding of the negation of the negation complicated Marx’s account of what this resulting society should look like and how it should be organized and opened up new possibilities that were not visible to him on the front side of the revolution. That none of these revolutions stably turned into communism and so could not fully develop into the negation, only further strengthens the idea that Marx is unclear about what the future holds.
Further, in the quote above, Marx admits that communism is not the goal of human development. This at least suggests that communism is not the end. It is significant that the passage quoted above is the end of an extended discussion of why it is no longer useful to talk of creation (Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, pg. 304-306). In essence, Marx argues that we ought not to look for the beginning or the end of the human story of species-being evolution. We must only understand the actual practices (i.e., labors) in the middle that create (i.e., produce) certain economic, social, and political conditions that make certain kinds of labor and therefore certain kinds of evolution possible.

This is further supported by his conclusion to “The Poverty of Philosophy” (pg. 212): “It is only in an order of things in which there are no more classes and class antagonisms that social evolutions will cease to be political revolutions.” This is the punch line that ultimately explains why he throws his support with political action and political revolution. However, there is an important subtlety that he includes here as well. Even after classes and politics disappear there will still be social evolution. Whether this is merely social evolution within the framework of communism or not is unclear. On the one hand, maybe the lack of political revolution is an affirmation that communism will never be overthrown and all evolution will take place within it. However, at what point does the evolution become so advanced that the society (and the species-being that comprises it) look so altogether different from the beginnings of communism that Marx thought that he could just barely ascertain that it really no longer is communism but some other society?

If communism is truly a negative economic system, then some of this is academic. If communism is nothing but the space needed to continue to labor humanly, then there is nothing there to evolve but only the continued evolution (of labor, species-being, etc.) inside the system.
On the other hand, though, it is still possible that in that continual evolution within communism it becomes obvious that a new space—a new economic system—is needed in order for that continual evolution to continue and to grow.

Both of the preceding inferences seem to be in keeping with Marx’s original theory. He can read the tea leaves, but he never gets a clear picture of the future or the systems and species-being that will exist there. And to make these systems and species-being clear would be to go against his theory. He criticizes Goethe for ultimately making this mistake:

Although he grasped things, as one should, from below,
It was for the Highest he made us go.
He wanted to make things so sublime
That soul-grip evaded him most of the time (“Epigrams II: On Hegel,” pg. 578).

The “soul-grip”—“humanised nature,” which is the free development of the species-being—is lost when the final, sublime society (or nature) is dreamed up. Communism may be the final solution to history’s riddle or it may merely be the next stage. It seems that when we get to communism, the process of laboring, which, as we saw, is what creates and evolves species-being, will determine what society looks like. In many ways, labor action will teach us how to create a labor-centric, classless economic system and a state—or some other society under a different name—with no political sense. Spontaneous, free labor will be the constitutive force. This societal evolution is a free and conscious process, so the results can only remain vague to Marx or any other theorist trying to observe and describe them. They must be worked out on the ground (“from below”) by those who are living and laboring in the society. This will involve change and could involve quite drastic change.

In fact, Marx wants the conditions to continue to change. In another poem—which he subtitles “A Jest” so that the “Good folk” will not get “cross” with him—he recounts a nightmare he has of heaven (“The Last Judgment,” pg. 572-573). Before he completes the jest by getting
lighthearted in his description of having to share heaven with skinny, chaste old women without teeth, he describes the heart of his nightmare:

God Eternal we must praise,
   Endless hallelujahs whine,
Endless hymns of glory raise,
   Know no more delight or pain.

Ha! I shudder on the stair
   Leading to perfection’s goal,
And I shudder when I hear,
   Urging me, that death-bed call.

There can only be one Heaven, (“The Last Judgment,” pg. 573).

For Marx, heaven is the scene of the last judgment, not the final reward. Heaven, as the place of unending sameness, is a terror so horrifying that Marx shudders. This stable, homogeneous society that disallows continued evolution sounds too much like the earthly nightmare of capitalism that Marx so often decried. Marx prefers continued change. Reaching the final stair in the chain of history is nightmare inducing.

If this heaven is a nightmare, Marx, in his poem “The Awakening” (pg. 562), explains what happens upon waking up from it:

Trembling, you sink
With heaving breast,
You see unending
Eternal worlds
Above you, below you,
Unattainable, endless,
Floating in dance-trains
Of restless eternity;
An atom, you fall
Through the Universe.

When you awake, you find endless possibilities, rather than the singular heaven described in “The Last Judgment.” This awakening is destabilizing and the destabilization leads to a sinking down. Life can get worse for a bit. This is reminiscent of Plato’s descent back into the cave. But, again reminiscent of Plato, this sinking makes rising possible. This rising is an endless revelation of “The secret of the soul” (“The Awakening,” pg. 563). It is the endless revealing of
“humanised nature.” This endlessness, this boundlessness is the eternal. The endless rising is the “Flaming, eternal/Lovekiss of the Godhead” (pg. 563). Divinity—and our intimate connection with it—is the endless search for and creation of true “humanised nature.” The end is never reached. But this process of creating and evolving it is the connection with divinity; it is maximally “humanised nature.” The endlessness is the negativity that we have discovered throughout. The activity—labor—itself is important, because it constantly changes being. This action of change—the negation of being and of the system that makes being’s change possible—is the realization of “humanised nature” and the humanized society required to labor it.

This process of change can only begin with the proper awakening. False consciousness must be thrown off (this leads to a sinking as all of life is seen to be an illusion) so that true consciousness can be found. But this process, this rising to true consciousness, is an endless process. And accompanying this endless process of human awakening is the unending exploration of “…unending/Eternal worlds.”

This is a far cry from the singular world of heaven that is found at the top of the stairs when all rising ceases. The awakening produces “Trembling” at first, but it ends in the ecstasy of a lover’s kiss. This is a far cry from the shudder that heaven produced. And if this heaven is so terrifying because it is unchanging, why would Marx be satisfied with communism taking its place at the top of the stairs? He is much more satisfied with endless evolutions that unendingly create new worlds that unendingly facilitate ever more complete laboring of “humanised nature.” This unending labor that unendingly produces a continually evolving species-being is what it means to live a human life with a “humanised nature.”
Interlude 2| Marx

Introduction

Before moving to the crux of our argument—Adorno—we need to again pause and take stock of where we have been. In this interlude, we will summarize our argument of Marx. In doing so, we will see how Marx connects with Plato and Aristotle but also how he modifies them and how this modification begins to anticipate Adorno. We will end this interlude with a brief introduction to Adorno’s argument, which we will examine in the next chapter. This brief introduction should already show us that rather than being completely radical, Adorno’s argument fits in the trajectory of the dialectical tradition. His argument does modify that tradition in important ways, but much of it can be found in previous thinker’s arguments.

Movement

Marx’s view of creating and evolving human being can be clarified through an analogy. Think of sculptors sculpting a sculpture. The sculptors’ freely and consciously labor with the goal of producing a sculpture that looks a certain way and has certain characteristics. This is how all sculptors work. However, our sculptors are unique. These sculptors are rapid learners, so as they are sculpting, they learn new ways to sculpt, develop new aesthetic sensibilities, better discover what a good sculpture is, and the like. As the sculptors learn in these ways, they will change the look and character of the sculpture even as they continue to work. Each new technique or aesthetic may merely refine earlier iterations of the sculpture or they may take the sculpture in radically divergent directions. In any case, as long as the sculptors continue in their art of sculpting, they will continue to learn new possibilities of sculpting and sculptures. This continued learning will continue to inform and then shift their work and will ensure that the sculpture is never fully completed.
The work of these hyper-sensitive sculptors is what Marx means by human production that is functioning according to its maximum human potential. People must freely and consciously labor to produce human being. But as they labor in these ways, they learn new possibilities for being. The new being that is created opens new directions for being in the same way that the sculptors’ labor on an arm can teach them new possibilities for muscle structure in general or proportion, for example. This means that sculptors can take lessons about muscle structure learned from sculpting arms and apply them to the sculpting of leg muscles. In their work on arm-being, they have created new possibilities for what it means to be an arm and this discovery taught them new possibilities for what legs could be. Or, to return to an example from the previous chapter, chefs who learn how to love through the donation of their uneaten hamburgers can apply that lesson to other areas of life and find other ways to develop the sense of love within themselves. In doing this, they would evolve other parts of their being to more robustly incorporate love. In each case, we can see that laboring in maximally human ways changes human being, and this change in being teaches the laborers new possibilities for what being can be. These are possibilities that were not visible to the laborers before the act of labor created new kinds of being that then revealed the new possibilities for being to them.

This act of laboring, then, teaches laborers new possibilities of being that they can freely and consciously labor toward. New iterations of being create new potentialities for creating being. The discovery of new possibilities of being teaches laborers how to use that being to labor in new ways. Not only does being change, but the change in being opens new avenues for laboring. As being becomes more according to “humanised nature,” the labor itself can become more humanized. For example, as chefs learn how to love in ways other than donating uneaten hamburgers, they can freely and consciously labor differently. The next time that they cook, they
could intentionally produce too many hamburgers, so there will be leftovers for them to donate. Or they could use the opportunity afforded by delivering donated hamburgers to get to know the culinary tastes of their neighbors. Then they could cook meals that the neighbors most prefer eating, or they could more intentionally labor in free and conscious ways that focus in a more targeted way on the evolution of their neighbors’ culinary sensitivities. In any case, as being evolves, the contours of labor change as well. As these changes take place, new kinds of being are again produced and the process starts all over again. This iteration is important, because chefs and sculptors are only acting according to human being when they are laboring to produce humanity. If this labor and what the labor produced never changed and never became different, then this labor of human production would cease and living humanly would be impossible. As it is, the movement continues. The labor always becomes different, human being always evolves, and living humanly remains possible.

Movement, then, is central for Marx. Movement evolves being, but movement is also the only moment when being is maximally human. Every movement of human labor, then, 1) is what it means to be human and 2) teaches people how to more maximally be human in their next movement of human labor (which is to say in their next moment of living according to maximally human being).

Negative

This movement is a process of constant negation. Every act of human labor that leads to human production is a negative process. Every act of labor negates the “being” that exists as that labor actively evolves the currently existing “being” and therefore creates a new iteration of it. This means that the movement of human labor is the negative space between two different positive conceptions of being. This negative space is where human being most completely exists,
because this is where the free and conscious production and evolution of human being exists. It is between positive conceptions of being, so there is space to evolve being and create it anew. Human being is a negative existence; it is the existence of creating what being is and what it is further going to be.

As we saw, Marx privileges these negative movements. He praises communism because it gives nothing positive except for this negative disposition of criticism. Communism is the negation of the negation, because it maintains this negative living past the revolutionary phase. It is the system that strips away everything that gets in the way of free and conscious labor, so that all humans can always labor in ways that continuously produce and evolve species-being existence and characteristics. In other words, it is the system that allows for continued negation. It is the system that allows for continual human laboring and so continual human being.

**Indefinite Deferment**

This means that, just like the mythical sculptors that we theorized at the beginning of this interlude, the work of human production is never completed. Human being means laboring in the creation and evolution of that being. This means that attainment of some completely true version of human being is always deferred. In fact, the goal shifts away from fully realized human being (in any positive sense) and toward constant movement (in the negative sense) of living being by constantly creating and evolving being. For Marx, the truly human life is not a stable existence, but a constantly shifting living, creation and evolution of existence.

This is a significant modification of Plato and Aristotle and moves in the direction of the move that Adorno makes, as we will discover in the next chapter. Plato and Aristotle privileged movement because it could move people closer to a positive, stable condition of being. That achievement of this stable condition was indefinitely deferred caused them to privilege
movement in the negative. As we saw, Plato even describes the philosophical life—the embodied life that comes closest to true human being—as a life of the dual movements of the dialectic. These movements constantly negated all that was false, even if they were never completed and so never fully revealed all that was true. Their purpose, then, was to continue to banish the shadows as it continued to enlighten (bring to light) the truth of complete being. For Plato (and similarly for Aristotle as we saw), movement was only necessary because positive attainment of true being could not be stably and completely achieved.

Whereas the movements for Plato and Aristotle are good enough to get people to the next stage (or even to the best possible stage) of being, the movements for Marx are good because they are producing ever more next stages. Marx, then, gives up the stable, positive condition of being in favor of an active creation and evolution of being. Whereas Plato and Aristotle decried indefinite deferment, Marx prefers and even celebrates it. Any stable attainment of some ultimate, divine state (including the state of being) is nightmare inducing for Marx. The only stability he wants is in a system that facilitates constant human laboring. But he is sure to leave space here too for the system itself to change and become a different system that better conforms to the evolved human being and so better facilitates continued evolution of that being. In every instance, then, Marx makes clear that it is always possible to continue the evolution. This closes off the possibility that the final condition could be reached, so we are left with its indefinite deferment. What is more, Marx makes clear that living according to human being requires perpetual evolution of being. Marx, then, unlike Plato and Aristotle, celebrates the indefinite deferment of being precisely because this constant evolution is what it means to awaken from false living and to embrace the “humanised nature” of human laboring that is producing human being. This process is more deeply good than it was for Plato and Aristotle. It is good because it
is what it means to be human and not merely because it is necessary to bring into existence complete human being.

Unknown

Marx, then, is pleased that human being remains constantly unknown. Awakening from the nightmare entails constantly climbing the stairs and never reaching the divine final stair. The final stair remains unknown, because the final stair does not exist. Climbing the stairs to continually evolve human being, then, is a never-ending quest. Human labor can constantly create ever higher, more purely human being. This constant labor toward better human being is the intimate connection with divinity. This constant act of creation is the divine kiss.

Plato and Aristotle were frustrated that they could never know complete and true being. Marx finds it exhilarating. He finds it human. It is only because the final end is always unknown and out of reach that humans can continue to act human—by producing humanity—at all.

Memory

Our account of Marx in the previous chapter omitted an explication of memory, but that is because Marx does not explicitly conceptualize it as Plato and Aristotle did. Instead of relying on remembrance to kickoff the process of acting correctly (living humanly) as Plato and Aristotle did, he relies on the evolving material conditions of history. It is these conditions that enlighten people to see their false consciousness and to engage in revolution to throw it off.

Marx makes it clear that the consciousness that exists at any moment of history is the result of material conditions as they occur in history, which means that consciousness changes as those material conditions change (e.g., German Ideology, pg. 36). But this shift in consciousness is more a process of evolution than it is a kind of punctuated equilibrium. The new consciousness is always already contained in the old society with its consciousness and ideas (e.g., The
As the cracks and contradictions of the old society become manifest, its consciousness is revealed as false and the solutions needed to move beyond that consciousness emerge as well.

This, of course, is the crux of Marx’s dialectic. It is not a theoretical movement in the mind as it was for Plato and, to a lesser extent, Aristotle, it is a material movement in history itself. History moves and history teaches. For Marx, Plato’s epistemological line is more horizontal and physical. Shadows and contradictions are revealed not by a philosopher thinking more philosophically but by humans living in history and understanding that history more completely. Aristotle also wanted this process to be physical—indeed, solving the formula of ethical, human being required physical actions that would educate and habituate—but that physicality was always grounded in abstract reasoning. The actions always needed philosophical reflection to explicate philosophical truths. Marx, of course, relies on reasoning as well, but this reasoning always follows material conditions, which is where the impetus for action and the education of proper action comes.

Marx, then, does not require humans to remember properly as Plato does. For Marx, the impetus for movement comes from history rather than from the mind. In this way, he is closer to Aristotle’s conception of recollection than Plato’s conception of memory. Marx requires people to acquire a proper understanding of the movement of history. Unlike Aristotle, though, this movement does not need to proceed from beginning to end. In fact, as we saw, he eschews exploration into either beginning or end precisely because he is more interested in historically grounded conditions than grand truths. All that he requires is an understanding of the current contradictions (i.e., the current impediments to laboring, and so living, humanly) and the solutions to those current contradictions. This is why he does not theorize a system after...
communism even though he hints at the fact that one may exist. It is enough to understand the current historical movement. That is all that is needed to engage in the movement of revolution that becomes the qualitative movement that solves the current historical conditions by creating a qualitatively new system.

**Adorno**

While the thinkers so far develop this cluster of concepts reluctantly or somewhat implicitly, Adorno makes them the core of his project. He takes seriously the notion that being is unknown and that ultimate achievement of it is indefinitely deferred. He argues that since no one fully knows the truth, every definition or category that presumes to describe the truth of being is a false one. Every definition purports to be the total truth, but it actually misses part of the truth and so oppresses or suppresses part of the truth of being. Being is unknown and will remain so. Because he accepts this and indeed even embraces it, he relies on movement even more heavily than Marx did.

Since Adorno understands that being never comes, he understands and fully accepts that the end of every movement is some version of non-being. Plato, Aristotle, and Marx all understood this, but they held out hope that the non-being was moving closer to complete and true being or that laborers were more fully creating and evolving being that was maximally human. They all hoped that every iteration of non-being was (or could be if the movements were true) less non-being. They all maintained an element of linearity; they saw people and history moving from non-being to less non-being even if not to complete and true being. Adorno, though, takes the unknown so seriously that he rejects this linearity. We can never know if non-being is moving toward being or not. All we know is that movement is the negation of one stable form of existence and the end of movement is some other stable form of existence. Both forms of
existence—that at the beginning and that at the end of the movement—are states of non-being. The movement is the moment when the potentiality of being exists, because it is the only moment unencumbered by the oppressive shackles of false being. It is only during movement that totalities and definitions are broken and so possibilities to live according to true being are opened. It is only during movement that people take seriously the unknowability of being and so do not close off—through false definitions of being—possibilities that may be according to complete and true being.

Despite this, Adorno does gesture toward the good, and, surprisingly, this good still relates to being. The good is still about human existence as it should be. It is still about true and complete human being. However, Adorno’s use of being is completely different. For him, existence is a series of tensions. It is being/becoming and the related tensions identity/nonidentity, subject/object, and the like. The good is the existence that is peaceful movements of this tension. Siding with either being or becoming would be to define human existence to a certain conception of being with a certain identity. In other words, siding with either side of the tension reintroduces dominating movements of the tension.

In this way, Adorno’s good is explicitly negative movements. Even if utopia were to stably come—and Adorno longs for this redeemed world—and the good could be stably lived, the good would still entail negative movements. This is because the tension cannot be peaceful otherwise. Every move risks upsetting the balance and this would be the loss of the good. This fragility of the good also means that it is unlikely that the good could ever be achieved. Adorno, at the crucial moment, does not definitively close off the possibility, but it is, again, indefinitely deferred.
This negative conception of the good is not only consistent with his theory, it also underpins it and gives Adorno the leverage he needs to justify determinate negation and his political project more generally. That there is a good means that it exists as possibility within us. Our current existence is tension. Adorno felt this viscerally. Since this is true, it is always possible that we could make the tension peaceful and so embody the good. Adorno refers to this as the already/not yet. The good has always existed, but it has never yet been brought into existence. Because of this, we can remember the good, or at least that the good is possible. This remembrance is the memory of Plato rather than the linear recollection of Aristotle. As we will see, Adorno explicitly ties his conception of memory to Plato. This memory of the already/not yet is necessary to shake people into movement. Absent this memory, it is too easy for people to maintain the label of being/identity that the system has given.

This memory is the critical impulse that Adorno mentions elsewhere. We can always remember who we are that has never been allowed to be. The response to this memory is criticism of that which does not let us be. This tearing down of given conceptions of being/identity is determinate negation, which is the baseline quality of what Adorno means by living the good life.
Chapter 6 | Adorno: To Be an Enigma

Introduction

In the dissertation so far, I have argued that the dialectical tradition—as seen in our pit stops at Plato, Aristotle, and Marx—has always sought to answer the question how do we live the good life if we are not yet good and in fact do not have a complete and true understanding of what the good is in the first place. In different ways, all wanted humanity to fully achieve itself. They wanted true and complete human being to be stably lived in each person’s individual and political lives. Ultimately, all of them found various obstacles in the way that pushed fulfillment of the good indefinitely into the future. This, of course, also meant that they realized that even they could not fully see what the good was, so instead of completely fleshing out what the good was and how it functioned, they provided a road map of becoming that would, they hoped, help humanity come to better understand what the good is and how to achieve it. This process of becoming, insofar as it got us closer to the good and maybe even approximated the good, was the good life.

To this point in the dissertation, I have argued the ways in which the ideas of Plato, Aristotle, and Marx can be drawn closer to Adorno’s own argument. There are places in their texts where they recognize the negative elements of their theory, even if they do not always explicitly highlight them or draw them to their full conclusions. This has the effect of showing that Adorno is not as radical (i.e., tearing the dialectical tradition up by its roots) as he himself or others may portray him to be. It also gives us a platform that grounds Adorno, so we can better analyze his own ideas. However, at this stage in the argument, I want to hold that idea in tension with the idea that Adorno does believe that he is doing something fundamentally different than the earlier dialectical thinkers. He believes that he is rescuing dialectics by remaining true to its
core, whereas the rest of the thinkers, at the crucial moment, seize the dynamic potential of the
dialectic. He believes this is because all who came before him hold to positive components of the
dialectic. All affirm some stable, positive good that provides the standard by which we evaluate
becoming. Adorno rejects this and explicitly highlights the negative components of the dialectic.
As we will see over the next two chapters, he rejects synthesis between being/becoming and
rejects any transcendental concept that unifies them. Instead, he highlights the dynamism in the
movement of the tension being/becoming. Understanding this very important difference will help
us to see how Adorno’s conception of the good is quite similar to and yet very different from the
thinkers we encountered earlier and how his different conception of the good allows him to
maintain the negative elements of the good and the good life without the persistent affirmations
of Plato, Aristotle, and Marx that ultimately allowed for their conceptions of the good and the
good life to devolve, Adorno argues, into totality and the oppressed life under totalitarianism.

This adherence to the negative while maintaining the possibility of the good, as we saw in
the dissertation’s “Introduction,” is exactly the point of contention in Adorno. Without some
positive conception of the good, how can Adorno engage in determinate negation, or how, in
fact, can he justify criticism at all? But, the argument continues, any conception of the good
would have to be positive. I contend that Adorno does gesture toward the good.
Conceptionualization, of course, is problematic for Adorno, but I use “gesture toward” for two
further reasons. First, he himself states that the good is “unspeakable” (Aesthetic Theory, pg. 32)
with parts that are “ineffable” (Negative Dialectics, pg. 11). The best he can do is gesture toward
it through analysis of potential models of the good: proper negative dialectics and the aesthetic
form. But second, and related to this, his conception of the good is not positive and so is not a
stable thing. This is for two reasons. First, the good will (likely) never be achieved because it
(probably) cannot be achieved. Bringing it into existence would (probably) be to destroy it. But second, even if it were achieved, the good itself is a relationship of movement not a stable thing. This movement cannot be explained, only gestured toward. In short, the utopia—that word, along with redeemed and reconciliation, is the word he most frequently uses for the good—would be a peaceful tension. It would be the peaceful relationship of movement between all of the tensions that political philosophers through the ages have found to be important: being/becoming, identity/nonidentity, universal/particular, etc.

Understanding utopia in this way, Adorno does have an understanding that there is some good, but this good is not a stable thing and probably cannot be achieved. As to the latter, he does not believe this is a problem. Indeed, none of the thinkers we have discussed so far had a conception of the good that was able to be stably achieved, and it may not ever be stably achieved. As to the former, also like the previous thinkers, he believes that his conception of the good does justify determinate negation and so can provide direction to our lives. It can teach us how to live good lives.

In this chapter, we will more fully explicate Adorno’s gesture toward the good, and then we will begin to draw some conclusions about what this abstract gesture looks like for human beings. Then, in the next chapter, we will examine how this conception of the good not only does not contradict his larger theory, but that, in fact, his theory actually functions with this good in mind. Both *Negative Dialectics* and *Aesthetic Theory* are built on this idea. In the former, he tries to save philosophy, and he does so by calling on thought to function according to his utopia. In the latter, he gives art as an example of something tangible whose form, perhaps necessarily, requires approximating, if not outright living according to, this utopia. After explicating this, we will end our discussion of Adorno by briefly examining what the good life—individually and
politically—would look like and why this negative conception of the good does allow for living in ways that benefit us. In the dissertation’s “Conclusion,” we will try to think with Adorno to draw some specific principles from his theory that could help us live better individual and political lives.

**The Good: Recollected Chords in the Key of Not Yet**

*Succinct Gesturing*

Even though Adorno equates “utopia,” the word that, along with “redeemed” and “reconciliation,” he perhaps most explicitly uses in conjunction with the good, with the “unspeakable,” he also claims that art does seek to “enunciate” it (*Aesthetic Theory*, pg. 32). It is in art, then, that we can best see what Adorno believes the good to be. As we will see over the next two chapters, artworks, because of their aesthetic form, are uniquely situated to be able to gesture at utopia even if they are “no more able than theory to concretize utopia, not even negatively” (*Aesthetic Theory*, pg. 32). As such, though he does address it elsewhere, it is no surprise that Adorno most clearly—even if this remains not all that clear—elucidates his understanding of the good in conjunction with artworks.

Perhaps Adorno’s most succinct, yet complete, iteration of utopia comes from the section of *Aesthetic Theory* entitled “Enigmaticalness, Truth Content, Metaphysics” (*Aesthetic Theory*, pg. 118-136). While this whole section builds toward an understanding of the good, it is, at the end of the section that he gives what I believe to be his most succinct gesture toward the good when he writes: “Each artwork is utopia insofar as through its form it anticipates what would finally be itself…” (*Aesthetic Theory*, pg. 135). The second half of this sentence includes an important addendum, which we will consider below, but this is the most succinct gesture toward Adorno’s notion of the good. There are three main components to this gesture: 1) “form,” 2)
“anticipates” what “would...be,” and 3) “finally...itself.” I contend that the good is to be found through an understanding of these three components and, even more crucially, in the relationship between these three components. I believe that much of the debate and indeed consternation around Adorno’s conception of the good comes through missing one or more components of this triad or, perhaps more crucially, through missing the way they interact.

The third component is perhaps the most troublesome given Adorno’s overall theory. Adorno, notoriously, criticizes conceptions of being/identity throughout his work. Despite these extensive and persistent criticisms, this idea—through the word “itself”—makes it into his most succinct formulation of the good. Utopia clearly includes that which “would finally be itself.” Adorno’s conception of the good contains within it the idea that the artwork, and by analogy the person⁴, would come to exist as “itself,” which is to say that “itself” would come to be according to true and complete being. As we will see, this notion of being is linked to the “ideal of identity,” which is to say to the true and complete being of “itself.” This is the element that Adorno’s detractors criticize him for not having, and his supporters reject in favor of a life of dialectical and/or aesthetic becoming. While Adorno does problematize being and while he does, he thinks, provide a different orientation to a different, rethought, understanding of identity/being, he also does not reject it outright. We will see more why this is so, but even here, in this succinct gesture toward the good, it is clear that Adorno maintains some notion of being,

⁴ This is an important, if subtle claim, a full defense of which is outside of the scope of this chapter, but which deserves full explication in its own right. For the purposes of this dissertation, as I will elaborate below, it is enough to understand that Adorno hopes that people will imitate art (e.g., Aesthetic Theory, pg. 122, 125, 132). This means that his discussion of utopia in art is applicable to the utopia for humans. However, throughout Aesthetic Theory, Adorno variously uses “art” and “artwork(s).” Usually, he seems to use artwork to denote particular, concrete iterations of art, whereas art is the universal category. There seems to be analogies to humans, then. Artworks would be analogous to particular individual humans and art to the universal category “human.” While in his succinct formulation of utopia, he references “artworks,” elsewhere in the section—and in particular in other parts of the section in which he addresses utopia specifically—he links it to art. This seems to be a nod toward the overall tension that I elaborate in this section. In this case, he maintains the tension between the universal/particular. We will briefly examine this distinction throughout the next two chapters in other guises.
even, and this is decisive for his theory, if this will also be different than the traditional conception of it.

Indeed, the second component of this gesture toward utopia preemptively qualifies the third component of the gesture described above and already suggests that Adorno’s understanding of being is different than the traditional one. This was already evident in the fuller iteration of the third component, where he claims that the identity/being as described in the word “itself” only “would finally be;” it is not yet. The second component expounds on this qualifier by exclaiming that in utopia the form “anticipates” this “itself” that “would finally be.” Utopia entails anticipation rather than achievement of “itself.” Clearly, this being does not yet exist; it has not yet come to be. The qualifier “would…be” of the third component and the “anticipates” of the second component is, then, a nod toward becoming. That the good also entails becoming means that it is also concerned with the elements of “itself” that are made invisible (i.e., not allowed to be) by false, incomplete conceptions of being that lead to false, complete conceptions of identity, which means that the good is also concerned with nonidentity.

To this point, for all of his critical pontificating, Adorno’s gesture toward the good does not sound all that different from the dialectical iterations of the past, which we analyzed in previous chapters: true and complete being is good and becoming is an important component to getting there. Indeed, since true and complete being is always indefinitely deferred, movements of becoming that move us closer to being are good and are good because they not only draw us closer to stable existence of the good but also because the movements of becoming themselves imitate the good. While his gesture toward the good may sound like that argument, understanding Adorno’s gesture instead forces us to rethink this familiar formula that we encountered in previous chapters. It is in the first component of his succinct gesture that his own
view of the good takes on a distinct character. Ultimately, the artwork’s utopia is found in its “form.” The utopia is neither being nor becoming, and it is neither identity nor nonidentity. The utopia is found in the artwork’s form, which can properly relate being/becoming, identity/nonidentity etc. The aesthetic form, which we will more fully evaluate in the next chapter, is able to properly encompass the elements of being /becoming and identity/nonidentity. Specifically, the aesthetic form is capable of maintaining the tension between being/becoming, identity/nonidentity, and the like.

As we will see, Adorno’s general pattern—in connection with utopia and in his theory more generally—is to recognize and even emphasize the oppressed half of the dichotomy (in Adorno’s historical moment, at least, this was becoming, nonidentity, the particular, etc.) in order to keep it from being swallowed by the other half of the dichotomy (being, identity, the universal, etc.). But this does not mean that the latter half of the tension disappears. It must remain part of the equation, so the tension remains and the form of utopia can emerge, even if it cannot concretely come to be.

To understand what this means and how it works, we need to more completely analyze each of the three components of the succinct gesture and link them to other places in Adorno’s theory where he discusses utopia, the redeemed world, reconciliation, and the like. It is to this that we turn next. After doing so, we will try to “speak” a little more about the “unspeakable” by trying to make this abstract theory a bit more tangible and relatable to humanity.

“Itself”

Since it forms the backbone of his theory, so much has been written about Adorno’s criticism of the concept “being” and of its close cousin “identity” that it is scarcely necessary to add to the annals. This is for good reason since he dedicates the entirety of *Jargon of Authenticity*
and a large chunk of Negative Dialectics to the philosophic desecration of these concepts. Further, his politics (in works like The Culture Industry) is grounded in his general criticism of the culture industry and its makers, and this criticism centers around the premise that they have provided an incomplete, and hence false, definition of being and yet have called it true and complete.

Despite the plethora of arguments, it is appropriate to summarize Adorno’s criticism of being/identity. In short, Adorno criticizes being/identity throughout his works primarily on three grounds: historically (e.g., Dialectic of Enlightenment, especially ch. 1 and 3; Jargon of Authenticity, pg. 63-66; Negative Dialectics, pg. 66-68), philosophically (e.g., most of Jargon of Authenticity and Negative Dialectics), and politically (e.g., The Culture Industry; Minima Moralia; and most everywhere else). All three critiques ultimately rely on the idea that “Total contradiction is nothing but the manifested untruth of total identification” (Negative Dialectics, pg. 6). In other words, any definition of anything (i.e., any categorization including any conception of being) is incomplete; there is always a gap between the given definition (i.e., concept “being”/”identity”) and the thing-in-itself.

All three critiques end with the claim that a focus on being/identity leads to nihilism, oppression, or both and that this is always the negation of being/identity. Or, put in other terms, focusing on being, particularly through creating categories of being, always leads to a definition that is taken to be identity, but which misses a part of the thing-in-itself and so unduly suppresses and oppresses part of the thing-in-itself by categorizing it as nonidentity. In short this leads to nihilism in that the part of the thing “itself” that is left out of the concept “identity” is made into nothing, and since this is part of the “itself,” the itself is made into nothing as well. Oppression
results as well because part of the “itself” is forcibly left out: it is not merely an omission but is oppression.

Adorno argues that calling these incomplete conceptions of identity complete is the false creation of totality. The powerful of society—those with defining power—claim that they know completely, or totally, what it means to be human and to live human lives, and they then force others to live according to this conception. Since the conception is false, this power is based on a false totality, and the power is, then, totalitarian. The power to force people to live (identify) according to prescribed being are incomplete and so false. In other words, Adorno explains that these incomplete conceptualiations of identity suppress parts of the “itself” and do not allow them to become visible let alone to express themselves and flourish. This is oppression. In short, claims to totality that are less-than-total=the oppression of parts of the thing-in-itself, and hence of the destruction of the identity of the thing “itself,” and thus=totalitarianism.

With this in mind, it is almost inconceivable that anything like being or identity would find its way into Adorno’s gesture toward the good. However, it does; the gesture clearly includes “finally…itself,” which must have some connection with being/identity. Before we analyze what that connection is and how Adorno thinks that he comes to understand it differently than those who he just criticized, we need to see why Adorno thinks that it is necessary to include it at all.

While he problematizes being/identity, Adorno rejects the notion that we can overcome the nihilism and oppression of being/identity by merely taking the opposite approach. While not nearly to the degree that he discusses being/identity, Adorno also problematizes becoming/nonidentity. He criticizes Bergson for his “pure becoming” calling it just as flawed as the “metaphysics since Plato and Aristotle” that Bergson attempted to overcome (Negative
Dialectics, pg. 9). Bergson’s pure becoming “washed away” the “dialectical salt” that is central to proper thinking (Negative Dialectics, pg. 8). His “undifferentiated tide of life” of pure becoming does not promote dialectical tension, but instead resolves that tension according to similar principles that thinkers like Plato and Aristotle used; he just approaches them from the opposite direction (Negative Dialectics, pg. 8). In Bergson’s case, the tension is resolved in favor of becoming rather than being. It is resolved in favor of the difference of nonidentity rather than the sameness of identity. But the result of washing away the dialectical salt is the same. Bergson merely makes becoming what being is. He merely turns nonidentity into identity. At this point, all of Adorno’s criticisms of being/identity become operative for becoming/nonidentity, which have merely taken the place of being/identity.

Siding with one side of the dichotomy is just as problematic as siding with the other…and for the very same reasons. It is true that Adorno saves most of his attack for the side that contains being, identity, concept, universal, etc., but that is primarily because that is where the most oppression currently occurs, and, perhaps, has always occurred (we will return to this point, especially in the next chapter). But choosing to elevate the other side of the tension would merely be to elevate becoming/nonidentity to being/identity, so his criticisms of pure becoming are the same as those of being.

Adorno consistently makes this argument throughout his works. In a discussion of Wagner’s music, writing that the music’s “unceasing change…ends in constant sameness” and ultimately exhibits “an affinity to identity” (“Wagner’s Relevance for Today,” pg. 53). Music like Wagner’s that adopts techniques of perpetual transition or change exhibit the same tendency toward identity that Adorno so vigorously attacked throughout his theory. The constant becoming of change is “nonqualitative, undifferentiated” (“Wagner’s Relevance for Today,” pg.
In other words, change for change’s sake becomes the focus. Becoming nonidentity for becoming nonidentity’s sake is the focus. This is merely an undifferentiated chain of change. It is merely to claim that identity is nonidentity, so to be, we need to become. Our being/identity is fixed and there is never qualitative change. Becoming has been transformed into being and nonidentity has been made identity.

Elsewhere he expands this notion beyond Wagner, and his obviously problematic music, and ties it to all music when he writes that unless music includes proper aesthetic elements that allow it to approach the “the utopia of music” its “incessant change degenerates into monotony, the recurrence of the same” (“Form in the New Music,” pg. 205). Later in this chapter, but especially in the next chapter, we will see what makes art’s form aesthetic (i.e., according to “utopia”), but in short, that aesthetic requires elements of being and becoming, identity and nonidentity and requires them to be properly related to each other. If the utopia were merely the latter qualities, it would turn those qualities into the former, and all of the problems asserted with them would return.

Whether in philosophy or in art, then, pure becoming leads to a concretion of sameness that becomes a new kind of identity. If it was about pure becoming, than that would be what it means to be human, and becoming the nonidentity would be the human identity that creates human being. Focusing on either half of the tension, removes the dialectical salt and devolves into the problematic conceptualization of being/identity that Adorno so prominently outlines throughout his theory.

Instead, Adorno reminds us that we need both halves of the tension: “without solidity there can be no dynamics, that where everything flows nothing happens” (“Wagner’s Relevance for Today,” pg. 53), or again “Even the postulates of non-repetitiveness, of absolute difference,
calls for an element of sameness without which the different cannot be seen to be different” (“Form in the New Music,” pg. 205). In order for the idea to be dynamic, which is to say to continue to be qualitative change, there must be something solid, there must be an element of sameness that does not change. In order for the becoming and nonidentity to be meaningful and to be good, there must be some identity linked to being; becoming difference (nonidentity) requires this sameness. As we will continue to see, nonidentity requires identity, becoming requires being, etc. Attempts to eliminate identity, being, etc. merely makes nonidentity into identity, becoming into being, and the like. Adorno, then, consistently calls for the tension rather than merely siding with the different, or the becoming of nonidentity.

This is why Adorno claims that “Unleashed dialectics is not without anything solid, no more than is Hegel. But it no longer confers primacy on it” (Negative Dialectics, pg. 37). Even the negative dialectics that underpins his theory does not eliminate the solid; there is still being/identity. However, what distinguishes negative dialectics from all other versions of the dialectic, is that Adorno no longer makes that being/identity the center of his project.

It should not be surprising, then, that in Negative Dialectics’ (pg. 149) most concentrated discussion of utopia in a section entitled “Cogitative Self-Reflection,” he claims that “the ideal of identity must not simply be discarded.” He again recognizes that conferring primacy on identity leads to total contradiction when he again affirms that no concept “identity” can ever be “the correspondence of the thing-in-itself” (Negative Dialectics, pg. 149). However, while this is true, we cannot simply discard the ideal that we could (in our understanding and living) correspond with “itself.” This is because there is some “itself.” Even if we can never fully come to know or conceptualize it, there is something solid. This ideal of identity cannot be completely eliminated; it cannot be simply discarded.
Adorno expounds on this arguing: “Living in the rebuke that the thing is not identical with the concept is the concept’s longing to become identical with the thing. This is how the sense of nonidentity contains identity” (Negative Dialectics, pg. 149). In short, Adorno recognizes that any claim made by nonidentity to its wrongful exclusion is already a nod toward the thing-in-itself and hence to identity. It is already a nod toward something solid. In making this move, Adorno remains consistent with his persistent argument that any definition of identity (i.e., any claim to being) remains incomplete and so excludes something of the thing-in-itself and relegates it to nonidentity and does not even consider it worthy of becoming, let alone being, (hence its oppressive nature). Here, Adorno acknowledges to think otherwise “is hubris” (Negative Dialectics, pg. 149); to think we can come up with a concept “identity” that has no gap with the “itself” is hubris. However, any recognition of nonidentity or the oppression done to it, is already to recognize the “ideal” of identity. It is to recognize “identity’s” (as a conception) longing to be the thing-in-itself. It recognizes that there is a thing-in-itself. As we will see, the utopia is not identity nor even true and complete identity, which would be the thing-in-itself—indeed, he explicitly claims here that “Utopia would be above identity” (Negative Dialectics, pg. 150)—however, the ideal of identity, which is true and complete being, cannot “simply be discarded.” Both identity and nonidentity (and both being and becoming) long for the thing-in-itself; they long for the elimination of the gap between themselves, as conceptions, and the thing-in-itself.

This is made clearer when Adorno addresses utopia earlier in Aesthetic Theory (pg. 32-33) in the section “Situation.” In the midst of this discussion of utopia, he describes the unfulfilled longing of the “new” (nonidentity) through the analogy of “a child at the piano” (Aesthetic Theory, pg. 32). This child tries to find and play a new chord, but it turns out that no
chord is really new, because every possible chord is already contained in the keyboard itself. In other words, the hope is for becoming something new—the hope is to find and recognize nonidentity so that it is no longer invisible and oppressed—but that hope, that longing, is just that: a longing. “The new is the longing for the new, not the new itself: That is what everything new suffers from” (Aesthetic Theory, pg. 32). Because of the existence of the “itself” (the keyboard itself), the new is never really possible. All nonidentity is already contained in the itself.

This is the idea that he used in the paragraph leading into his succinct gesture, when he wrote “Art desires what has not yet been, though everything that art is has already been” (Aesthetic Theory, pg. 134). Nothing is truly new, because all has already been. Everything that could be is already contained in the “itself.” This idea is a refrain from his opening argument of Aesthetic Theory: “In their relation to empirical reality, artworks recall the theologumenon that in the redeemed world everything would be as it is and yet wholly other” (Aesthetic Theory, pg. 6). In a world that is redeemed—this is the world of utopia, the world according to the good—the thing-in-itself would be as it had always been and yet it would be completely (i.e., qualitatively) different. In other words, there is some “itself” there, so everything has already been; it is contained in the “itself.” The problem is always that concepts “identity,” “being,” etc. are always incomplete, so they always stifle what has always been and so “itself,” though it has always been, is “not yet.” As we will see, the solution to this requires dialectical salt. But the solidity of “itself” is a key component to this dialectic.

But there is a reason why, in discussing this, Adorno uses the word “itself.” He writes, “For the sake of utopia, identification is reflected in the linguistic use of the word outside of logic, in which we speak, not of identifying an object, but of identifying with people and things”
His utopia is going to be concerned with “people and things.” He is concerned with things themselves. He is concerned with the itself. Formulating it in this way already shows that he is significantly altering what is meant by “being.” He already implies a renewed understanding of the subject/objet relationship. The artwork’s form helps us to better understand this subject/object tension, and we will explore that in the next chapter. But what is obvious here is that this relationship with people and things (the itself) is new. It is a relationship of “identifying with.” This is a new kind of identification; it is one that moves beyond “identity.” To understand what this means, we need to analyze the second component of the succinct gesture. It is to this that we turn next.

*Anticipating the “Would Be”*

Even though, Adorno problematizes pure becoming, and even though he claims that nothing is ever really new (nonidentity) but is already contained in the “itself,” it is also clear that becoming/nonidentity are crucial to his understanding of the good. It is also clear that Adorno’s theory privileges the oppressed half of the dichotomy (becoming, nonidentity, etc.). Indeed, at the very beginning of *Negative Dialectics* (pg. 5) he writes “Dialectics is the consistent sense of nonidentity.” This is representative of his theory as a whole. As we already saw above, the problem with concepts like “being” and “identity” is that they are never a perfect correspondence with the “itself,” and so they create nonidentity and limit the becoming of that nonidentity so that it must remain consistently hidden from view, which is to say suppressed, and hence oppressed.

This all means that while the “itself,” the “ideal of identity,” is not “simply discarded,” it is equally true that it alone is not the utopia. The inclusion of the “itself” in Adorno’s gesture toward utopia already includes nonidentity, because the itself includes what comes to be known
as “nonidentity” through the creation of an incomplete concept “identity.” Further, since there is never a correspondence between “identity” and “thing-in-itself,” Adorno claims that being does not exist as a stable category. This introduces the need for the inclusion of becoming.

He reminds us of this fact in his succinct gesture by including the qualifier “would…be” to “itself.” The utopia has to do with the what “anticipates” this “would be.” The itself is never a stable category that exists. In other words, because all of it is never made completely visible (i.e., never completely and truly conceptualized as “identity”), it also never has being. The itself is already only a fictitious being that has never “yet been” and (probably, as we will see) will always only “would be.”

This idea was quite explicit in our description of the “itself” above. As we saw, though everything has already been—contained in “itself”—it also is not yet. This means that with utopia, if it were ever to come, the “itself” would be “wholly other” than what it currently is. The utopia “anticipates” what “would be” if the itself were to come in its utopic form, even though this itself—even in its utopic form—has always been. All of the possible chords may already be in the keyboard, but the child is still there searching for them. And this search is necessary precisely because some incomplete concept of “being” or “identity” has kept part of the itself from making itself visible. Without the search for the nonidentical—those chords that have not yet been played, i.e., not yet been made visible—the “itself,” though as it has already been, has not yet been and will not be. This is the same as to say that without becoming the itself will never be; it will never have being.

Extrapolating from this, Adorno boldly claims that this search for the nonidentical has always been the secret telos of identity; even by those identitarian thinkers that he so roundly criticizes (Negative Dialectics, pg. 149). The quest for identity is the quest for nonidentity.
However, the problem with this is that philosophers have always been concerned with identifying what has been left out of their identity-conceptions of “itself.” That is they seek to identify the nonidentical. This means that philosophers have always sought to make nonidentity “come under” a new, more complete, truer conception “identity” \((\textit{Negative Dialectics}, \text{pg. 149})\). They have sought to capture nonidentity so it could be included in identity. Even though this is where they went wrong, Adorno points out that this means that nonidentity was always the goal of any search for categories of identity.

As is so often the case, Adorno asserts that he will start with this hidden, yet misused or misunderstood, quality of earlier thinkers and will make it explicit so that he can make it the center of his new/yet not new project. In this respect, he still makes nonidentity into the telos of sorts, but he then radically alters what this means by taking it seriously as its own category rather than allowing it to be swallowed by the oppressive half of the dichotomy (being, identity, etc.). Since there will never be correspondence between identity and itself, Adorno’s focus is not on a more complete identity through incorporation of nonidentity into identity. Instead, he focuses on the nonidentity itself. He wishes to show that there is nonidentity and what the nonidentity is. In other words, he wants to identify with nonidentity.

Adorno makes clear that this is what reconciliation—another of the words that he uses analogously to the good—is:

> “Art is not reconciliation in the classicistic sense: Reconciliation is the comportment of artworks by which they become conscious of the nonidentical. Spirit does not identify the nonidentical: It identifies with it. By pursuing its own identity with itself, art assimilates itself with the nonidentical” \((\textit{Aesthetic Theory}, \text{pg. 134})\).

Reconciliation is not the identification of nonidentity, because that would merely result in identity swallowing nonidentity. It would be the synthesis of nonidentity and identity into a new, but still incomplete, conception “identity.” Instead, art can engage in reconciliation that identifies
with nonidentity. It can show that nonidentity exists, which subsequently shows that the conception “identity” is incomplete and false and that it then suppresses nonidentity—makes it remain invisible—in an act of oppression. In this sense, negative dialectics is more identitarian than identity thinking; it just identifies in a different way (Negative Dialectics, pg. 149). It identifies so nonidentity can become visible. This is because nonidentity is a crucial component of the good.

Going back again to the example of the child at the keyboard, this is why the longing for the new rather than the new is ultimately what art is about. All exists as possibility in the “itself,” so nothing is ever really new (it has already been), but many chords have not been allowed to be played (based on categories of identity with respect to music that make things like atonality or dissonance into “nonidentity”). The child longs for these chords. The child wishes to identify with the nonidentity. This longing is the anticipation of what would be itself. This longing is for the good. As such, nonidentity is an important component of the good.

“Form”

However, the ideal of identity cannot simply be discarded. There is still the sense that there is some itself—which is the already/not yet, being/identity that exists outside of any conceptualization of being/identity—and that nonidentity too has connection with “itself.” As we have seen all along, Adorno’s discussion of utopia entails the tension between various dualities: being/becoming, identity/nonidentity, already/not yet, etc. The tensions of these dualities are actually the centerpiece of Adorno’s understanding of utopia/the good.

This was already implicit in the overall framing of utopia as seen in the succinct gesture. As we saw there, it is not artwork that is utopia, but artwork’s form: “…artwork is utopia insofar as through its form…” (Aesthetic Theory, pg. 135). The artwork can teach us about utopia, can
begin to embody the good, because its form is able to maintain the tension between the anticipated “would…be” and the “finally…itself.” Its form allows the itself and the anticipation of itself to exist simultaneously without the one swallowing the other. This means that neither half of the tension is the good in its own right. Any solidity from itself, the ideal of identity, is not the good on its own, and likewise any focus on nonidentity and becoming—determinate negation or otherwise—is not, by itself, the good. The good ultimately resides in the form that allows the tension between the two to play out. The tension is good because it produces dynamism. The good, then, is a kind of movement, and this movement is only possible with the proper kind of tension that comes from a proper relationship between being/becoming, identity/nonidentity, etc. It is not a movement of becoming that leads to being and it is not a movement of becoming alone; it is a special kind of movement that maintaining the proper tension allows.

Artwork is capable of being the kind of form that can, if not fully embody this tension, at least gesture toward it. As we will see in the next chapter, even artworks, with the right form, are incapable of stably existing utopically. Even artwork’s true aesthetic form cannot concretely live the good. But this just further emphasizes Adorno’s point: the good is the tension. Anything that eliminates the tension, dooms one half of the tension to be swallowed by the other, and concrete living will always eliminate the tension by choosing one side over the other. Artwork’s aesthetic form can act as a model for overcoming this at least episodically, because it can embody, at least sequentially if not perpetually, the tension.

Before we can see how artworks, through their form, can gesture toward the emergence of the proper tension, we need to see what Adorno means by proper tension. To do so, we need to return again to the succinct gesture. The second half of that sentence further solidifies the idea
that the good is about the tension rather than any resolution of the tension. Adorno concludes his thought about utopia by writing “…and this converges with the demand for the abrogation of the spell of self-identity cast by the subject” (Aesthetic Theory, pg. 135). Even individual people cannot produce a concept of identity for themselves, because even they cannot know all of their own “itself.” Self-identity is still hubris, and it still creates total contradiction between the, in this case, self-created concept “identity” and the itself. The good is not about the person choosing to live according to some self-chosen notion of identity. And this includes the idea that the person could, as a subject, constantly become different in opposition to any identity given by themselves or an outside force. In other words, just as the person cannot truly and completely self-identify their being, the person cannot make constant becoming their true, complete self-identity. That too would be an incomplete, false conceptualization and so would not be the good. This means that the good is not about the individual choosing to live according to either identity or nonidentity. The good entails abrogating that. That abrogation is necessary for understanding how to properly relate “would…be” with “finally…itself.” The good is the existence of the tension without any move to resolve it, even by the so-called subject of the “itself.”

In our discussion so far, we have hinted that the good is the tension itself. We saw this in the succinct gesture: would be/finally itself. We saw this in the idea of itself as already/not yet. This is an idea that is repeated in his elaboration of the succinct gesture when he argues that utopia is the “recollection” of the “yet-to-exist;” it is the already/not yet (Aesthetic Theory, pg. 135). Elsewhere, he argues that utopia contains the conceptual and the nonconceptual (Negative Dialectics, pg. 8-10). Likewise, he claims that utopia must contain identity and nonidentity (Negative Dialectics pg. 10-11). Consistently, then, Adorno links the idea of utopia with a
tension, and he argues that the utopia must keep the tension without resolving it in one direction or the other.

While discussion of tension is a frequent partner to his discussion of utopia, Adorno sums up the idea of tension and its relation the good in “On Subject and Object” (pg. 247) where he connects it to reconciliation:

“Were speculation concerning the state of reconciliation allowed, then it would be impossible to conceive that state as either the undifferentiated unity of subject and object or their hostile antithesis: rather it would be the communication of what is differentiated...In its proper place, even epistemologically, the relationship of subject and object would lie in a peace achieved between human beings as well as between them and their Other. Peace is the state of differentiation without domination, with the differentiated participating in each other.”

The “state of reconciliation” is the state of utopia; utopia is the redeemed world where there is reconciliation. This utopia is not a state of “undifferentiated unity.” This means that it is not the state of identity. Again, this means that it is neither a state where identity swallowed up all nonidentity by absorbing it into itself to create a true and complete identity, nor is it a state where the becoming of nonidentity is what it means to be. But the state of utopia also is not the state of “hostile antithesis.” It is not merely a determinate negation that unmasks all false, incomplete notions of identity through a hostile focus on its opposite: nonidentity. This is an idea that we have not yet discussed but to which we will return. Instead, the state of utopia is the state of the tension; it is the “state of differentiation without domination.” It is the state where identity/nonidentity, being/becoming, etc. live in constant tension, but this tension is as it should be. It produces peace rather than domination. This is why in *Minima Moralia* (pg. 157), he argues, “None of the abstract concepts come closer to fulfilled utopia than that of eternal peace.” The abstract concepts of utopia are positive concepts, so they never suffice, but those that gesture toward peace are closest to getting it right. Utopia, he claims here, is the state of tension that allows both halves of the dichotomy to be visible so that neither side of the dichotomy can dominate the other side. Adorno argues that dialectics, and philosophy more broadly, has always
ended up siding with one of the other two options. It was either about undifferentiated unity or hostile antithesis. Hence, the inevitable result was always domination. Adorno proposes the third option; one where the tension itself is the focus. One where the tension itself is the reconciliation.

This is what Adorno tries to express in the conclusion to “Cogitative Self-Reflection” in the second gesture toward utopia that we have been hinting at all along: “Utopia would be above identity and above contradiction; it would be a togetherness of diversity” (Negative Dialectics, pg. 150). This means that existence—as it should and could be—is togetherness of diversity. We can see now, in part, why utopia is unspeakable. Here Adorno is arguing for true and complete being, but he is fundamentally shifting what that means. By this, he means the tension between being/becoming, identity/nonidentity, etc. is what so-called true and complete being would be. It is neither being nor becoming. Instead, it is the peaceful tension between the two. It would be a togetherness of diversity. The solidity of itself is necessary (togetherness), but so too is nonidentity’s diversity. The good would be the tension that exists in the thing. This would be the existence of the ideal of identity. But since this is tension—a togetherness of diversity—this existence is never identity nor nonidentity. The diversity of the itself is lost in any conception of identity: this is why utopia is above identity and above the contradiction that any conception of identity inevitably brings. But it is also not merely the unbound diversity of perpetual becoming and identification with nonidentity. This eliminates the togetherness that is the “itself.” Utopia, the good, would be an existence where the identity/nonidentity, being/becoming, etc. tension lived. It would be the visible manifestation of a togetherness of diversity. It would be a peaceful tension.

If we understand Adorno to this point, then, it becomes clear why he links this redeemed world with the already/not yet. The tension is a tension between identity/nonidentity,
being/becoming. The tension is the embodiment of an itself that has always been and the nonidentity that constantly reminds “itself” that it never was. The tension is the embodiment of the human being. It is the embodiment of the entire range of possible chords already in the keyboard that have not yet been played. This, then, is why Adorno says “in the redeemed world everything would be as it is and yet wholly other.” The thing (human) has always existed as a tension, but the tension has never been peaceful. In the redeemed world, the thing would still exist as a tension, but this existence would be wholly other because the tension would be peaceful. In the redeemed world, the thing would actually exist.

In some ways, this is precisely why Adorno claims that the subject/object tension (and by extension, the rest of the dichotomies, some of which he discusses in similar terms throughout this essay) are “real and semblance” (“On Subject and Object,” pg. 246). On the one hand, the subject/object tension is real. His entire theory traces out the devastating consequences that result when the tension is resolved in favor of one half or the other. In those cases, it is painfully obvious that the tension is real. However, if the tension is resolved in this way so that one half dominates, then the tension has been destroyed; it is merely semblance. On the other hand, the tension, if it is actually kept as a tension, reveals itself to be semblance. What the thing is=tension. This means that both sides of the tension must be real. The tension would not exist otherwise. But on the other hand, as he argues all throughout this essay but also elsewhere, each side of the tension constitutes the other side. This combined with the fact that the two combined constitute the thing, means that the tension between them is semblance. Understanding this real/semblance idea makes the peaceful tension clear. The tension remains (is real) but it is peaceful (semblance). This does not mean the elimination of the tension; the tension must
remain, but it does mean that the peaceful reconciliation of the tension is the utopia, because that is what the human being is. The “is” here = tension.

Focusing on maintaining the proper tension would allow Adorno to fulfill the purpose of *Negative Dialectics* (pg. xix) because it would “free dialectics from such affirmative traits without reducing its determinacy.” As he indicates here, Adorno hopes that his project eliminates affirmation while still keeping determinacy. The former is needed, because he believes that positive conceptions of truth/being/identity are the source of domination. He must argue for the latter, because the history of philosophy has explicitly (though, as we saw in previous chapters, implicitly these conceptions have relied a great deal on negative thinking) relied on positive conceptions of the good in order to justify determinacy.

Adorno’s conception of the good as peaceful tension not only is in keeping with this goal, but, as we will see in the next chapter, is an important foundation for his theory’s overall ability to achieve that goal. That the good is a tension means that it is not a thing. This means that there is no affirmation. Adorno’s good is not a positive conception; instead, it is a relationship. The good is a reconciliation of a tension that already exists. The good would be a relationship whereby the movements that constitute reality would never affirm themselves but would remain in the proper tension with each other. The tension is dominating only when one side affirms itself, which forces the other half of the tension to “come under” its power. Adorno’s good would eliminate the affirmation so the tension could exist peacefully. This, then, means that his good still offers hope of a better world, so it maintains the determinacy. If his good were achieved, the tensions would move from domination to peace, and the world would be redeemed.

This also means that utopia can only be approached negatively. Adorno makes this clear in the run-in to his succinct gesture when he writes that “Even by artworks the concrete is
scarcely to be named other than negatively” (Aesthetic Theory, pg. 135). Even artworks approach the good negatively. Even trying to name the good—which is always unspeakable—can only be done negatively. This echoes his thoughts from a few pages earlier (Aesthetic Theory, pg. 130) when he states, “The spell with which art through its unity encompasses the *membra disjecta* of reality is borrowed from reality and transforms art into the negative appearance of utopia.” Art can only provide a “negative appearance of utopia” by actively taking the side of nonidentity, the “*membra disjecta*,” by embodying that nonidentity within the “unity” of the artwork itself. The artwork must embody the unity (identity)/diversity (nonidentity) tension, and the only way that it can do this is by embodying nonidentity, which would then succeed in destroying the (false) positive conceptions of identity that exist. In this way, artworks would approach utopia negatively: it would destroy the dominance of the tension, which would make possible the emergence of a peaceful tension in its place.

It is important to note here too that this process is “borrowed from reality.” Artworks must take this approach, because “reality” has a tendency to affirm, so the only way for this reality to act as it should (i.e., according to reality, which is the peaceful tension) is to negate the positive conceptions of identity that it is constantly creating. This negative approach would destroy the dominance of the tension and make possible the appearance of the peaceful tension.  

*Two Implications*

From this analysis, two final points emerge. First, the negative path to utopia is Adorno’s determinate negation, though this determinate negation is not, itself, the utopia. And second, if reality has a tendency to affirm, the emergence of utopia may not ever come. We will examine these two points in turn before concluding this chapter by briefly drawing some conclusions about what the good may look like for humans.
As we just saw, our only hope of approaching utopia is through negation of what is not utopia. If we are to live according to the peaceful tension, we need to unmask and destroy the dominating elements of the tension. This, of course, is the key element of Adorno’s determinate negation. To give one example where he argues this, he writes “Totality is to be opposed by convicting it of nonidentity with itself—of the nonidentity it denies, according to its own concept” (Negative Dialectics, pg. 147). The only way to destroy society’s oppression through identity creation is to show that any concept “identity” is inadequate. Showing the gap between the concept and the thing-in-itself shows that the concept is not total and the power used to force obedience to that false concept is totalitarian. This idea is well established.

For our purposes here, though, it is important to note that determinate negation is the path to utopia, but it is not utopia itself. From what we have seen so far, it should be clear that determinate negation is the equivalent of “hostile antithesis.” It is the opposition of one side of the tension (in this case, the side of nonidentity) to the other side (in this case, identity). While this approach is, given current conditions, necessary for approaching utopia negatively, Adorno explicitly argues that this is not utopia, which is a peaceful tension rather than a hostile one.

Throughout his theory, Adorno confirms this idea. He argues that dialectics “to begin with” seeks to overcome this problem by showing “that objects do not go into their concepts without leaving a remainder” (Negative Dialectics, pg. 5). Determinate negation is the beginning of his project, but, as he implies here, not the end. He further hints at this idea in Aesthetic Theory (pg. 32) when he states, “What takes itself to be utopia remains the negation of what exists and is obedient to it.” Determinate negation is only taken to be utopia. It is easy for people to mistake determinate negation for actual utopia, because “In the unreconciled condition, nonidentity is experienced as negativity” (Negative Dialectics, pg. 31). In a world of dominating
tensions, the only way that we can ever relate to nonidentity is by engaging in the hostile antithesis of determinate negation. If the reconciled world ever came about, it would be possible to experience nonidentity differently. It would still be through a negative relationship, but this relationship would be one of peaceful tension rather than hostile antithesis. We will encounter this idea again in the next chapter, but as we can see already, Adorno consistently hints at a distinction between determinate negation and utopia.

This discussion, though, relates to another aspect of Adorno’s understanding of utopia. Even if determinate negation is not utopia, Adorno consistently argues that this is the path toward utopia, because reality is what it is. Further, he strongly implies that this aspect of reality is insurmountable, so all we will ever be able to do is engage in determinate negation; we will never be able to live the peaceful tension itself. For example, he argues that any “utopia of construction,” including any created by “constructive art,” will only “arrest the process” that would be that utopia by enforcing the “loss of tension” (*Aesthetic Theory*, pg. 58). In other words, any time that we try to create utopia—perhaps, though from the context here this is not entirely clear, even by trying to actualize the negative utopia that is the peaceful tension—would inevitably result in a loss of movement necessary to maintain the proper, peaceful, tension. Maybe there are aspects of reality that get in the way of our ever embodying the peaceful tension. This is why the “possibility” of a utopic “paradise” in the “here and now” always “converges with the possibility of total catastrophe” (*Aesthetic Theory*, pg. 33). The moment that the peaceful tension is brushed is the moment that one side begins to dominate the other and on the precipice of paradise, we fall into total catastrophe. We will return to this idea at the end of this chapter and in the next chapter, which we will end with a discussion of the possibility that, no matter how unlikely, we may be able to embody the peaceful tension sometime in the future.
Conclusion

But what does this really mean? Gesturing or not, this concept of the good must be something more than theoretical speculation. What would it really mean to live according to this good? What would it mean to live a life of peaceful tension?

Adorno’s use of the keyboard illustration suggests two things. First, there is a finite set of possibilities contained in the keyboard, and, second, there is always the promise of a new possibility, which implies an infinite set of possibilities. This seems to encapsulate the tension that he refers to. In a sense, the keyboard has always been as it is, so all of the possibilities already exist. Yet, not all chords have been played in combination (relationship), so the keyboard has not yet been. The keyboard, then, is the anticipation of what would finally be itself. That all of the possibilities could exist but do not yet exist necessitates movement. But this movement would only be good if they moved in a certain way. These movements could not privilege the finiteness represented by the keyboard “itself” or the infiniteness of the “anticipated” possibilities.

This just brings us back to the same question that has always plagued conceptualizations of the good. Is there a right chord that we can and should play at the right time in the right way? Or, at any one time, are there any a number of chords that we could (regardless of should) play? In other words, should our quest entail being the right chord or should it entail constantly becoming a different chord? It seems that Adorno wants us to think beyond both of these options. The peaceful tension would make visible the entirety of the “itself,” which includes the entirety of nonidentity. This is to say that it would make visible the entirety of all of the possibilities—all of the possible chords—at any one moment. It is not about choosing the right or true chord to play. That would be to side with being/identity. Nor is it about choosing to play a
different chord. That would be to side with becoming/nonidentity. In any case, self-identity needs to be abrogated too, so it is not about choosing at all, which is always identification regardless of whether it is in service of being or becoming. Instead, the utopia would be the constant visibility of all possibilities contained in the itself so the tension could reconcile itself. As we will see in the next chapter, this idea of the tension reconciling itself seems to be central for Adorno. It is only in the “resolving itself” that we can have true freedom, spontaneity, and autonomy that would be outside of the control of dominating tensions and so would be necessary for the emergence of a peaceful reconciliation of the tension. If this reconciliation happened, we would have a togetherness of diversity.

But it seems that this reconciliation can never happen, because the balance of negative movement seems too precarious. The moment any negative motion occurs, we are in danger of making something positive. Any speech, thought, or act will almost inevitably cause us to side with one half of the tension or the other. Further, our very existence in the spatial-temporal realm seems likely to destroy any negative balance. How can the full panoply of diversity spontaneously emerge given space-time constraints?

Here, then, we are met with the pessimism of Adorno. If this is the utopia, as Adorno gestures toward numerous times throughout his theory, then any action that we ever take (always a spatial-temporal act) will almost certainly upset the peacefulness of the tension and will almost certainly ensure that, at the precipice of utopia, we manage only to create total catastrophe.

So, in Lyotard’s words, Adorno is the devil. He promises redemption and then takes away any possibility of it. While this is tempting, I believe that Adorno is more subtle than that. Yes, (it seems) the utopia is always just out of our grasp. However, there is utopia for Adorno. It is, as has always been the case in the dialectical tradition, indefinitely deferred. However, this
time, Adorno is upfront about this. He is honest that there is some ideal of identity—there is some utopia—but any attempt to claim it will (probably) only lead to oppression and nihilism. But this honesty gives him the leverage to theorize a different path. At the very least, he can caution us against any affirmation. This orients us toward determinate negation. Every act/thought should unmask the unsatisfactoriness of the current attempt to define what it means to be human/to live the good human life. His conception of the good allows him to do this.

Reality is according to a peaceful tension. Reality is no longer seen as existing in the realm of either being (modernism) or becoming (postmodernism). It is the tension between the two. That we do not exist in that space of peaceful tension gives us leverage to engage in determinate negation.

While this seems insignificant, this does produce benefits. We will examine what these benefits are in the next chapter, but before we do, we need to see how this conception of the good not only is not contradictory to the rest of Adorno’s theory, but actually underpins it.
Chapter 7 | Adorno: Clowning Around on the Precipice

Introduction

Adorno recognized the pervasive criticism that his theory does not allow him to do anything that can make life better. In a number of minor works (e.g., “Resignation,” “Free Time,” and “Commitment”), he explicitly rejects these criticisms. In “Resignation” (pg. 166), for example, he argues that when confronted with a world of totality—a world that produces a dominating tension—that puts us “behind bars,” “Only thinking could offer an escape.” The “unconfused thinking” that is the aesthetic reasoning that is in line with negative dialectics is the only act that is not resignation, because it is the only act that does not succumb to the life of equivalent identity that the totality demands (“Resignation,” pg. 167). Anything outside this aesthetic thinking is merely “pseudo-activity;” it is activity according to predetermined directives, and so only marginally counts as action (“Resignation,” pg. 167; “Free Time,” pg. 173). Proper thinking is the only thing that breaks the conceptions of identity that require certain standard, preset actions, so it is the only thing that makes “spontaneity” possible (“Resignation,” pg. 167), and spontaneity is the only thing that makes true activity—activity that is in correspondence with the peaceful tension—possible. Proper thinking is the only thing that “has a firm grasp upon possibility” that “rejects the foolish wisdom of resignation” (“Resignation,” pg. 168) and is not a “capitulation to” the totality (“Resignation,” pg. 166). Proper thinking alone is capable of making the tension within the thing itself visible so that spontaneous (again this is not about subjective self-identity but a peaceful subject-object tension) actions that could possibly be in keeping with the peaceful tension itself. This is the only hope of living in a way that is not resigned to the current oppressive regime of totality.
While proper thinking is itself already action, Adorno also offers the hope that this thinking can also teach us so that we can live differently too. As he writes in *Minima Moralia* (pg. 81) in one of the three concluding aphorisms that are meant to be “models for a future exertion of thought” (pg. 17): “Thought waits to be woken one day by the memory of what has been missed, and to be transformed into teaching.” The first step toward the good life, which is the “melancholy science from which” *Minima Moralia* flows (pg. 15), is to revitalize our thinking. This proper thinking will be thinking that understands that things are broken—we remember what could have been but was missed. But this is just the first step. Next this thinking needs to begin teaching. Though he does not much develop the point in *Minima Moralia*, both *Negative Dialectics* and *Aesthetic Theory* are the “future exertion of thought” that seeks to build upon the model that *Minima Moralia* offered. In these books, we see that proper thinking is not merely about thinking but is also related to living.

*Negative Dialectics* and *Aesthetic Theory* are the magnum opuses of Adorno’s theory. They are the capstone if not exactly the summation of his theory. They bring together many of his ideas, but they also seek to give the “so what” of his theory. It is, as he admits in the “Preface” to *Negative Dialectics* (pg. xix), an explanation of his “methodology” and, to quote Benjamin, the crossing of “‘the frozen waste of abstraction to arrive at concise, concrete philosophizing.’” In other words, these works show what he was up to all along. They seek to cross over from the abstract to something more tangible. They seek to provide guidance for life. In keeping with his understanding of dialectics, also keeping room for the discontinuity of his works and between those works and these capstone works.

As such, these works in a sense illuminate what Adorno was always doing, but they also provide more concise ideas for what to do with his theory. He makes this clear at the beginning
of both of these works. As we saw, in *Negative Dialectics* (pg. xix), he states that the purpose of the book is “to free dialectics from such affirmative traits without reducing its determinacy.” Likewise, *Aesthetic Theory*’s (pg. 341) goal is to rescue the field of aesthetics from affirmative moral, normative traits so that it can teach (“provide the capacity for reflection”) people. In both cases, the goal of his theory is not merely criticism for criticism’s sake. He also hopes that his theory can help build a better world. He wants to lose affirmation but not determinacy. He wants to bring back aesthetics not as a positive system of morals but as a way to give what system and identified morality (as prescribed, affirmed principles) promised but could not. Ultimately, he wants art to come to embody aesthetics, so that art can be the model that can teach humans how to live aesthetically. In both cases, building toward a good life can only happen if dialectics is understood properly.

For him, then as we just saw, this process starts with thinking. In particular, it requires negative dialectical, aesthetic thinking. *Negative Dialectics* addresses the former and *Aesthetic Theory* the latter. However, in his discussion of both, it becomes clear that Adorno is addressing more than just thinking. Even more, it becomes clear that his definition of utopia is at the heart of both of these discussions and so is at the heart of how to think and how to live.

Negative dialectics—as a philosophy or way of thinking—only fully exists if it corresponds with utopia; it must eschew synthesis and instead peacefully embrace various tensions. *Negative Dialectics* as a whole is, in part, a catalog of tensions that have been important in the history of philosophy—being/becoming, identity/nonidentity, subject/object, universal/particular, truth/relativism, etc. Consistently, when he addresses these tensions, he argues two things: 1) proper thinking would think both of these extremes without allowing one side of the dichotomy to dominate the other and 2) because the world is broken and because this
brokenness is the result of universal/identity/being/etc. thinking, proper thinking might not be immediately possible, so we must use the dominated half of the dichotomy, which is to say the particular/nonidentity/becoming/etc. half, to criticize the dominating half. In other words, we need to engage in determinate negation.

Likewise, in *Aesthetic Theory* (pg. 343), he argues that aesthetics can only do what he wants if it is a “dialectical aesthetics.” The “essence” of this aesthetics is the “tension” that is neither “false synthesis” nor “rigid polarity” (*Aesthetic Theory*, pg. 97). If aesthetics is going to be what aesthetics is supposed to be, it must peacefully embody tensions rather than siding with either synthesis or antithesis. Again in some ways, *Aesthetic Theory* is a catalog of the ways that art can become aesthetic by peacefully embodying each of the important philosophical dichotomies he discussed in *Negative Dialectics*. Because the artwork’s form is already inclined toward embodying the peaceful tensions, art may be able to better model living the utopia. However, even if artworks do not perfectly embody it, their form still encourages determinate negation because this always allows for a peaceful tension to arise even if it never does.

In other words, for dialectics and aesthetics to act as they promise, they would have to embody utopia. They would have to embody the peaceful tension. Ultimately, then, he does not discuss dialectics and aesthetics merely to provide understanding of proper thinking—though, importantly, it is that—but he does so also to provide us with models of the embodiment of the good life, which may be able to teach us how to live.

Ultimately, neither is a perfect embodiment of the good life—“Art is no more able than theory to concretize utopia, not even negatively” (*Aesthetic Theory*, pg. 32)—so neither can fully model what the good life looks like. However, the form of both—particularly of art—allows each to function in ways that continue to hold out hope that it could possibly come to embody
utopia. If dialectics is true to its way of philosophizing, it will, at the very least, use the dominated extreme to criticize the dominating extreme, because this is the only option that can maintain the dynamism necessary to move beyond the broken (i.e., dominating) relation of the tensions and to possibly make them peaceful. Any synthesis after that would destroy the dynamism and concretize the domination. Art’s form is even more promising, because its form does not require proper thinking or even proper intentions to generate movement. Art, as with any object, is tension; this is the already part of the already/not yet. But its uniqueness as an art-object makes that tension more obvious than other objects’ forms do. We never quite know what an artwork is/is supposed to be, and the artwork is always moving in ways that get us to think about it differently. In other words, any time we think we know what the artwork is, we give it an identity and dominate it, but at that moment the artwork, because it has an artistic, if not fully aesthetic, form, causes us to question our understanding and the identity that came from it. The artwork’s form, then, uses the dominated half of the tension—in this case that which we designated as nonidentity—to criticize the dominating half—our identification of the artwork.

In both of these cases, even a dialectics or aesthetics that does not embody the good life can still teach us how to think and perhaps how to eventually live according to the good life, because there is something about their form that requires determinate negation until the good life comes. Again, the determinate negation is not the good life, but without determinate negation constantly fighting against the domination of the tensions, it would be impossible to make those tensions peaceful. For this to work, though, there is already the presumption that there is a good life and the dialectical/aesthetic form would be the embodiment of that good life. Determinate negation is the “critical impulse” (“Culture and Administration,” pg. 116) of the dialectic/aesthetic form only because the form recognizes that it is not yet what it already is. The
form knows it must engage in determinate negation, because the form is the existence of the peaceful tension, but that peaceful tension does not and cannot exist.

This, then, extends to us. Dialectical/aesthetic thinking and existing is what it is, because they correspond with the larger reality. Indeed, “art stands as plenipotentiary for the in-itself that does not yet exist” (Aesthetic Theory, pg. 252). There is a connection with larger reality here. If there was not, there would be no reason for Adorno to so painstakingly describe dialectical/aesthetic thinking and explain why it is—potentially, if it ever lives up to its promise—right thinking as opposed to all other kinds of thinking. It is right, because it corresponds to reality. Again, this reality is the peaceful tension that never was. Thought can only be “woken” in the first place by the “memory of what has been missed,” which is the world that should be if ever yet it existed as it already is. This reality already exists, but because the history of the world is the history of wrong thinking, it has never been allowed to exist. The redeemed world would be the world where this reality “would…be” “finally…itself.” It would be as it always was and yet wholly other. The only hope of that is if we learn to think properly, because this thinking properly would require us to live properly. We would have to embody the peaceful tension in order to think it. Of course, we need to think the peaceful tension in order to embody it. And in any case, neither will (likely) ever happen. However, this does not make Adorno the devil, because we, like negative dialectics and aesthetic art, could remember our own form (in much the same way that Plato thought that we could remember our true form) and this would spur us to determinate negation. And each movement of determinate negation that breaks the dominating tension promises the possibility of the embodiment of the peaceful tension. As we will see, there are benefits to living this kind of life, even if it is not the actually redeemed life.
This, then, is what we will explore in the sections below. In the next two sections, we will examine, in a little more detail, the two major components of Adorno’s overall theory: negative dialectics and aesthetics. These explications will show that Adorno’s conception of utopia is not at all contradictory to his overall theory, but that, on the contrary, it is the foundation of his theory. Dialectics and aesthetics, if they are functioning properly, are themselves the approximation of the gesture toward thinking and living according to the peaceful tension that they themselves help to make visible. We will end each of the next two sections with hints as to what this form of living is, then in the final two sections of this chapter, we will draw some larger conclusions. We will see that we can live on the precipice of the good life, even if we can never fully concretize utopia or the good life of utopia per se, and that this living on the precipice, even though it constantly falls off the cliff into total catastrophe, has positive benefits. We will examine this in terms of the individual and then collectively through a discussion of politics. Then, in the “Conclusion” to this dissertation, we will try to tease out some further, perhaps more tangible, principles from Adorno’s gesture toward the good that could help us to live a better politics.

The Dialectical Life: Commotion Under the Microscope

Systems mean stasis; they are at a “standstill” (*Negative Dialectics*, pg. 25). Adorno argues that Hegel, like Aristotle before him, tried to create a system that still was able to maintain “dynamism” (*Negative Dialectics*, pg. 25). Both thought that they could do this by creating an overarching, “transcendental subject” (*Negative Dialectics*, pg. 26). Hegel called this “spirit,” which he claimed was “a simultaneous being-in-itself and pure becoming” (*Negative Dialectics*, pg. 25). Hegel, Adorno argues, created a category that he thought could encompass both being and becoming. This overarching category maintained a system—everything held
together because of it—but that the system could still be dynamic, Hegel thought, because there was a constant tension between being and becoming. This approach is akin to Aristotle’s notion of definition, which we considered at length in the first chapter on Aristotle. Aristotle’s conception of definition encompassed both being and becoming; it provided a stable system that accounted for, and even encouraged, dynamic movement from becoming to being. Adorno particularly emphasizes Aristotle’s idea of definition’s reliance on the deity’s purity as a final point of hypothetical coalescence of being and becoming where human “being” would reach its divine possibility. In both Hegel and Aristotle, then, the opposites of being and becoming remained in tension, and, they thought, this was a productive tension, precisely because there was an overarching concept that held the system together, hence providing direction to the becoming (so it could become being) and hope for being (which had not yet become).

Adorno, however, argues that the overarching, transcendental component still creates a system and therefore destroys dynamism. His quest in *Negative Dialectics* is to replace this system with a new kind of philosophy: negative dialectics. Negative dialectics would fulfill the promise of dialectics—perhaps the most promising kind of philosophy for Adorno—largely because the criticism of negative dialectics would “release the cohesive force which the idealistic systems had signed over to the transcendental subject” (*Negative Dialectics*, pg. 26). Negative dialectics, if it is to work properly, must destroy not only systems (or asystems, he reminds us), but also any part of the system/asystem that brings cohesion to tension. This elimination of cohesion is the center of the negative dialectic project. As long as any kind of cohesion of tension exists the system or even asystem will maintain its worst elements, and this is true, because it destroys the proper tension.
While this transcendental element of the “idealistic systems” of philosophy, which include most dialectical systems, is an example of a particular way that thinkers seek to bring cohesion to tension, it is not the only possible way. Adorno discusses the problem of bringing cohesion to tension in more general terms when he discusses synthesis. Adorno often criticizes thinkers like Hegel, Kant, and Plato for using synthesis in various guises (for one concentrated passage see *Negative Dialectics*, pg. 156-158). The problem with synthesis is that it seeks to bring “unity” to various tensions: identity/nonidentity, being/becoming, subject/object, etc. (*Negative Dialectics*, pg. 158). The idea is that this unity would keep the tensions from destroying each other so that they can work together to produce the true outcome: the good. Synthesis seeks to unify identity/nonidentity, for example, by reducing the gap between the two. It seeks to incorporate the nonidentical elements into the identity, so the thing can be completely and truly defined as the complete and true identity. Or else, it seeks to create a third category—transcendental being—that is the synthesis that makes rational sense of the contradiction between identity/nonidentity or any of the other dichotomies (*Negative Dialectics*, pg. 105). The problem, for Adorno, is that synthesis always becomes a “congealed synthesis” (*Negative Dialectics*, pg. 158). Dialectics that seeks synthesis is static. The synthesis stops the tension between the two halves of the dichotomy and brings them together in unity. The hope is that it eliminates the gap between the two and allows them to live harmoniously in a (static) complete truth. However, as we saw, Adorno argues that this is not what actually happens. Every synthesis is false and incomplete, so instead of creating a harmonious stasis around the truth, it creates an enforced stasis around falsehood. The result of this, Adorno consistently claims, is catastrophic. The result is contradiction, which is the gap between whatever unified stable concept is created and what the thing actually is. Adorno calls this reification, and this reification, as we saw, leads to
nihilism and oppression. As we saw, any attempt at synthesis merely allows one side of the tension to dominate the other side.

For Adorno and his understanding of dialectics as a negative dialectics, he wants to hold onto the early Hegel who Adorno believes refused synthesis:

“As early as the Introduction to *Phenomenology of Mind*, Hegel comes close to a sense of the negativity of the dialectical logic he is expounding. That Introduction bids us purely observe each concept until it starts moving until it becomes unidentical with itself by virtue of its own meaning—in other words, of its identity. This is a commandment to analyze, not to synthesize. For the concepts to satisfy themselves, their static side is to release their dynamic side, in a process comparable to the commotion in a drop of water under the microscope” (*Negative Dialectics*, pg. 156).

Negative dialectics would be about analysis rather than synthesis. This is analogous to what we already saw: synthesis=identification/making something “come under” a concept whereas analysis=identifying *with* the nonidentical. Analysis will always show that there is a gap between the current concept (synthesis) and the thing itself, so it will always show that there is something “unidentical” with the concept “itself.” Just like analysis under a microscope reveals that there is a great deal of dynamism in what was considered static, this kind of analysis would show that what was considered to be stably defined is actually quite dynamic. Analysis is only capable of doing this, if there is something dynamic there. It turns out that the thing “itself” is dynamic; it is a tension. Negative dialectics seeks to be analysis that reveals that tension, rather than synthesis, which always seeks to resolve that tension. Negative dialectic thinking, then, does not seek a new synthesis that would resolve the tension, but instead seeks to make the tension visible and, perhaps, lived. Of course, at least given the contemporary conditions, any attempt at living the tension will cause the tension to resolve itself in some way, which would be a new synthesis that would require further analysis.

However, Adorno makes clear that this strong opposition to synthesis is merely due to negative dialectics’ task given the contemporary situation. That negative dialectics strongly
argues against synthesis is “for the sake of today’s status quo” (*Negative Dialectics*, pg. 158). Ultimately, it is not about “unity,” but it is not about the “Many” either (*Negative Dialectics*, pg. 158). If negative dialectics must more strongly oppose synthesis than hostile antithesis, it is only because that side of the tension is currently winning. This is why, in a conversation about the absolutism/relativism dichotomy, Adorno argues that “Dialectics…does not seek a middle ground between the two; it opposes them through the extremes themselves, convicts them of untruth by their own ideas” (*Negative Dialectics*, pg. 35). Even though the peaceful tension would be the ideal solution, given the contemporary climate that is not immediately possible. At the present historical moment, absent the peaceful tension, synthesis is the natural result. As such, negative dialectics seeks to oppose (antithesis) each side of the tension by using the other side to show that the other side is false and therefore not worthy of defining the terms of the synthesis. If there was ever a world where difference (the “Many”) was the natural destroyer of the tension, negative dialectics would no longer need to employ a “rigid polarity” that sought “hostile antithesis” in the tension but would have to use synthesis to criticize that side of the tension.

Since enlightenment has always been about identification (unifying synthesis), and since “To think is to identify” (*Negative Dialectics*, pg. 5), which suggests that synthesis will always be the natural destroyer of the peaceful tension (even for thinking that is according to negative dialectics) if left unchecked, Adorno’s task for negative dialectics is one that more strongly opposes synthesis. His task for thinking is to shift the identifying nature of thought toward identifying *with* nonidentity. His task for it is analysis, which will constantly oppose synthesis. This is his task, because the goal is understanding and living according to the peaceful tension that is already there but is not yet.
Thinking that is done right would be thinking according to the peaceful tension. At least given the current conditions, getting there, if it is possible at all, requires analysis. Constant analysis constantly reveals the contradiction of whatever happens to be the current reigning concept “identity.” This means that thinking, at least given the current conditions, must be determinate negation.

This kind of thinking, as we saw above, is the only true action. It is the only action outside of the dominance of the reigning “identity.” Negative dialectical thinking would be living a life of determinate negation. This entails consistently tearing down current conceptions of identity. It is about constantly unhinging ourselves from some framework.

This kind of life is not without cost, which Adorno recognizes. Eliminating “frameworks,” refusing to construct simple “Yes or No,” “True or False” categories of thinking and bureaucratic living is “dizzying;” it is “Vertiginousness” (Negative Dialectics, pg. 31-32). However, Adorno claims that “The vertigo which this causes is an index veri; the shock of inconclusiveness, the negative as which it cannot help appearing in the frame-covered, never-changing realm, is true for untruth only.” The dizzying imbalance of vertigo is felt only because the existing environment is our reference for balance, so any deviation from that is disorienting. If there was a change in the environment our relationship to the good would change too. We would no longer find the constant movement between identity/nonidentity, being/becoming to be vertiginous. Our change in reference would end the imbalancing disorientation of vertigo. The same experience of approaching the peaceful tension, then, would be balancing, as it should be, rather than imbalancing. It is only because the world is structured around strict identity creation and adherence to that identity that a peaceful relationship between identity/nonidentity is
disorientating and imbalanced. The vertigo, then, is in the culture and not in us. We are already the peaceful tension, which cannot yet come about because of society’s false frameworks.

In the meantime, this does not limit the vertigo that we will feel when engaging in determinate negation—regardless of our ability to actually embody the peaceful tension. Constantly decentering ourselves from the culture industry’s or even our own perceived “identity” is nauseating and will produce disorientation in us. The good life is not without effect or affect. However, as we will see, this life can be beneficial too.

The Aesthetic Life: Imagine Music

In explicating Adorno’s gesture toward the good, it was quite obvious that art, and more specifically the aesthetic form that art strives to embody, is central to the good. As we saw in the succinct gesture, this form is the component that could properly relate the “finally…itself” with the anticipation of what “would...be;” it is what can, at least asymptotically, hold those other two components in peaceful tension. It will not be surprising, then, that Adorno’s understanding of the good agrees with his analysis of aesthetics, and in fact is intimately tied to it.

Building on our investigation of the aesthetic form from last chapter, in this section we will pull together Adorno’s thoughts on what makes art aesthetic. Doing this will allow us to see that the good life has connections with the aesthetic life just as it does with the dialectical life. In fact, the aesthetic life can, perhaps, move us closer to the good life than even the dialectical life can. Even though, as we saw, “Art is no more able than theory to concretize utopia, not even negatively” (Aesthetic Theory, 32), the aesthetic form provides a framework that we could use to begin to do more than merely engage in the determinate negation of dialectics done properly. We never fully embody the peaceful tension itself, even if we are able to successfully live an aesthetic life, but we may be able to begin to approach it. We, perhaps, can reach the precipice of
paradise before again converging with total catastrophe. However, art’s form is, perhaps even more than negative dialectics, capable of continuing the movement away from that catastrophe and the dominating, rather than peaceful, tension that it produces, because art’s form demands constant movement for it to continue to be art.

Art’s form, more than anything else, is the approximation, if not full embodiment, of the peaceful tension. We have already begun to see how this works, so in this section, we will focus on art’s ability to approximate the subject/object tension even as we briefly analyze how this relates to the nonidentity/identity and being/becoming tensions. In doing this, we will more fully come to understand a point made only in passing in the last chapter: the tensions that exist are both internal and external. Adorno argues that there are three ways that art can develop or change historically: 1) through the artwork because of “art’s autarchy,” 2) through the work of artists, and 3) through the environment and work of society/world (this last one is broad, ranging from personal/societal interpretations of the artwork to the environment of totality in which the artwork arises) (Aesthetic Theory, pg. 192). As we saw in the previous chapter, Adorno argues that real, qualitative change only occurs through tensions. The first possibility of change or development of art is due to internal tension and the final two are the result of external tensions with either the artist or the larger society. In this section, we will examine the first two tensions before briefly returning to the third tension in the section on politics.

These tensions are not always peaceful, and, particularly in the third possibility, can be quite “antagonistic” (Aesthetic Theory, pg. 192). In this latter case, any change is regressive rather than progressive; it moves us farther from the peaceful tension rather than closer to it. However, as we will see, art’s quest is to bring peace to the tensions, because its quest is to fully embody the aesthetic form, which is the utopic peaceful tension. This means that art’s aesthetic
form (even if imperfectly embodied) is, perhaps, the best model for approximating how both of the internal and external tensions can be made to approach, if not fully become, peaceful.

Peacefully Subject/Object

*Aesthetic Theory* contains a section entitled “Subject-Object” (pg. 163-175). In this section, Adorno traverses the gamut of subject/object topics as they relate to art, ranging from a discussion of the subjective/objective debate surrounding art interpretation/criticism to analysis over who the subject is in artworks: the artist “I”, the interlocutor “I” in art itself, or some “We” of a fictitiously reconciled society at large. While all of these discussions are relevant to our topic here, for simplicity’s sake, we will focus on the subject/object relationship across two dimensions: between the artist (subject; though also object) and the created artwork (object; though also subject) and in the artwork “itself,” which is also subject/object. In other words, we will examine the external and internal subject/object tension of artworks. In the section on politics below, we will return to a further aspect of this subject/object relationship by introducing another component to the external tension: society.

In framing this discussion, Adorno very clearly sets out artwork’s goal as it relates to the subject/object relationship, and this overarching principle cements the relationship between aesthetics and the good: “But the reciprocity of subject and object in the work, which cannot be that of identity, maintains a precarious balance…It must be the artwork’s ineluctable ambition to achieve balance without ever being quite able to do so: This is an aspect of aesthetic semblance” (*Aesthetic Theory*, pg. 166). Adorno writes this amidst a discussion of the subject/object relationship between the artist and the artwork, but his formulation also makes clear that he is also addressing the subject/object relationship in the artwork itself. In short, he lays out for artworks the task of embodying a “balance” between subject and object, and this balance can
never resolve itself in terms of any concept “identity.” In other words, as we saw, the tension must be kept and, since this tension must be according to “reciprocity,” this tension that the artwork seeks to maintain must be a peaceful one. Subject/object must be kept in balance which is to say without one side dominating the other.

He makes clear in this quote that this balance can never be fully achieved. As he argues here and throughout *Aesthetic Theory* (especially, pg. 100-110), art is more aesthetic semblance than aesthetic. Here he explains that this is so because artworks—like theory—are never fully capable of living according to the good; they are never able to fully “achieve balance.” However, the aesthetic semblance remains important, because it is still related to the aesthetic form, which remains our best hope of approaching the precipice of paradise: “Great works” still have “truth” despite their “semblance” (*Aesthetic Theory*, pg. 130). This is possible, because the artworks “are unable to lie” (*Aesthetic Theory*, pg. 130). Their own semblance is obvious (or at least artworks that approach the aesthetic make it obvious). These artworks are never the perfect embodiment of a peaceful balance of subject/object, being/becoming, identity/nonidentity, but this fact is what keeps them moving. They are never satisfied with the improper balance. This ensures that the artworks maintain a connection with truth in that they proclaim that the utopia has not been achieved. They proclaim that “being” and “identity” have again concretized and need to be determinately negated. They proclaim that they are only the semblance of balance. This is because, as Adorno claims, art’s “law of form” is the “law of movement” (*Aesthetic Theory*, pg. 3). Because artworks are always aesthetic semblance, their form impels them to keep moving in the indefinitely deferred quest to achieve its ambition: peaceful balance of the tension, which would also require continued movement.
Art’s form, then, becomes primary. This is important, because the focus becomes artworks and their internal tension. These internal tensions exist, in part, because of the external tensions, and these external tensions can be of the dominating variety. However, the artwork “itself” also has an internal tension, and this internal tension can work despite the potentially dominating external forces. This is why art is what gives us the best model of living utopically. Its form can work to peacefully balance dominating external tensions, precisely because its internal form is oriented toward peacefully balancing its own tension. If it does not engage in this process, then it is not art but religious symbol (Aesthetic Theory, pg. 135) or historical document (“Late Style in Beethoven,” pg. 103) or the like. Art’s quest to embody the aesthetic form is the distinguishing characteristic of artworks.

To see more what this means and how it works, we will examine in more detail the external tension between artist and artwork as well as the internal tension in the artwork. We will start by examining the external tension as it is, in some ways, more intuitive than the internal tension and because it helps us to understand the internal tension, both how it comes about and how it seeks to move in order to eliminate any traces of dominance from the external tension.

External Tension

Giving an idea that is so obvious that it is barely worth more than a passing mention, Adorno writes that the artwork’s “materials are shaped by the hand” of the artist according to the artist’s “subjective impulse” of “expression” and a subjective mechanical production through the art’s “form” (Aesthetic Theory, pg. 166). In simple terms, there is an artist who acts as the subject through the artistic act of creating the artwork, which is the artist’s object. The materials, expression, and form of the artwork is the result of the subjective impulse and production of the artist, so that artworks are the result of the subjective work of artists. There is a sense in which
this is obviously true, and as such, Adorno does not belabor the point here or anywhere in
_Aesthetic Theory._

However, what is perhaps less transparent is that the artwork is not merely a passive
object that accepts the productive creations of an artist. The materials, form, and, more
obscurely, expression of the artwork art what they are also due to the artwork itself. There is
some material—“the marble block in which a sculpture waits, the piano keys in which a
composition waits to be released”—and this material already predetermines and guides the
artist’s “tasks” in creating the artwork (_Aesthetic Theory_, pg. 166). The artist already has to work
in a certain way because of the material itself. Granted this necessity has “a certain variational
range” that is broader than the “univocity of equations,” but there is still an “objective solution”
to the artistic problem because of the materials of the object itself (_Aesthetic Theory_, pg. 166).
This means the artwork that is created is not merely the result of the subjective acts of the artist
but are also due to the object’s own materiality. The thing (object) artwork has subjectivity.
Marble requires different kind of actions than piano keys. The materiality demands certain kinds
of actions. The marble breaks in certain ways, the piano keys vibrate in certain ways, the wood’s
grain offers resistance in certain ways. The material, which is part of the art-object and not the
artist, is already determining the artistic outcome. The artwork acts as subject in its own
objective creation. Its materiality ensures it.

Likewise, while the artist makes subjective decisions on what form to use in molding the
materials, this already must be done “according to the demands of the object” (_Aesthetic Theory_,
pg. 166). The poetic form, with its standards of rhythm, rhyme, metaphor, alliteration, etc.,
already begins to cause the poem to write itself outside of the hands of the poet; words find the
poet rather than the poet finding the words. The form of painting already causes the painting to
be painted outside of the hands of the painter. The liquid form of the paint causes it to run in only partially expected ways or it causes the colors to blend in only partially expected ways. The skilled artist can work with the form. The artist does have some control (subjectivity) over the material (words) that is molded by the poetic form or the paint (material) utilized in the form painting, but the form itself also controls the artist. The object’s form creates the artwork as does the artist-subject.

Since the object’s materiality and form already give the art-object subjectivity, “objectivity leaves its imprint” on the expression of the artwork as well (Aesthetic Theory, pg. 166). Again, the artist can intend to express certain thoughts or emotions through the certain formation of materials, but because the thing-artwork also actively influences the process of material formation, it also decides what will be expressed through itself.

To further illustrate the idea that artworks have subjectivity in their own creation, Adorno, earlier in the book, gives another example of the process of artwork creation. In a discussion of Strauss, he writes, “it is well known that even composers with the best ears are usually astonished when they actually hear their orchestral works performed…This leaves room for surprises, those that are desired as well as those that require correction” (Aesthetic Theory, pg. 38). There is something about the material of the instruments and something about the way they are played (form and, to a degree, expression) that produces music other than what the composer intended. Here he leaves open the possibility that the artist, as artist, can make tweaks to the music to try to overcome bad surprises. The artist maintains subjectivity. Elsewhere, though, he argues that “it is hardly ever the case that what is decisive in a work of art is what the artist intended,” so Adorno recognizes too that sometimes artists would be better served leaving subjectivity to the artwork (Aesthetic Theory, pg. 60). Oftentimes, the surprises that the artwork
provides are the best surprises and the things that make the artwork great art (or, even, art at all). Since “art itself thinks,” artworks are more than what artists or interpreters/critics intuit in it (Aesthetic Theory, pg. 99). This means that artworks cannot be understood “as soon as philologists have pumped out of it what the artist pumped in,” which is good because if that is all that artworks were they would be “tautological” rather than aesthetic (Aesthetic Theory, pg. 129). This does not mean that there is never room for the artist to tend to what requires correction. Even though this correction is required, at least in part, because of the artist’s technical and artistic deficiencies in drawing the objective solution out of the object-artwork, this does not mean that the artist is completely superfluous. On the contrary, this only emphasizes the need for the artist’s technical and artistic abilities. While the artwork has subjectivity, the artist maintains subjectivity as well.

So what is it, really, that makes art and, in particular, good art: art created by artists or art created by the artwork? Adorno notes that Schoenberg and others had hope that things like “automatic writing” would be the utopia of art (Aesthetic Theory, pg. 115). The hope was that the complete objectivation—the artwork as thing-object making the decisions—would lead to perfect art. On the other hand, Adorno contends, people like Kant placed hope in “geniuses” (perfect artists) creating the perfect art (Aesthetic Theory, pg. 171). In the end, Adorno argues that both are wrong because both lead to the problem of conceptualized “identity” (Aesthetic Theory, pg. 115) rather than the “object” “thing-in-itself” (Aesthetic Theory, pg. 169). Neither artworks (Aesthetic Theory, pg. 169-170) nor geniuses (Aesthetic Theory, pg. 170-171) can fully define the object; there will always be a gap between their identifications of the object and what the object is. There is always more to the thing-object than the definition given to it externally—by the artist—or through the artwork’s own self-identification. The thing-object requires that the
artwork “aspires to be” something, but it is always more than that aspiration (Aesthetic Theory, pg. 169-170) likewise, artists are part of the artistic process, but “works are not creations and humans are not creators” (Aesthetic Theory, pg. 170). In short, both artists and artworks are involved in the process of artistic creation, but neither, on their own, is decisive. At least neither can be decisive if the artworks are to be art; if they are to be aesthetic.

The key to creating true art lies elsewhere, then. Adorno argues that in artwork creation, “The genial is the dialectical knot…To be genial means to hit upon a constellation, subjectively to achieve the objective…” (Aesthetic Theory, pg. 171). The real genius—that which really produces great art—is the tension between the subjective and objective. It is the external tension between artist/artwork and the subject/object tension that both bring to the creation of the artwork.

After explaining, in the passage we analyzed above, how the artist never quite hears the music until it is played, Adorno notes:

“The real source of the risk taken by all artworks, however, is not located in their level of contingency immanent to it, without any guarantee that the productive forces—the spirit of the artist and his procedures—will be equal to that objectivity. If such a guarantee did exist it would block the possibility of the new, which itself contributes to the objectivity and coherence of the work” (Aesthetic Theory, pg. 38).

That there is an artist and an artwork should not be seen as a great risk. We should not worry whether or not the artist will be technically and artistically skilled enough to resolve the problem of the object to allow an artwork to emerge from it. We should not be worried if the artist is a “tool” (Aesthetic Theory, pg. 166) worthy of the potential of the artwork. This coming together of artist and artwork is not a risk but an opportunity. Something new may be able to emerge because neither the artwork—as material, form, expression—nor the artist who seeks to wield those three elements of the object-artwork will be resolving the material, form, expression
according to their intentions. Instead, the dialectical process that is the tension between the two of them will do so. As long as the tension remains a peaceful one, a great artwork is possible.

This makes sense, because when this happens, there is a peaceful tension between artist/artwork, subject/object, the subjective/objective. Neither dominates the other. This produces the productive movement between the two extremes and allows for the “togetherness of diversity” (*Negative Dialectics*, pg. 150). This is the best opportunity to allow the emergence of an artwork that is aesthetic, which as we will see next is, as a form, the embodiment of the peaceful tension. In other words, artistic creation according to a peaceful tension is the best opportunity that an object-artwork will emerge that has the full range of possibilities built into itself where the identity/nonidentity, being/becoming can fully flourish.

This peaceful external tension of artistic creation is not immediately possible, in part for reasons internal to the artwork, which we will see below, but also because of external conditions. Because the world has historically developed in the broken way that it has, this peaceful external tension is not possible (*Aesthetic Theory*, pg. 169). The world has developed in such a way that it has created “fractured” relations toward the object, which makes “primacy of the object” impossible and identity creation in the act of creating the art-object inevitable (*Aesthetic Theory*, pg. 169). The broken reality has created broken artists and broken artworks, so even if both sought to engage in an aesthetic relationship that allowed for the creation of an aesthetic artwork that fully embodied the peaceful tension, the fully aesthetic artwork will not come to be. Given this broken world, the best option is to grant “entry…to the *membra disjecta*” (pg. 169); the best that can be done is determinate negation. However, again, this result is the necessity of a broken world: it is “only in a state of decomposition” that this determinate negation “becomes commensurable with the law of form” (*Aesthetic Theory*, pg. 169). It is only when things are
broken that one side of the tension—in this case, nonidentity, the *membra disjecta*—must be privileged in order for movement (“law of form” *Aesthetic Theory*, pg. 3) to occur. However, this determinate negation does provide movement, so this also has the utopic hope that it will produce the proper “tension” that “traverses the extremes” rather than produces “identity” (*Aesthetic Theory*, pg. 115). Even in the broken world, art might offer the best hope of producing peaceful external tensions. But even if not, it privileges acts of determinate negation.

However, while this is true, Adorno offers a bit more hope. Maybe there is something about the artwork itself that can move beyond this situation. It is to this that we turn next.

*Internal tension*

Given our current conditions, acknowledging the “primacy of the object” is the way forward. Focusing on the primacy of the object is akin to “identifying with people and things” that we saw previously (*Negative Dialectics*, pg. 150). In both cases, it is the intentional focus on the thing-object rather than trying to identify it with some concept or definition. The majority of *Aesthetic Theory* is spent identifying with the thing-object that is “artwork.” Adorno tries to understand the artwork without conceptualizing it. He tries to identify with it, so we can see what the artwork is.

Giving everything that we have argued so far, it is not surprising that this approach causes him to constantly illuminate the internal tension of the thing-object that is the artwork. Adorno makes clear that by “primacy of the object” he does not mean “objectivity” without the “mediation” of the “subjective” (*Aesthetic Theory*, pg. 322). He is not arguing that artworks are objects in the sense of the passive process of objectification. As we just saw, in the process of the creation of the artwork as a thing-object there is an external subject/object tension. If the artwork
were merely a passive object, it would just be the conduit for the world and its domination. But, as we just saw, it is not.

This passivity of object, then, is not what Adorno means by primacy of the object. He clarifies what he means by calling artworks “things of the second order” (*Aesthetic Theory*, pg. 99). Things of the first order are merely passive objects. The second-order thing-object is distinguished from these by its form. The second-order thing-object has an “inner structure,” which is “dialectical,” and it is a “mediated” process (*Aesthetic Theory*, pg. 99). This thing-object that Adorno has in mind is not a passive object; it is a dynamic process. A few pages earlier, Adorno argues that the “essence” of the “artifact” (i.e., the artwork as second-order thing-object) is “tension,” and Adorno explicitly distinguishes this tension, which is the thing-object’s essence, from both “false synthesis” and “rigid polarity” (*Aesthetic Theory*, pg. 97). In other words, what the thing-object is, is a tension. Its existence is tension. By primacy of the object, then, Adorno means we must focus on the thing-object, and since the thing-object is tension, this means that we must focus on the tension rather than seeking to resolve the tension in either of the dominating ways that he mentioned here (false synthesis and rigid polarity) and that he discussed in “On Subject and Object.” The way to overcome dominating external tensions is by focusing on the artwork’s internal tensions.

Over the course of about a page of text in which he highlights the inner structure of the artwork thing-object, Adorno gives several examples of the tensions that are the essential component of artworks. The inner tensions that constitute artworks include: “intuitable”/“unintuitable,” “Reification”/“that which appears,” “transcendent thing-in-itself”/“an object subjectively constituted through the law of its phenomena,” thing-object fixed in “space and time”/“the element that precedes their fixation as things,” “text”/“performance,” the “thing
itself” (being)/“performance” (becoming), “instant”/“process” (Aesthetic Theory, pg. 99-100). And this is just a small sampling of tensions that are the essence of the thing-object artwork that Adorno mentions throughout the book. Elsewhere he argues that artworks are the tension of “essence”/“appearance” (e.g., Aesthetic Theory, pg. 109), “conceptual”/“without concept” (e.g., Aesthetic Theory, pg. 96), “identity”/“nonidentity” (e.g., Aesthetic Theory, pg. 141), “existing”/“nonexisting” (e.g., Aesthetic Theory, pg. 135), and the like. This, admittedly tedious, listing underscores the pervasive focus that Adorno places on the artwork’s inner tensions. He focuses on these tensions, because the tensions are thing-objects. Primacy of the object requires analysis (not synthesis) of the tensions.

Recognizing that artworks are essentially internal tensions allows us to make sense of the process of art. If the artwork did not have these internal tensions, the external tension would not be possible. Without this inner tension, the artwork could not be a second-order thing and would merely be a passive, objectified thing. It would be static and at the mercy of the subject-artist’s dominance. The inner tension gives the artwork the dynamism necessary to be active and to engage in the external tension with the artist (and as we will see with society). Because the internal tension of artworks exists and because it functions the way that it does, artworks are capable of changing the shape of the external tensions.

This means that the artwork’s internal tension is the only place where there is any hope of solving the dominating external tensions. “Spirit today is not imaginable in any other form; art offers its prototype. As tension between the elements of the artwork, and not as an existence sui generis, art’s spirit is a process and thus it is the work itself” (Aesthetic Theory, pg. 88). Art’s spirit is its aesthetic core. This is the inner tension that is the thing-object. This means that art’s inner structure, its essence, is aesthetic form. If artworks fully embody this aesthetic form, they
are the embodiment of the peaceful tension. Art, as art, has existence not as a stable thing, but as a “process.” This process maintains dynamism, which offers hope that the current static, dominating tension can be changed. Art, because of its form, may be able to break the dominating external tensions.

This we have already seen, but here Adorno argues something else. Art’s spirit—its embodiment of tension—is a “prototype.” Art is a model. Because of the dominating external tensions that exist today, the aesthetic spirit is only “imaginable” in artworks. But art, through its form, may also be able to teach us how to imitate that internal tension so we too can live according to who we are/can be and so that we may be able to change the shape of the external tensions.

However, this presupposes that artworks that are aesthetic can actually arise even given the dominating external tensions. To become aesthetic, the artwork’s birth would have to be other than the “genesis” it had as a result of the external tension between artist (and society)/artwork. As he notes at the very beginning of Aesthetic Theory (pg. 3), “artworks become artworks only by negating their origin.” Artworks can only begin to approach the aesthetic form—and so truly become art—when they overcome the subjective forces (internal by the artwork and external by the artist and the society) that sought to identify it. This is the only way that the dominating tendencies of the tension can be eliminated and the peaceful tension—which is the core of what the aesthetic form is—can arise. This is what Adorno means when he writes that “Art must turn against itself, in opposition to its own concept, and thus become uncertain of itself right into its innermost fiber” (Aesthetic Theory, pg. 2). Artworks must overthrow the conceptualization of it as given to it by internal and external forces. Artworks must throw off all external intentions—whether they be what the artwork, the artist, or society
intended. This overthrowing of all conceptualizations causes uncertainty; even the artwork cannot know what it is. It is at this moment that it is possible for the peaceful internal tension to become visible, because it is at this moment that all but the artwork as second-order thing-object becomes primary.

To see what this means, we need to again return to the list of dichotomies that Adorno uses to describe the tension of the artwork and examine some of the more tangible explanations that he gives. These better illuminate what he means by these abstract formulations.

For example, Adorno examines artworks like plays or music and asks what is the artwork? (Aesthetic Theory, pg. 100). Is the play the text or the theatrical performance? Is the music the score or the concert? In laying out this choice, he is very clear what is at stake. He argues that the text/score is the “thing itself.” Remaining true to the clichéd philosophical trope, then, he argues that the text is being. Subsequently, he argues that no performance is ever a perfect representation of the text/score. So, again in keeping with the philosophical tradition, the performance is the appearance; it is becoming. In further keeping with philosophical tradition, he even goes so far as to claim that the texts/scores are “almost always better than the performances,” because they are “the thing itself” (Aesthetic Theory, pg. 100). Performances are always imperfect appearances of what is. If he had stopped there, he would have been Plato exactly. However, rather than stopping there, that is where his analysis really starts. He claims that the artwork as second-order thing is both the performances and the text/score and that “Incidentally, both concepts of the artwork as thing are not necessarily distinct” (Aesthetic Theory, pg. 100). In other words, the artwork—because it is second-order thing-object that is inner structure of tension—is the tension musical performance/musical score. It is the tension truth/appearance. It is the tension being/becoming. This artwork as second-order thing could not
have an aesthetic form—it could not have its origin as art—otherwise. If the artwork was the performance, then it would be the result of subjective choices of becoming, and if it was the text, then it would be the result of objective being. Both of these options would result in the objectification of the artwork; it becomes passive object that is created and defined by some external force.

Artworks that have aesthetic form, though, “are things in themselves” and this is only so “by virtue of their particular law of form” (Aesthetic Theory, pg. 100). Since art’s “law of form” is the “law of movement” (Aesthetic Theory, pg. 3), this means that the artwork can only exist as art if it takes on the aesthetic form, which requires it to constantly move. This movement is the creation of the thing-object’s objectivation (which, again, is distinct from object as in objectification but relates to the artwork being second-order thing-object) because “Objectivation traverses the extremes” (Aesthetic Theory, pg. 115). Artworks only have their genesis as aesthetic thing-objects when they constantly move between the extremes. Artworks can only be aesthetic thing-objects if they make peace with the tension. If they side with either extreme of the tension, they allow the dominance to reemerge. Artworks can only take on the aesthetic spirit when they, through their existence as thing-object, embody the tension.

To see more how this works, we turn to a passage on music’s aesthetic qualities from a lecture that Adorno gave late in his life (1963) on how his relationship to Wagner and Wagner’s music had changed in the decade plus since he wrote his book on Wagner. In this passage, he argues that his understanding of and reception to Wagner changed not merely because he changed or the historical environment changed but because the music “itself” changed (“Wagner’s Relevance for Today,” pg. 37). The music itself could change, because as artwork, it is a second-order thing-object, which means it is tension. To describe this, he provides a succinct
understanding of what “itself” is in a musical, aesthetic sense. This gives us insight into what the “itself,” or thing-object, of art is. He writes:

“As spiritual entities, works of art are not complete in themselves. They create a magnetic field of all possible intentions and forces, of inner tendencies and countervailing ones, of successful and necessarily unsuccessful elements. Objectively, new layers are constantly detaching themselves, emerging from within; others grow irrelevant and die off. One relates to a work of art not merely, as is often said, by adapting it to fit a new situation, but rather by deciphering within it things to which one has a historically different reaction” (“Wagner’s Relevance for Today,” pg. 37).

From this description, we see that aesthetic art contains within itself a peaceful contradiction. The artwork is an “itself” and any change in the artwork or even the artworks reception is the result of action that takes place “within it.” However, the artwork is not “complete” if we only focus on the itself. It is not merely a stable being of existence according to some complete identity. Instead, Adorno argues, the artwork’s form also includes becoming and nonidentity. Artworks “create a magnetic field” that pulls into itself and out of itself (and, importantly, both are operative) “all possible intentions and forces.” The artwork is never completely understood, even by itself. There is always more to pull out of the artwork. Elsewhere, Adorno claims that every time people “thought they understood” the artwork art’s form reemerges “overwhelming them for a second time with the question ‘What is it?’” (Aesthetic Theory, pg. 121). This means that the aesthetic form of artworks includes the ability to constantly illuminate (identify) the nonidentity within itself forcing itself to be reanalyzed by itself and by those outside of itself. The aesthetic form allows movements of becoming as part of the process of identifying the nonidentity within “itself.” This means that the artwork is the peaceful tension between what is “finally…itself” and the anticipation of what “would…be.” Its form is the constant movement created by this tension. On the one hand, the artwork as second-order thing-object has within itself all of the possibilities, but, on the other hand, these “new layers” that are constantly coming to life or dying off, constantly change the “itself.” All of these layers “already” existed within artwork, but they had “not yet” been. Artworks, when they are aesthetic, are the form that allows
for this tension to peacefully exist without forcing it to resolve itself in one direction or the other, which would force it to sink into domination. This is the “Janus-like character of the work itself” (“Wagner’s Relevance for Today,” pg. 37). In other words, this is the tension that is the form of the work.

In short, the artwork is the text and it is the performance and the next performance and the other performance. And it is more than that. And it is not that. Most importantly, it is never understood, even by itself. If art is ever understood, if it ever loses it “enigmaticalness,” if it is ever “unpuzzled,” “then the work vanishes into the distance” (Aesthetic Theory, pg. 121). The enigmaticalness of the artwork is the idea that there is always more to understand in the artwork. Enigmaticalness is the idea of the tension. It is the idea that everything is already contained in the artwork, but that it has not yet been. If this enigmaticalness was lost, which is to say if people came to understand that artwork, the artwork would itself would be lost. If the artwork’s origin was in becoming uncertain of itself, its death is in coming to be understood. This would resolve the tension. The artwork would either be the performance and identity would equal becoming nonidentity or the artwork would be the text and identity would equal being identical. Or the tension itself could come to be fully understood and then the tension itself would be identified, the enigmaticalness would disappear, and the artwork would die (Aesthetic Theory, pg. 120).

Adorno already anticipated the inherent problems of dominating identification in his discussion of Wagner and the artworks form. There he warns us that part of the Janus-like character of artworks is the idea that artworks always exhibit “progressive and regressive traits” (“Wagner’s Relevance for Today,” pg. 38). The artwork’s form allows it be the kind of non-affirming determinacy that he longed for in Negative Dialectics, but it also can be regressively affirmative in that it is always creating static identities that it demands to be followed. This
duality is consistent with everything we have seen so far. Even for artworks, when at the precipice of paradise, they always again converge with total catastrophe. Some of the layers within itself will lead to choosing one side of the tension or the other, which is the reintroduction of identity, and domination will again reign. And this is, in part, because some of the layers of artworks are still tainted by the dominating components of the external tensions that were part of their creation: “Only a philistine and stubborn faith in artists could overlook the complicity of the artwork’s thing-character with social reification and thus with its untruth” (*Aesthetic Theory*, pg. 100). But the artwork, because of its internal tension, is always capable of overcoming this complicity with domination; though this does not mean that it always will. Artworks can and do die; they lose their aesthetic core. The tension becomes fully reified, the movement stops, and the “identity”-dominating tension reemerges. When this happens, artworks turn into historical documents or the like.

Really Adorno makes a stronger claim than the idea that certain layers of artworks lead to the artwork’s death. All layers do, because all layers ultimately choose sides. The artwork only regains its aesthetic qualities when it again moves. It has to again throw off conceptions of itself so that it again becomes uncertain of itself. In other words, it has to again engage in determinate negation. This is necessary, because without it the tension is again dominating. Each determinate negation again gives hope that the peaceful tension will become visible and will be able to become stable. But it never does: “Through determinate negation of the reality of spirit, however, these artworks continue to refer to spirit: They do not feign spirit, rather the force they mobilize against it is spirit’s omnipresence” (*Aesthetic Theory*, pg. 88). The artwork never embodies spirit, but the omnipresence of spirit in artwork’s internal tension gives artworks a chance. The artwork is the only place where the aesthetic spirit is possible. Artwork’s form, at its
core, is aesthetic, even if that core is never fully embodied, and that form continues to demand movement; as long as there remains the spark of aesthetic spark, artworks will at least engage in determinate negation. The continued determinate negation, as we have seen throughout, is not the aesthetic form, but it is what continually allows the possibility for that the aesthetic form—the peaceful tension—to come to be.

The Aesthetic Life

Adorno explicitly links his idea of aesthetics with the good in an extensive passage that, due to its uncharacteristic bluntness and precision, is worth quoting at length:

“As connoisseurship of art is the combination of an adequate comprehension of the material and a narrow-minded incomprehension of the enigma; it is neutral to what is cloaked. Those who peruse art solely with comprehension make it into something straightforward, which is furthest from what it is. If one seeks to get a closer look at a rainbow, it disappears. Of all the arts, music is the prototypical example of this: It is at once completely enigmatic and totally evident. It cannot be solved, only its form can be deciphered, and precisely this is requisite for the philosophy of art. He alone would understand music who hears with all the alienness of the unmusical and with all of Siegfried’s familiarity with the language of the birds. Understanding, however, does not extinguish the enigmaticalness of art. Even the felicitously interpreted work asks for further understanding, as if waiting for the redemptive word that would dissolve its constitutive darkening. Following artworks through in the imagination is the most complete, most deceptive surrogate for understanding, though obviously also a step toward it. Those who can adequately imagine music without hearing it possess that connection with it required for its understanding. Understanding in the highest sense—a solution of the enigma that at the same time maintains the enigma—depends on a spiritualization of art and artistic experience whose primary medium is the imagination. The spiritualization of art approaches its enigmaticalness not directly through conceptual elucidation, but rather by concretizing its enigmaticalness. The solution of the enigma amounts to giving the reason for its insolubility, which is the gaze artworks direct at the viewer. The demand of artworks that they be understood, that their content be grasped, is bound to their specific experience; but it can only be fulfilled by way of the theory that reflects this experience. What is enigmaticalness of artworks refers to can only be thought mediatedly. The objection to the phenomenology of art, as to any phenomenology that imagines it can lay its hands directly on the essence, is not that it is antiempirical but, on the contrary, that it brings thinking experience to a halt” (Aesthetic Theory, pg. 122).

As we saw above, even the best music virtuosos could not perfectly hear the music they themselves composed. Here, Adorno is asking us to do much more than that. He writes that “Those who can adequately imagine music without hearing it possess that connection with it required for its understanding.” If we could imagine the music without hearing it, we would embody the music. We would be more than the artist who was part of the creation of the music,
we would be the embodiment of the artist/music tension and the embodiment of the music’s own internal tension. We would think “mediatedly,” which would be to think the “enigmaticalness” of the artwork. We would think the tension of the artwork. This would be the “solution of the enigma that at the same time maintains the enigma.” We would not come to understand the artwork, which would be to lose the enigmaticalness, but we would come to mediate alongside the artwork. We would embody the aesthetic form and all of its tensions, so our thinking would be aesthetic. We would think the artwork (whose essence is tension) along with it. This would cause us to mediately think the tension. That is with the tension. This opens possibilities for redemption. “Even the felicitously interpreted work asks for further understanding, as if waiting for the redemptive word that would dissolve its constitutive darkening.” The redemptive moment for the artwork would be that moment whereby the internal tension was no long invisible (“would dissolve its constitutive darkening”), but would be understood by itself and by those around it. But this understanding would not be the dominating understanding of identity thinking; the thinker would not be seeking to identify the artwork. Instead, this would be the aesthetic, mediated thinking that identifies with the artwork. And ultimately, this identification with the artwork would be the embodying of the peaceful tension that is within the artwork and that, as the aesthetic form or essential inner structure of the artwork, is the artwork. Now the artwork’s inner tension would be primary.

Of course, this good remains indefinitely deferred. This “imagination” that is the thinking mediatedly “is the most complete, most deceptive surrogate for understanding” because in imagining “it can lay its hands directly on the essence…it brings thinking experience to a halt.” Part of the tension, as we have seen throughout, is that there are always other possibilities waiting to be that are already part of what is. There are always new layers to the artwork; there
are always other chords to play. Imagining that we have come to understand all of this—even through a mediated thinking that thinks with the tension itself—already arrests the peaceful movement between the two sides of the tension and the tension automatically again resolves itself to the domination of one side or the other. So even this imagination is deceptive. It does not bring about some stable existence of the good.

But, in continuing with the pattern we have seen to this point, even this deceptive understanding has benefits. Adorno says even though this imagination is “a deceptive surrogate for understanding” it is “obviously also a step toward it.” If nothing else, if we think in this mediated way, we will come to understand that we do not understand the artwork. Even if we were one of the ones with a felicitous understanding of the artwork, we will come to know that we do not understand it at all, and this will cause us to ask again “What is it?” Doing this is already a determinate negation. We already come to unmask our understanding as false and this destroys that incomplete “identity” that we had envisioned. Again, while this is not the good, it is the only thing that keeps open the possibility that we could achieve the good. It again takes us to the precipice of paradise.

But this aesthetic experience may benefit us in other ways. Artwork is to be the prototype, so maybe our participation in the aesthetic mediation of tension will cause us to have our own aesthetic birth where we throw off all conceptions of ourselves and become completely unknown, even to ourself. Maybe this would make our own second-order thing-object primary. Maybe our own internal tension would become visible. Maybe we would discover “new layers” that already were but have not yet been. Maybe this primacy of the internal tension would cause the dominating external tensions to change. Or maybe, less grandly, we could remember to engage in determinate negation. To analyze how much of this is possible and how it would
function, we need to examine Adorno’s notion of the good life in more detail. It is to this that we turn next.

The Good Life: Clowning Around

Given everything that we have seen so far, we can understand why Adorno puts the concept of utopia in terms of recollection (Aesthetic Theory, pg. 118-136). Who we are is peaceful tension. We have forgotten this—so much so that remembering it produces vertigo within us—because throughout recorded history, enlightenment thinking—thinking that identifies and forces everything to “come under” concepts—has ruled (Dialectic of Enlightenment, especially ch. 1). With every thought, action, law, norm, etc. we have chosen one side of the tension (identity/being/etc.) over the other. But there is some hypothetical “prehistory” before this enlightenment world, and we can remember it (Aesthetic Theory, pg. 119, Dialectic of Enlightenment, pg. 3, 24). This prehistory is not really a historically existing time. Adorno makes clear that the remembrance is the “longing” for the “possibility of the nonexisting” (Aesthetic Theory, pg. 132). Our remembrance of prehistory is the remembrance that it is possible to live according who we are (again, where is=peaceful tension not “being”) even if that is nonexisting. Our remembrance of prehistory is the remembrance of the not-yet good that is already. Adorno explicitly ties this notion of remembrance to Plato’s and argues that in both cases “remembrance…alone concretizes utopia without betraying it to existence” (Aesthetic Theory, pg. 132). We remember that we are the peaceful tension—this in a sense concretizes it—but the peaceful tension has never existed. As such, we do not remember this peaceful tension as a positive thing, we only remember it as a possibility that is nonexisting.

He gives two examples of this remembrance. Children remember this prehistory in their “collusion with animals” when their play world becomes the “primordial world of animals”
(Aesthetic Theory, pg. 119). They play as dragons and unicorns and therefore remember a prehistory world before enlightenment came to know and identify these as lizards and narwhals. They do this when they act the “clowns” and “fools” (Aesthetic Theory, pg. 119). In these cases, their play encourages them to take on characters who have been made “nonidentities” in society. These are the characters that society seeks to eliminate by forcing everyone to play according to equivalent identities that are productive for society. In both cases, children come to remember the possibility of a world outside of enlightenment’s “identity.” They begin to identify with nonidentity. They recollect a time before enlightenment. They recollect a prehistory beyond the dominating resolution of tension.

The second example is even more prescient. Artworks, in their act of “clownishness” also recollect this prehistory (Aesthetic Theory, pg. 119). By invoking art’s clownish acts as recollection, he explicitly ties recollection to the artwork’s own aesthetic form. This form, as we have seen, relies on “enigmaticalness;” artworks, to be art, must always be more than we or they know them to be. Art’s clownishness is its movements that ensure enigmaticalness. “This characteristic cavorts clownishly” in that being an enigma means “That artworks say something and in the same breath conceal it” (Aesthetic Theory, pg. 120). Artworks always tease the viewer. They always reveal something to the viewer only to again hide it. They act like a clown with a handkerchief at a child’s birthday party. When they act this way, they recollect prehistory. Recollecting the prehistory is recollection of their own form. Acts of enigmaticalness that always strive to protect the tension is recollection of the artwork’s aesthetic form.

To the world, this is unacceptable. Every time someone’s recollection conjures a prehistory before the enlightenment world of identity, authority figures must “drive it out” (Aesthetic Theory, pg. 119) “with the most terrible punishments” (Dialectic of Enlightenment,
“Donald Duck in the cartoons and the unfortunate victim in real life receive their beatings so that the spectators can accustom themselves to theirs” (“Culture and Administration,” pg. 110). Recollection must be stopped at any violent cost. Remembering the inner tension, as we saw, can fundamentally alter the external tensions too. This is dangerous to those in power, so they will seek to halt any recollection of “prehistory.”

But despite society’s best efforts, it is never able to completely suppress our remembrances. There are always “spheres/centres of freedom” (“Culture and Administration,” pg. 111, 130) that children at play or the autonomous artwork can find. Any time we remember our own inner tension, we create pockets of freedom. This, then, opens the door to utopia.

Memory of our prehistory awakens a critical impulse within us. Art/culture has an “irrevocably critical impulse towards the status quo and all institutions thereof” (“Culture and Administration,” pg. 116). As we saw, the aesthetic form automatically resists dominating tensions, because its form has to be acutely aware of itself, which means it must be acutely aware of its internal tensions. When we remember that our form is also peaceful tensions, we awaken a critical impulse in us as well. Adorno refers to this as an impulse, because it is a natural outflow of a form that is aware of itself as a peaceful tension. But this impulse is not disconnected from thought. As we saw, “memory” awakens “thought” (Minima Moralia, pg. 81), and the “value” of this awakened “thought” is in how “antithetical” it is to “the preexisting standard” (Minima Moralia, pg. 80). Indeed, thought that acts according to dialectical thought must embody the peaceful tension, and this thought necessitates (again “impulse”) criticism of that which is part of the dominating tension. These critical impulses negate the incomplete, false identities and open space for the potential emergence of the already/not yet peaceful tension that the recollection conjured.
Adorno explains what would happen if this peaceful tension were to emerge:

“In artworks, spirit has become their principle of construction, although it fulfills its telos only when it emerges from what is to be constructed, from the mimetic impulses, by shaping itself to them rather than allowing itself to be imposed on them by sovereign rule. Form objectivates the particular impulses only when it follows them where they want to go of their own accord. The rationality of artworks becomes spirit only when it is immersed in its polar opposite” (Aesthetic Theory, pg. 118).

The fully aesthetic form would be able to live a peaceful tension. All of the “particular impulses”[5] would find their way into the second-order thing-object that is the artwork. These are impulses, plural, because the artwork is made up of a diversity of possibilities. However, these possibilities are all already bound up in the “itself.” The form is the embodiment of that tension; the spirit (“itself”) “immerses” itself in its “polar opposite.” The form is the togetherness of diversity. The only way for this tension to be peaceful is if all of those diversity of impulses could satisfy themselves “of their own accord.” There must be freedom, spontaneity, and autonomy. The diversity must be free to emerge. It must be free to emerge spontaneously and not according to some “sovereign rule.” It must be free to emerge autonomously, of its “own accord.” But all of this is still done within the confines of the artwork itself. All of this difference is emerging (each “objectivates”) in the artwork itself. This idea corresponds with Adorno’s discussion of the freedom/determinism tension in Negative Dialectics (pg. 264). In this discussion, he follows his normal pattern and argues that freedom/determinism must work together in peaceful tension, and our thinking and acting must follow that tension without favoring one side or the other. To favor one or the other would be to “proclaim identity,” which would restore the dominating tension (Negative Dialectics, pg. 264). So the freedom, spontaneity, autonomy of the diversity here has to work within the determined confines, the

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5 From the perspective of the external tension, these may be the impulses of the brush or the paint to drip in a certain way. From the internal tension perspective, these may be the impulses of the green paint to be tree or bush or grass; in this case it is part of the work’s internal enigmaticalness. The diversity of impulses keep the work from being given an “identity.”
togetherness, of the itself. That is the only way to maintain the peaceful tension. “Spontaneity amid the involuntary is the vital element of art” and, in particular art’s “form” (Aesthetic Theory, pg. 114). Peaceful embodiment of that tension leads to an artwork that successfully embodies this peaceful tension.

It is no coincidence that criticism, spontaneity, and autonomy show up here. In “Culture and Administration” (pg. 123), these are exactly the principles that are at stake in the tension between culture (that which is aesthetic) and administration (that which is enlightenment). If the latter dominates the former, these principles constrict. But as the former successfully engages in criticism’s determinate negation, it opens the possibility of the emergence of the peaceful tension and the emergence of these principles.

We may never be able to live the peaceful tension. At the very least, as we saw, we are conditioned to not even imagine what the redeemed world would look like, let alone how to live the peaceful tension. But, as we also saw, we can fight that condition. In following the pattern that we have seen all along, we do this not by positively creating the right world, but by negating the false one. This includes negating the falsity of our own identities, which is part of the conditioning that keeps us from even imaging the good in any tangible sense. The only way to do this is through determinate negation. We think in terms of analysis rather than synthesis, which allows us to think with nonidentity rather than thinking to identify it. We engage in determinate negation.

This life is beneficial for us. While freedom, autonomy, and spontaneity are not possible in any stable sense outside of the embodied peaceful tension, the critical impulse functions regardless. Even if the good is not yet attained, it is already contained in us. Society that becomes ever more total is able ever more completely to bury the critical impulse within us by ever more
fully enforcing our obedience to their false identities. This makes us ever more alienated from our inner, already/not yet peaceful tension, but this process is never complete. As such, the critical impulse never completely dies. Our responsibility is to act on that critical impulse. “The only philosophy which can be responsibly practised in face of despair is the attempt to contemplate all things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption” (Minima Moralia, pg. 247). We do not embody that state of redemption, so we do not really know what the peaceful tension from the standpoint of redemption would look like. But we can know that what we have is not redemption. At the very least, when we remember that we can engage in determinate negation.

Even if that is all that we do, it is not nothing. At the present time “Freedom can be defined in negation only, corresponding to the concrete form of a specific unfreedom” (Negative Dialectics, pg. 231). Determinate negation is not the utopia, so it is not freedom, but it can free us from certain, specific oppressions of certain, specific false identities. As it does so, it presents episodes, moments where the possibility of spontaneous, autonomous action would occur. It is possible that these free, autonomous, spontaneous actions would persist in the embodiment of the peaceful tension. This is unlikely, but due to our existence as inner tension, it might happen. And if it did, it would require constant movement between the two points of tension, so it would remain a negative utopia. But again, this emergence of the peaceful tension is unlikely. And that is alright for Adorno, because the life of determinate negation does have benefits. It provides us with episodes where freedom, autonomy, and spontaneity are possible.

As should be obvious by now, this determinate negation is possible, because there is some “standpoint of redemption.” The redeemed would be the world of peaceful tension, which
always resists—by critical impulse—any dominating tension. This redeemed world is the world that always has been but never was. As such, it is a world that could be remembered.

**Politics**

But is it possible to build a world according to the good life where all internal and external tensions could be made peaceful? Adorno explicitly does not want to ask that question. In his essay “Resignation” (pg. 169), he writes: “At the present moment, no higher form of society is concretely visible: for that reason, anything that seems in easy reach is regressive.” Adorno starts with the assumption that society is broken and that we are so wrapped up in the false totality of that broken system that we are not only broken ourselves but are actually complicit with the brokenness. Our thinking, regardless of how hard we try to think otherwise, is bound up with society’s false, broken thinking. Even artworks, as we saw, can become complicit in this brokenness. Adorno takes this idea seriously, and in doing so he concludes that any picture we may have of a good society is not and cannot be the good society. Since we are broken and are complicit in reproducing brokenness, if we think we see the positive solution, that already proves that it is not the solution but just a different iteration of the brokenness.

As we saw, in the dissertation’s “Introduction,” many of Adorno critics and sympathizers make much of this point. His critics argue that Adorno claims that the world has become too total, so we can no longer see a way forward. His apologists claim that determinate negation is still possible, but then the question is, do we need some notion of the good to give determinate negation the leverage that it needs?

On the face of it, it does seem that Adorno contradicts himself. Every time he claims something like: “Antagonisms that are unsolved in reality cannot be solved imagineatively either; they work their way into the imagination and are reproduced in imagination’s own
inconsistency” (*Aesthetic Theory*, pg. 169), he counters it with a claim like: “Thus art participates in the actual movement of history in accord with the law of enlightenment…” (*Aesthetic Enlightenment*, pg. 118). Every time he argues that “to write lyric poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric” (“Commitment,” pg. 84) or, with regards to the necessarily aesthetic musical language, that “no such language exists any longer” (“Form in the New Music,” pg. 214), he also claims that of course art is still possible and would still be possible even if it was administratively “prohibited and it is decreed that it must no longer be” (*Aesthetic Theory*, pg. 250). In short, at times he argues that the broken reality has become too broken and art can no longer make a difference, but at other times, he argues that art can and does still change that reality.

But Adorno also provides a solution to this, and it is the solution that we have been arguing all along. His “Culture and Administration” essay is a summation of the categories culture (art) and administration (the totality thinking and politics of the culture industry). He concludes this essay by arguing, “No matter how reified both categories are in reality, neither is totally reified; both refer back to living subjects” (“Culture and Administration,” pg. 130). In other words, no matter how reified categories are and no matter how complicit we become in the creation of dominating tensions, things can be otherwise. And things can be otherwise because we are what we are. We are internal tensions (“living subject”).

It turns out that the solution to this supposed contradiction in Adorno’s theory is a notion of the good. But it is not a positive notion of the good that prescribes positive ethical maxims that we use to live that good life in opposition to the broken life or to build a good society to replace our broken one. Instead, the solution is that the good life that always was yet has never been gives the impetus for determinate negation, which may make possible the appearance of the
good. The more total the world becomes, the weaker the critical impulse becomes and the more readily we accept and reproduce the antagonisms of society. The more we uphold the dominating tensions. The more our recollection is incapable of remembering beyond those dominating tensions. The more we, like Adorno, are incapable of seeing a better politics. But precisely because we are (again, this is where the utopia becomes “unspeakable,” because “are” here means the being/becoming, identity/nonidentity, etc. tension) who we are.

This means, then, that positive actions are specifically denied by Adorno. This is especially true when the domination of one half of the tension is as total as it is in contemporary societies. The more dominating the world is, the more we consciously or unconsciously, intentionally or unintentionally reproduce it in our thoughts and actions. We cannot, through any positive actions, create a way out. Those positive actions would be complicit in reproducing the dominating tensions. The only way out is to let what has always been—the peaceful tension—come to “finally be.” And this is only possible by eschewing anything positive.

This was the point of his essay “Commitment.” He concludes this essay by arguing “This is not a time for political art” (“Commitment,” pg. 89). Any political art would be according to some “commitment,” and any commitment that we have is already tainted by the existing dominating tension. Instead, the solution is autonomous art: “politics has migrated into autonomous art” (“Commitment,” pg. 89) and “art becomes social by its opposition to society, and it occupies this position only as autonomous art” (Aesthetic Theory, pg. 225). Art can only make a difference politically if it is autonomous; it must be without commitment. But the opposite is also true. Art that is autonomous is already political and is already what could improve society. Art “criticizes society by merely existing” (Aesthetic Theory, pg. 226). This is because artwork’s existence is a testament to utopia. Artwork’s form demands determinate
negation because its form, in its perfect embodiment, is the peaceful tension that would be the ultimate stable destruction of the dominating tensions. Artwork’s form demands criticism. This criticism is most effective when it is sufficiently autonomous, but “Even in the most sublimated work of art there is a hidden ‘it should be otherwise’” (“Commitment,” pg. 89). Even works that are only marginally autonomous, or on the surface are completely committed/completely sublimated by the broken world, have criticism built within them. They still have a form that faintly includes the aesthetic spirit. The good is still buried deep inside them.

How can Adorno argue this? Because there is a gesture toward the good that underpins everything that he is doing. Art, as a living subject, always has a peaceful tension within it, even if it has never yet been because of the dominating world. No matter how sublimated it is, the categories are never totally reified. Something of what it is remains there, so it is always possible to again find the critical impulse. Of course, the more autonomous the work, the more effective the criticism, because the more it acts according to its form. The more peaceful the tension, the more free, spontaneous, and autonomous the actions can be. The more life can be lived according to the entirety of the thing.

Even though Adorno hedges by saying that utopia “did not—may not ever—come to pass” (Aesthetic Theory, pg. 135; emphasis mine), it is still likely that we can never stably live according to the peaceful tension. Every thought or action is likely to pick a side and thereby reproduce domination in the tension. But in the meantime, determinate negation does break the dominating tension. Even if it always immediately replaces it with another version of it, this does give us episodes of possibility, and someday we may just take advantage of one of them.

299
Introduction

As should be clear by now, Adorno rejects “positive blue-prints” for a redeemed society, because they would be just as “rooted in barbarism” as the society that they sought to replace (Minima Moralia, pg. 156). Any set of positive maxims or rigid political principles would upset the very foundations of what would be the redeemed society. They would merely become the next framework that promised the totality of the peaceful tension, but that ultimately brought back the dominance in all of the tensions that exist. These positive blueprints would not allow for the proper negative movements that would approach “eternal peace” (Minima Moralia, pg. 157). As such, the very “question” of what “the goal of an emancipated society” would be “is illegitimate” (Minima Moralia, pg. 155-156). This is a question that requires identification of rather than identifying with.

However, this does not mean that Adorno is politically impotent. As we saw over the last two chapters, his gesture toward the good does justify continued determinate negation, which, Adorno argues, is an important political act (and not merely the process of thought). In this concluding chapter, I wish to tease out of Adorno’s theory some other principles that we can use politically. What draws these principles together is their negative quality. These are not positive political maxims; instead, they are principles that help ensure that we continue to engage in the kinds of movements that may, eventually, become the peaceful movements of a peaceful tension. These negative movements would not provide the positive blueprint for society’s utopic goal, but would instead allow the goal to spontaneously and autonomously appear from the peaceful tension itself. Absent the appearance of this, most likely indefinitely deferred, utopia, these principles will constantly ensure that the impulse for criticism remains strong.
Humility

I and others (e.g., Shusterman, 1988, 1992, 1993, 1994; Harding, 1997; Helmling, 2003, 2006; Markus, 2006) see an affinity between Adorno and T.S. Eliot with regards to Eliot’s negativity in thinking and/or aesthetics, even despite Adorno’s (“The Schema of Mass Culture,” pg. 80) belief that Eliot, like the dialectical thinkers before him, ends up countermanding this negative core. In “Four Quartets” (pg. 185), contestably the height of Eliot’s poetic career but also contestably his crowning political statement, he argues that humility is our only hope for redemption because “humility is endless.” Humility is the only thing that can continually impel us to take the necessary but painful negative journey that is his equivalent of determinate negation. Only when you come to know that the “crown upon your lifetime’s effort” is that you do not know, that all are deceived, and that this is the result of the master and the slave alike can you begin the journey whose end—which is always indefinitely deferred—is the good (“Four Quartets,” pg. 204). This is because this remembrance is also a remembrance of our own complicity in the brokenness and a remembrance that anything we do will extend the brokenness in different ways. Humility keeps us questioning and keeps us criticizing.

Adorno does not argue for humility in these strong terms, but the idea is implied in several places in his theory. As we saw, he argues that any conception of identity is “hubris” (Negative Dialectics, pg. 149, emphasis his). He makes clear too that this extends to all self-identified concepts as well. Any time that we believe that we know who we are and how we are to act according to that perceived identity, we arrest the movement that constantly reveals what is missing from that conception of identity and the identity congeals in the same oppressive way that it also has. The end result of this hubris, then, is contradiction. It is dominating tension. Humility is needed to overcome this contradiction. Humility eliminates the hubris that we can
totally define ourselves (i.e., that we can totally define the peaceful tension). It is only when this humility eliminates hubris and hence our willful involvement in producing dominating tensions that the peaceful tension may be able to spontaneously and autonomously emerge.

Adorno comes at this from another angle as well. As we saw, Adorno constantly reminds us that even artworks—with the essential aesthetic core that is the best model of the peaceful tensions—is complicit in society’s oppression. This is, in part, because the external tension that is instrumental in creating the artwork is dominating, but that is not the whole of it. The artwork is complicit even apart from the artist (Aesthetic Theory, pg. 100). Even artworks come to rest between movements and so reproduce identity. They come to be known (by themselves and others) and become complicit in reproducing domination in the tension.

Complicity, then, might be vertigo’s best antidote. Constant determinate negation and, in our misconditioned state, the vertigo that it brings is uncomfortable and disorienting. We want to understand who we are and how we are to act. We want to be authentic according to our identity. Humility reminds us that we are not being authentic to who we really are (i.e., the peaceful tension) and that our attempts to be so destroy our ability to be authentic, because they recreate the domination in the tensions. Worse, this makes us complicit in creating a society that keeps everyone from being authentic to the peaceful tension. This was a major theme in Jargon of Authenticity where he remarked that authenticity to being merely destroys our ability to be, and in “Culture and Administration” (pg. 125) where he argues that authenticity as it relates to becoming different (“the heterogeneous”) is also to form a false identity of being. Authenticity—either according to being as is Adorno’s focus in the former or according to becoming as is his focus in the latter—always leads to domination. Humility keeps us grounded and reminds us that we do not know what it means to be authentic. Any attempt to be authentic is a ploy for personal
comfort, but personal comfortableness is paid for with a public price. Personal comfort is political apathy. Humility is the force that impels us to brave the vertigo and continually criticize “identity,” even those versions that we have a hand in creating.

Humility, then, is a political virtue. This is not a new idea; it was a foundational political virtue for early democracy/republic proponents. Publius in Federalist No. 37 (Kammen, pg. 175) reminds us that fallible men drafted the Constitution of the United States, which citizens should remember when it came time for them to vote on ratification of the Constitution, but that the citizens voting on the Constitution’s ratification are also fallible, which they should also remember when they vote. This mimics the famous Federalist No. 51 (Kammen, pg. 203) where Publius warns that no humans (neither governed nor governing) are angels; all are flawed. While there is undoubtedly a political motivation behind this—Publius was polemical as well as philosophical because the goal was to persuade people to ratify the Constitution—there is a larger philosophic point as well. The American political project, Publius claims, is one that works with human nature, which is flawed. The only way for the government to deliver on what it promised is if the tensions between governed/governing remained, so they could oppose each other through the extremes. However, this works even better if both sides of the tension remembered that they were flawed, which is to say that both sides humbly recognized fallibility, and then both sides acted in light of that humility. In Adorno’s terms, this humility could perhaps allow the system to move beyond criticizing the extremes by the other (the kind of critical antithesis that is determinate negation) to a system of peaceful tension, where both sides can peacefully move in proper tension.

Mill, in *On Liberty* (especially pg. 14-15, 18) also uses “fallibility,” but his usage is an explicitly philosophic one. He heavily relies on our ability to humbly remember our own
fallibility. In fact, this principle is the beginning of, and so the foundation of, his theory on how to achieve freedom in society. Understanding that we could be wrong about anything, even, or more aptly especially, those elements of which we “feel very certain” (*On Liberty*, pg. 15) because they are the core part of our identity and our world, is necessary or we will never engage in the kinds of “negative discussion” (*On Liberty*, pg. 36-37) that are necessary if we are ever to come to know and act on our true nature (which, incidentally, he also pushes off indefinitely into the future). In discussing this, Mill explicitly ties this process of negative discussion to the dialectic. In order to engage in the stripping away of all that is false, so that maybe eventually we can see the complete truth, we need humility. Remembering that we are fallible should not prevent us from thinking and acting, even quite strongly, but should remind us that we will be oppressive in the process and so must continue to engage in the negative discussions to continue to strip ourselves of those oppressive elements (*On Liberty*, pg. 14-18, especially pg. 17). Again, to move this closer to Adorno, without humility, we lack the critical impulse needed to engage in the often painful discussions that reveal where we have been complicit in oppression.

Thinkers like Adorno and Eliot, then, merely remind us that humility is a foundational political principle; they do not invent it. During the age of revolution—in some ways the political height of the Enlightenment—when people were trying to create republics and democracies that would bring freedom, those founders inserted the principle of humility as one of the cornerstones of their revolution. Adorno and Eliot, writing in the midst of two World Wars and a Holocaust, lived through the breaking of the Enlightenment-revolutionary promise. It is no wonder, then, that in seeking to criticize why that project failed, they point to the broken promise of the political virtue that underpinned it. Their negative, aesthetic enlightenment project that seeks to fulfill the promise—or at least keep us from breaking the promise—of previous enlightenments
also begins from a similar political principle, but they hope to have a theory that more robustly embodies it.

**Beyond Identity, Beyond Identity Politics?**

Humility, then, is crucial to the process of determinate negation and the antidote to vertigo. The question then becomes, can this vertigo be overcome enough to think not only beyond identity but also beyond identity politics? To have any hope of achieving this, the humility needed to overcome vertigo would need to touch both major ideologies in America. Thinking otherwise would be to fall prey to “false conflicts” (“Culture Industry Reconsidered,” pg. 104) that, since they are “no longer…real conflicts,” “generally have no real consequences” (“The Schema of Mass Culture,” pg. 69). All visible conflicts in society are of this kind, because none of them are capable of overthrowing the system. In fact, all visible conflicts are themselves complicit in the reproduction of society. Adorno at least hints that political parties in particular, and the political ideologies that underpin them, are part of these false conflicts in writing “that political participation within the sphere society grants them, and this holds true for all political systems in the world today, can alter their actual existence only minimally” (“Free Time,” pg. 192). Political parties are the illusion of political participation in democracies that has only minimal effect, so they are false conflicts. To have any hope of changing the political landscape, humility must extend to the realization that all are complicit in the system.

On the issue of identity politics in particular, this schema becomes plain from everything that Adorno has argued. As we have seen all along, taking either of the two sides of the tension ultimately produces domination of one side of the tension. In this case, the conservative ideology seeks to protect already established identities, while the liberal ideology seeks to destroy these identities by, initially, taking the side of nonidentity only to ultimately seek to create new stable
identities to take the place of the old identities when nonidentity itself becomes identity. In both cases, dominant identities are created that arrest movement and ensure that the tensions within us no longer move in peaceful ways but congeal around one version of dominance or the other. Even seeking to make becoming different our identity reproduces this phenomenon. As we saw, this just resolves the tension in the opposite direction, so the same dominance recurs in new guise.

Adorno wants us to see that all identities, even those that determinately negate the currently reigning identities, are oppressive. Determinate negation, as we saw, requires that we “lend a voice to suffering” (Negative Dialectics, pg. 17), which often means taking the side of oppressed identities. But this is not the good in itself. Making it the good merely turns those oppressed identities into the new oppressive ones. They become the new, stable models of identity that society seeks to enforce. Humility gets us to see where all conceived identities are wrong, so we continue the process of determinate negation and thereby continually open the possibility of the emergence of the peaceful tension. This causes us to continually recognize that all living (in thought, speech, action) closes that possibility and needs to be criticized. This process, though, is not to glorify, on the one hand, becoming different or, on the other, becoming being. It is to allow being/becoming to exist in proper, peaceful tension so we all can be/become as we should. Being is becoming, but becoming is also according to being.

In lieu of this peaceful tension that would be beyond identity politics, maybe the best that we can do is criticize both approaches from the standpoint of the other. As we have seen already, Adorno explains the general approach in that “the dialectic advances by way of extremes, driving thoughts with the utmost consequentiality to the point where they turn back on themselves, instead of qualifying them” (Minima Moralia, pg. 86). This is in opposition to the “Echternach”
dance of “three steps forward, and two steps backward” (*Minima Moralia*, pg. 86 and fn. 1). The dialectic’s determinacy is not in a gradual overcoming of falsity in some linear—or in this case quasi-linear fashion—instead, it is advancement by forcing each side of the tension to come to grips with its own falsity and complicity. And this is done by way of the opposite extreme. This is why Adorno believes that the circle is actually a good picture for dialectics (*Negative Dialectics*, pg. 157). The circle should not be seen as the closure of thought as it discovers the completely good identity; instead the circle is retrograde. It shows “advancing process” and “a reaching back” (*Negative Dialectics*, pg. 157). It constantly forces us to reconsider where we thought we made progress (even in the determinate negation itself), to see where that progress is really retrograde, and to engage in determinate negation from the other side of the tension. Absent the existence of the peaceful tension, this back-and-forth critical antithesis between the tension is the only hope that the peaceful tension may yet emerge. Otherwise, today’s sufferer becomes tomorrow’s oppressor. We need to see where we are perpetrators of suffering and where we are the suffering. This makes the tension visible, and it makes visible the dominance in the tension. This visibility is the memory that is thought, because it causes us to recollect a tension that was always there. This thought underpins the critical impulse that keeps us engaged in determinate negation. But all of this requires humility and risks vertigo. Without this, there is no moving beyond identity politics or either of the dominating interpretations of it.
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310


314


