

## **A Battlefield of Theoretical Leverages: Habermas and Early Critical Theory**

*Paolo A. Bolaños*  
*University of Santo Tomas*  
*pabolanos@ust.edu.ph*

### **Abstract**

In this paper, I will focus on the dismissive critique made by Habermas in the *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* and to respond to this critique. I will specifically focus on the charge of “performative contradiction,” a strategic counterweight employed by Habermas against his philosophical opponents which also gives way to other related charges, such as, Nietzschean proto-fascism, irrationalism, pessimism, irresponsible aesthetic adventurism, and the lack of any practicable solutions to the problem of miscommunication or contradiction. For Habermas, the critical import of the proposals of Adorno and Horkheimer (which is also extended to other thinkers, like Heidegger, Foucault, and Derrida) is undermined when the inherent performative contradiction of their arguments is exposed, that is to say, that their totalized critique of Enlightenment reason is a self-contradiction because the resources of reason are used to undermine reason. Contra Habermas, I argue that this is not exactly the case and that Habermas might be putting too much weight on performative contradiction as a strategic leverage to justify the primacy of a formalized model of communication or deliberation. The unfortunate result is that critical theory is reduced to a “battlefield of theoretical leverages” which is counterintuitive to the practical goals of social philosophy.

**Keywords:** Habermas, Adorno, Frankfurt School, Critical Theory

### **Introduction**

In this paper, I will discuss a very important aspect of the history of the Frankfurt School which sprung forth from the arguments made by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer in the *Dialectic of*

*Enlightenment*:<sup>1</sup> the debate that ensued which was spearheaded by Jürgen Habermas. The most sustained criticism of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* occurred within the confines of the Frankfurt School itself, that of Habermas and his student Axel Honneth. However, it is important to lay down some qualifications: on the one hand, the young Habermas, resolved to work as Adorno's research assistant, started with sympathetic gestures towards the works of Adorno which later on turned into a bitter polemic especially after the death of the latter;<sup>2</sup> Honneth, on the other hand, as Habermas' research assistant during the 70s, began his career paying lip service to his mentor and, hence, started off as very critical of the works of the early Frankfurt School, especially the *Dialectics of Enlightenment*.<sup>3</sup> In recent years, however, gleaned from his essays published during the last decade, Honneth has recently reconsidered his account of the early Frankfurt School through a re-reading of the critical potential of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and a more engaged reappraisal of Adorno's contribution to social philosophy which exhibits proximity to the critical force of a world-disclosing critique.<sup>4</sup> Honneth's early musings on the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is profoundly informed by Habermas' own criticisms, that when reading his early texts one gets the feeling that he is simply repeating the claims already made by the latter. However, in his recent examinations of early critical theory, Honneth appears to have recanted most of his earlier claims and, in turn, does justice to the contributions made by the early Frankfurt School, especially Adorno.

That being said, in the following I will focus on the dismissive critique made by Habermas in the *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*

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<sup>1</sup> Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. by Edmund Jephcott (California: Stanford University Press, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> Ben Morgan recounts that Habermas' "changing responses" to Adorno trace a "process of disappointment"—from an admiration of Adorno's "underlying childishness" that informs his social critique to a bitter reproach of the same childishness. "Where the earlier Habermas saw a social critique inspired by lingering childhood attitudes, the later Habermas sees an unproductive aestheticization of theory, even if one can understand how it came about in the drastic circumstances of the 1940s." "The Project of the Frankfurt School," in *Telos*, 119 (Spring 2001), 76.

<sup>3</sup> See Honneth's "Communication and Reconciliation: Habermas' Critique of Adorno" which was written for a special edition of *Telos*, 39 (1979), 45-61, in honor of Habermas' 50<sup>th</sup> birthday.

<sup>4</sup> See Axel Honneth, "A Physiognomy of the Capitalist Form of Life: A Sketch of Adorno's Social Theory," in *Constellations*, 12:1 (2005), 50-64.

and to respond to this critique. I will specifically focus on the charge of “performative contradiction,” a *strategic* counterweight employed by Habermas against his philosophical opponents which also gives way to other related charges, such as, Nietzschean proto-fascism, irrationalism, pessimism, irresponsible aesthetic adventurism, and the lack of any practicable solutions to the problem of miscommunication or contradiction. For Habermas, the critical import of the proposals of Adorno and Horkheimer (which is also extended to other thinkers, like Heidegger, Foucault, and Derrida) is undermined when the inherent performative contradiction of their arguments is exposed, that is to say, that their totalized critique of Enlightenment reason is a self-contradiction because the resources of reason are used to undermine reason. Contra Habermas, I argue that this is not exactly the case and that Habermas might be putting too much weight on performative contradiction as a strategic leverage to justify the primacy of a formalized model of communication or deliberation. The unfortunate result is that critical theory is reduced to a “battlefield of theoretical leverages” which is counterintuitive to the practical goals of social philosophy.

### **The Dialectic of Enlightenment, Performative Contradiction, and Aesthetic Modernism**

The dramatic language and seemingly unsystematic presentation of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, akin to the writings of Nietzsche, is the first thing that a reader notices; it is also the first thing that unsettles the judicious reader. Perhaps, the authors of the book, again like Nietzsche, intend to unsettle us. Indeed, the book is formidable—it inspires awe and demands from its readers the exhaustion of all possible interpretive angles—partly because of its elusive presentation and partly because it *says* the *unsayable*—the self-contradiction of reason—which is often left unsaid in most philosophical treatises. By saying the *unsayable* or the unmentionable out loud one undermines the privileged position of philosophic and scientific discourse, that is, of rational discourse itself. Rational discourse often leaves out talks about the pathological consequences of rationality, it is often silent about the destructive tendencies of reason—of how the hopes of the past have sunk “into a new kind of barbarism,” that is, into fascism or the commodification of social relations. This is the dreaded *unsayable* that the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* openly declares in its first pages: that human rationality, instead of ushering in a truly human condition, has morphed into a modern form of barbarism. But this is precisely what

is often neglected or downplayed, consciously or not, by its critics, for in saying the *unsayable* we often learn things about ourselves that we would rather not entertain.

In the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer paint a grim picture of the history of rationality. This gesture is often interpreted as the authors' enfeebling pessimism. It is also for this reason that Habermas comments, to the effect, that Adorno and Horkheimer have turned from "dark" to "black" writers because of their use of de Sade and Nietzsche to conceptualize the self-destructive tendency of the Enlightenment.<sup>5</sup> Or, in other words, that the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is the "blackest"<sup>6</sup> of Adorno and Horkheimer's books because it does not have anything positive or constructive to say about the Enlightenment. This specious observation is the basis of Habermas' criticism of the book, which appears more like a criticism of—more than anything else in the book and more than the authors themselves—the influence of Nietzsche. Habermas writes in his "Postscript" to the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: "It is no longer Marx, but Nietzsche who points the way. It is no longer a theory of society saturated with history, but a radical critique of reason denouncing the union of reason and domination."<sup>7</sup> Habermas' tone is telling, as if the shift from Marx to Nietzsche meant an aberration and the revelation that, in its present form, reason successfully manifests itself as destructive domination is sheer trifle with grave political consequences. Moreover, Habermas questions the "right" of Adorno and Horkheimer to criticize the Enlightenment project on the basis of Enlightenment's self-destruction,<sup>8</sup> as if saying that Adorno and Horkheimer unwittingly threw out the baby along with the bathwater,

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<sup>5</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, trans. by Frederick G. Lawrence (Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1990) 106. Habermas' use of "dark" and "black," of course, does not have anything to do with race or skin color. The "dark" writers of the bourgeoisie, such as Machiavelli, Hobbes, Mandeville, and Schopenhauer are contrasted to the "black" writers of the bourgeoisie, such as de Sade and Nietzsche. Habermas remarks that the dark writers were still constructive Enlightenment thinkers while the black writers broke ties with the Enlightenment.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Jürgen Habermas, "Nachwort von Jürgen Habermas," quoted by Hullot-Kentor in *Things Beyond Resemblance: Collected Essays on Theodor W. Adorno* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 28.

<sup>8</sup> "If enlightenment is caught up in an unstoppable process of self-destruction, where then would such a critique, which made this diagnosis, have a right to such a diagnosis." "Nachwort," quoted in *ibid.*

and so they mount an “ideology critique that outstrips itself.”<sup>9</sup> The philosophical position of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, for Habermas, “slide off into the groundless” or, in other words, are devoid of any normative content.<sup>10</sup> *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* is notorious for its scathing testament against Nietzsche as a “decadent” thinker who ushered in the postmodern sensibility, a sensibility which Habermas, echoing Lukács, equates with politico-philosophical “irrationalism.”<sup>11</sup> Habermas associates this irrationalism with “aesthetic modernism,” an attitude of “decentered subjectivity liberated from all constraints of cognition and purposiveness and from all imperatives of labor and utility,” in other words, anarchism—an attitude he quickly attributes to Nietzsche, Mallarmé, and Adorno.<sup>12</sup> In forcing the relation between aesthetics and politics, Habermas *strategically* formulates a strange rhetorical “*reductio ad hitlerum*” equation: aesthetics + politics = fascism. While we are not to question the overall intention of *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, which forms part of its author’s noble effort at ideology critique and the recovery of reason via a continuation of the unfinished project of Enlightenment, the specific claims leveled at early critical theory are unnecessarily disputatious. Without question, Habermas’ polemical treatment of Adorno and the early Frankfurt School has definitely put him and his project in a position from which his predecessors appear to have committed nothing more than a philosophical faux pas. Yet one wonders whether his theory of communication actually squares off with the ideology critique offered in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* or, rather, adding up to his serious criticisms of Adorno and Horkheimer, end up as a controversy-mongering or even a self-

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<sup>9</sup> Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, 125, 127.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 83-105. Before Habermas, Georg Lukács, in his *The Destruction of Reason*, trans. by Peter Palmer (London: Merlin, 1980), already exhibited a sweeping condemnation of Nietzsche on similar grounds; Richard Wolin extends the same polemic and even more pungently, for example in *The Seduction of Unreason: The Intellectual Romance with Fascism: From Nietzsche to Postmodernism* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2004). Interestingly and surprisingly enough, however, the young Habermas was more sympathetic to Nietzsche and in 1968 even wrote a postscript which outlined the merits of Nietzsche’s critique of epistemology, see “On Nietzsche’s Theory of Knowledge: A Postscript from 1968,” trans. by James Swindal, in *Nietzsche, Theories of Knowledge, and Critical Theory: Nietzsche and the Sciences I* (London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1999), 209-223.

<sup>12</sup> Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, 122-123.

aggrandizing tactic,<sup>13</sup> and paradoxically enough by Habermas who is known for cautioning us against “strategic action” or false communication. Unfortunately, in this battle for theoretical leverage, there is much that is sacrificed philosophically and practically. For example, the lumping of aesthetics and politics results in the unwitting abandonment of the philosophical force of the notion of aesthetic altogether, ignoring one of the central theses of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*—that of the mimetic character of thought predisposed to non-identical thinking that is receptive to somatic, expressive, and communicative modes of relating to the environment. Habermas openly distinguishes between objective knowledge, derived from science and theoretical philosophy, and subjective human activities, derived from literary criticism, literature, and religion; in this quasi-Platonic move, the priority is given to objective knowledge.<sup>14</sup> This does not only resemble a purist appeal to objective knowledge, but also, in the process of deliberately downplaying the philosophical importance of the aesthetic, Habermas, according to Robert Hullot-Kentor, paradoxically separates himself from the German Enlightenment tradition, “especially since Kant, the defense of reason has been conceived not just as inseparable from but ultimately as dependent on the aesthetic.”<sup>15</sup> It could be said that Adorno and Nietzsche are rightful heirs to German Romanticism, a tradition which seriously takes into consideration the Kantian supposition of the inextricable relation between reason and the aesthetic. It is unfortunate that, as a commonly regarded mouthpiece of Kant,

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<sup>13</sup> A similar observation is made by Deborah Cook in “Critical Stratagems in Adorno and Habermas: Theories of Ideology and the Ideology of Theory,” in *Historical Materialism*, 6 (2000), 67. The Adorno-Habermas relation is, of course, an ongoing dispute in recent scholarship, for example, the heated exchange between Cook and Finlayson. See James Gordon Finlayson’s “The Theory of Ideology and the Ideology of Theory: Habermas contra Adorno” and Cook’s “A Response to Finlayson,” both in *Historical Materialism*, 11:2 (2003), 165-187 and 189-198 respectively. Another promising account of the Adorno-Habermas relation is found in Romand Coles, “Identity and Difference in the Ethical Positions of Adorno and Habermas,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Habermas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 19-45; in contrast to Coles, see the early Honneth’s “Communication and Reconciliation: Habermas’ Critique of Adorno.”

<sup>14</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, trans. by Christian Lenhardt and Shierry Weber Nicholsen (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1992), 20-28.

<sup>15</sup> Robert, Hullot-Kentor, *Things Beyond Resemblance: Collected Essays on Theodor W. Adorno* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 32.

Habermas understates the significance of the Kantian preoccupation with the aesthetic.

However, with Habermas, the gesture of warning turns into a hypostasized paranoia, in the guise of theoretical sophistication and precision, that disavows the possibility of redemption precisely from the standpoint of crisis, distress, contingency, ambivalence, and the aporetic nature of language. It is from the standpoint of “crisis”—or what Adorno refers to as “the wrong state of things”—where any form of critical theory of society consciously emanates.<sup>16</sup> Perhaps the most unfortunate and vexing spin-off of this “battlefield of endless controversies” which, anyway, would end up in irresolvable antinomies (ala Kant) is the forced decision to choose between Adorno and Habermas, an either/or situation issued at the expense of philosophical creativity, a notion of creativity that should not be confused with or reduced to political adventurism. The unfortunate consequence of the *reductio ad hitlerum* is that it reduces the weight and dynamism Adorno ascribes to aesthetic experience to a mere political caricature. Owing to his observation of the *bad* influence of Nietzsche, more precisely of irresponsible aestheticism, on Adorno and Horkheimer, Habermas further identifies several problems in the theoretical structure of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: the lack of cognitive and normative grounding of the authors’ arguments, the disconcerting “performative contradiction” in the method, and the absence of a prescriptive practical solution.

Habermas claims that a politically “risky” narrative of the human domination of nature is introduced in the book. The exaggerated picture of the pitfalls of human rationality is seen not only as a performance of methodological contradiction but also a practically irresponsible political gesture, on account of its reductive image of human progress. To put it succinctly, Habermas thinks that Adorno is guilty of a “totalizing self-critique of reason” that “gets caught up in a performative contradiction since subject-centered reason can be convicted of being authoritarian in nature only by having recourse to its own tools.”<sup>17</sup> Habermas warns that similar to Nietzsche’s risky diagnosis of nihilism, Adorno and Horkheimer “bring abstractions and

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<sup>16</sup> Similar points are made in the following: Nikolas Kompridis, *Critique and Disclosure: Critical Theory between Past and Future* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2006), 5; Coles, “Identity and Difference in the Ethical Positions of Adorno and Habermas”; and Stanley Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 32 and 83.

<sup>17</sup> Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, 185.

simplifications into the bargain” that make their own diagnosis of ideology, the dark side of reason, no less risky.<sup>18</sup> By abstractions and simplifications, Habermas is referring to, on the one hand, the fictionalized presentation of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, a worry which he also feels towards the works of Nietzsche and the ones he regards as poststructuralists, like Foucault and Derrida. On the other hand, Habermas assumes that they are abstractions and simplifications, and hence politically risky, inasmuch as they are not exactly grounded in *the* normative structures that Habermas has in mind, i.e., the primacy of intersubjective validity testing as a way of resolving conflict.<sup>19</sup> According to Martin Jay, the primacy of intersubjective validity is one of the bases of Habermas’ *strategic* use—that is, to gain theoretical leverage—of “performative contradiction” as a foil against his opponents, in this case, Nietzsche, the early critical theorists, and the poststructuralists. The charge of performative contradiction is used by Habermas to demonstrate the contradictions in the line of argumentation of his opponents, for example, Adorno- and Horkheimer’s totalizing critique of reason without acknowledging that such critique is normatively based on a particular logic that presupposes the use of reason. Moreover, Habermas suggests that such performatively contradictory statements are contradictory since they are not based on an earnest attempt to “communicate” valid claims based on intersubjective exchange. In other words, contradictions, for Habermas, rest more on intersubjective miscommunication than on the ontological or structural level.<sup>20</sup> He attempts to propose the normative primacy of communication at the expense of his opponents, whom he thinks are not communicating clearly enough because their statements are not based on actual intersubjective exchange, but, rather, on subjective drivels—hence, they are abstract, simplistic, and risky.

### **A Response to Habermas**

This preemptive move against risk is, however, misleading. Firstly, Habermas himself is guilty of simplifying Nietzsche’s diagnosis of nihilism, while warning us of its political ramifications, he ignores the fact that it was not the notion of nihilism that the German fascists appropriated but, rather, the notion of the will to power; for even in

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Martin Jay, *Force Fields: Between Intellectual History and Cultural Critique* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 29.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.



the most fundamental Nietzschean interpretation, fascism itself is a nihilistic attitude which, of course, the fascists would not admit to themselves.<sup>21</sup> In any case, we can observe that Habermas is resolved in overstressing the political adventurism of Nietzsche's fascist and neoconservative readers,<sup>22</sup> but what is forfeited here is a treatment of Nietzsche's ideas at a deeper philosophical level. Despite his emphasis on the normativity of communication, Habermas leaves very little room, if at all, for philosophical dialogue or a possible rapprochement. Tracy B. Strong and Frank Andreas Sposito point out that the treatment of philosophers (from Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, Bataille, Adorno, Horkheimer, down to Derrida) offered in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, despite having the characteristics of lucidity and comprehensiveness, is marked by a particular sense of disdain—"an intimation of naiveté, as if his [Habermas] subjects did not know that they were playing with something dangerous . . . that there is a dark violence to humankind to which these writers . . . are *apprentis sorciers*."<sup>23</sup> The upshot of this is that one can conveniently conclude that the *only* logical consequence of the works of these philosophers is one of catastrophic political paralysis, inasmuch as they are seen too *childish* and lacked the perspicacity to buttress their claims with acceptable normative standards. For Habermas, the skeptical stance against normative standards, or what he would sometimes call "value skepticism,"<sup>24</sup> is traceable back to Nietzsche whose critique of modernity comes by way of unmasking the perversion of the will to power in reason which "sets itself outside the

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<sup>21</sup> Specific details of this ongoing debate is found in a collection of essays edited by Jacob Golomb and Robert S. Wistrich called *Nietzsche, Godfather of Fascism? On the Uses and Abuses of a Philosophy* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2002).

<sup>22</sup> See, for example, comments made in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* where neoconservatism and aesthetic modernism ("aesthetically inspired anarchism" or "postmodernity," whose proponents are Nietzsche, Heidegger, Bataille, Foucault, Derrida) are lumped together and presented as enemies of the Enlightenment. *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, 4-5. Also see Thomas McCarthy's "Introduction," in *ibid.*, xi. The relationship between aesthetic modernism and neoconservatism is further explored by Habermas in *The New Conservatism: Cultural Criticism and the Historians' Debate*, trans. by Shierry Weber Nicholsen (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989).

<sup>23</sup> Tracy B. Strong and Frank Andreas Sposito, "Habermas' Significant Other," in *The Cambridge Companion to Habermas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 279.

<sup>24</sup> See Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*.

horizon of reason.”<sup>25</sup> Nietzsche, according to Habermas, has perfected the skeptical stance, for he shakes “his head over philosophical argumentation as though he were witnessing the unintelligible rites of a strange tribe.”<sup>26</sup> This characterization of skepticism is quite strange and, as will be shown shortly, misses the mark of the critical force of Nietzsche’s skepticism and philosophical skepticism as a whole. Furthermore, since Habermas can only perceive Nietzsche as a nihilist in the pejorative sense (a characterization that goes against everything that Nietzsche himself stood for), a nihilistic value is ascribed to philosophical skepticism, thereby extending the nihilistic charge to Adorno and Horkheimer (and, of course, also to Heidegger, Foucault, Bataille, and Derrida).

The absence of normative standards, which for Habermas are supposed to be standards or “values” for rational intersubjective deliberation, is a practical impediment towards the proper coordination of discourse ethics since it tends towards ethical relativism understood in terms of subjectivism.<sup>27</sup> “Value skepticism,” the *other* of discourse ethics, entails the death of philosophy (hence, of morality) and historically results in what Kant calls *Schwärmerei* (enthusiasm or excessive sentiment).<sup>28</sup> We can respond to this Habermasian worry by rehearsing the response of Strong and Sposito,<sup>29</sup> which they make by invoking none other than the very first words of Kant’s preface to the *Critique of Pure Reason* that initiate us to the fundamental premise of critical philosophy:

Human reason has this peculiar fate that in one species of its knowledge it is burdened by questions which, as prescribed by the very nature of reason itself, it is not able to ignore, but which, as transcending all its powers, it is also not able to answer.<sup>30</sup>

What Kant’s statement registers is an “ambivalence” that is conditioned by thinking itself. That thinking is torn between the insistent demand of thought to answer questions that elude its very own powers, on the one hand, and the inability to empirically answer

<sup>25</sup> Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, 96.

<sup>26</sup> Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, 99.

<sup>27</sup> See *ibid.*, 76 and 184.

<sup>28</sup> See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. by Norman Kemp Smith (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 128.

<sup>29</sup> See Strong and Sposito, “Habermas’ Significant Other,” 281-282.

<sup>30</sup> Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 7.

the same questions perhaps on account of thinking's very own powerlessness, on the other hand. Or, as Strong and Spósito maintain, that thinking is torn between "skepticism" and "enthusiasm,"<sup>31</sup> an ambivalence in the very act of thinking itself. While this upsets Habermas, Kant gracefully accepts this intrinsic tension within thought and construes it as constitutive of human knowledge itself. Kant is abandoning neither skepticism nor enthusiasm, but, rather, proposing a coalescence of these two tendencies of reason, to steer reason between these two rocks.<sup>32</sup> In other words, the Kantian ambivalence allows the human being to *wander* and lose himself in nature, like Dionysus, but almost simultaneously, the human being maintains a kind of *measured composure* that takes him back to himself, like Apollo. Adorno's radicalized notion of mimesis or thinking's reorientation to the non-identical precisely falls under the rubric of Kantian ambivalence: the symbiotic or dialectical exchange between concept and object or, to put it differently, the exchange between art and philosophy, proposed in *Aesthetic Theory*, opens up one to the other, one (art) assuming the form of the other, and one (philosophy) maintaining a deferential distance to the other.

I would like to follow further the proposal of Strong and Spósito that a radical reading of this Kantian insight should be made to caution

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<sup>31</sup> "From this reading," they argue, "one would say that the task of the *First Critique* (and that of genius) was not to establish rationality at the *expense* of sense with its doubt and certainties, but to establish rationality as a *balance* between the subjective and the objective, denying any of them." Strong and Spósito, "Habermas' Significant Other," 282. Cavell also echoes this Kantian insight and interprets it as an expression of the romantic temperament: "It is expressed in Kant's portrait of the human being as living in two worlds, in one of them determined, in the other free, one of which is necessary to the satisfaction of human Understanding, the other to the satisfaction of human Reason. One romantic use for this idea of two worlds lies in its accounting for the human being's dissatisfaction with, as it were, itself. It appreciates the ambivalence in Kant's central idea of limitation, that we simultaneously crave its comfort and crave escape from its comfort, that we want to be lawfully wedded to the world and at the same time illicitly intimate with it, as if the one stance produced the wish for the other, as if the best proof of human existence were its power to yearn, as if for its better, or other, existence." *In Quest for the Ordinary*, 31-32.

<sup>32</sup> "We now propose to make trial whether it be not possible to find for human reason safe conduct between these two rocks, assigning to her determinate limits, and yet keeping open for her the whole field of her appropriate activities." Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 128. The "two rocks" is perhaps an allusion to the mythic images of the mythic monsters Scylla and Charybdis.

us against the Habermasian move of downplaying the philosophical or epistemic status of other discourses, such as literature or poetry, that maintain the tension between the “comprehensible” and the “uncomprehended.”<sup>33</sup> The challenge for philosophy posted by this tension—which is already taken up by the early German romantics, Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche and, more recently, by Heidegger, Bataille, Lacan, Foucault, Derrida, Benjamin, Kracauer, Bloch, and Adorno, among others—is the unabating reflection on the relation between philosophical language and poetic language. The supposition that skepticism (value skepticism included) necessarily results in irrationalism is simply misleading, since, as Kant shows us, knowledge or the human propensity towards knowledge is conditioned by both the skeptical and enthusiastic tendencies of reason. And if such acts of skepticism lead to exaggerations and outlandish claims, or come in the form of unbridled dithyrambs, “They may just have found us on a road in knowledge,”<sup>34</sup> or, as Adorno himself puts it in “Opinion Delusion Society”: “All thinking is exaggeration, in so far as every thought that is one at all goes beyond its confirmation by the given facts.”<sup>35</sup> If we radically follow the logic of this Kantian ambivalence, then Habermas’ criticism of Nietzsche, and hence of Adorno and Horkheimer, of unmasking the dialectics of Enlightenment “outside the horizon of reason” loses its credibility because it denies the capacity of reason to exaggerate beyond the logics of the common and banal, exaggerations that may lead us on a road to a better, albeit sometimes more painful, understanding of ourselves and our surroundings. The suppression of this better half of reason is anathema to literature or poetry, indeed to mimetic practices that maintain the non-identical in thought. It is hasty on the part of Habermas to assume that an emphasis on the aesthetic dimension of experience would rid of experience’s communicative dimension. Of course, Habermas does not deny the existence of aesthetic experience, but he does unnecessarily make a stark opposition between the two, specifically downplaying the centrality of mimesis in the formation of worldviews. Again, the point of Adorno’s refusal to accept a definitive communicative logic and, instead opening up philosophical discourse to a variety of expressions or redescriptions, is not to totally deny the possibility of communication, but, rather, the “recognition that the current social reality . . . renders abnormal the state of performative consistency

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<sup>33</sup> Strong and Sposito, “Habermas’ Significant Other,” 283.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 282.

<sup>35</sup> Theodor Adorno, *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. by Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 108.

Habermas wants to instantiate.”<sup>36</sup> This goes beyond Habermas’ supposition that contradiction is simply linguistic-base and could be resolved via proper communication; as Martin Jay writes in relation to this:

What speech act theorists like to call the “happy” or “felicitous” outcome of illocutionary acts may be hard to come by in a world not conducive to fulfilling other kinds of happiness. And a fortiori, the intersubjective overcoming of contradiction is even less likely to occur.<sup>37</sup>

What Jay is alluding to here is the persistence of contradiction in a society marred by the wrong state of things. This is not to say that Habermas is simply ignoring the fact that contradictions indeed exist; however, he is wrong to insist that they only happen at the level of intersubjective communication. For instance, in times of natural disasters (e.g., massive flooding, earthquakes, fire, etc.) the ensuing confusion is not simply caused by miscommunication alone, but surely the confusion could be worsened, for instance, by faulty judgments or announcements which are meant to deceive the people in order to control panic and reinstall order. There is also a dimension of intersubjectivity that the Habermasian model appears to ignore, that is, the almost instinctual and selfless drive “to put others before oneself” in times of crises which is not simply reducible to sheer heroism or naïve sympathy—but this curious phenomenon surely involves some form of subjective agency which is not always prefigured by formal intersubjective communication. I hasten to add that this might be an ambiguous, yet more persuasive source of our utopian hopes.

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<sup>36</sup> Jay, *Force Fields: Between Intellectual History and Cultural Critique*, 37.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

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