

# University of Alberta

From Constellations to Autoprohibition: Everything You Wanted to Know About Adorno's  
Ethics (but Were Afraid to Ask Žižek).

by

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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Political Science

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Spring 2010  
Edmonton, Alberta

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For Lisa,

who continuously provides me with unwavering love, understanding, and patience.

## Abstract

This project is centered on two primary concerns. First, a reformulation of Adorno's notion of ethical subjectivity in a way that allows for a clearer articulation of his normative position, which is defined by a series of *a priori* moral imperatives. These imperatives include: an emphasis on the physical body as a source of truth; the injunction to end unnecessary suffering; and the importance of recognising non-identity both in one's self and in others. Second, this project attempts to make Adorno's ethics more relevant to our contemporary social context and advances in social theory. My claim is that we can achieve this by rejecting Adorno's philosophical method (negative dialectics and constellations) by reading it through the lens of Žižek's method which I am calling 'autoprohibition.' As I will show, autoprobhibition is Žižek's strategy for breaking the deadlock of the dialectic of enlightenment and its accompanying defeatist politics by developing a dialectical theory that neither rests on pure negation nor falls into the totalising and reifying trap of orthodox Marxism. It is in the context of autoprobhibition that one can rearticulate Adorno's normative imperatives mentioned above, without these imperatives being negated by the totalising dictates of the dialectic of enlightenment. The best way to redeem the important normative components of Adorno's formulation of ethical subjectivity is to reject its underlying philosophical method and resituate it in another. I frame this methodological shift as one from 'constellations to autoprobhibition,' which allows for a more positive articulation of Adorno's ethics; a plan for actively *practising* an ethical life vs. one premised on the rejection of participating in an unethical system.

## Preface

This project began as a general study of Theodor Adorno's use of the Jewish Image Prohibition (i.e., the Biblical Second Commandment) in relation to problems of aesthetic and philosophical representation. In Adorno's view the Second Commandment bans images as a way to protect the integrity of the particular (in the philosophical understanding of the term). On the other hand, the image (of God) can never fully grasp His ineffable and formless character; rather, it reifies – or renders finite that which is infinite. The important insight here is that, from an Adornian perspective, the image is associated with the *universal* and the Image Prohibition is intimately linked to the truth of the *particular*. On my reading, this way of understanding the Image Prohibition informs all of Adorno's philosophy. That is to say, the anti-conceptual insights of negative dialectics – that concepts can never capture or fully grasp the truth of their objects – is informed by precisely the same logic as the Image Prohibition.

However, this understanding of Adorno's thought was challenged by my reading of Peter Brown's work on the iconoclast conflict in the Byzantine Empire of the 9<sup>th</sup> Century. In particular, by being exposed to the various theological and political dimensions of this conflict, I became less certain that Adorno's approach was fully adequate for employing the Image Prohibition in a contemporary critical and secular philosophical register. Brown demonstrates that the image, in the form of the icon, actually acted in the name of the particular against the universalism of the Church and Empire. More specifically, icons which presented the images of (local) patron saints and their main proponents – “holy men” – were seen as political rivals to the centralised authority of the Church; they fostered a *local* or *particular* loyalty in the towns scattered

across the Eastern Empire, thus eroding the citizens' allegiance to Church and Empire. In this context, the philosophical importance of Brown's description of the iconoclast conflict is that it points to a possible reversal of Adorno's reading of the nature of the image vis-à-vis the particular and universal. The image is understood as being associated with the particularity of local communities and it was the agents of the universal – Church and Empire – who expressly prohibited its creation and diffusion.

The decisive moment for my project occurred during a conference at which I presented a paper (that ultimately became Chapter Three of this dissertation) wherein I worked through my understanding of Adorno's defense of the Second Commandment (the injunction to *not* represent what cannot be represented). Specifically, Adorno uses the Second Commandment to fortify his claim that negation – the disproving of posited truths – is the only proper approach to practising philosophy and attempting to provide solutions for social problems. A participant at the conference asked me “what do you think about Slavoj Žižek's interpretation of the Second Commandment? Žižek asks the question: What if the prohibition is not intended to prevent calling true what is false, but is in fact required to *prevent the truth of the image from being recognised?*”<sup>1</sup> Simply put, I had no answer because I was unfamiliar with this unorthodox perspective of Žižek vis-à-vis the Prohibition. I immediately set out to read *On Belief*, and as a result, the approach I was taking toward my dissertation changed. Žižek's argues that the image was banned by Judaism because it presented an *unbearable truth*; this argument, seemed to completely contradict Adorno's perspective from a *philosophical* perspective (vs. Brown's social-historical account). This led me into research that would ultimately reject

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<sup>1</sup> The student in question is James Martell de la Torre from the PhD in Literature program at the University of Notre Dame.

Adorno's reading of the Prohibition, and to a new understanding of his negative dialectical method as a whole. In effect, I found myself concluding that Žižek's method can be interpreted as a further dialectical move that deepens negative dialectics in a very interesting way. More specifically, I began to consider the idea that what Žižek was doing with the Prohibition was suggesting that instead of reading it as something that must be honoured in philosophical discourse in order to protect the integrity of truth, it should be read as already *containing its own prohibition*. Later in my research this idea was modified in a way that argues that it is not the image that contains its own prohibition, but that the *subject automatically prohibits the truth of the image* because of its unbearable truth-content. As such, I began to formulate one of the major themes of my project which is a comparison of an important aspect of Adorno's methodology known as 'constellations,' with Žižek's method, which I am calling 'autoprohibition.'

In addition to this unintended focus on comparative dialectical method, my interest in ethical subjectivity was similarly unexpected. Because I was exploring the Jewish nature of Adorno's thought, I was drawn to an essay by Jean-François Lyotard – "Adorno as the Devil" – due to its recurrent religious themes and symbolism, and because its central claim is that Adorno suffers from a certain melancholy for an ideal past, a melancholy that Lyotard argues is endemic to all modern philosophy. This emphasis on melancholy for a lost ideal past prompted me to begin distinguishing between different forms of political and religious Messianisms. Furthermore, reading Lyotard led me to consider his formulation of the 'inhuman' which I used as traction to think through his critique of Adorno. Thus, a comparison of the 'inhuman' in Adorno

and Lyotard resulted in a general interest in Adorno's model of subjectivity. From here I began to think all of these themes together and my research questions were settled:

- 1) What would it look like to consider Adorno's ethical subjectivity through the lens of Žižek's method of autoprohibition?
- 2) How would this blending intersect with or be relevant to contemporary understandings of subjectivity and social behaviour?
- 3) How might it lend itself to a normative critique of power or resistance?

These questions led me in several unexpected and challenging directions. The result was nothing less than a complete overhaul of my own philosophical model for understanding ethics. However, a reader may inquire at this point: if this project is intended to contribute to an overcoming of the failures and deficiencies of both Marxism and postmodernism by way of a re-reading of Adornian ethics through the work of Žižek, would this project have been made stronger by a more direct engagement? Would a simple comparative approach to Adorno's and Žižek's philosophical methods and their respective formulations of ethical subjectivity, made the connections more clear? Why begin with an obscure category like the Second Commandment to illustrate insights about ethical subjectivity? Does it not seem that beginning with this category results in an unnecessarily circuitous route to the desired conclusion?

The answer to this concern is that there exists a connecting thread through the dissertation in the form of the category 'prohibition.' If it was not for the initial focus on the Image Prohibition, I could not have produced the section on ethical subjectivity without losing some of the project's richness and idiosyncratic character. More specifically, the particular nature of the starting point of my dissertation allowed for what

I see as its most important aspect: the exploration of the various prohibitions that exist in contemporary society, the diversity of ways in which they manifest themselves, and the multiple logics at work in these prohibitions, and how we (Western subjects) are always caught up in their power.

Finally, I believe that my argument in this dissertation has the potential to make a significant contribution to existing debates in critical political and social theory. More specifically, I consider my dissertation as part of what I see as one of the emerging and primary set of concerns shared by contemporary critical theorists: the attempt to reconstruct Left political thought after its deconstruction by certain strands of postmodern thought and identity politics in the 1980s and 1990s. Žižek is, perhaps, the central thinker in this movement, which also includes Alain Badiou, Giorgio Agamben, and Jacques Rancière.

## **Acknowledgements**

There are several individuals I would like to thank for helping me through the last 7.5 years of school. I need to recognise the unbelievably committed support that my supervisor – Catherine Kellogg – provided me over the years. Catherine, I learned so much from you – not just about political theory, but also how to treat students, and people in general, with a compassion and respect that a lot of academics fail to practice. Also, Don Carmichael for his friendship and idiosyncratic devotion to mentorship; David Reddall for his camaraderie and wisdom; my parents for their love and financial support; my brother for being a constant inspiration and ardent practitioner of creative living; my fellow graduate students who directly influenced my project or life in some important way: Kyla Sentes, J.D. Crookshanks, Mark Blythe, Trevor Tchir, Stephanie Martens, Chris Emmerling, Jay Makarenko, Amy Swiffen, Craig Campbell, Megan McKenzie, Dan Preece, Angela Thachuk, Octavian Ion, Julian Fowke, and Matt Hildebrand; the Jasters for accepting me with open arms into their family and making me feel at home in Edmonton; the Political Science administrative support-staff: Marilyn Calvert, Cindy Anderson, Caroline Kinyua, Donna Coombs-Montrose, and Slavica Lepki; and finally all my good friends who made my life in Edmonton a wonderful experience: Tom McGuire, Shannon Robinson, Mike McLaughlin, Jason Harcus, Paul Smith, Tyler Scott, among many others.

## Table of Contents

<b>Preface</b> .....	1
<b>Introduction</b> .....	1
<i><b>Brief Summary of Argument</b></i> .....	9
<i>Adorno's Ethics</i> .....	9
<i>Adorno's Method</i> .....	10
<i>Autoprohibition</i> .....	11
<i>Rethinking Adorno in a Contemporary Ethical Context</i> .....	13
<b>Chapter Breakdown</b> .....	14
<i>Chapter 2</i> .....	14
<i>Chapter 3</i> .....	15
<i>Chapter 4</i> .....	16
<i>Chapter 5</i> .....	17
<i>Chapter 6</i> .....	18
<i>Chapter 7</i> .....	19
<b>Chapter 2: Key Ideas and Terms</b> .....	20
<b>Key Adornian Terms</b> .....	20
<i>Negative Dialectics</i> .....	20
<i>Jewish Thought: The Image Prohibition and Constellations</i> .....	23
<i>The Dialectic of Enlightenment</i> .....	29
<i>The Culture Industry</i> .....	33
<i>Terminological Clarification: Subject? Person? Self? Human?</i> .....	36
<i>Ethical Subjectivity</i> .....	39
<i>Habermas and Dialogism</i> .....	44
<b>Key Žižekian Terms</b> .....	51
<i>Autoprohibition and the Žižekian Subject</i> .....	52
<i>The Act</i> .....	56
<b>Chapter 3: If Adorno isn't the Devil it's because he's a Jew: Lyotard's Misreading of Adorno through Thomas Mann's <i>Dr. Faustus</i></b> .....	65
<i>Lyotard and the Melancholic Sublime</i> .....	67
<i>Lyotard: Adorno as the Devil</i> .....	72
<i>The Image Prohibition</i> .....	77

<i>Adorno, Art, and the Secularisation of the Prohibition</i> .....	81
<i>Conclusion</i> .....	84
<b>Chapter 4: Žižek’s Rereading of the Image Prohibition: The Case of the Holy Man in 9<sup>th</sup> Century Byzantium</b> .....	88
<i>Žižek and the Image Prohibition</i> .....	89
<i>Peter Brown: Iconoclasm and the Holy Man</i> .....	96
<i>Žižek’s (In)Human</i> .....	106
<b>Chapter 5: Decaf Reality and the Duty to be Healthy: Obverting Adorno’s Critique of Self-Preservation</b> .....	115
<i>Preliminary Problems with Adorno’s Ethics</i> .....	121
<i>Drucilla Cornell and the Ethics of Self-Preservation</i> .....	124
<i>The Present Context: Updating Adorno’s Theory of Self-Preservation</i> .....	129
<i>The Self Colonised by the Concept of the Body and Decaf Reality</i> .....	131
<i>The Duty to be Healthy</i> .....	136
<i>Adorno and "Dying Today"</i> .....	140
<b>Chapter 6: Adorno, Žižek, and Weber: Rehabilitating Ethical Subjectivity</b> .....	144
<i>Why not the Act?</i> .....	146
<i>Max Weber, Homo Economicus, and Intelligibility (as Ethics)</i> .....	150
<i>And Finally</i> .....	164
<b>Chapter 7: Conclusion</b> .....	168
<b>Post-Script: On Balance</b> .....	178
<b>Works Cited</b> .....	185

## Introduction

Writing a PhD dissertation on Theodor Adorno and Slavoj Žižek has proved to be a daunting task. Regarding Adorno, not only are his ideas complex and derived from a broad and diverse set of thinkers, disciplines, and topics, but his writing style is often convoluted and esoteric. Regarding the diversity of his philosophical influences, one of his central driving assertions is that thought, which should always be oriented toward totality, has become fragmented into separate disciplines and spheres of activity in a way that erroneously assumes truth claims can be made about particular phenomena without relating the claims to anything outside of the specific objects of inquiry. In this regard, he attempts to reconcile discourses like idealism and materialism, economics and sociology, aesthetics and political science, and metaphysics and empiricism. Given his erudition in these areas, a full understanding of Adorno would require expertise in the history of science, phenomenology, social anthropology, literary and musical aesthetics, political economy, positivist philosophy, Hegel, Marx, Weber, Nietzsche, Freud, Heidegger, and the list goes on.<sup>1</sup> As such, I will not make the claim that I am an *expert* on Adorno, and it would be the rare Adorno scholar who would.

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<sup>1</sup> In his translator's note to *Negative Dialectics*, E.B. Ashton says: "To follow the line of thought from detail to detail, you need to know Kant near-perfectly, Hegel perfectly, and Marx-Engels viscerally ... Besides, you should have a working knowledge of moderns from a variety of fields, of such philosophers as Bergson, Husserl, Scheler, Walter Benjamin ... of prominent sociologists and psychiatrists, of seminal poets (Beckett) and composers ..." Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton, New York: Continuum (2004) xii.

In terms of his writing style, Adorno models himself after Hegel who he describes as having understood the impossibility of fully capturing the dialectic in words, because the objects of philosophical inquiry are in constant motion.<sup>2</sup> Because writing is a conceptual medium, and concepts can never fully contain the truth of an object, Adorno suggests that the best one can do is attempt as much as possible to mimic the play of dialectics through the play of language in written form. As such, Adorno's writing can be dense and conflicting, and even intentionally ambivalent.<sup>3</sup> This makes for slow and difficult reading, but it is ultimately richly rewarding because the laborious procedure challenges the reader to 'let thought linger,' and marvel in the end at the incredibly creative and carefully crafted mixture of philosophical treatise and artwork that one has just witnessed. And Adorno is certainly unapologetic about his inaccessible style, as he claims that 'dumbing down' one's writing for the sake of intelligibility is tantamount to allowing one's work to be commodified. As he says: "only what they do not need first to understand, they consider understandable; only the word coined by commerce, and really alienated, touches them as familiar."<sup>4</sup> Following from this, Adorno argues that presenting a set of ideas in a manner to make them eminently communicable will only encourage a "downward urge of the intellect."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> See: Theodor W. Adorno, "Skoteinos, or How to Read Hegel," in *Hegel: Three Studies*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen, London: MIT Press (1993).

<sup>3</sup> See: Susan Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and the Frankfurt Institute*, New York: The Free Press (1977) 58.

<sup>4</sup> Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life*, trans. E.F.N. Jephcott, New York: Verso (2005) 101.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 29. For a very interesting discussion of Adorno's writing style, see: James Miller, "Is Bad Writing Necessary? George Orwell, Theodor Adorno, and the Politics of Literature," *Lingua Franca*, vol. 9, #9, (2000), <http://linguafranca.mirror.theinfo.org/9912/writing.html>

This penchant for difficult prose resulted in a vexed relationship between Adorno's thought and the activist (New) Left of the 1960s, many of whose members sought some sort of positive political project or, at least, some type of direction or inspiration for their cause. While Adorno and Horkheimer's critique of the culture industry provided some fodder for the European Left in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Adorno lost his credibility as spokesperson for revolutionary causes when he called in the police on his students, some of whom had begun to regularly heckle and harass him publically.<sup>6</sup> Inspiring the youth to (at least, immediately) rebel was, of course, never Adorno's primary intention. What he was most interested in was motivating people to *think*, and if proper self-reflection and social analysis led to a progressive praxis, then so much the better. In this vein, what Adorno achieved was an extremely impressive and profound *oeuvre* of theoretical writings that thoroughly negated society and dominant forms of thought, if only in words. Moreover, despite his challenging writing style and lack of clear program for social change, he also produced a formal model of ethics that, at some level, only became developed in any systematic way by sympathetic scholars after his student, Jürgen Habermas, had rejected Adorno's work and produced his own, very influential, ethical system. Unfortunately Adorno's ethical system has remained largely at the level of a formal model (without positive content) despite a number of excellent and insightful contributions in the

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<sup>6</sup> Lorenz Jäger, *Adorno: A Political Biography*, trans. Stewart Spencer, New Haven: Yale University Press (2004) 203.

secondary literature.<sup>7</sup> My dissertation attempts a very small but pointed intervention into this literature. Specifically, I am interested in rethinking Adorno's category of ethical subjectivity in contemporary times and actually providing a (limited) prescription for social action.

Writing on Žižek poses its separate difficulties. Like Adorno, Žižek draws from many thinkers and genres, although it is easier to identify a handful of philosophers that clearly dominate his philosophical and political positions (Hegel, Marx, and Lacan). A further comparison with Adorno is that Žižek's writing style can be quite frustrating and difficult to follow at times, but this is not because he is attempting to mimic the movement of dialectics in his sentences as does Adorno, but rather because of his sometimes idiosyncratic and informal style. Žižek does not always hold himself to the same standards as other professional philosophers do, particularly in his more 'popular' writings. At times, this informal style is manifest in his use of vulgarity and references to banal pop cultural objects and phenomena.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, Žižek has been dismissive of some versions of contemporary political theory, particularly left-liberalism and various forms of postmodernism, claiming that these discourses

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<sup>7</sup> For my project, the most influential Adorno scholar of ethics is Drucilla Cornell. See Drucilla Cornell, *The Philosophy of the Limit*, London: Routledge (1992). However, see also: Jay Bernstein, *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics*, London: Cambridge University Press (2001); Lee, Lisa Yun, *Dialectics of the Body: Corporeality in the Philosophy of T.W. Adorno*, New York: Taylor and Francis (2004).

<sup>8</sup> For example, one of his most infamous claims is that different types of toilets are symptomatic of different national ideologies or philosophical comportments: "In a traditional German toilet, the hole into which shit disappears after we flush water is way in front, so that shit is first laid out for us to sniff and inspect for traces of illness. In the typical French toilet, on the contrary, the hole is at the back: shit is supposed to disappear as soon as possible. Finally, the American toilet presents a kind of synthesis, a mediation between these two opposed poles – the toilet basin is full of water, so that the shit floats in it, visible, but not to be inspected." Slavoj Žižek, "Fantasy as a Political Category: A Lacanian Approach," *The Žižek Reader*, Malden, MA: Blackwell (1990) 90.

contain no radical emancipatory potential, despite their claims otherwise.<sup>9</sup> In their stead, Žižek attempts to theorise a truly revolutionary politics that fully recognises what is required for revolution: sacrifice, violence, and terror.<sup>10</sup>

As a result, in some circles, Žižek is not taken seriously as a professional scholar and philosopher. By some accounts, this is because he is seen to support violence and terror. Žižek has shown strong support for both revolutionary (Maoist/Bolshevik) and counter-revolutionary violence (Robespierre, Stalin) and this has led to the accusation that he “betrays a nostalgia ... for dictatorship, political violence, and ruthlessness.”<sup>11</sup> While there may be some truth to these charges, Žižek’s writing is markedly ambivalent about his normative position on authoritarian politics. However, I would argue that in terms of left politics, Žižek has the potential to play an important role in at least encouraging left-wing scholars and activists to be introspective regarding the quality and efficacy of their theoretical positions.

For the purposes of my project, Žižek’s positions on concrete political questions are not particularly relevant. I am most interested in the psychoanalytic version of subjectivity Žižek employs which relies on his own distinctive reading of Lacan. Clearly, there is no direct or necessary connection between a left-wing revolutionary political agenda and theories of subjectivity. Indeed, as Žižek argues, ‘subjectivity’ is a vacuous ontological condition – it is defined by an

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<sup>9</sup> See his critique of ‘liberal communism’ in, Slavoj Žižek, *Violence*, London: Profile Books (2008).

<sup>10</sup> See his discussion of the French Revolution and the Chinese Cultural Revolution in: Slavoj Žižek *In Defense of Lost Causes*, New York: Verso (2008).

<sup>11</sup> See Simon Critchley’s critique of Žižek in a letter to the editor, *Harper’s Review*, May (2008).

irreducible “lack” – that can be filled in by any set of ethical and political commitments and, therefore, his work focuses on how left-wing politics can benefit from a Lacanian perspective.<sup>12</sup> My project, in a sense, is an attempt to ‘fill-in’ Žižek’s notion of the subject – his distinctive rendering of Lacan – with some of Adorno’s key ethical imperatives. These imperatives include: an emphasis on the physical body as a source of truth, the injunction to end unnecessary suffering, and the importance of recognising non-identity both in one’s self and in others.

Together, I argue, Žižek’s model of subjectivity and Adorno’s ethics can help us think about the possibility of living well. I should make it explicit that I am using Žižek as a social theorist, and not as a Lacanian philosopher or analyst. All of Žižek’s work must be understood as an *appropriation* of Lacan for political and social analysis because all of Lacan’s writing was intended only for *clinical* analysis. Žižek, however, argues that despite this clinical focus in Lacan’s work “one can short-circuit the process and concentrate instead on its effects on the way it colours everything that appears non-clinical ... to explain our social and libidinal predicament.”<sup>13</sup> Therefore, whether his reading of Lacan is a faithful one is not at issue, and there will be no systematic analysis of Lacan in this dissertation. Lacanian categories will only be discussed as they are *appropriated* by Žižek.

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<sup>12</sup> For a discussion of the relationship between Lacan, Marx, and Hegel in Žižek’s work, see Chapter 1 in Tyler Myers, *Slavoj Žižek*, New York: Routledge (2003).

<sup>13</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *How to Read Lacan*, New York: W.W. Norton (2007) 5-6.

In the history of contemporary social and political theory there is a direct, if undertheorised, relationship between Adorno and Žižek. Žižek cites Adorno frequently but never in a rigorous or sustained manner. His recurring comments are representative of a fairly common critique of Adorno's method ('negative dialectics') and of his anthropological theory of history he developed with Max Horkheimer (the 'dialectic of enlightenment'). In both cases, Žižek argues that because Adorno leaves the dialectical process at the level of 'immanent' negation (in which no final positive sublation of the object or history is posited), his theories do not allow for positive, revolutionary political action. He describes this as a despairing position that is the "obverse of accepting capitalism's triumph" insofar as it leads to an "acceptance of the futility of all struggle ... so nothing can really be done, one can only wait for an outburst of 'divine violence.'"<sup>14</sup> In other words, on Žižek's account, while Adorno advocated radical and progressive social change, his theory of the total domination of the forces of late capitalism left no foreseeable way out of the situation, barring an unforeseeable 'Messianic' redemption. From Žižek's perspective, Adorno's work marks the end of the genuinely progressive and radical left-wing intellectual political project of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; it is not long after that French 'postmodern' and deconstructive thought replaces Marxism as the pre-eminent intellectual influence of left-wing activism, in which 'identity' replaces 'class' as the central unit of analysis. The problem with postmodernism and identity politics, according to Žižek, is they contain no genuinely anti-capitalist potential. In fact, he considers them to be ideologies

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<sup>14</sup> Žižek, *Lost Causes*, 337.

perfectly consistent with contemporary capitalism because their celebration of categories like contingency, ‘newness,’ and challenges to fixed identities all, in part, drive the market today. Therefore, despite demonstrating an unmistakable respect for Adorno’s work, Žižek’s project is an attempt to go beyond it – to break the deadlock of the dialectic of enlightenment, as it were; to imagine a new way out of this impasse other than post-modernism. He claims quite explicitly that the Left has two choices for breaking this deadlock: the theory of either Habermas or Lacan.<sup>15</sup> Žižek obviously chooses the latter, and I see my project as a complementary response to his intervention, but one that takes some of Adorno’s ethical injunctions more seriously than he does, treating them as still valuable and relevant.

This project is thus centered on two primary concerns. First, to reformulate Adorno’s notion of ethical subjectivity in a way that allows for a clearer articulation of his normative position, and second, to make it more relevant to our contemporary social context and advances in social theory. My claim is that we can achieve this by rejecting Adorno’s philosophical method (negative dialectics and constellations) by reading it through the lens of Žižek’s method which I am calling ‘autoprohibition.’ As I will show, autoprohibition is Žižek’s strategy for breaking the deadlock of the dialectic of enlightenment and its accompanying defeatist politics by developing a dialectical theory that neither rests on pure negation nor falls into the totalising and reifying trap of orthodox

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<sup>15</sup> Žižek describes these two options as the formulation of a “positive normative frame of reference” in the case of Habermas, and reconceptualising the “‘humanity’ of the deadlock/limitation as such” in the case of Lacan. Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press (2006) 112.

Marxism. It is in the context of autoprobhibition that one can rearticulate Adorno's normative imperatives mentioned above, without these imperatives being negated by the totalising dictates of the dialectic of enlightenment. The best way to redeem the important normative components of Adorno's formulation of ethical subjectivity is to reject its underlying philosophical method and resituate it in another. I frame this methodological shift as one from 'constellations to autoprobhibition,' which allows for a more positive articulation of Adorno's ethics; a plan for actively *practising* an ethical life vs. one premised on the rejection of participating in an unethical system (which Adorno's ethics amounts to on my account).

### ***Brief Summary of the Argument***

This dissertation touches on a number of philosophical themes and borrows from several philosophical traditions. Thus, in the interest of the reader, I will provide here a concise and structured summary of my argument. The following set of assertions will act as threads throughout my project.

### ***Adorno's Ethics***

I disagree with critics like Habermas and Wellmer who argue that Adorno lacks a normative foundation for social action. Indeed, I believe that Adorno employs categories that can contribute to a normative understanding of human interaction, but they are simply difficult to identify because Adorno never

systematises them (and, as discussed above, they cannot be articulated positively within Adorno's overall philosophy of negation). It is these categories, or imperatives, that I want to identify and revitalise throughout my investigation of Adorno's method. On my reading, for Adorno:

1. *Ethics is a relational term.* In fact, in Adorno's work there is no individual ethical 'subject,' only *intersubjectivity*. Thus, ethical subjectivity must be understood as a relationship with others that *makes ethics possible*.
2. *Ethics must take into account the truth-content of the body (physical desire and suffering).* This is a rejection of Kantian ethics which, Adorno argues, focuses too much on the rational dictates of Mind. That is to say, he claims that Kantian ethics has taught us that all bodily desire and pleasure should be repressed in favour of a rationally-governed asceticism. This, Adorno argues, is the dominant form of subjectivity under the social conditions of late capitalism. Adorno claims that to resist this form of subjective reification we must *remember* the truth-content we experience as suffering and desiring *physical bodies*.
3. *All thought and action should be oriented toward the elimination of unnecessary suffering of others.* This is an *a priori* assumption for Adorno, and he formulates it as 'a new categorical imperative' to 'never let something like Auschwitz happen again.'

### *Adorno's Method*

One can approach Adorno's philosophical method from two distinct traditions of thought. The most common tradition in which his philosophy is understood is German Idealism. In other words, Adorno follows the German idealist tradition in which Hegel's 'speculative dialectics' is followed (or even sublated) by Marx's 'materialist' version. On this reading, Adorno's method is known as 'negative dialectics.' However, my reading of Adorno situates him

more comfortably in the tradition of esoteric Jewish thought. From this perspective, his method is known as ‘constellations,’ and its foundational category is the Biblical Second Commandment, or the ‘Image Prohibition.’ Both methods approach truth negatively, that is, the truth-content of objects can only be accessed via the negation of their posited concepts. The primary difference between them is that whereas negative dialectics is purely abstract and formal in character, constellations is more spatial and visual, drawing on Old Testament narratives like the Garden Story, dictates of Mosaic Law, the tower of Babel, and the relationship between the Name of God and the Torah. In relation to the method of constellations, it is important to remember:

1. *The priority of the truth of the object.* This is another way of saying that it is the truth of the particularity of objects that must be prioritised vs. the universal, abstract categories (concepts) which attempt to define them.
2. *The Image Prohibition protects the integrity or the truth of the particular.* The basic lesson of Adorno’s method is that one should not call true what is false. This is the fundamental insight of the Image Prohibition – the image of God should not be made because it would necessarily be false (God is formless and indefinable). This truth extends to the description of all objects by concepts.
3. *We can only approach the truth of objects through constellations of concepts.* If the image or concept can never fully capture the truth of the object, then we must make do with a series of concepts that revolve around the object, setting it in motion within a ‘constellation.’ Constellations have the ability to reveal aspects of an object that have been left out by attempts to subsume it under a single concept.

### *Autoprohibition*

I approach the philosophical method of autoprobhibition by way of Žižek’s alternative reading of the Image Prohibition. It is through this re-reading that I

demonstrate the limitations of Adorno's method of constellations. Žižek's method of autoprobhibition is defined by a series of claims:

1. *The image must be prohibited because it reveals an unbearable truth.* This claim rests on Žižek's Lacanian formulation of subjectivity. The subject recognises in the image of God 'the Real' (pre-symbolic) of subjectivity. The Real demonstrates that the core of subjectivity is a contentless void and therefore it must be disavowed in the subject to ensure its stability as subject (explained in more detail below).
2. *The subject must reject the truth of the image.* This is a complicated set of ideas that will be explained in more depth later, but a rough sketch of the logic is this:
  - a) when the subject enters into the Symbolic Order (when it becomes 'subject'), it experiences this moment as a traumatic rendering away from wholeness;
  - b) therefore, the subject experiences subjectivity as a fundamental lack;
  - c) this lack is experienced as a 'lost object' (*objet petit a*) which the subject constantly strives to regain by pursuing surrogate objects in an impossible attempt to fill the lack (it is impossible because this lack is the *ontological condition of subjectivity*);
  - d) this lack, paradoxically, exists as an 'excess' for the subject, because it is experienced as a 'never enough' (thus, lack = excess);
  - e) the pleasure one seeks in the pursuit of this object (or to fill the lack) is called *jouissance* (the limit point of enjoyment when pleasure and pain become indistinguishable);
  - f) for Žižek, God is understood as both an object for channelling one's excessive desire for wholeness, *and* as an object that is defined by an excess;
  - g) Judaism banned the Image, not because it would fail to grasp the ineffability of God, but because it would demonstrate that *God is defined by the same excess as man* (imperfect, incomplete, and impotent);
  - h) recognising this truth would destroy the Judaic Symbolic Order in which God both ensures meaning and acts as a receptacle for man's excessive desire;
  - i) Christianity circumvents and sublates this negation by directly positing the identity of God and man in the figure of Christ;

- j) from Žižek's secular, Lacanian position, the truth of the image is not a truth of the object, but a truth of the *subject* – God is nothing but the excess of man, and one therefore recognises *the divinity in man*;
  - k) for Žižek, the lesson we are to learn from Christianity's transgression of the Image Prohibition is that humans are able to perform 'miracles,' which simply means that they have the ability to change the Symbolic coordinates in which they live through what he calls political 'Acts.'
3. *Autoprohibition is a move away from the truth of the object, but retains the importance of particularity.* Žižek's alternative reading of the Image Prohibition through the lens of autoprobhibition does not recognise the truth of the object, but understands the importance of particularity *in individual subjects*.
  4. *Autoprohibition distinguishes between three types of objects:* First, *objects of simple perception* are not the concern of autoprobhibition. These sorts of objects are captured adequately by constellations. The method of autoprobhibition is concerned with *objects of desire* like the image (the desire for wholeness). Only objects of desire demonstrate the impossibility of fulfilling the subject's desire. The subject automatically prohibits or disavows the truth-content of these objects. Finally, *the body as object* is a special case because the body is both object and subject. Because the body is both a source of desire (due to its ontological lack) and that which desires, the body can be said to *prohibit itself*.

### *Re-Thinking Adorno in a Contemporary Ethical Context*

Because Adorno's method does not take into account the different types of objects listed above, and because it lacks any substantive formulation of the subject, his philosophy is inadequate for explaining or providing normative content for ethical subjectivity in a contemporary social context. However, his initial normative impulses can be redeemed if we frame them within the context of autoprobhibition. More specifically, one must think about the subject in the context of the third type of object – the body as an object that prohibits itself. This contemporary social context is defined by several features:

1. *Subjectivity is over-determined by the concept of body, not mind.* It can be argued that in contemporary times, Adorno's description of the nature of subjectivity as overdetermined by the concept of mind is no longer the most prominent form of subjective reification. Instead, the concept of body has come to be the most common source of reification. However, this is not characterised by Adorno's normative plea to 'remember' the desiring and suffering body as a source of truth, but by a fetishisation of physical health at the expense of all other physical impulses or desires.
2. *This new context is best captured by the 'duty to be healthy.'* As the imperative to 'remember the body' (in a way that Adorno would have supported) became incorporated into ethical consciousness in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, it became a victim of its own success. The truth-content of physical desire transformed into a normative imperative to maintain sheer physical self-preservation. From this perspective, any behaviour by others that appears contrary to the ends of the duty to be healthy becomes unintelligible to individual subjects.
3. *Autoprohibition best explains this shift.* Physical desire becomes prohibited by the same source from which it arose – the body. In this context, the body can be said to *prohibit itself*. The method of 'constellations' is inadequate for explaining and addressing this phenomenon.
4. *Attempts to challenge this new form of reified subjectivity require a rethinking of subjectivity.* Žižek's formulation of subjectivity allows one to rethink ethical action in a positive manner that Adorno's formulation of constellations does not. By emphasising the category of 'intelligibility' as a normative category of intersubjectivity, the particularity of intersubjective behaviour oriented toward physical desire challenges the reification of subjectivity by the concept of physical health.
5. *Adorno's initial normative impulses are maintained.* The priority of particularity, physical desire, intersubjectivity, and the imperative to eliminate unnecessary suffering are all affirmed in this new context. The subject in the context of intersubjectivity acknowledges the particularity of its own desires against the universal dictates of the duty to be healthy, and therefore makes the particularity of the desire of others *intelligible*, if not *understandable*.

## **Chapter Breakdown**

### *Chapter Two.*

In Chapter Two, I provide an overview of the important ideas and debates that inform this dissertation. It should be understood as a brief literature review, setting the context of the argument, and as a resource for referencing terms when the reader encounters them later in the dissertation. A concentrated effort is made to demonstrate Adorno's position in the tradition of German idealism (and Marxism), and to highlight his philosophical ethics in relation to the dominant form of critical theory today: Habermasian discourse ethics. The second half of this chapter focuses primarily on Žižek's contribution to contemporary thought, with special attention given to his rejection of both orthodox Marxism and contemporary postmodernism/left-liberalism. It is through this debate that I seek to highlight the way in which he has appropriated Lacanian thought in order to develop a unique form of anticapitalist theory relevant to what he calls the postmodern or 'post-ideological' form of capitalism in which we live today.

### *Chapter Three.*

In Chapter Three, I focus on the way in which Jewish thought influences Adorno's philosophy. I do this by first examining Jean-François Lyotard's criticism of Adorno in his peculiar essay "Adorno as the Devil." Lyotard's argument is basically this: because Adorno adamantly refuses to allow for representation (the coincidence of an object and its concept), but still retains the premise of an underlying truth of the object, his philosophy becomes paralysed and impotent in regards to social change. In other words, Adorno's fidelity to negation does not follow through to its logical end which is, on Lyotard's reading,

postmodernism and the celebration of unrepresentability as an ontological condition (as opposed to a socially determined one). In a strange twist, Lyotard argues that this gives Adorno's thought a *Christian* character because art takes on a 'Christ-like' quality in his work, and because he is 'melancholic' for an ideal past (i.e., the utopic moment before the Biblical 'Fall'). To make this argument, Lyotard employs a reading of Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus* in which a main character – Wendell Kretzschmar – is based on the figure of Adorno. My response to Lyotard is that his reading of Adorno lacks nuance in a way that misconceives him to be a secularised Christian thinker instead of a secularised Jewish one in which a particularly Jewish form of Messianism is manifest. This, I argue, is observable only if one understands the way in which Adorno appropriates the Jewish Second Commandment against images to construct his secular, negative dialectical method. An analysis of the Image Prohibition also helps the reader understand the nature of 'constellations' in Adorno's work, and sets up my argument in Chapter Four.

#### *Chapter Four.*

In Chapter Four, I examine Žižek's re-reading of the Image Prohibition. As mentioned above, Žižek claims that the image of the divine, in particular Christ, is a site of a profound truth of the subject. This reading implicitly challenges Adorno's claim that the Prohibition protects the integrity and power of the particular/Name, and instead postulates that the image contains its own particular excess, and thus the normative power of the particular that Adorno

formulates can be understood as already existing in the image. To test this hypothesis, I investigate the actual events and discourses of the iconoclast conflicts in 9<sup>th</sup> century Byzantium. Through the work of Peter Brown, I conclude that the image itself can manifest the power of the particular as resistance against the universal. More specifically, this process is apparent in Brown's description of the figure of the holy man – a living icon – who challenged the universality and hegemony of the Orthodox Church and the Byzantine Empire. In a more abstract sense, the holy man and Žižek's re-reading of the Image Prohibition demonstrate how the universal and particular can exist contemporaneously in an object and how this is akin to experiencing the Real and the Symbolic *at the same time*. Thus, I argue that Adorno's approach to the Image Prohibition must be rethought – de-reified, as it were – because the power relationship between the particular and universal, it would seem, is more complex than he acknowledges. More importantly, Žižek's reading of the Image Prohibition demonstrates his method of autoprohibition which I apply to a critique of Adorno's understanding of ethical subjectivity in the next chapter.

#### *Chapter Five.*

In Chapter Five, I introduce Adorno's theory of self-preservation at the level of subjectivity as interpreted by Drucilla Cornell. From Cornell's perspective, Adorno argues that modern subjectivity is reified by a demand for preserving the noumenal self, or mind. Therefore, his notion of ethical subjectivity should be understood as a relationship which must first be de-reified

of a sense of self dominated by the concept of mind. I argue that this formulation needs to be updated, because it gives no attention to the possibility that the obverse might be true also. That is to say, just as subjectivity can be dominated or colonised by a reified sense of mind, it is just as possible that it can be reified by a sense of self colonised by the concept of body. I then argue that this is precisely the situation in contemporary, Western society. To support this claim, I discuss Žižek's idea of 'decaf reality' in which contradictory imperatives to enjoy and to preserve one's physical health exist, and demonstrate how this situation emerged through the discourse of the 'duty to be healthy,' as articulated by Claudine Herzlich and Janine Pierret.

### *Chapter Six*

In Chapter Six, I bring these concerns together in a question: how can we rethink Adorno's category of ethical subjectivity for contemporary times, considering his particular form of Jewish modernism, and Žižek's re-reading of the Image Prohibition, as outlined in the two previous chapters? My answer is that by using Žižek's dialectics of autoprobhibition as a lens through which to reflect upon subjectivity, we can rethink Adorno's formulation of it in terms of the value we attach to the value-sets mind and body. To the extent that subjectivity is colonised by the concept of body, then its rejuvenation requires a certain 'de-colonisation.' I then go on to argue, via Max Weber's category of *homo economicus*, that a key component of this process of de-colonisation is that it renders the decisions of others 'intelligible' and, as such, should be considered

the primary goal of creating ethical situations instead of mutual agreement or consensus, *a la* Habermas. In this way I conclude that the *a priori* ethical imperatives that Adorno advocates can be revived by rethinking them in a contemporary context. This method of reading Adorno's formulation of ethical subjectivity, while recognising the impossibility of the fulfillment of desire (in both banal and Messianic terms), allows one to begin to rethink ethics, or the ancient question of living well.

### *Chapter Seven*

In Chapter Seven, I conclude the project by summarising the overall argument, and re-addressing some of its most important ideas. In this way, I attempt to reassert the linkages between some of the more seemingly disparate categories and concepts that I covered in the main body of the dissertation.

## Chapter 2

### Key Ideas and Terms

#### *Key Adornian Terms*

My project is as much about philosophical method as it is about ethical subjectivity. Ultimately, I combine two forms of dialectics to create a model for understanding aspects of contemporary subjectivity. As mentioned above, the focus on subjectivity was an unintended consequence of an initial, innocent, intellectual curiosity: thinking together Adorno and Žižek’s respective philosophical methodologies. As such, while I summarise all of the important categories of Adorno’s thought that are relevant to my project, I begin by examining that which I deem most central – his method: ‘negative dialectics’ and ‘constellations.’

#### *Negative Dialectics*

Once one works through all the intricacies of Adorno’s thought, certain thematic patterns can be observed. In the final analysis, however, one can return to a single quotation from *Negative Dialectics* that, in effect, adequately summarises his method: “The name of dialectics says no more, to begin with, than that objects do not go into their concepts without leaving a remainder....”<sup>16</sup> This means that the truth of any object cannot be captured fully by the linguistic concept that is created to define it. Adorno calls his approach ‘negative’

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<sup>16</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 5.

dialectics to differentiate it from the ‘positive’ dialectics of Hegel, which is to say, negative dialectics is Adorno’s attempt to rescue Hegel’s dialectics from its ‘identitarianism’ or its attempt to posit a final identity between subject and object in the category of Spirit.<sup>17</sup> Contra Hegel’s positive dialectics, negative dialectics is a way of experiencing and coming to know the world phenomenologically via negation that results in no reconciliation between either the rational and the real or between subject and object.

Within Adorno’s dialectical model exist a series of categories essential for understanding his work. The first is the relationship between what he calls ‘identity’ and ‘non-identity’. Following from German idealism, Adorno uses the term identity to point to the ways that in the speculative model of absolute idealism, philosophically speaking there is no difference between an object and its concept. In other words, identity is said to occur when the concept appears to fully express the truth of the object to which it is meant to correspond.<sup>18</sup> Conversely, *non-identity* refers to the ways that an object is never fully identical to its concept. Indeed, any object can only be fully understood in relation to what its concept, in effect, leaves out. Concepts, then, can never be said to be ‘true.’ From Adorno’s perspective, the conceptual always obscures the particularity of objects due to its tendency toward creating the appearance of false identity. This occurs through ‘reification,’ which is a process by which that which is more-than-itself comes to appear as identical to itself. Reification is both a naturalising

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<sup>17</sup> ‘Spirit’ is the ‘subject’ side of the Absolute. See: Robert C. Solomon, *In the Spirit of Hegel*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (1983) 197.

<sup>18</sup> Theodor Adorno, *Hegel: Three Studies*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen, London: MIT Press (1993) 71.

process endemic to positivist philosophy and is the ‘enlightenment’ aspect of the dialectic of enlightenment.

The next category important for understanding negative dialectics is the binary ‘particular/universal.’ To understand an object as particular is to appreciate it as something true or valuable in itself (not as its concept), and specifically not as something that is simply a representative of a species.<sup>19</sup> To associate a particular object as a *specimen* is to make it identical to other particular objects and, therefore, to make it exchangeable, which is an imperative of capitalist social relations. The classic Marxist example of this, of course, is that all workers must become ‘free’ to sell their labour so that capitalists have the ability to extract surplus value from them, and to ensure a flexible labour market that slavery and serfdom legally did not permit.<sup>20</sup> In this way, the universality of human rights and freedom applied to workers actually creates the conditions for their brutal exploitation and their existence as exchangeable units of labour. It follows, then, that commodity exchange can be understood as the social equivalent of identity. This is not to say that for Adorno, there is no universal component of things, it is just that abstract universalism has a tendency to forget the importance of the particular. Universality acts almost like a schoolyard bully in Adorno’s account: “The universal makes sure that the particular under its domination is not better than itself. That is the core of all the identity brought

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<sup>19</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 408.

<sup>20</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital*, A New Abridgement, ed. David McLellan, Oxford: Oxford University Press (1995) 364-365.

about to this day.”<sup>21</sup> In social terms, law is perhaps the area in which universalism operates in the most obvious ways. While law has the ability to recognise the particular, and therefore the reflective capacity to change, until the moment it is challenged on a juridical level, it remains a force of reification – a covering over of the particular. This is why Aristotle felt compelled in his discussion of justice to introduce the notion of ‘equity’ as a category to illustrate moments in which law will not yield justice, in an informal sense.<sup>22</sup> For Aristotle, there are particular cases in which the exercise of law is unjust because it does not recognise the particularity of the situation. For Adorno, this sort of situation occurs in any moment in which identity or the conceptual is fetishised.

### *Jewish Thought: The Image Prohibition and Constellations*

Adorno was heavily influenced by Jewish thought and his understanding of particularity can be situated best in relation to it. Particularity is a philosophical category pregnant with Utopian and redemptive potential. According to Adorno, for whom “theology is always moving right under the surface,”<sup>23</sup> this potential is best demonstrated through the idea of the ‘Name.’ The redemptive potential of the Name will be discussed in greater detail in the main body of the dissertation, but suffice it to say that the Name – the Name of God – represents a redeemed object to the extent it has become known in its

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<sup>21</sup> *Negative Dialectics*, 312.

<sup>22</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., trans. Terence Irwin, Indianapolis: Hackett (1999) 83-84.

<sup>23</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press (1989) xi.

particularity. Adopted from Walter Benjamin, the Name harkens to a time before the existence of universals. Adam was the first philosopher because he named things in their particularity before naming became taxonomical.<sup>24</sup> On the other hand, the ‘word’ (read ‘concept’) acts in the name of universality; it reifies the object to the extent that it represents its object as universal. To speak the ‘Name’ is to utter the unknown Name of God which is prohibited by Jewish law. From an Adornian (secular and philosophical) perspective, this prohibition retains a significant truth content in modern times, because its central message is that hope lies in not calling true what is false. As David Kaufmann suggests, for Adorno: “The Name presents the possibility that the catastrophe can be undone, but at present the Name is merely an object of hope, the horizon of a future redemption. In the meantime, philosophy has to make do with its constellations.”<sup>25</sup> Redemption here can be equated with ‘reconciliation.’ While ‘reconciliation’ is usually used in Idealism to connote the identity of subject and object (and therefore generally understood as anathema to Adorno), I am using it specifically in regard to the truth of the *desire for reconciliation*, and in no way suggesting that Adorno is positing its *actuality*. Here I again take my cue from Kaufmann: “Adorno speaks of the hope that resides in the notion of the Name, that is, the hope of an eventual identity between word and thing.”<sup>26</sup> This is what Adorno

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<sup>24</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne, London: NLB (1977) 37.

<sup>25</sup> David Kaufmann, “Correlations, Constellations and the Truth: Adorno’s Ontology of Redemption,” *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, Vol. 26, No. 5 (2000) 70.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

calls the “pledge” inherent to thought: “that there should be no contradiction, no antagonism.”<sup>27</sup>

At first glance, this series of categories appears as a set of dualisms (identity/non-identity, conceptuality/non-conceptuality, Name/word, etc.). To comprehend fully the dynamics at play here, we must understand a key category – ‘constellations.’<sup>28</sup> On the face of things, constellations appear to have a contradictory character because, despite Adorno’s critique of conceptuality, concepts still act as the basic unit of constellations. If concepts act in a way that creates a false identity between concept and object, how can it be that the concept is also the basic unit of *negative* dialectics? The answer is that, for Adorno, there is no other way to intelligibly express meaning other than through concepts, but they can be organised in such a way that they reveal the non-identical nature of a given object. This formulation takes on a paradoxical character, as Adorno claims: “The concept – the organon of thinking, and yet the wall between thinking and the thought – negates that yearning [to animate non-conceptuality]. Philosophy can neither circumvent such negation nor submit to it. It must strive, by way of the concept, to transcend the concept.”<sup>29</sup> As such:

constellations represent from without what the concept has cut away within: the ‘more’ which the concept is equally desirous and incapable of being. By gathering around the object of cognition, the concepts

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<sup>27</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 352. He makes another comment regarding the pledge later in the text: “To this day, all happiness is a pledge of what has not yet been, and the belief in its imminence obstructs its becoming.” Ibid. 352.

<sup>28</sup> For the best secondary sources dealing with the category of constellations in Adorno, see: Susan-Buck Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*; Fredric Jameson, *Late Marxism: Adorno or the Persistence of the Dialectic*, New York: Verso (2006); David Kaufmann, “Correlations, Constellations and the Truth.”

<sup>29</sup> *Negative Dialectics*, 15.

potentially determine the object's interior. They attain, in thinking, what was necessarily excised from thinking.<sup>30</sup>

A useful heuristic for trying to understand this proposition is to invoke Hobbes's physics-based ontology. For Hobbes, all things, to the extent they are alive, are in motion. Naturally they run into and bounce off of other things. When a thing ceases to be in motion, that thing is dead. I argue that concepts can act in an analogous manner: when they are in motion they are always interacting with other concepts and, as such, the observer witnesses different 'constellations' of concepts in different dynamic relationships with each other. The problem with positivist philosophy, according to Adorno, is that it does not observe this dynamism and, as a result, sees concepts as dead.

Furthermore, to demonstrate the specifically Jewish nature of 'constellations,' one can think of the Name of God in relation to the Torah. In the Kabbalist tradition of Jewish esoterism the Name of God is, in effect, an anagram of all the letters in the Torah.<sup>31</sup> In other words, all the letters in the Torah can be rearranged to spell the Name of God. The process of rearranging or *reconstellating* the letters is an attempt to access the truth of the object – God – via the revelation of its Name. In the Kabbalist tradition, to succeed in this attempt at formulating the Name of God is to redeem the world and humankind as it would herald the return of the Messiah who reveals God's absolute presence through all of reality. Thus, in this regard one can see how a Messianic hope is immanent in the method of constellations. The desire of philosophy is to one day

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 162.

<sup>31</sup> Gershom Scholem, "The Name of God and the Linguistic Theory of Kabbala," trans. Simon Pleasance, *Diogenes* (1972) 20/59.

do away with concepts – for them to be dissolved into a singular identity which fully expresses the object.

While this model of approaching constellations is useful in a purely abstract sense how exactly can it be enacted in written form? Was this not Socrates's objection to turning the purity of speech into the distorted medium of writing?<sup>32</sup> Put another way, how can ideas based on a spatial metaphor like constellations be expressed in *words*, or in *philosophy*, considering that they are supposed to be in constant motion? Unfortunately, Adorno is not very clear on this point. As mentioned above, his own writing is profoundly dialectical, and at times appears quite contradictory, an appearance due to his frequent use of literary devices like chiasmi, which it has been suggested is a strategy on the part of Adorno to “slow down” thought.<sup>33</sup> One could argue that a chiasmus – the intentional reversal of words in a sentence or phrase – is an attempt at reconstellating concepts to reveal the multiple ways of understanding an object. However, a chiasmus is not the strongest example of constellations as a philosophical method. It is more of an ‘immanent’ rhetorical technique designed to demonstrate that concepts can be *reversed*, rather than a technique that ‘surrounds’ an object by concepts in a dynamic way as Adorno describes constellations.

One can address this problem by thinking of constellations as ‘interdisciplinarity.’ For example, as a well-rehearsed proclamation goes, one

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<sup>32</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans. Harvey Yunis, New York: Cambridge University Press (2008).

<sup>33</sup> Jeffrey T. Nealon, “Maxima Immoralia?: Speed and Slowness in Adorno,” in *Rethinking the Frankfurt School*, ed. Jeffrey T. Nealon and Caren Irr, New York: SUNY Press (2002) 132.

cannot understand Karl Marx without being familiar with the ‘constellation’ of fields from which he was inspired: German idealism, British political economy, and French Utopianism.<sup>34</sup> Undoubtedly, this too is an important aspect of Adorno’s philosophical approach, as not only is his brand of Critical Theory directly indebted to a slew of thinkers and disciplines, but Adorno’s genius in bringing them into dialogue with one another might be considered a form of ‘constellation.’ If constellations is imagined in this way, the metaphor certainly makes more sense in terms of an object being ‘illuminated’ in a way that exposes aspects of it heretofore obscured or kept in the dark. If we apply this model to philosophy, ‘constellations’ as a method becomes a playing with texts; a way of declining language that ‘mimics’ the movement of the dialectic. For Adorno ‘playing with language’ is a gesture intended to uncover a redemptive truth, and not solely to demonstrate the aporetic character of the text. Thus, if we return to Adorno’s definition of negative dialectics –“dialectics says no more, to begin with, than that objects do not go into their concepts without leaving a remainder” – we can see that this is incomplete. What negative dialectics actually says is that the entire meaning of an object is only substantially (but never *fully*) captured when the object’s concept (that has reified it) is revived by setting it back into motion within the constellation of concepts to which it is affiliated. In the spirit of Adorno’s method, then, I bring together here several objects, events, and discourses that are seemingly unconnected, creating a sort of constellation around

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<sup>34</sup> Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, “The Three Sources and Component Parts of Marxism,” *Lenin’s Collected Works*, Moscow: Progress Publishers (1977) 21-28.

its ultimate topic of interest: reading Adorno's formulation of ethical subjectivity through Žižek's method of autoprohibition. (To which I will return, below)

### *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*

According to Horkheimer and Adorno, the ideas of the Enlightenment (hereafter referred to as 'enlightenment'<sup>35</sup>) promised to relieve humans from the fear of the uncontrollable and horrible powers of nature and the unknown. It was the expectation of enlightenment philosophers that through the power of reason, science, and technology, humankind would come to fully understand and thereby develop the ability to control nature and, thus, cease to fear its power. This would inevitably lead the world toward a 'perpetual peace,' as Kant declared, and nothing but rational progress would ensue. However, as Horkheimer and Adorno suggest, things turned out much differently: "Enlightenment, understood in the widest sense as the advance of thought, has always aimed at liberating human beings from fear and installing them as masters. Yet the wholly enlightened earth is radiant with triumphant calamity."<sup>36</sup> This 'triumphant calamity' is, of course, a reference to several mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century events: the failure of socialist revolutions and the rise of various Fascist regimes, Stalinist totalitarianism, the Holocaust, WWII, and the development and deployment of the atom bomb.

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<sup>35</sup> The term 'enlightenment' is used by Adorno as a generic term for thought governed by the imperative to overcome and control nature. In this regard he only uses the term 'the Enlightenment' if he is making an explicit reference to the historical period known as such.

<sup>36</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott, Stanford: Stanford University Press (2002) 1.

So what exactly went wrong on humanity's march toward enlightenment? The answer for Horkheimer and Adorno lies in this very enigmatic statement in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: "Myth is already enlightenment, and enlightenment reverts to mythology."<sup>37</sup> This means that what we commonly understand to be myth – superstition, belief in magic, archaic and irrational practices – is actually oriented toward fulfilling the very same goals as enlightenment and that it goes about it in an almost identical manner. In other words, myth, by the same means as enlightenment, attempts to overcome its fear of nature and control it through observation of cause and effect which then becomes codified in ritual beliefs and customs: "Myth sought to report, to name, to tell of origins – but therefore also to narrate, record, explain."<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, it follows that the codification of enlightenment principles in law and science becomes a new form of myth when it has not been successful in fully exorcising fear or reducing human misery, which is exactly what Horkheimer and Adorno suggest has happened not only in relation to the above mentioned historical catastrophes, but also in the everyday banality of late modern society.

Another significant similarity between myth and enlightenment is the process by which the subject distances itself from the object (*i.e.* nature). To demonstrate this distancing in mythical practices, Horkheimer and Adorno provide the example of the shaman who draws a circle around himself, into which demons cannot enter, so as to give the shaman the ability to conjure and banish

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., xviii

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 5.

evil spirits without endangering himself.<sup>39</sup> Similarly in enlightenment, because of the Cartesian *cum* Kantian split of the subject into a noumenal self (the subject) and a phenomenal self (the object), the subject becomes increasingly differentiated from its objects – its external and internal nature (physical environment and physical instincts, respectively). As humans begin to forget that they are a part of nature, they similarly forget that they are also desiring, *embodied* subjects. Under the reified social relations of late capitalist society, it is the particularity of the *body* that is forgotten and as such must be remembered if we want to redeem subjectivity in any way. In this way, Adorno's famous insistence on the 'primacy of the object' can be understood as the rejection of Kantian and Hegelian categories of the subject. In other words, the firm distinction between mind and body in Kant, presents a case where the thinking subject (consciousness) is given normative primacy over the corporeal, desiring body. This creates a repressive environment in which the subject is ultimately more objectified by ignoring its 'objective' component (in terms of a repression of instincts). It follows then, that to think of the subject as an object, or to 'remember' its existence as a physical, desiring body is a way of freeing the subject from the tyranny of instrumental reason.<sup>40</sup>

To the extent that the premise of enlightenment is the overcoming of the mythic fear of nature, in large part by coming to understand and control nature, this distancing produces the opposite effect. The individual becomes pitted

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>40</sup> Instrumental reason is one of the principal topics in Chapter Five of this dissertation, and it will not be discussed in any greater detail here.

against both external nature and internal nature and thus justifies the destruction of both in its attempt to control them. This is what Horkheimer and Adorno mean when they famously say “Enlightenment is mythical fear radicalized;”<sup>41</sup> fear, once reserved only to the domain of external threats, has now spread to the objective side of subjectivity (the body) itself – fear “doubles itself.”<sup>42</sup> Consequently, fear of the body leads to an imperative to control its physical instincts.

Enlightenment, finally, is defined by a process of identification (i.e. reification): as enlightenment thought becomes more and more abstract and distances itself further and further from the particular, and because of its desire to reach the greatest abstraction of all – to reduce everything to mathematical equivalencies – all things, including human beings, become identical to each other. Objects, as a result, lose their particularity – their particular meaning and value as distinct objects – and therefore become exchangeable as *specimens* within a given species. According to Horkheimer and Adorno, when the shaman sacrifices a lamb in the place of the first born, the process of exchangeability, which is a hallmark of enlightenment, has begun.<sup>43</sup> Taken to its extremes, Horkheimer and Adorno suggest, it was the elimination of particularity that allowed humans to engage in horrors such as the Holocaust because “in the concentration camps it was no longer an individual who died, but a specimen ...”<sup>44</sup> In other words, all value is lost except the numerical. While lives may be

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 6.

<sup>44</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 362.

added they are just as easily subtracted without concern for what those numbers represent.

### *The Culture Industry*

One of the most controversial claims that Horkheimer and Adorno make regarding the dialectic of enlightenment is that the same logic that governed the Holocaust is also present in mass culture – the “culture industry,” as they call it – as a reifying, stultifying, and dehumanising ideological system. The culture industry is an ‘industry’ in the proper sense of the word; it produces standardised products on a mass scale through rationalised, efficient techniques of distribution that ensure standardised, mass consumption. To understand what this means, I must first make a brief comment on how Horkheimer and Adorno perceive the difference between autonomous art and the products of the culture industry. Autonomous art is ‘autonomous’ in the Kantian sense because it is disinterested, or unattached to any particular external institution or set of ideas that it might serve.<sup>45</sup> So, for example, religious art commissioned by the Church is, by definition, not autonomous both because it inherently has a set of assumptions resulting from its purpose (e.g., glorifying the divine or aiding believers in their worshipping practices) and because its form and content are prefigured by religious tradition and Ecclesiastical rulings on what is acceptable. Thus, there is no room for spontaneity and newness in its production, which for Horkheimer and

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<sup>45</sup> Lambert Zuidervaart, *Adorno's Aesthetic Theory: The Redemption of an Illusion*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press (1991), demonstrates that it is, in fact, the illusion of autonomy that is important because no work of art is ever fully autonomous. This will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Three, but for now I will leave the definition as it stands for purposes of clarity.

Adorno, are hallmarks of genuine, autonomous works of art. While Horkheimer and Adorno do not go into much detail regarding the history of autonomous art, Benjamin convincingly argues that a time did exist when it was widely produced through the institution of patronage. This period was defined by wealthy art connoisseurs who commissioned artists to make works without (ideally) strings attached and thus the works could be considered autonomous.<sup>46</sup> In other words, the artists' creative sensibilities, and not pre-existent notions of exchange-value or the interests of any particular institution, governed the production of these artworks. However, with the downfall of patronage and the emergence of techniques of mass production, the western world was set for the rise of the culture industry.<sup>47</sup>

According to Horkheimer and Adorno, what the culture industry does by reducing its products to a uniform standard is two-fold. First, the character of any work which would correspond to spontaneity of production and its ability to demonstrate newness is dissolved. The singularly most important quality of a product of the culture industry is that it be received on the widest scale possible or, at least, within a particular, yet large, consumer demographic (e.g., the demographic that likes horror movies or the population that likes romantic comedies, and so on). The formula for success, then, is to package cultural products in pre-existing forms that have proven marketable in the past. The

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<sup>46</sup> Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich: (1968) 217-252.

<sup>47</sup> It should be noted that Benjamin saw revolutionary potential in the mass production of cultural products, while Horkheimer and Adorno explicitly rejected this premise.

second correlate of the standardisation of cultural products is that consumer response also is emptied of all its spontaneity; cultural products are created with the consumers' responses planned in advance of their consumption.<sup>48</sup> Laugh tracks, film scores that prompt audiences how to feel, and standardised literary devices and narratives in novels, are all examples of the dissolution of spontaneity in consumer response.

Finally, the ideological effect of the standardisation of cultural production on society at large is one that ensures conformity and acceptance of the status quo. Genuine artworks, as Adorno claims, are always characterised by a simultaneous expression of existing society and rejection of it.<sup>49</sup> That is to say, artworks depict existing society, but in a deformed and mutilated manner so as to demonstrate society's dehumanising and reified character and, therefore, also the need to change it in a revolutionary way. In contradistinction to genuine artworks, cultural products imbue the audience with a sense of familiarity, fantasy, and fatalism. As a well-worn cliché says, Hollywood and the culture industry lulls us into complacency while, to quote Neil Postman, we simultaneously "amuse ourselves to death."<sup>50</sup>

For the purposes of this project, an understanding of the culture industry is useful to the extent that it demonstrates the way in which standardisation, rationalisation, and reification operate at the level of culture (which I will discuss in Chapter Five), and provides some initial insight into what, for Adorno, is the

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<sup>48</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 109.

<sup>49</sup> Theodor Adorno, "The Autonomy of Art," in *The Adorno Reader*, ed. Brian O'Connor, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing (2000) 239-263.

<sup>50</sup> Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, New York: Penguin (1986).

nature of a genuine artwork. Adorno's position on the nature of artworks is relevant to my exploration of the Image Prohibition in Chapter Three. I will discuss artworks and their importance for Adorno's aesthetic theory in a later section of this chapter.

*Terminological Clarification: Subject? Person? Self? Human?*

If one is interested in exploring something approximating the 'ethical subject' in Adorno, as a general philosophical category, then one should first clarify the way he employs four separate but related categories, all of which might be equated with each other in other philosophical contexts. These categories are: 1) subject; 2) person; 3) self; and 4) human (and inhuman). Adorno does use these terms equivocally, but there is a useful way to distinguish them. The first term – 'subject' – refers to the noumenal side of Kant's mind/body dualism. Thus, one should avoid using this category to refer to a normative conception in Adorno's work because the 'subject' as defined here usually denotes a category of reified existence to the extent that it leaves out the physical, phenomenal body that must be taken into account. Furthermore, the category of 'subject,' used in the singular, detracts from the intersubjective quality of Adorno's understanding of subjectivity.

Regarding the second category listed above, in the short section 'Against Personalism' in *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno provides a polemic against the category of 'person.' The person refers to the sacrosanct and inviolable, yet unreflected, value of the individual human being as a bearer of morality.

However, the person, as a posited moral individual, exists in an amoral society: “Freedom, which would arise only in the organization of a free society, is sought precisely where it is denied by the organization of existing society: in the individual.”<sup>51</sup> To the extent that the person is an unreflected social object, it is contrasted with the human. This is illustrated in *Negative Dialectics* where he echoes his comments regarding the human in *Problems of Moral Philosophy*: “We cannot anticipate the concept of the right human being, but it would be nothing like the person, that consecrated duplicate of its own self-preservation ... Men are human only where they do not act, let alone posit themselves as persons.”<sup>52</sup> It is interesting, then, that in the next paragraph he goes on to contrast the ‘self’ with the person, when he states: “By the concept of the self we should properly mean their [humans’] potential, and this potential stands in polemical opposition to the reality of self.”<sup>53</sup> The ‘potential of self’ would, then, be understood as something like the ‘human to come,’ while the ‘reality of self’ is the alienated and disfigured subject of late capitalism or the ‘self’ of ‘self-preservation.’ In another instance Adorno further states: “The self is what is inhuman.”<sup>54</sup> This ‘self’ must also refer to the unreflected self-as-object, and it would correspond to the above quote because the inhuman self would be positioned against normative human potential.

Obviously, Adorno’s ambivalent use of the term ‘self’ creates problems for his readers. However, it seems plausible that the self will always refer to the

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<sup>51</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 276.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 277.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 278.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 299.

individual's consciousness of itself, whether reified or redeemed. That is to say, just as in Kant's system, according to Adorno there exists two 'selves,' roughly corresponding to the phenomenal and noumenal, or body and mind, which should always consciously be recognised as existing together in a dialectical relationship as guarantors of the awareness of the individual's non-identity. For Adorno, however, this distinction between mind and body should not be understood as positing objects which exist in separate realms (i.e., an ontological dualism) that nevertheless interact with each other, but as value-sets – the rational and the physical – in which rational reflection and calculation correspond to the value-set 'mind,' and physical desire corresponds to the value-set 'body.' Thus, a redeemed self, aware of its own non-identity, would correspond to the human, while a reified self would always be associated with the inhuman (i.e., the one-sided category of subject). It is in many ways, a restatement of Marx's famous formulation of *species-being qua* human. While the subject is the contentless form of freedom that the Enlightenment promised, the self to come is the filling in of this form with substantive content – the fulfillment of enlightenment's promise of freedom.

Finally, the term 'human' proves to be Adorno's favoured nomenclature for something resembling an ethical subject. This finds textual support in the fact that, for the most part, when he is referring to a human individual warped and reified under late capitalism, Adorno refers to the 'human' as that which is deleteriously affected and, as in the quote above, the 'inhuman' as that which is untrue or identical to itself. However, as Drucilla Cornell suggests, the human is

not a posited object, but a kind of ethical relation that exists between the value-set body and the value-set mind. Cornell defines the ‘essence’ of this relation, which is also the essence of ‘truth,’ as the recognition of the non-identity between subject and object.<sup>55</sup> Following from this claim, we can superimpose this articulation of the essence of ‘truth’ onto that of the human so that the human’s ‘essence’ is understood as its recognition of its non-identity in relation to its position as both subject and object or mind and body respectively. Therefore, in this project, when I refer to the human in the context of Adorno’s work, it is defined as the human individual conscious of the truth of its own non-identity *qua* mind and body.<sup>56</sup>

### *Ethical Subjectivity*

When Adorno discusses subjectivity, it is almost always in relation to how it has been reified under the alienating social relations of late capitalism. As a normative category, then, Adorno always presents subjectivity as what it should not be, and never as a positive statement of ethical norms. Adorno is not, in other words, a deontologist like John Rawls, who at the very least provides a positive category of fairness and its various correlates that can be activated in the world

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<sup>55</sup> Drucilla Cornell, *The Philosophy of the Limit*, New York: Routledge (1992) 20.

<sup>56</sup> In this dissertation, I will only employ the term ‘human’ when I am directly comparing it to Žižek and Lyotard’s formulations of the same category. Otherwise, I will use the term ‘subjectivity’ because I have found that over-using the category of ‘human’ obscures the clarity of my writing. This is in large part because the secondary literature on Adorno uses the term ‘subjectivity.’ Furthermore, the category of ‘subjectivity’ can be used to describe a way of experiencing the world and one’s self, but avoids the atomised, individualistic connotation of ‘the subject.’

for political and ethical purposes.<sup>57</sup> Ethics, to the extent that Adorno would use the term, becomes intimately tied to (even, perhaps, ‘identical’ with) denouncing the unethical.<sup>58</sup> One can transpose Adorno’s theory of conceptuality and identity onto his construction of subjectivity to the extent that subjectivity is ‘conceptualised,’ that is, presented as fully capturing the reality of human existence. This is basically how all the secondary literature on subjectivity in Adorno treats his thought. Commentators tend only to differ on whether this formulation is useful for thinking about resistance to reification or the possibility of a non-reified subjectivity in contemporary society. So for example, commentators like Buck-Morss<sup>59</sup>, Jameson<sup>60</sup>, and Spariosu<sup>61</sup> stress the importance of mimesis of the object for overcoming reification; Pritchard<sup>62</sup> and Kaufmann<sup>63</sup> focus on the importance of the Image/Name Prohibition; Hohendahl<sup>64</sup> insists on the value of constellations; Bernstein<sup>65</sup> and Cornell<sup>66</sup> emphasise the importance of

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<sup>57</sup> John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press (1971).

<sup>58</sup> In *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, ed. Thomas Schroder, trans. Rodney Livingstone, Stanford: Stanford University Press (2001), Adorno claims that he does not like the term “ethics”, because it is too individualistic in its connotation (9-11). That is to say, ethics ignores the primary problem that a moral system needs to address: the relationship between the particular individual and the greater society in which he or she lives.

<sup>59</sup> Buck-Morss, *Origin of Negative Dialectics*.

<sup>60</sup> Jameson, *Late Marxism*.

<sup>61</sup> Mihai Spariosu, “Editor’s Introduction,” in *Mimesis in Contemporary Theory: An Interdisciplinary Approach*, Vol. 2, “Mimesis, Semiosis and Power,” ed. Ronald Bogue and Mihai Spariosu, Amsterdam: John Benjamins (1984) 1-12.

<sup>62</sup> Elizabeth A. Pritchard, “Bilderverbot Meets Body in Theodor W. Adorno’s Inverse Theology,” *Harvard Theological Review*, 95:3 (2002) 291-318.

<sup>63</sup> Kaufmann, “Correlations, Constellations and the Truth: Adorno’s Ontology of Redemption,” 62-80.

<sup>64</sup> Peter Uwe Hohendahl, “Adorno: The Discourse of Philosophy and the Problem of Language,” in *The Actuality of Adorno: Critical Essays on Adorno and the Postmodern*, ed. Max Pensky, Albany: SUNY Press (1997) 62-82.

<sup>65</sup> Jay M. Bernstein, *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (2001).

<sup>66</sup> Cornell, *The Philosophy of the Limit*.

‘remembering the body’ and the ‘sensual object’; Coles<sup>67</sup> works through the dialogical nature of Adorno’s ethics; and Zuidervaart<sup>68</sup> and Weber<sup>69</sup> stress the idea that the genuine aesthetic experience together with the rejection of instrumental reason is the remedy to a life lived wrongly. All these authors in some way see a critical, emancipatory potential for a self-conscious subjectivity in Adorno’s work. But ultimately these are all pronouncements of the same thing: reconciliation at the level of subjectivity is realised through the recognition of non-identity.

So how does one begin to think about ethical subjectivity in Adorno’s thought if all there is to work with are various pronouncements of the truth of non-identity? What sort of ethical imperatives or concrete guidance for ‘living well’ can be established based on this type of abstract formulation? The answer is found in the most fundamental category that drives all of Adorno’s thought: *suffering*. For Adorno, all philosophy should be motivated by the desire to negate suffering. In fact, he famously outlines a new categorical imperative, which is to never let something like Auschwitz happen again.<sup>70</sup> While this imperative surely includes psychic as well as physical suffering, the physical plays a much more central role in his work, and as a result, most of the secondary literature has

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<sup>67</sup> Romand Coles, “Identity and Difference in the Ethical Positions of Adorno and Habermas,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Habermas*, ed. Stephen K. White, New York: Cambridge University Press (1995) 27-28.

<sup>68</sup> Lambert Zuidervaart, *Adorno's Aesthetic Theory*.

<sup>69</sup> Shierry M. Weber, “Aesthetic Experience and Self-Reflection as Emancipatory Process,” in *On Critical Theory*, ed. John O’Neill, New York: Seabury Press (1976).

<sup>70</sup> “A new categorical imperative has been imposed by Hitler upon unfree mankind: to arrange their thoughts and actions so that Auschwitz will not repeat itself, so that nothing similar will happen.” Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 365.

focussed primarily on the physical aspect of the imperative. As a result, there is a sizeable literature on the topic.

Within the work of all the commentators who discuss the possibility of an emancipated subjectivity in Adorno's work, the most common category cited for realising it is 'aesthetic experience.' This is because, for Adorno, artistic production is one of the last realms of human life in which non-conceptual and non-figural forms of expression is possible (which makes art a conveyor of non-identity), given existing social organisation. A genuine aesthetic experience is the encounter with the non-identical and, therefore, truth via art. It is defined by the 'mimetic shudder': the overwhelming sense of the truth of the object. It is referred to as a shudder because it disturbs the identity of reified subjectivity, momentarily allowing the subject to understand the manner of its reification.<sup>71</sup> In this moment of realisation, the subject understands that the world is not as it should be and that it is possible for it to be otherwise. More specifically, in the moment of the mimetic shudder, the subject becomes cognisant of the great amount of unnecessary suffering in the world and the *a priori* ethical imperative to end it.

According to Adorno, *genuine* artworks serve to give suffering objective form and, thereby, negate society; they are society's antithesis, because they point to the possibility of changed social conditions. Artworks are non-conceptual because they do not conform to the communicative model of language, whereby

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<sup>71</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor, London: Continuum (1997) 418. See also: Martin Morris, *Rethinking the Communicative Turn: Adorno, Habermas, and the Problem of Communicative Freedom*, Albany: SUNY Press (2001).

an object is subsumed and reified by its concept.<sup>72</sup> It is important in this regard to understand that philosophy is also indicted in Adorno's critique of conceptuality. Philosophy is an imperfect mode of representation because it is mediated by language – the conceptual – and, therefore, never can express its object fully. It is only in art that non-conceptuality can be experienced. However, for non-conceptuality to be meaningful it must be mediated by concepts in the same way as Adorno's philosophical method 'constellations' is. Thus, it is the task of philosophy to interpret art and provide it with a conceptual voice – to point toward the truth of non-conceptuality (because it can never be fully expressed linguistically). Beginning from the knowledge that philosophy is essentially impossible is vital for approaching truth – the truth that is found in the object – in this case, art. Here a dialectic occurs: the more that the false positivity and conceptuality of society becomes reified, the more art needs to express its negation. In this way, politics 'migrates' into art, and art can become the site of politics.<sup>73</sup> The more atonal and disharmonious the form of art, the more it reveals the existence of suffering and, therefore, the falsity of society and the need for its negation.

Unfortunately, as Rüdiger Bubner argues, aesthetic experience fails to live up to its own premises and, therefore, cannot bring about what is required for Adorno: the New. According to Bubner, Adorno claims in his aesthetic theory that the realm of art is where the New occurs. But this is premised on the idea

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<sup>72</sup> Artworks are not imitations of reality, but 'reconstellations' of reality.

<sup>73</sup> Theodor Adorno, "Commitment," in *Aesthetics and Politics: The Key Texts of the Classic Debate within German Marxism*, ed. and trans. Ronald Taylor, New York: Verso (1990).

that philosophy must interpret art for it to become meaningful. At this point Adorno's valorisation of art breaks down, for what he considers to be 'autonomous' art, can no longer be autonomous by definition (because art is constructed to satisfy the existing interests of philosophy). Bubner's criticism is that Adorno's philosophy pre-judges how it will interpret art, meaning aesthetics simply becomes a misleading surrogate for philosophy. In other words, the priority that Adorno wants to give art over philosophy is negated by the fact that philosophy has already determined the standards for good art.<sup>74</sup> Bubner's critique forces one to look for an alternative place in Adorno's work for a normative formulation of ethical subjectivity. In this regard, a much more convincing and useful approach to understanding Adorno's formulation of ethical subjectivity is found in the idea of dialogism, or intersubjective communication which is dominated today by the figure of Jürgen Habermas. Therefore, I will first turn to his work to describe the context of the contemporary debate before discussing Adorno's position on the matter.

### *Habermas and Dialogism*

There remain only two significant traditions of thought that are critical of, but still seriously engaged with Adorno's work: 1) postmodernism; and 2) the thought that has emerged from the work of Adorno's former student Jürgen Habermas. In Chapter Three I provide a detailed analysis of the first through a

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<sup>74</sup> See: Rüdiger Bubner, "Concerning the Central Idea of Adorno's Philosophy," in *The Semblance of Subjectivity: Essays in Adorno's Aesthetic Theory*, ed. Tom Huhn and Lambert Zuidervaart, Boston: The MIT Press (1997) 147–75.

reading of Jean-François Lyotard's challenge to Adorno's brand of modernism, so I will not devote any space in this introduction to the general postmodern critique of Adorno. Instead, I will focus on Habermas, primarily because working through his debate with Adorno allows for a better understanding of the latter's ethical position, and because it is a useful process for debunking common misperceptions of Adorno.

Habermas works in the tradition of 'ideology critique,' which is a method of separating knowledge from power. As defined by Habermas, ideology itself is a widespread false knowledge about things that circulates because powerful interests, institutions, and systems are actively engaged in producing and disseminating it.<sup>75</sup> It is the role of critique to identify ideology, negate it, and in the process, allow for the emergence of truth hitherto hidden. The important point here is that the possibility of critique is based on the legitimacy of reason as a vehicle for accessing truth. In other words, critique is only possible if one remains committed to the ability or legitimacy of reason to activate it. In this way, ideology critique is a legacy of Enlightenment thinking because reason is valorised as the only vehicle through which to pursue social progress. Habermas thinks that it is crucial that we retain this category of critique as an emancipatory tool and he claims that this is precisely what Horkheimer and Adorno seek but fail to achieve. While Habermas agrees that society is saturated with false ideas that produce injustice or uncritical subjects, he argues that because Horkheimer and Adorno indict reason itself as one of the primary *causes* of this situation, we have

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<sup>75</sup> Andrew Edgar, *The Philosophy of Habermas*, Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press (2005) 21.

lost the only source from which critique can activate its emancipatory potential. That is to say, according to Habermas, Horkheimer and Adorno's critique of society and Enlightenment ideas is a totalising one because it seeks to undermine reason itself while providing no space for progressive political change. What they are left with, Habermas contends, is a Nietzschean aesthetic subjectivism which yearns for an "original relation of spirit and nature"<sup>76</sup> which is ultimately "the utopia of a long since lost, uncoerced and intuitive knowledge belonging to a primal past."<sup>77</sup> In other words, by excluding reason as a source of critique, their analysis only allows for a non-linguistic or non-rational answer to the problems of modern thought and society.

This argument has been rebuffed by many Adorno scholars (the most prominent being Jay Bernstein<sup>78</sup> and Deborah Cook<sup>79</sup>) simply by demonstrating that the 'reason' which Horkheimer and Adorno are denouncing is a specific type – 'instrumental' reason – and that hope lies in the construction and widespread embracing of a more holistic, value-oriented, 'substantive' reason. Substantive reason, in the Weberian sense, is a type of reason governed by a value-rational orientation toward the world. In this regard, Adorno's emphasis on the ethical imperative to end suffering – to 'remember' the body – is important for understanding what he means by substantive reason. According to Adorno, however, substantive reason also stresses the importance of intersubjectivity when

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<sup>76</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, trans. Frederick G. Lawrence, Cambridge: MIT Press (1987) 186.

<sup>77</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action* vol. 1, trans. Thomas McCarthy, Cambridge: Polity Press (1984): 366.

<sup>78</sup> Bernstein, *Adorno*.

<sup>79</sup> Deborah Cook, *The Culture Industry Revisited: Theodor Adorno on Mass Culture*, London: Rowman and Littlefield (1996).

formulating value-based goals or judgements. To this extent, then, there is an important dialogical aspect of his ethics that positions him into close relation with Habermas's normative philosophy.

As I alluded to earlier, Habermas wants to save the 'unfinished project' of Enlightenment through what he calls 'discourse ethics.' The basis of this system is the idea that language is structured internally in a way that allows for the possibility of consensus. As he says, "reaching understanding inhabits human speech as its telos."<sup>80</sup> 'Discourse ethics,' then, is a process of creating the appropriate structural conditions to allow for open, transparent, equal, informed, and rational communication to flourish in the creation of norms and rules by which society will be governed. While some scholars, most notably Drucilla Cornell<sup>81</sup> (whom I discuss in greater detail in Chapter Five) have tried to demonstrate that the ethics contained within *Negative Dialectics* informs Habermas's discourse ethics and enjoys similar dialogical properties, some Habermasians have made a point to argue that this is not the case. Perhaps the strongest voice in this regard is Albrecht Wellmer.<sup>82</sup> Romand Coles has written well on Wellmer's challenge and has refuted it in an apt manner. Thus I will reserve my discussion of this debate to his account.

According to Coles, Wellmer's attack is oriented around two main criticisms. First, Adorno depends too much on a rigid formulation of concepts. That is to say, Adorno does not recognise that words or concepts can be used in

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 287.

<sup>81</sup> *Philosophy of the Limit*.

<sup>82</sup> Albrecht Wellmer, *The Persistence of Modernity: Essays on Aesthetics, Ethics, and Postmodernism*, trans. John Cumming, New York: Seabury Press (1972).

many different ways, and employ multiple meanings and, therefore, remain ‘open’ (vs. ‘closed’ as in Adorno’s understanding of the reified character of concepts discussed above). Second, Adorno suffers from a “residue of naïveté” because his critique of concepts means that he must adopt a position outside of language to attack it.<sup>83</sup> For the Habermasian Wellmer, this is ‘naïve’ because it is impossible for rationality (and therefore critique) to operate outside of the structure of language.

Coles responds by demonstrating that Adorno’s method of ‘constellations’ is modelled on language in the sense that he achieves Wellmer’s desire for openness because the meaning of a concept is changed, and continues to change, when it enters into a constellation. As for the naïve extra-linguistic position that Adorno supposedly adopts, Coles admits that there is some truth to this because it is the relationship of the embodied subject to suffering, corporeal objects that stimulates thought and that the body, for Adorno, exists outside of language. However, it is the experience of physical suffering – either one’s own or observing the suffering of others – which allows the subject to attain a sense of non-identity (which is ethical) because one’s thought is accompanied by a sense of guilt for thinking conceptually.<sup>84</sup> As such, this ethical thought of the non-identical emerges immanently from a linguistic consciousness – a consciousness aware of the linguistic failing of conceptuality in relation to truth.

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<sup>83</sup> Romand Coles, “Identity and Difference in the Ethical Positions of Adorno and Habermas,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Habermas*, ed. White, 27-28.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 28-29.

If Wellmer's criticism does not hold, then what is the difference between Adorno's and Habermas's ethics? According to Coles, the primary difference lies in their respective emphases on the normative category of consensus. If, for Habermas, 'consensus' is the *telos* of language, then disconsensus or agonism can only be understood as "a private 'fallen' condition in light of communicative suppositions, one that calls for the rehabilitating effects of consensus striving."<sup>85</sup> Adorno, on the other hand, is profoundly suspicious of discourses that stress consensus, especially if they are accompanied by the sense of an immediate necessity for agreement. As Habermas claims, all discourses are conditioned by 'pressures' to reach consensus in a given length of time that vary in intensity but will always compromise the communicative process and therefore the truth-content of the agreements that emerge out of it. According to Coles, it is not that Adorno wants to negate consensus as an ethical impulse *per se*, but instead he desires to illustrate that agonism is always a constituent component of dialogue, or that irreconcilability is always accompanied by the hope for reconciliation. More specifically, what is crucial for Adorno is that reconciliation, or consensus should never be posited as a *concept*.<sup>86</sup> To posit reconciliation as a concept would be to reify consensus as an ethical ideal and therefore leave out difference and agonism. Thus, in dialogical situations there exists a constant tension between identity and differences that lead us to a 'togetherness in diversity,' which will never ensure consensus, but will allow for the conditions to have an ethical conversation. It is only in this way that dialogism can avoid reification for, as

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 33.

Coles suggests, we must remember that “resistance, transgression, and agonism are fundamentally vital ideals that are as deserving of our fidelity as those ideals that pull us together, lest our somnambulism is to begin again to proliferate violence.”<sup>87</sup> Therefore, if we are to discuss an ‘ethical subject’ in Adorno, it must be understood not as an isolated individual who possesses characteristics that define him or her as being ethical, but as a relationship that *makes ethics possible* between subjects.

While Coles is quite right in suggesting that a primary difference between Adorno and Habermas’s ethics lies in their respective emphases on consensus/agonism, I would add that Adorno’s focus on the body is something lacking in Habermas’s account. In both cases, the ethical systems are largely procedural in nature. At first glance dialogism, whether Adornian or Habermasian, does not provide positive goods that humans should want in order to live ethically, except for the process of dialoguing itself. While this is true for Habermas’s discourse ethics, one nevertheless must remember that Adorno includes an imperative to end suffering. While this may be implicit in discourse ethics, one would think that the form of conversation that emerges out of subjects who have opened themselves to the suffering of others would be of a qualitatively different nature. In other words, the experience of the sensual, suffering object which stimulates consciousness of one’s non-identity should produce qualitatively different participants in the communication situation. Thus, due to his focus on

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 32.

the suffering body, in a peculiar way considering his critics, Adorno provides *more* positive content than Habermas does.

In sum, my understanding of Adorno's 'ethics' is always as an ethical *relation* in that the practice of living well is always oriented toward living with others in a non-violative and dialogical manner. To live 'ethically' is to be cognisant of one's own non-identity and the non-identity of others. For Adorno, any way of living otherwise is by definition a wrong way to live. In this project, any reference to the term 'ethics' will include this premise – that the possibility of 'living well' is intimately associated with relations of non-identity. However, the definition of ethics in this dissertation should also be understood in the classic Aristotelian tradition of practising the good life (*eudaimonia*). Ethics is a 'practice' in that it both implies a commitment to bettering one's self in relation to certain values and activities and constant work at resisting reification or identity-thinking. As will be discussed in great detail in the body of this dissertation, the nature of contemporary reification at the level of subjectivity is defined by a strange paradox in which the pursuit of physical desire/enjoyment is both a normative social imperative and simultaneously prohibited in the name of physical self-preservation. Therefore, ethics is defined herein as the practice of living well, with one's self and others, and includes a distinct orientation toward resisting reification at the level of physical desire.

### ***Key Žižekian Terms***

## *Autoprohibition and the Žižekian Subject*

Theodor Adorno and Slavoj Žižek have a lot in common. Both are situated in the Hegelian-Marxist (or perhaps, ‘post’-Hegelian-Marxist) constellation of philosophy; both are decidedly modern philosophers despite the many who would like to label them ‘post’-modern, both are concerned with the relationship between ideology and contemporary popular culture; both are heavily indebted to psychoanalysis; and both emphasise the importance of retaining the ‘material’ component of historical materialism in cultural critique. But from my perspective, their greatest contributions to contemporary philosophy relate to their respective formulations of the dialectical method. In a review of Žižek’s book *The Parallax View*, Fredric Jameson refers to Adorno and Žižek as the two ‘great’ modern dialecticians, high praise indeed from an eminent scholar of the practice like Jameson.<sup>88</sup>

Žižek’s dialectical method at first glance seems quite similar to Adorno’s version of immanent critique, in that he always aims to demonstrate that a concept is never adequate to its object. He, however, rarely makes observations that *sound* like Adorno, or even Marx for that matter. For example, he would not claim that the subject of abstract rights, who is free and equal, in reality does not correspond to the empirical existence of the subject who is dominated over and very much unequal to others (as does Marx in “On the Jewish Question”<sup>89</sup>). His

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<sup>88</sup> In comparison with Žižek, Jameson claims: “The other great modern dialectician, Theodor Adorno (whose generic tone compares with Žižek’s, perhaps, as tragedy to comedy)...” Fredric Jameson, “First Impressions,” *The London Review of Books*, September 7, 2006.

<sup>89</sup> Karl Marx, “On the Jewish Question,” in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, ed. Lawrence H. Simon, Indianapolis: Hackett (1994) 1-26.

position would be: pure freedom at the level of the subject is an impossible desire, and therefore is always already prohibited. That is to say, Žižek's dialectics is one in which the attainment of an object of desire is automatically prohibited. Contra Adorno, the impossibility of identity between object and concept is not a result of reification due to identity-thinking, but a result of the impossibility of the fulfillment of the subject's desire or, more specifically, the desire for the object. This idiosyncratic form of dialectics results from Žižek's use of Lacan to read Marx and Hegel.

What exactly does the 'impossibility of desire' mean? By way of a brief gloss, Lacan postulates the existence of the 'split self' in which one's 'symbolic' self is simultaneously a product of and source of resistance to the 'Real' of the subject.<sup>90</sup> The symbolic self exists in the Symbolic Order, and is akin to one's 'subject position.' It is the subject's self-image, as well as a strategy to stay intelligible, unified, and consistent as subject. On the other hand, the Real of the subject is its irreducible core which resists all attempts to be incorporated into the Symbolic realm. In other words, the Real is the pre-linguistic, pre-human, chaotic expression of the subject before it is subject – a simple, inarticulate bundle of drives. The entry of the subject into language, or the Symbolic, is the moment that the Real disappears from the consciousness of the subject, that is, the Real is the 'vanishing mediator' of the subject. In other words, the moment of consciousness is simultaneously the loss of the Real. The subject comes to

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<sup>90</sup> Jaques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan, New York: Norton (1977).

understand itself as ‘autonomous’ and ‘unified,’ unaware that it is largely conditioned by the dictates of the Real in its everyday activities.

The Real manifests itself in a way that constantly threatens the unity of the subject. Unconsciously the subject strives to reach the Real or, more specifically the pleasure of the Real referred to as ‘*jouissance*.’ *Jouissance* – the state of a sublime mixture of pleasure and pain – is precisely that which can never be attained, but is assumed to exist because we are never satisfied. It is a desire that can never be satisfied – an impossible desire, as it were. If *jouissance* were ever achieved, it would be tantamount to peering directly into the chasm of the Real of the subject, which would result in the pure devastation of the subject through the collapse of the Symbolic Order – everything that allows the subject the ability to remain unified. This, I argue, is akin to the Judeo-Christian tradition in which seeing the Face of God means certain madness for the witness (which, as I discuss in Chapter Four, Žižek alludes to in relation to the Image Prohibition).

According to Žižek’s political reading of Lacan, *jouissance* will manifest itself differently in different individuals and cultures. This is because the object-cause of desire, while always related to the Real and, therefore, ultimately unattainable, is an actual human construct and therefore will vary from context to context. Various objects correspond, in other words, to the construction of fantasies. According to Lacan, fantasies are the mechanisms through which we organise and control our desires. The ‘core fantasy’ of a subject is what allows it to deal with the traumatic loss of its object (*objet petit a*). For Žižek, the only way a subject can change or become ‘free’ to act – to commit an Act – is to

change the core fantasy which would re-coordinate the Symbolic.<sup>91</sup> In a political register, such fantasies might include ‘Freedom’, ‘Revolution’, or ‘the End of History,’ all of which are pure in their fantastic form and, therefore, impossible. Lacan refers to this object-cause of desire as *objet petit a* – that by which one’s behaviour is conditioned without fully understanding or being conscious of it. *Objet petit a* corresponds to the Real as a ‘lost object’ – something that has been taken away and which the subject incessantly desires to recapture. Since, as I mentioned above, the successful attainment of this object would be a direct encounter with the Real (and by implication, the death of the subject), Lacan understands its pursuit as a sort of death drive. This death drive is not, however, an actual, literal desire for death, but more like a tendency on the part of the subject to repeat unhealthy or self-destructive behaviour (from the perspective of subjectivity) centred around particular objects, which results in a sort of ‘stuckness,’ the inability to move one’s fixation away from the object. This formulation of the death drive is one of Lacan’s most important contributions to his attempt to return to a faithful reading of Freud (insisting on the difference between drive and instinct).<sup>92</sup> In other words, as Žižek claims, the death drive is “...not a biological fact but a notion indicating that the human psychic apparatus is subordinated to a blind automatism of repetition beyond pleasure-seeking, self-

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<sup>91</sup> Žižek, *Lost Causes*, 305-306.

<sup>92</sup> Lacan’s formulation of the death drive also contains an important shift away from Freud in that he posited that all drive is the death drive. That is to say, there is only a singular drive (vs. Freud’s assertion of two competing drives: *Eros* and *Thanatos*). Sean Homer, *Jacques Lacan*, New York, Routledge (2005) 76.

preservation, accordance between a man and his milieu.”<sup>93</sup> While subjects never can liberate themselves fully from the death drive and its object of fixation, it is possible (via analysis) to identify *objet petit a* and either moderate the self destructive behaviour it causes or, indeed, *change the object and its corresponding fantasy*. In Jameson’s terms (quoted in Žižek), we are capable of an impulse toward “desiring to desire, a learning to desire ...”<sup>94</sup>, which is another way of saying that we can learn to desire ... better.

This, then, establishes what I mean by the ‘impossibility of desire’ in the formulation of Žižek’s dialectical method, which I am calling ‘autoprohibition.’ The next logical question, then, is: what exactly is ‘dialectical’ about this process? To answer this we must switch our focus to Žižek’s political philosophy and how it relates to his appropriation of Lacanian ontology.

### *The Act*

For Žižek, the fact that we have the ability to alter our symbolic reality by changing our object-cause of desire, allows for a certain type of freedom within a structurally (psychically) unfree context and, thus, allows for the possibility of the New, which he refers to as a genuine political ‘Act.’ An Act is a reconfiguring of the Symbolic in which a new object-cause of desire is established around which the Symbolic becomes structured. In real empirical terms, Žižek likens such an Act to achieving what seems like the impossible, but in hindsight always

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<sup>93</sup> Žižek, *Sublime Object*, 4.

<sup>94</sup> Žižek, *Lost Causes*, New York: Verso (2008) 196.

appears immanently possible.<sup>95</sup> Consequently, he is a committed advocate of grand, utopian projects, even though, by his own ontological premises, these Acts are bound to fail, at least in terms of reaching a *pure* expression of the Utopian desire. That being said, he does seem to set up a sort of standard for revolutionary political success. In *In Defense of Lost Causes* he discusses the Chinese Cultural Revolution in exactly this context. According to Žižek, when Mao assumed power in China, this only achieved what Marx would call a political revolution, because the underlying culture and mentality of the Chinese population remained largely unchanged. For Žižek, this is an example of an immanent negation (which I discussed earlier) because it does not constitute a full positive or ‘determinate’ negation. In the Chinese context, a genuine attempt at ‘determinate negation’ began only with the Cultural Revolution. It was the Cultural Revolution which was intended to change the core Chinese ‘fantasy’; to fundamentally change the organisation and everyday way of being within Chinese society. Despite the horror and massacres unleashed at this time, Žižek observes that it was so successful that immediately before it was crushed by Mao, a good portion of the population was organised and demanding an end to state rule as such, that is, they demanded the ultimate Marxist fantasy – pure, stateless communism. This is when, for Žižek, Mao betrayed his revolutionary commitment, as he should have

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<sup>95</sup> An example of an Act that he provides is the U.S. opening talks with China under Nixon. Nowadays, Žižek suggests that a far more profound Act the Left needs to (re)consider is the possibility of overcoming capitalism despite the failure of Communism and the wide scale acceptance of globalisation “with a human face”. See: Chapter 9 “Unbehagen in Der Natur”, Žižek, *Lost Causes*.

accepted his own death or exile in the name of the revolution that he helped put in motion (à la Robespierre in relation to the French Revolution).<sup>96</sup>

While Žižek would ultimately reject a teleological understanding of historical materialist dialectics, I am not sure that he would reject the *fantasy* of such a commitment. Be that as it may, it seems that his example of the Cultural Revolution is an attempt to demonstrate, on a macro level, the way in which something genuinely new can emerge out of, in this case, class antagonisms (which in Lacanian terms, is articulated in the antagonism between the Real and Symbolic). He is, in other words, still a dialectical Marxist to the extent that he believes that antagonisms create their own resolutions in the form of the New, but to do so they require a ‘re-imagining’ after the initial event to ensure the outcome is genuinely new.

We, therefore, can observe how the process activated by the Chinese Cultural Revolution was a dialectical one, but how exactly did it simultaneously ‘prohibit’ itself? Unfortunately, Žižek does not expound on this much in the context of the Cultural Revolution, but it must be implied that even if Mao and the Chinese state had been successfully swept away, the end result of the revolution, despite being new, would not have satisfied its supporters’ own fantastic desires. Despite the impossibility of these situations, Žižek insists that the revolutionary mantra should be (quoting Beckett): “Try again. Fail again. Fail better.”<sup>97</sup> The point is if my formulation of ‘autoprohibition’ holds, then the impossibility of

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 206.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 210.

success becomes a *necessary* component of all Acts because the impossibility of the fulfillment of desire is an ontological claim, signifying that it is inescapable.

How, then, does the relationship between the particular and universal manifest itself in Žižek's dialectics of autoprobhibition? This, unfortunately, is a slightly more complex question. Contra left-academics that celebrate particularity in the form of difference and otherness and correspondingly degrade the universal as always already totalitarian, Žižek wants to revivify the importance of the universal in relation to the subject.<sup>98</sup> This, he claims, is the only way in which we can begin to think again the possibility of a collective Act for the Left, and other 'lost causes.' However, his formulation of the universal is a very idiosyncratic one in the way that it is intimately tied to the truth of the particular. What he is interested in theorising is a form of particularity, or 'subjectivity,' that subjects develop a profound attachment to, and as a result, can be raised up to the status of the universal. In other words, the universal emerges through an unrelenting commitment to a particular. His fascination with Mao and China is apparent here again, as he claims that one of Mao's great insights is the relationship between principal contradictions and particular ones. For Mao, dogmatic Marxists who criticised the revolution in China as historically premature did not understand that the nature of capitalist contradictions will be manifestly different depending on the time and place. Thus, in China the primary contradiction was that between peasants and the bourgeoisie, but in the context of orthodox Marxism, this would

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<sup>98</sup> Examples of theorists that Žižek criticises for their celebration of otherness are Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida. See: Žižek, *The Parallax View*, 112 and Žižek, *Spinoza, Kant, Hegel and ... Badiou!* <http://www.lacan.com/zizphilosophy1.htm>

be considered a particular contradiction. Mao's insight is that one must treat a particular contradiction *as if it is the principal contradiction*, and that the truth of the universal lies in the particular itself.<sup>99</sup> This is where Žižek deviates from orthodox Marxism. For him, at heart, the concern of Marxism has always been one of the excluded vs. the included or, more specifically, those included by virtue of their exclusion. (For Žižek, the central demographic today that exemplifies this is slum-dwellers.) Thus, any particular revolt by the excluded is a manifestation of the universal, utopic desire of Marxism.

Another example Žižek provides to demonstrate his understanding of raising a particular to the status of the universal is the Rodney King incident. To the extent that the seemingly unprovoked and unjustified beating of a black American citizen by white police officers was a particular event (and was explained away as an aberration by the LAPD), it could be turned into a particular event that stands in for the universal struggle against racism that could spark the overturning of the racist structure in America. Another particularly illuminating example of this process in Žižek's work is that of the Jewish Image Prohibition. I discuss this in much greater detail in Chapter Four, but it is worth mentioning here because of both its relationship to questions of particularity and universality, and autoprohibition. According to Žižek, the traditional understanding of the Second Commandment by Continental philosophers (including Adorno) is that because the image never can represent fully the truth of its object, its prohibition contains a profound philosophical truth that challenges reification and

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<sup>99</sup> Žižek, *Lost Causes*, 182.

conceptuality – the image of God should be prohibited just as the concept must not be reified. In other words, Adorno’s method of negative dialectics is a secularisation of the principle that informs the Second Commandment. Žižek, ever the contrarian, suggests that it is exactly the opposite. He claims that the image (the site of the universal) precisely *reveals* a truth that humans simply cannot acknowledge because it would be tantamount to the experience of the Real. Thus, the truth-content of the image is automatically prohibited because its truth is impossible from the perspective of the subject. The Image Prohibition, then, demonstrates both Žižek’s dialectics of autoprobhibition and his formulation of the co-determination of the particular and the universal in objects. In terms of the emergence of the New out of this prohibition, Žižek suggests that by allowing the representation of God in the image of Christ, Christianity simply acknowledged the truth of what had been prohibited by recognising it in the image of man (i.e., Christ). It is Christ’s ‘inhumanity,’ or excess, in which subjects recognise the truth of the image – it is tolerable because it is situated in the form of man *cum* God and, thus, not a direct experience of the Real; it is manifested as a sort of aura that only hints at the existence of the inhuman excess that is inherent to being human.<sup>100</sup>

It should also be mentioned that the idea of ‘autoprobhibition’ does not imply that a new truth will *necessarily* emerge out of an object that prohibits itself. That is to say, in the context of what Žižek calls our ‘postmodern’ or ‘postideological’ era, there exists a widespread series of desires that prohibit

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<sup>100</sup> Žižek, *On Belief*, New York: Routledge (2001) 127-137.

themselves due to a resistance on the part of the subject to acknowledge the substance that the fulfillment of the desire would require. This he refers to as ‘decaf’ reality:

On today's market, we find a whole series of products deprived of their malignant property: coffee without caffeine, cream without fat, beer without alcohol... And the list goes on: what about virtual sex as sex without sex, the Colin Powell doctrine of warfare with no casualties (on our side, of course) as warfare without warfare, the contemporary redefinition of politics as the art of expert administration as politics without politics, up to today's tolerant liberal multiculturalism as an experience of Other [sic] deprived of its Otherness (the idealized Other who dances fascinating dances and has an ecologically sound holistic approach to reality, while features like wife beating remain out of sight)? Virtual Reality simply generalizes this procedure of offering a product deprived of its substance: it provides reality itself deprived of its substance - in the same way decaffeinated coffee smells and tastes like the real coffee without being the real one, Virtual Reality is experienced as reality without being one. Is this not the attitude of today's hedonistic Last Man? Everything is permitted, you can enjoy everything, BUT deprived of its substance which makes it dangerous. Today's hedonism combines pleasure with constraint ... the very thing which causes damage should already be the medicine. ... And is not a negative proof of the hegemony of this stance the fact that true unconstrained consumption (in all its main forms: drugs, free sex, smoking...) is emerging as the main danger? The fight against these dangers is one of the main investments of today's “biopolitics”.<sup>101</sup>

I discuss this in greater detail in Chapter Five, so I will only make some brief comments here. Decaf reality, it seems to me, is a manifestation of the contemporary crisis of undecidability. The subject becomes *consciously* split – torn – between two options equally attractive depending on one’s perspective: in some cases the desire for physical gratification is pitted against the desire for physical health and safety, in other situations the desire for revolution or justice is prohibited due to the liberal rejection of violence as a legitimate form of political

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<sup>101</sup> <http://lacan.com/Zizekdecaf.htm>

expression. The resultant compromise is a disingenuous, substantless, hollow shell of desire. The former (pleasure vs. health and safety) is the most important manifestation for my dissertation because there is a way in which it can be addressed in a progressive way. The latter manifestation (properly political questions of revolution and violence vs. reformism and pacifism) is a much more difficult problem to wrestle with and it will not be addressed in this dissertation. But in both cases, Žižek is concerned that the resistance on the part of the subject to acknowledge the necessary substance of its desire leads to a certain stagnancy in which any genuine attempt to re-coordinate reality or one's fantasy prohibits itself because the subject has become colonised by a normatively vacuous form of subjectivity.

Finally, decaf reality best illustrates the way in which the body is a special type of object in the context of autoprobhibition. In this case, the nature of the logic of autoprobhibition is not ontological but *social*. That is, the body does not prohibit itself simply as a condition of being, but is caught up in the historical process that Adorno calls the dialectic of enlightenment, in which subjective reification oscillates between a fetishisation or identification of the subject with the value-set mind and the value set body. In this regard, the subject, as both subject and object and source of desire, can be understood to prohibit its own desire. The subject which consciously understands the truth of physical desire which emerges from itself *qua* body prevents itself from pursuing its own desire. This is because physical desire is overridden by a negative impulse – to avoid all things that might cause harm to the body. From an Adornian perspective, we can

say that in this situation the body prohibits itself because the very source of truth – the physical desiring body – is negated as a result of a fetishisation of physical health.

This ends my review of the most important ideas and debates that inform my dissertation. In the next chapter, I begin the substantive portion of my project. The purpose of the next chapter is to illustrate the distinctly Jewish character of Adorno's thought and how it emerges out of his reading of the Biblical Second Commandment. It explains how this category acts as a foundation of his philosophical method 'constellations,' and how this informs his formulation of ethical subjectivity, or the 'human.'

### Chapter 3

#### **If Adorno isn't the Devil, it's because he's a Jew: Lyotard's misreading of Adorno through Thomas Mann's *Dr. Faustus***

*When the founders of the Humanist Union invited me to become a member, I replied that 'I might possibly be willing to join if your club had been called an inhuman union, but I could not join one that calls itself 'humanist.'*<sup>102</sup>

The claim that Theodor W. Adorno enjoys an ambiguous place in the history of Continental philosophy, as his ideas seem to straddle the border between the modern and postmodern, is a well-rehearsed, if not overused, sentiment to introduce an academic chapter on his work yet it is a sentiment that seems difficult to avoid repeating. As Albrecht Wellmer suggests (in the context of his philosophy of art): “Adorno’s aesthetics is a hesitation, to speak in popular terms, at the threshold of postmodernism.”<sup>103</sup> While he is clearly a dialectical thinker, in this regard more directly influenced by Hegel rather than by Marx, Adorno’s emphasis on the negative moment of the dialectic and his rejection of idealist forms of reconciliation, positions him closely to approaches characteristic of contemporary forms of deconstruction. While Adorno’s modernist credentials are not really up for debate, it is interesting, considering the preponderance of literature trying to think his work together with poststructuralist figures like Derrida, to ask the question: what *kind* of modernist is he?<sup>104</sup> Why are writers

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<sup>102</sup> Adorno, *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, 169.

<sup>103</sup> Wellmer, *Persistence of Modernity*: 133.

<sup>104</sup> See, for example: Seyla Benhabib, *Critique, Norm, and Utopia: A Study of the Foundations of Critical Theory*, New York: Columbia University Press (1986); J.M. Bernstein, *The Fate of Art: Aesthetic Alienation from Kant to Derrida and Adorno*, Cambridge: Polity Press (1992); Peter Dews, “Adorno, Poststructuralism and the Critique of Identity,” in *The Problems of Modernity: Adorno and Benjamin*, ed. Andrew Benjamin, London: Routledge (1989), 1-22; Miriam Hansen, “Mass Culture as Hieroglyphic Writing: Adorno, Derrida, Kracauer,” in *Adorno: A Critical*

seemingly so concerned with attempting to link his thought to the so-called ‘linguistic turn’? And why do some modernists desire so strongly to invalidate his distinct form of modernism?<sup>105</sup> I would like to examine this question within a discursive constellation that, as Kaufmann suggests, has tended to be underappreciated by the Anglo-American reception of Adorno.<sup>106</sup> I am referring here to the core position that (Kabbalist) Jewish esotericism enjoys in relation to Adorno’s aesthetic theory and questions of representation. More specifically, I want to suggest that if one wants to understand the distinct form of modernism that Adorno has developed, one must grasp the way in which he appropriates an important Jewish category – the Second Commandment against graven images, or Image Prohibition. To enter into this realm of inquiry is to pose the question of the possibility or permissibility of representation. In this regard, it is important to remember that the problem of representation is, of course, one of the fundamental schisms that divides the modern and postmodern paradigms, and thus central to understanding Adorno’s modern thought.<sup>107</sup>

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*Reader*, ed. N. C. Gibson and A. Rubin, Oxford: Blackwell (2002) 57-85; Cristoph Menke, *The Sovereignty of Art: Aesthetic Negativity in Adorno and Derrida*, trans. N. Solomon Cambridge, MA: MIT Press (1998); Peter Osborne, “Adorno and the Metaphysics of Modernism: The Problem of a ‘Postmodern’ Art,” in ed. Benjamin, *Problems of Modernity*, 23-48; Jeffrey T. Nealon, “Maxima Immoralia?: Speed and Slowness in Adorno,” in *Rethinking the Frankfurt School*, 131-144; Gilbert Chaitin “Lacan with Adorno? The Question of Fascist Rationalism,” in *Future Crossings: Literature between Philosophy and Cultural Studies*, ed. Seamus Deane and Krzysztof Ziarek, Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press (2000) 221-248.

<sup>105</sup> See, for example: Wellmer, *Persistence of Modernity*.

<sup>106</sup> Kaufmann, “Correlations, Constellations and the Truth.”

<sup>107</sup> To clarify, the “problem of representation” refers to the question of whether metaphysical categories can be depicted in conceptual form, whether philosophical (linguistic) or aesthetic in their presentation. The modern paradigm, represented by Hegel and Marx, points to this possibility in the form of a teleological understanding of history. To posit the ultimate reconciliation of subject and object at the end of history, is to argue that representation is not only possible, but also inevitable.

I will not speak here of a generic ‘postmodern’ perspective on representation – this would be a disservice to the multiplicity of positions that have been articulated on the topic by various writers. Instead, I will focus on a single author – J.-F. Lyotard – who both heralded the coming of postmodernism in the Humanities and was deeply engaged with Adorno’s work in terms of the problematic of representation. Furthermore, Lyotard has been the most influential figure in sustaining interest in the question of representation due to his engagement with, and re-reading of, the Kantian category of the sublime.<sup>108</sup> Because the category of the sublime has been used by Lyotard to challenge the idea of representation in modern art, this is where I will begin.

### *Lyotard and the Melancholic Sublime*

In *Answer to the Question What is the Postmodern? (WIPM)*, Lyotard asserts that, with the emergence of avant-garde art, and postmodern society, we have witnessed a transition in the nature of art from an aesthetic of the beautiful to one of the sublime. The beautiful is a category with a strong affinity to modern philosophy because it assumes a subject that unproblematically experiences objects as good form – as harmonious in accord with the subject’s pre-existing faculties of judgment because the subject finds pleasure in recognising in an object a sort of balanced order – a characteristic that we recognise as useful and

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<sup>108</sup> See: J.F. Lyotard, *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime: Kant’s Critique of Judgment*, Sections 23-29, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg, Stanford: Stanford University Press (1994).

purposeful for us in the abstract.<sup>109</sup> In other words, the certainty of the subject is reinforced by the experience of the beautiful to the extent that beautiful objects remind us of our own faculty of reason. The sublime, on the other hand, differs from the beautiful because the object of a sublime experience is defined by a form that cannot be immediately presented by the imagination due to its sheer vastness (the mathematical) or overwhelming power (the dynamic). While the first impulse when experiencing a sublime object is fear, this quickly turns to “joy” because we realise that the object cannot in any way threaten us internally as moral beings. By rejecting an aesthetic of the beautiful, which can provide a correspondence between the conception of an object and its presentation, Lyotard suggests that art enters a new realm of possibilities regarding the relationship of the subject and object of art because the sublime invokes in the subject the impossibility of presentation. In other words, the sublime “occurs when the imagination in fact fails to present any object that could accord with a concept, even if only in principle. We have the Idea of the world (the totality of what is), but not the capacity to show an example of it.”<sup>110</sup> The result is, of course, that the subject is confronted with things that, to the extent that it can conceive them, are real, and yet cannot be presented. To reiterate, for Kant, the sublime creates in the subject a sense of pain because it is exposed to the limits of its power to imagine, and challenges the idea of nature’s purposiveness for us. This pain,

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<sup>109</sup> That is to say, the idea of balanced order is useful for us as moral beings. However, the balanced order that exists in beautiful objects does not make these particular objects useful for us. In this regard, beautiful objects are always defined as autonomous from human utility.

<sup>110</sup> J.F. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press (1987) 10.

however, is thereafter remedied by way of the intervening power of the faculty of reason, which reminds the subject of reason's superiority even over those objects that possess the impudence of the sublime. Ultimately, the purpose of the sublime in nature is to reinforce the power and superiority of the subject.<sup>111</sup> Lyotard, however, defers this moment of reconciliation to the always almost but never will, and thereby turns Kant on his head. That is to say, the initial reaction the subject experiences when it witnesses a sublime object – a sense of awe – becomes valuable in itself, and is not accompanied by the reassurance of reason's superiority. Consequently, the sublime becomes a category that challenges the subject, instead of confirming it. In Lyotard's words, with the experience of the sublime the subject has grown out of its "infancy" that was the aesthetic of the beautiful,<sup>112</sup> and realises its lack of "universality and necessity that are promised singularly everytime",<sup>113</sup> but are never fulfilled. Instead of the reconciling power of reason, Lyotard emphasises the desire – the *attempt* – to present the unrepresentable. In artistic production, this can only be presented negatively, through the allusion to unrepresentability; through the absence of the object itself. In fact, it is never really an attempt to present the unrepresentable, but to "produce the feeling that there is something unrepresentable."<sup>114</sup> And, he concludes, any return to an aesthetic of the beautiful in art – which would be tantamount to

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<sup>111</sup> This is similar to the purpose of the beautiful, except that through the sublime the power of reason is revealed via its negative presentation.

<sup>112</sup> Lyotard, *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*, 20.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>114</sup> Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 15.

Hegelian idealism – would be a return to terror<sup>115</sup>; the terror of an artistic form acting as a closed system that contains, rather than fosters or releases, libidinal energies.<sup>116</sup>

The sublime, then, acts as a postmodern remedy to the terrorism of modernity's claims to a reconciled metaphysics. However, Lyotard identifies two modes of the sublime: the (modern) melancholic, and the (postmodern) *novatio*. In the melancholic “[t]he accent ... fall[s] on the inadequacy of the faculty of presentation, on the nostalgia for presence experienced by the human subject and the obscure and futile will that animates it in spite of everything”; while in the *novatio*

the accent ... fall[s] on the power of the faculty to conceive, on what one might call its ‘inhumanity’ ... since it is of no concern to the understanding whether or not the human sensibility or imagination accords with what it conceives – and on the extension of being and jubilation that come from inventing new rules of the game.<sup>117</sup>

The *novatio* sublime corresponds to postmodern art because it celebrates the new and genuinely induces in the subject the mixture of pleasure and pain characteristic of the Kantian sublime. Whereas the melancholic plays with content to make allusion to the unrepresentable, it is conservative because it retains a unity in form, that is, the traditional form that modern art inherited from its predecessor – Romanticism – which employed an aesthetics of the beautiful.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>116</sup> The word ‘terror’ is used by Lyotard to describe a situation in which an interlocutor refuses to allow another to speak in an agreed upon language game. When one refuses to allow another to speak, Lyotard refers to the former as acting “terroristically.” Lyotard, “WIPM?”, *The Postmodern Condition*, 63.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 14.

The melancholic, then, alludes to a longing for what once was; a nostalgia for harmony, whilst the *novatio* revels in the fact that this unity (of the subject) has been lost, or had never been and, therefore, provides no ‘solace’ for the subject. Lyotard characterises this differend as one “between regret and experimentation.”<sup>119</sup>

In this particular piece, Lyotard mentions Adorno only three times, and yet the word-choice and accentuation of his writing leaves one with the distinct sense that he had Adorno in mind (as the object of his criticism) when he constructed the melancholic sublime (despite his seemingly conciliatory comments regarding Adorno in relation to Habermas<sup>120</sup>). However, what I have outlined above from *WIPM?* and *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime* is inadequate to verify this claim. Thus, we need to examine other moments of Lyotard’s work to make the appropriate connections. I found such evidence in his 1974 essay: “Adorno as the Devil,”<sup>121</sup> to which I will shortly turn. However, to set up my argument in advance, for the purposes of my project I would like to point to two major failings of Lyotard’s analysis of Adorno’s aesthetics: 1) he limits his reading of Adorno to *Aesthetic Theory* and *Philosophy of Modern Music*, and therefore disregards the important, complementary components of other key works (most notably *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, *Negative Dialectics*, and *Minima Moralia*) that distinguish Adorno from the type of (modern) theorist Lyotard accuses him of being; and, as a result, 2) I think it can be argued that Lyotard’s reading of

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>121</sup> J.F. Lyotard “Adorno as the Devil,” *Telos* 19, Spring (1974) 28-137.

Adorno, tends to ascribe a Christian character to his work that ignores the distinctly Jewish influences which inform all his thought. More specifically, as will be demonstrated below, the way in which Adorno *secularises* a key Jewish category – the Prohibition against images – highlights a unique way in which he escapes Lyotard’s totalising construction of ‘theology.’

*Lyotard: Adorno as the Devil*

“Adorno as the Devil” is a vexing piece – written in 1974, while Lyotard was writing *Libidinal Economy* and, therefore, during the period marked by his departure from Marxism. Within his new philosophical framework, Lyotard is concerned with the way that libidinal energy is released in the form of intensities, or affects, both creating and being contained by structures. These structures might include such objects as the subject or the human, political parties, bureaucracies, or even metanarratives – in fact, the category of structure can extend to anything that ‘represents’ to the extent that libidinal sensations presented to the subject are re-presented in the form of truth. Recognising that structures of representation are inevitable outcomes of the circulation of libidinal intensities, Lyotard’s concern is with the moment said structures become hegemonic and prevent further libidinal release, which translates into an end to experimentation and pluralism. In “Adorno as the Devil,” it is this form of analysis that Lyotard applies to Adorno’s philosophy, and Critical Theory in general, by ascribing to ‘criticism’ the name ‘theology.’ Lyotard contends that Critical Theory contains the same philosophical failings that all religions do: a

‘faith’ in a Grand Signifier – for the “Marxism of Frankfurt,” this signifier is “unalienated man.” In this particular piece, however, Lyotard focuses on Adorno’s philosophical aesthetics, in fact, he looks exclusively at two texts: *Aesthetic Theory* and *Philosophy of Modern Music*, but through the intermediary of Thomas Mann’s novel, *Dr. Faustus*.

The title of Lyotard’s piece refers to a character – Wendell Kretzschmar – who acts as one manifestation of the Devil in Mann’s novel. Kretzschmar is a music teacher who takes the young musical protégé, and genius-hero of the novel, Adrian Leverkühn, under his tutelage (the character of Leverkühn is widely understood to be a fictional composite of Friedrich Nietzsche and Arnold Schönberg). Kretzschmar is indeed a nostalgic, if not, melancholic figure – a musical dialectician, really.<sup>122</sup> While he lectures on Beethoven’s late works, he demonstrates how the new, which is always already existent in the womb of the old, is always the death of its object and the possibility of art itself. Kretzschmar presents a public lecture in the provincial town of Kaisersaschern (which is used throughout the piece as a metaphor for ‘old Germany’), entitled “Why didn’t Beethoven write a 3<sup>rd</sup> movement for his last piano sonata, Opus 111?” Near the end of this lecture, Kretzschmar stresses how the last movement represents a farewell that “blesses its object, its dreadful journeys now past, with overwhelming humanization ... ‘now forget the pain’ it says ‘God was Great in us.’”<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> It is unclear if Lyotard is differentiating between nostalgia and melancholia. For this reason, I will treat these two categories as interchangeable in his work.

<sup>123</sup> Thomas Mann, *Doctor Faustus*, trans. John E. Woods, New York: A.A. Knopf (1997) 59.

Mann then returns to the narrator:

We had needed only to hear the piece, he said, to be able to answer the question ourselves. A third movement? A new beginning after that farewell? A return – after that parting? Impossible! What had happened was that the sonata had found its ending in its second, enormous movement, had ended never to return. And when he said, ‘the sonata,’ he did not mean just this one, in C minor, but he meant the sonata *per se*, as a genre, as a traditional artform – it had been brought to an end, to its end, had fulfilled its destiny, reached a goal beyond which it could not go; cancelling and resolving itself, it had taken its farewell.<sup>124</sup>

And so art moves on, but what of that strange moment, an almost ecstatic outburst on the part of Kretzschmar: “God was Great in us!”? To return now to Lyotard, the implication that God is no longer with us is a theme that weighs heavy on his discussion of Adorno. Specifically, Lyotard argues that for art to exist, as Adorno desires it – art as negation – there must exist a cult in which to receive it. But modernity is defined by the death of the cult – briefly to be replaced by ‘totality’ (read, Marxism) but nonetheless still gone. In other words, in Modernity we no longer have the category of God to secure the integrity of truth and meaning, and as such one can only wax nostalgic: God *was* Great in us! It is Lyotard’s assertion that, despite the extreme nature of negation in Adorno’s aesthetics, God still plays a prominent role in His absence: “Just as with Schönberg there is a reference to tonality *in absentia*, which is the revocation *in absentia* of sensuality, of the feminine, of Catholicism, of the reconciled god, so with Adorno there is reference to the cult and to nature *in absentia*.”<sup>125</sup> In this context, nature *in absentia*, is shorthand for representation, because a true nature is assumed to

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 59-60.

<sup>125</sup> Lyotard, “Adorno as the Devil” 137.

exist, waiting to be realised phenomenally. In other words, this indictment of that which exists *in absentia* seems to be, simply, another means of expressing the postmodern critique of Marx's 'species-being,' i.e., the true essence of humankind that will be realised with the emergence of non-alienating conditions of social existence.

Lyotard claims that with the absence of the cult, art, for Adorno, can only exist as a middleman – as the various incarnations of the Devil in Mann's text – the pimp, the music critic, the intellectual, the capitalist – but more importantly for my dissertation, the work of art for Lyotard, assumes a "Christ-like" quality which has "taken upon itself all the darkness and guilt of the world ... it finds all its happiness, all its beauty in forbidding itself the appearance of the beautiful."<sup>126</sup> It can only pay for the highest with the lowest, i.e., by sacrifice and martyrdom. The price of genius is always its unintelligibility, or disease (as the young Leverkühn contracts syphilis after a single visit to a brothel – the only sexual experience of his life). There is no resistance here: the paroxysms that Adorno wants to prove still exist in art are nullified because there exists no cult to realise their potential: "Diabolism is then the testimony that the paroxysmic force or power persists in the confines of a world which has no place for it – it can only persist as disease, syphilis, neurosis, etc."<sup>127</sup>

It all comes back to this: art, for Adorno, and criticism itself, is a nostalgia for God. This means that when God was "in us," the world was reconciled with humanity. The very existence of art demonstrates that it no longer is. For

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<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 127.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 129.

Adorno, art becomes a receptacle for the utopic desire for reconciliation. As a result, Lyotard proclaims: “Adorno is criticism’s finale, its bouquet, its revelation as fireworks”<sup>128</sup>; it is, the second/last movement in Beethoven’s Opus 111 – a farewell to criticism, but without its author’s willingness to acknowledge it.

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The suggestion that Adorno is working within a theological framework is by no means absurd or surprising, especially considering the extremely broad way in which Lyotard employs the term. It can be said that virtually all of modern philosophy has its religious moment, its ‘leap of faith.’ However, does it not, at the same time, seem somewhat peculiar to assign a *Christian* position to Adorno – to call his work “Christ-like” and “Catholic”? Does this not ascribe to him the same position as that of Kant, according to which God must exist as the guarantor of the moral law<sup>129</sup>; or Hegel, for whom the final reconciliation of subject and object on Earth is already achieved or, at least, imminent? With these considerations in mind, it becomes important to differentiate between modes of the theological, in an attempt to identify a space for opening up Lyotard’s position that the melancholic, or nostalgic, is not simply opposed to something we might call the postmodern. This is what I will show in the second half of this chapter.

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 130.

<sup>129</sup> Theodor Adorno, *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, ed. Schroder, trans. Livingstone, 148.

*The Image Prohibition*<sup>130</sup>

The Second Commandment, which prohibits the creation of images, is a trope many scholars<sup>131</sup> have employed when attempting to come to grips with systems of thought that are based in phenomenological negation, in particular, Jewish thinkers.<sup>132</sup> To begin with the Jewish perspective, God has no finite shape or form, and therefore is unknowable as such.<sup>133</sup> This anti-anthropomorphic principle is converted into Law via the Second Commandment. To attempt to create an image of the Divine is to do violence to the transcendent truth of God, and is a process of producing false idols that the jealous God will not tolerate.<sup>134</sup> Furthermore, the ban on images is extended to speaking the Name of God. This is not to say that God does not have a name, but that the language in which it must be understood is not a human language: it is the sacred language of the absolute, of Truth. In sum, the dual prohibitions on images and the Name, signify that no representation of the Divine can be tolerated because any representation would necessarily be false – it is an absolute ban on the representation of the

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<sup>130</sup> I would like to thank my colleague Karyn Ball for introducing me to the importance of Adorno's relationship to Jewish theology. Without her expertise and patient commitment, I would not have been able to write this chapter.

<sup>131</sup> See, for example, Žižek, *On Belief*; Karyn Ball, "Paranoia in the Age of the World Picture: the Global 'Limits of Enlightenment,'" *Cultural Critique* 61 (2005) 115-147; Gertrud Koch, "The Aesthetic transformation of the Image of the Unimaginable: Notes on Claude Lanzmann's Shoah," trans. Jamie Owen Daniel and Miriam Hansen, *October* 38 (1989); David Kaufmann, "Adorno and the Name of God," <http://webdelsol.com/FLASHPOINT/adorno.htm>; Michael Rothberg, *Traumatic Realism: The Demands of Holocaust Representation*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press (2002).

<sup>132</sup> My reading of the Jewish tradition will be largely filtered through Adorno's secular appropriation of certain elements from the Kabbalist interpretation of the Torah via Walter Benjamin, who in turn, was mentored by Gershom Scholem.

<sup>133</sup> Although I am restricting my study to the Jewish interpretation of the Image Prohibition, one could populate this history with Islam's reaction to the Image Prohibition, and the two moments of violent collision between the iconoclast and iconophilic tendencies in Christianity (in 6<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> Century Byzantium and during the protestant Reformation).

<sup>134</sup> For more on this, see Alain Besançon, *The Forbidden Image: An Intellectual History of Iconoclasm*, trans. Jane Marie Todd, Chicago: Chicago University Press (2000).

unrepresentable.<sup>135</sup> According to this reading, the possibility of redemption exists in the Name of God. But the future-oriented Messianism of Judaism prevents the possibility of a phenomenal basis for redemption *hic et nunc*.

Christianity negates this future-oriented Messianic position. For iconophiles like St. John of Damascus (arguably the greatest apologist for icons), the coming of Jesus Christ fundamentally changed the relationship between God and His people. Because it was understood that Christ was God the Word become Flesh, it became acceptable to represent the visible part of the invisible God.<sup>136</sup> Originally this position was radically heterodox, and the Catholic Church's official affirmation of it was only realised after centuries of periodic violent confrontations (i.e., the iconoclast conflicts). Ultimately, the icon came to literally represent what Christ was thought to be – an *object* that exists contemporaneously in both the divine and profane worlds (for example, the blood and myrrh that exude from icons were considered to originate from beyond the

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<sup>135</sup> Adorno adopts the doctrine of the Name from Benjamin. In short, the Name represents the particular. It harkens to a time before the existence of universals. Adam was the first philosopher because he named things in their particularity before naming became political. See: Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne, London: NLB (1977). On the other hand, the *word* acts in the name of universality; it kills the object to the extent that it represents it as universal. Adorno appropriates the Jewish prohibition on speaking the Name of God, because hope lies in not calling what is false true. See: Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 23-24.

<sup>136</sup> “I do not adore the creation rather than the Creator, but I adore the one who became a creature, who was formed as I was, who clothed Himself in creation without weakening or departing from His divinity, that He might raise our nature in glory ... The flesh assumed by Him is made divine and endures after its assumption ... Therefore I boldly draw an image of the invisible God, not as invisible, but as having become visible for our sakes by partaking of flesh and blood.” See: John of Damascus, *On the Divine Images*, trans. David Anderson, Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press (1980) 16. In the next chapter I explore Brown's understanding of Christian iconoclasm in much greater detail.

phenomenal world).<sup>137</sup> Thus, the Second Commandment is read by iconophilic Christians as a pre-Christian problem that demanded reconciliation – a reconciliation that was achieved with the coming of Christ.<sup>138</sup> It is my assertion that, despite Lyotard’s re-reading of him, Kant’s sublime employs very much a Christian iconophilic understanding of the Image Prohibition because, to the extent that the faculty of reason makes the sublime intelligible, it suggests we exist in an already redeemed world. While subject and object might not be fully sublated, in a Hegelian register, the mind, via the sublime, determines absolutely its connection to the phenomenal world in the form of the moral law.

Thus, if Lyotard wants to use the category of the sublime as a basis for reading the indeterminate and infinitely negative aspects of the avant-garde it is difficult to see how this can be directly linked to Kant’s hermeneutic of the sublime as a form of aesthetic judgement. That is to say, it seems to ignore the role that Kant explicitly assigns the aesthetic as a bridge between the realms of pure and practical reason. This may be why Lyotard is compelled to formulate his two modes of the sublime. In effect, what he achieves with these distinctions is to highlight the differences between, not so much, Christian and Jewish interpretations of the Second Commandment, but differences between modern and postmodern readings of it. In both cases the emphasis is on negativity and,

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<sup>137</sup> See Peter Brown, “A Dark Age Crisis: Aspects of the Iconoclastic Controversy,” in *Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity*, Berkeley: University of California Press (1982) 261.

<sup>138</sup> “These commandments were given to the Jews because of their proneness to idolatry. But to us it is given, on the other hand, as Gregory the Theologian says, to avoid superstitious error and to come to God in the knowledge of the truth; to adore God alone, to enjoy the fullness of divine knowledge, to attain to mature manhood, that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine. We are no longer under custodians but we have received from God the ability to discern what may be represented and what is uncircumscribed.” See: John of Damascus, *On the Divine Images*, 18.

therefore, based on Lyotard's reading, both are opposed to positivist, idealist forms of modern philosophy (read liberal, or Hegelian). However, he is also attempting to link his melancholic sublime to a romantic desire for a pre-modern social unity – *God was Great in Us!* – that never existed. Thus, with a broad stroke, modernism and dialectics are discredited by Lyotard. But I want to stress again that this melancholic sublime is based on a distinctly Christian interpretation of the Image Prohibition and, therefore, we must hold open the possibility that a form of negative presentation informed by Judaism could be radically different. For example, Lisa Yun Lee claims that Utopia for Adorno is a “negative, intangible site that cannot be understood or located in a spatial sense. Hope and Utopia are not located in the future somewhere, but in how we imagine the future and the conditions of knowing,”<sup>139</sup> and this corresponds to the understanding of redemption in various Jewish traditions.<sup>140</sup> If this is the case,

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<sup>139</sup> Lisa Yun Lee, *Dialectics of the Body: Corporeality in the Philosophy of T.W. Adorno*, New York: Taylor and Francis (2004) 8.

<sup>140</sup> Anson Rabinbach, in “Between Enlightenment and Apocalypse: Benjamin, Bloch and Modern German Jewish Messianism,” *New German Critique* 34 (Winter 1985): 78-124, identifies four dimensions of modern Jewish Messianism, two of which are important for this dissertation. The first dimension is most akin to Lyotard's melancholic sublime, i.e., an expectation that through esoteric knowledge one can ‘evoke the lost utopian content of the past’ (85). The second dimension also retains a redemptive character, but one that ‘conceives of utopia in terms of a new unity and transparency that is absent in all previous ages as its central ideal ... Redemption appears either as the end of history or as an event within history, never as an event produced by history’ (85). If one focuses only on the first dimension it is easy to indict any Messianic tradition as conservative and romantic. However, the second dimension complicates the matter and allows for more nuanced readings. Contemporary readings of Adorno as full of melancholic yearning for a lost unity may be largely influenced by Susan Buck-Morss's work *Origin of Negative Dialectics*, in which she traces the influence that Walter Benjamin's Jewish mysticism had on Adorno's philosophy, in particular, his comments on Adam that I mentioned above. It demonstrates the extent to which Adorno, via Benjamin, recognises the truth content of Toranic passages because of their anti-conceptual lessons, but does not imply a literal reading of the Garden story as historical event that will once again be. See also: Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. Adorno and Tiedemann, trans. Hullot-Kentor: “The concept of originality, as in Benjamin's sense of the “originary,” does not so much summon up the primordial as the yet to be in works, their utopic trace” (226).

then perhaps we can situate the latter form as a sort of theoretical bridge, or heuristic tool that can help us read Critical Theory as both against postmodernism and the dominant form of modernism.<sup>141</sup>

*Adorno, Art, and the Secularisation of the Prohibition*

For Adorno, the Jewish Image Prohibition marks a moment of religious rationalisation – an attempt to free humankind from myth and superstition. As he states in *Negative Dialectics*:

The materialist longing to grasp the thing aims at the opposite: it is only in the absence of images that the full object could be conceived. Such absence concurs with the theological ban on images. Materialism brought that ban into secular form by not permitting Utopia to be positively pictured; this is the substance of its negativity. At its most materialistic, materialism comes to agree with theology. Its great desire would be the resurrection of the flesh, a desire utterly foreign to idealism, the realm of the absolute spirit.<sup>142</sup>

In the anthropology of the dialectic of enlightenment, this is a negation of magic because the possibility of controlling nature through imitation – magical symbols, rituals, and utterances – is rendered impossible.<sup>143</sup> Hope for redemption still exists, but it is preserved negatively – in the *inability* of humans to access the Divine through the profane. As David Kaufmann characterises it: “The prohibition on speaking the Name maintains the integrity of the transcendent while preventing any shortcuts towards attaining it.”<sup>144</sup> Thus, for Adorno, certain strains in the Kabbalist tradition set up a world in which the hope for a future

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<sup>141</sup> In other words, Critical Theory opposes postmodernism to the extent that it posits the possibility of redemption, but it lacks the linear teleology of German idealism (modernism).

<sup>142</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 207.

<sup>143</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 7.

<sup>144</sup> Kaufmann, “Adorno and the Name of God,” 2.

redemption is seemingly paradoxical because, on the one hand, the idea of God has negated the mythical belief in pure immanence or blind fate, while, at the same time, situating the possibility of change in a transcendent, unknowable, and inaccessible deity. It is at this crossroads that Adorno intervenes and appropriates the Image Prohibition for his own project. He suggests that, indeed, the Prohibition returns to myth as pure immanence (fate), but only if *one retains faith in God*.<sup>145</sup> For Adorno, it is the task of the *faithless* to adopt the prohibition on the Name, secularise it, and attempt to redeem the world through recovering its power.<sup>146</sup> But, as stated earlier, it is not possible to name the Name through human language, and therefore one must look elsewhere, beyond ‘communicative’ or ‘intentional’ (‘conceptual’) language. For Adorno, this beyond of human language, is none other than the non-conceptual language of art.

According to Adorno, because artworks are a means to express suffering, they challenge society as it exists in its deformed state. They are not communicative in nature – instead they are non-conceptual forms of expression.<sup>147</sup> To express suffering in a non-conceptual way is to demonstrate in art a lack of harmony, tone, unity, or figural beauty. Whether it is Picasso’s *Guernica* or an orchestral arrangement by Schönberg, genuine artworks refuse the

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<sup>145</sup> “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. There is no mistaking the analogy with the tendency of the profane to secularize the realm of the sacred to the point that only as secularized does the latter endure.” Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 7.

<sup>146</sup> For an understanding of how Adorno uses the idea of ‘redemption’ in relation to the Doctrine of the Name, see Kaufmann’s article: “Correlations, Constellations and the Truth”: “The Name presents the possibility that the catastrophe can be undone, but at present the Name is merely an object of hope, the horizon of a future redemption. In the meantime, philosophy has to make do with its constellations” (70).

<sup>147</sup> Artworks are not imitations of reality, but ‘reconstellations’ of reality.

false positivity of ‘beautiful’ art; one is not supposed to ‘enjoy’ art, one is supposed to learn from it.<sup>148</sup>

The nonconceptuality of art answers the ‘why’ but not the ‘how’ of art’s power of resistance. To this point, I have stressed that Adorno secularises Jewish theology to develop his aesthetic theory, but I have not worked through the form of this secularisation, which cannot be understood divorced from his neo-Marxist critique of capitalist social relations. In other words, his secularisation of the Image Prohibition is of the Marxist stripe. With this in mind, Adorno’s notion of genuine artworks, and the aesthetic experience they engender is best understood by their position as ‘defetishising fetishes.’ This is explored by Lambert Zuidervaart in *Adorno’s Aesthetic Theory: Redemption of an Illusion*, in which he masterfully summarises this seemingly paradoxical character of artworks by way of identifying a series of polarities active in them, which are peculiar to advanced capitalism. To summarise briefly: artworks are both independent of, and dependent on, society. To the extent that they are dependent on capitalist society, they are fetishes that cover up the labour invested in them and *appear* to take on a life of their own. The word ‘appear’ is crucial here, because it indicates the *illusion* of autonomy that provides artworks their unique power to suggest changed conditions of social existence. Art also *appears* to have no use-value, and therefore, no rationale for exchange value. In other words, artworks appear to have no use beyond their own existence, and to this extent they are considered

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<sup>148</sup> Adorno calls Schönberg’s works songs that refuse to be enjoyed. See: Theodor Adorno, “On the Fetish-Character in Music and the Regression of Listening,” in *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, ed. Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt, New York: Continuum (1982) 274.

‘irrational,’ given the existing social relations and ideological environment. Thus artworks remind us of an aspect of production that we have forgotten: unalienated, and genuinely human production.<sup>149</sup> The dysfunctional function of artworks recalls what I have already said above, but is worth repeating. To the extent that artworks are apparently irrational and dysfunctional, it is not philosophy’s task to identify these characteristics, but to make sense of their meaninglessness.<sup>150</sup>

Above all, Adorno’s category of aesthetic experience is a process of consciousness raising – of coming to realise the falsity of identity in a society dominated by it. In short, art achieves the intent of the Image Prohibition, but in a secularised form heavily informed by a Marxist critique of reification and exchangeability. Art refuses to call true what is false, while retaining a utopic trace of what could be via a negation of what is. However, the possibility of an unalienated world or totality, is founded upon the possibility of an unalienated subject – a subject that exists today only in the negative presentation of art. Thus, the truth of the Image Prohibition – the hope of a future redemption – is maintained in the secularised form of modern art.

### *Conclusion*

While there does seem to be a romantic trace of melancholia in Adorno – for example, his nostalgia for aesthetic production that is not determined by

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<sup>149</sup> Lambert Zuidervaart, *Adorno's Aesthetic Theory: The Redemption of an Illusion*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press (1991) 88.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*, 152.

market forces – his appropriation of Jewish Messianism allows for the future coming of Truth on Earth, but it is crucial to understand that for Adorno, to the extent that this Messianism is religious in character, it is a passive one, and therefore enslaved to immanence (fate). By secularising the Image Prohibition in a Marxian context, redemption becomes a demand that history makes of humankind. It therefore becomes humanity's task to 'reconstellate' the false totality so as to negatively illuminate its truth content. In this way, the truth of the object, or materiality, is made possible. In other words, Jewish Messianism becomes rooted in the real material conditions of existence. Adorno's philosophy is based on acknowledging the truth of the object, or the phenomenal world, and in the realm of aesthetics, the truth content of art is none other than *hope* for reconciliation itself.

But let us consider for a moment the notion of 'humanity' in Adorno's work. As I suggested earlier, Adorno transfers the passive Jewish Messianic idea into the hands of history and humanity. But what is 'humanity'? Is this not Lyotard's devastating point of attack? For the critical Marxism of Frankfurt, is the category of humanity – unalienated humanity, or 'three dimensional man' – the Grand Signifier that all modernisms suffer as fatal weakness? Certainly underlying all of Adorno's work is a notion of the human, but how is it expressed? It is never, in fact, presented (to my knowledge) positively. Consider this passage from *Problems of Moral Philosophy*: "We may not know what absolute good is or the absolute norm, we may not even know what man is or the

human or humanity – but what the inhuman is we know very well indeed.”<sup>151</sup> This is a reference to the Jew of the concentration camp – the subject of Auschwitz, as it were, that “... was no longer an individual who died, but a specimen.”<sup>152</sup> Thus, to the extent that Adorno wields a notion of the ‘human,’ it is only manifested as the negation of the ‘inhuman.’<sup>153</sup> Thus, the task of redemption for the human is completely invested in illuminating the category of the ‘inhuman’ – the diseased, the demonic. If we know what constitutes the ‘inhuman,’ then what of the ‘human’? How can we understand this? Is the ‘human’ simply a metaphor for the ‘particular,’ i.e., the secret Adamic power of naming? For the truth content of Kabbalism? Is it a demand to break through exchange relations, which is the normative foundation of Lyotard and other thinkers, like, for example, those of the *Collège de Sociologie*? Does this sort of approach to understanding Adorno challenge the criticism that he still operates within a theological framework of representation? Within this context can ‘dialectics’ be saved, or is it simply a ‘hesitation’ before the postmodern on the part of Adorno, as Albrecht Wellmer suggests?

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<sup>151</sup> Adorno, *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, 175.

<sup>152</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 362.

<sup>153</sup> It is Lyotard, of course, who is best known for his relatively recent work on the ‘inhuman,’ and it should not be confused with Adorno’s category of the same name. That is, the inhuman is Lyotard’s normative construction intended to challenge the reified category of the ‘human’ (or, the ‘subject’). It is possible, however that the ‘inhuman’ in Lyotard and the ‘human’ in Adorno, have many similarities. For more on Lyotard’s notion of the inhuman see: J.F. Lyotard, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby, Cambridge: Polity Press (1991).

The answer to these questions is twofold. First, there can be no doubt that Adorno's category of the human is theological in character, albeit in a secularised form. The human, as the human-to-come, is only intelligible against the background of a future-oriented Messianic hope for redemption (a Messianism, however, lacking a positive teleology). From an ethical perspective, Adorno's human must be rejected because it lacks any substantive potential for informing an ethical way of life beyond an ascetical relationship to existing norms and values – one can only attempt to reject what one can never get outside of (late capitalist social relations). Second, in response to the question 'is Adorno's philosophy a simple hesitation before the postmodern, or is postmodernism the logical (but disavowed) extension of his philosophy?' The answer to this is *no*: Adorno's key *a priori* ethical imperatives – those that would define the human – can be saved from both the excessive relativism of postmodernism and the formal proceduralism of Habermas, by adopting a more sophisticated, alternative understanding of subjectivity, or what it means to be human. This is a primary component of Žižek's project to revitalise left-wing thought and politics. In the next chapter I explore this alternative, starting with Žižek's idiosyncratic, but distinctly *Christian* reading of the Second Commandment.

## Chapter 4

### **Žižek's Rereading of the Image Prohibition: The Case of the Holy Man in 9<sup>th</sup> Century Byzantium**

In his 2001 text, *On Belief*, Slavoj Žižek proposes an alternative reading of iconoclasm to that offered by Adorno, and he situates it in the context of the movement from paganism through Judaism to Christianity.<sup>154</sup> While by no means an exhaustive and rigorous study of comparative theology (that is, he presents his argument in the form of one of his trademark gestures – the rhetorical question), it can be appropriated to reconsider simultaneously, Adorno's method, his understanding of the Image Prohibition, and the status of the human in his work. At the same time, Žižek's analysis of the Image Prohibition is a perfect example of what I described in Chapter Two as his dialectics of 'autoprohibition.' As I will argue, for Žižek, the image, as a site of the particular, is automatically prohibited by the subject because it also contains the unbearable 'truth' of the ontological emptiness of subjectivity. Approaching the nature of the image in the way that Žižek does, allows for a notably different formulation of subjectivity than that offered by Adorno, and one that is better able to explain contemporary (Western) subjectivity and thus is better able to think the contemporary field of ethics in which that subject is formed.<sup>155</sup> I add support for Žižek's reading by

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<sup>154</sup> It should be noted that Žižek nowhere directly addresses Adorno's reading of the Image Prohibition. Thus, the work here should be considered my comparative interpretation of the two perspectives.

<sup>155</sup> To prefigure the argument of this chapter and the next, what is meant here by 'contemporary subjectivity' is Žižek's Lacanian understanding of the subject. It is contrasted with Adorno's late-modern formulation of subjectivity which is based on the notions of repression and false consciousness. Žižek's theory of subjectivity is much more sophisticated – taking into account the ambivalence of desire and the way in which experiences of subjectivity are caught up in the power

applying it (along with Adorno's critique of the Prohibition) to an examination of some of the events that constitute the iconoclast conflicts in 9<sup>th</sup> Century Byzantium.

### *Žižek and the Image Prohibition*

Žižek's primary interest is to reconstruct the traditional understanding that the move from paganism (Greek/Roman) to Judaism is principally a process of "de-anthropomorphisation." Žižek claims that it is commonly assumed among Continental philosophers that while the pagan gods of antiquity shared human qualities, both mental and physical, and engaged in human behaviour – including sexual and debaucherous excess – the Jewish God is without human form or attributes.<sup>156</sup> With this in mind, Žižek poses the question: "...what if the true target of Jewish iconoclastic prohibition is not previous pagan religions, but rather its *own* 'anthropomorphization'/'personalization' of God? What if the Jewish religion *itself* generates the excess it has to prohibit?"<sup>157</sup> He notes that, far from being fully de-anthropomorphised the Jewish God, in fact, more strongly personifies human qualities than the various entities in the pagan pantheon. As he states: "It is only with Judaism that God is FULLY 'anthropomorphized,' that the

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affects of contemporary capitalist social relations, which repress, produce, organise, and alter pleasure and desire. 'Ethics in contemporary society' refers to a shift away from the bourgeois ascetic ethical imperatives that Adorno observed in his time, to its obverse that Žižek identifies. The discursive phenomena used to frame this 'contemporary context' are the 'duty to be healthy' and 'decaf reality, both of which are discussed in Chapter Five.

<sup>156</sup> See the Introduction to his book *Puppet and the Dwarf*, for a brief discussion regarding Continental Philosophy's alleged love for Jewish thought and rejection of Christian thought. Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity*, Boston, MA: MIT Press (2003).

<sup>157</sup> Žižek, *On Belief*, 130.

encounter with Him is the encounter with another PERSON in the fullest sense of the term – the Jewish God experiences full wrath, revengefulness, jealousy, etc., as every human being.”<sup>158</sup> Thus, for Žižek, the reason for prohibiting the creation of His image is not that it would necessarily be a *false* depiction, that it would never be adequate to His true unrepresentable nature, but that it would *all too faithfully* demonstrate His humanity. He claims: “... the Jewish prohibition only makes sense against the background of this fear that the image would reveal something shattering, that, in an unbearable way, it would be TRUE and ADEQUATE.”<sup>159</sup>

If this position is in any way tenable, then what does it mean that Christianity allows and, in some cases, even worships the image of the divine? For Žižek, the reasons for this are clear: Christ fulfills the genuine move *toward* anthropomorphism that Judaism began, simply by recognising it in itself. However, for Žižek it is not simply (as it was for John of Damascus) that in Christ God becomes man, but that “Christ is fully a man only insofar as he takes upon himself the excess/remainder, the ‘too much’ on account of which a man, precisely, is never fully a man” and therefore, “it becomes clear that God is NOTHING BUT the excess of man, the ‘too much’ of life which cannot be contained in any life-form, which violates the shape (*morphe*) of anthropomorphism.”<sup>160</sup> Thus, in Žižek’s work the Xenophanic maxim<sup>161</sup> is

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<sup>158</sup> Ibid., 130-31.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid., 132.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid., 131-32.

<sup>161</sup> “But if horses or oxen or lions had hands or could draw with their hands and accomplish such works as men, horses would draw the figures of the gods as similar to horses, and the oxen as

acknowledged but with a twist: God is created in man's image-perception of Himself, but only to the extent that it projects that which is unrepresentable and uncontainable in the form of man. To the extent that the 'human' would be understood as complete, enjoying all the immanent properties of the modern subject (Marxist, liberal, or otherwise) in the Symbolic Order, it can only approximate wholeness or humanness by recognising its lack – its inhuman complement – the yawning gap between the Symbolic and the Real. Žižek articulates this point most clearly in his contribution to the book *The Neighbor*, wherein he defines the human being as “the difference between human and the inhuman excess that is inherent to being – human.”<sup>162</sup>

I will speak to this inhuman excess later in this chapter, but for now Žižek's analysis is interesting for my project because, I argue, this 'excess' of the human directly challenges Lyotard's construction of the *inhuman*. Žižek argues that it is the *image* of man, and not its absence, that points to its truth content. While for Lyotard, the subject becomes an avant-garde work of art as a signifier of the unrepresentable, for Žižek the inhuman excess manifests itself in its concrete representation. In this regard, Jewish iconoclasm can be understood as a hesitancy to recognise *the divinity in man*. For Žižek, the move from Judaism to Christianity is akin to a move from what might be called an 'immanent

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similar to oxen, and they would make the bodies of the sort which each of them had.” Xenophanes, *Fragments*, trans. J.H. Leshner, Toronto: University of Toronto Press (1992) 89.  
<sup>162</sup> Slavoj Žižek, Eric L. Santner, and Kenneth Reinhard, *The Neighbor: Three Inquiries in Political Theology*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press (2007) 175.

dialectic,'<sup>163</sup> in which no progress or transcendence occurs, to a genuinely materialist dialectic, in which a divine object is fully sublated into the phenomenal world. In other words, as he puts it, "Judaism and Christianity are related as In-itself and For-itself – Judaism is Christianity 'in itself,' still in the form of paganism, articulated in the pagan horizon. *Within* this horizon (of images, sexualized rituals, etc.), the New can only assert itself in the guise of a radical *prohibition*: no images, no sacred orgies."<sup>164</sup> Judaism, in short, represents a disavowal of its truth-content by prohibiting its positive presentation (because its revelation would destroy the Judaic Symbolic Order).

This is reminiscent of Adorno's use of the Second Commandment, whereby the power of the Name is transferred from the realm of immanence or fate into the hands of humanity as historical agent. The establishment of the Image Prohibition is, in other words, a historical moment of dialectical sublation in which a new truth emerges (that humans must make their own destiny). In a similar manner, Žižek reads the Prohibition as a moment of dialectical sublation, but not as a *full* sublation. For Žižek, the completion of the dialectical unfolding occurs one epoch later and with the Christian *overcoming* of the Commandment (i.e., allowing the image of God).<sup>165</sup> Žižek offers a radical interpretation of the relationship of the image to these two religious traditions because, on his reading,

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<sup>163</sup> I need to acknowledge my colleague Amy Swiffen for bringing this idea of 'immanent dialectic' (among other Žižekian and Lacanian categories) in Žižek to my attention.

<sup>164</sup> Žižek, *On Belief*, 129.

<sup>165</sup> For Žižek, history proper begins with Judaism because it initiates the division between history and eternity; or the advent of a 'before' and 'after' vs. the pagan cosmos which is understood simply as a cycle of the rise and fall of empires. In other words, he suggests that Judaism is the first mode of thought to introduce a teleological/eschatological understanding of history (despite not being a full sublation of paganism). Žižek, *On Belief*, 111-112.

the normative discourse surrounding the relationship between the particular and the universal – in both the Jewish and the Christian traditions – is re-arranged. The new relationship he describes between the particular and the universal does not simply reverse them; it is not that the universal becomes the site of truth, while the particular is false because it is not fully sublated. On the contrary, what he is describing is an object in which the particular and universal are indistinguishable. If one were to describe it in Adornian terms, the particular, which is true, is firmly situated in the image of man, which is also the site of the universal. On my reading of Žižek, because the image appears to capture both the human (as a construct in the Symbolic) *and* the inhuman excess (the lack called the Real), seeing the image is tantamount to a momentary experience of the Real because it is complete – the particular and universal appear to be momentarily reconciled. The content of this image points to the necessary dissolving of the Symbolic Order from which an Act can emerge. Adorno would reject this reading because it posits a non-existent redemption (or reconciliation of subject and object). The key point to remember, from a Žižekian perspective, is that the image does not signify a reconciliation that remains with the subject or redeems the world, but a reconciliation that the subject instantly (or shortly after) begins to break apart or divide in order to create a new Symbolic Order. Therefore, there is no reconciliation here in Adornian terms. There is only a destruction of subjectivity as such that allows the possibility of a new, but by no means redeemed, way of being a subject (one remains alienated from the Real) but in a new Symbolic Order. This is slightly akin to Adorno's category of

aesthetic experience, but the major difference is that, while a subject obtains a higher level of consciousness after an aesthetic experience, it still finds itself in the same alienating and totalising world.

To this extent, the Real of man becomes ‘inhuman,’ and the proper dialectical object of philosophical investigation. For Žižek, the greatest flaw with most modern and contemporary Continental theorists of subjectivity (and this includes Adorno) is that they do not acknowledge the inhuman component of humanity. It is his contention that without coming to grips with this ontological fact of being human, philosophers will never fully understand historical moments of human brutality and terror, nor will they be able to adequately formulate a genuinely progressive political project.

And so, for the sake of argument, I will for the time being refer to Žižek’s construction of the human, or more-than-human due to its divine excess, as another articulation of the ‘(in)human.’ With this counter-narrative of iconoclasm in mind, it proves productive to read it against Adorno’s appropriation of the Image Prohibition – specifically in terms of the relationship between the particular and the universal, in which the power of the Name is manifested. For this, I would like to explore a historical moment in which virtually the entire constellation of contested theological and political principles constituting the debate over images arose: the iconoclast conflict of 9<sup>th</sup> century Byzantium. What is most apparent in studying this conflict is that Adorno’s reading of the Image Prohibition is severely flawed, if not completely mistaken. If the power of the image of the divine during this period is represented primarily by icons and the

holy man (as a Christ-like figure), it was manifested quite clearly *against* the universalism of the Church and Empire. These figures (icons and holy men) were distinctly localised, representing the particularity of rural communities resisting attempts to be incorporated into a universal political structure. In this context, iconoclastic Christians were not destroying images in an attempt to stay true to the Old Testament Commandment, but to eradicate the power of their particularity (manifested in the form of local populations' loyalty to particular saints and holy men). What is striking about the holy man is the way in which his image and his place in society are consistent with Žižek's re-reading of the Image Prohibition and his model of subjectivity in general. To this extent, the holy man represents the inhuman excess by which all humans are defined.

Before moving on, I should make a brief comment on the method I am using to connect Žižek's analysis to these historical events. When Adorno claims that capitalist exchange relations are the social equivalent of identity, he demonstrates that his philosophical understanding of particularity/universality can be used to describe empirical phenomena. In classical Marxist terminology, the particular refers to the use value of an object, while the universal refers to its exchange value. Exchange value is considered universal because the meaning of the object is completely abstracted from its material reality. It follows, then, that the particularity of an object refers to its use value – the innate properties of an object *qua* genuine human need. While Adorno would reject the notion of use-value as a pre-dialectical metaphysical category (i.e., as something existing outside of the mediation of language), he would claim that the object is particular

in terms of its materiality. Following from this, I assert that the language of particularity/universality can be applied in a social context to describe the analytic distinction between the *local* and the universal (which will be described differently depending on the context, i.e, the global, Empire, the national, etc.). In this chapter, the events I examine (the iconoclast conflicts) are understood as a struggle between the universality of the Church and Empire and the particularity/locality of individual towns, villages, and monasteries.

*Peter Brown: Iconoclasm and the Holy Man*

My intent in this section is not to provide a detailed historical account of the series of events that constitute the iconoclast crisis during the 9<sup>th</sup> century, but to highlight the way in which certain discourses of universality and particularity, represented politically by Empire and local authority respectively, were articulated through the language of theology. In effect, my argument is that what might be perceived as a debate over dogma was, in fact, a struggle over the political imaginary of the populace. Thus, the following account is intended only to identify discursive trends that can help shed light on the main tropes of the first section of my project: philosophical appropriations of the Image Prohibition, the problematic of representation (and its relationship to the particular and universal), the various modes of approaching the category of the (in)human, and contrasting the dialectical methods of Adorno and Žižek. The conclusion of this chapter will involve a conceptual comparison of the holy man and Žižek's particular account

of the (in)human, which is simply another way of describing his understanding of subjectivity.

The Byzantine Empire existed from 306 to 1453 CE and, at the height of its power, spanned from southern Spain to the Syrian Desert and northern Italy to southern Egypt. It enjoyed its 'golden age,' under the reign of Emperor Justinian I, between the years 527 and 565. During this time the Empire experienced a period of relatively undisturbed peace (in terms of its relations with neighbouring empires). The 'iconoclast crisis' itself began when the stability of this period was shaken in the late 7th century due to a series of successful raids/incursions into Byzantine territory by the Arab Empire. These raids and incursions profoundly demoralised the populace because up to that point Byzantine subjects had been confident that God protected their borders. Their question thus became: 'How have we transgressed against God to deserve this divine punishment?'

Searching for a scapegoat to explain the success of the Arab challenge, the Church firmly placed the blame on widespread idolatry (primarily, the worship of icons) or 'national apostasy,' which, of course, included the transgression of the Second Commandment.<sup>166</sup> The iconoclasts suggested that images of Christ and the Saints serve to distract Christians from the worship of God in His indeterminable shape because these images constitute unconsecrated objects of veneration, and they thereby violate the scriptural prohibition on graven images. The iconophiles, by contrast, *promoted* the use of such images with the argument that they are 'useful' for illiterate Christians as reminders of God's glory and that,

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<sup>166</sup> Brown, *Dark Age Crisis*, 251.

in fact, icons are holy relics because they are consecrated ‘from below,’ that is, they were deemed holy not because of official consecration by the Church, but because there was a deep psychological need among the masses for such holy objects.<sup>167</sup> Regardless of the iconophile appeal, in 726 Emperor Leo III enacted the first official policy of iconoclasm within the Eastern Empire, and the Church sanctioned this position in 754 at the Council of Hieria. All images of Christ, the Virgin and, most markedly, Saints, were to be removed from places of worship and public display. This policy lasted almost uninterrupted until the last iconoclast Emperor – Theopholis – died in 842.<sup>168</sup>

Peter Brown is widely recognised as the foremost social historian of this age, and therefore my analysis will rely heavily on his work. He chooses to focus on a particular place and time – the Syrian countryside in the 9<sup>th</sup> century – because the changing social dynamics of the population characteristic of this historical moment can best illustrate why icons and holy men were both revered and reviled by different demographic groups.<sup>169</sup>

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<sup>167</sup> The response was markedly different in the Western Empire which did not experience the Arab incursions directly, but was still forced to address the question of the legitimacy of icons. In response to the Second Council of Nicaea, the Western Empire acted quickly. The acknowledgment that icons could be legitimately used as guides by illiterate Christians, but under no circumstances worshipped, was strongly posited in the Western Empire in the *Libri Carolini* in 790 CE: “We permit images of the Saints to be made by whoever is so disposed, as well in churches as out of them, for the love of God and of his Saints; but never compel anyone who does not wish to do so to bow down to them (adorare eas); nor do we permit anyone to destroy them, even if he should so desire.” Quoted in: Philip Schaff, “The Seven Ecumenical Councils,” Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1896. <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf214.xvi.xviii.iii.html>

<sup>168</sup> There was a brief period (752-814 CE) when official iconoclasm was reversed by Empress Irene and the Second council of Nicaea in 787. After Irene was deposed in 802, iconophilism lasted through the reign of three more rulers until iconoclasm was restored by Leo V the Armenian in 815.

<sup>169</sup> Paul Fouracre, “The Origins of the Carolingian Attempt to Regulate the Cult of Saints,” in ed. James Howard-Johnston and Paul Anthony Hayward, *The Cult of Saints in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages: Essays on the Contribution of Peter Brown*, New York: Oxford University Press

As Brown suggests, studying the controversy surrounding the use of icons in 9<sup>th</sup> century Byzantium is an exercise in exploring the socio-political and psychological dimensions of Syrian life during this period.<sup>170</sup> It should be stated from the outset that, in this regard, the icon proper – the portraiture of saints – played a secondary role to that of the ‘holy man’ who came to serve as an integral social institution in the form of arbiter, philosopher, counsellor, and political advisor.<sup>171</sup> In fact, the icon itself was only considered a sufficient surrogate if no holy man was available for counsel.<sup>172</sup> Thus, it is to the holy man that I first turn to understand the significance of the iconoclast crisis that rocked the Byzantine Empire in the 9<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>173</sup>

Brown begins with a very simple assertion: the rise of the popularity of icons and the influential position of the holy man would not have occurred if the subjects of the Byzantine Empire did not believe that human beings can directly intervene in divine affairs and, therefore, influence worldly phenomena.<sup>174</sup> In other words, the Christian population of late antiquity believed strongly that the

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(1999), illustrates the primary difference between approaches to images between the Western and Eastern Empires. In the West, the cult of saints was regulated by the Church through the integration of relics into official services. These relics were always objects related to the lives of dead saints. In contrast, the cult of saints (or holy men) in the Eastern Empire tended to focus on living individuals (144-145). As will be shown, the lack of regulation or normalisation of holy men on the part of the Byzantines resulted in severe political consequences for the Church and Empire.

<sup>170</sup> For various reasons explained by Brown, the existence and influence of the holy man during this time was greatest in the Roman province of Syria. See: “The Rise and Function of The Holy Man in Late Antiquity”, in Brown, *Society and the Holy*, 109-123.

<sup>171</sup> Considering my discussion of iconophilia and iconoclasm in Chapter Three, I will refrain from reiterating it here as it relates directly to icons. Instead, I will reserve this space primarily for a summary of Brown’s work as it pertains specifically to the holy man.

<sup>172</sup> Brown, “A Dark Age Crisis: Aspects of the Iconoclastic Controversy,” in *Society and the Holy*, 269.

<sup>173</sup> In his later work, Brown began to devote some attention to the subject of holy women as well as holy men. See: Avril Cameron, “On Defining the Holy Man,” in *Cult of Saints*, 27-44.

However, this aspect of his work is not relevant to my project so I will not be exploring it here.

<sup>174</sup> Brown, “A Dark Age Crisis,” 269.

course of terrestrial events is directly correlated to the sinful or wholesome behaviour of human beings. If a community was perceived to be characterised by widespread and inveterately wicked practices, that community could expect some kind of large-scale punishment from the venerable Beyond. The same belief operated on a micro-level as well. People understood that all sorts of personal afflictions originate from a divine source. However, these same people were not always resigned to their fate, as it was commonly believed that some exceptionally righteous persons have the ability to intervene in divine affairs and, effectively, change or correct their fate. Thus, the first characteristic of the holy man that must be considered is his relationship to the divine. In this regard, he must be understood as a site of power, a “living icon” as Brown puts it, or a “clearly-defined *locus* of the holy on earth.”<sup>175</sup>

There is, then, is a parallel between the icon and the holy man. For Brown, the icon can be understood literally as a physical object that exists simultaneously in both the empirical and metaphysical realms. Or, as he describes it: “The icon was a hole in the dyke separating the visible world from the divine and through this hole there oozed precious dribbles from the great sea of God’s mercy.”<sup>176</sup> The miracles that occurred at the site of icons – the actual emanation of matter (tears, blood, myrrh) from venerated images – were to be understood literally as holes between the dominions of the holy and profane. In a similar fashion, holy men were perceived as literal conduits of the miraculous. For example, it was widely believed that simply upon seeing a holy man, a

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<sup>175</sup> Ibid., 268.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid., 260-61.

believer could experience supernatural phenomena or deeds similar to those which icons performed, in particular, the miracle of healing. For the 9<sup>th</sup> century Byzantine subject, this power clearly demonstrated the ‘inhuman’ character of the holy man. As Brown argues: “Why the holy man over other possible mediators? The question must be asked ‘Are you Human?’ The answer for the sociologist was quite definitely, ‘no.’ In late Roman society, the holy man was deliberately not human. He was the ‘stranger’ *par excellence*.”<sup>177</sup> This concentration of divine power in the figure of the holy man meant that he became a site wherein the populace focussed or displaced their hopes and fears because he had the unique ability to ensure the actualisation of justice on Earth. He became an approachable object for a religion characterised by an unapproachable God, and thus the holy man became the “bearer of the objectivity of society.”<sup>178</sup>

The second characteristic of the holy man that needs to be examined is his role as political mediator/counsellor. During the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Syrian countryside was characterised by a rapid increase in both population and wealth. As is the case in all societies witnessing a growth in social complexity, mediators were required to ensure the peaceful settlement of disputes and the uninterrupted flow of social relations. The villagers of 9<sup>th</sup> century Syria found such a figure in the holy man. In this role, he replaced the ‘patron,’ a personality who existed as a liaison between town and village, and who used his contacts in each to facilitate

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<sup>177</sup> Brown, “Rise and Function,” 130.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*, 134.

urban/rural transactions, while amassing his own fortune.<sup>179</sup> In this regard, the primary difference between the patron and the holy man is that whereas the patron was firmly entrenched in society, the holy man, as radical ascetic, was resolutely positioned outside of society. He acted, one might say, as the divine or social *particular* in relation to the town's *universal*. This lent him a special place in the eyes of the village populace because his clients were able to avoid the debilitating humiliation that accompanied the accrual of debt that was characteristic of relations with the patron. As a saint and Christ-like figure, it was the holy man "as patron, and not his humble client, who ha[d] already taken on himself by asceticism the full load of humiliation."<sup>180</sup> In this regard, to the extent that the holy man was a site of power, the power that defined him was of a non-coercive sort because no clear material motivation for his intercessions existed.<sup>181</sup> In short, the holy man was a figure that transcended exchange relations. Ostensibly his interest lay not in personal profit – as was the case with the patron – but in some other realm and, therefore, he acted as the social particular in an Adornian register. Whether this motivation was a sort of righteous charity or simply the sheer exercise of power, is unclear.

So we begin to see that the holy man was an influential political authority in his community. To the extent that he can be understood as a site of power – both divine and political – this was a localised power within the greater context of Empire, which included, of course, a heavily hierarchised church

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<sup>179</sup> For various reasons, these elite slowly drifted away from patronage and toward working for the empire see: Philip Rousseau, "Ascetics as Mediators and as Teachers," in *Cult of Saints*, 45-59.

<sup>180</sup> Brown, "Town, Village and Holy Man: The Case of Syria," *Society and the Holy*, 161.

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

(infra)structure.<sup>182</sup> Thus, the holy man existed side by side an ordained priest – the official representative of the Church. His influence was not easily challenged by the clergy due to his special position as social outsider. For the Church and Empire, after losing the Eastern provinces to the Arab incursions, this sharing of power became untenable. In response, a sustained attempt to eradicate the influence of these *de facto* political authorities was pursued alongside the destruction of icons.<sup>183</sup> This was played out by purging monasteries and individual holy men. But more illustrative of this process was the removal of the images of local saints to be replaced with more universal symbols of Christendom, e.g., the cross and the Eucharist. The intent behind this was to foster a new form of imperial patriotism, one that referred back to Christianity as the core of Byzantine identity, and to discourage subjects from identifying with their local community and the saints that protected them:

Icons suffered, in part, because they were the symbols of a style of political life that was out of date. The Byzantine Empire could no longer afford the luxury of remaining a ‘commonwealth of cities’. Self-help had proved to be either treasonable or ineffective. The Emperor had to be omniscient, and to be seen to be omniscient. For the collapse of the city left a void in men’s view of the Empire. A new patriotism had to be created. The void was filled by more concrete emphasis than ever

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<sup>182</sup> At the top of the ladder, the Emperor was God’s representative on Earth. However, it was understood that he ruled jointly with the Church. As for the Church’s structure, five archbishops ruled over the five ‘Great Sees’ of Constantinople, Jerusalem, Rome, Alexandria and Antioch, with the archbishop of Constantinople acting as the titular leader, or ‘First Among Equals.’ Below the archbishops, each province in the empire was run by a bishop with the title ‘Metropolitan.’ After this, each region of a province had a bishop, each town and village had a priest, and the monastic orders were spread all over the empire. Important decisions were made by groups of bishops who convened under the auspices of a ‘synod’ or ‘Ecumenical Council.’

<sup>183</sup> It should be noted that some academics have challenged Brown's interpretation of the antagonistic nature of the relationship between holy man and the Church. See, for example: Susan Ashbrook Harvey, “The Stylite's Liturgy: Ritual and Religious Identity in Late Antiquity, ” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 6.3 (1998) 523-539, who argues that the holy man was always presented by the church in such a way as to be consistent with dogma/ritual.

previously on the Byzantines as a people of God, whose political imagery was borrowed from the Old Testament.<sup>184</sup>

Brown argues that by attacking icons the Church was indirectly challenging the political/spiritual authority of the holy men, partly by attempting to undermine the perception of their inhumanity. This was demonstrated by Constantine V who organised public spectacles designed to humiliate holy men and to prove that they were nothing more than mortal humans. For example, he would make holy men wear marriage gowns during public processions in the Hippodrome to demonstrate to the citizenry that they were tied to the world. And as such, “[t]he scene in the Hippodrome of Ephesus, quite as much as the destruction of the icons, [was] no less than an attempt by a group of Byzantines to challenge three centuries of unofficial leadership in the Christian community.”<sup>185</sup> As mentioned earlier, the holy man was a locus of the holy on Earth, however, he was also the primary agent of fostering the diffusion of icons. Thus, the iconoclast attacks were, ultimately, an attempt by the Church to centralise and consolidate its power. In Brown's words: “What was at stake ... was not the dissolution of the Byzantine monasteries. It was, rather, a singularly consequential, if spasmodic, determination to break the power of the holy man in Byzantine society, both as a principal bulwark of the power of the icon and, so one might suggest, as a force in itself.”<sup>186</sup> The events of the iconoclast conflict were, in other words, imperial politics as usual articulated through the idiom of religion.

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<sup>184</sup> Brown, “A Dark Age Crisis,” 290.

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid.*, 301.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*, 295.

For the purposes of this project, these attacks represent a conflict between the particular (holy men) and the universal (the Church), demonstrating a concrete historical example of the power of the particular – or the threat of the particular to the universal. In fact, late antiquity was a historical era almost defined by the localisation of the holy – in terms of the rise of the cult of the saints, and the social importance of icons, relics, and holy men. It was a revolutionary period for both the Church and the masses. Thus, we see the role of the particular in such a process, but again, in a role consistent with Žižek’s re-reading of the Image Prohibition. Contra Adorno, in this context the image is related to the particular, the local, and resistance to Empire, while the universal and ineffable gosesteps under the orders of a highly centralised and uncompromising authority. We witness here, perhaps, a concrete and imperial manifestation of Lyotard’s melancholic sublime. However, this is not to say that Žižek’s reading, as it relates to empirical-historical phenomena, is always true, but more that the relationship of the particular to the universal as it plays out in real political events will always be context-dependent (if not always bound up contemporaneously in the same objects or events). In other words, images must be interpreted in their specific political and historical positions of enunciation in order to determine whether they act in the name of the particular, the universal or, in some cases, both simultaneously.

At first glance, Brown’s description of the inhuman holy man fits well with Žižek’s account of the (in)human, because he was understood as a living icon. Therefore, his particularity (as a site of the divine on Earth and social

outsider) was located in his own physical image, and not in its express prohibition. In an Adornian register, he was inhuman to the extent that he transcended exchange relations due to that ineffable trace of the divine that could not be captured, or because he was ‘non-identical’ to himself. He was, in other words, a material manifestation of the particular that challenges the power and authority of the universal or conceptual (but, again, through the power of his own image). However, left as is, the above claim of an identity between Žižek’s inhuman and the holy man certainly lacks scholarly rigour, and needs to be examined more closely to confirm its validity. It will be shown that this relationship is somewhat more complex when we actually look at Žižek’s (in)human in a more detailed manner.<sup>187</sup>

### *Žižek’s (In)Human*

For both Adorno and Lyotard, the (in)human is characterised by a resistance to socialisation; they emphasise the trace left over from the processes of reification and acculturation respectively.<sup>188</sup> As I described in Chapter Three, the primary differences are observable in the normative aspects of their formulations: Adorno’s Jewish Messianic hope for reconciliation and Lyotard’s desire to retain the inhuman *in perpetuum*. My questions now are: what does Žižek’s mean by

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<sup>187</sup> I will use the term (in)human to describe Žižek’s notion of subjectivity because the inhuman excess is part of being human and, therefore, the human and inhuman are indistinguishable from each other.

<sup>188</sup> I refer here to ‘reification’ in relation to Adorno because of its ideological connotation, that is, for Adorno socialisation is a process of ideological ‘naturalisation’ of one’s experience of (false) subjectivity. For Lyotard, the process of socialisation is more banal, and simply refers to the social acquisition of a certain set of values, taboos, and manners – in short, ‘rules’ – specific to one’s culture. In this way, I employ the term ‘acculturation’ for Lyotard’s (in)human in distinction from Adorno’s ‘reification.’

the ‘inhuman excess’ and how does it differ from Adorno and Lyotard’s constructions? To what, exactly, does he refer when he talks about a certain *divinity* in man? And can his formulation of that divinity be related to the holy man? Finally, how exactly does the notion of the (in)human help inform his method of what I am calling ‘autoprohibition’?

In order to begin answering these questions, the following two major issues require clarification: 1) what Žižek (and Lacan) mean by the (dis)avowed ‘divinity in man’; and 2) what Žižek means by the ‘inhuman excess’ that is, nonetheless, integral to being human. Through a series of categorical equivocations in Žižek’s texts, one can work through these issues quite efficiently. It is my assertion that the ‘divinity in man’ and the inhuman excess are one and the same in Žižek’s reckoning. This is because ‘divinity’ is explicitly equated with the ‘too much of life’ and thus, it represents an excess *beyond* the human (or, in Freud’s terms, ‘beyond the pleasure principle’). This ‘too much of life’ is one way to talk about *jouissance*, the point *beyond* enjoyment: the pleasure sought to fill the lack at the core of subjectivity.

As mentioned above, *jouissance*, itself, is unattainable, but it is assumed that the Other has it (because we are never satisfied). To the extent that the cause of this search for *jouissance* is *objet petit a*, and it is the Other that has *jouissance*, then the Other can be understood as *objet petit a*. After working through the logic of this theory, I found this passage tucked away in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*:

What we find in Christianity is something of quite another order [than Judaism]: the idea of the *saint*, which is the exact opposite of the *priest* in service of the Holy. The priest is a ‘functionary of the Holy’; there is no Holy without its officials, without the bureaucratic machinery supporting its ritual, from the Aztec’s official human sacrifice to the modern sacred state or army rituals. The saint, on the contrary, occupies the place of *objet petit a*, of pure object, of somebody undergoing radical subjective destitution. He enacts no ritual, he conjures nothing, he just persists in his inert presence.<sup>189</sup>

This quote is in reference to a common trope that Žižek employs to differentiate Judaism and Christianity. For Žižek, Judaism is the religion of *the Law*, and thus its representative is the priest. The Jewish Law prohibits the ‘too much of life’ (the recognition of the inhuman excess that is a part of being human) in the same way that its Second Commandment disavows it in the form of the image.

Christianity (as a set of ideas and not the institution), on the other hand, is the religion of *inner belief*; belief in one’s personal relationship with God, the impossible, and the miraculous.<sup>190</sup> The saint is its representative because, in his image, the impossible or miraculous is very readily visible. To the extent that the saint is *objet petit a*, and *objet petit a* is the void that is the subject, Žižek’s ‘subject’ is revealed to be none other than the saint or the holy man. In other words, in the guise of the saint the subject sees a mirror image of its irreducible core: the Real of the subject.

But we must not forget that for Žižek, ‘the subject’ does not really exist in a positive manner – it emerges as an experience of the loss of an originary (pre-

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<sup>189</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, New York: Verso (1989), 116.

<sup>190</sup> “Christianity involves the distinction between external rules and inner belief (so the question is always: do you REALLY, in the innermost of your heart, believe, or are you just following the dead letter of the law?), while in Judaism, the ‘external’ rules and practices DIRECTLY ARE the religious belief in its material existence ....” Žižek, *On Belief*, 128-129.

Symbolic) completeness. That is to say, it is not part of the Real, but only manifest as a series of effects in the Symbolic Order. This is why he can call the saint *objet petit a*, the nonexistent cause of desire, because in the image of the holy man we witness the conflation of the Real and the Symbolic. In this way the holy man can be understood as the *(in)human* because he contains both the Symbolic and Real components of subjectivity in an avowed form. The human is the set of symbolic attributes which we acknowledge in ourselves, while the inhuman is what we disavow (but both are always present in the subject). It is unclear what specific, positive content constitutes these symbolic attributes, but in a liberal society (a Symbolic Order defined by the tenets of liberalism), one would expect it would correspond to classical liberal understandings of subjectivity: the human as a rational, ethical, and reflective actor, who is in the possession of free will. On the other hand, what we disavow is our true desire that leads us to act under the governance of the death drive, that unconscious imperative which leads us to repetitive behaviour in the impossible search for *jouissance*. In the clinical context, the task of the analyst is to help the analysand recognise this drive and learn to live with it, or re-coordinate it in a less destructive manner.<sup>191</sup> For Žižek, in his appropriation of Lacan for political theory, the successful re-coordination of desire is equivalent to the Act ('traversing the fantasy'). An Act is precipitated by a direct, if momentary, experience of the Real, in which the subject's Symbolic

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<sup>191</sup> It should be noted that the issue of the analyst and analysand is a distinctly ontogenetic one, while Žižek is really interested in the phylogenetic possibilities of this inhuman potential. As will be demonstrated, my project does not share the ambition of Žižek's in that I am interested in thinking of ethical behaviour at the level of individual subjectivity and not intent on theorising the possibility of a grand collective Act for the left.

universe collapses, thereby requiring that a new order be built (because the Symbolic Order always acts as the limit-point of the subject's ability to render things intelligible). A successful Act is, in effect, a re-ordering of one's core fantasy wherein a new *objet petit a* is established, and a new set of repetitive behaviour begins to circle it.<sup>192</sup> It is the inhuman component of being human that is the primary source of motivation for this and, as such, the holy man stands in for such potential.

Thus, we can establish that the inhuman complement or the divinity in man corresponds to both a desire and a potential in human beings. A desire to experience the pleasure of the Other, which drives us to action, and a potential for the 'miraculous.' That is to say, in the same way that the holy man was a conduit of the miraculous, so too is Žižek's (in)human which, in a secularised context, simply means that it has the ability to act in a way that makes what once seemed *impossible* become *possible* precisely to the extent that it happens. In hindsight, from the perspective of a subject who has witnessed a miracle, what once seemed 'impossible' only seems this way because the former Symbolic Order determined the limit of the subject's ability to imagine possible actions or events. Similar to Brown, who suggests that as a religious epoch Late Antiquity was distinctive because "the *locus* of the supernatural was thought of as resting on individual

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<sup>192</sup> Žižek cites the decision of Keyser Soeze in the film *The Usual Suspects* as a radical example of re-coordinating the Symbolic. Soeze's family is being held hostage by a criminal gang, and the gang uses this as leverage to blackmail Soeze. This threat to his family can be interpreted as the traumatic encounter with the Real that destroys Soeze's Symbolic Order. However, his decision to kill his family himself so that he can seek revenge on the gang without worrying about their safety, is cited by Žižek as a model of a genuine Act. Soeze experienced the Real, and made a decision that radically changed the coordinates of the situation in which he could act.

men,”<sup>193</sup> contemporary times for Žižek are defined by the banality of miracles, i.e., they happen all the time because they are simply successful re-coordinations of the Symbolic Order.

With this in mind, we can add to Žižek’s formulation of the new Christian universe as a fully sublated pagan one, if we consider his work on Paul. In a political register, for Žižek it was not Christ but Paul who was the true revolutionary Christian figure. This is because he institutionalised that which only existed in an ideal form, or as Žižek says: “*there is no Christ outside of St. Paul*; in exactly the same way there is no ‘authentic Marx’ that can be approached directly, bypassing Lenin.”<sup>194</sup> It is, in other words, Paul who founded the Christian Law that we know today, and thus it is he who committed the Žižekian Act known as ‘Christianity.’<sup>195</sup> Let us, for a moment, consider the holy man in this context. If, as stated above, the holy man is the site of both the particular and the universal but also opposed to the Church’s universal, either the Church must have produced the holy man as its inhuman excess or (and perhaps it is the same thing) the holy man is a trace remainder of the original moment of Christ himself, or that which refuses identification with Christianity as an institution.<sup>196</sup>

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<sup>193</sup> Brown, “Rise and Function,” 151.

<sup>194</sup> Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute: Or, Why is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?*, New York: Verso (2001) 2.

<sup>195</sup> *On Belief*, 3. For Alain Badiou, Christ is the Event and Paul interprets the resurrection of Christ as the relief from all law. While Žižek is a reader of Badiou, it is unclear to me what his relationship to Badiou’s Paul is. There appears to be some major differences, but Žižek does not seem to acknowledge them. See: Alain Badiou, *St. Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, trans. Ray Brassier, Stanford: Stanford University Press (2003).

<sup>196</sup> The issue of the non-identity of the holy man and Christianity raises a possible difficulty in this comparison of the saint in Žižek’s work to the holy man in Brown’s. Does the example of the holy man actually challenge Žižek’s claim that Christianity is a fully sublated form of paganism? Because when Žižek suggests that the saint is the representative of Christianity, this saint has a name, ‘Paul,’ and not ‘Simeon’ who is the ascetic holy man par excellence for Brown. In this

In the context of my project, the claim that the holy man can be understood on analogy with *objet petit a* is historically relevant because, like Christ, he is an *embodied* form of this non-existent object. In other words, he reinforces the critique of Adorno's reading of the Prohibition. As such, he represents the disavowed inhuman complement of being human, but directly in the form of an important political actor, which raises another interesting comparison between Žižek and Brown's work. As Žižek suggests, the search for *jouissance* is an exhausting undertaking, and we actually embrace the Law because in its prohibitions it provides us an excuse to give up this imperative (even though it always returns in our enjoyment of minor transgressions and the effects of the death-drive).<sup>197</sup> If we recall Brown's claim that the holy man assumed the humiliation and financial debt of his client then, in a similar vein, the displacement of the inhuman excess by regular Byzantine subjects onto the holy man is a strategy to relieve themselves from the superego commandment to enjoy. But as Lacan was always emphatic in his insistence: one should never give up on one's desire! While this utterance was never meant to be a radical or subversive call for a return to the political truth of the desiring body (*a la* queer theory or various forms of feminism), it serves as an appropriate misreading to segue into

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context, Paul is the founder of Law, while Simeon challenges it. Can it really be considered a genuine sublation if such a powerful remainder exists? Or is it simply another example of "Try again. Fail Again. Fail Better"? At first glance, the example of the holy man seems to fit better an Adornian negative dialectical framework of understanding history (the dialectic of enlightenment) rather than a Lacanian materialism. However, the problem is really that Žižek is vague in his definition of the saint. On the one hand, Paul is the figure he discusses the most, but his claim that the saint "persists in his inert presence" suggests the ascetic figure of Brown's work, and not the extremely active and proselytising Paul. Although working through this apparent equivocation would be an interesting undertaking, its resolution is not particularly significant for the conclusions of my project, so I will not explore it any further.

<sup>197</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies*, New York: Verso (1997) 114.

my next chapter, in which I will return to Adorno in an attempt to rethink his formulation of normative subjectivity (i.e., the ‘human’), not so much as a subject ‘of resistance,’ or as a ‘revolutionary subject,’ but more in a Foucauldian sense of an ethical subject (which, of course, always implies some form of resistance, regardless of how minimal this resistance might be or seem). However, in contradistinction from Žižek’s (in)human, my focus will be on the ethical subject in relation to *conscious* desire at the level of the body. In other words, I want to remove myself from the contentless, abstraction of the Act, and translate this new dialectical relationship of the particular and universal into a prescriptive formula for understanding contemporary, physical behaviour and the meaning subjects attach to it.

In conclusion, the new formulation of subjectivity that Žižek produces on his re-reading of the Image Prohibition is akin to the saint or the holy man. This can be understood from two perspectives: 1) the holy man as the subject; and 2) the holy man as an object of desire for the subject. From the perspective of the former, the subject has the ability to perform ‘miracles,’ but only in a banal secularised form. Even though the subject is enslaved by its inability to fulfill its desire, it can still *act*. This simply means that the subject can identify and alter its object-cause of desire so as to produce something new. As to the latter perspective, the holy man represents the desire of the Other. The subject misperceives that the other has the ability to satisfy its desire. By recognising the falsity of this perspective, the subject learns something crucial: all subjects are bound by the same *universal* condition that prevents full satisfaction of desire.

But, as will be argued, the particular is also acknowledged in this account to the extent that the nature of desire in individual subjects is always characterised by a *particular* content.

## Chapter 5

### **Decaf Reality and the Duty to be Healthy: Obverting Adorno's Critique of Self-Preservation**

Žižek's re-reading of the Image Prohibition, and the example of Peter Brown's holy man allows one the opportunity to revisit and rethink the underlying assertions that inform Adorno's entire philosophy, namely, his understanding of conceptuality and its relationship to non-identity. While Adorno stresses that, in the same manner as the image, the concept must be negated (as true in itself) because it is untrue to the extent that it ignores the truth of particularity, the reading I offer that brings Žižek to bear on Brown, demonstrates that the image contains the truth of both the particularity and universality of the subject in the form of an inhuman excess – that divine remainder that defines humanity despite its uncontainability in the category of the human. Adorno contends that because thought itself is conceptual, one can only think the truth of non-conceptuality or non-identity through concepts. The task then, is to reorder concepts themselves in order to reveal the dialectical nature of the objects they are attempting to illuminate. A concept can only hope to resist the reification of its meaning if its context is never allowed to become fixed or unchanging. As I discussed in Chapter Two, the model Adorno employs to show the dialectical nature of concepts is 'constellation'; concepts orbit the object and interact in a way that reveal its non-identity – the dimensions of the object not entirely covered by the concept.

The question I pose in this chapter is this: what if, in line with a specific reading of Žižek and Brown, ‘the concept’ (*as a concept*) was dialectised? That is to say, what if the concept ‘concept’ reveals its own excess to *itself* and therefore reveals its own negation? This question emerges organically out of the method of this dissertation: if the image stands in for the concept in Adorno’s philosophy, and the image is autoprohibited in my new (Žižekian) formulation, then the logic of this claim would suggest that somehow the *concept* can be understood as automatically prohibited by the subject. This would be a very neat and tidy linkage if it were true in all cases; unfortunately it can only be treated as a *qualified* truth. I argue that Žižek’s position *does not* open up this possibility for concepts *in themselves* (as abstract and contentless units), but it does allow a way to understand *objects of desire* and the *body* as self-negating if these objects are *conceptualised* in the manner I described in the last chapter (i.e., the body is conceptualised when the self is colonised by the *concept* of the body). In general, it is unintelligible to think of an autoprohibited concept if that concept lacks any content that might be desired or is itself the source of desire. This is a major insight regarding the methodological shift from constellations to autoprohibition: Adorno treats all concepts as equal, whether they are abstract or concrete. Autoprohibition knows no such thing as concepts in the abstract – only objects that have been conceptualised, and of these, only objects of desire or objects as the source of desire are of any consequence.

In the case of objects of *desire*, the fact that they can never fulfill the subject's desire reveals to the subject its ontological condition of incompleteness. This is the same process that is revealed in Žižek's analysis of the Image Prohibition because God is shown to be the excess/lack of the subject. The process of autoprohibition vis-à-vis a conceptualised body is different, however, because the body is both subject and object. Here, Adorno's position that the truth of the physical, desiring body must be taken into account for creating the condition of possibility for ethical relations is very important. For Adorno, 'remembering' the truth of the body is treated as a strategy of subjective de-reification and he leaves his analysis as such. The question I explore in this chapter is what if the 'remembering' of the body in the Adornian sense can turn into a new form of reification? What if the truth of the body can be turned into its obverse, i.e., a reification of the body in the form of *sheer physical self-preservation*.

Following from the analysis I undertook in the last chapter, my hypothesis is that Žižek's argument opens up just such a possibility, but only in terms of the second and third types of objects described by autoprohibition – objects of desire and the body as object. Žižek suggests that the image is true, but its truth-content is unbearable because it reveals to the subject the Real of subjectivity – that which, if acknowledged by the subject, would destroy subjectivity itself. This is why I claim that the truth of the image is autoprohibited. The very nature of its truth-content must be disavowed for subjectivity to exist or continue as such. This claim that the truth-content of the image is automatically prohibited is a

higher level of sublation of the truth of non-identity than Adorno's philosophy achieves. That is to say, Adorno leaves his critique of the image at the level of abstract negation, i.e., the image must simply be negated because it is untrue. There is no dialectical sublation here – no sense of how the truth-content of *the image itself* might contribute to a new level of understanding of a given object, or how the object might tell us something about the nature of subjectivity. By contrast, Žižek interprets the Image Prohibition in a manner that allows for a concrete negation of the object. Just as the image of God or the holy man demonstrates the *divinity in man*, all objects, specifically objects of *desire*, have the power to perform this sublation because they demonstrate the impossibility of the fulfillment of desire. In other words, all objects of desire reveal their own inadequacy for contributing to *subjective fulfillment* because the impossibility of the fulfillment of desire, for Žižek, *is a structural component of the subject*.

Stated in slightly different terms, my hypothesis is that if we use Žižek's analysis of the automatic nature of the prohibition that images undergo, we can make a methodological shift that I am characterising as a move from 'constellations' to 'autoprohibition.' One might say that Žižek performs a dialectisation of Adorno's negative dialectics because it is the base-unit of negative dialectics – the concept – that Žižek dialectises (but, again, only in relation to objects that have been conceptualized, never concepts in the abstract). It is through the frame of this new Žižekian ontology that I will re-examine Adorno's understanding of ethical subjectivity. I argue that in the same way that Žižek superimposes his reading of the Image Prohibition (as autoprohibitive) onto

that of his formulation of Lacanian subjectivity, one can use the method of autoprohibition to re-read and revivify *Adorno's* understanding of subjectivity in a way that retains its normative content but also includes a higher level understanding (higher sublation) of subjectivity than Adorno achieves with his abstract negation of the subject of late capitalism. In other words, I am interested in maintaining what is important in Adorno's understanding of subjectivity and building on it by situating it in a different (*Žižekian*) ontological context. Retaining Adorno's normative orientation is both necessary and desirable because, on his own, despite his theorisation of the Act, *Žižek* does not help us, in any particular way, negotiate everyday ethical life *as embodied subjects*. This is another way of saying that *Žižek's* autoprohibitive subject lacks normative content. Or, at the very least, I see much more potential in Adorno's work because of his orientation toward classical sociology and the critique of self-preservation (all within the context of his imperative to eliminate unnecessary suffering). In short, I think that Adorno treats the body more seriously as a political category than *Žižek* does, and that he is right in claiming that the truth of the body must play a central role in the formulation of ethics. Put most succinctly, my argument is that Adorno's notion of ethical subjectivity – the human – reveals a fuller explanatory and normative potential when it is thought through the lens of *Žižek's* method of autoprohibition.

Finally, it should be stated emphatically that thinking Adornian ethics through the lens of autoprohibition requires a shift in the nature and logic of autoprohibition itself. Autoprohibition can be understood both as an ontological

condition and as a social phenomenon. In the case of ontology, autoprohibition is required for the subject to stay coherent and unified as a subject. Therefore, the truth of the image or the object of desire must be always already prohibited for the subject to exist as such. This has already been explained in the previous chapters of this dissertation. In the present chapter and the next, I demonstrate how autoprohibition operates in social/historical contexts, and the logic that governs it. In short, the process of subjective experience within the dialectic of enlightenment is one in which the subject oscillates between different poles of reification, i.e., on the one hand the subject experiences a sense of self colonised by the concept of mind and, on the other, its obverse: a sense of self colonised by the concept of body. In both cases, social forces acting on and within the subject produce a sort of prohibition against recognising the truth-content of physical desire, or the body as a source of truth, in the Adornian sense. This process is not 'automatic' in the sense of the 'always already' of ontological existence, but more of a political process in which social forces struggle and compete over the self-understanding of subjectivity in individual subjects. In this regard, autoprohibition is an eminently political process. What I will focus on exclusively in the last few chapters of this dissertation, is the type of subjectivity in which the fetishisation of physical self-preservation subsumes the truth-content of the desiring body. In this case, the prohibition of the truth-content of the body emerges from a reification of the body itself. Thus, the body can be said to 'prohibit itself,' and it demonstrates the social logic of autoprohibition.

*Preliminary Problems with Adorno's Ethics*

There are several difficulties in attempting to outline any sort of substantive ethico-normative subjectivity – the human – in Adorno's work. These difficulties are both historical in nature and immanent to his thought itself. The historical problem is that if one is searching for some practical instructions on how to live the good life, one might instinctively look to Adorno and Horkheimer's category of the reified individual in their analysis of the 'culture industry' because this is their most sustained empirical critique of culture.<sup>198</sup> A thorough and critical engagement with this formulation of the culture industry would require its own dissertation, and I am surprised at the paucity of literature attempting to do so.<sup>199</sup> However, attempting to use the idea of the culture industry to analyse contemporary society is full of problems. I will provide a few comments regarding these problems below.

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<sup>198</sup> The closest thing to a positive, normative statement by Adorno in print that I have found is in *Problems of Moral Philosophy*: "I would almost go so far as to say that even the apparently harmless visit to the cinema to which we condemn ourselves should really be accompanied by the realization that such visits are actually a betrayal of the insights we have acquired and that they will probably entangle us – admittedly only to an infinitesimal degree, but assuredly with a cumulative effect – in the processes that will transform us into what we are supposed to become and what we are making of ourselves in order to enable us to survive, and to ensure that we conform...Perhaps the situation is that if we start to reflect on what is involved in joining in, and if we are conscious of its consequences, then everything we do – everything that goes on in our minds to contribute to what is wrong – will be just a little different from what it otherwise would have been." (168). This, of course, will not satisfy the social or political activist that demands a positive political project. However, it does seem to suggest that, for Adorno, refusing to participate in the institutions of the culture industry is at least a small act of resistance, even though it is decidedly negative in character. That being said, I get the distinct sense that he is not really convinced of the efficacy of this act, otherwise one would think he would have written more on the topic. I would not be surprised if he associated non-participation with student and artist counter-culture which he had a very ambivalent relationship with.

<sup>199</sup> A notable exception includes Deborah Cook's *The Culture Industry Revisited*, although her book is already somewhat dated and does not grapple with many of the most important formulations of contemporary society like, for example, various postmodernisms or theories of globalisation.

First, whether we want to call this society ‘postmodern,’ ‘postindustrial,’ or ‘network society,’ it is clear that we live in a very different social world than the ‘mass’ society of mid-century America (Adorno lived in the US from 1938-1949). Whether this difference refers to massive changes in capitalist social relations over the last sixty years and its concomitant changes in consumerist ideology, is open for dispute, but what is clear is that the contemporary social order is much different than it was when Adorno and Horkheimer wrote *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Second, Adorno and Horkheimer’s positioning of autonomous art against mass art would need to be reconsidered and, unlike a reappraisal of their analysis of mass society, their perspective on the difference between high and low art has no lack of critics.<sup>200</sup> Third, the culture industry would need to be rethought in light of Žižek’s Lacanian materialism which posits the impossibility of desire’s satisfaction, and the extent to which humans inherently desire the repression of their desire (because it relieves them of an impossible and exhausting quest for fulfillment). If the impossibility of the fulfillment of desire is an inescapable ontological reality, then a simple attempt to overcome it through the reassertion of autonomous culture is impossible. Finally, although specific aspects of the Habermasian critique of Adorno can be challenged (as I discussed in my introduction), Adorno’s analysis is still in many ways lacking substantive positive content that might significantly contribute to a program for social change. In terms of the internal dynamics of his thought, scholars like Habermas are right to be suspicious of the totalising nature of his critique of thought itself (as always

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<sup>200</sup> See: Bubner, “Concerning the Central Idea of Adorno’s Philosophy”; Zuidervaart, *Adorno’s Aesthetic Theory*.

succumbing to the dictates of the dialectic of enlightenment). However, they are wrong in asserting that he does not, at least, attempt to provide a means of escaping the dialectic of enlightenment.<sup>201</sup> For example, his most seductive category – the aesthetic experience – is precisely the experience of what a redeemed subject would look like, and indeed, it posits that individuals have the ability to experience, at least momentarily, this de-reified form of subjectivity. Unfortunately, despite its seductiveness, Adorno’s aesthetic experience fails to live up to its own premises. For example as outlined in my introduction, Rüdiger Bubner has demonstrated that because of its tautological nature the aesthetic experience can in no way fulfill its promise of revealing *newness*.<sup>202</sup> On the other hand, while Adorno’s ethical dialogism does produce a formal model for the foundations of a just society, it contains no substantive prescriptions for building a better world.<sup>203</sup> The question I ask is this: if Adorno’s sociology of mass society and his aesthetics prove to be theoretical dead-ends, then where might one look for a notion of substantive ethical subjectivity – the human – in his work; one in which the posited image or body is autoprohibited and therefore can tell us about ‘the way one should live?’

It seems to me that out of all the secondary sources in the mass of Adorno literature, the theorist that provides us the most hope for progress regarding this

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<sup>201</sup> See: Deborah Cook, *The Culture Industry Revisited*; Marianna Papastephanou, “Ulysses’ Reason, Nobody’s Fault: Reason, Subjectivity and the Critique of Enlightenment,” *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 26, 6, 2000, p.54.

<sup>202</sup> Bubner, “Concerning the Central Idea of Adorno’s Philosophy,” 147–175.

<sup>203</sup> See Max Pensky, ed., *The Actuality of Adorno*, for a series of articles by renowned Adorno scholars who attempt to reconcile his thought with that of postmodernism. For a position that suggests Adorno overdetermines the nature of reification in America, see: Claus Offe, *Reflections on America: Tocqueville, Weber and Adorno in the United States*, Cambridge: Polity Press (2005).

question is Drucilla Cornell in her *Philosophy of the Limit*. Cornell has hit on the most useful philosophical category to address the question of ethical subjectivity in Adorno: ‘self-preservation.’ Ultimately, I argue, it is the category of self-preservation that demonstrates the way in which the truth-content of the body prohibits itself.

### *Drucilla Cornell and the Ethics of Self-Preservation*

For students of political philosophy, the category of ‘self-preservation’ is most commonly associated with the work of Thomas Hobbes (and to a lesser extent, all of the social contract theorists) as it provides the justification for both the establishment of government and, in certain circumstances, the individual subject’s revolt against government. In Hobbes’s case, the subject of self-preservation – the ‘self,’ as it were – is a decidedly physical, empirical object: the body, or biological existence.<sup>204</sup> For political theorists who read Hobbes in this way, reading Adorno can be perplexing because while self-preservation clearly enjoys a central place in his philosophy, his use of the term is not congruent with the social contract theorists and it is also, at times, inconsistent. While it may not always be clear what Adorno is referring to when he invokes self-preservation, in most cases the ‘self’ to be preserved is certainly something more like ‘mind’ than ‘body,’ or the values attached to these categories. It seems important, then, that we first explore how the category of self-preservation functions in Adorno’s

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<sup>204</sup> For purposes of clarification, any moment in which the term ‘biological existence’ or ‘biological life’ is used, it is not meant to invoke the work of Giorgio Agamben’s *Homo Sacer*. It is used in this dissertation solely as a synonym for physical life divorced from questions of sovereignty, inclusion/exclusion, or sacredness in the Agambian sense.

thought in order to set up the central argument of this chapter – the way in which contemporary subjectivity prohibits itself

Drucilla Cornell's 1992 text *The Philosophy of the Limit* has provided the most thorough and thoughtful examination of the concept of self-preservation in Adorno to date, and so I will use her work as an entry-point into the discussion. In her first chapter – “The Ethical Message of Negative Dialectics” – Cornell argues that Adorno is not interested in creating a determinate moral theory – a “right way to behave,” as she puts it, which would establish a “system of rules,” but instead that his aim was to theorise an “ethical relation,” which could point to the “kind of person one must become in order to develop a nonviolative relationship to the Other.”<sup>205</sup> In other words, Adorno is not attempting to create a framework of ethical norms to which one could appeal when interacting with others, but more of a design to help us produce ourselves in a manner that would *make a non-violative relation to the Other possible*. She uses Adorno's critique of self-preservation to illustrate the nature of this relation.

Her formulation of self-preservation in Adorno's work is summarised in a dense but succinct quotation:

In the story that Adorno tells in *Negative Dialectics*, the Kantian subject, as a being of the flesh, falls prey to the endless striving to subjugate his own impulses and thus to secure the possibility of moral action. Reason is geared solely to the preservation of the subject, equated here with consciousness; because of Kant's separating of consciousness from the flesh, the subject is pitted against the object, which includes that aspect of the subject conceived empirically. Conceived in this way, the subject-object relationship necessarily gives rise to the master-slave dialectic. The master-slave dialectic is played out in our relations to nature, taken here to

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<sup>205</sup> Cornell, *Philosophy of the Limit*, 13.

mean both against the external world of things, and against our internal 'nature' as physical, sexual beings. Ultimately, the master-slave dialectic takes its toll. The thinking subject's striving for mastery turns against itself. The part of our humanness that is 'natural' – sexual desire, our longing for warmth and comfort – succumbs to a rationality whose mission is to drive into submission an essential part of what we are. The subject itself becomes objectified, an object among other objects.<sup>206</sup>

For Cornell, the 'subject' of Adorno's understanding of self-preservation is the Kantian transcendental 'self,' the noumenal subject that she abbreviates to 'consciousness.' For Kant, the unconditional and universal dictates of the categorical imperative demand the body's submission to its authority, and the human individual becomes identified with the abstract entity 'mind.' Further, things do not get any better with Hegel's attempted reconciliation of mind and body in the category of Spirit. According to Adorno, Hegel repeats Kant's mistake by forcing an absolute unity that is, ultimately, Subject because there is no autonomous nature from which the subject stays distinct. That is to say, for Adorno, Hegel posits the positive reconciliation of subject and object but in the form of reconciled *subjectivity* (while leaving out any significant consideration of *objectivity*). While Hegel recognised that mind always requires its empirical otherness, according to Cornell's reading of Adorno, he simply failed, in the final analysis, to stay true to his own premises.<sup>207</sup> In sum, Adorno claims that in both Kant's and Hegel's philosophy the body is relegated to the status of detritus and the immediate, while mind is absolutised *qua* subject. The consequence of their overdetermination of the subject in this manner is that the imperative of self-preservation is associated solely with mind. That is to say, the 'mind' becomes

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<sup>206</sup> Ibid., 13-14.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid., 14.

identical with the ‘self’ to the extent that the self refers to the subject’s self-understanding. In fact, for Adorno in *Negative Dialectics*, the history of Western philosophy is a history of the emergent primacy of the subject. It follows then, as Cornell suggests: “The first [ethical dimension of Adorno's work] is the revelation of the ‘more-than-this’ in nonidentity. The presentation of the ‘more-than-this’ serves as a corrective to realist and conventionalist ethics with their shared impulse to enclose us in our form of life or language game.”<sup>208</sup> The critique is clear: under the impetus of the radical, Kantian separation of mind and body, the mind becomes opposed to the body, and the truth-content of the impulses of the body is forgotten. This is a great example for demonstrating the process of reification, as Cornell remarks (quoting Adorno): “All reification is forgetting.”<sup>209</sup> In other words, when a substantive part of any object is forgotten, or simply unaccounted for in the object’s discursive existence, it is said to be reified. In a similar manner to the clarity of Cornell’s critique above, the ethical ‘message’ is also clear: remember the body! According to Cornell, this process of remembrance is the condition for the possibility of intersubjective ethics: “For Adorno, a moral subject which does not know itself as a desiring natural being will not recover the compassion for others that can serve as a non-repressive basis for moral intuition and, more specifically, of the goodwill.”<sup>210</sup> In other words, to develop an ethical relation with the Other, one must first become aware of the

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<sup>208</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>209</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid., 17.

truth of otherness within one's self – that Other, in this case, is the desiring body, that has been lost or forgotten to the reification of late capitalist social relations.

Cornell provides a fairly accurate reading of one aspect of Adorno's theory of self-preservation, and no one can deny the importance of this sort of discourse for the establishment of (ironically, from an Adornian perspective) 'identity'-based social theory and politics. Furthermore, one finds strong supporting evidence for her argument in a more sociological vein in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, as Adorno demonstrates the 'love-hate' relationship of the body in Christian and Western culture.<sup>211</sup> However, this is not the entire story. A set of philosophical ideas as richly dialectical as those found in *Negative Dialectics* and *Dialectic of Enlightenment* reveal an internal dynamic that goes beyond a critique that 'mind' is simply one-sided. There is something undialectical about Cornell's formulation; almost as if what the subject lacks is some sort of balance between the phenomenal and noumenal. But this is not the case, as Adorno himself argues against Aristotle, the ethical median point is not something that exists *between* the extremes, but is something accomplished *through* the extremes.<sup>212</sup> That is to say, dialectics is not balance – it is a constant tipping of the scales which moves the object toward the New. As is argued below, attempting to de-reify subjectivity by

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<sup>211</sup> See the following quotes from "Notes and Sketches" at the end of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: "Christianity celebrated labor but, in compensation, vilified the flesh as the source of evil" (192); "Love-hate for the body colors the whole of modern culture. The body is scorned and rejected as something inferior, enslaved, and at the same time is desired as forbidden, reified, estranged. Only culture treats the body as a thing that can be owned, only in culture has it been distinguished from mind, the quintessence of power and command, as the object, the dead thing, the corpus" (193); "In Western civilization, and probably in any civilization, what pertains to the body is tabooed, a subject of attraction and revulsion" (193). These quotes have a strong Žižekian flavour, but they can certainly be understood as existing within the Adornian paradigm of non-identity.

<sup>212</sup> Adorno, *Metaphysics: Concepts and Problems*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press (2000) 47.

‘remembering the body’ is a much more complicated task than, perhaps, Cornell accounts for. More specifically, I argue that the situation in which we live today is much different than that in which Adorno was writing and it makes his postulation of a self colonised by the concept of mind outdated. In fact, I argue, it is more accurate to understand contemporary subjectivity as reified by a sense of self colonised by the concept of *body*.

*The Present Context: Updating Adorno’s Theory of Self-Preservation*

Adorno’s observation of the slow, historical emergence of the primacy of the subject – a subject reified by its own concept (mind) – fits well many social processes and discourses (and, of course, the history of Western philosophy, from Descartes to Hegel). For example, the subject of ascetic forms of religion and the cold, calculating, and self-interested subject of late capitalism are both largely defined by the imperative of self-preservation in the way that Adorno and Cornell suggest. In both cases, the individual is called upon to reject, or at least defer their bodily pleasure for the preservation of a higher, abstract sense of self: the Soul or instrumental reason *qua* mind, respectively. While it may be that these fetishised forms of behaviour and social relations were more readily observable in the middle-class values of ‘mass society’ of mid-20<sup>th</sup> century America and Western Europe than they are today, it seems that Adorno’s perspective on these issues are somewhat outdated as a general critique of contemporary society. While I strongly suspect that (let us say ‘middle-class’) societies in industrialised nations were never as monolithically reified as Adorno suggests, proving or

disproving this claim is not pertinent to the present argument.<sup>213</sup> But, at the very least, it is useful to concede that any cultural homogeneity that may have existed in the mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century has been severely challenged or diluted by several social phenomena including increased immigration, urbanisation, secularisation, post-industrialisation, the increases in international travel, and the explosion of both corporate (mass) and alternative media sources (particularly, the internet).

The question, then, arises: What can we (or would Adorno) make of widespread behavior or discourses that seem to obviously contradict these all-encompassing claims about the meaning of self-preservation (in which the ‘self’ is identical to mind)? How can we understand the contemporary discourses that unabashedly promote physical gratification or, on the other side of the bodily coin, the importance of physical health (whether it is ‘individual’ or ‘public’ health or, in particular, public ‘safety’)? What are we to make of the fetishisation of sheer physical longevity that a recent *New Yorker* article claims is the newest premier indicator of social prestige (replacing conspicuous consumption) of the baby boomer generation?<sup>214</sup> As far as I am aware, Adorno simply did not deal with these questions in any significant way. This, however, is not to say that his immanent critique of late capitalist society is no longer useful or that his theorising of subjectivity is completely anachronistic. His ideas just need to be built on in a way that employs a more sophisticated dialectical understanding of subjectivity. I argue that one can take Adorno’s formulation and turn it into its

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<sup>213</sup> But for those interested in the topic, see again: Offe, *Reflections on America*, for an argument against this claim that America is or was a totally reified society when Adorno lived there.

<sup>214</sup> Michael Kinsley, “Mine is Longer than Yours: The Last Boomer Game,” *New Yorker*, April 7, 2008.

obverse: from an understanding of the self as colonised by the concept of the mind, to one colonised by the concept of the body<sup>215</sup> or one defined by a fetishisation of physical self-preservation. In fact, reading the idea of self-preservation in this way simply extends the logic of the dialectic of enlightenment, whereby mythic fear returns *mutatis mutandis*, and produces a richer and more fully dialectical notion of self-preservation vis-à-vis subjectivity.

### *The Self Colonised by the Concept of the Body and Decaf Reality*

Adorno's criticism of the mind-body dualism is, in many ways, a simple argument. On his account, mind and body are only analytically separable. To believe that there is thought without a body and physical experience unmediated by mind is to fall prey to the crudest kind of idealism and/or the crudest kind of materialism; it is to take an 'abstraction' as a category capable of revealing the truth of experience. As he claims in *Negative Dialectics*: "The controversy about the priority of mind and body is a pre-dialectical proceeding. It carries on the question of a 'first' ... Both body and mind are abstractions of their experience."<sup>216</sup> In the moment we hypostatise our understandings of ourselves with a notion of mind or body, we experience what is left out as something akin to the Lacanian 'bone in the throat,' or the Lyotardian 'itch.' Adorno uses more abstract, intangible metaphors to describe this; hypostatisation manifests itself like a 'spectral haunting' by one's own negativity. In relation to our so-called

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<sup>215</sup> In this dissertation, the phrases 'a sense of self colonised by the concept of mind' and the abbreviated 'self colonised by the concept of mind,' are used interchangeably.

<sup>216</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 202.

‘instinct’ for self-preservation, he says: “[t]he only trouble with self-preservation is that we cannot help suspecting the life to which it attaches us of turning into something that makes us shudder: into a specter, a piece of the world of ghosts, which our consciousness perceives to be nonexistent.”<sup>217</sup> Furthermore, “...he [the individual] is equally concerned with that ‘more’ of the concept with his need. To this day, he will experience this ‘more’ as his own negativity”<sup>218</sup> or:

What is, is more than it is. This ‘more’ is not imposed upon it but remains immanent to it, as that which has been pushed out of it. In that sense, the non-identical would be the thing’s own identity against its identifications ... This is where insistent thinking leads us in regard to the individual: to his essence rather than to the universal he is said to represent.<sup>219</sup>

If this is the case, and because we have determined that the body can be reified in a similar manner to mind, then the several pronouncements in *Negative Dialectics* regarding the ‘human’ and the ‘inhuman’ can be re-read so that the ‘inhuman’ does not refer solely to consciousness, or the subject, but also the body or object (always, of course, depending on the context of one’s particularity). That which is ‘human,’ in an otherwise dehumanised being, may be at once mind and body or, theoretically, it may be only mind or body to the extent that the one or the other has been over-identified with self.<sup>220</sup> To the extent that self-preservation refers to the preservation of either body or mind, within the dialectic of

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<sup>217</sup> Ibid., 364.

<sup>218</sup> Ibid., 151.

<sup>219</sup> Ibid., 162.

<sup>220</sup> An absolute identification of this sort is impossible in empirical life, i.e., outside of abstract philosophy, regardless of the conditions of socialisation. In other words, the claim that a sense of self is colonised by the concepts of mind or body would have to be treated like a Weberian ideal-type. And Adorno seems to recognise this at times, despite his tendency to posit total socialisation: “By no means has the individual thus lost all functions ... The individual survives himself. But in his residue which history has condemned lies nothing but what will not sacrifice itself to false identity.” Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 343.

enlightenment it always becomes a reification of these categories as the concept of 'self.' Depending on the context, one of these categories – mind or body – then becomes the object of what must be 'preserved' – the 'self' in the concept of self-preservation. That is to say, I argue that the impulse for self-preservation always becomes over-determined due to the over-identification of the self with the value-sets mind or body. Just as the truth of the 'body' can be forgotten due to the reification of mind, so too can the mind (defined here as the 'more-than-this' of the body) be forgotten for the sake of a fetishised body.

If, as has been argued above, for Adorno the 'self' – the noumenal aspect of an individual human being – is the name he gives to what is 'inhuman,' then to recover the term requires disassociating it from its reification insofar as it is identified with mind. The 'self' to which both Adorno and Cornell refer is the individual human whose sense of 'self' has been *colonised* by the concept of mind. It follows from my previous argument of the reciprocal potential of reification of mind and body, that one's sense of self can also be colonised by the concept of body. Žižek's analysis suggests, in fact, that this form of subjectivity is predominant among bourgeois subjects in the West. This means that increasingly, subjectivity is dominated by the concept of physical self-preservation or sheer physical health at the expense of other impulses or ways of knowing and experiencing the world.

However, as Žižek also points out, the imperative for physical self-preservation coexists with a seemingly contradictory social imperative to pursue physical pleasure – or an obligation to enjoy without guilt for following one's

sexual urges, or enjoying the decadence of good food and drink, or the adrenaline rush that accompanies risky pastimes (like extreme sports).<sup>221</sup> Underlying this second imperative is the notion that only this sort of behaviour can provide the subject with an *authentic* experience. The contradiction I describe here, Žižek calls ‘decaf reality,’ a reality in which we are no longer required to repress our physical desire in the name of an abstract Kantian moral category, but rather its obverse. Žižek argues that we are now socialised to feel guilty if we do not *enjoy enough*. In fact, as Žižek claims in *The Fragile Absolute*, postmodern society is partly defined by a new categorical imperative to ‘enjoy oneself,’ or as he puts it: “You should because you can.”<sup>222</sup> At the same time, this imperative is blocked by informal prohibitions; there is always a qualifier: Enjoy! ... but not too much, in the proper manner, and never do anything that might pose any risk to your physical health. This is the essence of what Žižek calls ‘decaf reality.’

To elaborate, one of the categories through which Žižek examines contemporary ‘postmodern’ society is “permissiveness.” He wants to contest the common perception that Western, cosmopolitan liberalism is marked by an ‘anything goes’ ethos, in which formerly strict and repressive ethical rules have been abandoned. While he does acknowledge that, ostensibly, traditional values – whether they be ethical (religious) or political (nationalist)<sup>223</sup> – are weakened by

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<sup>221</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor*, New York: Verso (1991) 237.

<sup>222</sup> Žižek, *Fragile Absolute*, 133.

<sup>223</sup> Žižek cites this phenomenon to contrast it with the discourse of nationalist ‘fundamentalism.’ He claims that this sort of fundamentalism, characteristic of the conflicts in the post-Soviet Baltic states, is usually understood as a return to rootedness, tradition, and security in the face of postmodern insecurity. In reality, however, he argues that it is a return to actual permissiveness

the forces of capitalism, Žižek suggests that new, informal prohibitions have emerged that negate the very values that were recently liberated from the dictates of tradition and conservatism. To the extent that several types of social practices that were formerly regarded as ‘vices’ are now legally or socially permitted, they carry their own prohibitions. While Žižek’s description of decaf reality was provided in the introduction of this dissertation, it bears repeating here:

On today's market, we find a whole series of products deprived of their malignant property: coffee without caffeine, cream without fat, beer without alcohol... And the list goes on: what about virtual sex as sex without sex, the Colin Powell doctrine of warfare with no casualties (on our side, of course) as warfare without warfare, the contemporary redefinition of politics as the art of expert administration as politics without politics, up to today's tolerant liberal multiculturalism as an experience of Other [sic] deprived of its Otherness (the idealized Other who dances fascinating dances and has an ecologically sound holistic approach to reality, while features like wife beating remain out of sight)? Virtual Reality simply generalizes this procedure of offering a product deprived of its substance: it provides reality itself deprived of its substance - in the same way decaffeinated coffee smells and tastes like the real coffee without being the real one, Virtual Reality is experienced as reality without being one. Is this not the attitude of today's hedonistic Last Man? Everything is permitted, you can enjoy everything, BUT deprived of its substance which makes it dangerous. Today's hedonism combines pleasure with constraint ... the very thing which causes damage should already be the medicine. ... And is not a negative proof of the hegemony of this stance the fact that true unconstrained consumption (in all its main forms: drugs, free sex, smoking...) is emerging as the main danger? The fight against these dangers is one of the main investments of today's “biopolitics.”<sup>224</sup>

The contradictory imperatives operative in decaf reality can be viewed from two angles. First, one could argue that the objects of desire in their pure, ‘caffeinated’ form are automatically prohibited by the subject. However, as we

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because participants have been given full license to commit the most Dionysian of crimes (murder, genocide, rape, etc.). Ibid., 132.

<sup>224</sup> <http://lacan.com/Žižekdecaf.htm>

know, these objects are not themselves the *cause* of desire, which is, instead, the fundamental *lack* which constitutes subjectivity. The subject attempts to fill the void of subjectivity via physical pleasure, but it is the *very same source* that prohibits even the *attempt* (impossible as it may be) at subjective fulfillment. In other words, the *body prohibits itself*. From an Adornian perspective, one might say that the truth-content of the body has been *remembered too much* and thereby *turned into its obverse*.

In the next section I provide a speculative account of the rise of this form of subjectivity, and then connect this account back to Adorno's dialectical understanding of the relationship between body and mind.

### *The Duty to be Healthy*

Decaf reality, is a useful term for thinking about subjectivity, but Žižek nowhere discusses how it came about – how did we get to this strange moment in history defined by competing and contradictory imperatives of the body? For Žižek, via Lacan, the superego injunction to enjoy results from the erosion of master signifiers which is characteristic of 'post-modern' society. Master signifiers are those institutions or discourses in which meaning and authority are stored and guaranteed. In less abstract terms, this means that traditional sources of truth – God, the State, the Party, or any other authoritative figures in political metanarratives – have increasingly lost their legitimacy to govern moral behaviour or to define right and wrong ways to live. This leads to an intensely

materialistic position: all that is left is the pursuit of physical enjoyment without the prohibitions characteristic of a master signifier.<sup>225</sup>

Writing long before Žižek forwarded the idea of decaf reality (and not as avowed Lacanians), Claudine Herzlich and Janine Pierret nonetheless provide some important insight into this phenomenon. Their account relates directly to the subject's experience of physical health and, therefore, their ideas prove most useful for my project. Their formulation of the 'duty to be healthy' both strengthens the position that subjectivity is increasingly dominated by the imperative of physical self-preservation and demonstrates the dialectical process through which it emerged. In their book *Illness and Self in Society*, the authors trace the way in which 'illness' and the corresponding self-understanding of the 'sick,' have been conceptualised and how these understandings have changed over several epochs, beginning with the *Ancien Régime* and ending with contemporary society. For the purposes of my project, there are three historical-discursive shifts ('epistemes,' in the Foucauldian vernacular) that are relevant. The first is the shift from "inactivity" to "the right to illness." For Herzlich and Pierret, once the idea emerged that illness is not inflicted on people by God, and therefore, not part of and therefore explainable by, a greater Divine Plan, a conceptual shift occurred that began to inculcate society with the responsibility to care for the sick.<sup>226</sup> The initial result of this shift was that doctors began to replace

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<sup>225</sup> See his discussion of the postmodern situation which is partly defined by a non-belief in the big Other: Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology*, New York: Verso (1999) 332.

<sup>226</sup> Claudine Herzlich and Janine Pierret, *Illness and Self in Society*, trans. Elborg Forster, Baltimore: John Hopkins Press (1987) 152.

priests at the bedsides of those afflicted with illness. Later, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, this discourse of “right to illness” emerged full blown, providing an ethical basis for modern universal healthcare systems.<sup>227</sup>

However, the most interesting changes occurred later in the 1960s and 1970s as a consequence of the recently established “right to illness.” In Herzlich and Pierret’s account, the first moment of this discursive movement was characterised by the phenomenon of “self-help.” For the first time, some of the responsibility for the *treatment* of illness was placed in the hands of the patients. Self-help included learning about one’s own illness, self-applying treatments like injections or dialysis, and actively engaging the doctor in decision making regarding one’s own condition. As the patient’s knowledge of his or her own body increased, and his or her corresponding ability to make decisions regarding self-treatment did likewise, a new situation emerged wherein the patient was forced to negotiate between two competing logics of illness: the medical logic and the social logic.<sup>228</sup> In brief, the medical logic refers simply to the requirements of effectively treating one’s *physical* maladies. The social logic, on the other hand, has a negative character in that it is defined against the medical, i.e., while the medical logic will always require a sacrifice of aspects of one’s social life because it knows only biological life as an imperative, the social logic of illness is manifested as a question: how much am I willing to cede socially for the sake of

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<sup>227</sup> Here Herzlich and Pierret are drawing extensively from Foucault and his formulation of the shift in the 18<sup>th</sup> century from what he calls nosopolitics to biopolitics as the governing discourse of health. See: Michel Foucault, “The Politics of Health in the Eighteenth Century,” *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews & Other Writings, 1972–1977*, in ed. Colin Gordon, New York: Pantheon (1980) 166–182.

<sup>228</sup> *Ibid.*, 217.

my physical health? For Herzlich and Pierret this means that historically the medical logic of illness often dictated a strict medical regimen that compromised patients' social liberty or, at least, their regular social routine (which is understood to be intimately associated with their quality of life). It was in this context that patients began to forego certain aspects of their doctor-prescribed treatment to ensure that their social life was not completely curtailed. In other words, they came to place more value, at times, on their social life than they did their long-term physical health.

However, the discursive shift regarding illness did not end there. Herzlich and Pierret's analysis concludes in the identification of the most recent discourse of illness: the "duty to be healthy." The discursive shift from 'self-help' to 'the duty to be healthy' is an obvious dialectical move. When the responsibility for *treatment* is partly transferred to the ill, it emerges that the responsibility to be healthy in general was always immanent to such a discourse. That is to say, it is no longer *treatment* that serves as the central concept in self-help, but the duty to *prevent* illness in the first place. With this shift, the negotiation between the medical and social logics of illness is actually erased. These two logics – the medical and social – are combined into a single one so that they are *both identified with the medical logic*. The new, conflated logic of illness becomes: *what is good for you physically or medically is what you should desire socially*. Herzlich and Pierret cite a report from the 1966 International Congress of Psychology in which the mission statement of this new discourse was articulated: "The task of the medical profession is to bring about a change in day-to-day

behavior, to create a new style of life, and almost, if we dared a new morality, a true psychological change.”<sup>229</sup> It is important to note the word ‘morality’ in this declaration. While the author of this report may not have meant to use it in such a strong manner, to present self-preservation as a *moral* category is an astonishingly powerful normative assertion, implying a return to a form of physical asceticism. If one required a contemporary example to explain to a student Foucault’s idea of ‘bio-power,’ it may very well be that no better example exists than this ‘duty to be healthy.’ But more importantly, it demonstrates a re-coordinating of desire in which physical desire – sexual, pleasurable, excessive – is prohibited but this prohibition originates from the same source that once posited physical desire as true and normative. Put another way, the logic of the duty to be healthy is this: come to know (remember) your body so that you can protect it from harm. What harms your body? All the things that bring you pleasure. Thus, the “duty to be healthy” illustrates another articulation of my main claim that the body prohibits its own immanent truth-content: pleasure and desire.

### *Adorno and “Dying Today”*

Any discussion of self-preservation in the context of a self colonised by the concept of ‘the body,’ brings death into focus. This is where Adorno is most instructive. For Adorno, the question of death, or ‘dying today,’ plays a central, if underdeveloped, role in his philosophy and sociology. While it might seem rather

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<sup>229</sup> Ibid., 231. As Herzlich and Pierret note, the duty to be healthy also becomes a legal issue, usually focusing on the cost of healthcare for those that do not take ‘proper care of themselves’. Ibid., 233-234. This is a good example of Weber’s observation that instrumental logic usually becomes enshrined in formal logic, as discussed in the next chapter.

unsophisticated and hopelessly idealist, Adorno claims that the paralysing fear of death is symptomatic of an unfulfilled and improper form of living. In a redeemed world, death would be perceived as an acceptable end to a life well lived.<sup>230</sup> He states:

The more enhanced the forces of production, the less will the perpetuation of life as an end in itself remain a matter of course. The end, as prey to nature, becomes questionable in itself while the potential of something other is maturing inside it. Life gets ready to become a means for that otherness, however undefined and unknown it may be; yet the heteronomous constitution of life keeps inhibiting it. Since self-preservation has been precarious and difficult for eons, the power of its instrument, the ego drives, remains all but irresistible even after technology has virtually made self-preservation easy...<sup>231</sup>

This is an untenable position to adopt in contemporary times, precisely because of the incessant impossibility of the fulfillment of desire, as Žižek argues. However, it is only untenable if this reconciliation is understood as an empirical, teleological possibility. What if instead, this reconciliation of subject and object is perceived as a 'horizon,' as is popularly used in some postmodern philosophies? Surely we are then dealing with an entirely different creature. In fact, we return to something akin to the Name (which heralds redemption), with which this project began, because the hope for redemption is immanent but not imminent to this type of subjectivity.<sup>232</sup> It is simply another way of describing the

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<sup>230</sup> Adorno, *Metaphysics*, 106.

<sup>231</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 349.

<sup>232</sup> It is, in many ways, reminiscent of the moral of Umberto Eco's novel *Foucault's Pendulum*: the point is not knowing *the* Secret, but knowing that there *is* a Secret. This little nugget of wisdom, of course, failed to prevent Belbo from being killed at the hands of the raving Diabolicals, but it certainly helped him gain meaning, however briefly, in his life. This sort of theme is consonant with secular Jewish philosophy, and it was certainly no coincidence that the novel begins with an attempt by a Kabbala scholar to generate the Name of God by a computer program. Umberto Eco, *Foucault's Pendulum*, New York: Random House (1990).

idea that Adorno's philosophy can be read both against post-modernism and the dominant form of modernism, as I claimed in Chapter Three (that is, Adorno's philosophy expresses both the modern desire for the reconciliation of subject and object, but as posited in a non-linear and unpredictable eschatological context).

The point is that, for Adorno, living under degrading and alienating social conditions does not a good life make. In fact, it is a 'dead' life to the extent that individuals are deadened to their external and internal natures. "As the subjects live less, death grows more precipitous, more terrifying,"<sup>233</sup> he claims. In this regard, humans are 'dehumanised' and his extreme example is, of course, the subject of Auschwitz. This, unsurprisingly, is one of Adorno's most controversial claims, i.e., that the same logic which was active in the Holocaust also governs the repression and reification of subjects in Western liberal democracies. One recoils at this proposition if it amounts to the claim that the experience of Jews and members of other persecuted groups in Nazi concentration camps is only *quantitatively* different than the experiences of subjects of the culture industry. However, while it is true that in both cases human individuals are objectified and made into exchangeable units so that genocide and more banal contemporary phenomena like marketing/ideological conditioning become justified respectively, if we employ the term 'human' as I am in this dissertation, and fit it into the context of dehumanisation, the subject of Auschwitz and the subject of liberal capitalist society can, and should be qualitatively differentiated. That is to say, if the human is defined as the 'self to come,' and therefore includes a 'promise' of

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<sup>233</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 370.

the self-same, then it is clear that this ‘promise’ was demonstrably absent in the extermination camps; not only was there an almost complete absence of even the most basic *liberty* there was no promise of *any future at all*. If we are governed by our desire, and in many respects ‘hope’ is simply another word for it, then the existence of a realistic sense of hope for the future (beyond the hope for sheer physical self-preservation) in any given situation is surely an indicator of how an experience differs from a situation devoid of hope. However, this does not necessarily mean that we must jettison the idea that subjects of late capitalism are, to use a classic Roland Barthes quote, “dead and going to die.”<sup>234</sup> If we posit a self colonised by the concept of ‘the body,’ then it is possible to imagine an individual, so fearful of death, so imbued with the ‘duty to be healthy,’ that certain behaviour understood to contain life-affirming attributes, are rejected because of the paralysing fear of a ‘life’ cut short. In the next section I will discuss what this subject looks like and how we might form a foundation for rehabilitating it in a contemporary theoretical and social context.

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<sup>234</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux (1980) 95.

## Chapter 6

### Adorno, Žižek, and Weber: Rehabilitating Ethical Subjectivity

*With priests, everything simply becomes more dangerous, not only curatives and healing arts, but also arrogance, revenge, acuity, excess, love, lust to rule, virtue, disease...*<sup>235</sup>

In some ways, the reformulation of Adorno's category of ethical subjectivity provided in the previous chapter does not depart radically from Adorno's own position; it is simply the *obverse* of his formulation of subjectivity. Demonstrating that subjectivity can be reified in a way that fetishises the value-set body does not present any substantive, positive content for living a 'good life' and it can still be understood as largely negative in character (as resisting reification). However, insofar as it builds on Adorno's initial reflections on subjectivity in late capitalism as overdetermined by the concept of mind, it does provide an updated account of the nature of reification in contemporary society (in which the subject is reified by the concept of body). Furthermore, the theory of autoprohibition, which recognises the impossibility of the satisfaction of desire, addresses Adorno's negative Messianic position: if, for Adorno, the precondition for the possibility of living ethically is a radical break with existing social relations, then this means that a new society must emerge *before* a new way of living can be practiced. From my reading of Žižek, I argue that because the founding premise

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<sup>235</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, trans. Maudemarie Clark and Alan J. Swensen, in *Classics of Moral and Political Theory*, 4<sup>th</sup> Ed., ed. Michael Morgan, Indianapolis: Hackett (2005) pp: 1142-1209, 1150.

of autoprohibition is that a redeemed world is impossible (redeemed in the sense of the total reconciliation of subject and object), living a good life becomes intimately tied to *practicing* a good life, or learning how to live *better*, despite the fact that one's attempts will inevitably fail to achieve full satisfaction (again, demonstrating Žižek's motto: "Try again. Fail. Fail better."). Thus far, then, my account of reformulating ethical subjectivity has only identified some of the ontological parameters in which contemporary subjectivity should be understood and, therefore, I have established only a theoretical foundation upon which a scheme for living well might be built.

The next logical step, then, is to explore how one might formulate a new model of positive ethical subjectivity based on the theoretical insights of the previous five chapters. How might one begin to think about 'living well' outside of the Adornian position which, in the final analysis, consists solely of the imperative to negate, reject, and refuse the specific form of subjectivisation in late modern capitalist social relations? In this chapter I argue that the most fruitful strategy for such an endeavor is to focus on Adorno's Weberian-inspired understanding of the different forms of rationality that motivate social action, and that through this analysis one can develop the category of 'intelligibility' which can be employed for the purpose of living well in a positive manner. However, before doing so, there is a nagging issue that must first be addressed, namely, why

I have chosen not to employ Žižek's theory of the 'Act' to understand living well, considering that it is the category he uses to discuss positive ethical action.

### *Why Not the Act?*

What might seem conspicuously absent from my account thus far is a discussion of Žižek's theory of the 'Act,' or the way in which a subject can traverse the existing Symbolic Order (which determines the limits of the possible) in an attempt to create a new order in which to live a better life. If the purpose of this project is to rework Adorno's understanding of ethical subjectivity in light of Žižek's formulation of the subject, should not the 'Act' play a significant role in thinking about an ethical way to live? Is not the Act, as described in Chapter Two, precisely the category Žižek offers as a guide to help people live better lives? From the perspective of the present project, it would certainly be appealing if the Act was the answer to the problem of living well, but unfortunately Žižek's theoretical apparatus does not allow for this in any coherent way, primarily because his project is oriented toward a qualitatively different set of problems than mine.

This project, unlike Žižek's has never been about proposing a revolutionary collective Act that would overthrow capitalism or liberal democracy. On the contrary, I am interested in formulating a way to think about how to act ethically *given existing social conditions*. This is the first problem in

attempting to appropriate the Žižekian category of the Act. For Žižek, the Act is precipitated by a ‘passionate attachment’ to a particular idea, which the subject then raises to the status of a universal. When he discusses *historical* figures, the passionate attachment is always an investment in a revolutionary collective movement (e.g., Mao, Lenin, Robespierre, St. Paul).<sup>236</sup> To this extent, the individual subject is only a conduit of a revolutionary impulse and the subject must be willing to sacrifice itself in the name of the revolution or, in Lacanian terms, the sacrifice is made in the name of creating a new (social) Symbolic Order. Thus, in the present context, Žižek’s notion of the ‘Act’ does not help inform my project because I am interested in the *individual* subject (which is, of course, always intersubjective in character) contributing, if anything, to an *expansion* of the existing Symbolic Order, not necessarily to its destruction.

However, Žižek does provide examples of Acts in the context of individuals divorced from a greater collective movement. What is immediately notable in this regard, is that all the examples he provides are of *fictional* characters (which may be indicative of his lack of interest in the problem of living well under capitalism, or symptomatic of the inability of his theory to address it). In terms of individual Acts, he cites the aforementioned case of Keyser Soeze in the *Usual Suspects*, the character of Sethe in Toni Morrison’s novel *Beloved* who

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<sup>236</sup> For references to Mao and Robespierre, see Žižek, *Lost Causes*; and for St. Paul and Lenin, see Žižek, *On Belief*.

kills her children rather than allowing them to become slaves,<sup>237</sup> and Antigone's refusal to follow her uncle's order to leave her brother unburied.<sup>238</sup> In all these quite extraordinary cases, the subject chooses to act in a way that sacrifices something dear to him or her, but also succeeds in completely re-ordering the terms of his or her Symbolic identifications which made those sacrifices 'unthinkable.' They completely challenge and, therefore, deprive the Symbolic authority of the Law; in Lacan's terms, they have successfully 'traversed the fantasy' by doing something unimaginable from the perspective of their previous Symbolic universe. But what is the outcome of these particular Acts? For Soeze, the intention behind killing his family was to create the conditions of a radical freedom so that he could track down and kill the gang members with no fear for his family's safety. In the case of Sethe, the thought of her children in slavery was unbearable, so she prevented them from this fate and denied the would-be-slave owners their property. As for Antigone, her brother was too dear to her to deny him the funeral rites that would allow him a proper afterlife. In all these cases, the subject encounters the Real – an unbearable decision forced upon them by the collapse of their Symbolic Order. However, their Acts are momentary and radically individualistic, and create a situation in which they can *no longer live their lives well*. That is to say, the horrible Acts they commit either directly lead

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<sup>237</sup> Žižek, *Fragile Absolute*, 152.

<sup>238</sup> Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, 170.

to their death (Antigone), or to a life ruined by the guilt produced by their Act (and this is unlike the revolutionary whose life is always lived well as long as the Cause remains, which it always does, even into the post-revolutionary moment). In short, this is not a formula for *living well*, it is only a model for understanding a heroic and radically de-subjectifying moment of decision.

On the basis of this brief gloss, it should be clear why Žižek's notion of the Act does not prove particularly useful for my project. In fact, considering that I am describing bourgeois subjects of capitalist liberal democracies, Žižek would most likely say that they *already live a good life*. His concern is always oriented toward those people included in global capitalism by virtue of their exclusion (the very poor, the homeless, and the powerless). While this is a compelling premise, I am interested in contributing to a theory of how this life could be made better, or more specifically, what are some *minimum requirements* for beginning a rehabilitation of ethical subjectivity in contemporary society. The next section concludes this dissertation by outlining these requirements. I argue that by returning to my updated account of Adorno's notion of subjectivity vis-à-vis self-preservation, and framing it in the Weberian category of *homo economicus*, we directly confront the motivations for social action or the value that individuals attach to particular actions. Ultimately, an exploration of these various types of rationality that inform social action can reveal the normative importance of

human particularity and the recognition of the particularity of the other as *intelligible*.

*Max Weber, Homo Economicus, and Intelligibility (as Ethics)*

As discussed in the last chapter, the form of reified subjectivity in contemporary society is one defined by a sense of self colonised by the concept of body. While it is Žižek, and Herzlich and Pierret that best articulate this phenomenon, my formulation of it emerges directly out of Cornell's reading of Adorno's normative understanding of ethical relations (as resisting the identity of mind and self). An important theoretical category that Cornell fails to address which is, nonetheless, crucial for understanding Adorno's ethics, is *rationality*. In this regard, Adorno is heavily indebted to the work of Max Weber. Weber's taxonomy of rationality and his theory that modernity is defined by a creeping 'disenchantment' of the world is central to Adorno's analysis of subjective reification. In terms of rationality, Jay Bernstein tells us that Weber's category of 'practical rationality' (which stresses calculability, standardisation, and efficiency) is synonymous with Adorno's 'identity-thinking.'<sup>239</sup> Furthermore, to the extent that the classical subject of political economy – *homo economicus* – is defined by Weber as governed by practical rationality, one can understand Adorno's reified subject of late capitalism to be roughly equivalent. I argue that, keeping in mind Weber's influence on Adorno vis-à-vis the reifying effects of

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<sup>239</sup> Bernstein, *Adorno*, 10.

practical rationality, one can identify an important category that serves to add positive ethical content to Adorno's notion of subjectivity (again, within the framework of 'autoprohibition'). This category is 'intelligibility' and this dissertation concludes with a speculative discussion of its normative importance for living well in contemporary society.

Considering the above, the first claim that must be made is that Adorno is strongly influenced by the work of Max Weber. In fact, when Adorno discusses the reified subject of late capitalism in relation to processes of rationalisation he is, in effect, a Weberian. The biggest differences are that whereas Weber sees the process of the increasing hegemony of practical rationality in modernity as an irreversible phenomenon (and his analysis is meant to be value-neutral), Adorno posits the possibility of both the overcoming or redeeming of subjectivity reified by instrumental rationality and, indeed, its moral necessity. In this regard, they understand the process of identitarian subject formation in modern or contemporary society, that is to say, the process of creating the normalised bourgeois subject, in an extremely similar manner.

The subject of this process of subjective rationalisation is best understood by the category of *homo economicus*; in fact, Adorno uses it as a synonym for the subject of late capitalism. *Homo economicus* is the infamous subject of positivist and liberal philosophy – the isolated, calculating, and purely self-interested, good (or profit)-maximising individual. The first scholars to use the term were the critics of John Stuart Mill who defined the subject of political economy “solely as a being who desires to possess wealth, and who is capable of judging of the

comparative efficacy of means for obtaining that end.”<sup>240</sup> Perhaps the broadest and well-known criticism of *homo economicus* is that of Marx, who used it to develop his understanding of alienated labour, but for present purposes it is most instructive to situate it in a Weberian constellation because, as mentioned above, Adorno borrowed both Weber’s formulation of *homo economicus* as the reified subject of late capitalism and his argument that modernity is defined by the increasing dominance of instrumental rationality as the source of social action. Horkheimer and Adorno describe the character of instrumental reason as follows: “... reason is the agency of calculating thought, which arranges the world for the purposes of self-preservation and recognizes no function other than that of working on the object as mere sense material in order to make it the material of subjugation.”<sup>241</sup> In other words, the subject *qua* mind seeks only to preserve itself and turn the object (here understood as both physical/human and external nature) into that which facilitates its own preservation. The truth or purpose of the object is ignored or forgotten.

The primary concern that governs all of Max Weber’s work is the social consequences of the shift from pre-modern to modern forms of thinking and acting. In Weber’s sociological scheme, individuals are consciously motivated by four distinct forms of rationality: 1) practical (hereafter referred to as ‘instrumental’); 2) theoretical; 3) substantive; and 4) formal.<sup>242</sup> As Stephen

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<sup>240</sup> John Stuart Mill, *Essays on Some Unsettled Questions of Political Economy*, London: J.W. Parker (1844) 131.

<sup>241</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 65.

<sup>242</sup> Max Weber, *Social and Economic Organization*, ed. Talcott Parsons, trans. A.M. Henderson, New York: The Free Press (1969),184-5.

Kalberg suggests, for Weber, instrumental rationality is “every way of life that views and judges worldly activity in relation to the individual’s purely pragmatic and egoistic interests.”<sup>243</sup> It is, in other words, classical means-end rationality because the means to achieving a particular goal are weighed rationally in order to determine the most efficient way of achieving said goal. Thus, in its ideal-typical form, instrumental rationality lacks the input of particular value orientations when the subject makes a decision, i.e., decisions are not informed by what might be commonly understood as properly ethical considerations (e.g, the consideration of others).

Theoretical rationality is informed by reflective judgments that determine an ultimate rational, ethical, or moral organising principle or system in which all decisions should be made. Religious or political-ideological systems are examples of reflective organisational schemes that are associated with this type of rationality. However, the existence of theoretical rationality does not necessarily imply that action will be undertaken on behalf of it. For example, an individual may fully believe in the mathematical organisation of the universe, but this will not necessarily change his or her everyday behaviour.

Substantive rationality refers to a source of value-rational social action, but contra theoretical rationality, it *directly* orders behaviour into patterns based on a set of value postulates. It does not necessarily require a ‘universal’ standard of applicability, and thus may only apply to a specific sphere of an actor’s life. It follows then, as Kalberg tells us, substantive rationality is marked by a “radical

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<sup>243</sup> Stephen Kalberg, “Max Weber’s Types of Rationality: Cornerstones for the Analysis of Rationalization Processes in History,” *American Journal of Sociology*, 85 (5), (1980) 1151.

perspectivism,” or particularity, even if it refers back to a set of values shared by a significant number of social actors in a single society or across several.<sup>244</sup>

Finally, formal rationality is, in effect, the enshrinement of instrumental rationality in a set of written, legal, bureaucratic rules and regulations that can always be referred back to and, in its ideal-typical form, promotes the most efficient way to achieve a list of goals depending on the context (maximisation of productivity, crime deterrence, management of resources, etc.). According to Weber, formal rationality will mirror the dominant rationality of a given epoch. Thus, in modernity, law and bureaucratic regulations are primarily defined by instrumental rationality.

While these forms of rationality (with the exception of formal rationality) can be said to have existed side-by-side in every society since the dawn of history, Weber suggests that separate historical social formations can be defined by the preponderance of one or another form of rationality. He argues that a defining characteristic of modernity is the emergence of instrumental and formal rationality as the dominant forms of rational-orientation for social action.<sup>245</sup>

In Weber’s scheme, what then becomes of the other forms of rationality when instrumental and formal rationalisation begin to crowd them out? This is an important question that Weber tends to gloss over. First, it must be acknowledged that substantive and theoretical rationalities are never fully extinguished, despite the fact that internally and externally they become increasingly prohibited as a

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<sup>244</sup> Ibid., 1155.

<sup>245</sup> Because Adorno shares this assumption of the predominance of instrumental rationality in modernity with Weber, and it has been discussed earlier in the context of the dialectic of enlightenment, I will refrain from defending my use of it here.

source of action, or at least, discouraged by the socialisation of instrumental rationality and law (formal rationality). As such, theoretical or substantive modes of rationality are rendered remainders of the process of rationalisation or, put differently, they become traces of difference that cannot be absorbed into a constellation governed by instrumental rationality. In other words, they become the *particular* to instrumental and formal rationality's *universal*, especially in the context of formal/legal rationality, which will always be an explicit utterance of the universal backed by empirical, disciplinary institutions that will punish those who attempt to transgress it. Finally, to the extent that instrumental and formal rationality posit themselves as universal, other modes of rationality become *unintelligible* from the perspective of *homo economicus*. In the context of means-end vs. value-oriented modes of social action, Weber claims: "The orientation of action to absolute values may thus have various different modes of relation to the other type of rational action in terms of a system of discrete individual ends. From the latter point of view, however, *absolute values are always irrational*."<sup>246</sup> In other words, from the perspective of an actor governed by instrumental reason, an action taken by another informed by a particular absolute (substantive) rationality is always irrational or unintelligible. However, because substantive and theoretical rationality are always still active as a source of human behaviour, and the individual actor is conscious of the value he or she attaches to such motivation, the actor is caught in a double bind: First, his or her actions become

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<sup>246</sup> Emphasis mine. Weber, *Social and Economic Organization*, 115.

*unintelligible* from the perspective of society at large. Weber describes this as such:

... many ultimate ends or values toward which experience shows that human action may be oriented, often cannot be understood completely, though sometimes we are able to grasp them intellectually. The more radically they differ from our own ultimate values, however, the more difficult it is for us to make them understandable by imaginatively participating in them.<sup>247</sup>

This means that the more that social motivation is governed by instrumental rationality the less will other forms of rationality be intelligible. Second, the subject experiences an internal antagonism when he or she recognises that a subjective desire for a transgression of instrumental rationality exists, but cannot ‘rationalise’ it or defend it because he or she is so fully socialised as *homo economicus*. In other words, I argue that this process produces *guilt*. Adorno supports this thesis when he discusses the psychic situation of the modern subject: “Its guilt is intimacy.”<sup>248</sup> In other words, the particular desires of the subject – those which clash with the universal desires *qua* instrumental rationality – are the source of the guilt of anti-instrumentality. It should be stressed again that I am here making a distinction from Žižek’s Lacanian ontology of desire. That is to say, I am interested in theorising the subject’s relationship to this process of

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<sup>247</sup> Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, 91.

<sup>248</sup> See Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, for the full quote: “Goodness is itself a deformation of good, By severing the moral principle from the social and displacing it into the realm of private conscience, goodness limits it in two senses. It dispenses with the realization of a condition worthy of men that is implicit in the principle of morality. Each of its actions has inscribed in it a certain resignation and solace: it aims at alleviation, not cure, and consciousness of incurability finally sides with the latter. In this way goodness becomes limited within itself as well. Its guilt is intimacy. It creates a mirage of direct relations between people and ignores the distance that is the individual’s only protection against the infringements of the universal. It is precisely in the closest contact that he feels the unabolished difference most painfully” (94).

rationalisation in terms of its explicitly *conscious* recognition of its desire and the ambivalence it engenders in relation to its informal prohibition.

As stated earlier, with the advent of modernity, instrumental rationality came to largely replace the other Weberian categories of rationality and, therefore, dominate the realm of motivation for social action. However, it should be noted that Weber qualified the way that instrumental reason changed from its ideal-typical form in this period. The instrumental rationality of the Puritan/protestant type was a new form of rationality because it conflated instrumental and substantive reasoning into a single “practical-ethical” rationality.<sup>249</sup> For the Puritans, the Christian doctrine of ‘good works’ became equated with hard, efficient, and unending labour for the glory of God. In other words, the orientation toward instrumental rationality (the means) is simultaneously the promise of salvation (the ethical ends) – the most efficient action is simultaneously the most ethical action. This is an interesting category because it fits well the theme I have been developing. The conflation of substantive and instrumental rationality in the protestant work ethic is extremely similar to the discourse at work in Herzlich and Pierret’s account of the conflation of the medical and social logics of illness into the singular ‘duty to be healthy.’ While in both cases you may have instrumental and substantive rationalities at work simultaneously, in terms of social action, they manifest themselves decidedly in the form of the means-end or instrumental; just as the social logic of illness became identical to the medical logic, the instrumental form of rationality

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<sup>249</sup> Max Weber, *The Protestant Work Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons New York: Routledge (2001).

becomes the ethical form. The main point to take away from this discussion is that, despite positivism's claims otherwise, *homo economicus* is not value-neutral in orientation; the ostensibly objective orientation of instrumental reason is, in fact, an ethical orientation in that the ethical is equated with efficiency and self-interest.

From Adorno's perspective, as instrumental reason became the preponderant source of human social action, humans became exchangeable and, indeed, from the perspective of positivist social science (who, according to Adorno, reified this category, i.e., all rational human beings act solely in accord with instrumental reason), became not only predictable, but *quantifiably* predictable. In regards to this process, Adorno is primarily interested in critiquing positivism's conceit regarding its claims to 'value-neutral' research, and the possibility of the quantifiability of human behavior as a measure of the truth of human nature.<sup>250</sup> However, I am more interested in exploring what is lost in the discursive production of *homo economicus*, i.e., the other things that motivate human beings to act beyond instrumental rationality. If all reification is forgetting, then it seems that one potential strategy to combat identitarianism is to recall and acknowledge the different sources of motivation from which people act or, more specifically, the way in which *value* is attached to actions that are unintelligible from the perspective of *homo economicus*. It is in the realm of values considered extraneous or unintelligible from the perspective of *homo*

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<sup>250</sup> As he and Horkheimer say in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: "Knowledge does not consist in mere perception, classification, and calculation but precisely in the determining negation of whatever is directly at hand. Instead of such negation, mathematical formalism, whose medium, number, is the most abstract form of the immediate, arrests thought at mere immediacy" (20).

*economicus* that one finds the particularity of subjectivity that should be recalled and fostered.

How then, can we understand the (largely disavowed) normative content of *homo economicus* in the context of autoprobhibition, as described earlier? In many ways *homo economicus*, the bearer of instrumental rationality, contains the dialectical force of reification. More specifically, it contains the possibility of obverting its ostensible normative content (i.e., *homo economicus* can be reified by either the concept of the value-set mind or body). He is, at once, Hobbes's subject whose priority is physical self-preservation (man in the state of nature), and Kant's bourgeois noumenal self (to the extent that all decisions should be dictated by *logos*). On the matter of instrumental rationality, it is itself, an empty category in terms of the orientation of its normative content. It is only defined by its form, i.e., means-end logic for the fulfillment of an objective. In other words, while *homo economicus* is dominated by the imperative of efficiency when it comes to achieving goals, what these goals consist of is not predetermined. In the context of my project, the end of instrumental rationality could correspond to desires of the value-set mind or desires of the value-set body. However, if we posit a self colonised by the concept of the body, then it follows that the focus of action will be related to the body. However, this claim needs further nuancing because, as established, the body can be understood at the level of physical pleasure and desire *or* sheer physical self-preservation. Thus, it cannot simply be assumed that when a concrete objective is pursued via instrumental rationality oriented towards the body, the objective will be the most efficient means to

achieve *physical pleasure* (the superego commandment to enjoy), because the body also demands *physical health* (the duty to be healthy). Thus, we find ourselves back in the realm of Žižek's decaf reality. That is to say, an imperative to 'remember the body' can end in a stalemate between the dialectical imperatives to enjoy one's self and to protect one's self from physical harm. However, if we take Adorno's claim seriously that the subject of late capitalism is defined by identitarian self-preservation, then it is the health imperative that wins out over the pleasure imperative which, nonetheless, is never fully extinguished. Why is this the case? Because the universality of the medical logic of self-preservation (determined by medical science) is more easily intelligible than the particular quality of physical enjoyment.

At this point, several of the seemingly disparate arguments that have been made throughout this dissertation meet up. The claim that contemporary subjectivity is governed by an instrumental rationality that posits the priority of physical health and safety, is supported both by my reading of Herzlich and Pierret's 'duty to be healthy' as a conflation of the medical and social logics of illness, and the institutionalisation of physical self-preservation in the formal rationality of public safety law (in which case the effects of autoprohibition enter the formal juridical realm). It makes intuitive sense that health and safety as a universalisable set of practices will win out because they are easily codified in law, versus physical (unhealthy) desire which is always much more particular in nature. Furthermore, Žižek's 'decaf reality,' in which the antagonism between enjoyment and the prohibition of the substance of this enjoyment is illusorily

overcome due to social and technological advances that allow, at least, a *similar* experience to the (always partial) satisfaction of desire, demonstrates the same conflated social logic at play. Ultimately, the point is that from the perspective of a self colonised by the concept of the body, any action that could be understood as harmful to the body, becomes *unintelligible*. While the desire for physical gratification remains intelligible in abstract terms (obviously because of the existence of the superego commandment to enjoy), it is negated to the extent that a pleasurable act is understood to be physically unhealthy. In other words, pleasurable behaviour is intelligible, even encouraged, in the abstract, but turns unintelligible when its empirical performance is judged to be unhealthy.

From an Adornian perspective, a self dominated by a fetishisation of physical health or self-preservation, is a reified existence, and therefore a wrong way of living by definition. I would like to build upon this tautology by proposing that it is wrong in two ways: 1) because the *internalisation* of this fetishisation has a deleterious effect on the individual; and 2) because it compromises both subjective and collective liberty and autonomy when it becomes formally *externalised* in the guise of law and governance. To the extent this domination is an internalised, subjective experience, it creates an impasse at the level of desire, and the truth-content of Adorno's desiring subject is rendered inactive. It also prevents the subject from fully developing its ability to relate to the desire of others, which from the perspective of *homo economicus*, becomes

unintelligible due to its resistance to the universal of physical self-preservation.<sup>251</sup> In other words, it creates a situation which makes it difficult for the subject to be an ‘ethical’ subject because the essence of the human is the acknowledgement of its non-identity, which opens up the possibility of an ethical *relation* with the Other. And finally, a self colonised by the concept of the body will tend to exist under a new ‘asceticism’ – the very thing that Adorno and Cornell want to repudiate in favour of the acknowledgement of desire. If this is the case, then it seems a perfect example of the logic of the dialectic of enlightenment. Consider this statement from Adorno: “If I were to formulate the matter in Nietzschean terms, I would probably say that the concept of morality has been severely compromised by the fact that, consciously or unconsciously, it carries around a lot of baggage in the shape of ‘ascetic ideals.’”<sup>252</sup> Is not the new situation I am describing (in which the self is colonised by the concept of the body) simply the advent of a new morality with strong ascetic tendencies that, instead of springing from a reification of the noumenal, is a product of the fetishisation of the phenomenal? That is to say, if the subject of enlightenment was defined by a return of the mythic fear of nature in secularised form, in which the subject is posited as that which can control nature, then as it relates to contemporary subjectivity, this fear returns in a new asceticism that posits the body as absolute.

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<sup>251</sup> This claim is reminiscent of Nietzsche’s discussion of Socrates who, when he was near his death, had been told by a daemon to write poetry: “This voice of the Socratic dream vision is the only indication that he ever gave any consideration to the limitations of logic. He was obliged to ask: ‘Is that which is unintelligible to me necessarily unintelligent? Might there be a realm of wisdom from which the logician is excluded?’” Friedrich Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music*, trans. Shaun Whiteside, Toronto: Penguin (1993) 71.

<sup>252</sup> Adorno, *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, 13.

In the context of external governing forces, this new asceticism manifests itself in formalised prohibitions that demand the repression of desire. This is the realm of Weber's formal rationality, and a challenge to Žižek's slightly overdetermined claim that postmodern society is defined by a lack of formal prohibitions.<sup>253</sup> For Adorno, to live an ethical life we must "go out of ourselves" and "enter into relationships with others, and in a certain sense relinquish ourselves to them."<sup>254</sup> As such, formal rationality leads us away from others and orients relationships toward impersonal, universalised, and externalised laws and norms.<sup>255</sup> In addition, laws regulating public health and safety create a justification for increased government parentalism – laws designed not only to protect individuals from other individuals, but also to protect individuals from themselves or their own desires. This creates a situation in which individual autonomy is severely compromised. If Žižek is correct, we unconsciously desire this sort of explicit prohibition because it relieves us of the exhausting commandment to enjoy. But this is an impossible claim to treat as a general truth,

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<sup>253</sup> What I mean here is that when Žižek claims that everything is formally permitted in postmodern society, he is referring to a situation in which many conservative, formal legal prohibitions have now been overturned. These are primarily moral categories related to things like marriage, sexual acts, etc.. What he does not discuss is the new trend related to the creation of laws and regulations related to public health and safety justified by the impulse for sheer physical self-preservation. These are the types of laws I have in mind when I claim that instrumental rationality oriented toward physical self-preservation becomes formalised in law. This is not an example of autoprobhibition *per se*, but demonstrates how the imperative of self-preservation formalises itself.

<sup>254</sup> Theodor Adorno, "Scientific Experiences of a European Scholar in America," *Critical Models, Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford, New York: Columbia University Press (1998) 242.

<sup>255</sup> See: Bernstein, *Adorno*.

especially if we are discussing *conscious* desires.<sup>256</sup> It is as simple as stating that particular individuals are fully conscious of at least some of their particular desires and understand full well when they are being prohibited by an increasing governmental and legal parentalism, and are consciously resentful of legal attempts to circumscribe them. Or, at the very least, one can still attempt to imbue the acknowledgement of one's physical desire against legal prohibitions with a certain normativity.

*And Finally ...*

In terms of normative ethics, this dissertation has been primarily oriented toward identifying the particular historical nature of contemporary subjectivity and how it relates to the practice of ethics and the subject's self-understanding of desire and living well. In this regard, the project has never been focused on formulating a positive prescription for ethical subjectivity in any *detailed* manner. However, there is an obvious, logical way to extend the claims of this project in the direction of a recipe for the de-reification of subjectivity. I will conclude here with a very brief and speculative account of the implications of my argument for living well.

Žižek is fond of pointing out that the normative imperative to practice tolerance toward the Other among left-liberal practitioners of political correctness,

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<sup>256</sup> Indeed, these desires are often associated with routine behaviour – one's 'everyday routine,' – which is, perhaps, a manifestation of the death drive. Routine, I would argue, can be understood as an important aspect of living well.

is always deceiving because this Other is always implicitly the Other who practices the very same reverence for tolerance. He says:

Let's again take today's discourse on tolerance. At one level this discourse preaches universal tolerance, but if you look closer there is a set of hidden conditions that reveals that you are tolerated only insofar as you are like everyone else – the discourse establishes what is to be tolerated. So, in reality, today's culture of tolerance subsists through a radical intolerance towards any true Otherness; any real threat to existing conventions<sup>257</sup>

For Žižek, the Other becomes a category gutted of its otherness, so that the Other, who *actually believes* in absolute truths or fundamentals that are incompatible with tolerance, or believes in social practices that might be discriminatory or repressive towards various groups of people or individuals, are either banned from greater social or political discourse, or the more unsavoury aspects of their otherness is deliberately ignored while their more exotic and folksy practices are lauded. In short, the plea for tolerance is directed only towards those who are exactly like the pleader, i.e., tolerant – a 'decaffeinated' form of other.

On a global scale, this is perhaps one of the most challenging, if not insoluble, problems facing not only the Left but humanity at large. Increasing immigration to Western countries, 'fundamentalist' politics and social movements, global ecological issues and, of course, terrorism may very well demand a confrontation between the ideals of tolerance and, say, political realism. This problem is more in line with what Žižek wants to address in his work, and it does not concern my present project. However, the general principle informing

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<sup>257</sup> Slavoj Žižek and Glyn Daly, *Conversations with Žižek*, New York: Polity (2004) 120.

this problem can be made relevant to my project if we localise it, or remove it by one level of abstraction to everyday intersubjective relations in Western societies, characterised by subjects whose selves are colonised by the concept of the body.

If in the abstract, an isolated individual recognises the value of resisting the social imperative to physical self-preservation in an attempt to live a better, if potentially shorter, life; if he or she can overcome the barrier of intelligibility to his or her own physical desires that are raised by socialisation as *homo economicus* then the newly minted ‘human’ actor (derefined but distinct from Adorno’s messianic character), by virtue of his or her desires becoming intelligible to itself, opens itself up to conditions for the possibility of the intelligibility of the Other’s particular desires. It is important to emphasise the ‘particular’ character of the Other’s desire because it is not the *content* of this desire that becomes necessarily intelligible (there will always be things one simply cannot understand about others), but it is the *value of particularity itself* that becomes intelligible and should be respected to as great an extent as possible (if we are to value the importance of particularity to being human in the way that Adorno suggests). This represents a shift from Cornell’s description of Adorno’s ethics as the construction of the possibility for nonviolative relationships, to the creation of *intelligible* relationships (which, of course, imply the principle of non-violation). This is not only an ethical formulation, but also a potential lesson, if not starting point, for a progressive politics. Just as the holy man challenged the universality of the church, so too a network of humans, characterised by a sense of self *decolonised* of the concept of body, might pose a challenge to informal or

formal modes of governance informed by a fetishisation of public health and safety. This, however, is a topic fit for a future project.

## Chapter 7

### Conclusion

It may seem that writing a dissertation which focuses largely on comparative methodology, particularly of the Marxist kind, is an anachronistic exercise. This criticism might have some merit if the methods in question lead nowhere in terms of a normative theory, but even this charge would ignore the fundamental lesson of Max Horkheimer's "Traditional and Critical Theory," that is, that all theory contributes to or reproduces existing empirical reality, even if only to an infinitesimal degree.<sup>258</sup> While this position is now widely accepted by critical theorists, the relationship of method to truth becomes much more significant if the method in question directly and explicitly produces its own ontology and, more specifically, if the ontology contains an immanent normative component. In other words, when a particular methodology is not only constructed to access truth, but is also conflated with an ontology that points to how things *should* be, that methodology has the potential for a direct normative intervention in existing social and political structures or debates. This is clearly the case with Adorno, whose method – which I have named 'constellations' – acts as his model for intersubjective ethics. That is to say, the method of negative dialectics *qua* constellations, which stresses the non-identity of all objects, is also the philosophical foundation for creating the conditions of ethical relations. In

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<sup>258</sup> Horkheimer, Max, "Traditional and Critical Theory," in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell, et al., New York: Herder and Herder (1972) 188-243.

this dissertation I have demonstrated the merits, but also the limits, of Adorno's approach to ethics.

To the extent that constellations are composed of individual concepts, and concepts can never be true by themselves, the way that truth is revealed becomes somewhat mystical in nature. The truth-content of concepts – their non-identity – emerges when concepts are set in motion with each other and as such illuminate their hidden *qua* forgotten truth-content. Left at this abstract level of pure method, Adorno's constellations have a distinctly revelatory character that contemporary philosophers have been rightly suspicious of (the truth is out there, but in the future). The formal category of truth or truth-content in this regard lacks any particular normative character, except to the extent that non-identity itself is a good. As I demonstrated in Chapter Three, for Adorno constellations can be applied negatively to illustrate the truth of the Image Prohibition. To the extent that the image is analogous to the concept, it must never be allowed to stand in for truth. What Adorno's critique of the Image Prohibition achieves is a rethinking of history in which *hope* is infused as a normative category, and can be understood to be at least one level of abstraction removed from the truth-content of concepts in constellations. Although 'hope' in this context is a materialist, secular desire for a better world, it still retains a revelatory, or Messianic character that is at best too idealist (from a materialist perspective), and at worst inadequate for achieving what Adorno's philosophy and sociology reached for – social emancipation (and this remains a plausible difficulty with his theory even though

Adorno argues for a shifting of the burden of redemption from religion into the hands of human beings).

Despite all this, I have argued that Adorno's formulation of ethical subjectivity in relation to the idea of self-preservation is the most promising aspect of his philosophy for contemporary normative theory. In his model of intersubjective ethics (reified) human individuals are analogous to concepts, and therefore should be similarly 'set in motion' in a dialogical space. For Adorno, the non-identity of human beings which can be illuminated or remembered is their desiring and suffering physical bodies. This remembrance acts as a sort of shock to the reified subject – a recognition of its lack of a truly human existence and therefore an opening for subjects to enter into ethical relations. In this formulation, Adorno's philosophy begins to take on a concrete, normative character. While it still remains at a fairly abstract level by emphasising the formal truth-content of the body, possibilities for political praxis emerge, most significantly represented in the social movements informed by the theoretical model of identity politics in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, Adorno's ethics overdetermines the nature of reification to the extent that he only focuses on the way in which individuals are colonised by a reified sense of mind, and this prevents his ethics from being relevant in a contemporary context. As I have tried to show, this lack can be addressed by understanding the ways that subjects can be reified by a sense of self colonised by the concept of body. In other words, Adorno simply did not address the possibility that the impulses and truth-content of the body could themselves act as a new source of reification.

However, to make this analysis fruitful, it must break through the ostensible dualism of the value-sets mind/body. For Adorno, the body is posited only as a normative category to the extent that truth can be learned via suffering and physical desire. In a way, one could say that for Adorno the integrity of the body is maintained in the *preservation* of a certain sensitivity to suffering and desire, and it is the fetishisation of the value-set ‘mind’ that hinders this. I have argued that this critique is not entirely convincing because it misses the possibility that a reification of the body can be activated by a fetishisation of the *body itself*. This is where Adorno’s focus on self-preservation becomes important, but in a way that he did not envision. Instead of understanding the reifying category of self-preservation as directed solely at the noumenal self, or the value-set mind, I am proposing that we rethink it as active at the level of the body. However, in this formulation the object of self-preservation (to the point of reification) is not the body as a desiring or suffering vessel, but the body in terms of sheer, physical existence – biological life – completely abstracted, indeed, from the truth of the body as posited by Adorno. But to make this claim requires a further dialectical move than the method of constellation can accommodate. That is to say, if the concept body is reified in such a way that it forgets both the truth-content of mind *and simultaneously* the truth content of the body as articulated by Adorno, then the body somehow *prohibits itself*. This is what I am calling ‘autoprohibition’ and it is most clearly articulated by Žižek via his critique of traditional philosophical understandings of the Second Commandment, and his formulation of decaf reality.

It follows, then, that to live an ethical life one would require a de-reification or decolonisation of subjectivity as it relates to this peculiar form of fetishisation. It is easy enough to emphasise the importance of rejecting an ethos of ‘living not to die,’ which is analogous to the old sports cliché that one should never ‘play not to lose,’ but this simple formulation suffers a fatal weakness. An approach like this will never be adequate to an Adornian analysis because it is not *relational*. For Adorno, in good Hegelian-Marxist fashion, to posit an individual as anything but social is a bourgeois mystification. Thus, an inherently relational category is required to imbue the method of autoprohibition with a normative content. I have rejected ‘tolerance’ as such a category because, as Žižek demonstrates, it is too often and too easily manipulated as a category to falsely distinguish between an Other that is, in fact, not really very different from the subject that determines otherness. One could add that tolerance seems to be a passive category in that it does not imply that one should make an attempt to comprehend the Other, i.e., tolerance is simply an intuition that the Other is not a threat. In this regard, it would seem that tolerance can quickly turn into intolerance the moment that surface assumptions are upset, for whatever reason. On the other extreme, ‘understanding’ should be rejected as a candidate for the proper normative, relational category for ethics. Understanding has too strong a connotation, because it implies mastery, and therefore, an understanding of the *content* of, for example, a decision made by others. A claim of understanding is almost always an example of either hubris or naïveté. Instead, as I have argued, the most useful social category to describe an Adornian ethical relation from the

perspective of autoprobhibition is ‘intelligibility.’ This choice is inspired by Adorno’s (via Weber’s) critique of instrumental reason. Intelligibility is at least one level of abstraction removed from understanding because it does not deal with specific content, but it does work within the context of behavioural motivation *in the abstract*. For example, one might not *understand* a particular sexual fetish, but being motivated by a sexual fetish is fully *intelligible*. More specifically, from the perspective of an individual decolonised of a sense of self dominated by the concept of body, a physically unhealthy act may not be understandable, but it is intelligible to the extent it is recognised that the actor finds value in it. Obviously, any form of social organisation demands negotiation in order to determine what sort of behaviour is acceptable or not, but an emphasis on intelligibility as a socio-ethical category creates a much larger space in which this negotiation can take place. It expands the limits of the Symbolic Order which, as mentioned earlier, always determines the limit of the social imagination. Adorno might call this an enhancement of freedom, whereas I would call it an enlarging of the realm of liberty (but that is a topic fit for another dissertation unto itself).

Furthermore, the category of intelligibility allows me to return to a topic I discussed in the introduction of this dissertation. Recall the way in which Romand Coles distinguishes the ethical models of Adorno and Habermas. Coles illustrates that whereas Habermas posits the structural possibility of consensus, Adorno believes that dialogical situations will always be marked by disconsensus and to suggest otherwise is tantamount to an invitation of linguistic terrorism in the Lyotardian sense. How, exactly, can dialogism operate if one assumes it is

defined by an unbridgeable agonism? My answer to this is highly speculative, and would need a concerted follow up to do it justice, but if by consensus Habermas is implying understanding (as I have defined it here), even though his ideal speech situation is an ideal-type, it suffers from an idealist, Enlightenment naïveté regarding the nature of reason. As I have argued via Weber, reason exists in different shapes and forms that, ultimately, prevent intelligibility in conversations when perspectives informed by differing rationalities, in effect, talk at cross purposes. For example, a conversant informed by a type of substantive rationality will often not be intelligible to one informed by instrumental rationality. Thus, to realise Adorno's ethical vision would require a shift from instrumental to substantive rationality. This is a well-worn assertion in the literature on Adorno, and all it means is that, in the Weberian sense, rationality should be directly governed by values other than efficiency and profit-maximisation. For Adorno, these non-instrumental values are related to categories such as freedom and emancipation – attractive to be sure, but certainly a realm of inquiry beyond the scope of this dissertation and certainly problematic in application. Instead, what I have argued in this dissertation is that a productive way to think about contemporary subjectivity vis-à-vis rationality is through the lens of Herzlich and Pierret's 'duty to be healthy.' I have already shown that their analysis is important due to its observation of the conflation of the medical and social logics of illness, which helps explain the nature of subjects colonised by a sense of self dominated by the concept of body. However, it also goes far in terms of rethinking the category of substantive rationality. As Herzlich and

Pierret's genealogical account illustrates, the duty to be healthy, which I have argued is informed by instrumental rationality of a sort (practical-ethical), actually emerged out of substantive reasoning. That is to say, it was from the social value of the collective responsibility to care for the ill from which the duty to be healthy emerged. The responsibility to care for the ill is undoubtedly an example of substantive rationality because it is social in nature and does not conform to the traditional understanding of instrumental reason which is profoundly egoistic in orientation.

But, as Herzlich and Pierret show, the collective responsibility to care for the ill possessed the seeds of what would grow into a new form of instrumental reason – one that identified (in the Adornian sense) the social good with physical health. In the process, the discursive realm of illness became saturated with a new morality in which no behaviour was intelligible if it included an unnecessary threat to one's biological health. At this point, it would seem, rationality ceases to be substantive, perhaps not in a strict Weberian sense, but certainly from an updated Adornian perspective, because physical health becomes overdetermined – the body, as a representative of the truth of physical desire, has prohibited itself. When individuals are ideologically dominated in this way, unintelligibility of one's own and others' physical desire emerges, and goes a long way toward explaining the genesis of Žižek's decaf reality – an ever-growing sense of the paradox of desire, not just in the Lacanian context of the impossibility of the fulfillment of desire, but the actual empirical prohibition of attempting fulfillment. This becomes even more pertinent if it is true that instrumental rationality tends to

become institutionalised in the formal logic of rules and law. While this is speculation on my part, the logical consequences of this process are that public health and safety laws proliferate, reinforcing and externalising what is at first only a manner of internalisation at the level of subjectivity. Furthermore, the imperatives of the duty to be healthy are moralised beyond the mandate of public health and safety, i.e., beyond a relational/public context. Individual behaviour (of the unhealthy kind), largely divorced from contact with others (i.e., not directly endangering others), is legislated against because it has been caught up in the moral panic caused by unintelligibility and reification.

In closing, I have shown the nature and importance of the method of autoprohibition at the level of the image and the value-set body. In both cases, autoprohibition is only relevant because the categories in question are understood as *conceptualised* in the Adornian sense. That is to say, Adorno argues that the image of God-as-man is a concept because it defines that which is undefineable. Similarly, I have demonstrated that the body can be conceptualised due to the fetishisation of physical health, leaving out its originary truth-content – desire and suffering. The question becomes, then, can the ‘concept’ itself conform to the logic of autoprohibition *in the abstract*, i.e., as a component of a methodological premise? This has been an underlying question of my entire dissertation: does the concept, in the abstract, fall prey to automatic prohibition in the same way that the image does? The answer is ‘no,’ because a concept never exists without content – just as there is no thought without a body, there is no concept without an object. In fact, as I mentioned in Chapter Two, autoprohibition simply has no interest in

objects that are not objects of desire. A contentless concept cannot be an object of desire because it has nothing the subject might desire. In this way, the method of constellations itself is somewhat misleading. Because it is based on a spatial metaphor, one can imagine contentless concepts bumping up against each other, or orbiting around an unspecified object, but in reality this is just as impossible as a contentless concept existing in the first place.

Thus, if one were to replace constellations with autoprohibition, it would be in many ways, quite faithful to Adorno's ethical principles. First, the recognition that autoprohibition requires the presence of particular objects, stays true to Adorno's materialism which, at times, he seems to stray from (especially considering his Messianic tendencies). Second, as the example of the image and the body demonstrate, the nature of autoprohibition changes depending on the quality of the object in question. Thus, one of the foundational Adornian categories – ‘the truth of the object’ – is maintained, i.e., the specificity of the object will determine the nature of its prohibition, except that it is only true to the extent that the object reveals a truth about the particularity of the subject. Finally, and this is immanent to the two previous observations, the priority of the particular over the universal is faithfully observed under the method of autoprohibition to the extent that it is the particularity of objects that guides the philosopher's critique.

## **Post-Script**

### **On Balance**

One of the concerns that compelled me to write this dissertation was the possibility that Adorno, despite his critics, could help us think about subjectivity in a more normative-prescriptive way. That is to say, I wanted to know if it is possible to take a step away from the abstract nature of his negation of existing society and subjectivity and add some positive content? I attempted this by situating his thought firmly within the categories of the physical body and physical health. I suggested that a subject, to the extent he or she is dominated by a sense of self colonised by the concept of the body, should reject the principle that physical health is an ethical absolute and thus should remember that there is value in following desires that would be unintelligible from the perspective of this principle. As we can see, I am still operating at a fairly high level of abstraction. As such, a future project would engage with actually existing discourses of public health and safety, governmental parentalism, and specific unintelligible behaviour that people still routinely engage in (smoking, drinking, unhealthy diet, riding a bike without a helmet, etc.). This would be a very interesting way of adding content to the form of my argument.

However there are some nagging problems regarding my argument that should be addressed. Despite my criticism of Cornell's interpretation of Adorno's ethics as a desire for balance, is it possible that I am guilty of promoting something similar, with the only distinction being that my starting point is a sense

of self colonised by the concept of the body (whereas it is the opposite for Cornell)? In other words, is not my ultimate conclusion just another call for balance at the level of how one should act ethically in relation to the mind/body value-sets (or in relation to the particular and universal), and balance in terms of the relationship between one's ideals and one's actual, empirical existence and the structural, social realities in which this existence is limited? Does this mean that, ultimately, I am concerned with a 'mean-based' ethics, in which virtuous or excellent behaviour would be associated with an equal acknowledgement of physical and psychic impulses, which is all too often reduced to 'moderation' in liberal ethical systems (despite its proper origins in Aristotle as 'excellence')? Is my project just another manifestation of liberal norms and values couched in the ideas of radical philosophers?

It seems that in much of the post-Marxist or postmodern variants of Continental philosophy there exists a desire for the radical negation of liberal, reified forms of subjectivity by promoting categories that are always resemblant of 'excess,' or 'trace,' or 'remainder.' There exists in these discourses also a strong desire for normative political and ethical claims, but all too often they collapse under the sheer agony of undecidability (and I would include Adorno in this category, to some extent), and end up reinforcing a superficial liberal ethics that, for all intents and purposes, is already widely accepted in mainstream society. Rarely do they enter the nebulous arena that most fear to tread – actually promoting a radical rejection of commonplace ethics. That being said, some contemporary philosophers do attempt to transcend this problem of prescription

and Žižek is a prime example. His promotion of the ‘Act’ and revolutionary terror is, if not a direct and unequivocal call to violent revolution, at least a challenge to left philosophers to rethink what it means to be radical. Another example may be Foucault and his ‘ethics of experience,’ although this category may easily be appropriated by liberal humanism. So what is the difficulty that plagues the various leftist, postmodern positions – these so called ‘radical’ discourses? Well, if they are not paralysed by indecision and thus, ultimately, have no political or ethical relevance for participating in the creation of a new world, they advocate a rebalancing of existing, popular ethics. Why is this the case? Is it possibly because contemporary subjects and the philosophers who theorise them are both *largely dominated by their own liberal subjectivity*, which seems to instinctually shun action of any substantive type? If this is indeed the case, I am certainly (at this point, anyway) unwilling to suggest that individuals should subscribe to unabandoned hedonism that would ultimately cut their life short. Nor would I advocate a Nietzschean or Sadean ‘take what is yours at the expense of the liberty of others’ sort of ethical position. Therefore, just as other so-called ‘radical’ academics, while I might intuitively desire a radical politics or change in ethics, I am simultaneously paralysed by the impossibility of actually making strong promotional claims on their behalf (or at least not imaginative enough to suggest productive values). For what it is worth, I did begin this dissertation by stating that my contribution would be a humble one, and that was certainly not false modesty on my part. However, perhaps my initial reactions

above are not the final word. Perhaps it may be possible that calls for balance in ethical relations are not necessarily as liberal as they seem ...

Now that I have invoked Nietzsche, I should include a brief comment here on how we can relate him to Adorno. What is it that Adorno desires and places in an edificial position? The Answer: The creation of the New. What is the defining characteristic of Nietzsche's *Übermensch*? The creation of *new* values. The question then becomes: can the New emerge out of balance or does balance by definition suppress newness? While I cannot here provide a well-tailored answer, I would like to speculate on the possibility of an affirmative relationship between balance and the New. In the context of my dissertation topic, for example, if the New is to emerge out of a rejection of the colonisation of the self by the concept of the body, it would, at least, allow for a renewed relationship to the body that could open up possibilities for experimentation and transgressions of formerly (auto)prohibited acts. In this regard, the most basic claim might be that a 'decolonisation' would simply allow for possibilities that any form of reified situation would not. In other words, to refer back to Herzlich and Pierret, a sense of non-identity as I have worked out in this dissertation may be the hidden potential in the social logic, not necessarily of illness, but of *health*. So perhaps my criticism of Cornell was too hasty. The balance required of proper consciousness – the balance between mind and body – does not necessarily return the subject back to a happy, liberal medium, in a process of rebalancing the value-sets mind/body, although this outcome may be one of many possibilities. Indeed, for those involved it simply creates a situation of increased choice, that is, choice

free from the blackmail of the conflated logics of illness/health. And better yet, it may also contribute to a social context in which choices are made *intelligible* to others – others who would never make similar choices themselves, but would understand the value of them being made.

On a more abstract level, my dissertation dealt with a novel form of dialectical thinking inspired by Žižek that I call ‘autoprohibition,’ and it may very well be an important academic project to theorise the category of ‘balance’ under its auspices. What might it look like if ‘balance’ contained its own prohibition, or was automatically prohibited by the subject? Can it be reified as a concept to begin with? How could something emerge out of ‘balance’ *through* its extremes to create a new dialectical object? Would it be something qualitatively different than balance? Or would it simply be a quantitatively different understanding of balance? How might this help Left academics relate to their own work, and their paralysis when it comes to the relationship between radical negation and normativity?

To an extent, Žižek has already undertaken such a project in his critique of ecological politics. He contests the idea of balance in relation to the ecology movement, claiming that it is detrimental to the potential for change if we conceptualise nature as existing always in a fragile balance. Instead, for Žižek, nature develops, and continues to develop, as a series of catastrophes to which adaptation is required in the face of the New.<sup>259</sup> As such, despite the fact that Žižek sees the impending ecological crisis as the most immediately pressing issue

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<sup>259</sup> Žižek, *Lost Causes*, 442.

facing humanity, he thinks that the focus on upsetting the balance of nature results in a demand to halt progress. When he cites ‘progress,’ he clearly does not mean traditional industrial production, but instead the possibility for the emergence of the socio-political New from a large collective Act. In this case then, Žižek implicitly challenges the dialectical potential of ‘balance.’

Unfortunately, in this regard Žižek is not much help as his discussion of balance in nature is much too brief, and seems to contradict claims he makes in other contexts. For example, he simply does not provide any reason why a concern for the ‘balance’ of nature could not as easily provoke a collective, progressive Act, as it could a conservative reaction against action. Furthermore, as his advice to students and activists is emphatically “think, think, think,” i.e., we need much more theory to tell us what is going on in the world before we can produce a project for change (and therefore we must resist the pressure to ‘act now’), he contradicts himself when he discusses the immediacy of ecological issues to which his solution seems to be a popular (i.e., outside of formal political channels, and including the world’s ‘excluded’) movement that would immediately grab state power and institute some form of green dictatorship.<sup>260</sup> Is it possible that these contradictions reveal Žižek’s true desire? That is, it seems that he would be seeking a ‘balance’ of theory and action of some sort, with a specific focus on what is required for a genuine (i.e., non-decaf) revolution. What ‘theory’ would tell us in this regard is that revolution requires careful planning but with an explicit rejection of the reified liberal position that violence and terror

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<sup>260</sup> Ibid., Chapter 9.

will not be tolerated as a part of it. Again, it would be out of a type of 'balance,' which perhaps even Nietzsche would endorse, that the possibility of an intelligible newness might emerge.

From this perspective then 'balance' becomes something quite different than the common understanding of it as moderation or as that which must not be upset. Indeed, it becomes properly dialectical, completely allowing for extremes where it is appropriate; a de-reifying *phronesis* for contemporary times, perhaps? I think it is something worth considering.

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