

This is a computer-translation of my German text that I have carefully revised. See: [eckhartarnold.de/EN/philosophy.html#Dialectics of Enlightenment Critique](http://eckhartarnold.de/EN/philosophy.html#Dialectics_of_Enlightenment_Critique) for the German original and additional materials.

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What remains of Horkheimer and Adorno's "Dialectic of Enlightenment"?

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1 Introduction

The "Dialectic of Enlightenment" by Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno is undoubtedly a multi-layered work. If one takes seriously the objective formulated in the preface, according to which the authors had "set themselves the task of recognizing [...] why humanity, instead of entering a truly human state, is sinking into a new kind of barbarism"¹, then one might expect the book to be a scientific analysis of the causes of the emergence of fascism and communism, an analysis that is supplemented by a sharpened cultural and social critique that identifies the factors that prepare the transition to a totalitarian state in (still) liberal societies. Indeed, the "Dialectic of Enlightenment" was understood in this sense as an analysis and critique of society, otherwise the book could hardly have become one of the "bibles" of the 1968 movement.

However, there is another level on which the work can be understood. On this level, it is not a scientific analysis, but the expression of a radically pessimistic world view. This level of understanding is conveyed not so much through the statements made in the work about enlightenment, mythology, the culture industry or positivism, but rather through the language, the style and certain figures of thought that point more in a religious-metaphysical direction. Here the verdict is passed on a world that can no longer be saved, in which salvation is imaginable,² but its realization is so completely out of the question that it would actually be better to put it out of one's mind right away.

To make a better distinction, I will call these two levels the *factual level* and the *metaphysical level*. This distinction seems important to me because the work fails almost completely on the factual level: the authors do not succeed in demonstrating in a credible way that the process of enlightenment is characterized by a "dialectic" through which enlightenment ultimately degenerates into "barbarism". Nor do they succeed in proving that modern "barbarism", by which the totalitarian forms of rule are meant, is a legacy (even if only unintentional) of the Age of Enlightenment. The fact that the work fails

¹Horkheimer, Max/Adorno, Theodor W.: *Dialektik der Aufklärung*. Frankfurt am Main 2000, p. 1.

²Cf. in particular the ends of the chapters in the "Dialectic of Enlightenment".

completely on the factual level does not mean that it is also doomed to fail on the metaphysical level. Accordingly, I do not claim that the following critique is the last word on the subject – especially since I want to deal primarily with the factual level of the work for two reasons:

1) The "Dialectic of Enlightenment" is hardly the relevant source for an examination of Adorno and Horkheimer's metaphysical pessimism. Much richer material for this can be found in the late writings of both, especially as the authors there have already detached themselves more strongly from their doctrinaire Marxism, which is still more than noticeable in the "Dialectic of Enlightenment".³

2 Before approaching the interpretation of the metaphysical level, we must first clarify the factual level. Metaphysics appears in a different light depending on whether the metaphysical problems correspond to actual social dangers, such as the spread of totalitarian forms of rule, which can and should be countered, or whether metaphysics lives purely on the level of a redemptive utopianism.

And there is yet another reason: the social criticism of the Frankfurt School no longer seems to be overly popular today. Nevertheless, I still believe that a critical examination of the "Dialectic of Enlightenment" on a factual level is necessary. After all, similar views are also held by other much-discussed philosophers. It is astonishing: we live in a time that is blessed with material abundance, in which everyone can almost certainly expect to live to be seventy or eighty. At the same time, we (in the West) live in the freest society that has ever existed, in which basic human rights have been realized to an unprecedented degree and are protected by a vigilant judiciary against government encroachment. But what do we learn when we consult the works of Horkheimer, Adorno, Foucault or, more recently, Giorgio Agamben on this subject? That it is all vinegar, that freedom is a sham, that domination over people has in fact become much more intense and that its methods are only more subtle but all the more pervasive, that citizens are held firmly in the government's biopolitical grip and so on.⁴

Such revelations about the true nature of supposedly free societies may tingle intellectually, perhaps they even have the objective value of drawing attention to the real dangers that can threaten freedom even in modern democracies through their excessive

³For example, in the crude way in which epistemological standpoints are interpreted as an expression of social power relations.

⁴Foucault must, however, be given credit for the fact that, despite his tendency to one-sided exaggeration, he at least draws on a remarkable amount of empirical material to support his theses. The same cannot be said of Agamben, who suggests a connection between human rights and dictatorship using a very similar montage technique to that used by Adorno and Horkheimer: "Fascism and Nazism are above all a redefinition of the relationship between man and citizen and are [...] only fully comprehensible against the biopolitical background opened up by national sovereignty and human rights" (Agamben, Giorgio: *Homo Sacer. Die souveräne Macht und das nackte Leben*. Frankfurt am Main 2002, p. 139).

exaggerations. But misjudging the existing and achieved level of freedom also harbors dangers. It could be that we fail to defend this freedom at the crucial moment because we do not know what it should be worth to us. For this reason, a critical examination of the theses of the "Dialectic of Enlightenment" still seems sensible to me.

2 The basic thesis of the "Dialectic of Enlightenment"

Right at the beginning, the authors state: "The fully enlightened earth shines under the sign of triumphant disaster."⁵ Nowhere in the work, however, is it clearly explained what they mean by "triumphant disaster" or the "barbarism" quoted at the beginning. Nevertheless, it is clear from numerous allusions and the context in which the work was written that barbarism obviously refers to totalitarian forms of rule and, above all, fascism.⁶

As the title of their work suggests, Adorno and Horkheimer seek the cause of "barbarism" in the distortions of a failed process of enlightenment. But why, in their view, does the Enlightenment lead to totalitarianism? It is indisputable (also for Adorno and Horkheimer) that this does not correspond to the intentions of the Enlightenment at all. In order to answer the question, it is necessary to go back to the origins of the Enlightenment. According to Adorno and Horkheimer, the Enlightenment is burdened with a birth defect: It is entangled with domination from the very beginning. For Adorno and Horkheimer, the Enlightenment begins in mythology. Enlightenment can be understood in the broadest sense as the rational criticism of outdated prejudices. And in this sense, Adorno and Horkheimer believe that mythology already contains elements of rational criticism that displace earlier mythologies.⁷ Homer's epics, for example, represent a step forward in enlightenment compared to earlier myths, but there is something "that epic and myth do indeed have in common: Domination and exploitation"⁸. This birth defect runs through the entire process of civilization, as if an imbalance had crept into the gears of human history very early on, causing ever greater destruction over time. Seen in this light, the totalitarianism of the 20th century only manifests what was already inherent in mythology: "Even the original myth contains the moment of the lie that triumphs in the dizziness of fascism."⁹

⁵Horkheimer/Adorno: Dialektik der Aufklärung, p. 9.

⁶With regard to the later reception success of the work, it is probably not without significance that, due to the unspecified nature of the term, "barbarism" can also be understood as any form of meaningless society. Understood in this broad sense, however, the pessimism of crisis and the mood of doom that the work breathes would seem inappropriate and downright grotesque. In my interpretation, I therefore assume that Adorno and Horkheimer actually want to warn their readers about totalitarianism and not just about consumption-terror or environmental destruction.

⁷Cf. Horkheimer/Adorno: Dialektik der Aufklärung, p. 14 f.

⁸Horkheimer/Adorno: Dialektik der Aufklärung, p. 52.

⁹Horkheimer/Adorno: Dialektik der Aufklärung, p. 52.

Adorno and Horkheimer examine the beginnings of the Enlightenment process as a story of doom using the example of Homer's *Odyssey*. For Adorno and Horkheimer, the way in which the *Odyssey* symbolically refers to the older myths shows that the process of enlightenment, in the sense of overcoming less enlightened stages, always has something violent about it. The provisional end of the Enlightenment in the 20th century is marked by positivist philosophy, which for the authors represents something like the final form of Enlightenment thought,¹⁰ and by modern entertainment culture ("culture industry"), which, according to Adorno and Horkheimer, stages "Enlightenment as mass deception"¹¹. At first glance, it may seem surprising that the authors link positivism and modern entertainment culture to fascism and totalitarianism. And the following critical examination of the theses of the "Dialectic of Enlightenment" will indeed show that the connection between positivism and totalitarianism is purely fictitious and that the connection between modern entertainment culture and totalitarianism is at least much weaker than Adorno and Horkheimer assume. But the authors obviously believed that there was indeed a connection between positivism, the culture industry and fascism. For while they did not repeat their radical critique of the Enlightenment in this form anywhere else, similar accusations against positivism can also be found in other of their writings.¹² For Adorno and Horkheimer, positivism and the culture industry were important factors in a process in which bourgeois society was transforming – quite logically – into a totalitarian society.

Overall, the basic thesis of the "Dialectic of Enlightenment" can be reconstructed as follows: *Enlightenment is burdened from the outset with the flaw of violence and the servility to power. An uncontrolled ("unreflective") Enlightenment therefore has a self-destructive character and leads to totalitarianism.*

¹⁰Cf. Horkheimer/Adorno: *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, p. 22; 24.

¹¹Horkheimer/Adorno: *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, p. 128.

¹²For a critique of positivism, see for example Horkheimer's essay "The latest attack on metaphysics". There he writes: "And yet in its present form it [neo-positivist philosophy, E.A.] is no less firmly linked to the prevailing conditions than metaphysics. If its connection with the totalitarian states [sic!] is not obvious, it is nevertheless easy to discover. Neo-Romantic metaphysics and radical positivism are both based on the sad condition of a large part of the bourgeoisie, which has completely given up the confidence that it can improve conditions through its own efficiency and, out of fear of a decisive change in the social system, submits without will to the rule of its most powerful group" (Horkheimer, Max: *Der neueste Angriff auf die Metaphysik*. In: Schmidt, Alfred [ed:] *Gesammelte Schriften*. Schriften 1936-1941, vol. 4. Frankfurt 1988, p. 116). - The connection between fascism and the "culture industry" can be read in the "Dialectic of Enlightenment", for example, as follows: "In the total drawing of cultural products into the sphere of commodities, radio renounces the idea of selling its cultural products as commodities at all. In America, it does not charge the public any fees. This gives it the deceptive form of disinterested, non-partisan authority that is a natural fit for fascism. There, the radio becomes the universal mouth of the Führer; in the street loudspeakers, his voice fades into the wail of sirens announcing panic, from which modern propaganda is difficult to distinguish anyway. The National Socialists themselves knew that radio gave shape to their cause like the printing press to the Reformation" (Horkheimer/Adorno: *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, p. 168).

In the following, I will try to show that the thesis that enlightenment leads to totalitarianism is simply wrong from a historical point of view, and that the connections between positivism, the culture industry and fascism claimed by Adorno and Horkheimer do not exist.

3 A clarification: Enlightenment is not totalitarian

The first question to be examined is therefore whether the "dialectical" connection between enlightenment and totalitarianism claimed by Adorno and Horkheimer actually exists. To this end, I will first examine the question of whether the close connections between positivism and totalitarianism and between the culture industry and totalitarianism suggested by the authors exist, and then address the more fundamental question of whether totalitarianism is a historical consequence of the Enlightenment.

3.1 The connection between positivism, the culture industry and totalitarianism is a legend

The question of whether there is a connection between positivism and totalitarianism is very easy to answer, because there is no internal or external evidence for such a connection. Almost nowhere in the writings of the neo-positivists are political or moral views advocated that correspond to those of a totalitarian regime. The exception is certain affinities with Marxism on the left fringe of the Vienna Circle, e.g. in Otto Neurath.¹³ On the contrary, due to its anti-metaphysical stance positivism has proven to be more resistant to ideology than almost any other philosophical school. Almost all prominent representatives of the Vienna Circle had to go into exile. Conversely, the relationship between totalitarian state philosophies and positivism is also characterized by hostile rejection. This applies both to fascism, whose recourse to mythologizing ideologems is obviously incompatible with the positivists' "scientific view of the world", and to communism, which is based on a supposedly scientific Marxism, for which Lenin set the line against positivism, which is labelled as bourgeois philosophy, early on in his essay on "Materialism and Empiriocriticism"¹⁴. All in all, it is virtually impossible to establish any connection between the philosophical movement of neo-positivism and totalitarian forms of rule, even if this has been repeatedly attempted, especially in the post-war period and not only by the left.¹⁵ The fact that Adorno and

¹³Cf. Cartwright, Nancy/Cat, Jordi/Fleck, Lola et al: Otto Neurath: Philosophy between Science and Politics. Cambridge 1996, p. 43 ff. *Hugo Dingler* could be cited as an example of a science-oriented philosopher who turned to National Socialism. However, Dingler can only be classified as a positivist in a very broad sense, as his epistemological conventionalism stood in contrast to the views of logical empiricism. In the biographical section of Friedrich Stadler's standard work on the Vienna Circle, there is not a single positivist philosopher with fascist affinities (see Stadler, Friedrich: Studien zum Wiener Kreis. Ursprung, Entwicklung und Wirkung des Logischen Empirismus im Kontext. Frankfurt am Main 1997).

¹⁴Lenin, Vladimir I.: Materialism and Empirio-Criticism. Stuttgart 1952.

Horkheimer persistently did not take note of historical facts such as those cited here is unfortunately indicative of their philosophical approach.

In contrast to the supposed connection between positivism and totalitarian forms of government, the assumption of some kind of connection between the "culture industry", i.e. the type of artworks and cultural goods that are produced and distributed by commercial enterprises in accordance with the principle of profit maximization, and totalitarian rule is much less absurd, as totalitarian propaganda often uses stylistic devices and forms of design that are typical of popular culture and therefore also common in free societies. In particular, totalitarian cultural policy relies heavily on kitsch aesthetics.¹⁶ Moreover, Adorno and Horkheimer can be conceded that their subtle analyses succeed in identifying figures of thought and hypocrisies in some kitsch products of free societies that also occur - in a much more massive form - in a totalitarian context. This is not surprising, however, because even free societies are never completely free of prejudice, and the prejudices and mendacities of a society are naturally reflected in art and culture. But does this mean that there is a connection between the culture industry and totalitarianism, for example - as one might imagine - in the sense that the culture industry hammers certain ways of thinking and feeling into the citizens, which then only need to be filled with the corresponding political ideology by totalitarian propaganda? This may sound plausible, but it is certainly wrong. It is true that there is a cultural industry and its product, mass culture, in both totalitarian and democratic states. However, this only shows that the culture industry is a characteristic of modern societies, and at the same time that it is not a specific feature of totalitarian states. Rather, what is characteristic of totalitarian states is that the cultural industry is monopolized. At best, there is a connection between the monopolization of the media and the cultural system and totalitarianism, but not between the cultural industry as such and totalitarianism. Adorno and Horkheimer can only maintain this suggestion by denying the factual diversity of cultural offerings in a non-monopolized cultural and media landscape. (In the USA, nobody is forced to listen to jazz music if they don't like it, you can just as easily go to some of the world's best symphony orchestras there ...) When cultural critics such as Adorno and Horkheimer denounce the hypocrisy of mass culture and the certain degree of pressure to conform that also exists in free societies, this is legitimate and even welcome in itself, but one must be aware that they are then dealing with problems that are far removed from the danger of totalitarianism.

¹⁵Cf. Eric Voegelin's accusations against "destructive positivism" (Voegelin, Eric: *The New Science of Politics. An Introduction.* Chicago, London 1997, p. 3 ff.). Voegelin is fairly insignificant, but his criticism of positivism was very much in vogue in the current of Christian humanism.

¹⁶Cf. Benz, Wolfgang: *Geschichte des Dritten Reiches.* Munich 2000, although an artistic avant-garde certainly had its place both in Italian fascism and in the Soviet Union before Stalin.

So it becomes very clear: positivism, the culture industry and fascism or totalitarianism are three very different things, of which positivism and totalitarianism have nothing at all in common, and the culture industry only poses a threat to democracy when it is monopolized. For Adorno and Horkheimer, on the other hand, positivism, capitalism, bourgeois society, the culture industry, technology and fascism come together in one and the same doom and gloom syndrome, which is somehow supposed to be a result and consequence of enlightenment. Before examining the question of *why*, in Adorno and Horkheimer's view, "barbarism" is a consequence of the Enlightenment, I would first like to clarify *whether* "barbarism" (by which I primarily mean totalitarianism, i.e. jazz music and the lousy films on offer in American cinemas are left out for the time being) is a consequence of the Enlightenment at all.

3.2 Fascism and communism are not consequences of the Enlightenment

The fact that totalitarian forms of rule are not a consequence of the Enlightenment applies quite clearly to fascism and somewhat less clearly to communism. In the case of fascism, the assessment is so unambiguous because the fascist movements explicitly opposed the principles of the Enlightenment. By the principles of the Enlightenment I mean 1) on an intellectual level, the principle of rational justification and criticism (i.e. views should be justified by arguments and may be criticized by arguments; appeals to authority do not count) and 2) on an ethical-practical level, the basic idea of the autonomy of the individual, which in turn is based on human dignity and the right to self-determination of each individual, and 3) on a political level, the demands for freedom, equality and the rule of law.¹⁷ All of these principles were *explicitly and fiercely* opposed by the fascist movements.¹⁸ Fascism was a *counter-movement* to the Enlightenment, but not a *consequence* of the Enlightenment. It is impossible to blame the Enlightenment for the fact that the counter-movement directed against it was quite successful at times.

The case is somewhat less clear with communism, because communism is based on a humanistic set of values, insofar as it advocates human equality and demands freedom

¹⁷These principles are central, at least for the Enlightenment philosophers of the 17th and 18th centuries. With the exception of the third point, which describes the republican political demands, they can also be found in older Enlightenment movements, for example in Greek sophistry. Adorno and Horkheimer, of course, use a very broad and no longer historically anchored concept of enlightenment, which seems to be limited to the principle of rational criticism. But even then it would be completely absurd to understand fascism or communism as an outgrowth of the Enlightenment, i.e. the principle of rational critique, because both totalitarian forms of rule are based on the suppression of rational critique, even if communism uses this means in the struggle against "bourgeois rule". The crucial point in this case is that although communism uses criticism as a means, it does not commit itself to the *principle* of rational criticism, i.e. the principle that the government's policies can be criticized with arguments at any time.

¹⁸On the ideology of National Socialism and Fascism, see Pohlmann, Friedrich: *Ideologie und Terror im Nationalsozialismus*. Pfaffenweiler 1992 - or one of the original sources, which clearly shows that the fascist "Duce" Mussolini did not agree with the Enlightenment view of man: Mussolini, Benito: *Der Geist des Faschismus*. Munich 1943, p. 5 ff.

from oppression and human rights. In addition - and in this it goes beyond the Enlightenment, but in a way that does not contradict the principles of the Enlightenment, and which in itself is only to be welcomed - communism advocates social and economic equality very decisively and not just equality before the law, as liberalism does. Also, while fascist movements like to invoke a kind of pseudo-mythology, communism claims to have a rational, scientific basis in Marxist social analysis.

On the other hand, there is no doubt that the enlightened, humanistic values that originally underpinned communism were in most instances¹⁹ unrestrainedly perverted under real socialism. There could (and can) be no question of political freedom in communist states, equality applied at best to ordinary citizens below the bigwig class, and human rights were and are trampled underfoot in communist countries, with some communist regimes even having instigated mass murder on a scale of millions of victims. All this so obviously contradicts the principles of the Enlightenment that it is impossible to see communism in any way as a realized or completed Enlightenment. The question can therefore only be whether the kind of perversion of enlightenment that we find in communism is already inherent in the Enlightenment. This would roughly correspond to Adorno and Horkheimer's thesis that a "dialectic" is inherent in the Enlightenment, which leads to the Enlightenment destroying itself in the end. In order to absolve the Enlightenment of this suspicion, it is not enough to show that its principles have been perverted. Rather, one must show that it is possible to realize the principles of the Enlightenment without breaking with the essentials of these principles. If this can be shown, then the proof has been provided that the perversion of the Enlightenment is not an inherent necessity of the Enlightenment itself. However, this proof has long since been provided in political practice: In liberal democracies, the essential principles of Enlightenment have been very successfully realized without any signs of barbarism even remotely comparable to fascism or communism. This is not to say that all is well in liberal democracies, and in particular the political philosophy of Enlightenment can be accused of neglecting social issues.²⁰ But this touches on a completely different discussion, namely how the Enlightenment can be improved. In no way do the weaknesses that the Enlightenment may still have in this or other areas justify Adorno and Horkheimer's diagnosis that the Enlightenment is drifting towards barbarism with an inner logic. In particular, it cannot be claimed that communism is the logical

¹⁹This restriction is necessary because in certain sectors, such as equal rights for men and women, real existing socialism was indeed more progressive at times.

²⁰Radical democratic and social movements such as those of the "Levellers" during the English revolutionary era in the 17th century or the "Sansculottes" in the French Revolution were a temporary phenomenon, and their ideas did not find their way into the main currents of Enlightenment thought.

consequence or the political completion of the Enlightenment.²¹ This is all the more true as communist ideology, in the form of its chiliastic view of history, the function of the party as the vanguard of the working class, from which a natural right to rule is derived, the collectivist conception of law and morality and the frequently occurring cult of personality,²² contains elements that can hardly be reconciled with Enlightenment thinking. Taken together, this means that the principles of Enlightenment can be realized without rupture. Communism, on the other hand, does not realize the principles of the Enlightenment, but rather partially perverts them and partially breaks with them.

The overall result of all these considerations is therefore that neither fascism nor communism are in any way products of the Enlightenment. Furthermore, it will now be shown that the justification provided by Adorno and Horkheimer is so scientifically inadequate that their central thesis could only be wrong for this reason alone.

4 The justification deficits of the "Dialectic of Enlightenment"

Later reviews of the "Dialectic of Enlightenment" can hardly do without considerable reservations about the work's radical theses.²³ However, the weaknesses of Adorno and Horkheimer's argumentation strategy are rarely examined in detail. In the following, therefore, the reasons that Horkheimer and Adorno provide for their theses will be discussed in more detail than usual.

The basic idea of the work is that Enlightenment is liberation by intention, but that in reality it only leads to the expansion of domination. Domination is to be understood in a multiple sense as the domination of man over external nature, as the domination of man over his own inner nature (i.e. as the domination of drives in the Freudian sense) and as domination in the political sense, i.e. as the domination of man over man. In each case, domination is a bad thing. This even applies to the domination of nature, because according to Adorno and Horkheimer, the Enlightenment was intended to take away man's fear of nature,²⁴ but the fact that it becomes a domination of nature in the process is already part of the "dialectic" of the Enlightenment, i.e. those undesirable side effects

21 I'm not sure whether Adorno or Horkheimer seriously want to make that claim. But if their thesis that the process of enlightenment leads to barbarism or that "the fully enlightened earth [...] shines under the sign of triumphant disaster" is to have any non-trivial meaning, then they must either claim that enlightenment leads to fascism or to communism or to both. Anything else would be simply ridiculous given the pathos of their book.

22 The teachings of developed, i.e. Leninist, communism are presented in brief by Donald Busky (Busky, Donald F.: *Communism in History and Theory. From Utopian Socialism to the Fall of the Soviet Union.* Westport, Connecticut, London 2002).

23 See, for example, Habermas, Jürgen: *Der philosophische Diskurs der Moderne* (4th edition). Frankfurt am Main 1988, pp. 130-157, and Schnädelbach, Herbert: *Die Aktualität der "Dialektik der Aufklärung"*. In: Kunneman, Harry/Vries, Hent de (eds.): *Die Aktualität der "Dialektik der Aufklärung"*. Frankfurt am Main, New York 1989, pp. 15-13.

24 Horkheimer/Adorno: *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, p. 9.

and internal contradictions of the Enlightenment which, as Adorno and Horkheimer believe, ultimately bring about its self-destruction.

4.1 Scientific thinking as "dispositional thinking"

For Adorno and Horkheimer, the Enlightenment is essentially to be understood as a process of increasing rationalization that asserts itself on all levels, in thinking, in social institutions and also in interpersonal relationships. Enlightenment rationality reaches its consummate form in mathematical and scientific thinking, which the philosophical school of neo-positivism has elevated to a certain extent to the standard of scientific and rational thinking in general. In line with their idea of enlightenment as a process of increasing intensification of power, Adorno and Horkheimer also claim that this connection is particularly close in scientific thinking and positivist philosophy. Adorno and Horkheimer read this as follows:

"The deductive form of science still reflects hierarchy and compulsion. Just as the first categories represent the organized tribe and its power over the individual, the entire logical order, dependency, concatenation, interlocking and union of concepts is based on the corresponding relations of social reality, the division of labour."²⁵

For Adorno and Horkheimer, the "deductive form of science" is therefore already an expression of power relations, of "hierarchy and coercion". The authors express this even more clearly at another point:

"The generality of thought, as developed by discursive logic, the rule in the sphere of the concept, rises on the foundation of the rule in reality."²⁶

But how do the authors justify their thesis that the "discursive logic" and the "deductive form" of science are an expression of social relations of domination? The answer to this question is that they do not justify it at all. The whole thesis rests solely on the personal associations of Adorno and Horkheimer. And, of course, the thesis is wrong. Discursive logic" is a tool that is just as much at the disposal of those who want to criticize domination as it is at the disposal of the ideologues who justify it. Discursive logic" is a tool of the mind that anyone can use for a wide variety of purposes.

Because Adorno and Horkheimer believe that scientific thinking is so closely linked to domination and subjugation, it is not surprising that they no longer even trust scientific thinking with the ability to recognize truth. In their view, scientific thinking does not serve the *knowledge* of nature, but only the *subjugation* of nature. Accordingly, it is

²⁵Horkheimer/Adorno: Dialektik der Aufklärung, p. 27 f.

²⁶Horkheimer/Adorno: Dialektik der Aufklärung, p. 20.

"dispositional thinking"²⁷ and by the enlightened man,²⁸ who makes use of this dispositional thinking,²⁹ in Adorno's and Horkheimer's opinion, "the knowledge that really captures the object is tabooed"³⁰. Adorno and Horkheimer evidently adhere to an idea of natural science according to which natural science is primarily motivated by the purpose of its technical application and thus to a certain extent aims purely instrumentally at the manipulation of nature rather than at knowledge. This may explain the accusation that allegedly "knowledge is tabooed", "which really captures the object". This accusation is somewhat difficult to comprehend, as experience has shown that the natural sciences tend to get to the heart of their subject quite well. And here, at the latest, the question arises as to what the kind of knowledge "that really gets to the heart of the matter" is supposed to be. The authors are obviously thinking of a kind of dialectical cognition, as the following critique of the Enlightenment's mode of cognition makes clear, from which indirect indications emerge as to how Adorno and Horkheimer imagine "correct" cognition:

"To comprehend the present as such, not merely to take away the abstract spatiotemporal relationships from the facts, by which one can then grasp them, but on the contrary to think of them as the surface, as mediated conceptual moments, which only fulfill themselves in the unfolding of their social, historical, human meaning - the whole claim of knowledge is abandoned."³¹

The model of knowledge that Adorno and Horkheimer equate here with the "claim of knowledge" itself is obviously that of German Idealism,³² as it was brought to a kind of perfection in Hegel's dialectical philosophy in particular. This immediately gives rise to two problems: firstly, dialectics is completely useless for knowledge of nature, as Hegel's philosophy of nature has unintentionally, but all the more impressively, demonstrated.³³ Secondly, it is to be feared that dialectics is even more heavily burdened by the social

27Horkheimer/Adorno: Dialektik der Aufklärung, p. 20.

28"The self that learned order and subordination from the subjugation of the world" (Horkheimer/Adorno: Dialektik der Aufklärung, p. 20).

29"Enlightenment relates to things as a dictator relates to people. It knows them insofar as it can manipulate them." (Horkheimer/Adorno: Dialektik der Aufklärung, p. 15)

30Horkheimer/Adorno: Dialektik der Aufklärung, p. 20.

31Horkheimer/Adorno: Dialektik der Aufklärung, p. 33.

32Elsewhere, the authors write: "Enlightenment has pushed aside the classical demand to think thinking - Fichte's philosophy is its radical development" (Horkheimer/Adorno: Dialectic of Enlightenment, p. 31). This quote clearly shows the extent to which Adorno and Horkheimer transfigure the reflective philosophy of German Idealism into the norm of philosophical thought par excellence ("classical demand"). This trick makes it easy for them to make philosophical thinking that does not follow this norm appear as a kind of betrayal of the ideals of philosophy.

33Hegel's almost pitiable passages on the law of gravitation can serve as an example (see Hegel, Georg Friedrich Wilhelm: Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften im Grundrisse. In: Hansen, Frank P. [ed.]: Philosophie von Platon bis Nietzsche. Berlin 1998, pp. 41242-42195).

context of "hierarchy and coercion", the "foundation of domination in reality", than Adorno and Horkheimer impute to "discursive logic" and the "deductive form of science", since its master and inventor was able to philosophically prove all kinds of political and social prejudices of his time with the help of dialectics. For example, Hegel was able to explain dialectically why women and men have different roles in marriage,³⁴ and no less cleverly, he was able to use dialectics to prove the necessity of the monarchical form of government³⁵, the impossibility (in the sense that it would not even be desirable) of world peace³⁶ and the usefulness of press censorship³⁷.

The accusation of "dispositional thinking" is not the only accusation that Adorno and Horkheimer make against Enlightenment thinking and especially scientific thinking. They make at least two further accusations that are not necessarily easy to reconcile with this accusation. These two accusations are, firstly, the accusation that mathematical-scientific thinking impoverishes the world view and, secondly, the accusation that it merely depicts nature.

4.2 The connection between enlightenment and mythology

The second accusation is not readily compatible with the assertion that scientific thinking is "dispositional thinking", i.e. thinking that is primarily aimed at harnessing nature for technical and industrial applications, because if you want to harness nature, it is not enough to simply depict it; you also have to develop a sense of the possibilities inherent in things. But then what Adorno and Horkheimer impute to mathematical natural science is no longer true, namely that "the subjugation of everything that exists to logical formalism [...] is bought with the obedient subordination of reason to what is immediately apparent"³⁸. Why do Adorno and Horkheimer insist that scientific thinking only repeats "the factual" or blindly "reproduces" it, thereby risking contradicting their other assertion that scientific thinking is "dispositional thinking"? The reason could lie in the fact that this is the only way they can justify one of the central theses of their work, namely the thesis that enlightenment is basically just mythology. For in Adorno and Horkheimer's view, reality is also reflected in mythology, in that in mythology the connections in nature are understood as unalterable laws of fate. If natural science likewise only depicts nature and thereby also arrives at immutable laws, then according to Adorno and Horkheimer's extremely questionable logic, the Enlightenment which is

³⁴Hegel, Georg Friedrich Wilhelm: Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts. In: Hansen, Frank P. (ed.): Philosophie von Platon bis Nietzsche. Berlin 1998, pp. 41196-42722, §§ 165, 166.

³⁵Hegel, Georg Friedrich W.: Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts, §§ 279, 280.

³⁶Hegel, Georg Friedrich W.: Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts, §§ 333, 337.

³⁷Hegel, Georg Friedrich W.: Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts, §§ 319, although in this case Hegel does not even attempt dialectics, but explains succinctly: "The freedom of public communication [...] has its direct safeguard in the police and legal laws that partly prevent and partly punish its excesses" (ibid.).

³⁸Horkheimer/Adorno: Dialektik der Aufklärung, p. 33.

based on scientific thinking must be the same as mythology. Adorno and Horkheimer stage this rather simplistic justification of their thesis with great rhetorical pomp:

"Mathematical formalism, however, whose medium is the number, the abstract form of the immediate, holds the thought to mere immediacy instead. The factual remains right, knowledge is limited to its repetition, the thought becomes a mere tautology. The more the machinery of thought subjugates existence to itself, the more blindly it modestly reproduces it. Enlightenment thus reverts to mythology, from which it has never been able to escape. For mythology had the essence of the existing in its figures: Cycle, fate, rule of the world reflected back as the truth and renounced hope. In the conciseness of the mythical image as in the clarity of the scientific formula, the eternity of the actual is confirmed and mere existence is expressed as the meaning that it obstructs. The world as a gigantic analytical judgment, the only one left of all the dreams of science, is of the same kind as the cosmic myth that linked the alternation of spring and autumn to the robbery of Persephone."³⁹

If one is not impressed by the authors' elaborate rhetoric, it is noticeable in this passage how extremely weak the justification for the thesis that Enlightenment itself is merely mythology remains. Just like the assertion of a connection between scientific thinking and power relations, the justification of this thesis rests solely on associations and suggestions, such as the suggestion that the use of mathematical formalisms turns "thought [...] into mere tautology", or, a little later, in the insinuation that enlightened science views the world as a "gigantic analytical judgment". Both claims, that the mathematical formalisms used in science are tautologies and that science turns the world into a gigantic analytic judgment, are simply false and have never been made by any positivist philosopher. If mathematics is applied scientifically, then mathematical formulas are no longer tautologies, and insofar as one makes the distinction between analytic and synthetic judgments (which not even all positivist philosophers do in the broad sense), judgments, i.e. statements about the world as posited by the natural sciences, are of course always synthetic judgments – because they are empirical judgments.

The outrageous thing about the way Adorno and Horkheimer "argue" here is that they completely ignore everything that natural scientists, Enlightenment and positivist philosophers have explicitly said on this subject, and instead impute to the Enlightenment views and tendencies that completely contradict the explicitly expressed opinions of Enlightenment and positivist philosophers. This unfair and dubious approach is also outrageous because the entire work contains the constant latent accusation

³⁹Horkheimer/Adorno: *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, p. 33.

against scientific and Enlightenment thinking that this thinking does not allow things to speak for themselves, but instead arranges them according to its own interests guided by instrumental exploitation intentions.⁴⁰ As the above quote shows, the accusation of not allowing the object of knowledge to speak for itself, but rather to shape it to one's own liking, must rather be directed against Adorno and Horkheimer's treatment of the Enlightenment. The following quote, in which the authors give their rather peculiar interpretation of Newtonian physics, may serve to illustrate how ignorant Adorno and Horkheimer often proceed in this regard: "The doctrine of the equality of action and reaction asserted the power of repetition over existence long after people had given up the illusion of identifying with repeated existence through repetition and thus withdrawing from its power."⁴¹ May we point out that this profound statement by the two great philosophers is pure nonsense? I think we have to, because the doctrine of "action and reaction" does not claim anything, absolutely nothing, about the "power of repetition" over existence. Rather, it says that for every force that one body exerts on another, there is a counterforce of the same amount but in the opposite direction, which the second body in turn exerts on the first. Example: The sun exerts a certain force on the earth through gravity, and according to the law of action and reaction, the earth therefore exerts an equally large force on the sun in the opposite direction: Earth and Sun attract each other (which, taking into account the different masses of the Sun and Earth and the Earth's initial velocity, explains why the Earth orbits the Sun). What on earth does this have to do with the "power of repetition over existence"?

As we have seen, it is hardly possible to take seriously the justification that Adorno and Horkheimer provide for their thesis that Enlightenment relapses into mythology, but does that also make the thesis wrong? It would also be conceivable that Adorno and Horkheimer merely gave a somewhat clumsy justification for a thesis that was in itself reasonable. But unfortunately, not only is the reasoning clumsy, but the thesis is also essentially wrong. The qualification "essentially" is necessary because the thesis can be understood in a broad and in a narrow sense. Understood in a broad sense, it could be judged to be correct, but it would be completely banal. If enlightenment and mythology are one and the same merely because they both in some way depict the world or "confirm what is factual", then this is roughly the same as someone claiming that rain and sunshine are one and the same because both are merely weather.

In a narrower sense, however, it is wrong, because there are very serious differences between enlightenment and mythology. Natural science, for example, is essentially based on the two principles of rational, intersubjective criticism of its theories and empirical

⁴⁰Cf. the beginning of the chapter on "Juliette or Enlightenment and Morality": Horkheimer/Adorno: *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 90 f.

⁴¹Horkheimer/Adorno: *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, p. 18.

verification by means of observation and experiment. Myths, however, are generally not empirically verifiable, and the rational criticism of myths almost inevitably comes into conflict with social taboos. Mythology and the rational knowledge of nature in the natural sciences are therefore very different things in principle alone, and if one were to make a serious comparison between myths and scientific theories, one would also encounter many significant differences in detail and most probably many more differences than similarities overall. All in all, Adorno and Horkheimer's thesis is not only ill-founded, but actually wrong.

But the thesis of the deeper identity of enlightenment and mythology is not only unfounded and false. Even if it were correct, it would also be quite irrelevant. For suppose it were true that enlightenment is basically just mythology. What would that explain? Can it explain why "humanity [...] is sinking into [...] barbarism"⁴² ? It could only do so if one assumes, without being asked, the thoroughly enlightened prejudice that mythology is always something barbaric. Otherwise, the statement that "Enlightenment relapses into mythology", presented with an important expression, explains nothing at all. But why do Adorno and Horkheimer place this thesis so much at the center of their treatise? One explanation for this could be found in the religious-metaphysical conceptual background of their philosophy. For Adorno and Horkheimer, the original sin of myth is based on the fact that it is intertwined with domination. And, as we have seen, according to Adorno and Horkheimer's interpretation of the Enlightenment, it is not possible to free oneself from this entanglement. From the point of view of their chiliastic Marxism, myth and Enlightenment therefore actually amount to one and the same thing, because the Enlightenment naturally cannot succeed in fulfilling utopian promises that it has never actually made, but which Horkheimer and Adorno believe humanity is no less **been deprived** of as a result. In a very similar way, fascism and bourgeois, i.e. democratic, rule repeatedly merge in Adorno and Horkheimer into one and the same undifferentiated negative vision of a world characterized through and through by domination, lies and oppression.

4.3 The impoverished world view of positivist philosophy

The accusation of merely depicting the world and thereby practicing a kind of cult of the factual,⁴³ is based on a criticism of the impoverishment of the world view through a one-sided scientific approach, as can also be found in other philosophers. Adorno and Horkheimer cite Edmund Husserl as their source, who in his essay on the "Crisis of the

⁴²Horkheimer/Adorno: *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, p. 1.

⁴³"The mathematical procedure became, as it were, the ritual of thought ... But with such mimesis, in which thought makes itself equal to the world, the factual has now become so much the only thing that even the denial of God falls prey to the judgment of metaphysics." Horkheimer and Adorno (2000)

European Sciences"⁴⁴ clearly emphasizes the dubiousness of a view of the world based solely on the mathematical theorization of the natural sciences. Unlike Adorno and Horkheimer, however, Husserl's argument is primarily epistemological (even if he adds a somewhat questionable philosophy of history to the epistemological theses of his Crisis essay). He criticizes the fact that scientific theories, if one interprets them ontologically (and not, as one should, instrumentally), replace concrete phenomena with abstract mathematical geometric shapes. In particular, "sensory fillings" such as color, sound and taste are replaced by geometric quantities such as the wavelength of an oscillation.⁴⁵ Another point of Husserl's criticism is that the claim of the natural sciences, especially physics, to describe the world completely is only ideally realized in infinite progression, which of course means that it can never be completely fulfilled in reality.⁴⁶

Adorno and Horkheimer decidedly radicalize this criticism. The accusation they make is no longer - as with Husserl - merely that certain aspects of reality that are meaningful to us are hidden by the scientific world view, but they assume that the world is predetermined in an inescapable way by the mathematical-scientific world view.⁴⁷ The infamous sentence "Enlightenment is as totalitarian as any system" should also be understood in this sense.⁴⁸ This statement is made in an epistemological context. However, the political overtones are probably intended by the authors, as they make analogies between epistemology and social relations throughout the chapter - in line with Marx's basis-superstructure theory.

As in other places, it is clear here that Adorno and Horkheimer are two philosophers who are thoroughly alien to scientific thinking. Otherwise, the world could not appear to them to be inescapably determined by the assumption that all processes in the world can be completely described mathematically. For as long as the laws of nature themselves are not named, the assumption of mathematical describability alone says virtually nothing about the world. The history of the natural sciences is therefore also a history of constantly new, surprising insights; just not for people for whom the fact that many of these insights are formulated mathematically is enough to stop them being interested in them.

If Adorno and Horkheimer had differentiated between the findings of the natural sciences on the one hand and the expansion of the scientific world view to all areas of

44Husserl, Edmund: Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendente Phänomenologie. Hamburg 1996.

45Husserl: Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften. Hamburg 1996, § 9c.

46Husserl: Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften. Hamburg 1996, § 9e.

47"\"When in the mathematical process the unknown becomes the unknown of an equation, it is thereby stamped as the old known before a value is inserted.\" (Horkheimer/Adorno: Dialectic of Enlightenment, p. 31)

48Horkheimer/Adorno: Dialektik der Aufklärung, p. 31; cf. also p. 12.

philosophy, as it takes place in materialist and positivist philosophies, and if they had directed their criticism primarily against materialist philosophy instead of against the mathematical view of nature per se, then it would still have been debatable. As a critique of natural science, however, their remarks seem simply incompetent.

4.4 The dubiousness of Horkheimer's and Adorno's examples

What about the examples that Adorno and Horkheimer cite in support of their thesis? If someone claims in a philosophical treatise that Enlightenment is the same as mythology and that it (therefore?) leads to barbarism, then it makes sense to cite examples of Enlightenment philosophers in whom mythology and barbaric tendencies are particularly evident. And Adorno and Horkheimer do indeed cite a number of philosophers in their book. The strange thing is that the philosophers they cite are either not Enlightenment philosophers or, if they are Enlightenment philosophers, they are misinterpreted by Adorno and Horkheimer in exactly the same questionable and unfair way that has already been criticized above in their presentation of the connection between Enlightenment and mythology.

The two philosophers discussed most extensively by Adorno and Horkheimer are the Marquis de Sade and Friedrich Nietzsche. Immanuel Kant is also mentioned quite frequently. (There are numerous allusions to neo-positivism, but hardly any mentions by name). However, neither the Marquis de Sade nor Friedrich Nietzsche are particularly enlightened philosophers. What they both have in common at most - and here one could at best establish a tenuous link to the Enlightenment - is that they preach emancipation from traditional moral norms. However, they replace traditional norms with a morality that no Enlightenment philosopher would ever advocate. The Marquis de Sade, for example, calls for complete impunity for every kind of sexual crime (and also for some other crimes), while Nietzsche advocates the well-known ethics of the master race.⁴⁹ But how then can Nietzsche and the Marquis de Sade be associated with the Enlightenment? The answer is that, according to Adorno and Horkheimer, they express one of the inner contradictions of the Enlightenment in an almost ideal-typical way. This contradiction

⁴⁹Nietzsche's moral philosophical ideas are particularly evident in his writings "Beyond Good and Evil" (Nietzsche, Friedrich: *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*. In: Ulfing, Alexander [ed:] Friedrich Nietzsche: *Ausgewählte Werke*. Köln 2000, pp. 691-910, e.g. ninth main section, 260th section) and "On the Genealogy of Morals" (Nietzsche, Friedrich: *Zur Genealogie der Moral*. A polemic. Stuttgart 1988, e.g. First Treatise, 5th section). The Marquis de Sade's moral convictions are largely woven into the dialogs of his novels. They are presented in a concise form in the essay included in "Philosophie im Boudoir" (Sade, Marquis de: *La philosophie dans le boudoir [Les instituteurs immoraux]*. Paris, 1972). See also Bertrand Russell's commentary on Nietzsche, which can serve as a good example of how enlightened philosophers react to Nietzsche's moral doctrine (cf. the chapter on Nietzsche in: Russell, Bertrand: *A History of Western Philosophy*. London, Sydney, Wellington 1984, 3rd book, XXV chapter). A reaction that Adorno and Horkheimer immediately insinuated was merely the result of hatred, because Nietzsche and de Sade had not (in their view, like the Enlightenment philosophers) covered up the unfoundedness of morality through reason.

consists in the fact that Enlightenment thinking cannot solve the problem of the ultimate justification of ethics. While the Enlightenment thinkers covered up this problem in a dishonest way (e.g. Kant, who refers to a "fact of reason" with regard to his categorical imperative), the Marquis de Sade and Nietzsche openly drew the consequences from this:

"The impossibility of putting forward a fundamental argument against murder on the basis of reason, not to have covered it up, but to have shouted it out to the whole world, has ignited the hatred with which progressives in particular still persecute Sade and Nietzsche today. Unlike logical positivism, both take science at its word."⁵⁰

What is striking about this passage, by the way, is that Adorno and Horkheimer do not give the "progressives" (who once again remain anonymous) a chance: If the "progressives" are outraged by Nietzsche and de Sade, then Adorno and Horkheimer know (how do they actually know?) that this is pure hypocrisy. If they did not, they would confirm the thesis of a "dialectic of enlightenment" all the more.

But, apart from that, aren't Adorno and Horkheimer perhaps right? Is it not in fact a weakness of the Enlightenment that it cannot solve the ultimate justification problem of ethics with reason? The following objection can be raised: However one may judge the solvability and insolubility of the problem of ultimate justification: if it cannot be solved with reason, then there is no other way to solve it. In particular, it is not possible to solve the problem of ultimate justification in religious (or mythical) terms, because *any* morality, one as good as the other, can be justified with reference to religion, without any particular moral norms being distinguished in this way as the only valid ones.⁵¹ Unfortunately, every moral philosophy has the problem that it cannot ultimately justify its norms. However, this fact is more evident in some philosophies than in others. But if this is the case, the insolubility of the problem of ultimate justification cannot be an aspect of the process that Adorno and Horkheimer call the "dialectic of enlightenment". Once this is conceded, however, it seems highly dubious to stylize Nietzsche and the Marquis de Sade as consistent perfectors of Enlightenment moral philosophy. They are certainly not, because the moral norms they proposed stand in sharp contradiction to the values advocated by the philosophers of the Enlightenment.

It can be said with reservations that the insolubility of the problem of ultimate justification is at least tacitly conceded by many representatives of modern positivism.⁵²

⁵⁰Horkheimer/Adorno: *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, p. 127.

⁵¹Religion may have the advantage that it can motivate moral action more strongly than is possible in other ways - but it cannot *justify* it, or only in such a way that the problem of justification is shifted to religion, which makes it even more complicated.

⁵²However, with the possible exception of David Hume, this could not be said of the philosophers of the Enlightenment era. The fact that even philosophers who - unlike almost all thinkers of the Enlightenment era - were aware of the insolubility of the problem of ultimate justification were by no means inclined to draw

But if Adorno and Horkheimer want to take the positivists to task for this, then they have to ask themselves whether they, for their part, can solve the problem of the ultimate justification of ethics. If they can solve it, then they would only have to communicate their solution and could save themselves their accusations. If they cannot, then they have nothing to reproach the philosophers who consider the problem of ultimate justification to be unsolvable.

The fundamental error in Adorno and Horkheimer's thinking is that they accuse Enlightenment thinking, insofar as one includes neo-positivism, of a fact that it has not invented but merely established - similar to how the "law of action and reaction", as has already been noted, is not an invention to justify unchangeable social order, but a law of nature that can be established experimentally. Adorno and Horkheimer's interpretation of Kant's philosophy is based on the same error of reasoning. They interpret Kant's epistemology as an expression of a world view that is characteristic of the late bourgeois epoch:

"The senses are already determined by the conceptual apparatus before perception takes place; the citizen sees the world a priori as the material from which he produces it. Kant intuitively anticipated what only Hollywood consciously realized: the images are already pre-censored during their production according to the standards of understanding according to which they are to be viewed afterwards."⁵³

Apart from the fact that the analogy between Kant's shaping of phenomena through the cognitive apparatus and the design principles of film productions is rather far-reaching, so that it seems questionable to speak of an intuitive anticipation here, Adorno and Horkheimer completely fail to recognize that Kant's epistemological construction is motivated by factual explanatory intentions. One can criticize Kant's schematism of perception for many reasons, but to understand it merely as an expression of certain social tendencies of the bourgeois epoch does not do justice to Kant's philosophy. This is all the more true as Kant, in his moral philosophy and his political philosophy, reveals himself to be a highly considerate philosopher (also in the sense of Adorno and Horkheimer), for whom reason is by no means the "instance of calculating thought that arranges the world for the purposes of self-preservation"⁵⁴.

amoral consequences from this fact proves that Friedrich Nietzsche and the Marquis de Sade do not differ from the Enlightenment philosophers in terms of greater consistency, as Adorno and Horkheimer imply, but quite simply in terms of their moral depravity. However, this moral depravity is then based on a particular choice of ethical values on the part of these authors and cannot be interpreted as a result of the Enlightenment process.

⁵³Horkheimer/Adorno: *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, p. 91.

⁵⁴Horkheimer/Adorno: *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, p. 90.

It can therefore be seen that not only Adorno and Horkheimer's arguments in the "Dialectic of Enlightenment" rest on very weak foundations, but also their examples are, to put it mildly, very poorly chosen and hardly suitable to support their thesis. It might even have been possible to find appropriate examples. One possible example would be Jeremy Bentham, whose theoretical description of the "Panopticum", a kind of perfect prison, is more of an invitation to reflect on the connections between enlightened philosophy, sadism and pathological delusions of feasibility.⁵⁵ And there are probably many more examples (even if we cannot go into this in depth here), because there is no doubt that the Enlightenment also has its dark side. One of the dark sides of the Enlightenment, for example, is the construction of history as a history of civilizational progress that is often found in Enlightenment thinking, which almost necessarily goes hand in hand with a devaluation of supposedly more primitive social conditions. Adorno once exemplified this problem in Goethe's "Iphigenia" in a much more convincing way compared to the argumentation of the "Dialectic of Enlightenment": Unlike Euripides' ancient model, Goethe's "Iphigenia" ends seemingly conciliatory: Iphigenia and her brother Orest are finally released voluntarily by Thoas, the ruler of the island of Tauris. But this humanistic ending has a catch: while the "civilized" Greeks Iphigenia, Orest and Pylades get their due, the "crude Scythe" Thoas has to give everything for it without receiving anything in return. This moral construction error in the drama is the result of a humanistic ethic, according to which the primitive way of life with its barbaric customs has absolutely no right to exist.⁵⁶ Of course, this example raises the methodological question of the extent to which a play by a particular poet can be representative of an entire epoch or intellectual current such as humanism, but Adorno's approach is not implausible in this case, and in contrast to what Adorno and Horkheimer interpret into scientific thinking in the "Dialectic of Enlightenment", the interpretation of "Iphigenia" is stringent and convincing.

However, whatever examples one may cite to support the theses of the "Dialectic of Enlightenment", the only thing that can be confirmed is the rather banal thesis that the Enlightenment also has its dark side. The strong thesis put forward by Adorno and Horkheimer that the Enlightenment is driving towards its own destruction with an inner logic is untenable under any circumstances. They neither succeed in supporting their thesis with an argument that is even halfway convincing, nor do they cite credible examples.

⁵⁵The significance of Bentham's "Panopticum" has been particularly emphasized (and perhaps again somewhat exaggerated) by Michel Foucault (see Foucault, Michel: *Überwachen und Strafen. The Birth of the Prison.* Frankfurt am Main 1976, p. 256 ff.).

⁵⁶Cf. Adorno, Theodor W.: *Über den Klassizismus von Goethes Iphigenie.* In: Tiedemann, Rolf (ed.): *Noten zur Literatur.* Frankfurt 1994, pp. 495-514, there see p. 509 f.

5 Result

All in all, it has been shown that the central theses of the "Dialectic of Enlightenment" are simply wrong from an academic point of view. Enlightenment leads neither directly nor indirectly to barbarism. There is a world of difference between enlightened or scientific thinking and mythology. It cannot really be said that myth alone is enlightenment, and it is not true that enlightenment reverts to mythology. It can indeed happen that people forget their enlightened principles and orient their thoughts and actions towards myths again, but then the Enlightenment has failed and has not reverted to mythology. Fascism can be interpreted as such a failure of enlightenment, but fascism is not the result of enlightenment.

This critical conclusion relates primarily to the factual and scientific content of the "Dialectic of Enlightenment". It was pointed out at the beginning that the "Dialectic of Enlightenment" can also be appropriated on other levels of understanding. In particular, the last part of the book, the "Notes and Drafts"⁵⁷, refer the work more to a literary genre. But on the other hand, the authors did not want to write a novel, but a philosophical work. And then the primary question is not "What did the author want to tell us?" but rather "Is what the authors claim true or false?". Unfortunately, what Adorno and Horkheimer claim in the book is largely false.

Now, of course, one could ask why one should be bothered at all by the factual errors in the book and not immediately see it as an expression of metaphysical rejection of the world, similar to Schopenhauer's philosophy, which hardly anyone considers to be literally true, but which is nevertheless appreciated by many. One reason why it is much easier to accept the errors in Schopenhauer's philosophy is that Schopenhauer distinguishes much more carefully between the metaphysical *interpretation* of the world and the scientific explanation of the *world*. When he enters the realm of explanation, he always argues very carefully and precisely and respects the facts (for example, in his excellent analysis of the concept of honor in the "Aphorisms on the Wisdom of Life"). Adorno and Horkheimer derive an explanation of the world much more directly from their metaphysical presuppositions (i.e. from their chiliastic Marxism and the dialectical method), which they hermetically seal off against objections. This lends the "Dialectic of Enlightenment", as well as many of their other writings, a decidedly ideological trait that is difficult to ignore, even if one sympathizes with Adorno and Horkheimer's pessimism and contempt for the world. It is only in the late work of these two philosophers that the ideological moment subsides.

⁵⁷Horkheimer/Adorno: Dialektik der Aufklärung, pp. 218-275.

The "Dialectic of Enlightenment" might have been a much more credible book if Adorno and Horkheimer had not placed the Enlightenment at the center of their critique of civilization. Despite all the exaggeration, some aspects of their criticism of mass culture, reification or instrumental thinking in dealing with nature are entirely plausible. But the connection to the Enlightenment and positivist philosophy is incomprehensible and can probably only be explained by the authors' resentment.

The extremely negative findings may come as a surprise for a book such as "Dialectics of Enlightenment", which today is accorded classic status by many scholars.⁵⁸ After all, the Dialectic of Enlightenment has experienced several phases of pronounced popularity in its history of reception. During the 1968 movement, it arguably had the status of a cult book, and in the 1980s it gained renewed popularity due to its radically pessimistic criticism of civilization in connection with the environmental movement. But even if one shares the basic attitude of the "Dialectic of Enlightenment", which is critical of civilization, it is not very worthwhile, at least from a scientific point of view, to deal with the book, because in the "Dialectic of Enlightenment" the dangers of the civilizational process are misrepresented and the responsibility for this is assigned to the wrong culprit.⁵⁹ There is not a single argument in the entire book that would be suitable for convincing anyone who does not already share the authors' opinion of the dangers of unbridled technical civilization. However, the discussion could be worthwhile for self-affirmation of one's own pessimistic mood, because in this respect the authors' uncompromising condemnatory judgments, presented in powerful language, admittedly pay off in full.

Today, however, the popularity of the work seems to have waned considerably. Philosophical conferences on the "Dialectic of Enlightenment" no longer seem to take place frequently. It is most likely to be discussed in political circles such as the Communist Platform of the "Left". The fact that the "Dialectic of Enlightenment" serves as an intellectual basis for obscure political circles does not correspond to its intellectual level, but in view of the scientific weaknesses of the work, it is also a self-imposed fate.

⁵⁸Cf. B. Beck, Ulrich: Interview on the subject of "50 years of the dialectic of enlightenment" in Radio Bremen. Bremen 1998. On the whole, however, Beck is also very critical of the "Dialectic of Enlightenment".

⁵⁹In the secondary literature, it is often claimed that Adorno and Horkheimer wanted to adhere to the goals of the Enlightenment (see Schnädelbach: Die Aktualität der "Dialektik der Aufklärung", p. 31), and in the preface Adorno and Horkheimer assert: "We have no doubt [...] that freedom in society is inseparable from Enlightenment thinking" (Horkheimer/Adorno: Dialektik der Aufklärung, p. 3). If it was indeed their aim to hold on to the Enlightenment, then Adorno and Horkheimer thoroughly missed their target, because there is hardly a good word about the Enlightenment or Enlightenment philosophers in the entire book.