

Estrangement in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*:
A Brief Critique of the Subject-Object Distinction

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Modernity likes to think of itself as being better than the past – as being an improvement over pre-modernity and over all of its ignorance. For the industrialized world, lifespans have extended, standards of living have improved, and knowledge has undeniably increased exponentially. Or is that undeniable? Do our claims to knowledge instead fall short, such that they are mere reinscriptions of pre-modern myth? Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, early theorists of the Frankfurt School, argue in their 1944 work *Dialectic of Enlightenment* that modernity, characterized by its claims of mass enlightenment, oversteps the bounds of reason and merely exchanges one form of myth – i.e. of falsehood – for another. Beliefs in magic, religion, and overt myth have been traded in for beliefs in technology, science, and covert myth – that is, the covert myth of enlightenment itself. Enlightenment, with its concern for utility and technological adeptness, is dominating and estranging, and it is the latter trait with which I am herein concerned.

Horkheimer and Adorno remark, quite early in the text, that “Myth becomes enlightenment and nature *mere* objectivity. Human beings purchase the increase in their power with estrangement from that over which it is exerted. Enlightenment stands in the same relationship to things as the dictator to human beings.”¹ The purpose of this paper is to elucidate a thicker understanding of this claim with other passages from *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and with Karl Marx’s *Estranged Labor* and to show that enlightenment and virtuous community are in conflict – that Enlightenment-style knowledge estranges us from *something*. I begin by elaborating on knowledge, power, and estrangement for Horkheimer and Adorno, follow by looking at the potential moral consequences of estrangement as explicated in Marx’s *Estranged Labor*, and conclude by claiming that the estrangement resulting from enlightenment, insofar as

¹ Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 6.

Enlightenment-style knowledge entails a subject-object distinction, is a critique not only of enlightenment, but also of the aforementioned subject-object distinction and that this subject-object distinction estranges the subject from itself. It is unhappily beyond the scope (and perhaps methodology) of this paper to present an alternative positive conception of interfacing with reality in contrast with a subject-object distinction.

Estrangement in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*

Before diving into *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, it is first necessary to remark that Horkheimer and Adorno value a negative, critical methodology – meaning that claims should attempt to reduce what is existing, in showing their negation or falsehood, which in turn leaves behind what may be true, as opposed to a positivist methodology which attempts to actually purport something as being true. As such, I will henceforth attempt to refrain from framing their ideas in a positivist sense. This will of course present some difficulties of intelligibility, but I believe it to be the intellectually responsible course of action. As Horkheimer and Adorno note in the preface, “false clarity is only another name for myth.”²

Horkheimer and Adorno ground their definition of enlightenment in the works of Bacon, who envisioned science as “the happy match between the mind of man and the nature of things.” Horkheimer and Adorno immediately note that this image of enlightenment is a patriarchal one – that man stands over Nature in domination. While this particular critique may seem strange, it perfectly coincides with modern views on technology, which Horkheimer and Adorno also point out. “Technology is the essence of this knowledge. It aims to produce neither concepts nor images, nor the joy of understanding, but method, exploitation of the labor of others, capital.”³

² Horkheimer and Adorno, xvii.

³ Horkheimer and Adorno, 2.

That is, enlightenment, which seeks to give us knowledge for *our* betterment, is a utility-based pursuit of knowledge which always gives us power over the object about which we know a thing. Advancements in mathematics are appropriated toward real-world applications – which itself is a mythic phrase which covers over a violent act – resulting in the improvement of roads, bridges, and energy creation. Science, and the knowledge it pursues, gives us only power after power. In fact, Horkheimer and Adorno explicitly state that “power and knowledge are synonymous.”⁴

The result of this accrument of power is the isolated subject – man distinctly extant in contrast with her environment. Procedurally, as man obtains more knowledge – a greater understanding of how best to make use of her environment to suit her specific ends –she insulates herself away from said environment. The *objects* become less unified with her sense of being; she ceases to respect and dignify their existence. They only exist insofar as they are used. Modernity forgets Berkeley’s *esse est percipi, to be is to be perceived*, in exchange for Bacon’s “happy match,” *to be is to be used*. In the words of Horkheimer and Adorno, “the man of science knows things to the extent that he can make them. Their ‘in-itself’ becomes ‘for him.’”⁵ Thus we can already observe the estrangement – which from our modern perspective seems so natural – latent in the exploitation of one’s environment. With “power as the principle of all relationships”⁶ in the modernity of enlightenment, relationships always become dominative in character. There is no longer a virtuous unification with one’s family, friends, colleagues, or pets, nor with living or non-living Nature. We pay for power, utility, and a ‘higher’ standard of

⁴ Horkheimer and Adorno, 2.

⁵ Horkheimer and Adorno, 6.

⁶ Horkheimer and Adorno, 5.

living with alienation and isolation. Proverbially, “human beings purchase the increase in their power with estrangement from that over which it is exerted.”⁷

Estrangement in Marx’s *Estranged Labor*

Marx’s discussion of estranged labor is illuminating to the foregoing discussion insofar as it is the case that Horkheimer and Adorno were influenced by Marx and that, consequently, the historical reading of the two essays in conjunction adds depth and richness to our understanding of Horkheimer’s and Adorno’s critique of enlightenment. In fact, I read *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as an extension of Marx’s critique of private property in *Estranged Labor*, though arguing this specific point is beyond the scope of this paper and thus remains solely as a shaping assumption.

There is a specific type of labor, which he refers to as estranged labor, that causes estrangement from the products of labor, man herself, man’s species being, and man in general.⁸ Private property is one sufficient cause of estranged labor, but it is not the only sufficient cause; instead, estranged labor and private property reinforce each other, with estranged labor being the originating factor resulting in private property.⁹

In the first case, estranged labor alienates man from the product of her labor – “the alienation of the worker in his product... means that the life which he has conferred on the object confronts him as something hostile and alien.”¹⁰ Marx here specifically looks at the appropriation of “sensuous nature” as well, stating that the more that labor consumes the objects of nature, the

⁷ Horkheimer and Adorno, 6.

⁸ Karl Marx, “Estranged Labor,” in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert Tucker, trans. Martin Milligan (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1978), 71-79.

⁹ Marx, 79.

¹⁰ Marx, 72.

less of nature that is available to be “means of life” for both labor and the laborer, in the senses that labor ceases to have objects to operate upon and that the laborer ceases to have physical means of subsistence.¹¹ Marx views this appropriative relationship to sensuous nature as being a self-reinforcing form of bondage, where the laborer must work to survive and where because she has survival needs must work.¹²

Marx claims that the products of labor are nothing but summaries of the activity of labor. Thus, if estranged labor alienates the subject from the objects which she creates, then so too does it alienate her from her modes of operating, particularly in the context of labor.¹³ Further, it alienates the subject from herself; alienation of the subject from her actions is nothing more – and consequently nothing less – than self-estrangement, for, as Marx says, “what is life other than activity.”¹⁴ The self and its activity are intimately and inextricably connected, such that if one is estranged, the other biconditionally is as well.

The alienation of man’s species being is a bit trickier to explain, since species being is a term wholly unto Marx. By species being, Marx refers to the unadulterated, essential nature of man, which prior to a system of estranged labor would have a universal, communitarian worldview. Instead, estranged labor forces man to focus on her individual existence, contorting a universal, communitarian outlook into a particular, individualistic one. “Estranged labour estranges the *species* from man. It turns for him the *life of the species* into a means of individual

¹¹ Marx, 72-73.

¹² Marx, 73.

¹³ Marx, 74.

¹⁴ Marx, 75.

life.”¹⁵ Instead of viewing herself as a component embedded in the overall structure of species, the alienated laborer thus views herself as individuated – the subject is fully realized.

Lastly, Marx looks at the estrangement of man from other members of her species. Marx makes two arguments for this point: first, that self-estrangement entails social estrangement – “if a man is confronted by himself, he is confronted by the *other* man”¹⁶ – and second, that estrangement from man’s species being – her essential nature – entails estrangement from man in general because all social interaction is mediated by man’s nature; social interaction is colored by the estrangement from and the distortion of man’s essential nature.

Relevant to our discussion here is the pervasiveness with which a singular instance of estrangement can affect all of being. The estrangement of the laborer from the products of her labor is felt in her relationship to nature, to herself, to her nature, and to her fellow man. Likewise, for Horkheimer and Adorno, the subject-object distinction singularly distorts reality, estranging us from our environment and from ourselves. Indeed, the unifying thread between their two works is that they both establish a relationship between technocratic objectification and estrangement.

Critique of the Subject-Object Distinction

Horkheimer and Adorno state that “the awakening of the subject is bought with the recognition of power as the principle of all relationships.” Thus, the existence of the subject, by acknowledgement of the subject-object distinction, is a sufficient condition for the tainting of relationships with terms of power. Thus, if increases in power lead to increases in estrangement, then the “awakening of the subject” is responsible for its own estrangement. The existence of the

¹⁵ Marx, 75.

¹⁶ Marx, 77.

subject inevitably leads to its own wretchedness – estrangement from nature and estrangement from others. Yet, these dialectics of enlightenment show further contradiction: not merely the contradiction between the subject and the object, i.e. the set of non-subject entities, but also between the subject and itself – that is, the subject-object distinction unavoidably results in the negation and sublimation of the subject itself. I believe this contradiction to be not only more immediate and personal but also more fundamental, since it is the subject which draws the subject-object distinction in the first place (a process which itself immediately subordinates the non-subject, another act of violence).

Horkheimer and Adorno state that “only thought which does violence to itself is hard enough to shatter myths.”¹⁷ I now turn to an internal contradiction of enlightenment – the alienation of the self from the self – with the belief that, if, due to enlightenment’s pervasive influence, particularly its notion of individualism, the foregoing discussion is not sufficient to persuade my audience of its horrors, the following will elucidate the incoherence of enlightenment. Consider the case in which the subject attempts self-knowledge – that is, introspective and reflective attempts at understanding oneself better. If the subject pursues this goal with what she knows best – Enlightenment-style reasoning – she appropriates outward violence and directs it inwardly; *she exploits herself*. The subject thus objectifies itself in an attempt to be *better* – more efficient, more rational, more calm, more moral, more, more, more. Immediately, we reason that those are desirable things to pursue, and they might well be from our modern perspective. But, at what cost do we purchase these betterments? If Enlightenment-style knowledge of the non-subject is “purchased with estrangement,” then so is knowledge of the subject. The subject becomes estranged from itself, sublimating itself into a technological

¹⁷ Horkheimer and Adorno, 2.

appendage of the Enlightenment and bourgeoisie economy – a highly rational, highly alienated, *wretched* existence.

Conclusion

The goal of this paper was to provide a brief critique of the subject-object distinction by explicating the contradiction and violence emanant in the estrangement caused by the distinction. I began by explaining Horkheimer and Adorno's views on enlightenment, knowledge, power, and estrangement, followed by detouring through Marx's *Estranged Labor* with the intention of providing a thicker understanding of estrangement, and concluded by presenting my own critique of the subject-object distinction: the negation and sublimation of the subject. My purpose for attempting this critique is a fundamental concern with community and the threats it faces, namely estrangement and alienation. Though it initially seems strange to question something as commonly accepted and foundational as the subject-object distinction, if the distinction leads to estrangement and thus threatens community, then it needs to be critiqued. As I mentioned earlier, this paper does not attempt an alternative conception in contrast to the subject-object distinction. Such a project presents significant methodological problems, insofar as any attempt to proclaim something positive as truth would attempt to operate as a universal and would thus reinscribe enlightenment. The only statement to which I am willing to commit herein is that the subject-object distinction is violent.