

Critical Theory: Between Ideology and Philosophy

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English speaking readers interested in the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School have been well served in recent years. Almost all the school's major works have now been translated and several scholarly studies have appeared. Two questions have nevertheless been somewhat under-represented – their status as philosophers and the intellectual consistency of the school. The reasons are, I believe, connected.¹

It is understandable that the purely philosophical aspect of Critical Theory should have received disproportionately little attention in Britain and America. Although the leading members of the school were trained and continued to regard themselves as philosophers, their writings first attracted attention abroad from sociologists, literary theorists and dissident Marxists, rather than academic philosophers. Working as they did within boundaries set by Kant, Hegel and Marx there hardly appeared to be a bridge of common concern connecting their problems to the anti-metaphysical Anglo-Saxon philosophical scene of Russell, Wittgenstein and Carnap.

Theodor Adorno's stay as an exile in Oxford in the thirties illustrates the gulf between the two worlds. Adorno complains in a letter that he can find no colleagues in the Oxford of Ayer, Ryle, Austin and Berlin sophisticated enough to appreciate his work: 'to make my philosophical affairs comprehensible to the English is an impossibility, and I must reduce my work to a somewhat childish level to continue to be understood'. Ayer, on the other hand, hardly regarded Adorno as a serious philosopher. He recalls him in his autobiography as 'a comic figure with his dandified manner and appearance'. The young philosophers of Oxford were, Ayer says, 'more amused than impressed' by Adorno's expressed interest in the philosophy of music. Clearly, neither was prepared to make concessions in order to appreciate the other.

I believe that this neglect of the philosophical dimension of Critical Theory has led to the second omission: a lack of satisfactory answers to the question of the school's intellectual coherence. Studies have concentrated on individual authors, and it is significant that the distinguished exception – Martin Jay's *The Dialectical Imagination* – breaks off at just the time after the war when the common identity of the school started to be seriously challenged. But this leaves behind a large question: was the school's undeniable break-up simply the passing of an episode in 'Weimar culture'; or was it, at least in part, the result of difficulties and indeterminacies implicit in the original enterprise?

The answer that I shall suggest is essentially this: the school's initial programme was, indeed, equivocal. Thus subsequent developments are best understood as a series of competing attempts to make that programme coherent and philosophically acceptable by resolving its original ambiguities.

Kant against Marx: Marx against Kant

To understand the perspective from which the programme of Critical Theory was developed it is helpful to refer back from the twentieth century to an earlier 'critical philosophy': that of Kant. As Kant described it, the task of philosophy was to set up a 'court-house of reason'. The legal metaphor carries important implications for the way in which the task of philosophy is conceived. The metaphor suggests, first, that philosophy is a *normative* discipline. Like a court it has to adjudicate disputes brought before it. Those disputes, it is important to note, are not solely the product of philosophical speculation, but arise in the course of the everyday operation of the human mind, as part of its 'natural dialectic'. Philosophers, then, are not parasites on the intellectual community. Although they can provide no substantive knowledge (and are pernicious impostors if they claim to) their function is indispensable in setting standards and establishing boundaries.

The court-house metaphor carries a concomitant implication for the manner in which philosophical issues are to be resolved. They are neither to be decided *dogmatically* – in response to some authority whose legitimacy consists solely in its established power – nor *sceptically* bypassed. Within the court's domain philosophers are engaged

in a kind of *philosophical jurisprudence*, making use only of what it is open to reason to determine. This is why Kant, his thinking interwoven as ever with the political vision of the Enlightenment, compares philosophy's role in bringing peace to the 'battlefield of metaphysics' with the political order of the *Rechtsstaat*, established with the foundation of civil society.

But what is the extent of reason's competence? To answer this Kant employs another, yet more famous, metaphor: philosophy is to carry out a *Copernican revolution*. Philosophical disputes would be incapable of resolution were the questions involved questions about the ultimate structure of a reality independent of the human mind. But they are not. They concern a reality which has been (in some sense) *produced*, whose features have been constituted by the activity of a non-empirical agency, the *transcendental subject*. What we have made (or 'constituted') we can know – not because transcendental activity is directly an object of our conscious perception but because its effects can be determined by a process of philosophical argument.

Kant's normative conception of philosophy forms a deliberate contrast to that of his predecessor, Locke. For, although Locke's *Essay* had also aimed to draw boundaries (it aspired, Locke wrote, to 'inquire into the original, certainty and extent of human knowledge') the method which it used was psychological and descriptive: Kant refers to it as a 'physiology of the mind'. Locke's psychological programme remained exceptionally influential, especially among the thinkers of the French Enlightenment, where it was developed into the 'philosophy of common sense'. At the end of the eighteenth century the school of social thinkers led by Destutt de Tracy actually chose a new name to differentiate their study of the origins and determinants of ideas from normative conceptions of philosophy. They called their discipline *idéologie*. Yet from Germany the school's identity seemed clear: *idéologie*, says Hegel, is 'pure Lockeanism'.

Ironically, by the time that Karl Marx came to elaborate his own programme for the positive understanding of ideas in society in the *German Ideology* the name had come to signify something different, philosophy which operated in abstraction from social reality; and the arch-ideologist was none other than Kant himself: the 'whitewashing spokesman' of the German petit-bourgeoisie, Marx calls him with characteristic good temper.

The result is that, whereas Marx took himself to be eliminating

philosophy in favour of social science, from the Kantian point of view he appeared to be taking Locke's side in a specifically philosophical dispute. Critical Theory in the twentieth century moves in this tension between Kant and Marx. It attempts to recognize the rootedness of ideas in history and society without supporting Locke against Kant and so abandoning philosophy's claim to normative rationality. Marxism had only abolished philosophy in various ways; Critical Theory set out to interpret it. Its solution involved the reinterpretation of the Kantian concept of the *transcendental subject*: no longer a nodal point below the surface of consciousness its true identity was to be shown to be social and historical.

Traditional and Critical Theory

This claim about the transcendental subject plays a fundamental role in Max Horkheimer's 'Traditional and Critical Theory'. This essay, written in 1937, forms a natural starting point for discussion, for it was commonly acknowledged by the Frankfurt School's members as the classic statement of their programme. As we shall see, it was not the programme of the essay itself but how that programme could be specified and realized that was to divide later writings.

'Traditional and Critical Theory' starts by explaining the opposition announced by its title. What traditional theorists have in common, according to Horkheimer, is that they take theory to be incorporated in its purest form in the propositions of natural science. Thus philosophers in other respects so widely separated as Descartes, Mill and Husserl are all classed as traditional theorists. In the name of Critical Theory Horkheimer denies that the natural sciences represent such a cognitive ideal. Such an ideal of theory is not universal but the product of a specific historical situation: 'The traditional idea of theory is based on scientific activity as carried on within the division of labour at a particular stage in the latter's development' ('Traditional and Critical Theory', E p. 212; G p. 146).²

In universalizing this activity into a timeless norm the traditional conception of theory embodies a preconception of knowledge as the essentially passive reflection by a thinking subject of a neutral, mind-independent reality: 'The whole perceptible world . . . is seen by the perceiver as a sum-total of facts; it is there and must be accepted'. ('Traditional and Critical Theory', E p. 212; G p. 148).

Horkheimer, however, counters this picture with a thoroughly Kantian claim: reality as we know it is *constituted*. If the world is, as Wittgenstein once said, a world 'of facts not of things', then to treat those facts as neutral and ontologically independent is simply to reasimilate them to things and so to miss what is, in Horkheimer's view, paramount: facts embody human activity. 'The perceived fact is . . . codetermined by human ideas and concepts, even before its conscious theoretical elaboration by the knowing individual' (Traditional and Critical Theory', E p. 214; G p. 149). Now, how this 'codetermination' or 'constitution' takes place is, of course, the crucial point. It results, Horkheimer says, from the activity of society which is (in contrast to the passive individuals who comprise it) essentially an active subject. But in what way is society's 'activity' to be conceived? Indeed, given that, as individuals, the standpoint of society as an active whole is not open to us, what is to prove that the activity is taking place at all?

Implicitly, as I shall show, Horkheimer deals with four distinct sorts of constituting social activity in the course of the essay. Explicitly, however, he makes only one fundamental distinction: between constituting activity which is *subjective* and that which is *objective*: 'The facts which our senses present to us are socially pre-formed in two ways: through the historical character of the object perceived and through the historical character of the perceiving organ'. (Traditional and Critical Theory', E p. 213; G p. 149).

In asserting that facts are preformed because of the 'historical character' of the perceiving organ Horkheimer is clearly committing himself to an *instrumentalist* epistemology. (The name, although standard for views which connect the possession of concepts to human beings' activity, is potentially misleading, since it suggests that this activity always has an instrumental – i.e. means-end – character. Critical Theory vigorously disputes this claim.) To use Karl Popper's vivid metaphor, Horkheimer opts for a 'searchlight' rather than a 'bucket' theory of perception. The subject's encounter with reality is always informed by a prior conceptual framework; all perception is interpretation: 'The individual, however, receives sensible reality . . . into his world of ordered concepts. The latter . . . have developed along with the life process of society' ('Traditional and Critical Theory', E p. 215, G p. 151).

In accepting this, Horkheimer's way is opened for an important

claim: if the framework of our concepts has been determined by the historical life process of society then there exists, perhaps, a form of activity whose particular role it is to change and develop those concepts and this, of course, is Critical Theory.

I turn now to the determination of the *object* (by which one means, properly speaking, *objective facts*) by society. What is involved in this conception is less easily established. According to Horkheimer the role of social action in the determination of the object increases with a society's capacity to affect and control the environment: 'The sensible world which a member of industrial society sees about him every day bears the mark of deliberate work.' ('Traditional and Critical Theory', E p. 214; G p. 150).

Yet this claim contains a significant ambiguity. The fact of human beings' effect upon their environment is beyond dispute: its philosophical significance is arguable, however. Specifically, does the undeniable fact that human beings transform their environment amount to the idea that facts are *constituted* by society in a way corresponding to that in which German Idealism had claimed they were constituted by the transcendental subject? I think that the idea that the two are equivalent derives from a failure to distinguish two different ways in which human activity might be said to *determine* an object. In the first case human activity determines an object when a reference to human actions features as part of the material, causal history of a phenomenon. In this sense the effects of human labour are an indisputable part of our world. An example would be the way in which climatologists take into consideration the effects of human habitation – the clearing of jungle, the pollution of cities – in order to determine future developments. It is clear that such actions are not dealt with *as actions* in the science. The phenomena which incorporate them can (indeed *must*) be reidentified by the scientist in purely physical terms – as a decrease in oxygen, increase in atmospheric sulphur, or whatever – in order to figure in the explanation; from the scientific standpoint it is extrinsic that they are at the same time purposeful human actions.

In contrast to this there is a second class of cases where the reference to human activity may be said to play a truly *constitutive* role in determining an object; this is where reference to the purposes of human agents is necessary to establish the very identity of the object in question. We could not establish that a bicycle was a *bicycle* or a house

a house except with reference to the purposes embodied in its construction and use. Even the purely physical criteria which the object must meet in order to be a bicycle or a house derive from these purposes; a house is an enclosed space *because* it is intended to provide shelter for human beings, for example.

So far, then, I have distinguished three levels of constituting activity: (1) An *epistemological* level (corresponding to Horkheimer's *subjective* determination) on which the concepts are determined by means of which we perceive the world. (2) A *material* level on which human actions have concrete causal effects upon objects. (3) An *ontological* level on which reference to human purposes and intentions plays an indispensable role in establishing the identity of the object in question. To these must be added a fourth kind of constituting social activity which plays an important role in Horkheimer's essay, although it does not fit neatly into his official division between the 'subjective' and the 'objective' determination of facts. This is: (4) The constituting activity of the *will*.

Evidently the activity of the will does not play a role in determining facts in general but only those which are properly seen as (or as embodying) actions. Horkheimer, however, does not state this limitation, leaving open the suspicion that he does not make it; perhaps because he assumes that all facts are, indeed, actions. The suspicion would appear harsh were it not that just this thesis is fundamental to German Idealism. Facts are actions for Idealism, not because all facts incorporate individuals' empirical wills, but because all phenomena incorporate the transcendental, self-realizing activity of *Geist*.

According to Horkheimer, actions are truly intelligible only to the extent that the will which is realized in them is transparent to itself. The will is transparent insofar as it is rational and collective. Thus social action within the capitalist economic order is only imperfectly comprehensible; for capitalism presents itself to the awareness of individuals in the guise of an impersonal mechanism. Its role as the realization of a collective will is at the same time concealed behind the deceptive appearance of a 'second nature':

[Men] experience the fact that society is comparable to non-human natural processes, to pure mechanisms, because cultural forms which are supported by war and oppression are not the creations of a unified, self-conscious will. . . . Reason cannot

become transparent to itself as long as men act as members of an organism which lacks reason.

('Traditional and Critical Theory', E pp. 218-19, G pp. 156-7)

Because not all facts can be assumed to be actions it is particularly important to distinguish this fourth level of constituting activity, by which actions are partial realizations of social will, from the third, ontological level, in which reference is made to human purposes in order to identify objects. If the two levels are conflated, every case in which we must refer to intentions in order to identify an object must be seen as incorporating, as intrinsic to that identification, an aspiration towards the self-realization of a collective subject. This is a very strong claim indeed: for surely we can identify a house as a *house* without needing to anticipate the architecture of some future emancipated society. The assumption that the true identity of an object can only be established by viewing it *sub specie emancipationis* implies a dependence of meaning on history with its ancestry in Hegel's teleology of *Geist* – by no means a trivial assumption.

The four levels of constitution are, then, logically distinct, and if they do, indeed, mutually entail one another then this requires a philosophical demonstration which Horkheimer does not provide. Yet he moves between all four levels in his conception of Critical Theory.

Critical Theory, he says, is unlike traditional theory in that it aims to use reality as it presents itself as something more than the starting point for direct imitation: 'The critical acceptance of the categories which rule social life contains simultaneously their condemnation.' ('Traditional and Critical Theory', E p. 219; G p. 157).

In suggesting that we both accept and criticize the given system of categories Horkheimer is evidently drawing on the fourth level of constituting activity to inform the first, epistemological level. It is at the level of the will that the tension shows itself between man as he is and the ideal of a community in which rationality is fully realized. Only in such a community would theory cease to play a two-sided role. Critical Theory has a concept of man 'in conflict with himself' until the opposition between 'the individual's purposefulness, spontaneity and rationality, and the work-process relationships on which society is built' is removed ('Traditional and Critical Theory', E p. 220; G p. 159). This is what sets it its goal in illuminating the concepts in terms

of which men know reality: 'Critical Theory in its concept formation and in all phases of its development very consciously makes it own that concern for the rational organization of human activity which it is its task to illumine and legitimate' ('Traditional and Critical Theory', E p. 223; G p. 193).

The assumption that the ideal of rational will can be extended from the fourth level to guide concept formation on the first, epistemological level of activity is a claim which goes beyond the claim that acts of will have a dual character. What warrants the extension of this dual character to guide a conceptual revision of features of reality other than human actions – clouds, trees, animals, etc.? Horkheimer does not say.

Nor does he make it clear what the ideal of rational will is to consist in. He contrasts 'rational self-conscious collective action' with the formal, instrumental rationality characteristic of capitalism. But what does the alternative amount to? Horkheimer, for obvious reasons, cites no contemporary instances of such non-instrumental rationality. Is he really doing anything more materialist than gesturing towards the old romantic doctrine of the harmonious social organism?

Another major question left unresolved in 'Traditional and Critical Theory' is the nature of the superiority claimed for Critical over traditional theory. Does the 'critical acceptance' of received categories imply that Critical Theory aims only to add a dimension of understanding neglected by traditional theory, conceding that traditional theory is adequate in its own limited terms? Or does traditional theory fail in even these restricted aims and require replacement?

The question is given point by Horkheimer's choice of Marx's *Critique of Political Economy* as a practical example of Critical Theory. For Marx makes both claims: the reality of the production of value by labour is, he says, obscured by a set of categories (wages, prices, profit) which generate the illusion that the bourgeois order is natural and eternal. But the law of value, once discovered, does not just point beyond contemporary society to an alternative economic order; it provides, Marx claims, an empirically superior account of the laws of motion' of capitalism itself than any which could be given by political economy which sticks within its 'bourgeois skin'.

Horkheimer, then, does not distinguish the four levels of constituting activity which he makes use of in 'Traditional and Critical Theory' and, by failing to do so, leaves unresolved the important questions

arising out of the relationships between them. Subsequent divergences in Critical Theory result from the attempt to make good this omission.

The Negative Dialectic

That Horkheimer should fail to differentiate the four levels of constituting activity was no accident, I suggest, but was encouraged by the fact that all four levels figure together as aspects of a single constituting agency, the *transcendental subject*, in German Idealism. One solution, then, for the problem of the relations between the four levels would be if a materialist equivalent could be found for that Idealist concept. This attempt is made in Theodor Adorno's *Negative Dialectic*, whose grand ambition is no less than to bring together the Idealist concept of transcendental subjectivity with the great *sociological* theme of the division of labour.

Written in 1966 it is Adorno's most fully elaborated philosophical work and it is, by any standards, an extremely difficult one. The style is aphoristic and allusive; its goal, as Adorno describes it, is an 'anti-system'. But it would be a grave (if common) mistake to think of the *Negative Dialectic* as a disjointed or inconsistent work – much less as one written in the 'anything-goes (it's all interpretation anyway)' spirit of vogueish Nietzscheanism. To the contrary, the *Negative Dialectic* represents the most sustained attempt ever made to work out a consistent Marxist-Hegelian philosophy. Only Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness* approaches its scope, but Adorno's grasp of German Idealist philosophy is incomparably more subtle and profound.

To grasp its implications for the problems left by 'Traditional and Critical Theory' we must first see how the four elements of constitution were related in their original Hegelian context.

Geist (translated sometimes as 'spirit', sometimes as 'mind') is Hegel's version of the transcendental subject. But for Hegel it is not, as he accuses Kant of making it, a quasi-psychological concept. It governs not merely the way that things *appear* to human beings but the way that they are in themselves. Thus, at the ontological level – level (3) – *Geist* is the true source of the identity of the objects encountered in the world – and this not just in virtue of limitations on the way that they can be known. It is an *absolute* subject. But it also underlies the individual's perception of the world, and so fulfils as

well the epistemological role played by the transcendental subject in Kant's philosophy – level (1). In the *Phenomenology of Spirit* Hegel traces the process by which these two aspects of *Geist* ('truth' and 'certainty') are brought into coincidence and the stage set for 'absolute knowledge', the subject matter of the *Science of Logic*.

This process of the 'coming-to-itself' of *Geist* also incorporates the other two levels of constitutive activity. It is a concrete historical process (level (2)) – indeed, it is the key to the rational understanding of world history. Men effectively follow the course of *Geist* as they strive to realize ideas whose true identity is not fully disclosed to them; it is this which gives history its rational (in Hegel's sense of the word, *logical*) form.

At the end of history men arrive at a state in which they can act without the identity of their actions escaping them. Political authority in the realized state can be seen to be legitimate – supra-individual but not mysterious. This state is the collective embodiment of rational will – level (4).

Thus *Geist* embodies all four levels of constitution. Adorno's reinterpretation of it has a two-fold structure. There is, first, the aim of 'reading back' the concept of *Geist* in such a way that it becomes apparent that *Geist* is actually an enciphered representation of *society*: 'Beyond the philosophy of identity's magic circle the transcendental subject can be deciphered as society, unconscious of its own self' (*Negative Dialectics*, E p. 177; G p. 179).

But this reinterpretation is not just a direct translation. The 'enciphering' of society in the concept of *Geist* conceals and idealizes what is, in fact, an oppressive feature of capitalist society, namely, the domination of the universal over the particular. It represents as the embodiment of harmony and reconciliation a process which is repressive and antagonistic – an 'order of compulsion':

The compulsive order of reality, which Idealism projected into the realm of the subject and of *Geist*, is to be translated back out of it. . . . The prior universality [of the process of production] is both true and false: true because it forms that 'ether' which Hegel calls *Geist*; untrue because its 'reason' is, as yet, no such thing, and its universality the product of particular interest. (*Negative Dialectics*, E p. 10; G p. 22)

Geist is not, as Idealism would have it, an ontological first cause: the 'ground of grounds'. It is only one pole in a social process cleft between mental and manual labour; a fact which the Idealist illusion of *Geist* as something spontaneous and creative conceals. *Geist*'s independence is not original but a *result*, produced by a process of intellectual abstraction corresponding to the regimentation of commodity production: 'Idealism, which distilled [the abstract law-governedness of exchange] into its Absolute Spirit, at once enciphers the truth that the phenomena encounter this mediation in the form of a mechanism of compulsion. *That* is what is concealed behind the so-called problem of constitution'. (*Negative Dialectics*, E p. 47; G p. 57).

This criticism of the Idealist concept of *Geist* means that it cannot function, as it had in Lukács's work, as an affirmative concept, an anticipation of a future, emancipated rational will. The sharpest passages in the *Negative Dialectic* are those in which Adorno exposes Hegel's theodicy of history as a concealed form of authoritarianism. For example:

The ideology of the independent existence of the Idea is so powerful because it is true. But it is negative truth; it becomes ideology when inverted into affirmation. Once men become aware of the universal's supremacy it is practically inevitable that they should transfigure it, the higher power that they must appease, into *Geist*. They take *force* for *meaning*. (*Negative Dialectics*, E p. 315; G p. 310)

However, the difficulties which Adorno's transformation of the concept of *Geist* faces become apparent when one considers its treatment of the material and ontological levels of constitution. As we have seen, these two levels are united in Hegel's system, for all of reality – the material world, as well as human history – is shown to be an embodiment of the absolute, the Idea, whose career is encompassed in the developed structure of the *Begriff* (literally 'concept'). So, according to Hegel, it is wrong to think of concepts having the role of intermediaries, as if they were just the *means* by which human beings come to terms with an essentially mind-independent reality. Concepts (to the extent that they are true) are embodiments of the single *Begriff* (which, like the Greek *Logos*, permeates reality and gives it the objective structure which the knowing subject aims at:

It is an inversion of things to assume that the objects which form the content of our ideas come first and that subsequently our subjective activity intervenes, forming concepts by the aforementioned activity of abstracting and holding together the common element in the objects. The *Begriff* is what is truly prior and things are what they are by the activity of the *Begriff*, immanent and revealing itself in them.

(*Hegel's Logic* (= *Encyclopedia*), para. 163, *Zusatz 1*)

The idea of the immanence of rational structure in the world may be expressed, Hegel says, by speaking of nature, as Schelling had done, as 'frozen intelligence'. In nature the Idea is not conscious of itself. But there is one part of reality which does have this as its aim; human history is the record of the struggle of *Geist* from immediate consciousness to that point at which it becomes fully aware of its own nature. The *Begriff* is not just descriptive of *Geist's* structure but forms the effective *telos* towards which the concrete agents of history implicitly strive.

Thus both nature – as the Idea 'outside itself' – and history – the record of its 'coming-to-be in and for itself' – participate in a common rational structure which founds their intelligibility. Both *material* and *intentional* aspects of history are seen to be articulations of a single process. From the standpoint of philosophical knowledge material reality can be seen to be adapted to the realization of human purposes, which are, in turn, inchoate stages in the realization of *Geist*. *Geist* is the reference point which establishes both the true identity of the objects we encounter and the final significance of the intentions in terms of which we act upon them. From this perspective *meaning* and *effective power* coincide.

The coincidence is guaranteed for Hegel by the status of *Geist* as an absolute subject, a claim which Adorno strongly denies. Yet I believe that, despite its rejection of the Idealist 'primacy of the subject', Adorno's philosophy itself relies on an assumed coincidence between history and meaning. This is presupposed by a thesis which I shall call *the objectivity of the meaning process*.

It will be recalled that Adorno grants that the career of *Geist* embodies a real, independent process. What he denies is that this process can be interpreted affirmatively; the unity of the historical process is not that of a teleology of self-realization:

Universal history is to be both constructed and denied. . . . The unity which welds together the discontinuous and chaotically fragmented moments and phases of history is undeniable; it is the domination of nature, progressing in the form of domination over man, and, finally, in the domination over their inner nature. (*Negative Dialectics*, E p. 320; G p. 314).

This historical process violates, rather than fulfils, the intrinsic character of whatever forms part of it. Nevertheless, crucially, this is the process to which negative dialectic is to address itself: '[Negative dialectic] accepts unmediated immediacy – the functions which society and its development present to thought – as it comes, in order to release its mediations by analysis, according to the standard of the immanent difference of the phenomena from what they aspire to be in their own right' (*Negative Dialectic*, E p. 38; G p. 48).

The problem, evidently, is to account for how this 'standard' of what phenomena 'aspire to be in their own right' can ever be known. Adorno makes neither of the claims which guarantee for Hegel that the innate significance of historical events is knowable: that history incorporates a movement in which things realize their essence and that we live in an epoch in which historical development has been significantly completed.

Adorno's criticism of Husserl gives an important indication of what his solution to this crucial problem is. Husserl had claimed that the philosopher (suitably initiated by the 'phenomenological reduction') had access to a region in which essential truths could be directly known by what he called an 'intuition of essence'. Adorno, significantly, endorses the idea that such intuition is possible. He seeks, however, to reinterpret it as part of his own theory: the doctrine of the constitutive role of society:

'Intuition of essence' is the name for the physiognomic way of regarding [*Blick auf*] intellectual [*geistige*] matters. It is legitimated by the fact that the intellectual realm is not constituted by the consciousness which is directed towards it cognitively. It is constituted, rather, well beyond the individual who originates it, in the collective life of *Geist*, and is objectively grounded according to its immanent laws.

(*Negative Dialectics*, E p. 82; G p. 89)

Essence, then, is revealed intuitively, but is objectively grounded in the collective life of *Geist*. Here we have, clearly stated, the thesis of the objectivity of meaning. The intuition of essence corresponds to an experience which is, Adorno says, 'the experience of becoming in what, supposedly, merely is' (*Negative Dialectics*, E p. 82; G p. 90). Thus it is the old Idealist category of *werden* (becoming) which carries the link between appearance and essence – between society as it is, and what might be. Philosophy must reveal *becoming* where the course of history serves to obscure it: 'Becoming disappears and dwells in the thing [*Sache*]; as little to be quieted into its own concept as to be split off and forgotten from its result' (*Negative Dialectics*, E p. 52; G p. 62). Negative dialectic claims to release the history 'congealed in the thing' (*in die Sache geronnen*). Temporal experience is the index according to which to assess reality; a role it is to play despite the fact that it cannot be treated as a stage in the self-realization of the Idea:

In reading what is as the text of its becoming, Idealist and materialist dialectics are contiguous. But, while Idealism justifies the inner history of immediacy as a stage of the *Begriff*, materialistically it becomes the measure of the untruth of concepts [*Begriffe*] – but, still more, of the untruth of what immediately exists.

(*Negative Dialectics*, E p. 52; G p. 62)

According to the thesis of the objectivity of meaning, phenomena have an essential significance which is an objective part of the history of the phenomenon itself, and gives it an 'immanent universality': 'Such immanent universality of the individual is objective as sedimented history . . . To become aware of the constellation in which the object stands is to decipher the history which it bears within itself as something which has become' (*Negative Dialectics*, E p. 163; G p. 165).

As a materialist Adorno denies that natural processes are intrinsically meaningful because nature has a purpose – a *telos* towards which it strives. So what can he mean when he says that history is 'sedimented' in phenomena? How can a materialist say that an object literally 'bears in itself' anything other than a causal natural history? Yet, if Adorno is doing no more than giving metaphorical expression to the idea that men perceive reality in terms of their own purposes and interests, what becomes of the thesis that the meaning process is objective?

It is at this point that we see the fundamental equivocation in Adorno's theory. Instead of answering the question of how meaning processes can have this quasi-natural 'objectivity' he slips into an Idealist terminology which conceals the dilemma. Negative dialectic, he says, is to free the 'mediations' which whatever immediately is contains. But what, precisely, is the philosophical status of a 'mediation'? Is it a *causal*, a *logical* or a *semantic* relation? For Hegel, of course, it embraces all three: mediations are 'moments' in the fundamental rational structure of reality. But Adorno, who rejects Hegel's assumption of an absolute subject, has no right to assimilate the three in a way that intimately depends on this assumption. And yet, if he does not, he has no way of explaining the crucial feature of his notion of *Geist*: its ascription to processes of human significance the objectivity usually reserved for material causal processes. Without the quasi-naturalism of the concept of mediation the thesis of the objectivity of the meaning process collapses.

Although the *Negative Dialectic* inverts Idealism, it does not succeed in emancipating itself from it.

Critical Theory without Hegel (1): Knowledge and Human Interests

Inasmuch as it fails to resolve the equivocation in the concept of *Geist* there are objective intellectual reasons why Adorno's philosophy proved a brilliant dead end. Rather than giving an account which could establish the thesis of the objectivity of the meaning process, Adorno's disciples were more concerned to inherit the master's literary-aesthetic nimbus. As a result, to the extent that Critical Theory developed in the nineteen-sixties and seventies, this was entirely the work of Jürgen Habermas.

Habermas's enterprise, however, represents a diametrically opposite approach to the problems left unresolved in 'Traditional and Critical Theory'. Whereas Adorno's reappropriation of the Idealist concept of *Geist* is intended to fuse the *material* and *ontological* levels of constitution into a single, objective process, Habermas concentrates his attention on the *epistemological* level and that of the *rational will*.

As expressed in his major book of the sixties, *Knowledge and Human Interests*, Critical Theory is Kantian rather than Hegelian; not concerned with the nature of reality as it is in itself, but only with the framework which pre-structures men's encounter with it. This

framework is *practical* as well as *epistemological* for it conditions both our actions and our knowledge. Thus Habermas emphatically takes up Horkheimer's thesis of epistemological instrumentalism, according to which what we mean by 'reality' is always (only) 'reality as it is for us'. Again, what sets the framework within which we encounter reality is not the transcendental ego, as in Kant, but society – the interests of a historical 'species-subject'.

In this context it is significant that Habermas reads Adorno's work as implying the attribution of meaning to nature: 'The resurrection of nature cannot be logically conceived within materialism, no matter how much the early Marx and the speculative minds in the Marxist tradition (Walter Benjamin, Ernst Bloch, Herbert Marcuse, Theodor W. Adorno) find themselves attracted by the heritage of mysticism' (*Knowledge*, E p. 32; G p. 42).

In fact this is a misreading of Adorno's intentions. Adorno is always careful to distinguish his belief in the objectivity of meaning-processes from an Idealist anthropomorphization of nature. Habermas is assuming that Adorno's conception of *Geist* is untenable and that, as a result, the doctrine of the objectivity of the meaning-process simply collapses back into Idealism. The consequence which he draws from this for his own work is that the search for buried meaning must restrict itself to what is, on Horkheimer's original distinction, the *subjective* side of constitution; philosophy cannot hope to answer ontological questions about reality in itself. He is, for example, quite untroubled by the criticism made by Michael Theunissen (from a standpoint extremely sympathetic to Hegel) that, on such an approach, the objectivity of knowledge becomes 'no more than' *intersubjectivity*. Habermas concedes the point – but sees no criticism in it. (Cf *Knowledge*, E p. 380; G p. 416.)

Habermas follows the tradition of *pragmatism* in believing that the framework for our encounter with reality is historically evolved; the product of the interests of a biological species rather than of a transcendental ego. Two important features separate his 'instrumentalism' from traditional pragmatism, however. In the first place, he rejects any suggestion that the nature of 'interests' can be interpreted from biology alone: 'The concept of "interest" is not meant to imply a naturalistic reduction of transcendental-logical properties to empirical ones. Indeed it is meant to prevent just such a reduction' (*Knowledge*, E p. 196; G p. 241).

Second (and connected with the first point) Habermas claims that we must acknowledge the existence of what German Idealism called an 'interest of reason'; that is to say, that reason itself has independent force and does not require motivating by a non-rational 'passion' in order to be effective: 'In reason there is an inherent drive to realize reason' (*Knowledge*, E p. 201; G p. 248).

The true interests of the species are not simply the biological ones derived from self-preservation; they are for the species to develop itself into a rational, autonomous community. To do so it must achieve self-knowledge by reappropriating its own activity (a process which Habermas calls *reflection*) in structuring reality. In this way philosophy and history are brought together. As the species becomes aware of its own accomplishments its capacity for rational action is enhanced. At the level of the species epistemological progress coincides with the formation of a rational will.

By concentrating on the epistemological side of constitution and the formation of a rational will *Knowledge* and *Human Interests* develops a conception of Critical Theory which risks none of the dubious theses of Idealist ontology. But it must rely heavily on the thesis of epistemological instrumentalism. There are, I think, decisive objections to this thesis.

At the root of these objections lies the difficulty of determining the instrumentalist thesis's philosophical status – a difficulty which arises in great measure from the fact that it is formulated in opposition to a position which is itself ambiguous. This position embodies what Habermas terms 'the illusion of objectivism': the belief that our perception reflects reality as it is in itself.

Now in its classic, empiricist form *objectivism* in fact incorporates two sorts of claim; *psychological* and *metaphysical*. On the level of psychology it asserts that our perceptual apparatus plays an essentially passive role, simply registering on the '*tabula rasa*' of the mind whatever reality happens to inscribe there. But because of this we are entitled to assert a further, overarching metaphysical thesis: the perception we have corresponds to the way the world is in itself.

It is, indeed, easy to challenge the naive theory of perception on which such classical objectivism is based. As cognitive psychologists have been showing for at least a hundred years our purportedly *direct* reception of reality is, in fact, informed in ways of which we are not aware by 'interpretations'. The tenacity of perceptual illusions is one

conclusive demonstration that perceptions, towards which, as far as our own awareness goes, we are entirely passive, in fact can be said to incorporate the subject's activity.

But what follows from conceding this? If the findings of cognitive psychology refute the first of the two claims made by classical objectivism – the thesis of passive perception – does it then follow that the thesis of the correspondence between mind and world is also refuted? No: logically, although the metaphysical thesis is *supported* by the psychological one, it does not itself depend on it. All that one can say is that, if the psychological thesis is false, the metaphysical thesis requires establishment on other grounds.

The findings of cognitive psychology, although they can refute the thesis of passive perception, in no way imply a contrary metaphysical thesis. As Kant's followers (Husserl, for one) have pointed out, the question of man's relation to the world is a *transcendental* question to which the deliverances of an empirical science like cognitive psychology are epistemologically posterior. Cognitive psychology frames its theories, after all, in a language which assumes the independent existence of the entities to which it refers. It already presupposes an objective world.

This is not a conclusive objection to instrumentalism, for it is open to the defender of instrumentalism to reply that he is using the findings of cognitive psychology in order to make something other than a *transcendental* claim, in Kant's or Husserl's sense: a thesis about the overarching relations between mind and world. But what does the instrumentalist thesis amount to if it is *not* a transcendental thesis?

It cannot be an empirical one, for, as an empirical thesis, it lacks sufficient precision to be informative. To say that we live in a world constituted by the activity of knowing subjects is informative only if we have some means to determine that activity's extent: how the balance is struck between *active* and *passive* components in perception. But this, of course, the instrumentalist can never have without assuming what, in giving up his transcendental claim, he has denied himself: some vantage point outside our everyday knowledge of the world from which to resolve perception into the *matter* received by the senses and the *form* imposed on it. Kant thought that he could draw the distinction on *a priori* grounds. Habermas, however, leaves the problem at the level of an antithesis: 'We cannot meaningfully conceive of anything like uninterpreted facts. Yet the facts cannot be

exhaustively reduced to our interpretation' (*Knowledge*, E.p. 97; G.p. 124).

But, in the absence of a standpoint from which this element in 'facts' which resists being 'reduced to our interpretations' could be isolated, the antithesis is empirically meaningless, and Habermas's instrumentalism turns back, willy-nilly, into an uninformative transcendental claim.

Critical Theory without Hegel (2): Communication and the Evolution of Society

Perhaps it is an implicit acknowledgement of these difficulties that instrumentalist epistemology plays a much less prominent role in Habermas's recent work. In *Communication and the Evolution of Society* (1976) it has receded in favour of a claim about *social meaning*: the structure which the philosopher aims to disclose is not now the effect of *interest* on men's encounter with the world and each other but the *rules* which they must follow in order to perform significant social actions. (The two claims are not, however, logically incompatible, so it would be premature to say that Habermas has rejected instrumentalism.)

Society, Habermas defines as a 'symbolically prestructured segment of reality' (*Communication*, p. 66), in the sense that the identity of specifically social phenomena is fixed according to a network of rules. This is a claim on the third, ontological level of constitution. But it is not – in contrast to Hegel – a claim about the ultimate being of phenomena. It concerns only that segment of reality which human beings endow with significance: that which is subject to *conventions* (*Communication*, p. 35). Society, in the sense defined, is open to 'communicative understanding' and philosophy has the task of making explicit ('reconstructing') what that understanding consists in: the grasp of the rules which underlie a symbolic structure: 'The interpreter attempts to explicate the meaning of a symbolic formation in terms of the rules according to which the author must have brought it forth. . . . He attempts . . . to peer through the surface, as it were, and into the symbolic formation to discover the rules according to which the latter was produced' (*Communication*, p. 12).

Evidently, the equation of *meaning* with *production according to rules* is crucial. It guarantees that what is meaningful is, at least in princi-

ple, an object of systematic knowledge (rather than something just lived and experienced intuitively). Thus it is surprising and damaging that Habermas offers no defence of the thesis; the more so because in both the German and the Anglo-Saxon traditions powerful voices have been raised in objection to it.

For an example of opposition to the equation of meaning and rules in the German tradition we need only return to Adorno. Adorno's objection (which has its ancestry in Kant) is that to equate meaning with rules is to restrict the nature of judgement to a formal procedure of classification. If the meaning of a concept can be expressed in a rule then the application of the concept in judgement need be no more than the subsumption of experience under that rule. In that case, however, whatever is specific or qualitative about experience – the non-identical, in Adorno's terminology – passes beyond the scope of knowledge. The restriction of what is knowable to what can be formally classified is, Adorno asserts, a fallacy, although one with a basis in social reality: it is a mental correlative to the abstract order of commodity production: 'The individual is more, as well as less, than its universal determination. . . . The contradiction between universal and particular has the significance that individuality does not yet exist' (*Negative Dialectics*, E p. 151; G p. 154).

Philosophy – here Adorno is at one with his arch-enemy, Heidegger – in trying to give conceptual expression to what is dissonant and unclassifiable, becomes contiguous with art. The work of art is a paradigm in that it has a coherent internal structure (Adorno talks of 'submitting to its discipline') but, because it is non-conceptual, escapes the mutilating effects of classification.

But objection to the equation of meaning and rules is by no means restricted to these German anti-positivists. The burgeoning discussion in the Anglo-Saxon countries shows this. This discussion has a different starting-point, however: Wittgenstein's familiar (if still controversial) considerations on rule-following in the *Philosophical Investigations*.

It is common ground among interpreters that Wittgenstein starts his discussion from the claim that a formulated body of rules is insufficient to specify the course of a systematic practice, such as applying a word. What is controversial, however, is whether Wittgenstein is using this claim as part of an attack on the notion that meaning is governed by rules, or not. Peter Winch's *The Idea of a*

Social Science has been the most influential statement of the view that Wittgenstein supports the equation of meaning and rules, and it is my assumption that Habermas relies on Winch's interpretation of Wittgenstein for his own rules thesis.

Winch argues that the insufficiency of rule formulations is a problem for the *identification* of the rules being employed, not an argument against their existence: 'What is the difference between someone who is really applying a rule in what he does and someone who is not? . . . [That] a man's action *might* be interpreted as an application of a given formula is in itself no guarantee that he is in fact applying that formula' (*The Idea of a Social Science*, p. 29).

We can know independently of observation that language use *must* be governed by rules, Winch says, for without them we should lack the standards to determine whether, on any two occasions, we were saying and meaning the same thing. If the practices we carry out can be expressed by more than one rule formulation then this only means that it is not possible to identify which rule is being followed by inspection of the course of the practice alone; the rule must be part of a 'form of life' on the part of the community, which fixes the rule being employed.

That Wittgenstein rejects the equation of meaning and rules has been asserted no less vigorously, however; Stanley Cavell, for example, is vehement in his denial of the rules thesis. Cavell says that 'whether the later Wittgenstein describes language as being roughly like a calculus with fixed rules . . . is not a question that can be seriously discussed' (*Must We Mean What We Say?*, p. 48); all of Wittgenstein's later work is directed against just this conception. Wittgenstein 'wishes to indicate how inessential the "appeal to rules" is as an explanation of language' (*Must We Mean What We Say?*, p. 52).

I think that both logic and (although I do not have the space to argue this here) Wittgenstein's text support Cavell. In order to demonstrate this it is helpful to differentiate the rather general claim that rule formulations fail to specify a practice into two theses which I shall call the *underdetermination* thesis and the *overdetermination* thesis.

The underdetermination thesis argues that the reason why systems of rules fail to specify practices is that no system of rules can, in principle, be rich enough to include all the circumstances of its application. The argument is close to Adorno's and also goes back to

Kant. Take a rule of standard form: 'In circumstances $A_1 \dots A_n$ do (or say) phi '; or 'In circumstances $A_1 \dots A_n$ X counts as Y'. How does one determine whether the circumstances stated as conditions for the rule's application obtain? To answer that one determines the existence of $A_1 \dots A_n$ by rules for their identification evidently leads to a regress, for those identifying rules will themselves require specification, and so on. The underdetermination thesis either refutes the claim that meaning is governed by rules or renders it trivial. It refutes the claim if it is part of that claim that the rules said to govern our practice must be capable of non-circular specification, for it shows that all rules have limits to their specification which rules alone cannot transcend. It renders the claim quite trivial if we deny that such a specification is necessary. In that case it would be permissible to give as rules of language use rules of the sort: 'Call all and only those things "red" which are red' – rules which, though undeniable, are explanatorily empty.

The underdetermination thesis is as follows: Any practice is composed of a finite sequence of separate performances, and may be expressed in a variety of different rule formulations. We may think, for example, that a sequence of numbers has been formed according to the rule 'add two'. But that is only one possible formulation; it is always possible that when a new element is added to the sequence we will find that we were wrong and that the sequence corresponds to some – but, importantly, not just to *one* – different formulation.

Although I think that Wittgenstein uses both theses, Winch only treats the second, overdetermination thesis. It is clear, however, that the underdetermination thesis, if accepted, is fatal to Winch's position. The community, according to Winch, is involved in *settling* which of the various rules on offer is the one which is, in fact, being applied. But the underdetermination thesis sets the problem as that of continuing a sequence in circumstances past the point at which rules are informative; there is no help to be had in choosing *between* rules where rules no longer extend. Thus the appeal to the community can only be a defence against the overdetermination thesis.

But, even restricting consideration exclusively to the overdetermination thesis, Winch's argument is inadequate. According to Wittgenstein a variety of rule formulations can be given for a sequence at *any stage*. Now imagine that at some stage the community takes a particular continuation. Does this settle the question of which rule it

is following? No. No single 'decision' can ever do this because, by assumption, at the next stage of the sequence *precisely the same problem will arise*. Once again several rule formulations will apply and the community's previous 'decision' will be insufficient to settle which one is 'truly' being applied. The point of Wittgenstein's argument is that it is not possible for the community to fix the rule being employed. All it can do is agree that this or that continuation is the right one at a particular stage. It cannot settle on a rule formulation and then, as it were, sit back and let things take their course, as if guided by 'infinitely long rails' (*Philosophical Investigations* I, 218). Rules do not explain why we can continue (some) practices as a matter of course. We just can.

The argument against the equation of meaning with rules leads to a textual point with important wider implications. Winch bases his claim for the necessary existence of rules governing meaning on the argument that rules are indispensable in order to establish the identity of meanings. This is how we know that there must be rules. He quotes the connection which Wittgenstein makes between the existence of rules and our ability to use the word 'same':

[The] question: What is it for a word to have a meaning? leads on to the question: What is it for someone to follow a rule? . . . We should like to say: someone is following a rule if he always acts in the same way on the same kind of occasion. But this again, though correct, does not advance matters since, as we have seen, it is only in terms of a given rule that the word 'same' acquires a definite sense. 'The use of the word "rule" and the use of the word "same" are interwoven. (As are the use of "proposition" and the use of "true")' (*Philosophical Investigations* I, 225). (*The Idea of a Social Science*, p. 28)

Wittgenstein undeniably relates *identity* of meaning to the existence of rules. But it is wrong to take this to imply that the existence of meaning presupposes the existence of rules without giving consideration to the opposite possibility: that there may be *meaning* without *identity of meaning*. Winch asserts so frequently in the course of his book that there 'must' be standards to establish that we are saying the same thing on different occasions that it is easy to ignore the fact that the only argument he gives is circular: without such standards there

would be nothing to *guarantee* that we are using a word in the unique correct way (*The Idea of a Social Science*, pp. 25–9). But why must there be such a guarantee? Why must a sharp line exist to divide ‘correct’ from ‘incorrect’ usage?

Must we always, for instance, be able to distinguish, on pain of meaninglessness or ambiguity, between whether the application of a word in a new context represents a *continuation* or a *change* in meaning? Is the word ‘strong’ being used with its original meaning when we predicate it of a chain or a cup of tea but with a new one when said of a musical performance or an assumption? If meaning is not a matter of fixed rules is there any reason to assume that it is a matter of fixed identity either? Winch’s argument could, in fact, be turned around: the fact that there are cases in which the question of ‘old’ or ‘new’ meaning is unanswerable casts doubt on any doctrine which entails that a boundary between the two *must* exist.

This radical conclusion draws Wittgenstein towards a reiterated claim of continental philosophy since the romantics: the impossibility of fixing a rigid dividing line between literal (‘cognitive’) and metaphorical (‘poetic’) discourse. If no rules fix the literal meanings of words who is to say that the scientist remains soberly within their limits while the poet licentiously transgresses them?

Conventionalism

With the dispute over the equation of meaning and rules Critical Theory comes full circle. No longer is it a matter of dealing with issues quite different from those preoccupying the Anglo-Saxon world; the dispute over rules actually divides both traditions. To challenge Habermas’s use of the equation of meaning and rules is also to criticize, by implication, a broad stream of Anglo-Saxon philosophy. For not only is the equation stated expressly in such important works as *The Idea of a Social Science* and John Searle’s *Speech Acts*, it is a presupposition of many others. (According to John McDowell, for example, it is an assumption in both Michael Dummett’s approach to the theory of meaning and Richard Hare’s analysis of moral discourse.)

The equation of meaning and rules is so widespread – and so little supported by explicit argument – as to suggest that it is, in Wittgenstein’s terms, a philosophical *picture*: a view which, though explanatory

ily empty, nevertheless grips philosophers with its vividness and appeal to ‘common sense’. But common sense, as Gramsci remarks, is the practical wisdom of the ruling class, and the ideological function of the equation of meaning and rules is not hard to identify: it gives crucial support to a view of social meaning as essentially a matter of *convention*.

To appreciate this it is necessary to distinguish between a broad and a narrow sense of convention. In the broad sense convention is simply a general term for those features of reality which are essentially social in character: *nomoi* rather than *physei*, as the Greek philosophers put it. (This, I believe, is the sense in which Wittgenstein sometimes speaks of meaning as a matter of convention; in the stronger sense Wittgenstein was not a conventionalist.) But a more restricted sense of convention is now common. In this sense conventions are specifically agreements or undertakings: that in such-and-such circumstances an X is a Y (a two of clubs is a trump) or a *phi* is done (a point scored). Conventionalism is the doctrine that all social meanings are conventions in this second, narrow sense.

The immediately obvious objection to conventionalism is this: No one could claim that all social meanings are a matter of explicit agreement. But if agreement is, at most, only tacit, what becomes of its binding force? The objection is illuminating to the extent that it makes apparent the role which the equation of meaning and rules plays for conventionalism. It is not, the conventionalist will reply, that social meanings are conventional in the sense of having the binding force of explicitly made agreements. What they have in common with explicit agreements is their form: the form of *rules*.

This is the claim advanced in John Searle’s *Speech Acts*. In that book Searle defends ‘the distinction between brute and institutional facts’ (p. 50), the distinction between facts which are the objects of natural science and those which are objects of social understanding: ‘[Institutional facts] are indeed facts; but their existence, unlike the existence of brute facts, presupposes the existence of certain human institutions. . . . These ‘institutions’ are systems of constitutive rules. *Every institutional fact is underlain by a (system of) rule[s] of the form ‘X counts as Y in context C’*’ (*Speech Acts*, p. 51, my emphasis).

Not the least objectionable feature of conventionalism is this presentation of it as the sole alternative to scientific reductionism. We must either, it is said, acknowledge that social meanings are institu-

tional facts, or accept the assimilation of the social sciences to the sciences of nature. It is: nature or convention.

Conventionalism is not confined to philosophers, either. Its assumptions vitiate the work of so distinguished a social theorist as Mary Douglas. In the introduction to her collection *Rules and Meanings* she writes:

There is a recognizable epistemological viewpoint, working through European literature, philosophy, linguistics and sociology which strikes some students as novel when they meet it. . . . A conversation started in Europe between philosophers and social scientists. . . . [The speakers] knew only too well that there can be rules without meaning. *They also assumed that there can be no meaning without rules.* . . . But once begun, this conversation, so hopeful of solving epistemological problems, soon split up into the musings of diverse specialists. *As a result, our knowledge of the social conventions which made understanding possible remains scarcely advanced from that beginning.* . . . *The theme goes back to Hegel and Marx; that reality is socially constructed.* (*Rules and Meanings*, p. 9, my emphasis)

The speculative history of ideas displayed in this passage embodies a confusion. As the emphasized sentences show, Douglas characterizes her 'conversation' in three distinct ways. Its participants believed: (1) 'that there can be no meaning without rules'; (2) that 'social conventions make understanding possible'; and (3) 'that reality is socially constructed'. Yet these three theses are not equivalent and to treat them as three versions of the rules thesis leads to historical absurdity; Hegel and Marx may have believed that reality is socially constructed (constituted would have been more accurate), but conventionalists they never were. The unquestioned assumption of conventionalism makes Douglas's approach, its cosmopolitan tone notwithstanding, unexpectedly parochial.

Conclusion

The view that the social origin of meaning is to be found in tacitly acknowledged conventions is, thus, only one – characteristically English – response to reductionism about meaning. There is a quite

different, characteristically German, response which seeks the origin of meaning in the constituting activity of a transcendental subject or *Geist*. Both have been represented in Critical Theory for both can be accommodated to its vision of philosophy as an emancipatory force bringing men to self-understanding.

But there is another, third, response to reductionism which is, if my reading is correct, Wittgenstein's. This is the view that social meaning is autonomous, in the sense that there is *no* point of origin to which meanings can be referred back. The significance of Wittgenstein's famous question – what gives life to a system of signs? – is that it is, in an important sense, unanswerable. To answer it would be to fall back into the search for an agency behind the system. We can, however, neither trace meanings back to natural processes, nor refer them to a founding spirit (or system of rules). As Goethe puts it: '*Man suche nur nichts hinter den Phänomenen: sie selbst sind die Lehre.*'

Yet where would this leave Critical Theory? Can this conception, too, be made part of a philosophy with a contribution to make in human beings' search for rational self-understanding? These are important questions, but lack of space – and lack of answers – prevent me from pursuing them here.