

*Criticizing Nominalism & “Negative  
Metaphysics”. Philosophy-historical  
considerations on the concept of  
“Nature” in Dialectic of Enlightenment*

*Una Crítica al nominalismo y a la “metafísica negativa”.  
Consideraciones filosóficas e históricas sobre el concepto  
de “Naturaleza” en La dialéctica de la Ilustración.*

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### Abstract

The article depicts the concepts “dialectic of nominalism” and “negative metaphysics” in the critical theory of the Frankfurt School. It points out how important these are not only in terms of history of philosophy. Karl Heinz Haag and Günther Mensching, philosophers from Frankfurt, have changed that particular Frankfurt’s School paradigm in the 1980s. First, the article summarizes the ambivalent concept of nature in Horkheimer’s and Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Then it shows how searching for a non-instrumental concept of nature leads to a recourse to nominalistic and realistic theorems, the key subject matter of Haag and Mensching’s interpretations. Finally, it is going to discuss Habermas’ appeal for a postmetaphysical thinking.

*Keywords:* Frankfurt School, Dialectic of Enlightenment, nominalism and realism, negative metaphysics, philosophy of nature.

### Resumen

El artículo describe los conceptos „dialéctica del nominalismo“ y „metafísica negativa“ en la teoría crítica de la Escuela de Frankfurt. Señala cuán importantes son estos conceptos, no solo en la Historia de la filosofía. Karl Heinz Haag y Günther Mensching, filósofos de Frankfurt, cambiaron ese paradigma particular de la Escuela de Frankfurt en los años ochenta. Primero, el artículo resume el concepto ambivalente de “Naturaleza” en la dialéctica de la Iluminación de Horkheimer y Adorno. Luego muestra cómo la búsqueda de un concepto no instrumental de la naturaleza lleva a recurrir a teoremas nominalistas y realistas, la cuestión clave de las interpretaciones de Haag y Mensching. Finalmente, se discutirá la apelación de Habermas por un pensamiento postmetafísico.

*Palabras Clave:* Escuela de Frankfurt, Dialéctica de la Ilustración, nominalismo y realismo, metafísica negativa, filosofía de la naturaleza.

The first chapter of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* starts with a long quotation by Bacon who pleads for “the happy match between the mind of man and the nature of things”<sup>1</sup>. Horkheimer and Adorno criticize Bacon’s views on the scientific-technological approach to the natural basis of human reproduction. “What human beings seek to learn from nature is how to use it to dominate wholly both nature itself and human beings.”<sup>2</sup> Domination of nature and self-preservation lead to de-qualification through formalization and statistical assessment. “Nature, stripped of qualities, becomes the chaotic stuff of mere classification, and the all-powerful self becomes a mere having, an abstract identity.”<sup>3</sup> The “Unity of nature”<sup>4</sup> only exists as a quantitative, statistical concept. The “identity of mind”<sup>5</sup> would have understood in the same way. The more we seek to “govern nature”, the more “we are thrall unto her in necessity”<sup>6</sup> because the pre-requisite for the domination of nature is self-control, which is internalized power.

Horkheimer and Adorno describe the history of enlightenment by using this powerful pathos formula. However, concerning the history of concepts, their work could have been more accurate. As is well known, that has often been subject to criticism. In my paper I wish to raise awareness about an often overlooked interpretation in the spirit of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* but with important differences to the book. I will reference the philosophy-historic research conducted by Karl Heinz Haag and Günther Mensching, once doctoral students with Horkheimer in the 1940s and 1960s and later important scholars of the Frankfurt School.

First, I will summarize the ambivalent concept of nature in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Then, I will show how the search for a non-instrumental concept of nature leads to a recourse to nominalistic and realistic theorems from the history of philosophy, the key subject matter of Haag and Mensching’s interpretations. Finally, I will discuss Habermas’ call for post metaphysical thinking.

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<sup>1</sup> Horkheimer, Max, and Theodor W. Adorno: *Dialectic of Enlightenment. Philosophical Fragments*, ed. by G. Schmid Noerr, translated by E. Jephcott, Stanford 2002, p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> L.c., p. 6.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno, op. cit., p. 1.

## 1. The concept of nature

IN *DIALECTIC OF ENLIGHTENMENT*, nature, like in Schopenhauer, is described as a relationship of powers. Killing and devouring, started in nature, continues into society – a remnant of natural history, a *bellum omnium contra omnes*, as written by Hobbes. However, nature also appears as a place of living existence. Its objective intention is, as in Rousseau's work, physical pleasure and freedom from misery. This intention is expressed in images of non-violent, peaceful synthesis. “[R]emembrance of nature within the subject”<sup>7</sup>: On one hand, it is the artistic expression of those images. On the other, their philosophical reflection. Both of them could help “to recognize power, even within thought itself, as unreconciled nature”<sup>8</sup>. In *Eclipse of Reason*, Horkheimer speaks of the “reconciliation of the two poles [nature and reason], that philosophy has always dreamed of”<sup>9</sup>. So, he alludes to Marx's idea of the humanization of nature by the naturalization of humanity in which Horkheimer sees more than a romantic reminiscence to pre- or anti-modern philosophy of nature. Rather, he sees a potential for the program of a “dialectical anthropology”<sup>10</sup>, underlying the fragments of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

Civilization is the “process which turned nature into stuff [and] material”<sup>11</sup>, writes Horkheimer in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* under the title “Interest in the Body”. The *physis* is being subordinated to social domination. Like Nietzsche and Freud, Horkheimer describes the history of civilization and culture as a process in which “the exploited body” is brought under a “control”,<sup>12</sup> which had been increasingly internalized. In parts, it sounds like an anticipation of “discipline and punish” by Foucault or “societies of control” by Deleuze. According to Deleuze, domination, as an internalized coercion, is no longer secured by institutions (factories, prisons, barracks, schools and mental asylums), but through all-encompassing, “socio-technological [...] control mechanisms”<sup>13</sup>. Such mechanisms would entail micro-electronic devices, which re-format all social spheres according to economic needs.

Horkheimer may not have known about today's “socio-technological control mechanisms”, but he had its principles in mind already. “The man of science knows

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<sup>7</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno, *ibid.* p. 32.

<sup>8</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>9</sup> Horkheimer, Max: *Eclipse of Reason*, New York 1947, p. 123.

<sup>10</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno, *op. cit.*, p. XIX.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* p. 194.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* p. 193.

<sup>13</sup> Deleuze, Gilles: “Postskriptum über die Kontrollgesellschaften”, in: Deleuze, *Unterhandlungen 1972–1990, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1993 (254–262)*, p. 261.

things to the extent that he can make them”, he writes in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* “their ‚in-itself‘ becomes ‚for him‘. In their transformation, the essence of things is revealed as always the same, a substrate of domination. This identity constitutes the unity of nature.”<sup>14</sup> However, it is not only the “man of science”, but also the authors of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* who must be able to answer one philosophical question: Does it have to be this way? On the other hand, is it possible to prove that the substance of nature can be determined in a more adequate way, better than just the substrate of scientific-technological exploitation?

In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the intertwining of contradictory motifs is depicted as an inevitable result. The concept of nature in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* may not only seem ambivalent, but aporetic. This has always been a controversial issue in the reception of this book.<sup>15</sup> If it is true that to science “the essence of things” is always determined as “a substrate of domination”, and from such false “identity”, “the unity of nature” is constituted, and then a determination of the substance of nature where nature is *not* degraded to the substrate of domination cannot be seen as a scientific conclusion. From this perspective, science become identical with the rationality of domination, whereby irrationalism remains as the only alternative. However, irrationalism is certainly not the intention of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.<sup>16</sup> This is how Mensching argued, who studied in Frankfurt with Adorno, Horkheimer, and Haag (at that time an academic co-worker of Horkheimer and Adorno).

I will come back to Mensching’s interpretation later. For now, let us have a closer look at the aporia of nature and science in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Adorno and Horkheimer write, though in an ironic tone “Enlightenment is totalitarian”<sup>17</sup>. According to this argument, natural sciences got rid of their basic principles of philosophy. Principles which were once meant to introduce orders of existence and values – first as conceptual universals and later as human rights. “The universal categories’ claims to truth”, however, was dismissed as mythology, as this claim “does not conform to the standard of calculability and utility”<sup>18</sup>. From the viewpoint of radical-nominalistic enlightenment, the “authority of universal concepts” was seen

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<sup>14</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno, op. cit., p. 6.

<sup>15</sup> Christoph Türcke and Gerhard Bolte demonstrate that by reference to the notion of necessity; see Bolte, Gerhard, and Christoph Türcke: *Einführung in die Kritische Theorie*, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1994, p. 61 sq.

<sup>16</sup> This is the argument brought forward by Günther Mensching, see his “Zu den historischen Voraussetzungen der ‚Dialektik der Aufklärung““, in: *Hamburger Adorno-Symposium*, ed. by M. Löbig and G. Schweppenhäuser, Lüneburg: zu Klampen, 1984, 25-46.

<sup>17</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno, op. cit., p. 4.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

as “superstition”. Philosophy had been subordinated to the methodological paradigm of natural sciences.

In the late 1920s, Heidegger had criticized the de-essentialization of the idea of nature, which he traced back to the Christian “reduction of the  $\varphi\upsilon\sigma\iota\varsigma$ ”<sup>19</sup> to *natura*. Heidegger explains this with the *oblivion of being* in modern thinking. Horkheimer and Adorno follow a different line of argumentation. According to them, the de-essentialization of the concept of nature can be traced back to the social conditions of the scientific-technological domination of nature. In the modern era, the natural sciences free themselves from the boundaries of the metaphysical paradigm. The new social conditions create a “universal control of commodities over the totality of life”<sup>20</sup>. The logic of exchanging commodities must be deciphered as a logic of domination.

In the spirit of Horkheimer and Adorno – contra some of the wording published in their book – the following has to be emphasized: Yes, the urge of natural-scientific methods to generalize is suitable to being united with the rationality of production and administration. Nevertheless, the urge does not necessarily lead to this unity. Yes, this urge can become a part of the rationality of domination mentioned above but it does not necessarily produce it. Natural-scientific methods isolate natural causal processes thereby enabling their controlled reproduction and their representation as laws of nature. However, this does not lead *eo ipso* to the fact that the concept of nature loses its substance. Of course, science describes and explains the phenomena of nature and society, so that nature can be controlled and society can be improved. However, the foundation of the domination of nature is the knowledge of nature.

Let us refer to Bacon once more. He stood on the brink of “proto-scientific” philosophy of nature and “normal science” of the modern era (according to Thomas Kuhn). Bacon asks, How does observing nature lead to knowledge about it? How can we make nature let us discover its secrets so that we can improve our social coexistence? In the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Bacon’s definition of what nature means for us is expressed in an inadequately shortened version. Horkheimer und Adorno focus on Bacon’s postulate that it is the purpose of science “[to] establish man as the master of nature”<sup>21</sup>. Undoubtedly, Bacon’s postulate has soon led to a stricter “distinction between humanity and nature”<sup>22</sup>, which was in no way contrary to Bacon’s

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<sup>19</sup> Heidegger, Martin: *Einführung in die Metaphysik*, Tübingen: Niemeyer, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, p. 13.

<sup>20</sup> Horkheimer, Max: “The End of Reason”, in: *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science*, Vol. IX, 1941 [1942], No. 3 (pp. 366-388), p. 379.

<sup>21</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno, op. cit., p. 1.

<sup>22</sup> Krohn, Wolfgang: “Introduction”, in: Francis Bacon, *Neues Organon*, Teilbd. 1, ed. by W. Krohn, Hamburg: Meiner, 1992, p. XXXIX.

intentions. However, we cannot forget that for Bacon, as he puts it in the *Novum Organum*, science has the requirement to “bring the human faculty of judgement” “into the presence of things themselves and their connections”<sup>23</sup>. Bacon is looking for general terms and propositions to determine inductively unique phenomena. His aim is still not to simply describe the general as a definition of thinking. The general should simultaneously be a determination of something which thinking refers to. “[B]y our method, axioms are gradually elicited step by step, so that we reach the most general axioms only at the very end; and the most general axioms come out not as notional, but as well defined, and such as nature acknowledges as truly known to her, and which live in the heart of things.”<sup>24</sup> In a productive way, Bacon straddles the divide between the philosophical realism of universality and nominalism. He positions the methodology of nominalism against realism, but he is still following partly the realist intention of knowledge.

In *Eclipse of Reason*, Horkheimer investigates the changes to the philosophical key concept of “reason”. In idealist concepts from Plato to Hegel, general notions become principles of natural existence. Concepts of reason are eternal, while individual beings and phenomena of nature will perish. The wrongful conclusion from this was that singular objects would only exist due to concepts. In the modern era, nominalism<sup>25</sup> has criticized the concept of reason held by the concept-realistic position. With this in mind, Horkheimer refers to the “view of reason” that “asserted the existence of reason as a force, not only in the individual mind but also in the objective world – in relations among human beings and between social classes, in social institutions, and in nature and its manifestations”<sup>26</sup>. From the nominalist perspective, the flaw of “ontological ideologies” had become evident: The confidence “to intuit the true order of things” by “keep[ing] aloof from history”<sup>27</sup>, as Horkheimer writes in his 1942 essay “The End of Reason”. The justified criticism towards hypostasized abstract universals<sup>28</sup> had overshot the mark.<sup>29</sup> “The triumph of nominalism”<sup>30</sup> and its post-metaphysical understanding of reason is a

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<sup>23</sup> Bacon, Francis: *The New Organon*, ed. by L. Jardine and M. Silverstone, Cambridge 2003, p. 11.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>25</sup> See Mensching, Günther: *Das Allgemeine und das Besondere. Der Ursprung des modernen Denkens im Mittelalter*, Stuttgart: Metzler, 1992, p. 93 sq.

<sup>26</sup> Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*, p. 4.

<sup>27</sup> Horkheimer, *op. cit.*, p. 387.

<sup>28</sup> See Adorno, Theodor W.: *Metaphysik. Begriff und Probleme (1965)*; ed. by R. Tiedemann, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1998, p. 28.

<sup>29</sup> See Horkheimer, *op. cit.*, p. 3-57.

<sup>30</sup> Horkheimer, *The End of Reason*, p. 371.

double-edged sword. It does not only curtail the antiquated traditions of ancient metaphysics, but also its critic potential. The post-metaphysical de-essentialization of the concept of nature degrades nature to a substrate of instrumentally-rational domination. At the same time, there is no turning back to the ontological models of an “objectivistic conception” “of reason”<sup>31</sup>. This is Horkheimer’s argument against attempts to restore neo-Thomism in the 20th century.<sup>32</sup> Horkheimer builds the aporia of a reason cut in half in a negative-Hegelian way: the wrong form of the objective spirit in the unfolding of the modern era.

## 2. The revision of nominalistic and realistic theorems

IN THE SECOND GENERATION of Critical Theory, the question was asked whether it is possible to reconstruct the unfulfilled content, which was left behind in the transition to the modern era. If we follow Haag and Mensching when looking for a non-instrumental concept of nature, a dialectic of enlightenment applies only to the universals controversy of the late medieval period and not to the ancient world, as Horkheimer and Adorno suggest.

Haag and Mensching have investigated how the de-essentialization of the concept of nature has happened in detail. However, they do not mention Horkheimer’s “The End of Reason”, but to me it can be seen as a sub-text.

Up until today, this modification of the Frankfurt Paradigm has hardly been received, neither in the secondary literature about Critical Theory, nor in discourse with the (meanwhile) fourth generation of the Frankfurt School. However, this modification of a paradigm is also a remarkable alternative to the post-metaphysical resumption of Critical Theory as a communication theory through Habermas. I will elaborate this later. – In their books, Haag and Mensching did not refer to *Dialectic of Enlightenment* or *Eclipse of Reason*. This may be the reason why their approach has hardly received any attention. Anyway, I will try to provide a summary.

In the metaphysical tradition since Parmenides and Plato, only the *general* being, the One (*das Eine*), has substance, but not the *particular*, existing singular being. Participation in the general enables individuals to gain existence and identity. The general is conceptual. For the ontological realism, the following applied: “It is the hierarchically higher determinations that provide contingent singular objects with

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<sup>31</sup> Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*, p. 6 (footnote 1).

<sup>32</sup> See *ibid.*, chapter 2: “Conflicting Panaceas”.

their existence in the first place.”<sup>33</sup> When their accidental existence ends, they do no longer participate in the substance.

In the universals controversy, nominalism criticized the assumption that the conceptual order of things would also be the order of existence. The argument was *the general is only a thought construct of the subject*.<sup>34</sup> Being a mere abstraction, it does not have an objective *fundamentum in re*. Existence can only be attributed to empirical, singular objects. Due to similarities, these objects are grouped into genera and species. The mind constructs a “*pure general*”<sup>35</sup>, which per se does not exist. Conceiving it as an existing universal means to hypostatize a word without a corresponding substance.

Bacon’s postulate of investigating nature in order to search for a general that “live[s] in the heart of things” and that “nature acknowledges as truly known to her”, was already obsolete since the beginning of the 12th century from the perspective of nominalists like Abaelard and Roscelin. Nominalism turned away from the contemplation of creation and developed into a concept of productivity. It could not be the goal of science to recognize the whole of nature in its being-in-itself. It would be important to describe the features and phenomena of nature to handle and alter them in line with the purposes and needs of humankind. This was the pre-requisite of modern technology that is focused on production.

The separation of logic and ontology was an epochal spiritual emancipation.<sup>36</sup> The practical emancipation of scientific-technological productive forces must have been preceded by a theoretical emancipation. Only then, individual entities could become subjected to scientific studies. Nominalistic thinking freed itself from the theoretic model of a static order of nature, Mensching summarizes. Nature was thought of as variable, both factually and conceptually. Eventually the autonomy was anticipated, from which a practical connection to the industrialized way of production was created.

In contrast, advocates of the realism of universals insisted on the argument that universals are adequate descriptions for the *essentiae rerum*. The conceptual order of nature, evident in individuals, species, and genera, is not simply a projection of the subject. It correlates to natural subjects. Therefore, the basis of the universals controversy is the question whether it is possible, necessary or unnecessary to determine the “being as such” in an intellectual manner. Alternatively, as Horkheimer

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<sup>33</sup> Mensching, Günther: *Thomas von Aquin*, Frankfurt, New York: Campus, 1995, p. 50.

<sup>34</sup> “Universals are only general in subjective thought” (ibid., p. 51).

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 48 sq.

writes in 1942: whether or not reason is able “to recognize itself in the material world”<sup>37</sup>.

Radical Nominalism separated logic from ontology. Resemblances of objects, as well as propositions concerning their properties, were defined as projections. We cannot say for sure if there is anything at all in the range of objects that correlates to them. A generalizing definition of things is not possible. We can only observe, describe, measure and count, but we do not know if this is adequate to the subjects. However, that is inconsistent.

However, it is not only logically, but also practically inconsistent to work with terms that require a conceptually constructible entity which, at the same time, should not be “based on something real”<sup>38</sup>. The successful manipulation of nature by scientific technology indicates that singular beings are receptive to conceptual classification.

Modern science followed the path of nominalism to the end. From the scientific point of view the inconsistency mentioned above seemed insignificant. Moreover, the concept of a being-in-itself of the objects seemed dispensable.<sup>39</sup> Later readings of Bacon’s “knowledge is power”-formula carried the de-essentialization of the empirical evidence to extremes. Whereas Bacon himself had claimed, “nature is conquered only by obedience”<sup>40</sup>.

Contemporary natural sciences do not intend to conceptualize essential features of natural objects in order to dominate nature. Essential cognition of the dominated is no longer presupposed. In that regard, Popper goes along with Occam. The relationship towards nature has changed through nominalism. Contemplation has transitioned to a practical modification. The reflection about nature-dominating work has been moved to the center of philosophical attention. The idea of a static order of nature now seemed no longer plausible. The same applied to an unchanging social order, which originated from the feudal system. In this form of rule, individuals are dependent from a general which, due to the progression of enlightenment, turns out to be the work of humans, and which has a legitimacy that requires explanations; otherwise, it is to fall apart in the course of history.

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<sup>37</sup> Horkheimer, *The End of Reason*, p. 367.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Christoph Türcke has elaborated the historical foundation of nominalism in the universal controversy of high and late scholasticism as a reflection of an radical social change (Christoph Türcke: “Luthers Geniestreich: Die Rationalisierung der Magie”, in: Pohl, Friedrich-Wilhelm, and Christoph Türcke, *Heilige Hure Vernunft. Luthers nachhaltiger Zauber*, Berlin: Wagenbach 1983 [9-74], p. 22. See also Mensching, Günther: *Das Allgemeine und das Besondere*.)

<sup>40</sup> Bacon, *The New Organon*, p. 24.

The dialectic of enlightenment arises in the era of nominalism, since emancipation from the ontological conception of the order of things takes far too drastic measures. Reason ceases the demand to conceive reality as a mediation of subjectivity and objectivity. Objectivity loses its object. Thus, the particular objects are even more at the mercy of an abstract General.

The philosophical emancipation of the autonomously thinking subject is in question, if it is no longer conceived under productive tension to its counterpart, because the counterpart of the subject is no longer entitled to any substance. Hegel's conception of substance as subject is to be rewritten ironically: The subject, too, gets insubstantial.

What is true, however, is that substantiality cannot be *set or given* from the result of mere thinking. What is also true is the fact that it can be *determined* through thinking. If this is denied, the subject of disposal also becomes subordinated to domination. The subjects of instrumental reason are emancipated; they subordinate natural and socio-cultural entities to their will. However, for themselves they are merely particular and replaceable specimens, always disposable to the social general.

The realist intention of metaphysical thinking is focused on the inner, constitutive form of the empirical thing: on "the constitutive form of its becoming"<sup>41</sup>. What we are looking for is the formative principle on which the emergence of specific singular objects is grounded.<sup>42</sup> Nevertheless, according to Karl Heinz Haag, it cannot be found by means of affirmative metaphysics. It reduces nature to its conceptually identifiable elements. The substance of singular objects is what remains after subtracting its changing, accidental qualities. At the same time, it is abstracted from the materiality and the non-repeatable singularity of the singular object.<sup>43</sup> The remaining features are those general features that the singular object has in common with all others of its species (and genus).

In Hegelian terms: The universal is the "sameness" in the singular appearances of the individual. Particularity is reduced to the "universal" incorporated in the singular entity. To Haag, Identity is produced by conceptual imitation of singular entities. This imitation has to abstract from their specific qualities. It confuses the

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<sup>41</sup> Haag, Karl Heinz, *Der Fortschritt in der Philosophie*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1983, p. 9.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, S. 32.

<sup>43</sup> See Haag, Karl Heinz: »Das Unwiederholbare«, in: Haag, *Kritische Philosophie. Abhandlungen und Aufsätze*, München: text + kritik, 2012, p. 97-108. – This essay was first published 1963 as Haag's contribution to *Zeugnisse. Theodor W. Adorno zum sechzigsten Geburtstag*, ed. by M. Horkheimer, Frankfurt am Main: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, p. 125 ff.

result of this abstraction with the essence of the singular entity.<sup>44</sup> The general is hypostatized and becomes a universal. Logic subsumption is transformed into a thesis of ontological constitution.

Nominalism is aware of this flaw. It defines the substance as the result from the comparison of identical and different features of empirical singular objects. According to Haag, nominalism liberates the “singular objects from their pseudo-substance”<sup>45</sup>. However, the “extreme nominalism”<sup>46</sup> forgets something. It completely ignores that the things themselves must have something inherent that allows for comparisons. Something from which can be abstracted to enable a summary of special features under general concepts.<sup>47</sup> After all, the answer to the question of the constituting inner form – which is the form that enables the development of particular singular objects – given by extreme nominalism, reveals the flaw of realism.

Following Thomas Aquinas, Haag finds anticipations on how to overcome the contradiction by reconciling the general with the particular.<sup>48</sup> According to Thomas, “the universal really exists only in the singular entity and only occasionally, not in its self-consistent general form.”<sup>49</sup> Here, the Aristotelian concept of form as the determining factor of individuals is taken up again. “[T]he general and the particular [merge] into the specific substance of *res*”<sup>50</sup>. Haag concludes in the spirit of the Hegelian dialectic: There can be “neither pure universals nor pure singularities”; furthermore, it is “the whole general, by setting itself *in re*, which is singular at the same time, and reversely, the whole singular that is general at the same time”<sup>51</sup>.

Kant considered this. Unlike David Hume, Kant does not reject the supposition that there is an “in-itself” of appearing natural entities. However, Kant deliberately refrains from any attempt to specifically defining their “in-itself”, as it would be reduced to conceptual identity. According to Haag, Kant’s “thing in itself” is a placeholder for the individual form of singular objects. From an

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., S. 37.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., S. 44.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., S. 43. – “The singularity, which is opposed to the old forms and essences, remains as abstract as these were.” (Haag, Karl Heinz, *Kritik der neueren Ontologie*, in: Haag, *Kritische Philosophie. Abhandlungen und Aufsätze*, München: text + kritik, 2012 [7-94], p. 14.)

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 12 sq.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

ontological point of view, the singular object is an item of singularity, but from a logical standpoint, it can only be general.

The quintessence of these considerations is a *Dialectic of Nominalism*. Nominalism has paved the way for the recognition of the individually-particular. However, it denies that the particular is conveyed through the general. Thus, it surrenders the particular to the domination of the general. Nature in itself is imagined as undetermined. It becomes the object of projection for scientific-technological operations, a substrate of the domination of nature. Only the relations of empirical singular objects can still be determined. Nevertheless, they do not hold onto the quality of things anymore. The “constitutive form of material objects”<sup>52</sup> cannot be a reasonable subject of scientific research. Thus, Horkheimer concluded in 1942: “Reason, in destroying conceptual fetishes, ultimately destroyed itself.”<sup>53</sup>

Haag did not express this so pointedly, but his arguments are similar. The emancipation of nominalism from the contemplative ontology leads to an aporia. If the de-essentialised nature is only a “chaotic plurality of unsubstantial singularities”<sup>54</sup>, the features of physical description become features of nothing. In natural sciences, it is assumed that nature is composed of “unsubstantial singularities”. On the other hand, nature in itself is supposed to be structured according to laws. This, however, violates the principle of avoiding contradictions. Therefore, one must admit that the assumption of an “intelligible being-in-itself of the appearing nature”<sup>55</sup> is at least logically mandatory. Even if this can no longer be supported through the recourse to affirmative metaphysics.

In this sense, Haag finds first signs of the concept of negative metaphysics in Kant. For Hume, there are only “matters of fact” which are consciously connected through “relations of ideas”. Causality provides a contingent conformity of facts and ideas as a rule of the thought process. Haag calls it “Hume’s extreme nominalism”<sup>56</sup>. In contrast, Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* attests: The “only source, through which the true dignity of the rules of nature can be [...] seen” is “the ‘inner, consistent and adequate principle’ of said nature, in which these rules really apply”<sup>57</sup>.

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<sup>52</sup> Haag, *Der Fortschritt in der Philosophie*, p. 12.

<sup>53</sup> Horkheimer, *The End of Reason*, p. 367.

<sup>54</sup> Haag, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

<sup>55</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

Haag refers to Kant's ideas as follows: "It should be possible to say about any ,effect': it is necessarily 'connected to its cause' by the rules of causality 'of the object'"<sup>58</sup>. "But the *intelligible reasons* for effects following certain rules under certain circumstances were not known to both, neither Kant nor Hume."<sup>59</sup> However, Kant does not let the intelligible reasons disperse into nothing. This is exactly the point for Haag. Kant expects that there are reasons. Negative metaphysics means that one assumes that nature in itself exists, but one is also aware of the fact that it cannot be determined affirmatively. "Nature in itself" is the logically mandatory basis for knowledge about nature and its practical modification by applying the laws of nature. In the end, Kant did not leave "negative metaphysics" in the "refutation of extreme nominalism" by Hume. He wanted to derive from the transcendental deduction of the conceptions of the understanding "that nature is a system"<sup>60</sup>. By this, Kant falls back behind his own negative-metaphysical determination of nature.

If knowledge of nature only means *physical* knowledge, the question about the reason of the natural being appears irrational. By using this way of expression, I use the concepts of *physis* and *natura* contrary to Heidegger, but I come to the same conclusion: By quantification and formalization, nature is shaped, but not revealed. According to Haag, empirical theory of science is the reverse of idealism's philosophy of identity. This failed to recognize the being of the individual too, as it subsumed the individual under its abstract concept.

Haag does speak neither of a "Dialectic of Enlightenment", nor of a "Critique of Instrumental Reason". He puts it this way: "Nominalism's criticism of realism removed the forms of objective order from the things and attributed them to the subject, without reflecting about the moment that must live in the things themselves in order to enable abstraction from each singular thing."<sup>61</sup>

In the reconstruction of the dialectic of nominalism, I see great potential to bring back a debate within the Critical Theory, which seemed to be forgotten. It is still a very demanding endeavor to speak of a dialectic of nominalism, which was articulated during the Modern Era and which is still present, instead of a universally historic dialectic of enlightenment. However, following this path, Horkheimer's criticism of science in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* can be moved onto a more solid foundation from philosophy-historical standpoint.

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<sup>58</sup> Idem.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p. 76.

<sup>60</sup> Idem.

<sup>61</sup> Haag, *Kritik der neueren Ontologie*, p. 18.

### 3. Critical Theory and post metaphysical thinking

ACCORDING TO THE LINGUISTIC TURN, Jürgen Habermas said that there is no return to the paradigm of metaphysics. Contemporaries that not wish to fall behind the state of affairs would be only with the possibility of *post metaphysical* thinking. To Habermas, the transition from idealistic and mental ontological paradigm to the linguistic paradigm in contemporary philosophy is a legitimate consequence of sciences' general transition to the paradigm of method and procedure. The dilemma of objectivist and subjectivist conceptions of reason must be overcome by "procedural rationality"<sup>62</sup>. This means to philosophize in terms of linguistic pragmatics within the framework of a sociological theory of action. According to Habermas, this provides more complex concepts of the world than those provided by philosophy of consciousness.<sup>63</sup> Thinkers who continue to stand up for metaphysics or solidarize themselves with it as a counter-project to linguistic philosophizing would, as it were, cling vainly to allegedly vested rights and are stuck with the choice between reactionary thinking or irrationalism.

That final stroke against metaphysics requires a revision. For Habermas, metaphysics is characterized by three characteristics: by the postulate of identity (or by identity constraint), by the idealism of the doctrine of ideas, and by elitism going out from a "strong concept of theory"<sup>64</sup>. I have no objections against Habermas' rejection of elitism. Habermas's criticism of the doctrine of ideas is in line with early Horkheimer, to whom the effort to "discover a sense of the world independent of human beings" was the aporia of "metaphysical consciousness"<sup>65</sup>. In the footsteps of Adorno and Haag, whose book of 1983 he quotes several times, Habermas aptly describes the connection between idealism and identity-thinking. However, he skips the immanently critical potential of metaphysics, because he is not willing to conceive of metaphysics otherwise as affirmative.

The critical potential of metaphysics is not associated with metaphysics' affirmative character in a dualistic or dichotomous way, but it is a moment of the dialectical movement of concepts. Kant elaborated the model of negative metaphysics, as Haag showed, and Adorno spelled it out. Nevertheless, to Habermas, Adorno's approach is merely a retreat. In his scenario, Adorno retires half-heartedly to rem-

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<sup>62</sup> Habermas, Jürgen: *Nachmetaphysisches Denken. Philosophische Aufsätze*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1988, p. 42.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28 f.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.

<sup>65</sup> Horkheimer, Max: "Der neueste Angriff auf die Metaphysik", in: *Gesammelte Schriften*, Bd. 4, ed. by A. Schmidt, Frankfurt am Main: Fischer (108-161), p. 108.

nant metaphysics because he has misunderstood or denied the signs of the time, namely the strain of scientification. Habermas suggests that Adorno's position of the *Negative Dialectic* was a "turn into the irrational"<sup>66</sup>. He puts him in line with Heidegger, Jaspers and Derrida (interestingly, also with Wittgenstein). Their "antiscientism"<sup>67</sup> would make it "impossible to determinate" what philosophy should positively be after the overcoming of metaphysics.<sup>68</sup> Nowadays, Habermas argues, "cognitions can only be demarcated by procedural rationality – by means of procedures, ultimately those of argumentation"<sup>69</sup>. Reading Adorno's *Negative Dialectics* as a program of denial of rational argumentation shows, in my view, a fixation on a shortened concept of argumentation. It indicates a misunderstanding of the immanent critique of metaphysics (both in the sense of *genitivus objectivus* and of *genitivus subjectivus*). I will try to point out from the view of Critical Theory what the potential of metaphysics is.

Affirmative metaphysics orientates thought towards the absolute. From Plato to Husserl, transcendence is placed opposite to the given. Thus, the validity claims of the given are limited. They can no longer be regarded as fundamental if non-material ideas can be defined as the substantial or essential base of the materially existing here and now. In view of this, phenomena must be subjected to epistemological and ethical criticism. The affirmative concept of metaphysics founded by Plato is therefore also critical. The assertion that volatile, ever-changing phenomena should be based on something stable, material, rests upon the certainty of an objectively conceived reason being the criterion of criticism. Criticism is given when entities remain behind what is essentially inherent in them – either as an immanent reference to an ideal transcendence (in Plato) or as a reference to the inherent *entelechy* (Aristotle).

That an entity may not live up to the content that its idea realizes in its genuine sphere of being – this is Plato's insertion point. The idea of justice, for example, remains an ideal that can be described only in the utopia of a community arranged justly. Historically existing communities fall behind this. Plato argues within the framework of his notions of rational social domination, as long as philosophers are not good in politics and politicians are unable to think philosophically, that is, if they do not have a critical concept of totality available and, under political pressure, so they are not able to see the general principle underlying a

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<sup>66</sup> Habermas, op. cit., p. 45.

<sup>67</sup> Idem.

<sup>68</sup> Idem.

<sup>69</sup> Idem.

particular case. For Plato's theory of ideas accounts what Marcuse summarizes on the memory of substance or essence: It contains "the critical consciousness of 'bad' facticity, of unrealized potentialities. The essence as potentiality becomes a force within existence"<sup>70</sup>. The metaphysical concept of *anamnesis* and its "idea of reality as opposed to appearance" encapsulate "the positive elements of a critique of reality and of the process of realization of the essential potentialities of man and things."<sup>71</sup>

In modern philosophy, the objective concept of reason is subjectivized. Now truth can only be founded by the "the critical autonomy of rational subjectivity"<sup>72</sup>, i.e. the Cartesian cogito and the Kantian "'I think' that must be able to accompany all my ideas". According to Marcuse, the ambivalence of the emancipation of the bourgeois individual into the metaphysical reflection writes to Descartes. "If the individual is to be salvaged and human freedom to be preserved, then the 'essence' of man must be located in thought. Here is where his authentic potentialities and the ontological certainty of his existence must be found"<sup>73</sup>. The social and historical moments of the particularity of man as an autonomous citizen, detached from the heteronomy of a metaphysically secured order of being, allows us to reevaluate the universal concept of humanity not as the subject of social practice, but as an idealist hypostatized subject of thought.

However, affirmative metaphysics tends in not only the modern age, but also *eo ipso* to subsume the particular to the general. As I tried to recapitulate above, from Parmenides to Hegel the individual entity was considered at least invalid if not irrelevant. Existing is only the universal being, while single entities are ephemeral. The possibility of their existence and identity is owed to their participation in being as a universal category substantial in or on them. In his Frankfurt lecture on metaphysics from 1965, Adorno has argued (akin to Karl Heinz Haag) that Aristotle criticized the Plato's hypostatization of the idea but in his own concept of pure form repeated Plato's degradation of the sensuous material and reinstalled the principle of conceptual primacy. "Only what is conceived purely in terms [...] should be as unchanging as the idea. What Aristotle misunderstood [...] is the abstraction of concepts; that is, that concepts in order to be possible at all refer to something sensuous from which is then subtracted, that is to say that the concept is mediated by the sensuous itself, which Aristotle [...] does not penetrate; the reflection on the

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<sup>70</sup> Marcuse, Herbert: "Concept of Essence", in: Marcuse, *Negations: Essay in Critical Theory*, transl. by Jeremy Shapiro, London: Mayfly Books, 2009 (31-64), p. 47.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p. 39.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., p. 31.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., p. 36.

act of the subject through which something like idea or concept emerges, remains undone. [...] this immanence of the concept in the matter is ontological to [Aristotle], that is, the concept is in itself in the matter, without consideration for the abstracting subject.”<sup>74</sup>

Nevertheless, a criticism of affirmative metaphysics must consider its truth-moment. Thus, Nietzsche already argued in his early philosophy, which was committed to the Enlightenment (and often referred to as positivism). It is necessary to recognize, he wrote in 1876, “that every positive metaphysics is error”, but that “its historical justification”<sup>75</sup> should be acknowledged. However, I do not see this, as Nietzsche did, in a useful self-deception. The truth moment of metaphysics is not the fine-tuning of human beings by the phantasm of a supernatural “second real world”<sup>76</sup>. It is not in the safeguarding of social domination by means of spiritual escapism by the mastered and the masters. Nor does it consist in the ultimate foundation of principles of the totality of all beings or in certainties about the last things and assertions about “a sense of the world independent from human beings” (to use Horkheimer’s words once more). The truth moment of metaphysics is that it creates a condition of the possibility of criticism.

The heuristic (and “ironic”<sup>77</sup>) concept of metaphysics is used in Marx’s critique of political economy. It has emerged from a nominalistic criticism of Hegel. But Marx’ analysis of the capitalist relations of production cannot dispense with the assumption that not only singularities exist, but also a general. Although the analysis follows the nominalistic destruction of metaphysical concepts of essence, in its criticism of *real abstractions* it is linked to the universal-realistic paradigm.

Marx and Engels put forth a “materialist” objection to “idealist” philosophy in the *German Ideology*: The “sum of productive forces, capital funds and social forms of intercourse, which every individual and generation finds in existence as something given, is the real basis of what the philosophers have conceived as ‘substance’ and ‘essence of man’, and what they have apotheosed and attacked”<sup>78</sup>. This criticism takes metaphysics seriously, or, to say it with Alfred Schmidt, “speculation is not simply dismissed as nonsense, but brought to its true content.”<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Adorno, *Metaphysik*, p. 87 f.

<sup>75</sup> Nietzsche, Friedrich: *Menschliches, Allzumenschliches. Ein Buch für freie Geister. Erster Band*, in: *Sämtliche Werke. Kritische Studienausgabe*, ed. by G. Colli and M. Montinari, vol. 2, München: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag 1980, p. 42.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.* p. 27.

<sup>77</sup> See Marcuse, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

<sup>78</sup> Marx, Karl, and Friedrich Engels: *The German Ideology*, in: Marx and Engels, *Werke*, vol. 3, Berlin 1981, p. 38.

<sup>79</sup> Alfred Schmidt: *Geschichte und Struktur*, München: Hanser, 1971, p. 23.

In *Das Kapital*, Marx speaks of “metaphysical subtlety” and the “theological mocking”<sup>80</sup> of the commodity. These metaphors for their fetish character are not only metaphors: The concept of real abstraction could not even be conceived without the metaphysical concept of a being, which could be reconstructed as a sociostructurally substance. As an object of use, Marx argues, a table is “an ordinarily sensuous thing. But as soon as he appears as a commodity, he is transformed into a sensuous-minded thing”<sup>81</sup>. The origin of the metaphysical and in this respect “enigmatic character of the product of labor, as soon as it assumes the form of a commodity” is, as is well known, the “form itself”<sup>82</sup>.

Obviously, the concept of form has Aristotelian and Thomistic roots. However, this does not disqualify it as a regression into metaphysics. Not only because Marx translates it from metaphysical transcendence into the immanence of sociohistorical practice. It is rather the other way around, that is, social conditions can only be criticized if they are not allowed to be regarded as plain givenness. The criticism of the domination and economic coercive power that creates these conditions must insist on the fact that it is not just a matter of interpretive struggles in the realm of ultimately interchangeable, nominalistic signs. In this way, however, it does not hypostasize these relations into an ontological universality.

Marx was able to reconstruct the structure of capitalist commodity production since he assumed that “existing abstraction”, a social universal, is the basis of the particular, concrete acts of exchange. Namely the *value* deriving from the individual quanta of working hours being adopted in the commodities that can be calculated against one another according to the principle of equivalence. “A social relation of production appears as something existing apart from individual human beings, and the distinctive relations into which they enter in the course of production in society appear as the specific properties of a thing”, says Marx: “it is this perverted appearance, this prosaically real, and by no means imaginary, mystification that is characteristic of all social forms of labour positing exchange-value.”<sup>83</sup>

How does Marx’s critical theory of conceptual realism look in detail?

According to Günther Mensching, the grounding philosophical assumptions of Marx are based on an immanent criticism of metaphysics. Without a dialectical critique of metaphysical universalism, an understanding of social phenomena is just as limited as its criticism. Mensching has minutely traced this step in Marx; in

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<sup>80</sup> Marx, Karl: *Das Kapital. Kritik der politischen Ökonomie*, Bd. 1, Frankfurt am Main 1968, p.85.

<sup>81</sup> Idem.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., p. 86.

<sup>83</sup> Marx, Karl: *Zur Kritik der politischen Ökonomie*, in: Marx and Engels, Werke, vol. 13, Berlin 1981, p. 34 f.

an essay from the year 1983, which Habermas did not take notice of, in contrast to Haag's book on negative metaphysics from the same year. Central terms, such as exchange value, money, and labor, were deconstructed in Marx' early period in the manner of nominalistic enlightenment, but in the later capital analysis they were conceived as moments of the existing reality of an abstraction. The socio-mediated incorporation of a general into the particular connects the historical-materialistic value theory with the epistemological achievements of the Aristotelian philosophy of the Middle Ages. In so far as the single object is real only as a particular commodity, which is only produced for the sake of the general exchange-value. Without some residual Aristotelism, a critique of political economy is thus not possible.

"The significance of these moments is revealed only in the context of a general social theory", says Mensching. "But their object, though the epitome of reality, is nothing perceptive, physical-immediate. Therefore, Marx's materialism is immanently forced to assume the reality of the abstract. This is the transition from a nominalist theory to conceptual realism."<sup>84</sup>

Labor producing exchange value is on the one hand an analytical concept. It is indispensable for Marx' representation of the capitalist mode of production. On the other hand, exchange-value-producing labor is at the same time real; it is the result of the historical unfolding of the capitalist mode of production. The exchange-value "inheres invisible to the thing and determines it to the commodity, thereby subjecting it to the laws of the second nature as well as it has always obeyed, by its physical properties, to the laws of the first. Its essence is divided realiter into a forma physica and a forma metaphysica."<sup>85</sup>

This chain of thought follows Horkheimer's criticism of logical empiricism, which, in its fixation on the vagueness of observable facts – by Otto Neurath's "protocol sentences" – denies the conceptual form of the social mediation of the given in its substantial reality. Thus, for example, "the statement that [...] the commodity is the unit of utility value and exchange value"<sup>86</sup> appears incompatible with science because it cannot be founded either by statistics or by consensus in the scientific community. Taking also into account the concept of labor, it becomes clear that the elements of speculative metaphysics are the conceptual foundation of critical theory: "Labor producing exchange value is abstract labor. This key category is an analytical term for the representation of the capitalist mode of production and

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<sup>84</sup> Mensching, Günther: "Nominalistische und realistische Momente des Marxschen Arbeitsbegriffs", in: *Krise und Kritik. Zur Aktualität der Marxschen Theorie*, ed. by G. Schweppenhäuser, D. zu Klampen, and R. Johannes, Lüneburg, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition 1987 (58-76), p. 69.

<sup>85</sup> Mensching, op. cit., p. 69 sq.

<sup>86</sup> Horkheimer, *Der neueste Angriff auf die Metaphysik*, p. 146.

at the same time real: the result of the historical development of this mode of production. It is only under the condition of capital that the abstraction of pure, merely quantitative labor can be obtained, for that mode of production produces this abstraction itself.”<sup>87</sup>

Marx’ negative conceptual realism is a definite negation of the realistic position in the universal controversy. From that point of view the basic question of critical theory is, how criticism of irrational universality in society can be combined with a defense of universals for that criticism? Marcuse took advantage of the elementary metaphysical distinction of essence and appearance to envisualize the telos of critical theory by quoting from the third volume of Marx’ *Das Kapital*. “That appearance does not immediately coincide with essence, that self-subsistent potentialities are not realized, that the particular stands in conflict with the general, that chance on the one hand and blind necessity on the other rule the world – these conditions represent tasks set for men’s rational practice. For the theory associated with this practice, the statement that all science would be superfluous when ‘the form of appearance and the essence of things immediately coincided’ has a new meaning.”<sup>88</sup>

Habermas’ turn to the linguistic paradigm in philosophy sacrifices the epistemological distinction of essence and appearance. If phenomena are supposed to be phenomena of nothing, the linguistic turn proves to be a nominalism, which is, so to speak, let off the leash. It gradually dismantles the conditions of the possibility of consistent thinking with object reference.

I agree with Habermas’ notion of “Kant’s ambivalent relation to metaphysics”<sup>89</sup>. However, Habermas simplifies the concept of metaphysics when he argues that metaphysics is essentially humanism,<sup>90</sup> namely one with an old-fashioned claim of totality. After Hegel, metaphysical thinking has to be replaced by philosophy of language framed by a theory of action. Within this framework, critical theory of society is redesigned as a theory of communicative action with its normative basis in understanding and consensus oriented action in contrast to strategic action. The prize for that is, as it seems to me, that Habermas de facto recalls Comte’s verdict on the metaphysical “stage” of human thought and knowledge which has been insufficiently removed from the theological stage, and that he is favoring, in the sense of Comte, the scientific “stage”. A crucial point in Habermas’ rejection of metaphysics

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<sup>87</sup> Mensching, op. cit., p.70.

<sup>88</sup> Marcuse 1936, p. 23.

<sup>89</sup> Habermas, *Nachmetaphysisches Denken*, p. 21.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

with regard to its theological implications is his insisting on the “verbalization of the sacred”. This is on the one hand an ideological and cultural-historical diagnosis and on the other hand simultaneously a normative criterion of occidental rationalization. As an argument against metaphysics it reveals a peculiarly diluted concept of language, for the sacred is per se linguistic – it is of course not only verbal, but is and has always been also verbal in an eminent way. Language is never merely a medium of enlightened deliberation with the help of signs, which are themselves without substance; language is always also metaphysics, which is, as it were, existing in reality, it can be not self-enlightened as far as its signs possess and exercise irrational power over their users. They form an enclosure of conditions of the possibility of articulation and reflection, with logical and ontological priority to the individual. This might create the appearance that actually (‘eigentlich’, in the terminology of the Heideggerians) the language is speaking and not its users.

Habermas, of course, is aware of that. He asks: “Can we know whether the process of the verbalization of the sacred, carried out in the work on myth, religion, and metaphysics over the millennium, is exhausted and concluded? Indeed, for philosophy the question of a continuation of the verbalization of the sacred, which has been carried out so far within religious doctrine, is now ‘external’. For philosophy it may only be possible to discover the still unresolved semantic potentials in religious traditions, and to translate them by way of their own conceptual means into a general language which is accessible not only to certain religious communities, and thus to supply them to the discursive play of public reasoning.”<sup>91</sup> However, isn’t this precisely what philosophy has been doing since Socrates’ times? I cannot see why it serves as justification for the abstract negation of the critical motif of metaphysics including its continuation by Marx, Horkheimer, Marcuse, and Adorno.

Marx had argued that science is the prerequisite for criticism, for “all science would be superfluous if the appearance and the essence of things were immediately coincidental”<sup>92</sup>. On a scientific basis, his critical theory of society derives from the distinction between essence and phenomenon, which descends from the category of metaphysics. Marcuse recognized this as “the critical motif in the theory of essence”<sup>93</sup>. To put it once more in Mensching’s words: “The concept of essence, which constitutes modern society as a totality, and yet cannot be made an appearing single fact, is the capital, the existing abstraction which reproduces itself through the in-

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<sup>91</sup> Habermas, Jürgen: *Nachmetaphysisches Denken II. Aufsätze und Repliken*, Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2012, p. 17.

<sup>92</sup> Marx, *Das Kapital*, vol. 3, Frankfurt am Main: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1968, p. 825.

<sup>93</sup> Marcuse, *Concept of Essence*, p. 50.

dividual moments of the process of modern history.”<sup>94</sup> Horkheimer’s and Adorno’s pin their criticism of science as far as science becomes a legitimately practice of natural domination by offering service to the rationality of capital and domination. Thus, nominalistic enlightenment falls behind its own level of reflection. Whereas Adorno insists that the “concept of a capitalist society is not a *flatus vocis*”<sup>95</sup>, Habermas follows the abstract negation of metaphysics. Nominalistic language-thinking is supposed to bring philosophy in line with scientific standards and adapt it to the proceedings and negotiations of bourgeois exchange and trade-processes.

#### 4. Postscript

FINALLY, I WOULD LIKE TO RESPOND to an objection that could possibly arise from a contemporary nominalistic point of view. Could an anti-constructivist concept of nature open the gates for essentialist distinctions between human beings? Could this concept provide racists with arguments that refer to an alleged substrate of nature? I do not have to emphasize that antisemitism was the actual historic background, against which the authors of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* expressed their criticism of power and their ideas to the concept of nature. So in the light of this, should not we better take distance from an anti-constructivist concept of nature? I would say No, especially not due to this circumstance. If a concept of nature in itself is logically mandatory, it is not for the subjects to decide about the order of things. Depleting the concept of nature can become a gateway for a subjectivism of definitions. To express it in an exaggerated way: Nobody, in the end, will be able to bring forth a rational objection if humans are deported in cattle trucks, exploited like animals and then killed. A moral impulse, however, will rise. Only reason, with its rational arguments, can raise an objection. A reason that understands itself as “faculty of calling things by their name”, as Horkheimer wrote in 1942.<sup>96</sup> By a name, *nota bene*, that is definitely more than just a nominalistic *flatus vocis*, a mere emission of sound. A “name” which is closer to what the Philosophy of Realism in Plato’s tradition conceived as “term”.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Mensching, Günther: “Zur metaphysischen Konstellation von Zeit und Fortschritt in Benjamins geschichtsphilosophischen Thesen”, in: *Materialien zu Benjamins Thesen ‘Über den Begriff der Geschichte’*, ed. by P. Bulthaup, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1975, pp 58-76, p. 175.

<sup>95</sup> Adorno, Theodor W., *Negative Dialectics*, translated by E. B. Ashton, London and New York: Routledge, p. 50 (footnote).

<sup>96</sup> Horkheimer, *The End of Reason*, p. 387.

<sup>97</sup> This distinguishes critical theory from analytical philosophy according to which concepts are “nothing else” than the use of words (Ernst Tugendhat: *Philosophische Aufsätze*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1992, p. 106).

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