

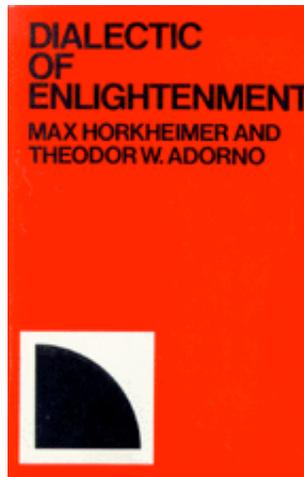


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# Other Voices

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## Odysseus and the Siren Call of Reason: The Frankfurt School Critique of Enlightenment

The revised text of a lecture delivered at the [Writers House](#), University of Pennsylvania, October 30th, 1996 as part of the series [Theorizing in Particular: Approaches to Cultural Interpretation](#)

[Curtis Bowman](#)

[OV Editor's Note: Located at the above address is another lecture by Dr. Bowman. The lecture, "Kant and the Project of Enlightenment," is dedicated to Kant and Rousseau and may also be of interest to our readers.]

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My intention tonight is to talk about the Frankfurt School — that loose collection of 20th century German thinkers whose philosophical interests center around an

interpretation and synthesis of the views of Kant, Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud. And I especially wish to address the topic of enlightenment, since I take this to be the fundamental concern of the Frankfurt School. (I'll go on to say why I speak of *enlightenment*, rather than *the Enlightenment*. So don't be distressed — at least not yet — by this odd-sounding locution.) To this end I shall focus my attention on a work by Max Horkheimer (1895-1973) and Theodor Adorno (1903-1969) entitled *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (originally written in 1944; first published in 1947).

*Dialectic of Enlightenment* is one of the most famous productions of the Frankfurt School, but one can hardly say that its fame is a result of the ease with which its many admirers have read it. Its terminology is obscure, despite the fact that much of it is drawn from German thinkers whom we might otherwise find comprehensible; its arguments are convoluted to the point of impenetrability; its intent is more than a little mysterious, since Horkheimer and Adorno never really bother to tell us what they hope to achieve by means of their book; and, finally, its structure is simply peculiar. The book consists of six parts: (1) an introductory chapter on the concept of enlightenment; (2) & (3) two lengthy digressions on literary works, the first on Homer's *Odyssey* and the second on the Marquis de Sade's *Juliette*; (4) an analysis of what Horkheimer and Adorno famously label the "culture industry," i.e., the various mass media of the 20th century, and its effect on contemporary Western society; (5) a chapter on anti-Semitism; and (6) various notes and drafts about topics related to the ones just mentioned. Whether these parts are interrelated, that is, whether they are somehow unified and build on one another, or whether they are simply individual essays that form no coherent whole — well, unfortunately, Horkheimer and Adorno say very little about these issues. This much is obvious, however: the topic of enlightenment is at the heart of the book. Here we can find the unifying theme of the work, even if we find ourselves unable to bring each part of the work into a coherent and comprehensible whole.

What I want to do tonight is to concentrate on the first two parts of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, that is, the introductory chapter on the concept of enlightenment and the material on Homer's *Odyssey*. These seem to me to be the most integrated parts of the book. Once we get a handle on how they are to be read, the book as a whole becomes clearer, as does the overarching intent of the Frankfurt School. I will argue that the point of the book is to explore what is sometimes called "the project of enlightenment" as well as to diagnose its failure, as the members of the Frankfurt School see it, to achieve its goal of human liberation. Yet the unity of the first two parts of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is not obvious, despite my maintaining that they make up the most unified sections of the book. The mystery to be unraveled as we progress is as follows: why does a book about a modern concept like enlightenment (which means that the book is also to some extent about the epoch known as the age of Enlightenment) discuss the work of a blind Greek poet from the 8th century B.C.? In short: how can Homer's *Odyssey* shed light on the project of enlightenment?

Before beginning to answer these questions, we must digress a bit and examine the philosophical background of the Frankfurt School. A term like "enlightenment" carries with it a great deal of baggage which must be unpacked if we are to orient ourselves properly. Most of the members of the Frankfurt School were practitioners of a form of Marxism that came to be known as Western Marxism. The geographical qualification was intended to separate their views from those of Marxists on the other side of the now dismantled Iron Curtain. Western Marxism, to summarize it in a single slogan, is Marxism without the proletariat. While this might sound like an obvious contradiction, there is something plausible about the phrase. This form of Marxism is more of a moral and political philosophy, understood in a fairly broad sense to include topics like aesthetics and art history, than a political program specifying what is to be done to change the world so as to usher in the hoped-for paradise of a classless society. The Frankfurt School is usually more interested in understanding the world, using various analytical techniques like Marxism, than in changing the world, although, of course, they would like to change it for the better. The fundamental value of the Frankfurt School, i.e., that which they wish to promote by means of their theorizing (to whatever extent it is possible to promote a change in the real world by means of intellectual efforts), is freedom — but freedom understood in a specific way, namely, freedom as autonomy.

It is here that the philosophical background of the Frankfurt School becomes relevant to our discussion. To understand what the Frankfurt School means by "freedom as autonomy" we must turn to the writings of Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). Kant was, we may say, the philosopher of autonomy of the 18th century. (Which is not to say that he was the first to be concerned with this topic. Rousseau exercised a great deal of influence on Kant and helped to turn Kant's attention to this issue.) Kant's ideas transformed our thinking about what it is to be a human being and inaugurated a new era in Western philosophy, influencing everyone who came after him. Broadly speaking, Kant advocates the idea that we should become autonomous individuals who freely investigate the world in and around us without appeal to external authorities (whether they be human or divine) and who live freely by subjecting ourselves to laws of our own creation, and that we are beings whose immeasurable value and dignity lie in our innate capacity for freedom of thought and action.

Autonomy, however, is not something that we possess from birth. Autonomy is thus for Kant an achievement, but it presupposes that we are already free. That is, we can be free but not autonomous. Kant maintains that we are always free in the sense that our actions are not causally determined by the world around us: that is, we have free will. But to be autonomous is more than to possess free will: it is to be able to choose and set ends for ourselves and to develop the appropriate means to those ends. Thus it is possible to be free yet not autonomous, a condition which Kant calls heteronomy. To illustrate this point Kant says that children are free in that they possess a free will that is not necessitated by the events in nature, yet they are not autonomous because they must rely on others, usually their parents, for direction and assistance. Children are, in a word, immature. They

remain undeveloped and thus have not yet achieved autonomy, i.e., maturity.

Kant generalizes this condition of childish dependence to humanity as a whole. To be in this state is to be unenlightened. This leads Kant — in a famous essay from 1784 entitled "An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?" — to define enlightenment as follows:

Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-imposed immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one's understanding without guidance from another. This immaturity is self-imposed when its cause lies not in lack of understanding, but in lack of resolve and courage to use it without further guidance from another. *Sapere Aude!* [Dare to know!] "Have courage to use your own understanding!" — that is the motto of enlightenment. (Translation from p. 41 of *Perpetual Peace and Other Essays*, trans. and ed. by Ted Humphrey. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1983.)

Note that Kant calls this condition "self-imposed," which implies that we are responsible for it. We could always end our immaturity, our dependence on others, if we would only summon up the will to do so. So, given that we are free, we are responsible, i.e., morally responsible, for our immaturity. If we are not autonomous, if we are merely heteronomous, then it is our fault, not someone else's. No one else is to blame.

Kant's definition of enlightenment helps us to formulate the notion of the project of enlightenment more clearly. Our task is to become enlightened individuals who are truly autonomous, who choose and set ends for themselves and develop the appropriate means to those ends. Furthermore, we are to do this in a way which respects the freedom of others, and so we are to act in ways that others can rationally consent to, thereby maximizing the amount of freedom in the world. As Kant sometimes puts it, we are always to treat others as ends and never merely as means. If fully carried out, this project would transform the world so as to make it unrecognizable to those of us living in the unenlightened era of today. A world of free individuals who respect and promote not only their own freedom but that of others as well would be a radically different world. This is the goal of the project of enlightenment. Kant recognizes that it is an ideal that we should approach without necessarily being able to attain it in full. Yet it is the highest moral demand made on us, and thus it is to guide all of our actions.

This concern for autonomy is inherited by Marx but is transformed by him into an analysis and critique of social structures which impede our efforts to become autonomous. As we know, of course, the institution that most occupies his attention is capitalism. This is no place to go into his critique of capitalism except to say why he criticizes it in the first place. Marx is sometimes represented, incorrectly I believe, as arguing that capitalism, which he characterizes as a mode of production in which the means of production are privately owned and in which there are two main social classes, i.e., capitalists and proletarians, is open to criticism because it unfairly distributes the goods which it produces. Thus communism, on this interpretation, is advocated because it will more fairly distribute these goods. Marx is certainly concerned about the distribution of goods in capitalist economies, but this is not really the source of his critique. If it

were, then he would simply call for reforming capitalism rather than overthrowing it. Marx would then really be a social democrat, not a communist.

Instead, his contention is that capitalism and other modes of production based on private property place us in a condition known as alienation, one in which the results of our labors face us as hostile powers and control us and impose their ends on us rather than serve us as means to our ends. Alienation is always contrasted with autonomy, for the two are understood as being mutually exclusive. And the Marxist concept of alienation should be understood as Kant's notion of immaturity writ large at the social level.

A simple example should clarify this abstract discussion. For Kant and Marx, organized religion — Christianity, for example — is the paradigmatic form of alienation. Both considered Christianity the product of the human imagination, but not a benign one. For them, Christianity often functioned as a means of manipulating people in an irrational fashion, sometimes for the benefit of others, sometimes simply to no benefit at all. The Christian doctrine of original sin, for example, tells us that we are all born sinners and thus may be justly damned to spend eternity in hell unless God bestows His unmerited grace on us. Such a doctrine, they thought, has been the source of incalculable misery. Why many millions of people ever came to believe such a proposition puzzles them. Furthermore, in some real sense this misery is self-inflicted, making it all the more puzzling. Since neither Kant nor Marx was a Christian, both believed that Christianity is merely our own creation, but a creation that has turned against its creator so as to oppress him. It is a form of alienation, the condition in which free beings find themselves when they fail to recognize one of their creations as one of their creations and thus fail to see that they can change the situation in which they find themselves. This failure to recognize the instrument of our oppression as our own creation is called false consciousness. The first step in overcoming alienation is to recognize that the source of alienation — in our simple example, Christianity — is our creation. That is, we are to overcome our false consciousness. Once we see it as our creation, we can give it up for some other belief, some other circumstance, some other arrangement.

Marx's critique of capitalism is designed to show us, among other things, that capitalism is not something that we must simply endure because it is somehow perpetual or unavoidable. Instead, he wants to suggest that it can be replaced by something else — communism, of course — which will better serve us in the pursuit of our ends. Whether or not this claim is true is a question that I don't intend to discuss tonight. Marx was certainly wrong in thinking that communism would inevitably supplant capitalism in accordance with laws of historical inevitability. Whether or not we should, or even can, replace it with communism is an open question. So let's leave it for some other discussion. (The members of the Frankfurt School do much the same themselves. They rarely discuss whether or not capitalism will give way to something else.) What I want to do now is to turn my attention to *Dialectic of Enlightenment* so that we can see how the Marxist categories of autonomy and alienation (which are ultimately Kantian,

according to my interpretation) are used in that work. Doing so will give us greater insight into that work and will help to elucidate the connection between the opening chapter on the concept of enlightenment and the interpretation of Homer's *Odyssey*.

One thing to keep in mind when reading *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is the time period in which it was written, namely, during the height of WW II. Horkheimer and Adorno had fled Nazi Germany and settled first in New York and then in California. Since both were not only Marxists but also of Jewish descent, it behooved them to emigrate. *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is thus suffused with an atmosphere of gloom and pessimism which reflects the circumstances of its composition. This fact, however, should not tempt us to regard the book as nothing but a mere reflection of its time. Instead, we should see the *Zeitgeist* as motivating its contents, leaving unanswered the question as to their continuing validity.

The book's opening observation expresses the idea that something has gone horribly wrong with the project of enlightenment. Horkheimer and Adorno note that enlightenment "has always aimed at liberating men from fear and establishing their sovereignty," but, they continue, surveying the state of the world in 1944, that "the fully enlightened earth radiates disaster triumphant" (3). Horkheimer and Adorno had only to look around to see that this was the case. How did this happen? How did we allow ourselves, despite our long dedication to the proposition that freedom is the fundamental value, to degenerate into a state of barbarity, totalitarianism, and warfare? What went wrong?

*Dialectic of Enlightenment* sets out to answer these questions, though not in ways that we would expect. There is no historical analysis of, say, Hitler's or Stalin's rise to power. Instead, we are treated to a discussion of two conceptions of reason and the ways in which they have influenced our attitudes towards ourselves and our circumstances. This method of analysis is extremely abstract, but I think that we can make sense of it. What they have in mind is something like the following.

The dominant form of reason in an alienated world, according to Horkheimer and Adorno, is what they routinely call instrumental reason. This is the capacity for selecting the appropriate means to our ends, whatever they happen to be. That is, we use reason as an instrument to guide us in attaining our ends. To this type of reason Horkheimer and Adorno contrast another, one which they claim is increasingly rare. It goes by several names, mostly frequently that of objective reason. This type of reason is not instrumental, not concerned with the means to our ends, but instead concerns itself with the ends themselves. It asks whether our ends are rational, whether they express our deepest needs and desires, whether they express our longing for freedom. Horkheimer and Adorno contend that objective reason has been undermined by the Enlightenment, although it should in fact be used to advance the cause of enlightenment. Instrumental reason simply conforms to the ends that we have acquired, telling us how to pursue them in the most effective fashion. Objective reason tells us what our ends should be, and thus it tells us how the world should be, because we are to transform the world in

accordance with our rational ends, and thus from how it is into how it should be. Rather than employing objective reason to discover what our ends should be, Horkheimer and Adorno maintain that our ends are usually imposed on us from without. (This is what Kant called heteronomy.) We acquiesce in what others tell us to think and to do, thereby giving up our independence and failing to achieve autonomy.

The first chapter of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* tells the story of the relationship between instrumental and objective reason as they concern enlightenment (and by implication, the age of Enlightenment and its aftermath). The goal of enlightenment has always been to free us from fear of nature and to give us power over it. If nature beats us down, we cannot meaningfully call ourselves free. Nature opposes us: it subjects us to disease, drought, deluge, cataclysm, and catastrophe. In other words, it is not sensitive to our needs and demands, for it is independent of and indifferent to us. We employ reason to control it, to bend it to our ends. We often succeed in these efforts, but, of course, not always. Much of nature remains beyond the sphere of our best efforts to dominate it. What are we to do in this circumstance?

It is here that the topic of myth enters the story, and it is here that we can begin to look at Horkheimer and Adorno's reading of the *Odyssey*. Myth, according to Horkheimer and Adorno, is an expression of our desire to dominate nature. The "basic principle of myth" (6) is anthropomorphism: the inanimate forces of nature are falsely interpreted as superhuman beings much like ourselves. These beings — the gods, spirits, and demons of ancient mythologies — are open to our influence, however. We can bargain with them, sacrifice to them, pray to them — all in the effort to enlist them, if only briefly, in helping us to realize our ends. Nature is seen as hostile to us (because the superhuman figures of myth are angry with us), when it actually has no regard for us whatsoever. These mythologies are clearly not forms of enlightenment; rather, they are forms of alienation. We create these mythologies and are then controlled by them. Nor do they really help us to control nature: they only give us the illusion of control. They are hostile powers of our own creation which we fail to recognize as our own creations. Seeing them as hostile, however, makes us suffer.

Enlightenment, according to Horkheimer and Adorno, has always opposed myth, and the age of Enlightenment, because of its hostility to organized religion, attempted to exchange science for superstition: "The program of the Enlightenment was the disenchantment of the world; the dissolution of myths and the substitution of knowledge for fancy" (3). Religion retreats under the pressure of science and the patient investigation of the forces of nature; imaginary control is replaced by real control. Enlightenment genuinely makes the world a better place. Horkheimer and Adorno never deny that it does. Yet they find themselves in 1944 in an allegedly enlightened world in which disaster is triumphant. How is this reversal of the initial successes of the age of Enlightenment — somehow perpetrated, they maintain, in the name of enlightenment — to be understood?

Once again, the answer is abstract. Any social system, capitalist or otherwise,

tends, they argue, to reproduce the conditions necessary for its existence. This is fairly obvious, for if a form of social organization cannot reproduce itself across time, it will die out. So any social system will tend to produce subjects who identify with the values which the system embodies. Thus there is a strong tendency towards conformity in any set of social arrangements. We can reflect on the values which we accept, and sometimes as a result we exchange them for others. But this is relatively rare. Normally, we accept the ends and goals sanctioned by society, and thus simply calculate the means required to attain these ends. (This says nothing about whether or not these values and ends are somehow the rational or proper ones. It is simply a claim about how most of us come to adopt them.) Therefore, we tend to reason instrumentally rather than objectively.

The Enlightenment successfully battled the mythological world in which it found itself, but, say Horkheimer and Adorno, it reverted to myth. A new mythological world arose: that is, a new form of alienation took the place of the old one. This follows from the pre-eminence of instrumental reason. The Enlightenment created new social arrangements, but in time they became as ossified as the old ones because of the conformist tendencies of instrumental reason. These new arrangements take on an alienated form in that, like the old ones, they are our creations but are not recognized as such, not seen as capable of being changed. Given that Horkheimer and Adorno are Marxists, these new arrangements are taken to be those of the capitalist mode of production. The enlightened world becomes a new form of myth because we are just as alienated in it as in the pre-enlightened world, though in a different way this time. (How, exactly, this sets the stage for the triumphant disaster of 1944 is never entirely clarified in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. More detailed history than that provided in the book would be required to answer this question. At this time the Frankfurt School tended to see fascism as the logical outcome of capitalism, but later they abandoned this view.)

This is one aspect of the dialectic of enlightenment (by which I mean a historical process, not the title of the book). Myth changes into enlightenment which reverts to myth. Some advances are made but certain features of the past are preserved, the chief one in this case being the alienation discussed earlier. Having come this far in our investigation, we can now return to the question which I posed at the beginning of this lecture: that is, what light does Homer's *Odyssey* shed on the project of enlightenment? Why do Horkheimer and Adorno discuss it?

Recall the story of the *Odyssey*, which, in brief, is as follows. After ten years of warfare the Greeks defeat the Trojans and return home. Odysseus and his men set sail for Ithaca, where Odysseus rules as king. They encounter various perils on the return voyage, many of them in mythological form. For example, the Cyclops Polyphemus traps and eats several of Odysseus's men. Employing the cunning for which he is renowned, Odysseus, the man of many devices, manages to blind Polyphemus and escape with most of his crew. Polyphemus prays to his father, the god Poseidon, asking that Odysseus return home alone, only after a long

delay and many troubles, to find sorrows in his home. Poseidon grants his prayer, thereby becoming Odysseus's enemy and the cause of his long journey home. After further adventures, including the passage by the Sirens and sailing between Scylla and Charybdis, adventures in which his entire crew is killed, Odysseus is shipwrecked on the island of the goddess Calypso, who keeps him as her lover for eight years. All the while his wife Penelope, who is under intense romantic siege from the suitors who have taken over her home, faithfully waits for Odysseus to return. Eventually, Calypso releases Odysseus, who sets sail for Ithaca. Six weeks later he returns in disguise, reunites with his son Telemachus, and the two of them slaughter the suitors. So, after going off to war twenty years earlier, Odysseus has finally returned home to resume his rightful role as king of Ithaca.

Horkheimer and Adorno claim that Odysseus is "a prototype of the bourgeois individual" (43). Ancient Greek kings are certainly not members of the bourgeoisie as Marx conceived of them, so how can Odysseus be a prototype for them? What does he have in common with them? What unites the two is Odysseus's cunning, his most famous trait. Like the bourgeoisie of the capitalist world, Odysseus employs instrumental reason to advance his self-interest. This enables him to survive the mythological terrors of the ancient world. He sacrifices all else that he might desire and value, even his crew, all of whom die on the way back to Ithaca. And so he escapes the mythological world of his voyage. Yet what does he return to? An enlightened world of freedom and autonomy? No, he returns to his kingdom, resuming his place as ruler of his people. His odyssey is thus a voyage in which — to express a complicated matter in a simple formula — Odysseus oppressed resumes his place as Odysseus the oppressor.

So instrumental reason can successfully combat myth, but only at the cost of re-establishing a new myth. One form of alienation is exchanged for another. This is the dialectic of enlightenment. Homer's *Odyssey* is thus an allegory of the failure of the project of enlightenment, one in which reason in the form of instrumental reason is at sea in the world of myth. Once it strikes land, by defeating the forces of myth, it takes up again the alienation to which it still conforms (for it always intended to return to it). Odysseus possesses cunning, but not insight: that which ought not to exist is not seen as illegitimate, and so it is never questioned, much less changed for the better.

Let me conclude with the following observation. Rationality is one of our chief virtues. To say that someone's thoughts or actions are irrational is one of the most damning things that we can say about that person. Furthermore, no one wants to be irrational; everyone wants to overcome irrationality, not to fall prey to it. Enlightenment recognizes this, and admonishes us to be rational, for rationality can set us free; but if we become complacent and use our reason uncritically, then we are in peril. This is the Siren call of reason. For Horkheimer and Adorno the triumphant disaster of 1944 had all the earmarks of rationality in its instrumental form; but, objectively speaking, it was thoroughly irrational. More often than not

we employ reason uncritically, i.e., instrumentally, and thus simply reproduce the irrationality around us. We are tempted by instrumental reason and usually succumb willingly, and thus we collaborate in our own domination. Odysseus heard the Sirens' song but withstood it. The Siren call of reason, however, numbed him into complacency, and simply guided him into returning to an irrational world. If we are not to be shipwrecked on the shores of irrationality, then, according to Horkheimer and Adorno, we must withstand the Siren call of reason and make the hard journey towards autonomy by thinking for ourselves.

### **Postscript - February 2005**

Because the Internet was new to me eight years ago, I did not expect that much would come of having my lecture published on-line. To my surprise, though, I received, and continue to receive, emails from readers expressing their gratitude at finding something to help them come to terms with at least a portion of Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

As I continued teaching classes about the Frankfurt School, I developed my ideas about *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in greater detail. If I were giving the lecture today, I would have to change some of what I said eight years ago. In many respects, however, this lecture still represents my thinking about *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in particular and the Frankfurt School in general. Nonetheless, a couple of new observations would not be amiss.

First, my discussion of Homer's *Odyssey* might mislead readers into thinking that Horkheimer and Adorno dismiss the poem on ideological grounds. This is not the case. Clearly, the poem is a supreme work of art. Were it not, Horkheimer and Adorno would not bother to discuss it. We might quarrel with the manner in which they connect it to the subject matter of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* — or at least with my interpretation of how they relate it to their mid-20th century concerns — but their discussion presupposes that the poem captures something of great importance, and thus that the poem merits the lengthy analysis to which they subject it.

Second, the final paragraph of my lecture identifies instrumental reasoning with reasoning uncritically. This was an unfortunate way of expressing what I wanted to say. Even within the realm of instrumental reason, we can think critically or uncritically. Since instrumental reason involves the harnessing of means to our ends, we can choose appropriate or inappropriate means. If we choose the latter unreflectively, then we are employing instrumental reason in an uncritical fashion. If we reflect on the most appropriate ways to pursue our ends, then we are reasoning in a critical fashion. In either case, however, we have yet to reason about our ends. Only once we reason about the ends that we are pursuing do we employ what my lecture calls objective reason. This, of course, is what most concerns Horkheimer and Adorno.

For several years I have been toying with the idea of writing a commentary on *Dialectic of Enlightenment* designed for students who are grappling with this

important but obscure work. The positive response to my lecture helped to convince me that such a book would find an eager audience. Now that I am working full-time as an independent scholar, and thus am no longer teaching, I have the time to pursue this project. Interested readers of this lecture can follow my progress by checking [my blog](#) from time to time.

