

Will humankind ever attain a rational happy life or never overcome the limits of Enlightenment?

Introduction

In the aftermath of the Second World War scholars from various disciplines, including psychiatry, anthropology and philosophy, strived to interpret these dramatic events and to identify their causes in the hope of preventing their repetition (Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, n.d.). Adorno and Horkheimer's seminal work, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, first published in 1944, was composed in this context and affected by it in its undertake to explain why an "Enlightened" society "instead of entering into a truly human condition, is sinking into a new kind of barbarism" (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997, p. XI). The purpose of this discussion consists in defending this argument and in demonstrating that even though Enlightenment thought has generated undeniable improvements in humankind's material life, it has also had caused great suffering. First, this work considers how the Enlightened search for knowledge, aimed at emancipating humanity from nature, has redefined the connection between subject and object in a way that causes alienation from the "self" (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997, pp. 3,5). This section is complemented with a reflection on 20th century Agent Network Theory interpretation of the subject-object relation and its potential consequences (Hicks, 2025, pp. 221-225). Secondly, it concentrates on the categorization of the world imposed by Enlightenment and its possible effects on people's existence (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997, pp. 29-31). Besides, it illustrates how this aspiration to classify extends to "encyclopaedic museums", explaining how theories

developed in these institutions offered supporting narratives for Colonialism and Colonialism in turn might have affected consciences in the following centuries (Gerstenblith, 2023; Hicks, 2025, pp. 333-335). Finally, it outlines how humankind's suffering and fear, unresolved by Enlightenment, might be alleviated by Cultural Industry, with the pleasing distractions provided by entertainment and advertising (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997, pp. 125, 134). It closes summarizing how the points presented might demonstrate the failure of Enlightenment thought to improve humankind's existence.

From rational search to alienation

One of the greatest ambitions of Enlightenment thought consists in developing a comprehensive knowledge of the world to free men from their fear of nature and of the unknown (Bristow, 2017). This endeavour should liberate humankind from its dependence on superstition, myth and religion, as well as from the oppression of tyrants and aristocrats, justifying their regimes through these systems of beliefs (ibid.). Adorno and Horkheimer in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* argue that this epistemological pursuit has been constantly combined with a desire to obtain power, not only power over nature, for the apparent benefit of all, but also power over the masses to the benefit of ruling elites, which might change in appearance through the centuries, i.e. from aristocrats to bourgeois, while their control over the many remains constant and secure (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997, pp. 3, 173). According to the philosophers' interpretation, the Enlightened search for knowledge is affected by this aspiration in the relationship it establishes between subject and object, which ultimately causes individuals' mental alienation (Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, n.d.). Knowledge is obtained empirically through the rational observation of the material world existing outside our consciences (ibid.). This inquiry embraces all the natural realm, including both inanimate and animate

things, consequently extending to the human species as well, “neutrally” assessed as the rest, so that men and women become both subjects and objects of this pursuit (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997, pp. 9, 26). Even though humanity benefits extensively from the scientific and technological advancement brought by this investigation, e.g. treatments for many diseases, increased life expectancy, etc., humanity also experiences the drawbacks of this “objectification” (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997, pp. 9, 28). People are reduced to combinations of figures and calculations, as any other phenomenon, and the existence of anything that is not explainable through this aseptic analysis is simply denied (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997, pp. 5-7, 16). Among these suppressed aspects stands humanity’s irrational fear, continuing to linger in human hearts, regardless of scientific advancements, that while, successfully uncovering nature mechanisms and mysteries, fail to complete these discoveries with “meaning”, needed to sedate this anguish (Bowie, 2022; Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997, pp. 5-7, 16). Hence, as the suffering generated by irrational fears is neglected and no comfort is offered to resolve it, some individuals might attempt to overcome its burden simply ignoring the pain, but as silencing a part of one’s conscience may not be achieved without renouncing portions of one’s own emotions as well, this expedient may ignite a process of alienation, i.e. a separation from the “self” (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997, p. 5, 29-30, 34; Pickford, 2024). Besides, as individuals learn to quieten their suffering, they might develop a tendency to ignore also other people’s sentiments and pain, gradually diminishing their engagement with the external world (Reeves and Sinnicks, 2024, p. 287). Consequently, these persons, disconnected from themselves and scarcely sensible to stimuli, might be more easily manipulable and willingly to passively accept the prosper world created by Enlightenment without challenging it beyond its surface, enabling ruling elites to remain in control (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997, pp. 28, 31). Even

though, the endurance of irrational fears and its consequences, due to their own immaterial nature, might not be measured directly on a large scale, yet they might be appraised through proxies such as the passive attitude they cause looking at people's behaviours. For instance, the low levels of participation in democratic elections in the last decade in many European countries and the USA might testify to the widespread disenfranchisement towards politics and society's organization as a whole (Hartig et al., 2025; Sky TG24, 2022).

Before continuing to the next section, it seems interesting to illustrate concisely the Agent Network Theory, possibly connected to the relation between subject and object discussed. Once the connection between subject and object has been transformed by Enlightenment and the distinction between the two somehow minimized, it might be more acceptable to regard individuals and things as undistinguishable, both actors of complex yet cohesive networks of inextricable relations (Hicks, 2025, pp. 224-225). 20th century French sociologist and philosopher Bruno Latour claims that within these networks, people and things might cease to exist separately and become new entities provided with their own agency, e.g. "man + artefact" (ibid.). Hence while things seem to be "promoted" to sentient beings, simultaneously humans appear "demoted" to mere objects, with their free will lessened as well as their responsibility, now shared with the tools they use (Hicks, 2025, p. 222, 225). If this construct is applied to weapons, it could help distance actions from the individuals or groups committing them, offering for example justifications for destructive military operations (Hicks, 2025, p. 237). News reports of drones' strike, for instance, often mention only the craft which caused "x" unintended civilians' deaths, while the remote pilot, the commander that planned the launch or the statesman that ordered it disappear in the background, so that no human seems responsible and mistakes are described as "technical errors", of which machines alone are culpable.

From categorization to dehumanization

Hence both perspectives, from different angles, seem to suggest that Enlightenment might have generated an “objectification of humankind”, a condition that according to Adorno and Horkheimer is further aggravated by the categorization inherent in the Enlightened search for knowledge (Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, n.d.). Categorization of all things and phenomena appears as the inevitable outcome of Enlightenment insatiable ambition to understand and control nature through what Francis Bacon describes as “*una scientia universalis*”, a tremendous intellectual endeavour requiring structure and meticulous cataloguing (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997, pp. 7, 10). This comprehensive classification however transforms all things, including humans, into “interchangeable” and “replicable” instances of groups, rendering through this process men and women exploitable resources, such as petroleum or iron (ibid.). This degradation intensifies as categorization extends outside the purely scientific realm to most aspects of society, such as education and work (Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, n.d.). Within each context, individuals are appraised and classified according to quantitative criteria, such as grades in school or performance indicators in corporations, determining, in line with set scales, the “standards for success and failure” (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997, pp. 7, 29-30). This system seems so logical and reasonable that people apparently embrace it willingly, submitting to the unconditional assessment of their personal value, adapting their emotional responses and behaviours to expected patterns (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997, pp. 24, 28-29). Moreover, categorization offers welcome simplifications, as it helps to schedule easily both work and private life, providing schemes and routines, that, with minimal independent thought, enable the effective realization and continuation of a prosper organized society, where everyone fulfils his or her own assigned

duties, being underpaid assembly work on a factory line or over compensated managerial duties in corner offices (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997, pp. 21, 24, 29-31, 37). Hence, the superficial welfare offered by these arrangements, combined with the alienation of the “self” examined earlier, seem to ensure people accept and even endorse this system, unaware or possibly indifferent to their transformation in mere commodities to the benefit of those in control (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997, pp. 7, 10).

In order to demonstrate how the rational categorization might affect our world in different ways, the discussion takes a step back in time to the late 18th and early 19th. In this period, Enlightenment classification influenced also the study of world cultures through the lenses of “encyclopaedic museums”, which in turn offered narratives justifying the conquests of Colonialism (Gerstenblith, 2023). “Encyclopaedic museums”, such as The British Museum, pursued a rational search for knowledge through the development of extensive collections, aiming at representing all expressions of human culture (ibid.). Some of these galleries were (and some still are) organized through categorizations influenced also by evolutionist theories, with displays reproducing imaginary timelines illustrating the advancement of mankind from a “primitive” condition, e.g. supposedly that of populations in West Africa territories at the time, to civilization, i.e. Europeans (Loftus and Mackie, 2020, pp. 237-239, 247). Hence, these museums’ collections might have supported Colonialism expansions, corroborating the narrative of the “white men” bringing civilization to “savages”, needing to be rescued from their “barbaric” condition (Hicks, 2020, pp. 38-40, 45). Moreover, this construct might have rendered more “palatable” to the public opinion brutal military campaigns, even if leading to the destructions of entire tribes, as these actions were presented as “necessary evils” perpetrated against distinct groups, dehumanized “others”, actions committed to facilitate a natural of development already in motion (Hicks, 2025, pp. 237-243). According

to some scholars, the public tolerance of this level of violence in the 19th century has created in human consciences a permanent impression, persisting through generations, rendering easier for ruling elites to justify brutalities and discriminations (Hicks, 2025, p. 333). This phenomenon has been described as the “boomerang effect”, as the horrors perpetrated during Colonialism in Central Africa and other territories have backlashed towards Western countries, becoming one of the contributing factors to the rise of Totalitarian regimes in the proximity of the Second World War (Hick, 2025, p. 334). This “normalised” dehumanization might still reverberate into the 21st century “third war world in pieces”, borrowing late Pope Francis’ words, and the related ethnic persecutions, continuing in many countries, as well as in the raising popularity of extreme right parties across Europe, depicting immigrants as “others”, radically distinct from “us”, as “dangerous invaders” that should be stopped at any cost (Merlo, 2022; Hicks, 2025, p. 335; Henley, 2025). Hence, in different ways, Enlightenment thought seems to have promoted a system of classification, that under an apparently neutral scientific efforts, has offered to those able to exploit its mechanisms, effective tools to obtain, increase and maintain power, while large portions of the society seemingly ignore or tolerate even the most dramatic consequences of these actions (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997, pp. 21, 29-31).

The delusions of Cultural Industry

This final section discusses Cultural Industry, which according to Adorno and Horkheimer represents one of the features of modern society helping people tolerate the intimate suffering that Enlightenment has failed to resolve (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997, pp. 121, 144). Cultural industry, through entertainment and advertising, may prevent the evolution of this pain from emotion to actions, that could potentially endanger the “better” world created by Enlightenment

(ibid.). Starting with entertainment, the philosophers claim that these contents, through multiple media, such as cinema, television and radio, serve jointly two purposes: on face value they provide viewers with relatively cheap and accessible pastimes for their enjoyment, but on a deeper level they are conceived to manipulate audiences' minds: to reduce their need to think independently, to soothe them with vain hopes and to subtly convey values aimed at preserving the status quo (Adorno, 1991, p. 160; Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997, pp. 121, 144). Reducing the necessity for independent thought is achieved in different ways, first of all most stories represented are based on simple predictable plots, endlessly reiterated to be appreciated with hardly any effort (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997, pp. 125, 134). Besides, special effects ensure there is no need for imagination, while artificial applauses and laughs offers cues for when to feel impressed or amused (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997, p. 126; Adorno, 1991, p. 160). In other words, contents seem ready to "digest" and offered in a rather structured way, so that they almost become reenactments of daily work routines, enabling viewers to occupy their free time without straining their mental capabilities (Bowie, 2022; Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997, pp. 137). Even though it might not be feasible to demonstrate the intentions of today's entertainment corporations, yet countless examples of repetitive formats may be detected both in films, e.g. with numerous versions of popular novels, plays, countless remakes, and on televisions, e.g. with soap operas, sitcoms, dramas or crime series aired for decades with the same characters and familiar tropes.

Moreover, according the two philosophers film and TV contents seem devised to sooth audiences portraying amiable characters with whom viewers may relate, such as parents, police officers, fire fighters, medics, teachers, etc... (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997, p. 156). These persons are depicted enduring various difficulties, from trivial to severe, but eventually succeeding, in order to offer

convincing examples of unfaltering resilience (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997, p. 138). Even cartoons, such as Disney's Donald Duck's adventures, representing the beloved character suffering continuous misfortunes, are far from innocent humorous programs, but rather means to persuade audiences that is normal to bear tribulations and yet to resist (ibid). Hence, the message apparently conveyed is that if these "everyday heroes" may overcome their troubles, so may viewers, continuing to trust in their own "happy endings" and accepting their life situations, as dire as they might be (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997, pp. 138-139).

Finally, false hopes are nurtured through talent shows, a format that address this desire in a "controlled setting", defined by specific rules: anybody may aspire to become a contestant through open auditions and even though actual chances to be selected are minimal and even smaller are those to win, achieving instant success and fame, this mechanism allows universal participation, with not need of specific skills or qualifications (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997, pp. 133-134, 145-146). Furthermore, these shows often invite viewers to appreciate their everyday chores, elevating trivial activities, such as cooking, through the depiction of contestants' tedious challenges as "momentous" events (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997, p. 156). The unceasing popularity of talent shows in the 21st century, with consolidated formats running across dozens of countries, might suggest that this concept still intrigues audiences as it did when appraised by the philosophers over half a century ago.

Concluding with advertising, this medium apparently devised to support companies address consumers' existing needs, in fact seems conceived to generate new desires, persuading target audiences to purchase certain products, aspire to certain ideals and behave in a certain way, to the point that "personality scarcely signifies more than shining white teeth or freedom from body odours" (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997, pp. 121, 144-145, 167). To this day,

commercials continue to propose similar images of bright smiles, perfectly germ-free kitchens and joyous families, celebrating the superficial happiness achievable with simple daily pleasures, subtly reinforcing, even though possibly unintentionally, the perpetration of the status quo (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997, p. 167). Moreover, Adorno and Horkheimer claim that manufacturers are able to charge unreasonably premium prices thanks to products' intangible features, such as the prestige associated with some brands, often perceived as more valuable than physical characteristics (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997, p. 123). This expedient is applied not only to expensive purchases, such as vehicles or design bags, but also to commodities, such as food or toiletries, that in their apparent triviality convey articulated set of values and narratives evoking enjoyable emotions and sometimes even modern myths, appreciated by consumers, who might placate their inner pain with these ephemeral pleasures (ibid.). The success of these techniques could be demonstrated with the exceptional financial results of companies such as Apple or Coca-Cola benefitting from well-constructed brand images, combined with arguable material differences versus competitors (Walter, 2025).

Bringing together entertainment and adverting, Adorno and Horkheimer seem to expose the paradox of apparently rational individuals, supposedly aware of nature and technology inner mechanisms, yet prone to be seduced by contents devised to numb their mental capabilities, appease their conscience and ultimately maintain the status quo (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997, pp. 121-144).

Conclusion

This work has strived to explain the consequences of Enlightenment thought in modern society outlined in Adorno and Horkheimer *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944). It started illustrating how the Enlightened epistemological pursuit, while creating a safer and materially enjoyable world, has also established a new

relation between subject and object that has objectified humans, leaving them exposed to suffering and external manipulations (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997, p. 5, 29-30, 34). Then it illustrated how the Enlightened system of categorization, part of the rational search for “*una scientia universalis*”, has transformed humans into commodities, exploitable by ruling elites (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997, pp. 7, 10). Besides, it explained how “rational” classifications might have also facilitated the dehumanisation of the “other” during Colonialism and in the following centuries through the “boomerang effect” (Hick, 2025, pp. 334-335). Finally, it discussed how modern society provides ephemeral relief from suffering through Cultural Industry, promoting certain ideals to preserve the status quo through entertainment and advertising (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997, pp. 121, 144). Concluding, it would appear that Adorno and Horkheimer’s thesis has identified some of the limitations of the Enlightenment project potentially extending to the 21st century and still preventing humankind from achieving a happy rational life in all respects.

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