Article

Nietzsche, irrationalism, and the cruel irony of Adorno and Horkheimer's political quietude

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Abstract Adorno and Horkheimer's legacy is incomplete without reference to their infamous political quietism. To thinkers such as Habermas, this was the unfortunate consequence of their alleged evacuation of reason. Attending to the treatment of Nietzsche in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* illuminates the distinct irony of such charges. Here, in their most popular book, Nietzsche is presented as precisely that which they praised him for warning against elsewhere: an advocate of cruelty animated by a reactionary morality. I contend that this exaggeration is not accidental, but rather illustrative; the authors present a consciously hyperbolized version of Nietzsche in order to articulate how he made possible his own misappropriation, and to distinguish themselves sharply from Nietzsche given their disagreements about the necessity of reason. Ultimately, however, even though Adorno and Horkheimer performatively differentiate themselves from the nihilism they saw in Nietzsche, their alternative would ironically be subject to precisely the same charges of irrationalism and political aporia that they sought so desperately to avoid.
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> "But only exaggeration is true." — Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*

Friedrich Nietzsche's influence on Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer is profound. After all, Nietzsche's radical critiques of the western tradition's self-destruction and modernity's internalized suffering harbor myriad continuities with Adorno and Horkheimer's analyses in *Minima Moralia* and *Eclipse of Reason,* respectively. However, the existing scholarship is curiously quiet on the peculiarity of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, which contains Adorno and Horkheimer's lengthiest treatment of Nietzsche. Here, Nietzsche becomes precisely that which Adorno and

Horkheimer praise him elsewhere for warning against: an advocate of cruelty looking to establish a cult of strength on the basis of a reactionary transvaluation of values. We are invited to ask: why, given their otherwise careful readings of the subtleties of Nietzsche's thought, do Adorno and Horkheimer give such a hyperbolic, programmatic presentation in the pages of *Dialectic*? And further, what can such exaggeration tell us about their own attempts to circumvent the neofascism they tether so tightly to Nietzsche?

In this article, I proceed in four parts. In the first, I give a brief account of the numerous continuities between Nietzsche, Adorno, and Horkheimer, and in doing so outline the existing literature that connects these thinkers. I emphasize how these scholarly appraisals have the effect of portraying the relationship between Nietzsche and the first wave of the Frankfurt School as predominantly methodological or stylistic, while downplaying the breaks and subsequent tensions between them. In the next section, I offer a close-reading of *Dialectic*'s Excursus II to argue that Adorno and Horkheimer's presentation of Nietzsche is *knowingly* hyperbolic; they consciously put into his mouth the cruelty that he condemns, render reactionary his affirmative transvaluation of values, and actively associate the truths he uncovered with fascism. The third section, then, articulates an account of why Adorno and Horkheimer employed an intentionally exaggerated Nietzsche in *Dialectic*. I argue that they have at least two reasons: first, Nietzsche is in some way an exemplification of the dialectic of enlightenment itself because he saw into the vacuity of reason and sought to release us from it, but ironically became the ground for heightened barbarism. Thus, what Nietzsche's thought had become is demonstrative of their shared claim that reason comes to undermine itself. Second, and related, Adorno and Horkheimer want to differentiate themselves from Nietzsche on account of their deep disagreement over the status of reason: whereas Nietzsche asks "why not unreason?," Adorno and Horkheimer remain committed to a substantive, albeit elusive, conception of enlightenment. In the final section, I contend that this dialectical encounter informs our understanding of Adorno and Horkheimer's infamous political quietism. Whereas Adorno dismissed Nietzsche's conception of *amor fati* as a sort of conservatism early on in his career, he too would be ironically condemned for his political quietude. As I argue here, the "cunning irony of reason" that rendered Nietzsche's thought barbarous likewise illuminates these charges against Adorno and Horkheimer's politics.

The Frankfurt School's Nietzschean Themes

The myriad continuities between Nietzsche and the early Frankfurt School are almost impossible to miss. Adorno and Horkheimer repeatedly invoke Nietzsche's writings as they critique the western tradition, while at the same time dialectically thinking with Nietzsche in their ruminations on the possibilities of freedom. In fact,

Nietzsche's influence on Adorno and Horkheimer easily rivals that of Marx and Hegel; in a 1963 series of lectures on moral philosophy, Adorno (2000, p. 172) states clearly "to tell the truth, of all the so-called great philosophers I owe him [Nietzsche] by far the greatest debt – more even than to Hegel." Rolf Wiggershaus (2001, p. 145), the renowned historian of the Frankfurt School, even goes so far as to claim that "they find in him, as in no other philosopher, their own desires confirmed and accentuated." For the sake of mapping out these architectonic continuities, we should begin with their critical parallels: namely, a shared diagnosis of modernity's self-overcoming, a common characterization of science as problematized after the death of God, and related critiques of cultural sickness in post-modernity.

Adorno and Horkheimer trace the roots of Enlightenment back to the prototypical bourgeois man Odysseus, who through his own cunning escaped the mythic figures of the lotus eaters, Polyphemus, and Circe. In doing so, not only did he turn the brutal animistic world into a mythic one open to overcoming, but he simultaneously sacrificed his subjectivity (by playing on the ambivalence of his own name, Odysseus, and *Udeis*, which means "nobody"). This logic contains within it the seed of enlightenment; in attempting to confront and overcome the world, nature is conceptualized as an object, creating at once the division between subject and object. This division, in which the meaning-conferring subject controls the meaningless object, represents the distinctive step toward the Kantian Enlightenment of Excursus II that ultimately reverts: enlightenment rationality, once fully constituted in Kantian formalism, betrays its own inability to secure substantive moral duties resulting in an empty methodology that Nietzsche and Sade exploit and the National Socialists render barbarous.

Nietzsche also proclaims the overturning of the tradition, meant here as the imposition of a causal understanding of the world in terms of a life-denying metaphysical doctrine driven by the urge to give meaning. He explores the moralization of action and the subsequent metaphysical systems in the aptly named *Genealogy of Morals*, where the example of the creditor-debtor relationship in Essay II is shown to have metamorphosed from a simple relationship of exchange to an archetype of interpersonal indebtedness. Precipitated by entrance into society and the resultant inability to discharge one's instincts outwardly, the *ressentiment* of the weak turned inward in the "*internalization* of man," thereby becoming bad conscience (Nietzsche, 1967, p. 84). Against this backdrop, the will to power of the slavish culminates in the ascetic ideal of Essay III, in which life is rejected in its entirety on account of the internalized (and now moralized) infinite "debt" that is owed to the creditor-god. The ascetic priest serves only to perpetuate and reaffirm this final attempt at valuation amongst the slave-like herd. Nietzsche's intent here is to expose the death of God, more broadly understood as the metaphysical tradition traceable to Athens (Nietzsche, 1989, p. 3) which culminates in the ascetic ideal, as a function of the confluence of the will to power (in its various forms, like the will

to truth), entrance into society, and the resultant pathologies (the internalization of man, bad conscience, etc.). The entirety of the tradition is implicated: "Socrates was a misunderstanding; *the whole improvement-morality, including the Christian, was a misunderstanding*" (Nietzsche, 1982, p. 478; emphasis in original). Metaphysics, in its creation of an eternal and unchanging realm of "being," undercuts the senses and their experience of the world as becoming. By exposing the realm of Being as a construction, Nietzsche demonstrates that systematizing Enlightenment Idealism is predicated on a falsity.

In a second broad critical continuity, Nietzsche offers a critique similar to Adorno and Horkheimer's account of the instrumentality of reason after the destruction of metaphysics. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, science is the narrowed technical application of rational formalism which contains within and reaffirms the subject-object division that leads to domination. Nietzsche explains that science after the death of God is the latest iteration of the ascetic ideal; instead of focusing on the externally problematic instrumentalization of science as an extension of the will to power, he instead emphasizes its capacity to serve as the last refuge for the sick who must rely on a system to give meaning. The description of science, however, is clearly similar. Science persists after metaphysics fails: "Science today has absolutely *no* belief in itself, let alone an ideal above it – and where it still inspires passion, love, ardor and *suffering* at all, it is not the opposite of the ascetic ideal, but rather *the latest and noblest form of it*" (Nietzsche, 1967, p. 147; emphasis in original). Science is able to withstand its own "hollowing out" of moral direction or derivable moral duty and exist for itself, with a calculating internal logic that extends the viability of bad conscience beyond the death of God. Moreover, in the same way that science is driven by a logic of domination and systemization in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Nietzsche describes the "will to truth" as the drive which causes the ascetic ideal to transform itself into the modern scholarly scientist. Science, then, for Adorno, Horkheimer, and Nietzsche is conceived of as a sublated form of the value-imputing tradition out of which its methodology was created. Upon the collapse of this tradition (with the death of God for Nietzsche and the playing out of the implications of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* for Adorno and Horkheimer), modern science is reduced to a methodology, harmful for both those who pursue it and those who are subject to it. Though emphasized differently in the two sets of texts, it is clear that science after modernity is problematic, to say the least.

A third broad continuity between *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and Nietzsche's work that is explicitly invoked by Adorno and Horkheimer is the status of modern culture. Perhaps stated most forcefully in the chapter on the culture industry, *Dialectic* argues that culture today has become a stultifying sameness: "Each branch of culture is unanimous within itself and all are unanimous together" (p. 94). Instrumental rationality, the hollowed-out shell of Kantian *Vernunft*, makes possible the undermining of any chance at *Bildung*. Instead, culture is fabricated by

the financially capable resulting in the eclipse of real aesthetic experience, and more worryingly, the possibility of freedom. Capitalist culture problematizes freedom understood as autonomy or self-creation: "Each single manifestation of the culture industry inescapably reproduces human beings as what the whole has made them. And all its agents, from the producer to the women's organizations, are on the alert to ensure that the simple reproduction of mind does not lead on to the expansion of mind" (p. 101). Given this process of systemization and normalization, Adorno and Horkheimer's critique that Enlightenment domination of nature ultimately results in domination of ourselves comes to fruition.

Nietzsche's analogous critique of modernity's cultural sickness is crystalized in his famous images of the "last man" in *Zarathustra*. In much the same way that consumers of the culture industry in Adorno and Horkheimer's modern society believe that their culture is "authentic" or "real," the last men "have something whereof they are proud. What do they call it, that which maketh them proud? Culture, they call it; it distinguisheth them from the goat-herds" (Nietzsche, 1997b, pp. 10–11). This culture is built around the life-denying teachings of the ascetic priest, predicated on giving meaning to earthly suffering by invoking the divine creditor-debtor relationship Nietzsche would later articulate in the *Genealogy*. For the last men, two things are paramount: release from the pain of the world through meaning: "A little poison now and then: that maketh for pleasant dreams. And much poison at last for a pleasant death," and a sameness which crowds out the possibility of newness: "Everyone wanteth the same; everyone is equal; he who hath other sentiments goeth voluntarily into the madhouse." Though not articulated in terms of the culture commoditized by the market, Nietzsche's last men suffer at the hands of their own life-denying culture; the hypostatized realm of "being" in which the Christian God exists is perpetuated by the ascetic priest, as opposed to the economically powerful. Culture for Nietzsche, then, is largely bleak given that newness is increasingly unattainable.

In the context of the three preceding sketches, Horkheimer and Adorno (2002, p. 36) acknowledge Nietzsche's prescient insight: "Like few others since Hegel, Nietzsche recognized the dialectic of enlightenment. He formulated the ambivalent relationship of enlightenment to power." Likewise, other scholars have explored these themes; for instance, Gillian Rose (1978, p. 27) contends that *Dialectic* owes much to Nietzsche's interpretation of reason, and that Adorno and Horkheimer "took over Nietzsche's position in a way which enabled them to point out the universality of domination." Additionally, scholars such as Ashley Woodward (2011, p. 131) and Karin Bauer (1999, p. 26) have written on Adorno's Nietzschean claim that many modern concepts are mere masks for their origins (see also Rose, 1978, p. 25), while Wiggershaus (2001, p. 144) goes so far as to claim that the early Frankfurt School harbored a "Nietzschean moment," with Horkheimer in particular seeing Nietzsche favorably as a "critic of the 'entire [bourgeois] culture of satiety [*Genügsamkeitskultur*].'"

At the same time, Nietzsche's influence on Adorno and Horkheimer is not confined simply to their critical approaches to modernity. Indeed, perhaps more scholarly literature is dedicated to their affirmative continuities. *Minima Moralia*, the volume of aphorisms Adorno subtitled *Reflections from a Damaged Life*, is a self-described "melancholy science" (Adorno 2005a, p. ix), a clear inversion of the Nietzschean *gaya scienza* that Marcuse would attempt to reimagine some years later (see Simpson, 2017). In this context, Matthew Rampley and Bauer both find connections between Nietzsche and Adorno's discussions of aesthetics in Wagner's operas, while Rose emphasizes the influence of Nietzsche's colorful and hyperbolic style on the aphoristic presentation of *Minima Moralia* (see Rampley, 2002). Further, David Owen (2018, p. 258) argues that *Dialectic* and Nietzsche's *Genealogy* may both be interpreted as compositions, in the artistic and musical senses of the term, insofar as their parallel inquiries into the self-undermining of reason are "performed textually" rather than merely stated.

Beyond their similarities in style and aesthetic interpretation, Nietzsche and Adorno in particular admit of a number of ethical similarities. Yianna Liastos (2006, pp. 153–154), for instance, reads Nietzsche's "ethic of action" and Adorno's reflective vigilance dialectically as possibilities for "a free-spirited response to the pressing need for bridging critical social thought and transformative action today." Likewise, Ulrich Plass (2015) reads *Minima Moralia* as an "implicit imaginary conversation with Nietzsche's aphoristic ethics and his critique of modernity as 'life in decline,'" which results in a shared concern for the possibility of intellectual ethical critique in a society that precludes it.

For the sake of brevity, we might say that the brief survey above demonstrates Nietzsche's extensive direct influence on the authors of *Dialectic*, as well as considerable acknowledgment and excavation of that influence by various scholars. Importantly, this body of literature often implicitly assumes what Adorno and Horkheimer at times make explicit: that Nietzsche's insights *are* useful and generative for a critique of reason, and more importantly can be meaningfully differentiated from National Socialism. In *Eclipse of Reason*, Horkheimer (2013, p. 108) forcefully distinguishes Nietzsche's infamous "superman" [*Übermensch*] from "such counterfeit supermen as Hitler," explaining that "the consummate superman, against whom no one has warned more anxiously than Nietzsche himself, is a projection of the oppressed masses, King Kong rather than Cesare Borgia." Even more explicitly, Horkheimer writes in his early essay "Egoism and the Freedom Movement" that

> The superman, the most problematic concept with which the psychologist left the analytical realm Nietzsche had mastered, has been interpreted along the lines of the philistine bourgeois' wildest dreams, and has been confused with Nietzsche himself. The adventurous element seemed so appealing. Greatness, blood, and danger have always been cherished in paintings and monuments.

> But *Nietzsche is the opposite of this inflated sense of power* (1993, pp. 108–109, emphasis mine).

Adorno (2005a, p. 96), less forthright in his defense of Nietzsche, still differentiates what was taken to be "master morality" in the 1940's from how Nietzsche conceptualized it, opting for an asceticism that can "at last permit [one] to be as kind, gentle, unegoistic and open hearted as Nietzsche already was then."

Beyond these writings, Adorno and Horkheimer's sentiments were borne out in their conversations with other members of the early Frankfurt School. Wiggershaus highlights the transcript of a 1942 conversation between Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse, and a handful of other associated thinkers on the relationship between need and culture in Nietzsche's writings. Wiggershaus (2001, pp. 144–145) reports that Adorno, perhaps the most interested of the group, "seeks to correct or supplement Marx through the use of Nietzsche as a thinker concerned with the 'totality of happiness [*Glück*] incarnate,'" ultimately concluding that the record of this meeting demonstrated Adorno and Horkheimer's "insist[ance] that Nietzsche must be rescued from fascist and racist appropriations."

And yet, *Dialectic*'s Excursus II represents an important departure; here, Nietzsche becomes the harbinger of fascism and explicit conceptual lines are drawn between his thought and his appropriation by the National Socialists. Why, if Adorno and Horkheimer had elsewhere been so adamant about distinguishing Nietzsche from Nazism, did they seemingly collapse the distinction in their most well-known book? Though scholars have certainly recognized the self-proclaimed breaks between the authors of *Dialectic* and Nietzsche, there has been a conspicuous silence surrounding this particular characterization. In order to make sense of this disjunction, we should first look in depth at Excursus II itself.

Nietzsche, Cruelty and the Overman in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*

Nietzsche, having proclaimed the death of God at the hands of the will to truth, knew that Kant's substantive duties were undermined by the very scientific rationality to which they were pinned. As Adorno and Horkheimer emphasize, this absence opened the door to reason being understood radically individualistically and to its being exploited simply as a mechanism of domination. Excursus II, however, appears to collapse this distance: Nietzsche is characterized as "maliciously celebrat[ing] the mighty and their cruelty when it is directed 'outside their circle,' that is, against everything alien to themselves" (2002, p. 77). Moreover, Adorno and Horkheimer underline Nietzsche's own definition of power as "the desire to overcome, to appropriate, to have enemies, obstacles and triumphs" in order to emphasize the link between Enlightenment and domination (hence overcoming and appropriation) and extermination (hence enemies and

obstacles) (Nietzsche, cited in Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002, p. 77). Thus, we as readers are expected to draw a direct connection between Nietzsche and a class of degradations of rationality: xenophobia, fascism, and physical domination. Over against the various critical resonances between the thinkers described in the section above, the Nietzsche of *Dialectic* proves to be the opposite: cruel despite Adorno's insistence of his gentleness, reactionary despite his subtlety in recognizing the dialectic of enlightenment, and proto-fascist despite Adorno and Horkheimer's various claims to the contrary.

The reduction of Nietzsche into an advocate of cruelty in Excursus II is apparent in the authors' discussion of the "slave morality" of the *Genealogy of Morals (GM)*. Playing on the infamous image of the lambs and the great birds of prey in Section 13 of the First Essay of *GM*, Adorno and Horkheimer claim that Nietzsche condemns the weak as guilty, and upholds the strong as vindicated in their injury of the weak on the grounds of its being "natural." Thus, everything that the "stronger" can do is "natural," be it oppression, violence, cruelty, tyranny, or injustice. Moreover, the weak should know their place and not defend themselves; to attempt to overcome the strong is an affront to nature. They must, in the end, submit (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002, p. 78). With this reading, Adorno and Horkheimer derive Nietzsche's advocacy of a "cult of strength" which taken "to its absurd conclusion" as a "world-historical doctrine" results in atrocities like German fascism (p. 79). Master morality, instantiated through a state religion, is portrayed as a reactive and destructive force. Thus, Adorno and Horkheimer flip the yea-saying of *Zarathustra*; Nietzsche no longer is the philosopher known for his joyful affirmation of life, but instead for his hostility "to the spirit of reality" (p. 79). The calls to "become hard" scattered throughout *The Gay Science* and *Zarathustra* are construed as hardness towards others: cruelty, the absence of pity, and domination.

Adorno and Horkheimer then extend this caricature by quoting what looks to be a damning discussion of cruelty located in Section 11 of the First Essay of the *Genealogy*. Regarding the noble type, Nietzsche writes that "They revert to the innocence of wild animals: we can imagine them returning from an orgy of murder, arson, rape, and torture, jubilant and at peace with themselves as though they had committed a fraternity prank…This "boldness" of noble races, so headstrong, absurd, incalculable, sudden, improbable … their utter indifference to safety and comfort, their terrible pleasure in destruction, their taste for cruelty" (Nietzsche, cited in Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002, p. 77). Knowing that Nietzsche praises noble valuation throughout much of his work (most notably in the section of *Beyond Good and Evil* entitled What is Noble?) and often accompanies it with descriptions of the infamous "blond beast," Adorno and Horkheimer intentionally quote this passage in order to conflate Nietzsche's conception of nobility with vulgar domination.

Adorno and Horkheimer's programmatic interpretation of Nietzsche's ostensible cruelty is intertwined with their representation of Nietzsche's thought as reactionary. This much is clear in Excursus II's misrepresentation of the noble revaluation that is supposed to overcome the slavish revaluation famously described in the *Genealogy*. According to Nietzsche, when the Jews exacted their "most spiritual revenge," the noble mode of valuation, in which the healthy was good and that which was not was simply bad, was inverted such that what had formerly been "good" was now "evil," and what was formerly "bad" became the new "good." The slavish valuation is thoroughly reactionary: it is not value creating, but instead the imagined revenge of an instantiated *ressentiment* by means of a reversal or inversion of values. On Nietzsche's account, a noble revaluation would transcend such a reactionary table of values.

However, Horkheimer and Adorno (2002, p. 81) argue that Nietzsche's insight into the reactionary slavishness of the Kantian ideal render "Kindness and good deeds [into] sin, domination and suppression virtue." Thus, *Dialectic's* characterization of the noble transvaluation directly mirrors the reactionary logic of the slavish transvaluation: the "good" of the slavish table becomes the "sin" of Nietzsche's noble table, according to Adorno and Horkheimer, while "domination and suppression" become the virtue (p. 81). Thus, *Dialectic*'s presentation of what comes after the slavish table of values is similarly one-dimensional and reactionary; it creates no values, and defines itself directly as an inversion of the table that came before it. More worrisome still, what Adorno and Horkheimer claim that Nietzsche defines as the new "sin" is clearly the slavish caricature of the original noble "good." The reader is led to believe that by pointing out the nihilism of the tradition, Nietzsche not only validates the dominating and cruel (slavish) image of the blond beast, but also actually advocates it. Though they cite it elsewhere, in *Dialectic* Adorno and Horkheimer completely obscure the expansive part of Nietzsche's body of work (notably scattered throughout *The Gay Science, Zarathustra* and *Beyond Good and Evil*) that aims at a new noble table of values that transcends the reactionary natural baseness of "simple domination."

By treating Nietzsche's transvaluation of all values as a reactionary inversion of decadent modernity, Excursus II portrays him as a profoundly non-dialectical thinker. We know, however, that both Horkheimer and Adorno (2002, p. 36) believe Nietzsche to be among the subtlest of thinkers; indeed, in the very same text he is lauded for his insight into the entanglement of enlightenment and power. A look at the first section of *Zarathustra* helps illustrate that Adorno and Horkheimer's emphasis on the cruelty of the blond beasts omits the dialectical nature of Nietzsche's thought. In "The Three Metamorphoses," we see the famous triptych of the camel, lion, and baby. The camel signifies the load-bearing spirit, straining under the weight of the Western tradition. The first metamorphosis is into the lion, the infamous blond beast which makes its most oft-quoted appearances in the *Genealogy*. The lion signifies the noble revolt against the tradition, hostile to

the great dragon that is God. In response to the dragon's command "Thou shalt," the lion exclaims "I will!" The process, however, is incomplete. Because the lion can only revolt, it must become the innocent baby so that it can attain the distinctively human capacity of esteeming, or value-creating. The forgetfulness of the baby, coupled with this newfound power of yea-saying, is the possibility to which Nietzsche directs those who understand him (pp. 21–23).

When we look to the passage from the *Genealogy* that Adorno and Horkheimer quote, it is clear that the cruelty the noble ones exhibit is tied explicitly with the "blond beast": "One cannot fail to see at the bottom of all these noble races the beast of prey, the splendid *blond beast*" (1967, p. 40). Thus, the cruelty to which Nietzsche refers is the moment of the blond beast, or in other words, the second moment of the three metamorphoses. If we allow Adorno and Horkheimer to equate cruelty with the value creation that Nietzsche espouses, we effectively truncate the positive (or posit*ing*) aspects of his work. Though Nietzsche explains that cruelty is a part of human nature, those noble races included, the third moment of the image is not reducible to the reactionary revolt against the tradition that makes up the second. In this way, the "power" that Adorno and Horkheimer want to serve as an analogy for domination "is not blunt force, sharp teeth, big muscles, which merely rend and incorporates things of nature while leaving the subject and the world around it fundamentally unchanged" (Church, 2014, p. 120). Articulating the will to power as a first order drive which manifests itself in creative and healthy second order drives such as the capacity to transform oneself, Jeffrey Church (2014, p. 121) explains that "Many readers [Adorno and Horkheimer among them] of Nietzsche make this mistake, arguing that Nietzsche means by the will to power that we seek something very vague like 'power' or more concrete violent ends like 'exploitation' or 'cruelty.'" Ultimately, the blond beast is prior even to the slavish revaluation, rather than the determinate end of the noble revaluation. Nietzsche's purported "cult of strength," then, is fashioned on a partial reading of his work.

In the final analysis, *Dialectic* characterizes Nietzsche as ushering in an era of social hierarchy based on exploitative power, a marked break with Adorno and Horkheimer's interpretation elsewhere. In claiming that Nietzsche and Sade are vilified for not "hush[ing] up the impossibility of deriving from reason a fundamental argument against murder, but proclaim[ing] it from the rooftops," Adorno and Horkheimer (p. 93) link Nietzsche all the more closely to the fascism they sought to rescue him from. What's more, as keen as they were elsewhere to distinguish Nietzsche from National Socialism, the authors of *Dialectic* (p. 68) even go so far as to claim "From Kant's *Critique* to Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals*, the hand of philosophy had traced the writing on the wall; one individual put that writing into practice, in all its details." This "one individual," as the text implies, can be none other than Adolf Hitler. In this way, Excursus II seeks to exploit the "problem of nihilism" that Nietzsche diagnosed and offered a response to more than half a century earlier. Worse still, Adorno and Horkheimer put into

Nietzsche's mouth the opposing response that he specifically denounces as base and reactionary. The question remains: why?

In the Twilight of Nietzsche

If we take Adorno and Horkheimer's reading of Nietzsche literally, Excursus II would be the *least* dialectical portion of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. The valuable Nietzschean insights that Adorno and Horkheimer elsewhere praise and invoke would be flattened in the reductionist claim that Hitler was merely playing out Nietzsche's master-morality. Worse still, a clearly instrumental reading of Nietzsche would risk exemplifying the vacuous rationality that Adorno and Horkheimer devoted *Dialectic* to exposing and critiquing. And yet, as Adorno and Horkheimer remind us at the close of Excursus II, "only exaggeration is true" (p. 92). In this spirit, I argue here that the authors of *Dialectic* knowingly and intentionally exaggerate Nietzsche for two important reasons: first, to express how Nietzsche is *himself* an exemplar of the dialectic of enlightenment, and second, to distinguish themselves sharply from Nietzsche on the question of reason.

In order to make sense of my first claim, we must look to Nietzsche's attempt to confront the nihilistic self-referentiality of western rationality: his much-maligned conception of master morality. Whereas the Nietzsche portrayed in Excursus II champions a reactive morality of cruelty that becomes fully realized in fascism, Adorno and Horkheimer carefully distinguish elsewhere between what Nietzsche *meant* by master morality and what it *became*. In the aphorism "a word for morality" in *Minima Moralia,* Adorno (2005a, p. 96) writes that the master morality no longer represents a potential radical challenge to the western philosophical tradition: "ascetic ideals constitute today a more solid bulwark against the madness of the profit-economy than did the hedonistic life sixty years ago against liberal repression." Adorno's 1963 lectures on moral philosophy provide a fuller context: "The ideals [Nietzsche] has in mind – nobility [*Vornehmheit*], real freedom, the virtue of generosity, distance – all these are wonderful values in themselves, but in an unfree society they are not capable of fulfilment, or at best can only be realized on Sunday afternoons, that is, in private life" (Adorno, 2000, p. 173). More specifically, Adorno (2000, p. 172) criticizes Nietzsche for "having failed to go beyond the abstract negation of bourgeois morality," meaning that, "given the state of society and the actual state reached by mind in that society, the norms Nietzsche opposed to it were not available in concrete terms and so had simply to be imposed from outside." In other words, Adorno contends that Nietzsche's master morality could never achieve what he intended it to, for it posited a new table of values beyond the realm of material possibility. Nietzsche, after all, was "in thrall to existing social conditions, because he was able to get to the bottom of what people had become, but was not able to get

to the bottom of the society that made them what they are" (Adorno, 2000, p. 174). In this context, *Minima Moralia*'s inversion of Nietzsche's *gaya scienza* into a melancholy science is a testament to Adorno's claim that the master morality could never achieve what Nietzsche had hoped. Horkheimer makes a similar point in his "Egoism and the Freedom Movement":

> [Nietzsche's] error lies in the present's lack of historical understanding, which leads him to bizarre hypotheses where clear theoretical knowledge was possible. He was blind to the historical dynamics of his time and hence to the way to his goal; therefore, even his most magnificent analysis, the genealogy of morals and of Christianity, despite all delicate subtlety, turns out to be too crude (Horkheimer,1993, p. 109, see also Owen, 2018, p. 255).

For Adorno and Horkheimer, then, Nietzsche was decidedly *not* the purveyor of cruelty represented in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

Given that Adorno and Horkheimer openly articulate the distinction between what Nietzsche meant by master morality and what it came to mean, the question posed above persists: why put into Nietzsche's own mouth these fascist appropriations? I contend that their exaggeration in Excursus II is demonstrative: Nietzsche is an exemplar not only of enlightenment, but *also* of the dialectic of enlightenment. That is, he saw into the vacuity of reason and sought to release us from it, but ironically became the ground for unprecedented barbarism. Put differently, Adorno and Horkheimer performatively exaggerate Nietzsche's relationship with fascism in order to draw attention to what even the most well-meaning of abstract negations of reality can become. In Nietzsche's case, the master morality he posed as an antidote to modern nihilism morphed into its opposite; Adorno (2005a, p. 96) claims that it "has become in face of manifest abundance the attitude of the backwoodsman, the deluded philistine, that same 'hard-done-by' mentality which the master-morality was invented to combat." Going further, Adorno (2000, p. 173) explains in his lectures that Nietzsche's master morality "remained objectively – going against [its] own intentions – the ideology of an expanding imperialism." In a different way, Horkheimer (2013, pp. 159–160) makes a related point: the "master morality" has metamorphosed into a projection of the oppressed masses, who lionize the antics of faux-supermen because they themselves have been robbed of their spontaneity.

Thus Nietzsche's relationship to fascism is dialectical: for Adorno and Horkheimer, Nietzsche both condemned *and* legitimated the barbarism of modernity. It is only in light of this dialectical tension that Horkheimer and Adorno (2002, p. 68) can argue that Nietzsche warned anxiously against Hitler (as in *Eclipse of Reason,* p. 108) while at the same time maintaining that Hitler put the *Genealogy of Morals* into practice "in all of its details." In much the same way, Adorno (2005a, p. 93) can describe Nietzsche as "kind, gentle, unegoistic and open-hearted" in the same passage that he writes, "If Cesare Borgia [whom

Nietzsche sometimes likened to an *Übermensch*] were resurrected today, he would look like David Friedrich Strauss and his name would be Adolf Hitler." Though Horkheimer (1993, p. 109) at times remarked that "Nietzsche himself cannot be thought of as an executioner, unlike many of his followers," Nietzsche could not be absolved of the role his legacy played in the 20th century. It was, after all, *Thus Spake Zarathustra* that was taken into the trenches during WWI.

Far from dismissing Nietzsche wholesale as a proto-fascist, Adorno and Horkheimer dialectically salvage Nietzsche from fascism by demonstrating that it is not so much what Nietzsche wrote as what he *became* that exemplified reason's self-undermining. *Dialectic*'s programmatic exaggeration in Excursus II, then, is meant to emphasize the distinct irony of how Nietzsche, whose writings were at the same time the Enlightenment's apotheosis and downfall, became the avatar and justification of barbarism in modernity. Hegel's famous conception of the "cunning of reason," in which history slyly progresses its rational designs in seemingly unreasonable ways, is flipped: Nietzsche may well be subject to the "cunning irony of reason," whereby the very nature of his inquiry into reason and attempt to overcome it made possible his instrumentalization by absolute unreason. Thus Excursus II is not a denunciation of Nietzsche on account of his ostensible fascism, but rather a reading of Nietzsche as himself embodying the cruel irony of the dialectic of enlightenment.

In addition to hyperbolizing Nietzsche in order to demonstrate his dialectical intertwinement with barbarism, Adorno and Horkheimer have a second important reason for implicating Nietzsche with fascism: namely, to distinguish themselves sharply from him on the question of reason's promise. On *Dialectic*'s analysis, Nietzsche's writings demonstrate the vacuity of reason but in doing so give no defensible reason why enlightenment should not be used barbarously. Even as they recognize Nietzsche's conscious attempts to affirm life, Horkheimer and Adorno (2002, p. 79) remind the reader that "the realization of Nietzsche's doctrines both refutes them and reveals their truth – a truth which, despite his yea-saying affirmation of life, was hostile to the spirit of reality." In other words, though Nietzsche would have found the Nazis abhorrent, his critique of National Socialism would have been subject to the very same arguments he levelled against Kant's rational moralism.

Writing prior to the atrocities of the Holocaust, Nietzsche was nevertheless aware that he was putting into writing the constitutive ambiguity of enlightenment. As Excursus II puts it, the "dark writers of the bourgeoisie [Nietzsche and de Sade], unlike its apologists, did not seek to avert the consequences of the Enlightenment with harmonistic doctrines. They did not pretend that formalistic reason had a closer affinity to morality than to immorality" (p. 92). Because of Nietzsche's frankness about the Janus-faced possibilities of enlightenment, Horkheimer (2013, p. 85) elsewhere refers to him as the "most consistent enlightener" and even sees a certain virtue in unmasking this brutal truth: "In proclaiming the identity of power

and reason, their pitiless doctrines are more compassionate than those of the moral lackeys of the bourgeoisie" (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002, p. 93). But it is in precisely this ambiguity that the danger Nietzsche exposes is most clear. Excursus I in *Dialectic* sets the scene:

> Whereas Nietzsche's attitude to enlightenment, and thus to Homer, remained ambivalent; whereas he perceived in enlightenment both the universal movement of sovereign mind, whose supreme exponent he believed himself to be, and a "nihilistic," life-denying power, only the second moment was taken over by his pre-fascist followers and perverted into an ideology (p. 36).

That is, even if only part of the ambivalence of enlightenment was taken up and transmuted into fascist ideology, the other "universal" movement can provide no grounds upon which to restrain or temper that violence.

Whereas Nietzsche's radical critique of Enlightenment seems to condemn reason *in toto*, Adorno and Horkheimer retain a minimalist, if elusive, conception of reason, however much Excursus II obscures it. Indeed, in their prefatory remarks to the section of *Dialectic* entitled "The Concept of Enlightenment," Adorno and Horkheimer state explicitly that they seek to "prepare a positive concept of enlightenment which liberates it from its entanglement in blind domination" (p. xvii). The "positive" form of enlightenment, however, begins as a relentlessly negative ethic of critique: what Adorno and Horkheimer later simply call philosophy. Much like the capacity of avant-garde art to crystallize tension and thereby critique existing social relations, philosophy is a form of refusal and resistance:

> Unlike its custodians, philosophy refers, among other things, to thinking which refuses to capitulate to the prevailing division of labor and does not accept prescribed tasks… Philosophy is not a synthesis, a basic science, or an overarching science but an effort to resist suggestion, a determination to protect intellectual and actual freedom (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002, p. 202).

Adorno and Horkheimer adopt this negative critical stance because they are acutely aware that articulating an abstract utopia would risk posing precisely the same sort of abstract negation of reality they critiqued in Nietzsche's writing. As Adorno (2005a, p. 102) puts it in *Minima Moralia*, "abstract utopia is all too compatible with the most insidious tendencies of society," reflecting his anxieties about how such utopian visions may be warped towards fascism.

Rather than cast their eyes forward onto a utopian future, Adorno and Horkheimer look elsewhere for this "positive" concept of enlightenment. Given *Dialectic*'s claim that western bourgeois rationality develops through the simultaneous domination of external and internal nature, Adorno and Horkheimer place their hope in mimesis, a potentially non-dominating relationship with nature.

Horkheimer (2013, p. 142) describes it as the "oldest biological means of survival" in which individuals mimic nature so as not to be destroyed by it. In *Dialectic,* the mimetic impulse is a "remembrance of nature within the subject," increasingly imperiled by the advance of civilization despite its constantly renewed radical potential (p. 32). In this way, though enlightenment collapses back into the barbarism from whence it was borne, reason is not monolithic for Adorno and Horkheimer. Despite the proliferation of instrumental rationality and its ability to reify anything it cannot systematize, critical *dialectical* thought is nevertheless possible.

It is this attempt to reformulate enlightenment that distinguishes Adorno and Horkheimer from Nietzsche. By putting fascism into Nietzsche's mouth in Excursus II, Adorno and Horkheimer performatively level a critique against a genealogy or deconstruction of enlightenment that relinquishes recourse to any form of substantive reason. The famous Nietzschean aphorism that when one looks "long into an abyss, the abyss also looks into you" (Nietzsche, 1989, p. 89) and repeated conception of future philosophers as birds venturing out over unknown moral oceans (Nietzsche, 1997a, pp. 228–229) are acknowledgements of the nihilistic departure from enlightenment *Dialectic* finds inextricably entangled with "blind domination." Writing in the wake of the Holocaust, it is this intractable moment of nihilism that Adorno and Horkheimer hope desperately to avoid. In this context, it is not hard to see why Adorno and Horkheimer reread the *Übermensch* as fulfilling a sort of individualistic moral universalism. They portray Nietzsche as tyrannically extending the implications of Kant:

> Nietzsche renews Kant's endeavor to transform the divine law into an autonomous principle, to rescue European civilization from giving up the ghost in English skepticism. Kant's principle: "that everything be done from the maxim of one's will as a will that could at the same time have as its object itself as giving universal law," is also the secret of the Overman. His will is no less despotic than the categorical imperative (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002, p. 90).

Though Nietzsche would have balked at this characterization, Adorno and Horkheimer's salvaging of substantive reason in the form of "philosophy" is a bulwark against precisely the fascistic reading of Nietzsche they knowingly advance in Excursus II.

In the final analysis, Nietzsche becomes an exaggerated mouthpiece in the pages of *Dialectic* for two connected reasons: he is exemplary of the dialectic of enlightenment *because* he does not retain any recourse to at least the minimal conception of reason that Adorno and Horkheimer keep alive. Read in this way, the exaggerated Nietzsche is neither lazy nor misinformed nor a wholesale condemnation of Nietzsche, but rather a warning against how the disposal of reason turns back upon itself. However, in defending such a minimal conception of

enlightenment vis-à-vis Nietzsche the authors of *Dialectic* unwittingly cast their own visions of political action into question. It is to Adorno and Horkheimer's infamous political quietude and purported conservatism that we must now turn.

Resignation, or, the Cunning Irony of Reason

Despite their efforts to communicate Nietzsche's entanglement with enlightenment by ironically exaggerating his misappropriation, Adorno and Horkheimer may similarly be victims of the "cunning irony of reason." That is, the authors of *Dialectic* soon found themselves subject to the very critiques they leveled against Nietzsche. Perhaps the most famous reproach along these lines comes from none other than Jürgen Habermas, the widely acknowledged standard-bearer of the "second wave" of Frankfurt School critical theory. For Habermas, *Dialectic*'s "positive concept of enlightenment" may have seemed to Adorno and Horkheimer a way to circumvent the irrationalism they feared in Nietzsche, but nevertheless closely resembled the abstract negation of reality they took issue with. As Habermas lays out in his *Theory of Communicative Action*, Adorno and Horkheimer begin their genealogy of instrumental reason at the dawn of hominization, or in their retelling, Odysseus' inauguration of bourgeois subjectivity through his self-effacement and consequent domination of nature. As described above, this drives Adorno and Horkheimer to locate this positive concept of enlightenment in the mimetic impulse, or as Habermas (1987, p. 382) calls it, "a reason that is before reason (which was from the beginning instrumental)." For Habermas (1987, p. 382), the issue is that Adorno and Horkheimer are incapable of communicating a theory of mimesis, for it lies outside the empirical and material history of western rationality; "At most, we can circle around this idea, drawing on images from Judaeo-Christian mysticism" (see also Verdeja, 2009). Adorno and Horkheimer are then caught in a paradox; they must rely on a theory of mimesis but must abstain from elucidating it abstractly, given that their appeal to mimesis in the first place was an alternative to the abstract negation they critique so stridently in Nietzsche. As Habermas (1987, p. 383) puts it, "the 'dialectic of enlightenment' is an *ironic* affair: It shows the self-critique of reason the way to truth, and at the same time contests the possibility 'that at this stage of complete alienation the idea of truth is still accessible.'" The irony, of course, is doubly so: not only does *Dialectic* result in aporia on its own terms, but it does so in almost exactly the way that the authors wished to avoid.

In his fifth lecture on the *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, Habermas radicalizes his critique by reasoning that the aporia at the heart of Adorno and Horkheimer's appeal to the "mimetic impulse" renders them guilty of the irrationalism with which they charged Nietzsche. For Habermas (2018, p. 123), Nietzsche's totalizing critique of reason entails departing from rationalist grounds

and "enthrone[ing] *taste*, 'the Yes and No of the palate,' as the sole organ of 'knowledge' beyond truth and falsehood, beyond good and evil." *Dialectic* is similarly guilty of jettisoning reason: "Horkheimer and Adorno find themselves in the same embarrassment as Nietzsche: If they do not want to renounce the effect of a final unmasking and still want to *continue with critique*, they will have to leave at least one rational criterion intact for their explanation of the corruption of *all* rational criteria" (pp. 126–127). Habermas (2018, p. 129) ultimately finds *Dialectic* lacking, lamenting that Adorno and Horkheimer "surrendered themselves to an uninhibited skepticism regarding reason, instead of weighing the grounds that cast doubt on this skepticism itself." Put differently, Habermas locates Adorno and Horkheimer within the very ambiguity of enlightenment that Nietzsche illuminated: critical of reason's inextricable relation with power, but unable to provide arguments against the brutality of its instrumental forms. *Pace* Habermas, on my analysis above, Adorno and Horkheimer performatively exaggerate Nietzsche precisely so that they could differentiate themselves on the question of reason, for they at least find Nietzsche's position dangerous and insufficiently dialectical. The distinct irony, then, consists in that Adorno and Horkheimer's own attempts to salvage enlightenment were subject to much the same critique they posed against Nietzsche.

Whether or not Habermas' charge of irrationalism is fair to either Nietzsche or the authors of *Dialectic* certainly remains a contested question among scholars (see, for instance, Owen, 2018 and Ridley, 2007). Indeed, Maeve Cooke (2020, p. 587) has argued that for Adorno and Horkheimer the role of critical theory and the negative dialectical reason that animates it was to disclose the social conditions that produce dehumanizing pseudo-realities and encourage fruitless actionism: far from the paralyzed seizure of thought Habermas ascribes to *Dialectic.* In this way, Habermas misses the mark; while Adorno and Horkheimer may have been caught in a historical or practical impasse, reason itself persists in the form of critique.

Alternatively, Habermas may well have taken a leaf out of his Frankfurt School forefathers' book. While *Theory of Communicative Action* and *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* condemn Adorno and Horkheimer for foreclosing reason in their attempt to salvage it, Habermas (1979, p. 43) elsewhere describes their approach as a "strategy of hibernation." Because "hibernation" implies an eventual thawing, Habermas may have at one point acknowledged Adorno and Horkheimer's alleged irrationalism as a historical response to the existing social conditions of the mid-20th century, subject to eventual reevaluation. Nevertheless, in order to defend his own attempt to advance the "unfinished project of enlightenment" Habermas decisively differentiates himself from Adorno and Horkheimer by consciously painting them with the same brush that they painted Nietzsche with some half a century earlier.

Whatever the case, if Adorno and Horkheimer find themselves unwillingly in the same boat as Nietzsche it is only partly due to their critical theoretical dispositions

toward enlightenment. The Frankfurt School thinkers' infamous political quietism is likewise illuminated by their dialectical encounter with Nietzsche. Here, the parallel with which I intend to conclude this article stems from Adorno's treatment of Nietzsche's famous dictum *amor fati*: love thy fate. In an aphorism from *Mimina Moralia* entitled "court of appeal," Adorno writes that

> We might well ask whether we have more reason to love what happens to us, to affirm what is because it is, than to believe true what we hope. Is it not the same false inference that leads from the existence of stubborn facts to their erection as the highest value? As he criticizes in the leap from hope to truth? If he consigns "happiness through an *idée fixe*" to the lunatic asylum, the origin of *amor fati* might be sought in a prison. Love of stone walls and barred windows is the last resort of someone who sees and has nothing else to love (p. 98).

For Nietzsche, a genealogy of the subterranean histories obscured by modern morality is required to love one's fate, and subsequently to make moral values all one's own. And yet, for all his exhortations to affirm life, Nietzsche's central teaching represents nothing more to Adorno than a defeated conservatism under modernity's rampant instrumental rationality: "resignation bows down in the *amor fati*, the glorification of the absurdist of all things, before the powers that be" (p. 98). It is only here that Adorno (2005a, p. 98) once again gestures towards the elusive form of reason he and Horkheimer sought to salvage in *Dialectic*: "In the end hope, wrested from reality by negating it, is the only form in which truth appears." This negative truth, this philosophy of constant ethical critique, is meant to resist reason's fascistic tendencies without succumbing to the resignation of *amor fati*.

If the issue with Nietzsche's affirmative politics was that it permitted too much, Adorno and Horkheimer's negative philosophy appeared to some to permit too little. In their anxiety to preclude the horrors they associated with Nietzsche in Excursus II, the negative conception of enlightenment that Adorno and Horkheimer used to critique social totality appeared so radical as to preclude all conceivable political futures and invited claims that it dissolves into the conservatism with which they charged Nietzsche. Given the tendency of instrumental rationality to reify thinking and the power of the culture industry to standardize and commodify life, the prospect of any emancipatory *praxis* faded into the distance. Though Horkheimer (2013, p. 186) allowed himself the brief rumination that "philosophy can function as a corrective of history, so to speak," Adorno's steadfast opposition to abstract utopia left him only able to gesture toward avant-garde art and the mimetic impulse.

This cruel irony is crystallized in Adorno's "Resignation" (2005b), a short essay penned in defense of his own political quietism some years after he himself had dismissed *amor fati* as resignation before the powers that be. Writing in response to

allegations of conservatism by the students' movements of 1968, Adorno defends thinking as the final refuge of life in a thoroughly commodified world:

> The happiness visible to the eye of a thinker is the happiness of mankind. The universal tendency toward suppression goes against thought as such. Such thought is happiness, even where unhappiness prevails; thought achieves happiness in the expression of unhappiness. Whoever refuses to permit this thought to be taken from him has not resigned (p. 203).

Though he and Habermas both signed a petition in support of the students' movements shortly beforehand, limiting their critique to the pseudo-activity of the students' violent tactics, Adorno's pivot to negative thinking as a bulwark against resignation was interpreted as nothing more than resignation itself. According to Cooke, there is at least some truth in this claim. Adorno's dismissal of gradual societal change, privileging of theory as a catalyst for radical societal transformation, and privileging of the critical theorist's interpretation of social reality all contributed to the aporetic politics of the early Frankfurt School (Cooke, 2020, p. 592). Thus, if Nietzsche's irony was that he became the figurehead of the nihilistic barbarism he sought so profoundly to transcend, the irony for Adorno and Horkheimer lies in the fact that the negative philosophy they hoped would distinguish them from Nietzsche led ultimately to charges of the conservatism they strove to avoid.

I have argued above that paying attention to Nietzsche's decidedly exaggerated presentation in Excursus II and its disjunction with Adorno and Horkheimer's clearly more ambivalent treatments elsewhere illuminates at least three important things. First, Adorno and Horkheimer's caricature of Nietzsche is self-conscious, inasmuch as they want to make clear his dialectical relationship with fascism. Second, because of this dangerous ambiguity, an exaggerated Nietzsche allows Adorno and Horkheimer to more clearly differentiate themselves on the question of salvaging enlightenment reason: whereas Nietzsche and de Sade liquidate it and playfully seek to leap across the nihilistic void they uncover, Adorno and Horkheimer opt instead to recuperate philosophy as a negative conception of reason. Finally, the "cunning irony of reason" that the authors of *Dialectic* portray through their programmatic reading of Nietzsche also illuminates what befell the critical form of thought Adorno and Horkheimer used to distinguish themselves from Nietzsche in the first place. When they wrote the words "but only exaggeration is true," Adorno and Horkheimer perhaps did not foresee that they too would be subject to the same ironic self-effacement that Nietzsche was. And yet, just as Nietzsche's work has proven to be a wellspring of critical and affirmative inspiration despite his association with fascism, Adorno and Horkheimer's writings continue to be a fount of radical critique in an age of mounting far-right extremism (see, for example, Mariotti, 2016; Ross, 2016).

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