

# Tragic Genealogies: Adorno's Distinctive Genealogical Method

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**Abstract:** As genealogy has gained greater disciplinary recognition over the last two decades, it has become increasingly common to call any historically oriented philosophy, such as Theodor W. Adorno's, "genealogy." In this article, I show that Adorno's philosophy performs genealogy's defining functions of "problematization" and "possibilization." Moreover, it does so in unique ways that constitute a significant contribution to genealogical practice. Adorno's method, here called "tragic genealogy," is particularly well-suited to the genealogical analysis of traditional philosophical problems and to the critical reanimation of declining, but ethically significant, values. Nevertheless, I also argue that Adorno's philosophy cannot be assimilated into genealogical practice without rejecting or revising some of its Hegelian influences, particularly its philosophy of history and its modal metaphysics.

**Key Words:** Genealogy, Adorno, Critical Theory, Freedom

**W**hy do moral ideals lose their traction in modern societies? When Marx and Nietzsche were writing in the nineteenth century, these radical critics of bourgeois ideology emphasized how ideals like freedom and equality concealed the coercion and antagonism at the heart of capitalist social orders. Their criticisms unmasked the mundane function of ideas that were supposed to be lofty social goals—not tools of manipulation. Today, however, critical theorists often emphasize precisely the *opposite* claim: our social ideals are not just manipulative ideologies; they are, rather, indispensable for struggles against oppression.<sup>1</sup> At first

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1. See especially the method of "normative reconstruction" in Axel Honneth's critical theory, described in the introduction of his *Freedom's Right*, and

glance, this change may seem to be a course correction from the earlier critics' overstatement of the case, but, in fact, contemporary theorists take themselves to be in a quite different historical situation: our ideals today are subject to widespread cynicism, and there is, as yet, no substitute for them for providing moral encouragement and orientation. This analysis gives us a framework for understanding the breadth of recent philosophical projects aiming to vindicate the historical emergence of enlightenment ideals.<sup>2</sup>

The analysis may also help frame the growth of "philosophical genealogy" in the last two decades. Since at least Bernard Williams' *Truth and Truthfulness*, genealogy has expanded into a fertile, pluralistic field of research with scholars from 'analytic' and 'continental' philosophy, history, and cultural studies. As this practice has developed, it has been deployed both to unmask ideas and practices that conceal power and to redeem the validity of ideas and practices with suspect historical origins. Williams calls the first, unmasking kind of account a "subversive" genealogy, and he calls the second, redeeming kind a "vindicatory" genealogy.<sup>3</sup> Genealogy can allow theorists simultaneously to criticize and defend the norms that structure our ways of life; in this way, genealogy is a powerful tool for analyzing and combating objectionable changes to those norms, like the cynicism eating away at classical bourgeois ideals like freedom.

There is a danger, however, that today's work in genealogy, especially as it appears in recent Frankfurt School critical theory, can serve as an uncritical apology for norms that are deeply intertwined with oppressive structures.<sup>4</sup> To avoid this, genealogies of modern norms need to account *both* for the sources and negative consequences of their decline *and* the opportunities for transformation that their decline presents. One might think, for example, that the fragility of solidarity today is partly due to the identitarian limitations that inhere in this concept, and that only if

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Jürgen Habermas's recent "genealogy of postmetaphysical reason" in *Auch Eine Geschichte der Philosophie*.

2. Such projects run the gamut of political and philosophical positions, from Steven Pinker's conservative *The Better Angels of Our Nature*, to Charles Taylor's communitarian reconstruction of liberalism in *A Secular Age*, or to Bernard Williams' non-foundationalist justification of "truthfulness."
3. Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness*.
4. For instance, see Schaub, "Misdevelopments, Pathologies, and Normative Revolutions," for a criticism of the conservatism of Honneth's method of normative reconstruction; and see Allen, "Having One's Cake," for a criticism of the "whiggishness" of Habermas's genealogy of western history.

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solidarity comes to mean something else will it have a stronger hold on individuals.<sup>5</sup>

In this article, I will show that Theodor Adorno's critical theory provides profound resources for genealogies of just this sort. By critically reconstructing his historical approach to the analysis of concepts, I argue that Adorno provides a distinctive form of genealogy—what I call “tragic genealogy”—that simultaneously analyzes the complicity of modern norms with oppressive structures as well as the potential transformation of these norms so that they might help us resist oppression. Suitably reconstructed, Adorno's theory performs genealogy's defining functions of “problematization” and “possibilization” in a unique way.<sup>6</sup> I claim that Adorno should be an important reference point for studying genealogical method and for conceiving the “normative ambivalence”<sup>7</sup> characteristic of modern societies. In these ways, Adorno's work is crucial for an analysis of the complex ways that we are both restricted and enabled by the norms constituting us.<sup>8</sup>

Despite this overarching goal of the paper, though, I also hold that Adorno's theory must be *critically reconstructed* if it is to be a serviceable genealogical method. We cannot take all his philosophical commitments on board if we want to problematize our relationship to the present and enable its potential transformation. This critical discussion takes me into some technical dimensions of Adorno's philosophy at the end of the article, and I want to flag their relevance in advance.

Adorno maintains three questionable commitments that conflict with reconstructing him as a genealogist: a reliance on a “universal history” of social evolution, the claim that society is structured as a totality, and a revisionist theory of modality indebted to Hegelian logic. Each of these commitments is highly complex and subject to much disagreement in Adorno scholarship, and this paper is not the venue for going through those paces. Nevertheless, readers familiar with Nietzsche and Foucault will know that they viewed universal histories, the idea of a social totality, and Hegel's logic as *incompatible* with genealogy. Against universal history, genealogy

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5. See Pensky, *The Ends of Solidarity*, esp. Ch. 2.

6. Koopman, *Genealogy as Critique*, introduces and systematizes the term “problematization” for genealogical practice; Lorenzini, “On possibilising genealogy,” does the same for “possibilization.”

7. For critical discussions of “normative ambivalence,” see the contributions to Ikäheimo et al, *Recognition and Ambivalence*.

8. For a seminal treatment of critical subjectivity along these lines—focusing particularly on the work of Foucault and Butler—see Allen, *The Politics of Ourselves*.

seeks ruptures and breaks in history rather than a continuous evolution;<sup>9</sup> against totality, it breaks down ostensibly large historical formations into multiplicities of local histories and struggles;<sup>10</sup> and against Hegel's grounding of historical events on the "Actuality" of the Idea, genealogy analyzes singularities that cannot be deduced from an essence.<sup>11</sup> Only on these premises, Foucault and Nietzsche argue, can genealogies effectively defamiliarize our present with the tools of historical analysis.<sup>12</sup> While I do not argue that an Adornian approach to genealogy must simply adopt these alternative commitments, I *do* argue that Adorno's three commitments above must either be jettisoned or revised for his theory to be a viable form of genealogical practice. Hence, the interpretation I present of Adorno here—though I do not think it does violence to the primary texts—is curated to bring Adorno's genealogical potential to the fore.

My argument will proceed in three sections. In Section I, I will give an overview of why it makes sense to present Adorno as a genealogist. Here I survey the recent literature defining philosophical genealogy, account for existing scholarship on Adorno in this connection, characterize my interpretive method for reconstructing Adorno's theory, and overview the promises and dangers of Adorno's "tragic genealogies." In Section II, I begin reconstructing Adorno's genealogical procedure and introduce his genealogy of the concept of "freedom" as an exemplification of the tragic genealogical method. In Section III, I reconstruct the final steps of Adorno's approach to genealogy—again with reference to the problem of freedom—and I argue that in these steps we can especially see both the uniqueness and deficiencies of Adorno's method. Accordingly, I also criticize Adorno's questionable philosophical commitments in this final section before showing that they are not essential to a workable reconstruction of Adornian genealogy.

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9. Foucault; "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," 90.

10. Foucault; "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," 88–89.

11. Foucault; "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," 94–95.

12. They both oppose the *defamiliarizing* use of history to the appearance of history in Hegel's philosophy, which they take to be an idealistic use of history that reinforces, rather than defamiliarizes, our existing relationship to the present (see Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, 33; Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," 77–80). For a more nuanced discussion of these issues in Nietzsche and Foucault than what I can offer here, see Saar, *Genealogie als Kritik*.

## I. Adorno a Genealogist? An Overview

Recent scholarship has highlighted the remarkable similarities between Foucaultian genealogy and Adorno's philosophical method,<sup>13</sup> emphasizing their historicizing and denaturalizing approach to social and conceptual practices. Moreover, both aim to identify the tensions or contradictions in the present that potentiate and anticipate changes to our experience or to the organization of social practices.<sup>14</sup> These commonalities lend an initial plausibility to the claim that Adorno, too, is a genealogist.

Similarities notwithstanding, however, Adorno's method is not the same as Foucault's.<sup>15</sup> And while it is common to note Adorno's proximity to thinkers of history like Hegel, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Marx, there has not yet been a systematic study of what makes Adorno's variety of historical inquiry *genealogy* rather than another variety of historical inquiry. Given the differences between Adorno and these other thinkers associated with genealogical practice, Adorno's adherence to this lineage is not self-evident.

The absence of such research has become particularly salient in light of the pathbreaking work that scholars have done to distinguish the types and functions of genealogy. According to Williams and Koopman, there are two basic types of genealogy: "subversive" and "vindictory." Subversive genealogies analyze the historical genesis of their objects to challenge or vitiate their value in the present; typically, such genealogies will deepen this analysis by showing how problematic origins were not an historically isolated problem but that this genesis has extended into the contemporary function of the genealogies' objects. Nietzsche's account of Western morality's entanglement with a resentful urge to punish is the prime example of such a subversive genealogy.<sup>16</sup> Vindictory genealogies, on the other hand, interrogate the historical emergence of their objects to

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13. Allen, *Critique on the Couch*; Allen, *The End of Progress*; Allen, "Reason, Power, and History: Re-reading the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*"; Cook, "Adorno, Foucault, and Critique"; Cook, *Adorno on Nature*.

14. See Allen, *The End of Progress*, and Allen, *Critique on the Couch*.

15. See Ng, "Back to Adorno: Critical Theory's Problem of Normative Grounding," and Baeza, *Contradiction, Critique, and Dialectic in Adorno*, 263–326. See also Pensky and Whyman's important articles on Adorno's difficult concept of "natural history:" Pensky, "Natural History: The Life and Afterlife of a Concept in Adorno," Pensky, "Toward a Critical Theory of Death: Adorno on Dying Today," Whyman, "Understanding Adorno on Natural-History." For a classic discussion of nature and history in Adorno and Benjamin, see Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*.

16. Nietzsche, *On The Genealogy of Morality*.

redeem their value in the present. Williams' vindication of "truthfulness" as an orienting norm of epistemic and social practice is a good example.<sup>17</sup> Allen argues that subversive genealogies tend to reveal their objects' emergence as historically contingent and avoidable: they, consequently, tend to have a denaturalizing effect that reinserts a supposedly natural or static object back into the social relations and forces that produce it. On the other hand, a vindicatory genealogy typically shows that its object's historical emergence was necessitated.<sup>18</sup>

The genealogical method can also be divided into two functions: "problematization" and "possibilization." Koopman argues that problematization consists in revealing the "depth conditions"—themselves understood as historically emergent—of the problems that define our relation to the present.<sup>19</sup> For instance, a genealogy could interrogate the history that accounts for why the dominant problematization of 'freedom' has been 'the problem of free will and determinism' since the Enlightenment. An effective problematization will disclose the diverse and complex causes for why the problem of freedom was posed and canonized in *this* way, and not some other way, and what sorts of conditions were in place that allowed this problematization of freedom to stick.<sup>20</sup> "Possibilization," meanwhile, has only quite recently been thematized as a function of genealogy, even if it has always been implicit in the practice. Lorenzini defines this function as the identification of "critical attitudes" and "counter-conducts" that actors create, or may create, to resist and change the problematizations defining their relations to the present.<sup>21</sup> Possibilization, then, can encourage targeted practices reacting back on the tensions disclosed and "intensified" by genealogical problematization.<sup>22</sup>

Adorno offers a unique variety of genealogical criticism that includes both vindicatory and subversive elements as well as problematizing and possibilizing functions. I call this method "tragic genealogy." Tragic

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17. See Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness*.

18. Both Koopman, *Genealogy as Critique*, and Allen, "Dripping with Dirt and Blood," argue that, in fact, most genealogies combine vindicatory and subversive strands (Allen, "Dripping with Dirt and Blood," 470–471).

19. Koopman, *Genealogy as Critique*, 33.

20. Koopman, *Genealogy as Critique*, 48. There is an intended ambiguity with the term "problematization": it can be a "nominal object of inquiry" as well as an "act of critical inquiry" (see Koopman, *Genealogy as Critique*, 98). Throughout this essay, I will use the term in both ways; context will clarify in which sense I am using it.

21. Lorenzini, "On possibilising genealogy," 12–13.

22. See Koopman, *Genealogy as Critique*, 100, on "intensification."

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genealogies capture and diagnose concepts, structures, or behaviors that are at risk of disappearing or becoming obsolete. By studying the fate of such objects—highlighting and intensifying the threat of their obsolescence—the genealogist can explain with greater force and determinacy how social practices affect and erode the objects through which they reproduce themselves. There is both a vindictory and a subversive element to these genealogies. They are vindictory because they attribute the decline of their objects, in part, to the deficiencies of the objects themselves; like tragic heroes, they merit their own fate because of their flaws. Tragic genealogies are subversive, on the other hand, since they try to rescue and preserve their objects' redeeming features from obsolescence. In this respect, too, tragic genealogies resemble their dramatic counterparts: as with a tragic hero, the resistance of the object to its fate stems from its redeeming qualities. Having shown their object of analysis to be both complicit in, and resistant to, the social forces eroding it, the genealogist intends to produce the conviction that the object should not decline and that social practices should support and develop its redeeming features. These subversive and vindictory elements of tragic genealogy correspond to "problematization."<sup>23</sup>

In addition, tragic genealogies can, on the back of effective problematization, engender at least three forms of possibilization. First, by reconfiguring a declining problematization, they can reactivate background moral intuitions or values that have grown difficult to access. Second, they can demonstrate the critical potential of philosophical work informed by an historical understanding of social phenomena. Third, they can account for unique experiences—"fugitive experiences," as Jay Bernstein calls them<sup>24</sup>—that promise the possible institution of a declining problematization's redeeming features in cognitive, ethical, or political experience. Such experiences indirectly model aspects of a different possible life than the one we are currently able to lead.<sup>25</sup>

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23. In Zuidervaart's classic text on Adorno's aesthetic theory, he argues suggestively that Adorno "locate[s] cultural phenomena in a 'context of problems,'" which "avoid[s] both the narrowness of technical historiographies and the imprecision of global philosophies of history" (Zuidervaart, *Adorno's Aesthetic Theory*, 299). Zuidervaart's account is brief (299–302) and predates the literature on genealogical problematization; nevertheless, there are some intriguing parallels between his comments on Adorno's historiography and the fuller account I give in this paper.

24. Bernstein, *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics*, 418.

25. See Jütten, "Adorno on Hope," esp. 299–300, and Gordon, "Adorno's Concept of Metaphysical Experience."

While one can see, from this high-level summary, how tragic genealogy might map onto the problematizing and possibilizing functions of genealogy, it should also be apparent that tragic genealogy as a method carries some tensions. It is not clear whether it is a form of vindictory or subversive genealogy: the same object's history can be considered from either perspective. The tragic aspect of this method introduces a different tension, as well. In tragedy, it is ambiguous whether the hero's fate is avoidable. There are some indications that his flaws could be overcome so that he might not bring about his own doom; however, there are other signs that his fate is inevitable. A similar ambiguity affects Adorno's tragic genealogy. At two different levels, it is unclear if the history of his genealogy's objects is contingent or necessary. The first level concerns the account of the object's genesis. For Adorno, concepts, structures, and behaviors emerge historically as functions of social adjustment, and they play a functionally necessary role in the reproduction of the social totality.<sup>26</sup> If the genesis and function of the genealogist's objects are necessitated by the society under critical scrutiny, what grounds do we have for believing that they might function otherwise?<sup>27</sup>

The second level of ambiguity in Adorno's account of historical contingency resides in his philosophy of history. Adorno has a complex account of universal history that presents the history of the human species as continuous domination of inner and outer nature.<sup>28</sup> For Adorno, history is not only this domination, but domination's continuity nonetheless prevents Adorno from asserting that any given historical event is contingent. He writes that "only if things might have gone differently" would critique be possible at all.<sup>29</sup> This "if" is important; it—so I will argue—indicates that while we are not licensed to say that the course of history is *necessary*, neither are we licensed to say that it is *contingent*. Thus, even if the tragic

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26. See Adorno (2000), 344–345.

27. The distinction between "levels" of ambiguity in Adorno's genealogical approach is my attribution, not Adorno's. Adorno does not explicitly distinguish dimensions of generality in his dialectical analysis of concepts, since one of the rhetorical strategies of his work is to mirror the fragmented character of the concepts studied in a fragmentary, aphoristic presentation. In this article, the role of Adorno's rhetoric and writing style in tragic genealogy is not a central focus (although see the end of Section II). These dimensions of Adornian genealogy will be a subject for later work. I am indebted to Fabian Freyenhagen, Alberto Bejarano Romo, and an anonymous reviewer for prompting me to address this question.

28. Adorno (2000), 313–315. See O'Connor, "Philosophy of History," esp. 83–84, for discussion of just how complicated Adorno's philosophy of history is.

29. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 323.

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genealogy of an object can disclose its historical genesis in a novel and defamiliarizing way, we cannot say whether this product of history itself was avoidable. This threatens to leave us in the position of a tragedy's audience: unable to change the protagonist's fate and unable to know what could change, or could have changed, it.

Ultimately, however, I will argue that Adorno's commitments to universal history and to a conception of social totality are not essential to his theory—indeed, I will claim they are in tension with some of his other social-theoretical commitments—and that we can revise or reject them while retaining the core of the tragic genealogical method. Thus, my approach to interpreting Adorno is a critical reconstruction: I do not advance my interpretation as an exegesis but as a selective emphasis of those elements of Adorno's thought most suited to philosophical genealogy.<sup>30</sup> On my view, this approach is a promising one for reanimating the living spirit of Adorno's critical theory, which can sometimes be obscured in the Byzantine complexities of his negative dialectics. Throughout the rest of this essay, I rely on two strategies for reconstructing the tragic genealogical method. The first is a heuristic device: I present the method as a six-step procedure. Anyone who has read Adorno knows that such a heuristic is a highly artificial device; Adorno's writing is intentionally aphoristic and fragmentary. Nevertheless, this heuristic is helpful for reconstructing the complicated steps of Adorno's argumentation. The six steps analyze the genealogy's object at increasing levels of generality: the first takes the object "naively" as it presents itself immediately to experience, while the sixth places the object in a conception of universal history. The second reconstructive strategy is that I exemplify Adorno's genealogical method by presenting his analysis of freedom in *Negative Dialectics*. My hope is that this not only gives greater concreteness to the paper's methodological discussions but also provides the proverbial 'proof in the pudding' that tragic genealogies are worth taking seriously as a method for analyzing traditional philosophical problems and for critically reanimating the declining, but ethically significant, norms of modern societies.

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30. This approach, as it happens, does not depart from Adorno's own efforts in the history of philosophy: "I would like to encourage you [. . .] to approach the Kant text in what appears to me to be the only appropriate way, namely, to read it with X-ray eyes. This means reading it in such a way as to make its hidden content and its hidden puzzles as transparent as the Cabbalists of old tried to make the Torah. Incidentally, any other approach to the great philosophical texts seems to me to be impossible" (Adorno, *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, 52).

## II. Tragic Genealogy: Problematizing and Possibilizing

### Steps 1–4: Continuities and Novelties

Tragic genealogies can be heuristically presented as a six-step method. In the first step of a tragic genealogy, a problem is identified and depicted in its received, seemingly natural guise. The problem of freedom, for instance, has come to assume the form of Kant's third antinomy: how can we be free if nature is causally determined and if we are ourselves part of nature?<sup>31</sup> In a second step, previous solutions to the problem are considered and shown to be inadequate. In the case of freedom, Adorno argues that compatibilist solutions are purely verbal clarifications of what we mean by 'freedom' and 'determinism,' while incompatibilist solutions like Kant's illegitimately appeal to the mind or will's "ontological priority" over empirical reality.<sup>32</sup> Then, third, the problem's defining terms are disaggregated across several historical dynamics that plausibly explain why the terms have taken the shape they have. For Adorno, our modern understanding of freedom predominantly drew from the realms of psychology and law: freedom's mark of 'spontaneity' derives from psychology's concept of 'impulse,'<sup>33</sup> while its connection with accountability and rationality was largely sourced from law.<sup>34</sup> As for the antithesis, our deterministic conception of nature comes from the necessary assumptions of the experimental sciences.<sup>35</sup>

By the third step's reinsertion of a problem's seemingly 'natural' terms back into their constitutive historical dynamics, these terms' ostensible abstraction from social demands is removed. 'Determinism,' to wit, is not just a theory of how natural phenomena are connected in space and time, but an indispensable assumption for a practice of science oriented toward the mastery [*Herrschaft*] of nature. 'Freedom,' understood as a mediation of rational principles and unpredictable impulses, is equally indispensable to modern practices of jurisprudence and moral judgment.

This permits the tragic genealogist to take a fourth step, which is to interrogate how the terms of the problem function in different—often incompatible—ways according to the diverse empirical needs for which they are enlisted. For instance, a paradigmatic modern theorist of freedom like Kant at times defines freedom in terms of causality and at others in

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31. Adorno (2000), 212.

32. Adorno (2000), 213.

33. Adorno (2000), 213.

34. Adorno (2000), 212, 238, 247.

35. Adorno (2000), 214.

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opposition to it<sup>36</sup>—depending, respectively, on whether he is speaking of freedom as the submission of the empirical subject to the moral law, or of freedom as indifference to natural causes.<sup>37</sup> Alternatively, one can refer to the development of the psychological sciences, which furnished the modern concept of freedom with its mark of 'spontaneity,' but now, through its theory of the introjection of moral authority, challenges the conception of freedom as the reflectively-endorsed self-application of law.<sup>38</sup> This fourth step not only allows the genealogist to raise the question: are we using the same concept in all the instances that its name is invoked? It also allows them to examine whether any of these diverse uses are ideological, where 'ideological use' consists in borrowing the presumed validity of the concept to conceal or surreptitiously justify practices of subordination.<sup>39</sup>

These first four steps of tragic genealogy fit inside the tent of problematization. Adorno begins with the "second-natural" appearance of a problematization defining our present,<sup>40</sup> and then intensifies this problematization by showing how attempts to ameliorate it theoretically are

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36. Adorno (2000), 228.

37. For criticisms of Adorno's interpretation of Kant on this point (among others), see Jütten, "Adorno on Kant, Freedom, and Determinism," and Pippin, "Negative Ethics: Adorno on the Falseness of Bourgeois Life." Jütten's article, however, is much more sensitive to the genealogical dimension of Adorno's Kant interpretation than Pippin's is, claiming that one can distinguish between "critical" and "metacritical" levels of Adorno's Kant interpretation.

38. See Allen, *Critique on the Couch*, and Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*.

39. Not all genealogists understand themselves to be doing ideology critique. Foucault distances himself from the term because, on his view, it presupposes that the social critic occupies a true, 'non-ideological' perspective (Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*). Certain interpretations of Nietzsche as a 'perspectivist' may exclude a Nietzschean concept of ideology as well. However, Adorno's conception of ideology does not assume that the critic has access to a true perspective—this is one signification of Adorno's "negativism" (see Freyenhagen, *Adorno's Practical Philosophy*, for a reconstruction and defense of Adorno's negativism). And, indeed, Foucault and Nietzsche both criticize problematizations for their partiality and their suitedness to particular interests. Foucault, for example, argues that the practices and discourses of sexuality in modern western societies disguise the operations of biopolitical power by misconstruing them as "repressive," rather than "productive," power (Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, v. 1, 85–91). Adorno's criticism of concepts as 'ideological' achieves something similar.

40. Adorno's understanding of "second nature" comes from Lukács, *Theory of the Novel*. Adorno first uses the concept in print in Adorno, "The Actuality of Philosophy." See Allen, *The End of Progress*, 186–192, and Allen, *Critique on the Couch*, for discussion.

insufficient—typically by showing how these theoretical resolutions fail to track the experiences organized through this problematization. With the intensified problem in hand, Adorno then shows how its components stem from, and continue functioning within, historical formations and institutions. This is one of the ‘denaturalizing’ or ‘unmasking’ dimensions of tragic genealogy. This denaturalizing step sets the stage for Adorno to further problematize the received problem he began with in the first step of the genealogy.<sup>41</sup> He can point out the confusions, contradictions, and potential misuses of concepts that the received problematization has made available or incentivized. This prepares the initial problematization for further questioning and, perhaps, to revision. What experiences or persons has it excluded or failed to cover? Which components of the problematization are suppressed by the practices with which they are entwined, and which are emphasized?

There are at least two novel emphases of Adorno’s approach to problematization that can be noted at this point. First, not all genealogies start by considering an existing problematization on its own terms; Adorno’s do. Nietzsche, by contrast, begins the *Genealogy* by presenting his contemporary historians of good and evil as “strange,” “interesting,” but “idiotic.”<sup>42</sup> Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish*, for its part, opens by juxtaposing spectacular torture to practices of discipline out of the public eye.<sup>43</sup> In these cases, genealogical problematization sets out with a striking characterization or image that, like a bolt of lightning, instantly makes strange a problematization we have become accustomed to.

Adorno’s approach is not simply more slow-going by comparison; it also underscores what appears intrinsically compelling about the problematization and emphasizes that there is no easy way to think differently about how its component terms might be configured.<sup>44</sup> Through this analysis, the problematization’s intuitive or pretheoretical plausibility is,

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41. I am again relying on Koopman’s distinction between “problematization” as a “nominal object of inquiry” and “problematization” as an “act of critical inquiry.” See Koopman, *Genealogy as Critique*, 98. The seemingly ‘natural’ problematization corresponds to the nominal object, and the reworking, or further development, of the received nominal object corresponds to the act of critical inquiry.

42. Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, 10–11.

43. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 3–6. *Discipline and Punish* is one of Foucault’s “archaeological” works, but I consider the general characterization of genealogical method to also apply to his archaeologies.

44. For example: “The either-or exacted by the question of free will is both succinct and worth asking” (Adorno [2000], 212).

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to some extent, vindicated by genealogical reconstruction.<sup>45</sup> In fact, this fourth step radicalizes the problematization, driving it towards *aporia* to preempt abstract philosophical attempts at suppressing or misrecognizing its aporetical character.<sup>46</sup> This wrinkle of Adorno's method is innovative because it seeks to make genealogy's defamiliarizing gestures a consequence of the immanent critique of the analyzed object. An effective construction of a problematization's contradictory, aporetical character is supposed, of itself, to render it strange, or to bring out (as it were) its inner strangeness.<sup>47</sup>

Adorno's focus on philosophical problematizations is distinct in another respect. In his analysis of determinism, for instance, he does not simply infer that the third antinomy is a *false* problem. Indeed, such an inference would make little sense as a sequel to his prior radicalizing of the problematization. On the contrary, he intends to show that, given the concordance between our forms of thinking and objective social processes, we cannot avoid thinking and acting in terms of the problematization. For example, we do, in fact, conceive phenomena as causally connected, and at present there is no alternative to that—even if there are signs that causality is in “crisis.”<sup>48</sup> The problematizations we inherit have a charac-

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45. This understanding of genealogy contrasts with Saar's (helpful but, by my lights, overly narrow) definition of genealogy: “Genealogies essentially can be thought of as ‘critical’ and ‘effective’ histories, i.e., histories that fundamentally change the conception of what they are about” (Saar, “Understanding Genealogy,” 398). While, as I discuss below, tragic genealogies do “change the conception of what they are about,” they *also* show the plausibility and un-avoidability of the problematization they address.

46. To refer again to our example, Adorno thinks that Kant's construction of freedom in terms of the third antinomy, for example, showed great insight. However, Kant was wrong (i.e., ideologically misled) to think that he could so quickly defang the conceptual conflict of freedom (see Adorno 2000, 212). See this early self-characterization of Adorno's method: “If philosophic interpretation can in fact only prosper dialectically, then the first dialectical point of attack is given by a philosophy which cultivates precisely those [philosophical] problems whose removal appears more pressingly necessary than the addition of a new answer to so many old ones” (Adorno, “On the Actuality of Philosophy,” 130). Adorno's antagonist here is Heideggerian fundamental ontology, which he takes to be an attempt at uprooting philosophy from its characteristic problems (e.g., God's nature, the soul's indivisibility, etc.) through an artificial ‘new beginning.’

47. Adorno, “On the Actuality of Philosophy,” 129. This step of immanent critique, however, might be fruitfully compared with Marx's genealogical method in *Capital*: see Allen, “Dripping with Dirt and Blood.”

48. Adorno (2000), 265–9.

ter that makes them practically and theoretically unavoidable. Adorno's goal, then, is not to invalidate or dismiss philosophical problematizations, but to enrich them, correct them, and dereify them by reinserting them back into their conditioning historical dynamics.<sup>49</sup> His effort to highlight the conflicts among the various applications of "freedom" is pursuant to this goal. In this way, there is probably more complementarity between Adorno's genealogical practice and traditional philosophy than what we find, by contrast, in the early Marx or Nietzsche; he understands his own approach as a critical inheritance and reanimation of the philosophical tradition rather than a sharp break from it.<sup>50</sup>

### III. Steps 5 and 6: The Promises and Problems of Adorno's Method

#### *Step 5: The Problematization's Tragic Fate*

These novelties notwithstanding, the first four steps of a tragic genealogy fall more or less comfortably in the mesh of genealogical problematization. However, the method's final two steps—even though they bestow on Adorno's genealogy its "tragic" character—are not so evidently fitted to this practice of critical inquiry. In a fifth step, Adorno reveals that the problematization under analysis is in a process of decay; its component relations and relata are at risk of disappearing. Tragic genealogies, then, aim to capture their object at "a moment of danger"<sup>51</sup> to induce a melancholic but critical response in its addressees.<sup>52</sup>

The decay of the analyzed problematization is attributed to two sources: a powerful social tendency that, for the sake of domination, insidiously eases the tensions between the problematization's component relata, on the one hand, and, on the other, the 'inner' deficiencies of the problematization itself.<sup>53</sup> On this analysis, the powerful social tendency—

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49. See Allen, *The Politics of Our Selves*, for careful discussion of how one can find similar efforts in Foucault.

50. Adorno (2000), 3–4; Adorno, "On the Actuality of Philosophy," 130. For thoughtful treatments of how Adorno situates himself within the history of philosophy, see O'Connor, *Adorno's Negative Dialectic*, and Pensky, "Critique and Disappointment."

51. Benjamin, "On The Concept of History," 391.

52. For relevant commentaries on the relationship between melancholy and criticism, see Allen, *Critique on the Couch*, 169–183, and Pensky, *Melancholy Dialectics*.

53. I place 'inner' in scare quotes to note an analytical, not ontological, distinction between the analyzed problematization and the social forces that traverse it, since the problematization is constituted by social forces.

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which Adorno often refers to simply as “objectivity”<sup>54</sup>—exerts a nigh-irresistible force on the problematization that weakens the tensions within it that might serve as enabling conditions of resistance. At the same time, however, the problematization itself is shown to be complicit in its own decay: its prevailing configuration and institution have, all along, reinforced the same social tendency that is now its undoing.

The situation presented in this fifth step can be illustrated by an imperfect analogy. When we see a friend in difficult circumstances cling to their worst psychological and behavior habits, the stress they are under seems to prevent them from drawing on their mature, self-reflective faculties to resist their bad habits. In circumstances like these, we have difficulty deciding how responsible our friend is for their actions, since we do not know how possible it is for them to access the parts of themselves they rely on to resist their anxious defense mechanisms. The analogy is imperfect because a problematization is not a person, but this asymmetry only heightens the ambiguity of the fifth step: if a problematization is an expression of, and entwined with, underlying social trends, on what basis can we think that it might be, or might have been, configured differently so that it could effectively resist those trends?

At this stage of Adornian genealogy, then, we encounter the ambivalence that maps onto tragedy. The decline of a problematization is seemingly “fated” by a social tendency with which it has always been complicit. Simultaneously, insofar as the genealogist can show that “objectivity” erodes the problematization’s potential zones of resistance, the same decline creates an opening for criticism. Through genealogical reconstruction, then, the problematization’s “moment of danger” can intensify our awareness of its critical potential. Yet this same danger also highlights the problematization’s inextricability from forces of domination. Hence the “tragic” character of this genealogy: its ambivalent analysis leaves it undetermined if the decay of the problematization was necessitated or if it can be undone.

Returning to the antinomy of free will and determinism allows us to see that this is a productive tension of Adorno’s genealogical procedure. In *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno observes that: “[t]he ephemeral traces of freedom which herald its possibility to empirical life tend to grow more rare; freedom is becoming a borderline value. No one even dares to put it forward as a complementary ideology; the powers that be . . . clearly have little faith in the continuing propagandistic appeal of freedom.”<sup>55</sup> The claim here is that the concept of freedom has undergone fragmentation in the

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54. See, for characteristic examples, Adorno, *History and Freedom*, 117, 161.

55. Adorno (2000), 245, tr. mod.; see also 216.

twentieth century: individuals scarcely use it to cognize aspects of their experience, and political power no longer needs to cite it for ideological justification.<sup>56</sup> The general social tendency producing this fragmentation is related to a shift in the relations of economic production. Nineteenth-century capitalist society relied on, and reproduced itself through, the norms of the bourgeois revolution because it depended on the wealth and ingenuity of bourgeois individuals. In the twentieth century, capitalism shifted to state-mediated monopolies that centralized power and capital in a bureaucratic elite.<sup>57</sup> Under these new conditions, bourgeois norms, especially freedom as self-determination, were neither necessary nor expedient; socialization practices incentivized and enforced integration and conformity in response.<sup>58</sup> The “culture industry” is an example of such socialization.<sup>59</sup> So, at this level of analysis, it seems that freedom, because a bourgeois category, declined alongside bourgeois capitalism’s relations of production; what remains of the concept might be an anachronistic “residual” element of liberal capitalism.<sup>60</sup>

At a second level of analysis, however, the problematization of freedom plays an *avoidable* role in its susceptibility to decline:

Reflections on freedom and determinism sound archaic, as though dating from the early times of the revolutionary bourgeoisie. But that freedom grows obsolete without having been realized—this is not a fatality [*Fatalität*] to be accepted; it is a fatality which resistance [*Widerstand*] must clarify. Not the least of the reasons why the idea of freedom lost its power [*Gewalt*] over people is that from the outset it was conceived so abstractly and subjectively that the objective social trends found it easy to bury.<sup>61</sup>

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56. Adorno also argues that causality is “in crisis” in *Negative Dialectics* (*Negative Dialectics*, 267), which again shows that he considers these two terms to be entangled in a problematization. For the sake of simplicity, however, I will focus on the concept of freedom in this paragraph, taking it as a stand-in for the third antinomy.

57. See Pollock, “State Capitalism. Its Possibilities and Limitations,” which greatly influenced the early Frankfurt School’s understanding of the institutional dynamics of twentieth-century capitalist society.

58. Adorno also argues that a shift in social-psychological individuation processes corresponds to these changes: the ego weakens and the superego, instead of serving as an idiosyncratic voice of conscience, is “externalized” and identified with existing social authority (see Adorno [2000], 273, 348).

59. Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 94–136.

60. See Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 121–128.

61. Adorno (2000), 215.

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The 'fated' obsolescence of freedom must be clarified by "resistance" to this obsolescence; one step toward that aim is to criticize the theoretical configuration of the problematization that has been predominant throughout its history.

Here Adorno draws on the previous steps of the tragic genealogy. As we saw above, the prevailing conception of freedom emphasizes its reflective dimensions, but it deemphasizes the impulsive character of spontaneity in favor of lawfulness. This deemphasis takes place despite evidence from psychology that the self-application of law requires unconscious identification with authority.<sup>62</sup> In addition, freedom has been conceived "subjectively" as a predicate inhering in the rational person. Again, this subjective emphasis prevails despite conflicting elements of the problematization, including the idea that freedom emerged *as* a problematization, as a frame of self-interpretation, only in a certain society.<sup>63</sup> Philosophers have by no means been unaware of these complicating elements—indeed, many Enlightenment philosophies conceive freedom alongside a teleological account of which of the Earth's peoples are 'ready' for freedom and which can be justly subjected to servitude<sup>64</sup>—but this dim awareness did not yield a disciplinary shift in freedom's problematization toward an emphasis on freedom's essential dependence on a specific social organization.<sup>65</sup> Thirdly, while the Enlightenment problematization has opposed freedom to natural determinism, the conception remains "abstract" because dissolving the contradiction depends on distinguishing two mutually indifferent perspectives, as in Kant's transcendental idealism. In this case, too, the elements of nature and external compulsion have been noted but deemphasized in the prevailing problematization.<sup>66</sup>

Referring to these emphasized and deemphasized elements, Adorno then claims that the problematization's configuration is partly responsible

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62. Adorno (2000), 213, 221–223, 270–274. See Freyenhagen, *Adorno's Practical Philosophy*, 255–270, on "the jolt" or "the addendum" as a non-violent synthesis of impulse and reflection.

63. Adorno (2000), 218.

64. See Topete, "Justifications of Slavery in Hobbes and Leibniz." See also *Negative Dialectics*, 221, where Adorno makes a similar point himself.

65. Adorno (2000), 218–9. NB, Adorno is not saying that *no* philosophers sought to change this emphasis of the problematization. Marx and Hegel, especially, did. However, their contributions were considered (at time of Adorno's writing, at least) extraneous to mainstream philosophical work on freedom or to common sense understandings of it. Hence, Adorno holds that this countervailing trend is the exception that proves the rule.

66. Adorno (2000), 229–232.

for its own obsolescence.<sup>67</sup> In each of these binaries—law vs. impulse, subjectivity vs. objectivity, rational activity vs. natural passivity—the prevailing configuration grants ascendancy to the term vindicating the general social tendency. Singular impulses, a just social organization compatible with individual autonomy, and a non-necessitarian nature are all ideas at odds with a principle of social integration that works to mold each social component to a prereflective fit with its functional role.<sup>68</sup> Consequently, Adorno suggests that one dimension of a tragic genealogy’s “resistance” to the decline of freedom is to clarify its problematization’s complicity with the “new oppression” of social integration.<sup>69</sup> This is the sense in which focusing on the tragic fate of a problematization can yield an intensified criticism of its hegemonic configuration.

However, the genealogy of freedom makes another aspect of resistance perspicacious. By identifying suppressed elements within the problematization and arguing for their relevance, tragic genealogies can incite a recommencement of conceptual work on the problematization. On this view, freedom should not be permitted to disappear, but this fate can only be avoided if the tensions traversing the problematization are reanimated. The genealogy’s addressees must be persuaded both that the problem of freedom is unresolved and that the non-resolution is of significance to them. In linking the problem’s non-resolution with the reappraisal of the importance of impulse, a just social organization, and a different experience of nature, Adorno’s tragic genealogy seeks to accomplish both these ends. If successful, it can lead readers to the belief that whatever freedom we experience under its declining problematization is diminished and distorted.<sup>70</sup> If genealogical work can make this experiential lack become conscious for modern subjects, it may contribute to the idea of freedom gaining “power over people” anew.<sup>71</sup>

This second level of analysis, then, complicates the tragic necessity found at its first level. While the theoretical history of a problematization may *initially* appear as a necessary consequence of general social trends, finer-grained analysis discloses the preferential emphases of the

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67. Adorno (2000), 216–221.

68. Adorno (2000), 191, 216, 262, 267, 293, 315. See also: “[B]y identifying with the course of the world, [people] do so in an unhappy, neurotically damaged way, which effectively leads them to reinforce the world as it is. And that, I would say, is the truth about the situation of human beings in history” (Adorno, *History and Freedom*, 76).

69. Adorno (2000), 214.

70. Adorno (2000), 220.

71. Adorno (2000), 215.

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prevailing problematization *despite* conflicting evidence that a different configuration of its elements is, or was, possible. Desirable features of the problematization are conceived simultaneously as historically suppressed and as still retrievable. The declining problematization can be reanimated in order to renew or redeem its suppressed features. Thus, the tension between necessity and contingency in the fifth step of a tragic genealogy enables transformative work on its problematization—Adorno's efforts to synthesize impulse and reflection in a new concept of freedom are an example.<sup>72</sup>

The transformative work on the problematization should also be seen as a form of *possibilization* in Adorno's genealogical method. According to Lorenzini, possibilization is the specification of critical "attitudes" or "conducts" that the tensions in a problematization enable.<sup>73</sup> The critical reworking of a philosophical problematization—the reinvigoration of its defining tensions and polarities—fits Lorenzini's definition. Regarding the problematization of freedom, Adorno draws on his intensification of the antinomy to possibilize an alternative concept and experience of freedom in which its suppressed and hegemonic elements are reconciled. Relatedly, he possibilizes a renewal of freedom's importance—a critical attitude given the problematization's obsolescence—both in specialized cultural practices like philosophy and in social actors' self-understandings. Arguing that freedom has declined in part because its prevailing configuration no longer matches individuals' experience and hopes, Adorno's reworking of the problematization prepares an experience of freedom that individuals would find significant and desirable.

This is a novel approach to possibilization among genealogical thinkers. Typically, genealogies underscore freeing ourselves from seemingly inescapable self-understandings; though this element is present in tragic genealogies, their emphasis falls on the creative renewal of a self-understanding gone stale. By assimilating Adorno's insights, genealogical possibilization gains an enriched capacity to reactivate addressees' deep background intuitions, including those contained in our political and religious traditions.<sup>74</sup> The critical retrieval of solidarity-conducting traditions is a political opportunity that genealogists cannot afford to ignore. Including Adorno as an exemplar of the genealogical method is a way to ensure our attentiveness to this opportunity without, crucially, backsliding into conservative pining for the "old" values.

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72. Adorno (2000), 226–230.

73. Lorenzini, "On possibilising genealogy," 12–13.

74. Habermas makes a similar point in *Between Naturalism and Religion*, 232.

## Step 6: Locating the Problematization in a Conception of History

### 6.a. Universal History and the Domination of Inner and Outer Nature

Having productively reworked the tension between the necessity and contingency of their declining problematization, tragic genealogies then take a final problematizing step. So far, the ostensible necessitation of a problematization's fate stems from general, but changing, social trends (e.g., the change from bourgeois to state capitalism). In the sixth step, changes to general social trends are incorporated into an even broader perspective that reveals them to be continuous with a universal historical pattern. The integrating trajectory of twentieth-century society is not only a shift from bourgeois social reproduction, Adorno claims, but the culmination of the integrating principle of history as such.<sup>75</sup> From this perspective, a basic continuity grounds all phases of historical development such that even the differences between these phases can be explained by the same principle. This principle has different names and historical shapes in Adorno's theory: sometimes he refers to it as the principle of integration, usually when speaking sociologically about late capitalism;<sup>76</sup> as the identity principle when criticizing philosophy;<sup>77</sup> however, I will refer to it as the *principle of the domination of inner and outer nature* (henceforth "DN").<sup>78</sup>

According to this principle, human society is driven by the compulsion to master nature, which is posited as an uncontrolled threat, through knowledge, rational planning, and technological manipulation so that it can be further mastered. The self-preservation of the species is secured as a means to greater mastery. Included in this dynamic is the mastery of human beings' *inner* nature: the corporal, cognitive, and psychological constitution of human beings is subjected to the same methods so that

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75. Adorno (2000), 24, 262, 267, 362. My interpretation of the idea of universal history in Adorno has benefited enormously from productive disagreements with Amy Allen and Fabian Freyenhagen (private correspondence).

76. Adorno (2000), 267, 362.

77. Adorno (2000), 147–8

78. Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 172, 206. Calling the principle of history by different names permits Adorno to show that it manifests differently depending on the domain of social practice. For instance, it appears as the identity principle in the domain of thought: objects are identical with their concepts (Adorno (2000), 147–8). This is an inheritance of Hegel's concept of absolute actuality in the *Logic* (Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, II.376). See below for greater discussion of Adorno's indebtedness to Hegelian modality.

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human beings themselves become progressively more effective technology for the greater domination of nature.

Situating a problematization within the DN allows Adorno to explain more rigorously the concordance between the problematization's prevailing theoretical configuration, its obsolescence, and the trends shaping a particular organization of society: all three are determined by the same principle. This deepens and complicates the first level of analysis discussed in step five. Theoretical or cultural practices like philosophy—Adorno often calls these “culture” or “intellectual labor”<sup>79</sup>—are not simply a spontaneous reflection of the economic forces of production; rather, their agents, like those of economic production, determine their actions in this sphere by the DN. Accordingly, developments within domains of intellectual labor can be somewhat independent of changes in economic organization. Nevertheless, all social domains are determined by the DN such that society, as an interconnected totality of semi-autonomous practices, still develops *overall* toward the greater domination of nature.

With this social theory, Adorno can account for both the evolution and decline of the problematization of freedom. The configuration in which it was instituted in the bourgeois period resulted from philosophy's self-determination by the DN. There was an apparent harmony between the entrepreneurial organization of the economy, cultural formations informed by Enlightenment values such as Kantian and post-Kantian idealism, and the ascendancy of republican political constitutions. As the overall social capacity for mastering nature increased, the bourgeois arrangement came into crisis, and each social domain adjusted by seeking new ways to realize the DN.<sup>80</sup> As a result, in the intellectual spheres, freedom not only grew less perceptible to mundane consciousness<sup>81</sup> but also lost its centrality in specialized practices like philosophy.<sup>82</sup> Surveying the gamut of cultural practices during this shift, Adorno claims that the decline of the problematization of freedom in each of these practices attests to the decline's irresistibility.<sup>83</sup> Just as bourgeois culture had an elective affinity with contemporaneous socio-economic and political changes, so, too, does the rise of the culture industry and positivism have an elective affinity with the shift to state-organized, late-stage capitalism. The elective affinity in both

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79. Adorno (2000), 366–7; Adorno, *Hegel: Three Studies*, 39.

80. Adorno (2000), 306–7.

81. Adorno (2000), 215–6, 274.

82. Adorno has in mind the shift to the institutional preeminence of logical positivism and nominalism (like Wittgenstein's) in this connection (Adorno (2000), 216, 252, 259, 312–3).

83. Adorno (2000), 262.

periods can be explained in the same way, namely, by self-determination through the DN.

### 6.b. Philosophical Obstacles to Tragic Genealogy

With Adorno's account of the DN in hand, we now come upon the difficulties that his philosophical commitments present to the genealogical intent of his critical theorizing. As you will recall from the introduction, these difficulties stem from three commitments: to a version of universal history, to a conception of social totality, and to residual features of Hegelian logic, particularly its theory of modality. Although these are overlapping issues in Adorno's philosophy, I shall discuss them more or less sequentially.

While the DN principle provides a more thorough explanation than step five of the *necessary* or irresistible character of intellectual changes, it also threatens the critical potential that step five gained for the tragic genealogical method. As we saw, resistance to a declining problematization involves showing that its prevailing configuration was or is *avoidably complicit* in suppressing a problematization's productive tensions. In step six, however, it is unclear that this complicity is avoidable. Now it appears that the evolution of intellectual changes is driven, and has always been driven, by the DN. What would permit us to say that this need not be, or need not have been, the case?

Adorno advances three different answers in his work. One is Humean in spirit: just because the rise and fall of problematizations has always been determined by the DN does not mean that this will always be so.<sup>84</sup> Even if this answer is logically unassailable, it is unsatisfying, especially for a genealogist who is searching for *historical*—as distinct from merely *logical*—grounds for calling change necessary or contingent. The second argument does supply a speculative historical basis, but in the species' origins: perhaps the DN achieved primacy as a developmental principle "contingently," "from archaic arbitrary acts of seizing power."<sup>85</sup> This argument may allow us to entertain the thought that the DN may not be a necessary determination of history, but this remote, unverifiable possibility does not give us any grip on the declining problematizations characterizing our present, which, per step six, are, after all, determined by the DN.

The third argument for the contingency of the DN is significantly more complex and will take some unpacking:

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84. Adorno (2000), 320.

85. Adorno (2000), 321. Elements of this argument are also on 323. Adorno connects this speculation with some of Freud's (self-consciously) mythological accounts of social development, such as the myth of the 'primal father,' in *Totem and Taboo* and *Moses and Monotheism*.

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Only if things might have gone differently; if the totality is recognized as a socially necessary semblance . . . only then will a critical social consciousness retain its freedom to think that things might be different some day. Theory cannot shift the huge weight of historic necessity unless the necessity has been recognized as realized appearance and historic determination is known as a metaphysical accident.<sup>86</sup>

One premise of this argument is that, to believe resistance to a declining problematization like freedom possible, history cannot be *necessarily* determined by the DN. That is, for resistance to be possible, it must also be possible that history could be, or could have been, determined by other tendencies, forces, or laws. There are three additional claims in this passage. One, modern society necessarily *appears* as a totality determined by a single principle. Two, genealogy must show that this appearance is grounded exclusively on historical dynamics, as opposed to transcendental or ontological grounds. Three, genealogy must show that the causality of history—how historical event A leads to historical event B—is ultimately *contingent*.

To illustrate these admittedly abstract points, we can look to Marx's conception of economic "laws" for an example of the contingency of historical causality. Take the law of immiseration: capitalism tends to immiserate the worker relative to the objectively available standard of living. This is a structural tendency of capitalism without which capitalism would not be capitalism—and in this sense, but only in this sense, the tendency manifests with necessity in the societies we live in. However, capitalism itself is a contingent social formation, which means that the law of immiseration is not a "law" of history as such, but an intrinsic tendency of a particular, unnecessary organization of society.<sup>87</sup> Adorno, similarly, would need to show that, despite his tracing the DN's workings back to the "pre-history" of the subject,<sup>88</sup> the DN is only an intrinsic "law" of contingent social formation(s).

This third argument for the contingency of the DN, then, turns on being able to recognize the DN-produced totality as "semblance," "illusion," or "appearance;" so let us turn to the three premises of this argument. We can admit that Adorno shows society to be an historical product; although the DN might have metaphysical or evolutionary grounds, these would be very difficult to establish.

As for historical determination being metaphysically contingent, this can be admitted generally (history may not proceed with metaphysical

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86. Adorno (2000), 323.

87. See Marx; *Capital*, vol. 1, 458, 469, 481–2, 486, 547.

88. See Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, xviii–xix.

necessity). However, this general admission does not help much when evaluating a declining problematization. Again, consider the example of freedom: the sixth step effectively says that, in the final analysis, freedom is in decline because this norm, like all other historical phenomena, is subject to the DN. To be sure, if historical causality were metaphysically necessary, then critically reworking a problematization would be absolutely impossible. Adorno does not have a problem this stark facing him.

But, as genealogists, we are looking for an *historical* basis for holding that problematizations can be effectively reconfigured, and a philosophy of history determined by the DN makes this very difficult. After the sixth step of a tragic genealogy, we can only say that the obsolescence of a problematization has all the trappings of tragic fate, but, historical evidence notwithstanding, perhaps things need not have happened this way—perhaps we can nevertheless reactivate the sedimented features of the problematization even if we cannot be sure that such resistance has ever taken place before.

This, I submit, defangs the critical bite of the fifth step. While resistance to a declining problematization cannot be shown to be futile, we do not have grounds, either, for claiming that resistance can react back on a problematization's formative dynamics and alter their course.

Such defanging, I believe, stems from Adorno's view that society *necessarily appears* as a totality determined by the DN. Here we enter on to the third questionable commitment of Adorno's philosophy: its residual Hegelian theory of modality. I will present this problem as briefly as I can. Adorno holds that "socially necessary semblance"—his definition of ideology—must be resolved into its historically-constituted essence. The terminology refers back to the *Logic's* "Doctrine of Essence." Hegel claims that "semblance" [illusion, *Schein*] is a manifestation, or showing forth, of essence determined by essence itself. There is, then, no ontological difference between semblance and ultimate reality: the former is a necessary manifestation of the latter. Consequently, the dialectician can define semblance *as* semblance by showing how it is essentially determined by its actual [*wirklich*] ground. Adorno retains the basic structure of Hegel's analysis, but he wants to argue that semblance—the DN-produced totality—is grounded in an essence that is *itself* historical and contingent. On this view, the semblance is indeed determined with necessity—society cannot *but* appear as a totality—but the actual ground of this semblance may not be necessary. Rather, actuality [*Wirklichkeit*], as an historical product, may be mutable and "untrue."<sup>89</sup> Adorno's goal is, accordingly, to identify semblance as a necessary manifestation of its essential ground's

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89. "The whole is the untrue" (Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, §29).

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contingency and unreconciled character; like Marx's economic "laws," the DN would then be an intrinsic, necessary feature of the unreconciled society in which we live, but contingent in the final analysis insofar as this unreconciled social formation is not *itself* necessary. Thus, Adorno needs to show that, despite the appearance of domination's historical necessity, it is *possible* that we could live in a non-dominating social formation.

Adorno revises Hegel's modal metaphysics to this end, arguing, as Bernstein puts it, that there is a kind of possibility "lodged between logical and actual [i.e., real or metaphysical] possibility," which is "neither fully actual nor fully non-actual."<sup>90</sup> MacDonald has made admirable efforts to expound Adorno's modal theory based on the groundwork Bernstein's seminal interpretation lays.<sup>91</sup> Here, however, we can limit ourselves to a few points. On Hegelian premises, all possibility is derivative on actuality.<sup>92</sup> So, if, as Adorno wishes to say, actuality can be possibly different, then there must be a kind of possibility that is irreducible to actuality but that is, nonetheless, related to it such that the former can alter the latter. Certain of our experiences, which Adorno calls promises of "metaphysical experience,"<sup>93</sup> indicate that there is such possibility embedded in social reality. Only if the essential grounds of historical appearance are mutable can we meaningfully speak of the possibility of change or resistance. Critique, then, must refer to these experiences of 'embedded' or 'lodged' possibility in order to maintain the perspective that resistance to problematizations is potentially effective. If resistance were to occur, then it would be precisely

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90. Bernstein, *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics*, 418, 435.

91. MacDonald, "Adorno's Modal Utopianism," and MacDonald, *What Would Be Different*.

92. For discussion of the origins of this principle in modern philosophy, see Abaci, "The Coextensiveness Thesis and Kant's Modal Agnosticism in the 'Postulates,'" and Abaci, *Kant's Revolutionary Theory of Modality*. It is, however, quite possible that Schelling exerted an even greater influence on Adorno's modal theory than Hegel or Kant. Between Schelling's *Freiheitschrift* and *Weltalter*, the German idealist develops a dynamicist modal metaphysics in which actuality is force that has suppressed conflicting force within it as its ground. This suppressed, conflicting force is 'potentiality.' Adorno read Schelling's *Weltalter* closely for a 1960 seminar (see Dews, *The Idea of Evil*, 229). For discussion of Adorno's affinity to Schelling, see Dews, *The Idea of Evil*, 192–194. For an impressive treatment of the *Weltalter's* theory of modality to which I am indebted, see Bowman, "Force, Existence, and the Transcendence of the Good in Schelling's *Ages of the World*."

93. Adorno (2000), 373. See Bernstein, *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics*, 419–456, for discussion of "fugitive" experiences; see also Jütten, "Adorno on hope," and Gordon, "Adorno's Concept of Metaphysical Experience."

because it transforms actuality through instituting these alternative possibilities.<sup>94</sup> Per the new perspective developed in step six, Adorno's model of a different freedom is supposed to be an intellectual form of resistance just because it illuminates and unites such possibilities; for instance, a form of freedom that reconciles impulse and rational principles.

Some aspects of the above account are instructive for tragic genealogical possibilization, as I will soon show. However, crucial features of step six must be rejected. For one thing, it is unclear that Adorno's modal theory can withstand philosophical scrutiny.<sup>95</sup>

More important is the theory's limitation by Hegelian logic.<sup>96</sup> Adorno would not need to resort to modal metaphysics to ground social criticism

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94. See MacDonald, *What Would Be Different*, 157–175, and Bernstein, *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics*.

95. For instance, is it plausible to say that possibility and actuality are related while being irreducible? More conventional modal theories would say that anything actual is thereby possible, and theories like Kant's or Hegel's claim that we only know what is possible because of the *actual* instantiation of the predicates of existing beings. In both cases, actuality reduces to possibility, or vice-versa.

96. It is possible to interpret Adorno's philosophy of history in a way that downplays or dissolves Hegel's influence. Amy Allen presents an influential interpretation along these lines in *The End of Progress*: "Adorno is sharply critical of both Heidegger and Hegel . . . because they fail, in different ways, to historicize their understandings of historicity" (189); according to Adorno, Hegel "appeal[s] to a timeless, unhistorical conception of history that is both metaphysical and mythological" (189). Allen argues that Adorno, by contrast, develops a concept of history that is itself historical. History plays an important role in how we philosophize for contingent, historical reasons; our understanding of history's principles and evolution may also be a contingent historical product. I agree with all these claims; however, Allen's interpretation does not exclude the fact that Adorno's means of disclosing the historical contingency of our concept of history (the "semblance" of a DN-produced totality) nonetheless relies on Hegelian premises, namely, dialectical conceptions of appearance/essence, universality/particularity, and actuality/possibility. On my view, we can only make sense of passages like the following by recognizing the enormous influence Hegel exerts on Adorno's thinking of history: "This much of Hegel's insistence on the universality of the particular is true: in its perversion, as impotent individualization at the universal's mercy, the particular is dictated by the principle of perverted universality" (Adorno 2000, 344). To be sure, Adorno is not here uncritically adopting Hegel's understanding of the mediation of particulars by universal history. Nevertheless, he *is* claiming that a dialectic of universality and particularity is the appropriate way to conceptualize history, wherein universality is understood as the "untrue" or "perverted" whole determining its particularized historical

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if he did not assume that society is essentially determined to appear as a totality governed by the DN. We might instead assume that a plurality of evolving principles shape history without a single logic—the DN in this case—determining their interactions. While this forsakes the perspective of a universal history—and Adorno has reasons he does not wish to do so<sup>97</sup>—it clearly benefits tragic genealogy's critical potential. This theoretical alteration enables us to identify historical cases where resistance effectively changed prevailing problematizations, which is important for entertaining that such resistance remains possible today. It also more legibly fits the idea that sources of resistance are conjoined with general social trends: on this account, social changes always involve negotiations between conflicting forces, and resistance, in turn, changes through its interaction with forces stronger than itself. This leaves room for Adorno's conviction that forces of domination tend to win these negotiations, but it does not require us to ground resistance on a distinct and somewhat nebulous modal category of possibility. A shift to a pluralistic social ontology would also better accommodate Adorno's conception of the quasi-independent status of each social domain and the crisis-prone character of their interactions. On these premises, rather than inquiring into how a mereological unity (a totality) is coerced out of disparate practices, the genealogist can examine the most tenuous or strained connections allowing distinct social domains to interact. This would still allow the "semblance" of totality to be negated, albeit in a different way than Adorno's residual Hegelianism attempts to.<sup>98</sup> Finally, genealogy cannot rest content

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appearances. I thus agree with Allen that Adorno is aiming at a philosophical method that can conceive the contingency of our own form of life and rationality as well as the possibility of its transformation (Allen, *The End of Progress*, 190–2), but I am less optimistic than she is that an Adornian genealogy can succeed in doing so without the theoretical revisions I suggest in this paper.

97. See Adorno (2000), 319–320, for discussion of why "universal history must be construed and denied." One important reason Adorno holds on, in his complicated negative-dialectical fashion, to universal history is the wish to maintain the possibility of "redemption," i.e., the possibility of a sublation of universal history into a non-antagonistic whole that does justice to those who have been history's victims (see Adorno (2000), 385, 403). History *per se* could only have a meaning were redemption possible. Discussion of this point is beyond the scope of this paper, but I believe that we must abandon this perspective. However, see Pensky, "Solidarity with the Past and the Work of Translation" for an intriguing rehabilitation of this view.

98. Recall from above that Nietzsche and Foucault take it to be a central task of genealogy to break the illusion of unitary historical formations into a multiplicity of forces and contestations.

with its own theorizing as a form of resistance, but this is what step six threatens tragic genealogy with. Because many social domains compose a problematization, genealogy should be able to suggest practices, beyond intellectual labor, through which problematizations can be challenged or changed. Failing this, tragic genealogies threaten to leave us in the position of a tragedy's audience: mere spectators whose only power is to regret the protagonist's fate.

### 6.c. Tragic Genealogical Possibilization

Supposing that we do make these revisions, however, the sixth step of tragic genealogies allows us to see two further forms of possibilization available to the method. First, Adorno's varied rapprochements with the philosophical tradition show that inquiry in the history of philosophy can be a source of possibilization. In tragic genealogy, creative recalibrations of classical philosophical problems go hand in hand with the criticism of contemporary social phenomena: in this form of philosophical hermeneutics, the two perspectives inform each other.<sup>99</sup> This approach has at least two attractions. On the one hand, it foregrounds the relevance of the history of philosophy, and philosophical thinking more broadly, for understanding and altering the present. On the other hand, it furnishes genealogists with an intellectual-historical method that neither naively assumes that philosophical concepts are independent of their socio-economic context nor reductively collapses philosophy into grounding social dynamics. Rather, philosophy is conceived as a semi-autonomous sphere of social action whose relationship to the general social field explains its affinities with, and participation in, phenomena of oppression but whose quasi-independence, nevertheless, allows it to critically reexamine dominant problematizations.<sup>100</sup> This conception thus situates philosophical practice as not only complicit in relations of power but also as a productive site of problematization and possibilization. Philosophers, on this view, have not merely interpreted the world: they have also, through historically-sensitive interpretation, changed it.<sup>101</sup>

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99. Because of this tight relation between social and philosophical criticism, I would argue that it is insufficient, as Jütten does, to opt for the "metacritical" rather than the "critical" dimensions of Adorno's approach to philosophical interpretation (see Jütten, "Adorno on Kant, Freedom, and Determinism," 562–565).

100. For an impressive account of how, in Adorno's work, philosophy can serve as a normatively-structured criticism of our form of life, see Hulatt, *Adorno's Theory of Philosophical and Aesthetic Truth*, 27–77.

101. This is a paraphrase of Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach." For Adorno's discussion

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Step six also offers another mode of possibilization: the promise of “metaphysical experiences” of the possibilities suppressed in a problematization. Now, I have argued that we are well-advised to eschew Adorno's modal theory; however, the model of promissory experiences can be independently articulated. Promissory experiences involve three key elements: one, singularity or unrepeatability; two, critical defamiliarization of quotidian experience; and three, the promise that quotidian experience could be transformed to be more like, or to more often sponsor, promissory experiences.<sup>102</sup> There are resemblances here to Foucault's ideas of “limit-experience” and experiments on the self,<sup>103</sup> but promissory experiences are distinct. These experiences, precisely because they seem to be so exceptional, raise a claim that our current form of life diminishes the quality of our cognitive, affective, and ethical experience. To return to our example of freedom, when we seem to experience the “jolt” of somatic impulse harmonizing with conscious volition, we not only anticipate what freedom might be in an emancipated society, but we also experience the twinned disappointment of the denial and suppression of such harmonization in our current form of life. Experiences like these, consequently, can invigorate resistance to the problematizations composing our form of life, all of which are taken to be potential obstructions to the kinds of experience we desire. In other words, this possibilization can engender a militantly critical posture toward existing society. Its effects are, then, potentially quite transformative, forming a relay between social criticism and context-transcending experiences.<sup>104</sup>

### Conclusion

Tragic genealogical problematization is an especially powerful tool for analyzing the social grounds of philosophical problematizations. Through scrutiny of philosophical problematizations on their own terms and an account of their intuitive plausibility, tragic genealogy illuminates both the distinctiveness and entanglement of intellectual formations with other practices. Moreover, the method can provide novel, surprising

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of Marx's eleventh thesis, see Adorno (2000), 3–4, and Adorno, “On the Actuality of Philosophy.”

102. See Bernstein, *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics*, 419–456.

103. Foucault, *Dits et Écrits*, §50, 642–643; §70, 862, 868; §73, 886.

104. See Kompridis, *Critique and Disclosure*, and Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, for a discussion of similar themes; see also Roessler, “‘Utopianism in Pianissimo,’ esp. 237–239; de Vries, “The Antinomy of Death,” on the relationship between social critique and utopianism in Adorno's philosophy; and Hulatt, *Adorno's Theory of Philosophical and Aesthetic Truth*, 130–133.

interpretations of the history of philosophy that can reorient our understanding of why certain developments in its history proceeded in the way that they did. Finally, as we saw in step five, tragic genealogy provides a uniquely potent method for explaining and resisting the *decline* of problematizations. By retrieving a problematization's suppressed elements and showing how both intellectual and non-intellectual forces conspired in their suppression, tragic genealogy can reanimate its object's constitutive tensions and, thus, recommence conceptual work on a problematization that had seemed dying or dead.<sup>105</sup> This is arguably the most distinctive feature of Adorno's genealogical approach, and it merits sustained attention from students of this growing philosophical practice.

However, the sixth step of tragic genealogies threatens to undo the otherwise richly insightful and productive features of Adorno's method. A unitary historical logic—however dialectically intertwined with disunity—leads to an undue fetishism of intellectual labor's power of resistance, and even this power, which depends on a fragile concept of possibility, is hypothetical. Consequently, I argue that, to do justice to Adorno's critical and genealogical intentions, tragic genealogies should jettison Adorno's philosophy of history, conception of totality, and modal metaphysics. I also argue that doing so lends more philosophical coherence to Adorno's own claims regarding the partial independence of spheres of social action.

The overarching aim of this paper has been to convince genealogists that Adorno has distinctive and important contributions to make to our understanding of the practice. I have shown that Adorno's approach to problematization is unique and provides tremendous resources for understanding the interplay between intellectual and non-intellectual social practices in processes of historical change. Moreover, Adorno's approach proves that genealogy, applied to philosophical concepts and moral ideals, can produce novel insights without reducing them to mere ideology. Finally, I have argued that Adorno's approach to possibilization enables a potent and thoroughgoing critical attitude toward existing society as well as a distinctive capacity to creatively reactivate the sedimented intuitions and cultural traditions of genealogy's addressees.

I have also maintained, however, that Adorno's theory cannot be adopted for genealogical purposes without critical reconstruction. As I showed in the discussion of step six, Adorno's adherence to a Hegel-inflected philosophy of history undercuts the critical potential of tragic

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105. The most striking illustrations of this method's effectiveness can be found in the final model of *Negative Dialectics*, "Meditations on Metaphysics" (Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 361–408) and in Adorno's essay "Progress," collected in *Critical Models*.

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genealogies. It leads him to isolate intellectual practice from the other practices that compose problematizations; it also forces him into a questionable modal metaphysics that, by its own admission, cannot show that resistance is possible. These problems, however, are not so central to Adorno's theory that they cannot be removed. Indeed, I argue that they can, and should, be.

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