

## Chapter 1

# Reason and Mimesis

To represent the mimesis it supplanted, the concept has no other way than to adopt something mimetic in its own conduct, without abandoning itself.

—Theodor Adorno (*Negative Dialectics* 15)

Habermas's theory of communicative action proceeds in a self-consciously postmetaphysical way, which is to say, it insists that we cannot but think and act politically *without* the confidence of an extra-worldly source of validation for those activities, and that we must always be on guard that our most cherished convictions, and even the seemingly most prosaic—our view of reality, for instance—may be inadequate and in need of sometimes mind-altering correction. We do not judge the *adequacy* of our convictions on a scale that measures a right correspondence between our utterances and fixed referents in the world, nor can we rely on a supposed correspondence between our moral convictions and an eternal moral order. We may judge our convictions adequate or inadequate only with reference to the normative horizon of the world in which we live and act, and this demands a historical self-understanding, a critical reflection combined with a hermeneutics.<sup>1</sup> The fundamental principles of truth, morality, and any method that determines adequacy must become cognizant that cognition itself cannot reproduce an objective image of the world, but always already takes its form and direction from the politically contested activity of historically situated meaning-making.<sup>2</sup> Old-fashioned “consciousness-raising” must

remain on the table, for political purposes, but neither (to mix metaphors) as a stepchild to political economy, nor any longer naively in thrall to a narrative of turning false consciousness to true. Instead of revealing what is already good and true, we postmetaphysical moderns are fated to agonize over our convictions and how they stack up against those of others, and how, in our world of Weberian value-pluralism, a normative political science might endeavor to think about how to adjudicate among competing claims answering to different notions of the good. A postmetaphysics brings the politics of interpretation front and center. This does not lead to wholesale relativism, for reasons addressed later, but it does mean that analysts and observers cannot pretend to exclude themselves from the court of opinion, because *that*, for good or ill, is what court there is, and the moral-political task is to discern better from worse from within this twilight world of opinion.<sup>5</sup>

### I. The Postmetaphysical Condition of Reason

In the demise of a viable socialist vision, a normatively democratic view fills the horizon of our contemporary moral-political imaginary, and this democratic form of political decision-making proves a fine homology for the premises of postmetaphysics. Following self-assertively in the tradition of Enlightenment, Habermas lays the possibility of a secular morality under conditions of an advanced, democratic capitalism based on the character of *reason*. Value-pluralism does not trump the necessity of mutual coordination and understanding; it is, rather, the enabling condition of understanding. Reason does not illuminate reality per se, but rather, the reality *for those to whom it belongs*. The peculiar illumination that reason provides comes in the form of articulate *reasons*, reasons that can be accepted or rejected on the basis of common understanding. The deepening of understanding comes through the practice of reasoning-in-common, and the reality that reasons illuminate is the discursive reality of being-in-common. We might call this process becoming-in-common. Thus, any theory of reason requires a concomitant understanding of the social solidarity and common understandings and commitments that underwrite its truth-value, while preserving and even inciting a critical capacity for self-reflection, to determine better from worse, progress from regression. For Habermas, “we must distinguish between the social fact that a norm is intersubjectively recognized and its worthiness to be recognized” (1990, 61).

Why must a democratic theory turn to reason, and why a reason that self-consciously asks itself to split the difference between historicism and reflection rather than answer to metaphysical adequation? Contemporary

critiques of Reason's traditional conceits of foundationalism and metaphysics have worked to undermine confidence in the secular validity of any kind of extra-worldly authority, and have contributed to a (largely beneficial) suspicion over the supposed neutrality or objectivity of this-worldly injunctions made in the human sciences to explain or interpret events or experiences.<sup>4</sup> It no longer suffices for political theory to depict Reason as John Locke did, as a faculty implanted universally by God to ensure that humans realize the objective demands of a moral order—particularly as Locke did, by grounding moral reason in the constellation of property, productivity, and appropriation by possessive individuals.<sup>5</sup> For “us,” right reason is hardly a neutral mirroring of God's will such that in mastering nature we sanctify ourselves as righteous, laboring beings. We know in particular that a modern political economy is structured in ways that do not answer to any realization of collective reason on this model, nor does Locke's model have any more powerful claim to make on us than the claims of those other groups and practices, and indeed, the natural environment, sacrificed on the altar of productivity.

Any epistemological filter like *reason* does not neutrally discover the facts of our bearing in the world, but rather every epistemology has a determinate hand in the production of what it “sees,” and indeed, it begs the question of whether “seeing” is the proper metaphor: better perhaps is “grasping,” “listening to,” “dialoguing with,” “playing with,” “participating in,” or “snuggling up to.” The moral force of reasoned judgments is always relative to the mode of understanding and the epistemological horizon within which its standards may be applied, and it requires a political sensibility—a sensitivity to power and justice that directs the course of self-reflection. On this account, Locke's worldview is no less reasonable, but all the more obviously motivated, on its own terms, by an *extra*-rational sentiment that betrays the best impulses of Lockean liberalism.<sup>6</sup> And its status as *political* makes Habermas's theory of communicative action, too, a *political* innovation, and not merely a *discovery* of a form of reason that was somehow missed by every theorist and philosopher prior to him. But Habermas *knows* of the politicality of his intervention: The paradigm shift Habermas is trying to force, in a shift we might think of as taking us from early modernity to late, Albrecht Wellmer has called “a postrationalist theory of reason.” It reflects a self-critical awareness not only of the rational elements in reason, the moral promise inherent in the structure of the linguistic character of reason, but also the romantic elements internal to its bearing that motivate its operation. This is the double promise of communicative rationality, as a reflective resource and an activity of social solidarity.

I would resist, however, those like Lyotard who argue that reason is simply a catchword couched in an implausible meta-narrative, the sheen on

a lens through which the analyst insists everyone look, a lens that doubtless and insidiously validates the analyst's perspective. This claim goes too far, I would argue, for to *a priori* conflate knowledge with illegitimate power answers the question of the possibility of moral judgment before it gets asked. If we imagine humans as storytellers above all, then Lyotard, who surely tells his own meta-stories (of the course of literature and science, for example), although correct to criticize the strong claims of objectivity made by some, sits actually quite close to Habermas's attempt to account for a reason that does not exist *a priori* but rather emerges in the doing.<sup>8</sup> The particular hope for a utopian future of brotherhood, sisterhood, or humanity must be relegated to failed grand narratives of the past; our task is not to vanquish power, but rather to effectively constrain and enable it for uses deemed by right procedure to be just and worthy, and to understand (with Foucault and Weber) the ways in which the exercise of power affects all within its purview. Not all subject-producing or subject-effacing power stands already guilty. The point is that, within the question of moral judgment, we must raise claims, ask questions, and remain open in our efforts to theorize the political, to the possibility of hearing new voices singing new music, as Nietzsche would say.

Skepticism concerning the ill use of conceptual power raised by Lyotard's epistemological perspectivalism is significant for questioning whether reason in fact remains the relevant cipher for thinking through competing claims to moral validity. However, the "strong contextualist" supposition of multiple, distinct language games, each with its own rules and norms, and answering to incommensurable versions of the good,<sup>8</sup> does nothing to release us from the moral demands inherent within every language game, the fact of which stimulates us to become multilingual, able to speak of moral demands immanent to each perspective, and which stimulates also the need to locate some way of thinking about how and when to privilege the terms of one language game over the rest in given situations. Attention to difference—in terms of the modes of experience, of expression, of culture, of communication, of moral bearing, and of the mode of being itself—is crucial in testing any reliable account of a reason that still can hope to be held to account for its oldest function, that of standing in for what is truly human in our ethos.

For to speak of the epistemological condition of modernity, "reason" today can be posited legitimately only in a wholly different sense than in linking our judgments to a permanent, transcendent, and unconditional moral order. The distinction between accident and essence in our moral thinking must give way to appreciating fully the scope in which without an anchor in essence, the formerly abjected category of accident, of heterology, now becomes all we have to go on—and it is both less and more heterogenous

to itself than formerly understood. A hermeneutics of experience and an analytic discourse demanding active participation by those affected is all moral thinkers have to wager with when sifting through the competing claims among constellations of value-pluralism, which points to the political task accorded to reason: A democratic sensibility forms its core, and this democratic deliberation essentially is open-ended in terms of its substantive outcomes. As Habermas puts it in its *negative* form:

The potential of unleashed *communicative* freedoms does contain an anarchistic core. The institutions of any democratic government must live off this core if they are to be effective in guaranteeing equal liberties for all. (1996a, xl)

This anarchic core at the heart of communicative freedom, unrestricted communicative action, as we shall see over the course of this investigation, is in truth a *mimetic* core, and in this sense a core posited as anarchic can at the same time be *constitutive* of any cultural solidarity. It serves a *negative* function, as a dissolvent, but it also can do the work typically attributed to a certain style of *aesthetic* thinking usually set off from traditional theories of morality: to innovate the values that motivate us to adhere to a cultural community, and to criticize it.<sup>9</sup>

We can thankfully give up the sense of reason as an immediate mirroring in speech and thought of the natural order of reality.<sup>10</sup> Our confidence is gone in this sort of narrative insofar as pluralism requires secular adjudication, and disputes will not be satisfied by a dogmatic position that claims to successfully mime an ordered reality. One cannot know that one's reasons mime reality, nor can one know that reality is ordered in the way our concepts would imply. This is not just a skepticism. It is the character of modern instability, a perpetual openness that is the condition for the making of meaningful judgments. Reason does not articulate reality as such but reality for us. Reason is always historical reason, a mode of as well as a product of world-building.<sup>11</sup>

The consequences of this humility and reasonableness, as it were, are not as some fear. The anxious scare-slogan that "nothing is real, so everything is permitted" finds justification only against a background of faith that absolute certainty was ever possible. With the end of this shibboleth, nihilism loses its force to intimidate, for reason does not aspire to the demands of an absolute order, but rather presupposes that reasonableness emerges as a normative counterfactual only against our ineliminable historicity and linguisticity. Objectivity still has meaning but within the bounds of knowledge that can be discursively redeemed. For "it is part of the grammar of the expression 'knowing' that everything we know can

be criticized and justified” (Habermas 1998d, 312). Separable from but analogous to this notion of “epistemic rationality,” a modern morality must invoke reason, and not, say, authenticity, because it is the rhetoric of reason’s *reflexivity* that can motivate adherents to its cause. As Habermas himself argues, a postmetaphysical thinking cannot answer the question, “Why be moral?”—but neither does this question truly present itself from within a postmetaphysical framework: “moral convictions do not allow themselves to be overridden without resistance . . . ; this is shown by the bad conscience that ‘plagues’ us when we act against our better judgment” (1992h, 239, 1998a, 35). This resistance arises, unbidden as it were, because for Habermas (revaluating Nietzsche’s account of the genealogy of morals), a modern moral intuition cannot avoid reflexivity. Such a modern morality would, then, take on the character of the best of aesthetic theories, for it would in the same gesture negate and create: The self-reflection of morality carries the potential to generate an authentic social solidarity as inherently self-reflexive.

## II. Mimesis

Traditionally *mimesis*<sup>12</sup> has anchored two overlapping traditions, one anthropological/ psychological and the other having to do with the representational arts.<sup>13</sup> As the basis of an anthropology, mimesis means *making oneself similar*, or *speaking in the voice of another*, or *acting as another would act*, as in mimicry.<sup>14</sup> Both Plato and Aristotle considered imitation a basic human activity, found in child’s play, but by no means shed in the human passage to maturity. Mimesis answers to a noncognitive mode of bringing difference into identity, to effect similarity in action. Let a child imitate a storm, or an adult a citizen.

In the arts, mimesis characterizes the somewhat mysterious relationship between original and copy—as in representational painting—but it applies as well as to the activity of theatrical actors on a stage (again: *speaking in the voice of another*, or *enacting a role*), in the making of music, where music may convey the affective aspects of human character, or dance, as in the homeopathic rituals of disciplined, rhythmic motion to effect an exorcism of a possession by the Corybantes.<sup>15</sup> Mimesis, however, is also used to indicate the imitation of nature, where what is imitated is no object but the power to create *as* nature creates, which is to say, an artist mimes the power of creativity itself.

Part of the contemporary attraction to the concept of mimesis is that as a catchword it is sufficiently indeterminate such that, successfully counterposed to its equally hoary, but also contentiously debated counterpart,

reason, it offers an alternative to our culture's overreliance on explanations of interest-based, volunteeristic, and ultimately private rational choice. Mimesis could prove a viable basis on which to think about how interests are formed and transformed, one that characterizes the intersubjective microprocesses of the social constitution of the human subject and community rather than bracketing our political thinking until only after we assume a givenness of identity and interests.

For illustrative purposes, we might briefly consider the centrality of mimesis to the process of political foundation in an early text in political philosophy's modern canon, Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan*. In his introduction, Hobbes declares provocatively that in founding political order, humans imitate nature, understood as the creative artistry of God. Hobbes opens up his grand text this way:

Nature (the art whereby God hath made and governs the world) is by the *art* of man, as in many other things, so in this also imitated, that it can make an artificial animal. . . . *Art* goes yet further, imitating that rational and most excellent work of nature, *man*. For by art is created that great LEVIATHAN called a COMMONWEALTH, or STATE (in Latin CIVITAS), which is but an artificial man . . . in which the *sovereignty* is an artificial soul; . . . the *magistrates* and other *officers* of judicature and execution, artificial *joints*; *reward* and *punishment* . . . are the *nerves* . . . ; the *wealth* and *riches* of all the particular members are the *strength*; *salus populi* (the people's safety) its *business*; *counselors*, by whom all things needful for it to know are suggested unto it, are the *memory*; *equity* and *laws* an artificial *reason* and *will*; *concord*, *health*; *sedition*, *sickness*, and *civil war*, *death*. Lastly, the *pacts* and *covenants* by which the parts of this body politic were at first made, set together, and united, resemble that *fiat*, or the *let us make man*, pronounced by God in the creation. (1994, 3–4)

Let's be clear. Hobbes here is saying that the human invention of politics is like God's creation of humans. God's art finds its parallel in the human art of creating political order, and political order is nothing other than the representation of the unity of all citizens combined into a single body which they themselves belong to by virtue of their co-production of it. Citizens are like Gods insofar as creating politics imitates God's creative power. Furthermore, Leviathan is nothing foreign to its creators; it is rather an artificial reproduction of their own natural bodies, but amplified, and disciplined in terms of specific functions, with each particular citizen

performing a duty that *is* the political body's internal workings. The imitation of God's power instaurates Leviathan, and the imitation occurs via "*pacts and covenants . . . which . . . resemble that fiat, or the let us make man, pronounced by God in the creation.*" It is the *resemblance* to God's power that empowers the fiat to bind citizens together as one. Mimetic power produces the mimetic polis constituted by mimetic citizens.

Some readers have placed Hobbes in the *rationalist* tradition of politics for his notion that political order is founded on a social contract<sup>16</sup>: Rational agreement in the form of binding contracts guaranteed by the sovereign's authority, so the argument goes, tames persons' self-regarding behavior, thereby steering a polity clear of the otherwise mutually destructive and inevitable war of all against all. This one-sided, juridical explanation of what produces and maintains political order fails to take into account Hobbes's insistence on the mimetic aspect of the original production of politics. We might be better off saying that the instantiation of political unity by way of explicit Covenants, that is, through propositional speech, culminating in the virtual, although consensual, performative speech act, "I promise to join, . . ." does not make rational but only *gives articulate form to the nonpropositional communion* that takes place in the deliberate founding.

As Hobbes says, political founding is rather like "that *fiat, or the let us make man, pronounced by God in the creation.*" This shift *within* the field of performative speech acts, from promise to fiat, occurs by sleight of hand; agency silently shifts from the proto-citizens who promise to join to Leviathan who then refracts the promise as a command. The original fiat, the so-called social contract is then *received* like a command that brooks no disobedience. As one cannot choose to disallow God from creating you, neither can one disallow the instantiation of State, or at least so goes the Hobbesian fantasy, but also Hobbes's perceived need for *more* than mere words to bind politically. The guarantee of order and obedience lies in the gesture to accept the fiat *as if it were* given prior to one's own utterance of it, as if one were merely echoing the command, obeying it, and belonging to it. The avowal of obedience that instantiates and constitutes government, in Hobbes's narrative, becomes the *mimetic semblance* of the nonpropositional event, and not the rational basis of it.<sup>17</sup>

Alternatively, we could open up the analysis, for there *is* debate between mimetic and rationalist accounts of political founding: Hobbes employs *both* rhetorics, that of reason and of mimesis. My limited point here is that for Hobbes, the passage out of the state of nature is plausibly described as a mimetic origin ritual.<sup>18</sup> That the ritual takes the form of a contract articulates but not does lessen the force of mimetic identification. As Hobbes (109) puts it, "This is more than consent, or concord; it is a real unity of them all, in one and the same person, . . . [that] *Mortal God,*"



Leviathan. Even at the origin of the so-called rationalist tradition, mimesis proves central and perhaps even unavoidable.<sup>19</sup>

In fact, the two mimetic traditions, anthropological and aesthetic, are first coordinated in Plato's political philosophy—which may have served in this as Hobbes's model, not to mention Rousseau's<sup>20</sup>—which is to say, mimesis is first and foremost a *political philosopher's* attempt at naming an affective power which is amenable to rational manipulation, but a power ultimately resistant within this mode of thinking to the stable identity classical political philosophy prefers.<sup>21</sup> Mimesis is posed as the unavoidable counterpart to identity-reason, and in this sense in Hobbes, mimesis is what reason attempts to stabilize, an imagined disorder by way of a ritualized mimesis. The Hobbesian making of political order rests not only on the mimetic communion of many bodies into a single body (in chap 17), but also on the preparatory work in constructing proto-citizens who come to speak the same language and define their inner-most appetites and aversions in precisely the same ways, which is the force of Hobbes's scientific and mechanistic depiction of human nature in chaps. 1 through 15. "Read thy self!" Hobbes urges (4), and he's sure you will read in yourself exactly what *he* writes down as a universal adequation of sense-experience. If we do *today* sense the reverberations of truth in his definitions, this does not confirm the eternal truth of Hobbes's position. To the contrary, the question this poses for us is how is it that a Hobbesian sensibility has been absorbed into our common sense, our culture, our feelings?<sup>22</sup>

Hobbes's *out of the state of nature story* represents an attempt to mimetically transform his readers so that "we" will employ the same words for the same meanings, and to order our array of sentiment and political obedience along the lines Hobbes has already decided would most capably discipline his reading public. At one level, he produces and thereby incites the need for order and the collective fear of disorder, but above all else, he underlines the necessity of a political solidarity arising from a shared mimetic origin story. Philosopher Hobbes wishes to be that fulcrum that pivots chaos to order, that orients the state's internal mimesis, and the extent to which he succeeds is the extent to which we study and internalize his work, its aesthetic intervention in our self- and social understanding.

If, however, we thematize his *rhetoric* of mimesis as an object of study, we institute a rupture of sorts from the mimetic snare. Do we then become disinterested spectators, reading Hobbes but inured to his rhetoric? Conversely, we might ask: In our redoubling on the figure of mimesis in the study of it, do we engage in a homeopathic therapy as a form of subversive mimesis? Or, do we simply perpetuate Hobbes's solution to the rational/mimetic political question? Must we, as Richard Rorty says of obsolete worldviews, simply leave Hobbesian mimesis behind?

We should take note in the above discussion of all the variability subtended by the notion of *imitation*, for it indicates that, first of all, imitation is hardly mere copying, and it is also not quite as single-minded as “the representation of reality,” the subtitle of Eric Auerbach’s great book of literary criticism, *Mimesis*. Within political philosophy, *mimesis* is figured as bringing persons, objects or processes into similarity, and not necessarily according to any ulterior or anterior logic beyond the power of similarity itself, though an ulterior or anterior reconstructive narrative or logic can lend coherence to the process. The hope and fear of patriots, alarmists, and revolutionaries alike is a totalizing mimetic power that entralls, as in a cult or a crowd, and in so doing, preempts questions of legitimacy. The ambiguity of *mimesis* bears with it political and moral dilemmas.

For some, rational, autonomous action indicates a cognitive and mindful exercise of freedom and independent judgment, whereas, in contrast, mimetic action indicates mindless or instinctual copying, a herd mentality. In particular, aesthetic *mimesis* is lauded or defamed for possessing the audience, robbing them of judgment by way of inciting them to excited behavior right-minded citizens would otherwise avoid. Aesthetic *mimesis* also has been held up for its educative function in molding audiences in the stamp of beneficial images of wholesome virtue, or at least, in a necessary solidarity on the model of a political *body* as in Hobbes. Thus, the affective power of *mimesis* is typically understood as threatening to defenders of the autonomous subject, but quite heartening to those for whom the production of a common sense or a General Will requires far more than mere calculative reason for motivation and loyalty.

On this score, defenders of rationality, such as Habermas, often are held to sound *conservative* noises even though they may ally with critical or progressive movements (e.g., Western Marxism), because in the Romantic tradition, but especially after the reception of Nietzsche, Adorno, and then Foucault, reason itself has been held as a culprit of bad faith. Bad faith, it is argued, because although claimed as a tool for progressive emancipation, rationality, in the same process that draws us from the darkness of our myths, operates by subjecting *all* ultimate aims to an acidic scrutiny those aims can’t possibly resist. Thus, in the strong, Nietzschean version of this argument, emancipation is achieved only at the expense of making irrational those aims that had motivated the drive for emancipation in the first place.

At the limit of this trend, some contemporary skeptics of rationality offer up a highly indeterminate defense of “others,” a generalized responsibility for the unknown or nonidentical.<sup>23</sup> Countering the force of a confident but totalizing reason, these theorists advocate indeterminability and a fundamental pluralism not only as a condition for reason, but also as

a guiding ethic and a telos of openness (if the latter formulation may be allowed). The bare existence of another is to signal a moral demand that we recognize that others exist in excess of what we make of them. Thus, in a perversion of our usual expectations, rationality is held responsible for coercing indiscriminate identity and closure where, to the contrary, mimesis signals a fundamental openness and ontic difference, implying a gap across which is felt a moral duty of respect and an attitude of wonder for otherness in general, or as in Levinas's work, the paradoxical formulation of otherness in its opaque specificity—the face.

Distinguishing mimesis from reason in political philosophy remains in this way plausible only insofar as mimesis answers to an other-than-rational aspect of human sociation and aesthetic response.<sup>24</sup> This dispute certainly orients much of contemporary political theory, and indeed, has been vital for political thinking in some form or other on two accounts. First, because, to paraphrase Rousseau (1973), more than rational law is necessary to solidify a polis. (Why? Because the validity of laws can't answer only to calculative considerations of self-preservation, lest we disobey when the laws prove inconvenient. Thus, we must respect and even *love* the laws, so this argument goes, such that calculative thinking is oriented by a *raison d'être* rather than supplanting it.) Alternatively, for those (like Adorno) *critical* of a libidinal model of political identification, aesthetic theory under the star of mimesis offers a negating power, subversive to unreflected affective ties, where affect is always tempted to corruption by a cynical reason. Mimesis conceived of as a distancing process can supplement a reason that alone would be insufficient to motivate citizens to break through false consciousness. Thus, a homeopathic remedy presents itself, a true mimesis acting to subvert false. Which raises the question: Can a subversive mimesis in aesthetic activity destabilize philosophy's hijacking of mimesis for politics?<sup>25</sup>

All of this to the side for the moment, it is vital to realize that these late debates on the open or closed character of reason or mimesis, are, as it were, already present at the origin. What Plato (1997c, 607b) called already an "ancient quarrel," the dispute between political philosophy and aesthetic activity is *governed*—a term to be used loosely—by a common mode of power, namely, mimesis. A political thinking *that wishes for itself legitimacy* finds itself compelled to put power into the service of morality, or at least an ethical solidarity, while at the same time, in finding its right orientation and expression, employing mimesis for aesthetic production and affective response. Art and politics, then, are *competitors* in aim and method for the hearts and minds of citizens: hence their antagonism and their *secret complicity*.<sup>26</sup> Mimesis serves as the process that coordinates the activity of belonging and boundary making together with the dissolution

of loyalties and orientations; it connects notions of the beautiful and of the sublime (i.e., modes of aesthetic reception) with questions of identity and identification, and is implicated in the process of constructing a legitimate political order that answers to principles themselves only apparently opposed to mimetic power.

This is what Plato understood long ago (see Chapter 2), and so he advocated the extreme measure of banishing the mimetic poets from his ideal Republic while reserving for himself and for philosophy a *proper* mimesis for the good of the polis, or at least for philosophy's control of the polis. The political struggle for the control of mimesis between philosophy and the poets establishes the antagonistic backdrop against which Adorno finds hope for resistance in art, and why Habermas has such an ambivalent relation to mimesis, why he tries to suppress it, like Plato, and indeed, in the German tradition of sublation, to transform it.

### III. Mimesis Against Disenchantment

The separation of politics and art that Plato's Socrates advocates in *Republic* already represents the outcome of a political battle, one that Adorno hopes to reinitiate with his concept of mimesis. And mimesis seems the appropriate point of attack because Plato aimed his anti-aesthetics squarely and specifically at mimetic poets. In Plato's view, poetic mimesis competes with philosophers for the souls of citizens. Plato's myths advocate for citizens a turning toward justice, against the poets who, he claims, merely reproduce in their stories a chaotic world in its appearance. A discipline of spirit promises political restraint, but a poetic conception of the world, complains Plato, merely fuels a chaotic freedom, ugly and irrational because self-contradicting, inwardly and outwardly in turmoil. Plato's judgment that poets corrupt is predicated on the view that citizens will take up as their self-image those myths released into society by society's great storytellers. So the *Republic* itself represents a meta-political gambit: The exoteric political question of "who should rule?" is transformed into the esoteric "who shall be society's storytellers?" The *Republic* entire must be read as presenting a poetic image in competition with poets proper.<sup>27</sup>

Plato's hope for victory rests on the asymmetries in the concepts that organize his philosophy: reason—myth, order—chaos, reality—appearance, beauty and its other—and each side of these conceptual dyads are overlain atop actual protagonists in political struggle. In these asymmetries, mimetic poets are forced (within Plato's argument) to the abjected side of disorder, unreason, ugliness, and immorality. We might say, in the language of deconstruction, that art and its partisans represent the constitutive other

of politics, at least from the perspective of philosophy. Hence, mimetic poets are dismissed as unworthy candidates for citizenship, and more importantly, unworthy to assume the role of educating citizens to their own self-knowledge.

Adorno takes up the challenge posed by Plato's aesthetic-political gambit: Adorno will accept for his own guide mimesis over truth, yet a particular variant of mimesis which he figures as *prior* to its construction as merely oppositional to reason. His positive re-evaluation of mimesis emerges out of a dissatisfaction with the failure of Enlightenment's reason to deliver a better world, and in particular, the notion that Nazi experience could be recognized not only as irrational, but, terrifyingly, as a rationality without moral compass. In this light it would not be enough for critical theory to simply urge more *reason*; rather, a conceptual other is needed that would unflinchingly stand opposed to brutality, which could show up the brutality harbored within reason. An analysis at the level of basic politico-philosophic concepts was required.

Adorno today is best known for, with Max Horkheimer, the deeply pessimistic assessment of Reason in their co-authored *Dialectic of Enlightenment* of 1944. Within Western Marxism, this provocative text seemingly drew to a close a certain kind of emancipatory hope.<sup>28</sup> Where Orthodox Marxism had narrowed its emancipatory energies to economic materialism, the circle around Max Horkheimer, and what became the Frankfurt School, deliberately aimed to widen the scope of materialism. Horkheimer in 1937 argued that a strict economism held within it an unacknowledged normative *deficit*:

[I]f in the present state of society economy is the master of man and therefore the lever by which he is to be moved to change, in the future men must themselves determine all their relationships in the face of natural necessities. Economics in isolation will therefore not provide the norm by which the community of men is to be measured. This is also true for the period of transition in which politics will win a new independence from the economy. . . . [T]hus even the character of the transition remains indeterminate. (1972, 249)

With the proletariat's loss of stature as the predetermined revolutionary class,<sup>29</sup> Horkheimer here signals the need for a new set of possibilities that locates material resistance elsewhere, which answers to norms situated beyond the old economism, and which reformulates the character of "transition," that is, of political revolution. Far from advocating an antimaterialist idealism,<sup>30</sup> Horkheimer saw that cultural forms and basic theoretical concepts that traditionally were understood to stand outside of

a material political economy needed to be reconceptualized as *internal* to the material basis of life.<sup>31</sup> The moving forces of social change would then find their home in a necessary relation to economic thinking, but would not be reduced at the normative or practical level to economic laws (of material accumulation, distribution, production, and exchange). The resources for political resistance and change would reside not merely (and not even necessarily) at the level of economy but at the level of *meaning*.

As McCarthy puts it, the early critical theorists aimed to uncover a “normative surplus of meaning that critical theorists can draw upon in seeking to transcend and transform the limits of their situations. In short, the dialectical critique of reason is ‘internal’ rather than ‘total’” (1993, 143).<sup>32</sup> This meant that the Frankfurt School proposed anew a return to the old ethical questions of political philosophy, those concerning a life worth living, but with the demand that questions of truth and value were to have a necessarily *historical* existence, and would act positively toward social and political change. This was a cultural-philosophic historical materialism, an approach that remains consistent across successive generations of the Frankfurt School.

During and after World War II, early optimism gave way to pessimism, as evidenced by Horkheimer and Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. In this new phase of their thinking, they argued that reason had surrendered its emancipatory potential.<sup>33</sup> Culture and cultural consumers, politics and citizenship, family and intimate relations all had undergone a sweeping transformation. Reason in the age of science, capital, and mass politics took now for its orienting norm the total mastery of nature and man; the underside of technical mastery was, elaborating on Max Weber’s thesis of 1919, the *disenchantment* of the world.<sup>34</sup>

According to this *disenchantment thesis*, experimental method and the logic of capital reduce all matter to component parts, all value to the coin of the realm—all facts and social relations are made manipulable, exchangeable, reproducible, and hence meaningless in and of themselves, but also dislocating, in that human individuation is severed from any embeddedness in a meaningful whole. Reason reduced to a calculative thinking suppresses not only the magical animating spirit of nature, but also represses the free instinctual life that might animate social bonds and self-relations. Although the primacy of technical mastery and capital (read: Enlightenment) might have succeeded in exorcizing the animistic demons of traditional culture, religious dogma, and political Absolutism, it succeeded all too well, leaving Bourgeois science/culture empty of that which might orient notions of a life worth living outside of economism. The means of life have subverted the ends of life.

As one commentator concisely remarks: Adorno and Horkheimer's concept of a vicious *dialectic* of Enlightenment posits "a mismatch between the aims and ideals of enlightenment, and its method of progressive demythologisation. Progressive demythologisation has yielded disenchantment but not liberation" (J. Bernstein 1999, 315). Thus, any faith in reason becomes unreasonable, a dogma, a re-mythologization. Like the archaic snake that eats itself, Enlightenment's own success consumes itself. Nazism, fascism, and anti-Semitism are not deviations from Enlightenment but Enlightenment's culmination, degraded moments of solidarity already signaled in reason's own disenchantment principle.<sup>55</sup> The most atrocious barbarisms are made possible by elevating all means to ends, debasing value by brute mastery. Enlightenment thinking reverts to myth, and myth to barbarism.

Against this assessment of modernity, what hope remains for the original intentions of Enlightenment, the possibility of freedom from dogma, alleviation from natural and social ills, autonomous action for moral purposes, a positive solidarity that does not immolate its members? We might expect that the pessimism in Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic* saturates all hope as instrumental rationality infects all reason. But this is not the case. Their analysis of the self-subversion of Enlightenment carries with it *mimesis* as its shadow, its origin, not quite its opposite, but Enlightenment's object, that which Enlightenment would, if it could, order, arrange and master.<sup>56</sup> "Mimesis" sounds a muted and half-forgotten but still *optimistic* tone in that it signals a force both primitive and irrational, prior to and resistant to the encroachment of full-on modernity.

To lay out what is at stake in a debate between Habermas's communicative rationality and Adorno's mimesis requires at least a provisional definition of mimesis for Adorno. Although mimesis in general notoriously evades definition, as we already have glimpsed, and Adorno is anything but willing to pin mimesis down to a single function, we might cautiously say that in Adorno's work, *mimesis* has two central nodes: The first figures mimesis as a relation between humans and nature characterized by an overlapping force field of imitation, negation, appropriation and creation. The second node finds that same force field (e.g., imitation, negation, appropriation, and creation) operative in describing and evaluating the proper function of art in society. With respect to both of these nodes, human practices are understood by the analyst, with *mimesis* in his or her tool bag of concepts, as to whether they are active or passive, cognizant or inspired, aiming at freedom or necessity, acting to open up possibility or as a cog in capitalism's grinding wheel. In this list of dyads, Adorno favors the mimesis that expands degrees of freedom, although mimesis as a process by no means always acts in this direction. Furthermore, mimesis itself

undergoes a history of enlightenment, so an older, archaic, cultic mimetic activity, for example, falls under a different kind of critique than mimesis in modern culture. The attraction for Adorno to mimesis is precisely its variability—it inherently resists what capitalism and its regime of reason would otherwise thoroughly determine as identities suitable for contributions within the bourgeois order. Hence, on the surface of the debate at least, reason aims at identity and the activity of identifying, where mimesis aims at indeterminability, polymorphism and the nonidentical.

Horkheimer and Adorno's respect for the inherent virtue of polymorphism and the nonidentical—in a word, the protean—in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* takes the form of natural or animistic pantomimesis. In their schematic version of the history of modern consciousness, human understanding progresses in three stages, from magical to mythic/epic to modern/scientific self-understanding. The first period, the magical period, is characterized by mimesis with nature or with cultic spirits. In their words:

On the magical plane, dream and image were not mere signs for the thing in question, but were bound up with it by similarity or names. The relation is one not of intention but of relatedness. Like science, magic pursues aims, but seeks to achieve them by mimesis—not by progressively distancing itself from the object. (1969, 11)

Mimesis signifies a fundamental *continuity* among things in the world and our knowledge of them. Knowledge may emerge from inhabiting this continuity, but knowledge always is already a degeneration of the relation, because distancing alienates the knower from what may be known. Likewise, conscious imitation of nature defies the spirit of mimesis insofar as consciousness requires a reflective distance between subject and object as a condition of its possibility: “Space is absolute alienation. When men try to become like nature they harden themselves against it” (180).

A true mimesis with nature, that is, a nonintentional mimesis, is *pantomimetic* in that nature is always nonidentical with itself, and therefore the assimilation of a self to nonidentical nature or to many cultic gods dissolves the self into its heterogenous context. They explain, “The shaman's rites were directed to the wind, the rain, the serpent without, or the demon in the sick man, but not to materials or specimens. Magic was not ordered by one, identical spirit: it changed like the cultic masks that were supposed to accord with the various spirits” (9). Even cultic magic, however, already points to the fully administered society: To harness the natural imitation of gods or nature is to already subject nature and God to a purposiveness that would control mimesis rather than let it make



manifest the relatedness of humans and nature.<sup>57</sup> Where Plato's gambit for the Philosopher's mimesis is directed to a single source of inspiration, the harmonious otherworldly Forms, Horkheimer and Adorno's natural pantomimesis describes a prior and more primitive notion of submission and self-loss, one that stands prior to the advent of a self-conscious reflective thinking with its ethos of scientific control over the wild forces of nature without and within. This natural mimesis lives on in the human body's own "archaic schemata" (180): burps, farts, stiff joints, the fear that stands hair on end. All that which eludes the ego's self-control rehearses the primal knowledge that instrumental rationality has not suffused all of the world and all of ourselves. A natural mimesis too lives on in certain unconscious social impulses, those "infectious gestures of direct contacts suppressed by civilization, for instance, touch, soothing, snuggling up, coaxing" (182).

Nevertheless, their scheme is *tragic* in its structure: The possibility for mimetic solidarity is forever preempted by a consciousness that, as it develops through the civilizing process, removes itself from the nature that it is, even as it wishes to bridge this self-imposed gap. (This agonizing progression echoes Rousseau's depiction of the civilizing process in his *Second Discourse*.) In this way, the subject-object epistemology of science operates as a mode of domination employed by moderns on nature, on each other, and with a Nietzschean sting, on the self, denatured in the process of becoming self-conscious.<sup>58</sup>

With his counter-concept mimesis, Adorno sets out to show that a *normative* state of a nondominative relation between humans and nature—and by analogy among humans and within human nature itself—can motivate us to challenge and resist the seemingly all pervasive logic of scientific rationality, particularly as modernity's reason plays slave to imperatives of capital accumulation and a cynical politics that misreads human needs as functional necessities of the economy. Mimesis is the action in the event of contact between others on which and through which a healthy uncertainty offers the promise that life has not been already satisfied and reduced to a relation of dead objects in a calculus of mastery.

Counterposed to the Baconian demand that humans should master nature, mimesis as a mode of contact and engagement indicates a more primitive and less determinate relation, one that is marked by awe, respect and supplication, but also, to the contrary, productive of an affective bringing-close, which moves humans toward the rhythms of nature, however dissonant.<sup>59</sup> If Enlightenment reason aims to analyze and organize nature for instrumental ends, then mimesis at least allows for the generosity and terror of nature—within the natural world as well as human nature—to speak in its own voice. It is a voice that holds itself out as indecipherable and unavoidable.

The mimesis that appears in Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is a primitive, anthropological power, mimicry, anticipates its later incarnation as aesthetic mimesis. These *two* mimetic forces, archaic and modern, reveal something permanent, although historically contingent, which can oppose reason's inherently political demand for identity among that which it orders. The Platonic philosopher's dogma, to subject art to political judgment, silently makes the *prior* political move to separate art from politics, thereby sterilizing for Adorno what makes art *art*. One alternative to this wholly degraded, depoliticized art, which Adorno does *not* adopt, is a reconciliatory art—that by which we represent ourselves to ourselves, what Hans-Georg Gadamer (1989, 48) has referred to, following Hegel, as satisfying the *human* purpose of art: self-knowledge (which not incidentally aims to answer the Delphic Command, "Know thyself!"). This consoling art, for Adorno, is the conservative flip side to what he in fact advocates, a *disruptive* or *subversive* art, with a power to negate, which flexes a sovereignty whose "ubiquitous potential represents . . . the penetration of an irresolvable crisis" (Menke 1998, 252).<sup>40</sup>

The perception that mimesis holds this promise of *resistance* to a dominant order takes place for Adorno not in just any art, but in the uncompromising, enigmatic, most useless and painful art that challenges the bourgeois self-conceit that comfort is the same as freedom, pleasure the same as happiness, order the same as health, tidiness the same as truth.<sup>41</sup> In fact, for Adorno we might even label as "art" any artifact or practice that strikes us as occupying this position of resistance, whether performed by so-called artists as art or not. Art that purposively tries to be art betrays its own concept, and so for Adorno, a true art only can *indirectly* serve to orient a way of thinking about social relations, because the artistic process in works of the highest caliber represents not an homage to object fetishism but rather is a true mimesis *of mimesis*: It manages to bring us into the light of a pure creativity.<sup>42</sup> The highest art, in Adorno's estimation, has as its paradoxical effect to represent the nonidentical in a mode of becoming that is its perpetual absence, its perpetual promise, like the messiah, never quite here but here nonetheless *as a promise* if you work to accept it as such. Artistic activity figured as a mimetic practice imitates no thing but rather the impulse of that which motivates humans to do art, which is, to be free.<sup>43</sup> It is, in Hegelian language, the tremor of spirit self-actualized, although not as a totality that totalizes, but rather, as a shard remaining from a whole long-ago shattered but still vibrant with light, still vibrating with the force of the infinite.

And this hope for art is *social* insofar as it acts as a negative, normative end of human activity, which is to say directly: preserve the other insofar as the existence of others offers the promise of self-transcendence, of a

society other to and better than one's own. The norm is *negative* insofar as it does not prescribe regulative rules for conduct, but rather the opposite, it presents a *way* in which interaction, or perhaps action *simple*, takes place in the absence of rules that constrain and repress. A primitive mimesis resounds in modernist art insofar as, in new form, it signals for humanity a better future freed from the cul-de-sac of Enlightenment rationality.<sup>44</sup>

Politics competes with art and aims to control it, to monopolize mimesis, because it knows that art *both* reconciles and negates, forms and dissolves; is conservative and progressive, reactionary and utopian: In a word, the promise and threat of art is captured in its sovereignty over the world, its apparent other-worldliness brought home, and so it can redeem, but it also can show the lie to power. In the working out of mimesis, then, we get neither a sovereignty of politics nor of art; rather, each takes hold of the other, in practice and also in the matter of judgment. Politics recognizes that a subversive art can resist the comfortable place that it would make for it (in a submissive pedagogic form, or a degraded, autonomous one), and by analogy, offer a "becoming otherwise" for the progressive spirit Adorno endorses. Art in its malleability, however, also is eminently suitable for corruption and inauthenticity.

For Adorno, emancipation *from reason* requires mimesis in that, dialectically speaking, only a logic of de-differentiation *and* an ethos of "identification with" can counter the global tendency of reason's slide toward total differentiation and "identification of." Art must avoid an inauthentic autonomy, and instead achieve an autonomy won through active negation of that which it would work through. Reason, reification, and the alienation of subjects and nature close off the possibility for authentic, nonviolent reconciliation. Reason operates on this model, whereas mimesis subverts it. Mimesis opens up this latter possibility. In this sense, Adorno's definition of mimesis differs from the abjected notion in Plato. It is, in fact, Adorno's intention to invoke a mimesis both before and beyond Greek thinking, for "[r]ationality in general is the demythologization of modes of mimetic behavior."<sup>45</sup>

To conclude here, one can read Adorno's specific sense of mimesis as an entwinement of two impulses, one aesthetic and the other moral: Mimesis might yield a moral and eminently human principle insofar as mimesis binds participants without thereby overwhelming them, giving each an appreciation for what the other's existence represents—the possibility of a better life—and so a duty, however self-regarding, to preserve the other. Mimesis might yield an *aesthetic* principle insofar as mimesis can create a sensibility of a nondominative solidarity—*feelings* of togetherness that make togetherness valuable and a good, but that, again, do not consume the other but exist only insofar as the other exceeds one's apperception.

Under conditions of advanced capitalism, aesthetic practice holds out the promise that this respect for the nonidentical may still find an octave in which to register its power in the world. For Adorno, mimesis stands against the tide of disenchantment.

#### IV. Mimesis as Re-Enchantment?

Given the discussion just presented, a depiction of mimesis as productive of an open and engaged solidarity, one might wonder what inspires the vituperative condemnation in Habermas's repeated attacks<sup>46</sup> on Adorno's mimesis.

In the paradigm shift to postmetaphysical thinking, a shift that links moral reason to communicative action, Habermas explicitly steers his course against Theodor Adorno's abyssal critique of reason *and* Adorno's counterthrust, the advocacy of Enlightenment's counter-concept, *mimesis*. Where Adorno's pessimism and optimism both defy modernity's faith in Reason, Habermas insists that the critique of reason has proceeded for too long without reflecting on its own normative presuppositions of critique. He identifies a fundamental weakness of early critical theory. We may read in Habermas's development of communicative reason and his dispute with mimesis the best contemporary effort to revitalize a passion for theorizing the strongest possible link (which is still justifiably weak) between public reasoning and its relation to the production of moral ends. This effort has only increased in intensity, and a recent countermovement has even sprung up, defending the mentor Adorno from Habermas's parricide, as it were.<sup>47</sup>

Much of the contemporary effort to rehabilitate the often hidden but surprisingly optimistic strain in Adorno's political philosophy rests on the explication of his late work on aesthetics wherein the notion of mimesis plays a central role in underwriting a moral sensibility. The leading American intellectual historian of the Frankfurt School, Martin Jay, has insisted (1997) on the significance of mimesis in Adorno's theory of aesthetics, and others too have sought to clarify the role of mimesis in Adorno's thought, and its relation to the aims of critical theory.<sup>48</sup>

My own position on the intense debate waged over reason and mimesis is synthetic. The contrasts, I believe, have been drawn too starkly one against the other, and a rapprochement is possible, although neither under the star of reason nor mimesis, but in a necessary tension between them, a tension kept open by an ineradicable *temporal* and *hermeneutic* dimension to the *experience* of communication, a tension that very occasionally finds its synthetic apotheosis, and in *those* cases, mythically, by the affective power of participation.<sup>49</sup>