

MYTH, METAPHYSICS AND ETHICS OF THE NEW:
ADORNO, BENJAMIN AND KAFKA

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Abstract: The focus of the text are two essays on the work of Franz Kafka – one by Theodor Adorno, and one by Walter Benjamin. They both look for the significance of Kafka for the project of critical theory, his potential to contribute to the social critique. Benjamin and Adorno use the concepts of myth and metaphysics and investigate their implied critique in some works of the Czech author. Another important perspective is the epistemological one. Literature is a key field of encounter for epistemological platforms and ethical claims. Kafka acquires his political importance as an unrecognized critic of the political status quo by means of his elaborate ethical stance.

Key words: Frankfurt School, epistemology, ethics, metaphysics, critical theory

This text presents an account of the relation between two readings of the work of Frantz Kafka – the ones of Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin. The most thoroughly considered text by Benjamin here is a letter of his to Gerhard Scholem from 1938, when the immediate public interest for authors like Kafka and Robert Walser was still present. It is due to the unique combination of mystical and uncanny elements and social critique. Adorno publishes his major work on the Czech writer – the hereby considered “Notes on Kafka” – in the sixties of the 20th century when the fashion of Kafka has already faded away. In the contemporary aesthetical consciousness Kafka is mostly related to the category of the absurd and the question of the day was rather whether his works succeeded in keeping their place in the critical consciousness or aren’t they a silent support for the power of the status quo. Such is also the main Kafkian issue in Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory*. The conception there is to a certain extent different from the older texts of Adorno and Benjamin. I mean, what differs is the significance of the work of art for the ethical encounter with the new, the ethical way to cope with the unknown and with the things that don’t fit into the network of categories of our time. Both authors show certain reluctance to recognize the problem as an ethical one. According to their account, the issues of Kafka are issues of ideology. Yet coping with the new can be thematized through the way the two

theorists interpret the coping with the old in Kafka himself. The present text represents an attempt for such thematization.

Myth and metaphysics have important role not only in the philosophy of Adorno and Benjamin, but also in their literary critical works. As for their works on Kafka, in the beginning stands a not very well motivated feeling or even prejudice that his world is open to very archaic times. Yet it is clear we cannot attribute to the writer a simplistic version of the dialectic of Enlightenment that wouldn't even be dialectic in the true sense. According to such a primitive interpretation, Kafka should be conducting a social critique by comparing the modern times to the darkest age of myth, while the latter, as it were, stay unchanged by the false Enlightenment.¹ Neither Adorno, nor Benjamin would choose such approach. They both start from the preliminary question whether there is anything archaic in Kafka, or not, and if there is what is it and what is its significance for us, what does it mean according to the critical social theory. And here come the differences between the two thinkers. While for Benjamin Kafka offers to the reader an encounter with a world that is ontologically absolutely ancient, one having in itself something from the time before myth², for Adorno the social relations in the Czech author are rather an example of metaphysics, i.e. they are a specific interpretation of myth. We will see what type of interpretation is referred later on.

According to the representative of the Frankfurt School the impression of authentic archaism in Kafka is due exactly to the presence of this metaphysical core. Does Kafka reach any prophetic conclusions on the rise of the ideological consciousness on the scene of European cultural life between the two world wars? Adorno believes that it is difficult to determine that for any work of art, yet for Benjamin the answer to the above question is *yes*, Kafka is a prophet of his own kind, but again some important suppositions must be considered – for Benjamin the case of Kafka is also a mysterious one. And finally, does the world of Kafka have any value for the future? Is this value only the abstract value of a riddle with a solution independent of our will, or is the reading of Kafka an example of education and ethical exercise? The quest for these answers is directed towards the interpretations of Adorno and Benjamin and that is not a mere coincidence. They both work in the same tradition and their texts represent an adequate account of the situation before and after World War II. Yet in the present study the sequence in which their texts will be examined is anti-chronological – we shall first consider Adorno's concept of metaphysics and the classical visions of critical theory and later on – myth and mysticism with Benjamin maybe from unexpected ethical perspective.

¹ In their book *Dialectic of Enlightenment* Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer develop the theory of Enlightenment as inherently contaminated with the instrumentalization of reason. That process starts from myth itself and the Enlightenment is false since the power of reason is always a masquerade for the advent of new domination.

² This is the interpretation from Benjamin's text dedicated to the anniversary of Kafka's death (*Illuminations*).

Metaphysics according to Adorno

The interwoven concepts of metaphysics and of philosophical work with the tradition of thinking are of crucial importance for Adorno's work on Kafka. Adorno's concept of metaphysics is specific and is not limited to Friedrich Nietzsche's critique where this tradition is only a burden that is to be rejected by thinking, although his conceptions are definitely an influence upon the Frankfurt thinker. According to Adorno, metaphysics is a way of thinking that is characteristic for some philosophers, as early as Antiquity and it is related to tradition in a multifarious way – not only through the book by Aristotle having this same title of *Metaphysics* long after the death of its author. When speaking about metaphysics, Adorno generally refers to the relation between two different systems of thinking where the newer system is replacing the older one but “salvages” or “rescues” something of the older one – the newer system incorporates that salvaged layer into itself taking it as a part of its own tradition. That is how each and every versatile and rich philosophical system was born. The logic of “rescue” preserves something of the older ideas and it is not lost, it does not die out completely in the refunctionalization of concepts. Metaphysics proper is the attempt of philosophical concepts to rescue something inherited from ideas in quasi-Platonic sense. The old layer acquires the sense of given and is something of a backbone of argumentation. Yet the idea of “rescuing” has, as a matter of fact, pretty ancient origins and is definitely marked by the philosophical habit of hypostatizing abstract concepts – it stems from the borderline of philosophy and mythology. In his dialogue *Phaedo*³ Plato mentions the said pristine philosophical procedure, while Adorno mentions *Phaedo* in his book *Against Epistemology*: “Socrates in Plato's middle period already feels it 'necessary to take refuge in concepts, and use them in trying to investigate the true essence of things'” [Adorno, 2013: 99].

By giving the above quote from *Phaedo*, Adorno refers to the primary saving of things in the concepts: we rescue things for knowledge by putting them into concepts so that they can be accessible for our souls – thus we preserve something from the things. In the dialectical account of Adorno the figure of Socrates, who is disappointed with the inconsistency of things themselves and their resistance to understanding, is easily turned into a starting point of metaphysics. In this dialectical view Socrates does not save himself, but saves the *things*. The process in Adorno is opposite to the general notion of overcoming since everything that is already overcome stays in the tradition nevertheless. The

³ Adorno's interpretation most probably wouldn't prove sufficient if criticized by classical philosophy. In Adorno's reference to *Phaedo* (pp. 99, 100 from the dialogue, and the reference is as above – *Against Epistemology*) it is written that disappointed Socrates turned away from studying natural science and decided to save something from the things themselves by putting it into concepts, since he couldn't know things directly. Yet it is clear that Plato doesn't speak of building an abstraction that is to come after the encounter with the things, i.e. he doesn't speak of abstraction through selection of characteristics. If we examine the translation of Gallop [Clarendon, 2002, *Commentary* pp: 176 - 181], Socrates turns for refuge not to the things, neither to concepts, but to the *logoi* of the things. According to the commentary said edition, *logos* in this case means that Socrates will address the existing theories of the things, “their theories”, their being as discourse.

theory of rescue most probably originates from a lecture by Max Horkheimer⁴ [Horkheimer, 1990: 471] who mentions that Kant tried to save metaphysics in his theory of knowledge. A more detailed version of the “rescue” can be found in the books of Adorno on Kant’s epistemology and on *Metaphysics* by Aristotle.⁵ The following quote exemplifies the view that he is to impose also over his studies on art:

“All traditional metaphysical systems known to me, that while these systems have always been critically disposed towards anything they regarded as dogmatic or fixed ideas, they have attempted, on the other hand, to rescue, on the basis of thought alone, that to which the dogmatic or transcendent ideas referred. This tension runs through the whole of metaphysical thinking (...).” [Adorno, 2001: 8].

Adorno, Kafka and Tradition

So Adorno has a problem with the proportion (or interrelation) of what Kafka “rescues” and what Kafka demolishes by his implicit social critique. The difficulty becomes even more serious when the theorist tries to outline a dialectical framework of the mythologized ideological consciousness as the write presented it and to also sustain the presence of truth in the Hegelian sense – where subject and object are sublated. In *Prisms* [Adorno, 1997: 247]. Adorno says: “Far more than for most other writers, it may be said of Kafka that not *verum* but *falsum* is *index sui*”. In the words of Spinoza *Verum index sui et falsi* (*Truth serves as criterion for both itself and the false*), but in Kafka there is no *index*, nothing points directly to the truth. Hence the uneasy road Adorno takes to reveal the work of art in an environment of signs permeated by ideological references. Kafka’s narrative with epical homogeneity refuses to incorporate anything that differs from its “reflections on sin, pain, hope and the true way”. Adorno himself quotes this planned title by Kafka. The only weapon Kafka has against the possibility of him just recreating the existing status quo is to deprive the narrative of whatever symbolic meaning it might have. To make the text so strictly literal as to render the reader incapable of staying at this level and make him work until he finds something own and socially relevant behind the work of art. Literal reading and writing is an act of protest and of preservation of artistic value – here *value* being used in its literal ethical meaning.

Kafka’s works protected themselves against the deadly aesthetic error of equating the philosophy that an author pumps into a work with its metaphysical substance. Were this so, the work of art would be stillborn; it would exhaust itself in what it says and would not unfold itself in time. To guard against this short-circuit, which jumps directly to the significance intended by the work, the first rule is: take everything literally; cover up nothing with concepts invoked from above. Kafka’s authority is textual. [Adorno, 1997: 247].

Adorno and Benjamin give different answers to the question what are the roots of the strong position of literal meaning in Kafka. And here come the is-

⁴ Max Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 9: *Nachgelassene Schriften 1914-1931*, p. 471.

⁵The titles are Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* and *Metaphysics: Concept and Problems*.

sues of, on the one hand, what leads to the characteristic writing of the Czech author where symbolic thought is replaced by a mythic literalness of the world, and on the other – what does this writing make for in aesthetic sense. Adorno says Kafka saved himself from the danger of lapsing into writing of “philosophical literature”, while this danger is, as a matter of fact, a double one – it is impending both over the writers and the readers who take the literary work as a philosophical one. To put it shortly, if we read and write the “philosophical” way, we are going to ignore the temporal foundation of literary thinking and thus ignore its hidden social embeddedness. This historical aspect of literature according to Adorno is akin to metaphysics since the work is a part of the tradition and inevitably measures the contemporary condition with that measure. The work of art reveals and acquires its aesthetic meaning in time, thus Adorno seems to be close to the tradition of hermeneutics, but, if we look upon his *Aesthetic Theory*, he has mainly Hegelian reasons for the historicity of art, namely the necessity of mediation between the social and the individual. Adorno insist we should not comprehend artworks as hermeneutical objects [Adorno, 2002: 118]. This is only one side of the historicity Kafka saved by refraining from symbolic thinking. But what did Kafka actually save, what did he rescue? In order to give an answer to this question, we shall again turn our attention to the concept of metaphysics and Kafka’s attitude to tradition.

Adorno does not deal with Kafka’s being a part of the German or Jewish tradition in particular. What is far more important for the theorist is the figure of tradition in general as maintaining the status quo, as an eternal masque of newer ideologies. The important thing is to trace how the detailed presentation of false consciousness in Kafka might turn out to be an indispensable part of his critical potential. “He (Kafka) himself contributed to the spread of the untruth”, Adorno says [Adorno, 1997: 247]. The work of the writer with the images of power and civilization – the last one is best fit for his stories and parables – is a dangerous adventure, it is the only way for revealing power in its true dimensions of totalizing language. Yet the ability of artworks to incorporate the untruth of ideology and to turn it into their own immanent truth is a part of their dialectic and it is characteristic of the peculiar way in which only artworks can be critical [Adorno, 2002: 129-130]. The enigma of the work is exactly to presuppose that it can either be a critique, or an unequivocal glorification of the existing – the answer of this enigma of ambivalence does not exist or, to be more precise, it is ontologically located in the future. The present being of the work contains the characteristic that the work is “suspended”. Enigma and silence are constitutive principles of Kafka’s storytelling.

The enigma of artworks is their fracturedness. If transcendence were present in them, they would be mysteries, not enigmas; they are enigmas because, through their fracturedness, they deny what they would actually like to be. Only in the recent past—in Kafka’s damaged parables—has the fracturedness of art become thematic (here we might spot a hidden reference to the text from *Prisms*) [Adorno, 2002: 125].

Such is the metaphysics of art – through its *damaged* present image it is to negatively give *something* regarding the future, that is the meaning of the metaphysical movement for preservation of the traditional element in art. It points

towards things that are absent for thinking. Art does not contain testimony and yet it bears witness. It is a daring journey to places unreachable for knowledge; it bears witness of that through mimesis, but does not bring about depictions. And yet the process of art is social, says Adorno in his Hegelian account. We, on our part, when having in mind the deontological nature of witnessing without forming any testimony, we can add that this process is ethical – presupposed by our duty to be ready and vigilant for the future. Here lies the implicit connection between the conceptions of art in the texts of Adorno and Benjamin on Kafka.

The Witness Mission of Kafka according to Benjamin

I am going to introduce in a large quote a remarkable allegory by Walter Benjamin who uses it as an analytic instrument in order to define the parameters of Kafka's world. To put it simply, the idea is as follows: an epistemological issue is put in the fundamental structure of the contemporary ideological blindness, while an ethical issue of witnessing for the invisible ideological evil is our only chance to oppose it. The quote is from a letter by Benjamin to Gerhard Scholem:

“Kafka's work is an ellipse with foci that are far apart and are determined, on the one hand, by mystical experience (in particular, the experience of tradition) and, on the other, by the experience of the modern big-city dweller. In speaking of the experience of the big-city dweller, I have a variety of things in mind. On the one hand, I think of the modern citizen who knows that he is at the mercy of a vast machinery of officialdom(...) When I refer to the modern big-city dweller, I am speaking also of the contemporary of today's physicists.”

What follows is a comparison between Kafka's thinking and the account of the condition of being in physics. The problem is the unknowability of the many laws that govern nature that render humans incapable of proper reasoning.

“Therefore, if one says – as I have just said – that there was a tremendous tension between those of Kafka's experiences that correspond to present-day physics and his mystical ones, only a half-truth is stated. What is actually and in a very literal sense wildly incredible in Kafka is that this most recent world of experience was conveyed to him precisely by this mystical tradition. This, of course, could not have happened without devastating processes (to be discussed presently) within this tradition. The long and the short of it is that apparently an appeal had to be made to the forces (Benjamin says *Krafte* – both force and power, authorities, but also natural forces. He doesn't say *Macht* (power) of this tradition if an individual (by the name of Franz Kafka) was to be confronted with that reality of ours which realizes itself theoretically, for example, in modern physics, and practically in the technology of modern warfare.(...)The experience which corresponds to that of Kafka, the private individual, will probably not become accessible to the masses until such time as they are being done away with”. [Benjamin, 2007: 141-142].

Before I try to interpret the elaborate allegory, let me rush forward a bit prematurely with a preliminary assumption since I think that the literary writing of Benjamin can elucidate at least the kernel of the argument even better than theorization. When epistemology fails to speak of the present being and of

the subject (that failure can appear not as a part of the history of science, but also as ontologically inherent in the models of cognition), than ethics incorporates in itself epistemological conclusions and in the complex situation it gives the stance of a new way of thinking. The deindividualized modernist voice has its epistemological foundation – the way it is generated and talked about. The two above mentioned fields – epistemological and ethical – in the allegory of Benjamin function as communicating vessels. What is implied is the idea, and it is not a new one⁶ but modified, that the cognitively oriented discourse is always an ethical choice. A choice of that kind is the witnessing of the world of the two ellipses – we are going to call them ellipse of mythology and ellipse of technology. The block⁷ between them is the beginning of ideology. This allegorically described failure of categorical thinking that opens the gates for lies and delusions is also present in Adorno.

The more densely people have spun a categorical web around what is other than subjective spirit, the more fundamentally have they disaccustomed themselves to the wonder of that other and deceived themselves with a growing familiarity with what is foreign. [Adorno, 2002: 126].

In order to save ourselves from the danger of making a simplistic interpretation of this statement, it is necessary to posit the situation in an ethical horizon. What is also necessary is to develop certain understanding of the epistemological status of what is absolutely new. Because what is meant here is not any kind of romantic Platonic prejudice, like how categorical thinking would blur the visibility of ideas. Some lines after the above quote, Adorno says that transcendence is not present in artworks. What is present than so that categorical thinking is not enough to suit the human condition of the need of art, what is the lack causing this need? My claim is that in the works of art what is present is not the transcendent, of course, but rather something that shall be called transcendental.⁸ The meaning of the just used term here does not coincide completely with Kant's use. The transcendental is what ontologically and epistemologically precedes the categorical, it precedes the categorical not only as principles on which

⁶ it is presented in Kant's Critique of Practical Reason.

⁷ Here I use the concept of Kantian block coined by Adorno. Its most detailed elaboration Adorno's book Kant's Critique of Pure Reason and it expresses the discrepancy between the epistemological and sociological endeavors of idealistic philosophy. On the one hand it is a discrepancy in the inability to infer social being from neither the synthesis of perception, nor from the transcendental deduction of the concepts of pure reason. On the other hand the concept is used as critique of schematism as form of interest subservient to domination, thus schematism is not knowledge but mastering. Adorno says that sociological schematism is impossible to emerge. He starts with the chapter "Society/Block" and the analysis of the subject-object relation: "This transcendental subject also contains, if I may risk a rather bold statement, the untruth of society. That means, the abstract characteristic of this transcendental subject is nothing but the internalized and hypostatized form of man's domination of nature" (Adorno, Kant's Critique of Pure Reason, p. 173). In Aesthetic Theory one of the ways of exposing and criticizing the block is art (the chapter "Enigmaticalness, Truth Content, Metaphysics").

⁸ These ideas of the transcendental are mainly characteristic of the medieval thought. I use the concept here without any detailed references and without complete accordance with any philosophical conception. My purpose is to outline the relation between the mystic attitude to art and the feeling of an impending epistemological crisis.

the latter shall be founded, but also as limitation to categories posed by mind independent being. Through art the inaccessibility of the world is no longer a Kantian block (Adorno) between the transcendental subject and the nominal or perceptual, but a source of false consciousness. This is exactly the double sense – epistemological and ethical – of Benjamin’s allegory. The individual under the name of Franz Kafka shall take as his duty to become a witness of that world focalized too far apart. It is his only chance to be a thinker, to comment on things.⁹ For that purpose he should acquire new experience which is not categorical.

The above quoted allegory has as its hidden foundation the possibility of a complete separation of lived experience (e.g. in Dilthey) – what leaves marks upon us in an idealistic and romanticist sense – and the substances of communicable achievements of the efforts of soul and reason, what is called just experience (in German experience – *Erfahrung* has a plural form – *Erfahrungen*). The Kafkian subject is constituted from certain combinations that appear strange to Benjamin. The sources of Kafkian thought would prove as enigmatic to Adorno too, they both quote extensively passages from texts not belonging to Kafka that resemble him strongly, according to their critical sense these are the *most Kafkian quotes*. What are the philosophical reasons of the presumption for the uniqueness of this writer? Many things are known as truisms, others belong to the characters as their own assumptions, thirdly come some common rules, on the fourth place we may have things given contingently, etc. Nevertheless, the lived experience (Erlebnis) as a source of stored experience and as forming the character (Bildung) is impossible here. According to Benjamin, the main reason for that is the sole constitution of the world, the world of Kafka but not one made by the writer, but as an idea – between him, experience and history. *Kafka* inhabits a world with two centers of idea. Benjamin writes on the inhabitant of the modern city many times. The city is at the same time a potential scene of crimes and a place of political fermentation, here I refer to the Benjamin’s work on Baudelaire *The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire: The Boheme, The Flaneur, Modernity*. In the book mentioned and in the study “A Short History of Photography” Benjamin analyses the photographs by Gasche depicting empty streets and makes assumptions on the ethos of the city. Even at the time they first appeared those photographs were considered to show a place for evil deeds, like crime-scenes. The freedom and the debauchery of the city are above the human dimensions. It is no mere accident that the city gives birth to revolutionary atmosphere – that all-enveloping conspiracy talk that is referred in the chapter “Boheme”. The processes are of an other-dimensional order in Kafka’s worlds too, the world of the inhabitant of the large modern city. The world founded upon the idea of bureaucracy cannot be looked upon by the individual, it is inaccessible for him in its totality. Yet the epistemological case is a bit different. A subject of a modified cognitive structure shall be able to witness the advent of the new. Benjamin and Adorno promote Kafka as a founder of a social critique

⁹ The expression is used by Adorno many times and usually as critique of that philosophy which limits itself in striving for pure knowledge – it appears incapable of “commenting on the things”.

the initiating point of which is achieved through a reduction of the epistemological value of the subject. The figures of this critique are the unsolvable parable and the noncodified gesture (these are present in both the text of Adorno and Benjamin), as if to challenge and refute the whole theory of knowledge as method. That is, to my opinion, the complex way of turning Kafka from a “philosophical” author into an ethical one – at least according to the tradition of critical theory.

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