The Specter of Babel: A Reconstruction of Political Judgment

by

Michael J. Thompson
In an age of rising groupthink, reactionary populism, social conformity, and democratic deficit, political judgment in modern society has reached a state of crisis. In The Specter of Babel, Michael J. Thompson offers a critical reconstruction of the concept of political judgment that can help resuscitate critical citizenship and democratic life. At the center of the book are two arguments. The first is that modern practical and political philosophy has made a postmetaphysical turn that is unable to guard against the effects of social power on consciousness and the deliberative powers of citizens. The second is that an alternative path toward a critical social ontology can provide a framework for a new theory of ethics and politics. This critical social ontology looks at human sociality not as mere intersubjectivity or communication, but rather as constituted by the shapes that our social-relational structures take as well as the kinds of purposes and ends toward which our social lives are organized. Only by calling these into question, Thompson boldly argues, can we once again attempt to revitalize social critique and democratic politics.
The Specter of Babel

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For the seekers of true justice... μοθαμνε... ν μέν, μ... μοδογματε... ν δέ


PrefaceThis book is technical in nature, but its subject matter is far from scholarly or obscure. It concerns the problem of judgment—that activity of discerning those forms of politics and society that are worthy of our rational obligations and those that warrant our disobedience. It concerns our capacity to think through defective and pathological forms of our social world and how they shape our individuality and the kinds of lives we live. I contend that modern political societies are losing their collective capacity for judgment, and that the ideal of the individual as an agent of conscience and reason is in peril. Regaining critical judgment through a more coherent and more radical conception of ethics and value is the central subject of my investigation, one that I hope will spark renewed interest in the paradigm of critical social ontology and its relation to critical reason. For many years, I have been troubled by the remarkable lack of critical consciousness and judgment displayed by modern citizens, especially during the early decades of the present century. Reckless wars, senseless material consumption, the toleration of staggering economic inequality, utter passivity in the face of human-generated climate change, the loss of thousands of animal and plant species, new forms of populism, the resuscitation of old prejudices, and a new penchant for authoritarianism, among so much more, all point toward a crisis in the ethical and political culture of modern societies. Conformity (no less than indifference) marks the modern personality as autonomy and critical reason have receded as cultural values. As a partisan of the Enlightenment and critical reason, I see it as essential that we question how contemporary philosophy has engaged the question of political judgment in particular and practical reason in general. My firm conviction is that the dominant approach to ethical questions that pervades contemporary philosophy and culture is misguided and cannot serve as the basis for a critical fulcrum against the imperatives and forces of technological, administrative-capitalist society. I mean critical in the sense that reason has more than a capacity to be reasonable, it must also, as Marx emphasized, go to the root of social phenomena, that is, the features and dynamics of human social being. As such, I assert
that our ideas about practical reason, about ethics itself, have lost their way. Because of
this, I believe something new is required. A new paradigm for thinking about practical
reason in critical terms and granting to our critical capacities a kind of ethical coherence
and vision for a more just, more emancipated society. The political and ethical crises of
the first half of the twentieth century gave rise to a renewed project to establish a form of
practical reasoning that would no longer rely on “metaphysics,” established truths that
were posited as transcendent to human life and action. At the same time, an emerging
liberal social contract meant that radical ideas rooted in human emancipation from an
alienating and dehumanizing social order no longer served as a valid political aspiration. A
move toward language, pragmatism, intersubjectivity, identity, pluralism, and the
“political” were articulated in this period. The symbolic took center stage, and the premise
was put forth that social change and social critique should be grounded in the
intersubjective, noumenal layer of human praxis rather than the actual structures of
power that were constitutive of society.

Now with economic problems of distribution largely viewed as solved by the welfare states of Western capitalist democracies, we were
free to formulate theories of practical reason, where the exchange of reasons and the
recognition of the identity of the “other” were of paramount importance. Gone was the
need to thematize the totality as a reifying process; gone, too, was the idea that the
“working class” could be the political agent for social transformation. But recent changes
in our political economy have made evident that this was indeed only a temporary phase.
The rise of neoliberalism has revealed once more the exploitative nature of capitalist
accumulation and the antidemocratic impulses of a social order based on technical-
administrative institutional control even as the reactions to its extractive and managerial
logics have spawned a new phase of populism and social unreason. In short, the
mainstream philosophical project that effected a shift toward postmetaphysics and
nonfoundationalism has been, in my view, a wrong turn in our thinking about judgment
and practical reason as a whole. As we witness the inflammation of the neoliberal social
order, where a rise in identity politics, racism, neo-authoritarianism, and other
antidemocratic forces are becoming prevalent, the need for critical judgment is even more
crucial. The temptation to follow the group, to allow the experiences of ego-threat to
impel us into the confines of some group identity is further eroding the practice of
judgment and critique. We can see, I maintain, that the lack of foundations and grounding
for our ethical life pushed by the postmetaphysical turn has left us with little armature for
this struggle. My suggestion in what follows is that we reground our ideas about judgment
and practical reason in a critical social ontology; that we look at ethical value not as a
matter of discursive concern but as rooted in the forms of social reality we inhabit and
how these social forms either promote or debase the development and flourishing of our
capacities. In short, a return to an ontological conception of the species as a basis for
ethics can be achieved and, I believe, grant us a more critical theory of consciousness and
ethics, one dearly needed in times of rising nihilism and ethical incoherence. Critique
requires both breaking down encrusted forms of power and ideological conformity and a
vision of what ought to replace it. This “ought” should not be seen in neo-idealistic or postmetaphysical terms but as an expression of what can potentially unfold from us if we were to live in a rational society—in a society shaped for the concrete, common purpose of the development of each member of the community and self-consciously by those members. We cannot ignore that there are certain species-specific needs and potentialities that can be enhanced or frustrated by the forms of life we inhabit and that we actively reconstitute in everyday life. The key project of critical reason is to reveal the pathological norms, institutions, and purposes that our lives are put to and by which our community as a whole is constituted. I hope that this book can at least alert readers to the importance of rethinking the dominant trends in current philosophy and engage a more critical and rational way of thinking about the concerns of the res publica. What I hope to accomplish is therefore an entrée to a more robust form of practical reason and ethics. As I see it, the project of articulating an objective ethics can be achieved once we are able to keep in view the shapes that our social reality takes. This means judging our world according to the various ways it shapes our relations with others, articulates norms and practices, and realizes certain ends, purposes, and goods. We have to judge these realities not through some illusory form of deliberative discourse but according to parameters about what kind of needs and relational goods are requisite for the good life, for a modern form of freedom. The Enlightenment’s project of modernity is in peril. Despite its best efforts to do otherwise, it has wedded its fate to the imperatives of capitalism: variables of production, consumption, and growth of material affluence as criteria for the success of modern society. But this is showing itself more and more to be a vapid and impoverished form of life. Under the pressures of neoliberalism, the prospects for a more rational and committed form of ethical life has withered to the point of nihilism. A new theory of ethics, rooted in our distinctive capacities and features as social and practical beings, will be able to open up new ways of thinking about social critique and social transformation. In this spirit, this book is offered, and I can only hope that it will foster some fresh reflection on these questions for future labors.

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Society, Northeastern Political Science Association, Midwestern Political Science Association, International Sociological Association, American Political Science Association, American Sociological Association, the Annual Symposium on Self and Society, and the highly fruitful, intellectually stimulating annual meetings of the International Social Theory Consortium. I have debated and discussed these ideas with many people whose insights deserve mention: Bob Antonio, Jim Block, Stephen Eric Bronner, Mike Brown, Daniel Brudney, Tom Bunyard, Andrew Chitty, Joel Crombez, Harry Dahms, Andrew Feenberg, Harrison Fluss, Jeff Halley, Neal Harris, Dick Howard, Axel Honneth, Peter Hudis, Reha Kadakal, Konstantinos Kavoulakos, Rafael Khatchaturian, Dan Krier, Lauren Langman, Christian Lotz, Toby Lovat, Darrow Schecter, Dirk Michel-Schertges, Patrick Murray, Steve Panageotou, Nathan Ross, Volker Schmitz, Jean Schuler, David Smith, Tony Smith, Heinz Sünker, Mark Worrell, and Greg Zucker. My wife, Elena Mancini, has also been an insightful and provocative interlocutor on my ideas as they have developed and, sometimes rightly, fallen to the ground. I owe her more than words can say. Although all of these people helped deepen my ideas, none of them can be held responsible for what unfolds in the pages that follow.

Introduction

Cybernetic Society and the Crisis of Modernity

Seen from the point of view of its supporters over the course of the past two centuries, the project of modernity was always centered on the premise that rational, self-legislating individuals were capable of generating self-government and cultivating moral personhood. Even for those who took the view that each person is essentially a social and cooperative being, the individual was still the crucible for any understanding of modern, rational forms of politics and ethics. Modernity was to create a world where the powers of irrational tradition, superstition, and illegitimate authority would be questioned, where public reason could generate binding norms and institutions. At the center of this Enlightenment project was the concept of judgment, or the capacity to discern which norms, laws, institutions, and social ends were rational, worthy of justification and obligation, and which did not deserve this endorsement and even those which warranted dissent and disobedience. This project is now seriously in question. This book proceeds from the premise that modern society is quickly losing its sense of vision of the purposes and potentialities of political life, that it is in fact losing its capacity for critical judgment. Concepts such as the common interest have been all but banished from the realm of modern political philosophy and consigned to the abstract preferences of the individual. In its place, we have been asked to accept a theory of politics that rests on consensus, agreement, and intersubjectivity; a theory of politics and judgment that seeks out sociality with others as a matter of the exchange of reasons rather than an object with its own dynamics and features. This theory is based on pluralism, tolerance, and mutual understanding. Although codified in volume after volume of contemporary political philosophy, it is profoundly detached from the actual dynamics of power that shape the contours of the real world. In a more philosophical sense, it fails as a guide for human societies seeking to judge and even transform their collective ethical
life. Even more, I believe it has distracted us from more pressing questions about the nature of political life and practical reason, from the deep structures of our social world that generate personal and social pathologies, and from a tradition of thought that saw the structure of society as a whole, as a totality, as the primary object of concern for political thought and emancipatory critique. The collapse of Western humanistic ideas that accompanied the destructive events of the first half of the twentieth century have led to a fear of discussing any kind of concrete nature of the good, freedom, or justice. Instead, we are now asked to commit to a more cautious, more academic model of ethics and politics. It is a model of democratic reason that, as I see it, is not up to the task of critical reason and is instead an unwitting legitimating logic for the most subtle and yet pervasive forms of social power. From its origins in the Enlightenment, the concept of modern democratic life was seen to be based on the capacity of agents to reflect rationally on their world and the kinds of norms and institutions that constituted it. As religion and other forms of traditional authority were gradually displaced in terms of political power by an alternative rational agency, the modes of thought and life that bound humans to rigid authority structures and hierarchies seemed to be collapsing. What essentially destroyed the social basis for premodern forms of authority, however, was also the soil for a new form of social power and dominance. The destruction of premodern ethical life was not replaced with a thorough, rational alternative. The gradual erosion of religion's capacity for serving as a cohesive ground for ethical life was sensed by thinkers like Rousseau, Kant, and Hegel, among others. They saw that a more rational alternative for ethics and value was possible: one that would be rooted in a concept of social reason where each member was able to think in terms of a rational, general will and freedom would be found in the self-consciousness of this new, expanded conception of personhood. What they could not have anticipated was the technological transformation of economic life oriented toward generating surplus and the repatterning of society and self that came with it. This set the stage for the derailment of the project to construct a viable alternative to premodern, pre-Enlightenment ethical life and value systems. The search for such an alternative nevertheless continued in different forms—some rational and progressive, others reactionary—well into the present. But our time has been shaped by a structure of thought that was constructed largely in the post–World War II period. This way of thinking can be characterized by a noumenal model of sociality where individuals exchange reasons and justify their normative commitments to one another. The model is built off of the scaffolding of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment mixed with twentieth-century philosophies of language. What has resulted is a dominant approach to ethics that misses any concrete conceptualizations of the good and ethical judgment. My central thesis in this book is that this project has failed to provide an adequate theory of ethics and judgment and that a more critical conception of political judgment is in fact necessary. It is necessary because the prevailing theoretical ideas and figures that have dominated the past several decades in academic discourse have become increasingly sealed off from the mechanisms of the real world and how power, consciousness, and society have been
transformed by a resurgent form of administration and a technological form of capitalism. The fate of the individual and of individual judgment have been at the mercy of the formative pressures of social integration that undermine the capacity to think outside of the parameters of this integration. What has resulted is a withered form of critical reason and a denatured moral agency rapidly losing the capacity to protest the imperatives of cybernetic mechanisms of conformity and control. One of the core theses of this book is that modern citizens are losing the capacity for critical political judgment understood as the ability to grasp and dissent from the dominant logics of power relations the make up modern society. Even more, the eroding capacity for judgment contributes to a new kind of politics and culture, one where democratic ideas of solidarity, the common good, and democratic equality are replaced by identity with one’s group membership. The ideas that dominate what passes for political judgment in the literature are not equipped for restoring this capacity or a culture of it in modern politics because it remains caught in a theoretical paradigm that cannot account for how the ontological structures of society deplete our critical capacity to comprehend it and judge it. This is not meant to imply that we have all become automata, lacking ethical values or capacity for evaluative reason. Rather, I suggest that we have lost a basic form of ethical coherence with respect to how the power structures of our world have been shaped. We lack not simply judgment but critical judgment: the capacity to question the social totality and how it shapes and patterns the world we experience phenomenologically. Critical judgment, as I reconstruct it, must have in view some sense of what forms of human sociality promote self-development and freedom and which ones do not. Critical judgment must be able to penetrate the appearances of our inherited world and grasp the essence of our species-specific dynamics. Only then can we shatter the reifying pull of the highly technical, administrative mass society that seeks to fold each of us into its manifold logic. Central to my thesis is that two forces have shaped modern society from the middle of the nineteenth century through today. First is the gradual technical patterning of the world, originating in the constant search for efficiency in production logics and the management of large-scale production and consumption regimes. These logics become ever more deeply constitutive of the individual as they colonize what were previously distinct spheres of culture and life. Second is a reaction, in many ways, to this trend: the increasing subjectification and particularization of ethical values and concepts of the “good.” With the phrase “specter of Babel,” I am denoting the potential reality of a society fragmenting along the lines of identity, culture, religion, ethnicity (or whatever axis we wish to insert) that generates a particularist field of ethical value—a society that no longer has self-understanding of its collective good and that allows each particular subgroup to turn inward and lose sight of the importance of the common interest. As a result, each individual increasingly comes to see the world in terms of their particular worldviews rather than in terms of common social patterns that affect all members of society. Whereas the project of postwar liberalism was to construct a moral-political framework for a pluralistic society in the face of modernity’s collapse of a common ethical life and
substantive political vision, it has instead given rise to a dearth of critical consciousness in the face of an increasingly powerful cybernetic society that has expanded the powers of private wealth and capital. Although, on one hand, there has been an increasingly cohesive knitting together of our lives under the auspices of technical and administrative institutional logics, each person searches for meaning in a world increasingly devoid of any meaning. Two forces exert pressure on our practical reasoning: the increasing technical mastery of our lives by the rationalized logics of power, and an increasing subjectification of value even as our powers of critical and moral reasoning are flattened by technical integration. The search for a common life with others, a kind of society that could realize a common good, is undermined by the atomized individual seeking their own conception of the good. The more that these mutually reinforcing trends increase in their potency, the more that critical judgment loses contact with the emancipatory goals of the Enlightenment and reflects the defective reality principle of the present. I see the tension between these two forces of modern life as the essential problematic of modern culture and modern philosophy. Let me explore these forces in turn. The increasing search for efficiency in production and social stability in modern capitalist societies has manifested a deepening of the social logics of administrative-rational authority and extended technical logics that have had deep effects on the nature of subjectivity. These social changes have only led to an increasing tendency of subjectivity to be routinized into power relations and forms of authority that are largely internalized but resonant with the imperatives and normative structures of production and consumption. Substantive cultural differences in terms of value orientations and worldviews become eroded as people become guided more by external logics, norms, and rule-following. The result has been less and less use of the individual is evaluative and cognitive capacities and an increasing reliance on external, indeed, heteronomous systems for social action. This has been the result of how the productive powers of the machine have been able to pattern the life of human beings. Not just the machine as a concrete object but also the socially autonomous logic of capital seeks its own expansion of surplus extraction and the instrumentalization of all social, natural, and cultural entities for that purpose. I refer to this sociological transformation of social systems and culture as the cybernetic society because it manifests the characteristics of a self-regulating, governing system. The problem with this image of modern society is that it represses the true nature of our social order. Far from being “self-regulating” and “autonomous” from individual human will, it exists and persists due to the socialized conformity and absorption of the individual into the collective processes and logics of the social system as a whole—a social system that is steered and organized as much as possible by elites with economic power and increasingly oligarchic control over material and institutional resources. The individual is in effect “piloted” through much of their substantive social activities by the internalized norms that have been articulated by highly rationalized forms of institutional authority, crowding out nonformal structures of life. The word “cybernetic” is derived from the Greek verb κυβερνάω, which means “to pilot” or “to steer,” which in Latin was translated as
gubernare, from which we get the term “to govern.” Resonant in the semantics of this term is the idea that “cybernetics” refers to the means by which the components of complex systems are directed and steered. Applied to modern society, this entails the spread of instrumental logics that subsume noninstrumental spheres of life, action, and consciousness. As capital and technical reason widen their scope of subsumption of subjective patterns of thought and feeling and make them resonant with their own ends and means, cybernetic society can be seen to emerge. This transformation of modern society has had deleterious effects on the structure of the individual and the capacity of critical consciousness to resist the pressures of conformity that emanate from the cybernetic patterns of social reality. More crucially, the individual becomes alienated from the processes that dominate the life-world and, as a result, seeks refuge in one’s “particularity.” Ideas like this go back to the origins of mass society. Georg Simmel, writing in the early twentieth century, formulated the outlines of such a description of society as a “culture which outgrows all personal life.” He continues: Here in buildings and educational institutions, in the wonders and comforts of space-conquering technology, in the formations of community life, and in the visible institutions of the state, is offered such an overwhelming fullness of crystallized and impersonalized spirit that the personality, so to speak, cannot maintain itself under its impact. ... They carry the person as if in a stream, and one needs hardly to swim for oneself. On the other hand, however, life is composed more and more of these impersonal contents and offerings which tend to displace the genuine personal colorations and incomparabilities. This results in the individual’s summoning the utmost in uniqueness and particularization, in order to preserve his most personal core. Simmel’s thesis of what he called the crisis of culture was that the powers of modern society were outstripping a person’s capacity to comprehend the whole. As such, as the “hypertrophy” of technologically complex society increased, so did the “atrophy” of the subject’s individual cognitive and moral-evaluative powers. Key to this is the rise of a certain kind of technical-instrumental reason that has become constitutive of the institutional and administrative life of modern subjects. It is a centripetal force that socializes our subjectivity to its own objectivity. Its norms colonize our practices, and as a result, ethical reflection and judgment begin to wither. The cybernetic society therefore must be seen as more than the communicative model of information exchange to capture a new form of administrative governance, a new kind of highly integrated, patterned form of behavior and consciousness. As Norbert Wiener, one of the founders of cybernetics, once put it: When I give an order to a machine, the situation is not essentially different from that which arises when I give an order to a person. In other words, as far as my consciousness goes I am aware of the order that has gone out and of the signal of compliance that has come back. To me, personally, the fact that the signal in its intermediate stages has gone through a machine rather than through a person is irrelevant and does not in any case greatly change my relation to the signal. ... It is the purpose of Cybernetics to develop a language and techniques that will enable us indeed to attack the problem of control and communication in general, but also to find the proper
repertory of ideas and techniques to classify their particular manifestations under certain concepts. Social power now becomes a function of compliance—compliance to a system that has its own autonomous logic within which human culture becomes embedded. Wiener's conflation of the person and the machine, which he took to be a fear of the future rather than a prescription for it, is no exaggeration. The development of modern techniques of power, production, and consumption now become tracks for the development of the subject's cognitive, evaluative, and cathetic ego-structure. The highly patterned, machine-like construction of administered institutional life socializes even the most recalcitrant among us into its fields of operation. The result of this has been an acute decline in the capacity for critical judgment—practical and political. The intense cybernetic patterning of social life is accompanied by an intensification of the reification of consciousness—not only its cognitive and epistemic capacities but also its moral-evaluative powers. The cybernetic society is therefore only possible once technical means of control and command have become routinized and rational authority has become reified in consciousness as the routinization of technical forms of control and administrative operationality has saturated socializing institutions. Indeed, Jacques Ellul saw this occurring in what he called "autatism of technical choice": When everything has been measured and calculated mathematically so that the method which has been decided upon is satisfactory from the rational point of view, the method is manifestly the most efficient of all those hitherto employed of those in competition with it, then the technical movement becomes self-directing, I call the process of automatism. As the institutional context of society becomes more automatic and self-regulating, so do the structures of the self and subjectivity. As Kenneth Thompson has insightfully pointed out: "The more socialization into institutions is effective, the more predictable and controlled conduct will be." The implications of this transformation and intensification of technical manipulation and control on the individual is immense. Particularly important is the effect it has on our practical lives. With the regularity and efficiency of the internalization of institutionalized norms generated by administrative-capitalist society comes the erosion of personal spontaneity and critical thought. Emile Durkheim correctly saw the problem: "If we live amorally for a good part of the day, how can we keep the springs of morality from going slack on us? ... The unleashing of economic interests has been accompanied by debasing of public morality." Perhaps one of the most pervasive effects of the gradual emergence of the cybernetic society is that a new kind of integration between the self and the institutions of the techno-administrative apparatus of modernity has taken place. It is not only in the suppression of critical-evaluative faculties of the person but also the problem that the essential reality of what human sociality is has become increasingly hidden from view. Our social world more and more takes on the shape of an autonomous machine separate from the actual human practices and relations that constitute it. Even more, as hierarchies of wealth and technical knowledge ramp up, the control of various social system becomes wrested from democratic and popular control and increasingly co-opted by economic and technical elites. Add to this the fact that the purposes and
legitimate ends of the polity, economy, and culture are becoming recoded by the imperatives of a cybernetic society fused to surplus accumulation at all costs. We are witnessing a great reversal of the Enlightenment project where society would finally be emancipated from superstition and autocracy and become the legitimate manifestation of the common interest of a free citizenry. It is not some dialectic of the Enlightenment that has effected this historical shift but a failure of its most mature and developed humanistic and democratic principles to transform consciousness and society. The crucial thing to keep in mind is that despite this increasing social integration at the systematic level of society, this does entail a uniformly conformist culture. The second, centrifugal force in modern society, as I pointed out, is the reaction spawned by the increasing tendencies of the centripetal force of the cybernetic society. We can see this as the turn inward and the search for meaning and identity—but a form of meaning and identity that, as Simmel had already observed, is particular in nature, which means that it is detached from the social world and a construct of one's fragmented worldview. As the institutions governing society become more saturated by technical and cybernetic mechanisms of socialization, control, and social reproduction, the individual has increasingly sought refuge in the self. Hence we see the postmodernist's attack against modern rationalism, the retreat into identity as a search for meaning and “authenticity,” the narcissistic exploration of self, return to religious traditions, and other expressions of anti-Enlightenment impulse. This leads me to the second force to which I alluded: the tendency for atomized individuals to search for their own conceptions of the good and moral meaning. With the erosion of traditional and conventional collective forms of meaning, Enlightenment rationality had attempted to provide a rational philosophical alternative for practical reasoning and subjective meaning. But the crisis of this project was already evident by the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth. Max Weber lamented what he saw to be the eclipse of the possibility for an “authentic modernity,” or a kind of secularized Protestant notion of conscience grounded in rational, evaluative self-reflection. What has declined in modern culture is the existence of a kind of personal life that is emancipated from premodern forms of cultural belonging and conventional communal worldviews. Instead, political and ethical energy has been invested in fragmented forms of life that cybernetic society has left in its wake. I use the phrase “personal life” in the sense employed by Eli Zaretsky, who argues: “By personal life I mean the experience of having an identity distinct from one's place in the family, in society, and in the social division of labor.” Modernity and its social-structural shifts therefore freed the individual from traditional forms of community and communal worldviews. But it also placed the burden of ethical meaning back onto the self. As Zaretsky argues, “Personal identity became a problem and a project for individuals as opposed to something given to them by their place in the family or the community.” Although the phenomenon of “defamilization,” or “the freeing of individuals from unconscious images of authority originally rooted in the family,” was indeed emancipating, the problem has been that a genuinely modern system of a ethical life—one where categories of human freedom and common interest can be formulated—has
been unable to emerge. Instead, the cybernetic society has crowded out and made obsolete most objective forms of ethical life, which in turn has placed pressure on individuals to find meaning or collapse into some form of nihilism or, in another sense, merely personalized forms of meaning. An age that celebrates the “market” and the entrepreneur, that sees the symbolic valences of culture as more explanatory of power and freedom than the architectonics of material power, was bound to grind up the frames of political meaning and judgment needed for taking on an era of oligarchic capitalism and the vertiginous forms of inequality and its attendant democratic deficits to which previous movements for social justice had access.10 This takes various forms from a narrow egoism to a return to conventional forms of meaning and tradition, religion, mysticism, or identity politics and group narcissism. In the end, the decline of critical personhood has also meant the expansion of the cybernetic society and the fragmentation of ethical life. The cybernetic society represses the reality of the interdependent social relations, practices, and structures that produce and sustain it. It is dependent on a false ontology rooted in neo-Hobbesian ideas about human life that posit atomized individuals in search of particular interests and desires. There can be no common good other than the negative freedom ensured by a social contract between persons of differing value spheres. A modus vivendi of atomized subjects seeking their own values of the good rather than a common life is to be the lot of modernity. In terms of contemporary philosophy and political theory in particular, this has led to a paradigm shift toward a “postmetaphysical” conception of practical judgment and reason. According to this conception, our normative propositions should be considered rational and valid only when they can achieve agreement among participants through an exchange of reasons or some other collective procedure. The rationality or validity of ethical propositions must be looked at not in terms of their content but in terms of their pragmatic formulation. The rejection of metaphysics tout court is now heralded as the emancipation of thought from any form of heteronomy or foundation. We are no longer to look at what human beings are, what capacities they have as a species, and how actually existing social forms either enhance or degrade those capacities. But concepts such as freedom or power need to be grasped as ontological categories: as concepts that have social-structural and normative and practical dimensions; as constitutive of the symbolic registers of consciousness. Instead, we are now asked to look at how we communicate or intersubjectively come to consensus over norms. Supposedly, the result of this move is the capacity for a fully constructivist form of democratic life, but it can be argued that what has really been achieved is the gutting of critical judgment and any satisfying theory of ethical life. What it lacks is a more complete and comprehensive understanding of human sociality. Political liberalism, in its various forms, has essentially become the ethical-political paradigm for this phase of modernity. Despite their important differences, theories of ethics and political philosophies from John Rawls to Jürgen Habermas, and their myriad acolytes, have viewed the idea of an intersubjective, pragmatic, and nonmetaphysical view of values as the core way to deal with the decline of premodern expressions of common and
organic values and ethical systems. But this has come at a price: the move toward the postmetaphysical inspired by Kant no longer sees society as an object with concrete features and dynamics. Practical reason is now to take the form of a proceduralism that reopens the chasm between the noumenal realm of values and their embodiment in concrete social forms. In place of seeing values such as the good, freedom, justice, and so on in ontological terms—that is, as manifesting certain embodied forms of social relations, processes, and ends—we are to determine them via pragmatic discussions leading toward either an overlapping consensus or universal agreement. Either way, the actual relations we should strive for, the kinds of social ends and purposes that ought to be set for our associational lives together, are now ejected from the horizon of practical reason. Perhaps more problematic, the postmetaphysical paradigm in ethics and judgment is unable to deal with the problems of reification and relativism—relativism because it cannot secure cultural norms and practices from being immune to critique, and reification because it cannot secure the intersubjective “space of reasons” from itself being colonized by the cognitive and normative patterns of thought shaped by the cybernetic society. There is no way to ensure that the members of any pragmatic exchange are not simply reproducing the very categories that render the status quo legitimate and that reconstitute that social reality. Relativism is another problem because simply relying on reason exchange does not give us criteria for which reasons should count and which should not. There is no way to call a reason into question other than from another perspectival stance. But we cannot rest with such a limited and, to be frank, academicized model of human sociality. Politics is not group therapy, we are not “situated selves.” Reason achieves critical valence and power when it can press the given world that we inhabit into new shapes and new modes of being. What is required is that our reasons grip the constitutive powers of the social world and their capacity to shape consciousness and reflection; what is also needed is a kind of practical reason that can articulate an ethical life promoting the ontological social structures, processes, ends, and purposes that are constitutive of a free and rational form of society.

As I see it, the importance of an ontological approach to society and ethical value is that it grants our normative reflections a foundation that is neither external to our social being in the form of some kind of inflated metaphysics (God or some eternal principles deduced from abstract reasoning) nor posited from some immutable source, such as nature. Instead, the thesis is that human beings do have certain essential dynamics or features, such as relational sociality, and that we need to see that any social reality possesses certain common features: relational structures, norms, processes, and ends or purposes that define them. The relevant space for critical judgment is the ensemble of ontological features that any society manifests. The key, indeed, critical idea here is that once we grasp the thesis that our social reality is the objectification of our associative and practical forms of life, we are in a position to inquire into whether these social forms maximize freedom as a concrete, objective condition of our sociality. Once we make this philosophical shift, we begin to see that the ontic manifestations of our reality can be pried open to reveal the forms of
dominance, exploitation, oppression, and so on that constitute it. The ontological approach I advocate here applies critical reason to the objective conditions of our world, revealing how the norms, values, and concepts we employ may sustain or enhance an unjust and freedom-attenuating social reality. Reason itself is seen as having a metaphysical structure: valid reasons, reasons that count, in other words, are those that are not only what we agree on as a result of reasoned agreement; it must also count because its embodiment in the world will objectify forms of free sociality that have developmental ends for the community as a whole and each individual member. Rational social freedom must be seen as embodied in the collective norms, relations, practices, purposes, and ends that serve as the infrastructure to our social reality. At the same time, it brings to consciousness the potentiality inherent within the ontology of our relational and practical lives undermining the defective structures and norms that sustain domination and subordination to elite interests and ends. It may be true that there are no timeless external foundations for human value and knowledge. But it does not follow that there is no internal ensemble of capacities that serve as the infrastructure for our ethical and political lives. The error of this kind of thinking is to posit a dualism between the world of value and the domain of social reality. Breaking down this dichotomy reveals a new ontological framework for judgment and ethics. Value should be seen as having an ontological ground that grants us a synthesis of our critical-cognitive faculties with the normative-evaluative framework for social criticism. What all of this means for those seeking to understand the question of political judgment is that we must look anew at the question that was passed over long ago: that of the relation between ethics and social existence or, to put it in terms I will use in this book, between value and social ontology. A central thesis I will defend is that without any sense of cognitive comprehension of the ontological shapes of our sociality, our capacity for critical judgment will be increasingly weakened by the cybernetic forces of modernity. Even more, what manifests itself as practical reasoning will continue to fragment and either retreat into the abstractions of irrationalism or simply come to resonate with the "natural" facticity of the prevailing social reality. In either case, what will be lost is a concrete, critical conception of ethics and a rational-critical capacity for critical judgment. The project of antifoundationalism and postmetaphysics has led to an incoherence of critical reason as well as a debasement of a more critical, radical alternative structure of thought rooted in what I describe as a critical social ontological perspective on practical rationality, ethics and judgment. As I see it, critical judgment can only be animated by rational and democratic aims when it can comprehend and resonate with the actual social-relational structures of human life and diagnose how the actually existing forms of life that we inhabit either inhibit or develop our ontological potentialities and potency. As I see it, the move to pragmatism, Kantianism, and the "linguistic" turn all fail to provide us with a valid critical framework for judgment. Its self-confident emphasis on formal reason, intersubjective praxis, and nonfoundationalism take for granted a rational, normatively critical model of personhood devoid of the pathological effects on the self rooted in cybernetic forms of social power:
one not afflicted by reification, alienation, conformity to deontic norms of rational domination, and so on. One of the core reasons for this is that they are unable to immunize reflective thought from the constitutive logics of modern forms of social power. Indeed, the cybernetic dynamics of modern society were something to which thinkers like Arendt, Habermas, and Honneth have sought to react. Their theories of social action were conceived as responses and alternatives to instrumental reason. But in their move to forms of truth rooted in intersubjectivity, they have been unable to secure this kind of rationality from the introjection of social norms and values into the background conditions of consciousness of participants in social action. Put differently, what I call constitutive social power is that capacity for social institutions to shape the internal normative values and collective-intentional norms that grant those institutions their existence and their legitimacy. Constitutive power is thus a crucial problem in the depletion of critical judgment in modern societies and the breakdown of a common ethical framework for the comprehension of social justice. The postmetaphysical claim, by contrast, asks us to consider thinking about our practical lives—as Hannah Arendt has called it, “thinking differently without a banister.” Tracy Strong speaks for many when he advocates a conception of political judgment that has no foundation and rests on no positing of truth claims. Rather, the concept of the “political” becomes a stand-in for ethical life more generally. Strong is correct when he asserts, “The underlying premise here is that, to the degree that moral principles are derived not from this world but from something beyond it (whether this be a Platonic or a theological realm), the events of the twentieth century have made the belief in or the acceptance of such principles impossible for any person who faces the world as it has shown itself.” However, this should not entail a move to a vague and indeterminate form of political and ethical life. The alternative, that of the “political,” must also be rejected as an academic construct emerging from a phenomenological and existentialist incapacity to deal with modernity. Because “the political rests on nothing other than acknowledging and being acknowledged,” it simply cannot provide a framework for the powerful forms of domination exhibited by the cybernetic society, nor does it provide some kind of normative framework for ontological validity: that is, for giving us some coherence with respect to what should count as valid normative reasons and what should not. For this reason, I want to lay the groundwork for an alternative conception of ethics and practical reason. Broadly construed, the two approaches to ethics that have dominated philosophical reflection has been either a formalist or a substantivist ethics. Formalism in ethics entails relying on procedures for determining the validity of any ethical proposition or value. This could be purely cognitive, as in Kantian ethics, where the formula of the categorical imperative is determinative for rational (and hence valid) ethical postulates, or it can be discursive, in which case mutual agreement and the procedures for discourse are determinative of validity. Contrast to this a substantivist conception of ethics that seeks to root the validity of any ethical premise in the traditions, beliefs, or practices of a given community. My proposition here is the construction of an ontological ethics, or an
objective ethics, that seeks to root our normative space of reasons in the actual sociopractical reality of human life. According to this ontological account of value, validity cannot be determined arbitrarily via some decision procedure or discourse because we cannot secure that space of reasons from the infiltration of power relations on our evaluative capacities, what I call the reification problem. Even more, substantive ethics simply rest on the content of what a given community does and has no means to gain critical distance from those values and practices and call them into question, or what I call the relativism problem. In contrast to these approaches, throughout this study I adhere to the Enlightenment concept of the universality of reason and the Hegelian-Marxist conviction that a more concrete system of ethical life can emerge. I think this project can be made meaningful once we see that a modern form of sociality can only be generated by critical subjects. Through a new way of looking at ethics and value, we will be able to reclaim a sense of political and ethical judgment that will not only confront forms of social and political power and domination but also articulate new forms of a meaningful and just life. This can come about, I suggest, once we shift our perspective toward a critical social ontology: that is, a paradigm shift that asks us to take into consideration how our ethical life should be rooted in the ontological capacities of human social being and how social forms of life can be seen to either enhance or stunt those capacities and forms of self-development. As I see it, this was the basic paradigm that united a specific strand in political philosophy stretching from Aristotle to Rousseau to Marx. I seek to revive this paradigm and use it against what I see to be a failed theory of politics and ethics in the form of postmetaphysics. Briefly put, the alternative I offer is rooted in a different structure of thought, one that I call the social-ontological theory of value and the metaphysical structure of reason. A critical social ontology is able to have in view the phylogenetic capacities of humans, as possessing capacities for relations and the practical realization of ends and purposes in the world. At the same time, it has in view how individuals are ontogenetically shaped by the prevailing forms of social relations, structures, processes, and ends that any given society exhibits. According to this view, judgment asks us to see the social world as a totality, as a whole within which the experiences, practices, and norms that govern our lives are rooted. Critical consciousness can only overcome the powerful pull of the reification of consciousness that is constituted by cybernetic society once it grasps the concept that the purpose of political life should be shaping social relations, processes, and ends that enhance common goods and individual development and enrichment. The instrumental use of humans and nature; the exploitation and expropriation of people, communities, and the natural world; the extension of cultural forms of control, subordination, and exclusion; other forms of subordination and marginalization; or the elaboration of vapid forms of subjectivity—all must be countered with an alternative value system rooted in the concrete purposes of our social membership. I must emphasize that this is an ontological premise—it derives its categories and concepts from the capacities that humans have and its evaluative concepts from how these capacities are shaped and (mis)directed by any given ontic form of social
reality in historical time. An ontological approach to ethics, value, and judgment focuses on how structures of social relations and the norms and practices that instantiate them are organized and sees the shape of these structures as constitutive of individual and common life. It is distinct from formal or substantive approaches to ethics and politics in that it takes our relational lives with others as the basic substance of value, but it also sees these relations as pliable and as the result of practices governed by forms of power that can be transformed and remade once we become self-conscious of our capacity to orient the substantive content of our sociality toward common goods and social freedom. Value is thus to be seen as ontological in nature rather than formal or as an abstract principle—it is circumscribed by the practices and purposes of our social world. Values entail certain ways of living, practices, relations to others and self, and so on. Values are concrete, real. They are functions of practices and the relational structures and processes that the forms of our sociality take. Judgment denotes the ability of individuals to assess and rationally grasp how the objective social processes that surround them either enhance the common forms of sociality and self-development or frustrate or redirect these capacities toward particular ends and purposes. As Andrew Feenberg has pointed out: "Judgment dereifies what were formerly understood as absolutes and reveals them as processes of constitution of self and world. It follows techniques back to their origins, establishing the relation between ends and the life-world from which they emerge. It brings reason and experience into critical contact." 14 This “critical contact” that Feenberg references is precisely what has been severed in modern culture. Indeed, in 1929, in The Quest for Certainty, John Dewey remarked on what he deemed to be the fundamental problem of the modern age, echoing this very thesis. As he put it: The problem of restoring integration and cooperation between man's beliefs about the world in which he lives and his beliefs about the values and purposes that should direct his conduct is the deepest problem of modern life. It is the problem of any philosophy that is not isolated from that life. 15 As I see it, a critical social ontology can provide us with a means to reconnect values with action and ground our values in the concrete nature of our lives together as cooperative, interdependent beings. Judgment is central in this regard because it is the second-order capacity that enables social critique and social transformation. This is too important to leave to the “political” or any other academic abstraction. A new ethical and political philosophy must be rooted in a rational theory of human beings. Once this is achieved, politics can once again speak of having a vision for emancipatory transformation. Political judgment is therefore entwined with the question of political obligation and of disobedience. The fundamental point toward which any question of political judgment must bring us is not necessarily a question of consensus and agreement, especially within the administrative-capitalist societies racked by inequality and power. Rather, critical judgment will lead us toward dissensus and disobedience to the imperatives, norms, and institutions of the cybernetic society. My argument is that the relation between obligation and disobedience, between consent and dissent are not opposed but dialectically related concepts. A rational stance of disobedience must be rooted in the kinds of social
arrangements and norms that would warrant our obedience. John Dunn has suggested that any theory of political obligation also requires a theory of rationality and a theory of ethics. As he puts it: “The only way in which presumed moral obligations might be conclusively whipped in under the aegis of rational action is by constructing and vindicating a comprehensive theory of what, theoretically, ethically, factually etc., it is rational for men to believe.”16 As I see it, this is an invitation to a more robust and ontologically grounded form of judgment. Once we see that our ethical lives should be shaped and judged according to how social beings can be morphed by the social and cultural structures that govern self-development can we begin to approach a theory of politics that is once again organized for the purpose of the development and freedom of its members. Domination, exploitation, instrumentality, and other forms of defective sociality can be called into question on objective grounds: that is, based on the foundation that the purposes and rational end of all legitimate sociopolitical associations, norms, institutions, and so on, are the common benefit of all and the development of each person as a social being, an individual who is socially and associationally constituted. But individuality is social and ensconced in social relations and social processes, and judgment must be able to have this as its ground if it is to serve a critical function. I believe this way of thinking can grant us a more critical and more robust way to think about practical reason and political life more generally. It is the burden of the following pages to make this case and show that a new more critically engaged alternative for political and ethical theory remains to be developed.1. I have explored this phenomenon elsewhere as a form of alienation. See Michael J. Thompson, “Alienation as Atrophied Moral Cognition and its Impact on Social Behavior.” Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour, vol. 43, no. 3 (2013): 301–21.2. Georg Simmel, The Sociology of Georg Simmel, trans. Kurt H. Wolff (New York: Free Press, 1950), 422.3. Norbert Wiener, The Human Use of Human Beings: Cybernetics and Society (New York: Da Capo Press, 1954), 16–17.4. Jacques Ellul, The Technological Society (New York: Vintage Books, 1964), 79–80.5. Kenneth Thompson, “Organizations as Constructors of Social Reality,” in Graeme Salaman and Kenneth Thompson (eds.), Control and Ideology in Organizations (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1980), 218.6. Emile Durkheim, Professional Ethics and Civic Morals (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1958), 12.7. Eli Zaretsky, Political Freud: A History (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 20.8. Zaretsky, Political Freud, 20.9. Zaretsky, Political Freud, 21.10. Daniel T. Rodgers describes this shift as an “age of fracture” and describes it by arguing that: “Concepts of power became more subtle, more intangibly imagined, and harder to pin down. Identity loomed larger than ever before: not as a collective given, now, but as a field of malleability and self-fashioning. The categories of race, class, and gender, after sweeping into academic discourse in the early 1980s, turned less distinct, disaggregated into subcategories and intersections of categories, or slipped into quotation marks. . . . Individualized and privatized, released of its larger burdens, freedom was cut loose from the burdens and responsibilities that had once so closely accompanied it.” Age of Fracture (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Belknap Press, 2011), 39–40.11. See my discussion of

Part II
In the Courtyard of Babel
Postmetaphysics and the Failure of Critical Judgment

Chapter 1
A Critique of the Judgment Paradigm in Contemporary Political Philosophy

Late modernity confronts the Enlightenment project with a distinct problem, one that plagues modern practical philosophy and modern culture more broadly. This problem can be described as the absence of a grounding that can secure normative values that can, in turn, provide coherence for practical judgment. Contemporary philosophy and social theory have embraced an antifoundational and postmetaphysical path to provide a way out of this dilemma. This view advocates a conception of practical reason that emphasizes the reflexive self-creation of norms and values that take as their criterion of legitimacy the intersubjective agreement of participants in discursive activity. Reason is taken to be embodied not only in the practice of reason exchange but also in the noumenal and epistemic powers of agents engaged in discursive practices oriented toward the mutual agreement of norms. This has been the hallmark of much of what now passes for a “critical theory” of society, and it is largely marked by a turn away from a more radical, more comprehensive, and, I think, more satisfying (albeit more demanding) philosophical project that seeks to provide and clarify value-concepts grounded in ontological properties of human sociality. According to this view, we can elaborate a critical social ontology that is not simply descriptive of social reality and the basic features of human sociality but also provides a critical or evaluative criteria constituting a critical practical rationality. This shift would seem to be only philosophical in nature, a turn in technical political and moral philosophy that few notice. But it is much more than this. It reflects a broader bankruptcy in how modern societies grasp their internal coherence and the ethical life that informs their lives. The problem of modernity has consistently been found in the contradiction between the moral impulse toward autonomy and human self-determination on one hand and the seemingly cybernetic and impersonal forces and tendencies of social, technological, and economic systems on the other. The crisis of modernity can be brought into view once we see that this disconnect between the individual and the social world is
becoming ever wider and ever more destructive of democratic forms of political life. The 
postmetaphysical turn and the cultivation of phenomenological, intersubjective, 
pragmatic, and discursive forms of practical reason as the framework for how a modern 
sense of political judgment should proceed is little more than the philosophical expression 
of a deeply incoherent and misleading form of self-understanding. The Dissolution of 
Political Judgment in Modern Society

The thesis I develop in the pages that follow takes 
this problem of judgment as the core and indeed the essential pathology of modern 
society. The erosion of this capacity was starkly and coherently pointed out as the effects 
of the emergence of mass societies was beginning to be felt during the nineteenth and 
twentieth centuries. The Enlightenment ideal of the autonomous self, capable of 
articulating rational moral imperatives that were universalizable was now giving way to 
the effects of instrumental reason, the administered society, and a culture increasingly 
bereft of moral content. Max Weber wrote that he was witnessing the dissolution of the 
capacity of the modern individual to achieve what he called “authentic modernity,” or a 
kind of society peopled by individuals who could express their autonomy amid a 
community of rational ethical life. The problem Weber pointed to in theory was nothing 
new. The great novelists of the nineteenth century also had their fingers on the pulse of 
this problem. Ivan Turgenev’s Fathers and Sons explored the moral implications of a rising 
nihilism and the deterioration of any kind of moral compass for expressing judgment even 
as the novels of Thomas Mann charted the decline of bourgeois and religious forms of 
meaning and ethical substance in the face of the stony realities of modern society. All of 
them saw, in some way, that the old moral traditions were fading. A new way had to be 
found to ground a modern form of ethical life that would serve the ideals of a post-
traditional society that lacked constraints on moral reasoning and practice. After the great 
tumults of two world wars, the problem of political judgment was again at the center of 
philosophical concern, and rightly so. The powers of ideology, whether fascist, communist, 
or capitalist, and the moral implications of the Holocaust in Europe, decolonization 
struggles, and so on had shown their power to overwhelm and absorb the individual. 
What began to rise from the ashes of the first half of the twentieth century was a 
postmetaphysical conception of moral and political philosophy that was rooted not in 
nature, a philosophical anthropology, a teleological conception of history, or anything of 
the kind. Rather, it would be through our practices with one another, through the ways we 
came to solve problems and come to mutual understanding that a new paradigm of 
political thinking and judging was to emerge. I direct my attention to this paradigm in 
political theory and I maintain that it is not only ethically bankrupt as an approach to 
moral philosophy and human ethical life, it is also deeply misleading about its own 
pretensions to serve democratic and rational social ends. There is no doubt that the 
emergence of modernity was strongly associated with a project across the natural 
sciences and philosophy more generally to overcome the metaphysical baggage that 
plagued the traditions of thought that carried over from the medieval and early modern 
periods. The strong influence of scholasticism was premised on a religio-metaphysical
system that grounded reason and nature in a transcendental rationality embodied in
divine or eternal law, which in turn shaped and influenced natural law. But as pressures
from nominalist thought began to grow, an alternative understanding of ontology and
epistemology began to take hold. According to this view, what could be known were
particular objects, not universals nor essences. Because the essence of things could not
be observed, they were deemed “metaphysical” in the sense that they were not properly
objects of science or rational cognition. Only particular objects that could be named, as
the nominalists initially claimed, or what could be verified via sense perception, as later
empiricists and positivists held, were valid objects of knowledge and of being. I can know
that the round object in front of me is a ball, but there is no universal category of
“ballness” that can be seen to exist in any valid sense of the word. Instead, we have names
that serve to delineate particular objects, but no universal concepts exist. This
philosophical impulse also led to empiricism, or the doctrine that valid knowledge about
particulars—the only valid knowledge of the objective world—could only be validated by
sensual experience. In this sense, features of human social life that had previously been
seen as axiomatic in understanding moral and political life from the classical period
through the medieval age—such as Aristotelian ideas about the naturalness of human
community—were being undermined and displaced by an analytic, mechanistic, and
atomist philosophical view that became central to the projects of liberal and market-based
society. No longer could we speak of “social relations” that existed prior to individuals or a
common good, let alone any universal features of social life, because they were to be seen
as constructed by us rather than inherent to us. For Hobbes, this became one of the
central aspects of his political theory: the classical ideas about the social essence of
human life or the idea that social relations and relations of social dependency that
Aristotle had put at the core of his ontology of human life were now seen to be fictions.
Humans were isolated and individual, society was atomistic and aggregated. Any social
relations or institutions that existed were constructed by us through consent, not in any
way natural to us as a species. Locke and later empiricists, utilitarianism, and Kant’s
philosophical project shared in this basic line of thinking when it came to any question of
an ontology of sociality. In this sense, the basic fact of a social ontology is not a search for
some kind of material substrates for human life, nor is it a search for some rigid
categories from which we can derive explanations of the social world. Rather, it is meant
to highlight the notion that the categories of human freedom, self-determination, and so
on have an irreducibly social basis and this sociality has certain basic features that can be
seen to be constitutive of our collective and individual lives.1 In this sense, as P. F.
Strawson correctly notes, “each must see himself in some social relation to others whose
purposes interact with his. If our subject is man in his world, it seems necessary to admit
that this world is essentially a social world.”2 To make such a claim invites us to think
about the nature of the social as a distinct object of inquiry, as something with ontological
weight that must be considered as a crucial element in any critical theory of society. Even
more, it invites us to pursue a new way of thinking about practical reason. Whereas
traditional forms of ethics were based on a substantive ethics, or one that was attached to a priori accepted truths about how to act and what the “good” consisted of, the modern view was formal and postmetaphysical. Empty of any content, what matters now is the procedure that allows us to arrive at normative truths. But a social-ontological approach differs from both. It maintains that only by understanding the developmental capacities inherent to and determinative of human life (such as social-relationality, praxis, and more) can we grasp how the actually existing social forms of any society deserve our obligation or their transformation. This is precisely the idea that was under attack by empiricism, nominalism, and utilitarianism at the birth of modern social and political theory. According to these movements, the individual was empirically cognizable, not “society” itself. Relations between individuals were the result of their individual choices and duties, not prior to or formative of those individuals. In the modern philosophical project more broadly, there was a fevered attack on the notion of ontology and metaphysics. Ever since Kant, thinkers within the Western philosophical tradition have labored under a bias against metaphysics and ontology. This should be of little surprise since Kant’s critique of metaphysics was constructed in opposition to the early and premodern concerns with transcendental metaphysics and being. There are two important implications of this move in philosophy. First, it entails a separation between facts and values, between knowledge claims that are premised on what exists in any ontological sense on one hand and knowledge claims that deal evaluative-normative claims on the other. Even more, he pointed to “regulative” versus “constitutive” reasons, which further pushed the noumenal from the phenomenal realm. Regulative ideas were those that were capable of constituting objects as objects of cognition rather than as objects in and of themselves. Rational reasons were accountable to themselves, their own rational reasons rather than any kind of substance that inhered in or acted behind what was grasped by consciousness. As such, any ontological speculation was cast out of the realm of rational possibility because it violated the boundary set by Kant between noumena and phenomena. Besides, what we were now to be pursuing was a rationalist project that defended the capacity of the autonomous, reason-giving subject that Kant saw as essential to the Enlightenment project. A second implication is that reality becomes a construction of cognition. Reality is now dependent on the epistemic subject in the sense that regulative ideas give shape to the chaos of experience. Constitutive reasons would be internal to the object-domain itself, making things what they are in essence. But this is not possible given Kant’s insistence on the separation of reason as a capacity of cognition on one hand and the objective world as merely an object of that cognition on the other. The contemporary return to the Kantian doctrine and the nonmetaphysical interpretations of Hegel have therefore sought to construct a postmetaphysical intellectual framework where we are to see practical rationality constituted by reason-giving by concept users who rely on reasons rather than the rational structure of the object-domain to count as what is valid rationally. But this poses important problems, namely, that we are barred from comprehending the actual, essential structure of objects, something that Hegel and
Marx saw as essential for a critical grasp of reality. Only once we can comprehend the rational structure of objects in the world can we reconstruct them in cognition and determine the idea itself, or that unification of the conceptual structure of cognition and the rational structure of the object-domain. This allows us to grasp how descriptive and normative claims dialectically sublate into a higher, more total knowledge of the world with mechanisms, relations, and purposes that are immanent to those objects. If modernity is defined by the exchange and justification of reasons by intersubjectively interlaced agents, there must be a means by which we can know or judge the extent of the validity of these reasons and justifications. The project of pragmatic justification sees this as circumscribed by the practices and obtaining of mutual agreement by intersubjectively acting participants using only rational reasons as a criterion of objective validity. The more we think about this, the more question begging it seems to be, for it appears increasingly unable to provide us with a convincing (let alone compelling) form of rational judgment, that is, one that can provide us with judgments about the objective social world and the kinds of goods and ends toward which social life ought to be organized. Clearly there is an impasse of sorts. On the one hand, we can plainly see that the critical rejection of transcendental metaphysics and the religio-ontological projects of the premodern period was in order. At the same time, it follows from this that the solution offered up by Kant—and absorbed into the basic fabric of modern social science and mainstream philosophy—opens us up to a kind of rationalism that is unable to defend against its own relativist implications. What the critical theory tradition, going back to its origins in Hegel and Marx, posits is that there is some sense in which the Kantian chasm between noumena and phenomena must be overcome for us to possess objectively valid knowledge with ontology as its basic criterion of validity. Indeed, whereas the renewed Kantian-pragmatist project in critical theory is unable to keep in mind is that only ontological claims or those normative claims that have ontological weight can be seen as adequately critical. Only once we are able to grasp the whole, the totality of social reality, and construct normative claims with that social reality in view can we begin to articulate a critical theory of judgment. Critical reason and critical judgment, facts and value, are dialectically sublated into a higher form of critical cognition. In what follows, I explore this thesis and suggest that a more compelling and more rational path for critical theory to develop seeks to place a critical social ontology at its center and keep in view the notion that normative claims are critical only to the extent that they carry descriptive claims about the essential structures of sociality. According to this view, norms must be evaluated according to an objective criterion that is stronger than the epistemic reason-giving and linguistic-discursive theories can provide. This criterion is rooted in the social-ontological categories that serve as the desideratum for any valid social knowledge and thus any diagnostic or critical account of the social world. This means that the advantage of a critical social ontology is that it can provide us with a means to sublate the division between facts and values, between our cognitive grasp of the social world and our normative-evaluative diagnosis of it. This is a powerful mode of critique because it enables us to bring to critical
awareness the perverted and distorted forms of sociation (alienation, reification, etc.) that plague modern forms of life. A critical social ontology therefore grants a more stable ground from which objective ethical postulates can be articulated and defended against the dangers of ethical relativism on one hand and epistemic abstraction on the other. An Epistemic Hall of Mirrors

What the postmetaphysical account lacks most of all is a robust and compelling criteria for judgment. What I want to suggest is that only by comprehending the social totality as an ontological totality—as a system of relational structures, processes, purposes, norms, and practices—can we begin to articulate rational categories for judging and clarifying the validity of our practical commitments. The error that many contemporary theorists of judgment have made is that they have defined themselves against an inflated conception of the Enlightenment, collapsing reason or objective truth into the categories of natural science of positivism. Instead, they have embraced hermeneutics, intersubjectivity, discourse, and recognition as vehicles for critical judgment and practical reason. What actually enables critical judgment, as I conceive it, is the capacity to understand the particular events, social facts, experiences, pathologies, or whatever as constituted by larger social processes and structures that derive their logics from the nature of the social totality. We are not looking for an inflated metaphysical conception of universality here; we are looking to understand how the structures of relations, the processes, institutions, and ends of the community in which we live is upholding the freedom of individuals to develop full membership in that community. This does not require any kind of transcendental metaphysical commitments, but it must push past what I call the epistemic hall of mirrors problem.

The problem can be described as a form of moral thinking that cannot find any secure footing; to put it another way, is unable to ensure that the normative propositions it articulates or examines are not already infected by the rationalized forms of legitimacy and authority already inherent by agents who have been successfully socialized by institutional authority-norms. Moral ideas and norms are not judged according to objective criteria, because, according to the postmetaphysical thinker, this is impossible, so we look for securing our norms to agreeing with what seems rational to us. Like a hall of mirrors where one cannot be sure of which image is valid and which is a copy, the postmetaphysician has cut all the struts needed to make critical judgment possible and, in the process, lost any semblance of orientation. In other words, we must be able to find an objective standpoint from which to critique, to judge social phenomena and social facts. Since any social totality in this sense is a social ontological account of the dynamics and properties of our social world, a commitment to a social ontology will be a more robust and more critically satisfying path for political judgment. The postmetaphysical and linguistic turn deprives us of the means to make judgments based on reasons that are relevant to the specific social phenomena under investigation. All norms and social pathologies are emergent properties of the structures and dynamics of the social totality. Critical reflection on political life cannot ignore or overlook these aspects of social reality. Instead, to retrieve any sense of a critical political judgment, we must abandon the
postmetaphysical position and embrace a critical social ontology that can allow us cognitive access to the social totality. In this sense, the idea that we can derive rational judgments from the kind of pathological problems facing modern society—alienation, reification, and so on—is simply to split critique from judgment. Indeed, once reification sets in, we can no longer rely on the immanent practices of the community, especially those deliberative practices that serve as the framework for contemporary theories of democracy and judgment, as a ground for rational (i.e., emancipatory) norms. The hall of mirrors problem returns with a different cut: we simply refilter those pathologies back through our sense of what constitutes validity in the first place—first-order pathologies now shape and fuse to second-order forms of reflection. We can view the matter as consisting of first- and second-order pathologies. A first-order pathology is one that affects the social relations we inhabit, whereas second-order pathologies affect our powers of reflection on the first-order pathologies. The second order is the realm of experience and praxis awareness. If we generate norms from that second-order level alone, we will simply refract the first-order pathologies back onto our hermeneutic praxis. There will be no critique and no valid judgment, no rational grasp of the world and our projects to transform it. We can say that the dynamics of modern societies create the conditions for alienation and other forms of personal pathology and suffering. We can also see that responses to this kind of modernity are disparate. One can conform to the prevailing order and its norms; another might try to escape it, embrace some conventional form of ethical life, religious identity, or whatever; yet another might seek transgressive outlets for one's pent-up psychic energy and moral frustration and ressentiment, and so on. In all cases, we see how the first- and second-order pathologies are related to one another. The response to the pathological structure of social relations and processes (an ontological layer of reality, or first-order problem) precipitates a disturbance and reflex reaction in the cognitive, evaluative, and affective dimensions of the subject (the second-order problem). The “epistemic hall of mirrors” problem emerges when we confine our theoretical inquiries about judgment to the experiential, phenomenological, praxiological, and/or noumenal levels of human consciousness. Once we do this, the capacity for judgment breaks down because we lose a vantage point for critique, or, put another way, we are unable to prevent evaluative concepts and values that have been constituted in our evaluative frameworks by the prevailing social norms from being used in the evaluative activity. Indeed, it can be said that current ideas about political judgment also rely heavily on the notion that our social practices are the context for understanding our political reality. The thesis here, in contrast to the Kantian-pragmatist view, maintains that our social practices not only mediate the experience of everyday life but also serve as the basic background capacity for political judgment. According to this thesis, social practices are the context for our establishment of valid norms because only by articulating norms via the practices we already share and live within can such norms be valid and authentic. Alessandro Ferrara argues that this allows for a “radically reflexive form of self-grounding,” which entails “a situated judgment on our
identity." The principle of reflexivity is therefore taken to be a crucial component of valid norms based on intersubjective discourse and interaction. But does this confront the hall of mirrors problem as I have laid it out? In other words, even intersubjectively, the reified norms can frame the exchange of reasons. What is required is a means to evaluate the reasons that are being employed; critique demands the examination of the reasons being used. It cannot rest with the procedure or some embedding of formalism in social practices. What this leads to, however, is not a satisfactory theory of political judgment and critique, but a kind of philosophic hall of mirrors where we become essentially unable to critique and judge the forms of power that sustain modern societies and that essentially constitute the forms of injustice and social pathologies we experience phenomenologically. Attempting to access the source of these forms of injustice and pathology via hermeneutics leads us away from a critical theory of judgment and toward expressivism or, at least, some form of epistemic relativism. These theories essentially root themselves in the experiences of identity politics that has characterized modern liberalism. They place inordinate emphasis on the plurality of conceptions of the good that constitutes modern liberal societies. But the real question is not value pluralism so much as questions of social power seen as the capacity of normative systems to organize relations between people in ways that are unequal and dominating in some basic sense. The intersubjective, communicative ethicist may believe that she can tease out contradictions in the worldview of any participant and thereby open up some aporia in their sense of the world. But this is a deeply mistaken view of the matter. What is needed is a theory of judgment that is immanent to the practices of our world and at the same time achieves an objective vantage point for critical reflection. This may seem like a contradiction in terms, but this is precisely what I maintain can be achieved by engaging in a critical social ontology that replaces the obsession with “reflective judgment” and postmetaphysics. Critical reflection is not immanent to any practice but must have a point of view, a way of thinking about the world, for there to emerge new insight and expand the moral horizons of judgment. Critique cannot be submerged within the phenomenological experience of a pathology of injustice, it must be able to penetrate appearance into the essential, generative structures and processes that produce them. Ontology, I assert (not pragmatism or postmetaphysics) is the true ground for critical judgment. Indeed, critical judgment begins when we begin to inquire into how values, norms, beliefs, practices, and institutions shape and reconstitute relations of domination. Whether it be in the larger systems of administrative capitalism or in the more communal systems of religion or moral beliefs about the family and so on, what is salient are the ways these social systems constitute power relations and forms of dominance that can become embedded within the cognitive and affective dimensions of those that participate in such systems. Hence, any kind of moral reflexivity has to have an ontological point of view at its core for critical judgment to be enacted. Any sense of critical judgment will therefore require a grasp of the totality, of the social whole within which social facts and phenomena occur. Our language, practices, opinions, and so on are all in some way
functionally dependent on the social ontology of this totality. Judgment as critique is the capacity for us to frame and reflectively critique even those practices that the totality itself has made ambient. No totality is “total” in the sense that it forecloses critical reflection; it can always be the object of rational reflection and critique. I argue that this requires a very different understanding of political judgment and critical reflection that contemporary theory has elaborated. What is needed is a means for theorizing the totality and calling into question its dynamics and purposes. What is required is what I call ontological coherence, or a grasp of the objective social relations, norms, practices, and purposes that are constitutive of the logics of social power that form and maintain the shapes of our sociality understood as the structures of relations, the processes that these relations instantiate, as well as the ends and purposes toward which these are oriented. Essentialism, in this sense, is not a matter of some fixed form of being or whatever; this is little more than a straw man concept. What it does concern is the generative forms of species-specific dynamics and features that serve as the basis for human beings; it concerns the relational, processual, and praxiological capacities that serve as the substance of our sociality that are shaped and formed into different historical forms of life that are the cause of either our pathologies and injustice or our development and freedom. As I see it, this constitutes a kind of basic ontological ground for critical political judgment. The central weakness of the judgment paradigm in contemporary philosophy can therefore be described as the hall of mirrors problem. What I mean by this is that in their search for a supposedly postmetaphysical and post-Enlightenment form of practical reason, such thinkers have abandoned any capacity for critical judgment. A norm is taken to be valid to the extent that any discourse community as a whole essentially sanctions it via mutual agreement. But there is no way for me, based on that premise alone, to judge the validity of that norm in any sense other than the fact that it has been mutually agreed on. But this cannot, by itself, make the norm or the ethical proposition right. Indeed, its moral rectitude must be rooted in some structure of meaning that grants us critical perspective. For all the talk of Kant's third Kritik, many are quick to forget the Hegelian view that conceptual thought mediates reality and the concepts we employ, if they are rational, are constitutive of the object of knowledge. This is a serious problem, one that is fatal for any serious theory of judgment. For we are asked to accept the thesis that all valid norms are contingent on their acceptability to any given community, as long as this community reflexively accepts that norm as valid. As one advocate of this approach has put the matter: The elements of a postmetaphysical, interactive universalism are: the universal pragmatic reformulation of the basis of the validity of truth claims in terms of a discourse theory of justification; the vision of an embodied and embedded human self whose identity is constituted narratively, and the reformulation of the moral point of view as the contingent achievement of an interactive form of rationality rather than as the timeless standpoint of a legislative reason. 8 We should take these premises in turn, because they take us far from any sense of a critical theory of judgment. Why should we assume that the validity of any claim can be grounded in discourse theory? The whole
thrust of the theory of reification and alienation—classical pathologies of consciousness and reasoning emerging from modern, capitalist societies—was to show that modern forms of social power could colonize consciousness and shape the discursive and cognitive domain of subjects. How, then, can we rely on this alone as the vehicle for judgment? The epistemic hall of mirrors problem is serious. It points to a serious flaw in the postmetaphysical and pragmatic approach to judgment. The idea that agreement in an intersubjective context alone as a criterion for validity needs to be overcome so that we have critical access to a capacity to judge the content of the norms that are agreed on. The basic problem is that once we abandon the idea of some vantage point for critique and instead use communication or reflexivity alone as a criterion for valid (i.e., universalistic) norms, we cut out how social power and social dominance works and affects the capacities for conscious reflection. Once we see power relations as exhibiting what I have called constitutive domination—or the capacity to shape the norms and values through which you navigate and understand the world no less than the basic intentional stances you take when acting as a member of your community—we must abandon the idea of there being no “privileged position” for critique. Critical judgment is only in play when we can make distinctions about the validity privileged or practice or institution according to the way it shapes the social world of which I am a part. This, in turn, requires that we comprehend the totality from which the phenomena we experience are generated. We need to see that critical judgment has as its referent not epistemic norms but concrete, ontological structures of relations, social processes as well as ends and purposes toward which we as members of any political community are asked to acquiesce and accept. In this sense, a new orientation is required that can encompass the structures of social reality that we inhabit and that constitute our individual and collective lives. Emphasis on the phenomenological structures of consciousness is inadequate for a theory of critical judgment because it cannot ground our concepts about what defective and good forms of sociality should look like and why. Emphasis on experience, trauma, the imaginative, or whatever are simply inadequate and, quite frankly, of no use with respect to actual political judgment. What is needed is a grasp of how social reality is constituted by structures of relations, processes, purposes, norms, and values that sustain and re-create that social reality. The key to understanding trauma and social and personal pathologies lies in its social origins: in how objective social reality patterns forms of self- and other-relations that either promote a free, self-developing individuality or pervert it. We need not a postmetaphysics but a critical metaphysics of our sociality. What is required is a departure from the failed paradigm of postmetaphysics and a revival of a critical social metaphysics—a form of social critique that embeds practical reason in the social world in the sense that we see that social world as made up of much more than our practices but also of an ontology of structures, relations, processes, and ends that constitute the social totality. We must move beyond the layer of practices and inquire into how these practices are shaped and how these structures and processes—both properties of the ontology of the social totality—help re-create and restructure those practices. This is why we end up in
the hall of mirrors problem. Without this, we have no reliable means of critiquing the first-
and second-order problems of social reality and consciousness. Without theorizing the
social totality—that is, the ontological shape of how our social relations, processes, and
purposes are organized—we cannot grasp the norms and practices that are contained
within it, constitute it, and are constituted by it. Social ontology is the ground for political
judgment because it concerns the very substance of our ethical life. Our sociality is far
more than merely intersubjective and phenomenological; it is also, and indeed more
important, constituted by relational structures and processes, purposes, and ends, as well
as the product of certain basic phylogenetic capacities beyond language. Once committed
to a postmetaphysical view of the social, we have sheared off the relevant layers of social
reality that grant us insight into a more robust, more rational form of social critique and
political judgment. We must, I insist, move beyond the hermeneutic and the linguistic into
a deeper conceptual grasp of human social existence itself and the ontic forms that it
takes in history.

Intersubjectivity and Discourse

Contemporary critical theory has sought to
deal with the problem I have outlined above by moving toward a paradigm that we can
broadly describe as one of pragmatic justification. According to this basic view,
communication and the justificatory structures inherent in the pragmatics of
communication oriented toward mutual understanding will be able to maintain a rational
structure and the open-ended inquiry and creativity demanded by a truly democratic,
noncoercive society. No ontology is needed here because we are concerned, as Habermas
continually maintains, with the problem of discursive justification and the extent to which
individuals are able to come to a rational, mutual understanding about the object-domain:
“Fundamental to the paradigm of mutual understanding is, rather, the performative
attitude of participants in interaction, who coordinate their plans for action by coming to
an understanding about something in the world.”10 Hence, the project of pragmatic
justification holds that the relation between subject and object, so central to idealist
philosophy, is overcome not by monological reason or through the paradigm of active
labor but through the act of argumentative discourse embedded in an intersubjective life-
world premised on rational justification. Hence, Kant’s problematic of the chasm between
the noumenal and phenomenal worlds is overcome. Habermas states the solution: “The
unbridgeable gap Kant saw between the intelligible and the empirical becomes, in
discourse ethics, a mere tension manifesting itself in everyday communication as the
factual force of counterfactual presuppositions.”11 This has extended itself into a more
general reinterpretation of many of the core metaphysical attributes of German
idealism.12 The project of pragmatic justification takes us back to Kant via the pragmatist
theory of action to pose the thesis that epistemic claims can be understood not in
transcendental form, as Kant had argued, but in terms immanent to the practice of
linguistically mediated communication. Hence, the domain of justification constitutes a
kind of realm of objectivity, moving emphasis away from the object-domain.13 Where this
project suffers is in the important problem that is brought to light by Hegel’s immanent
metaphysics, on one hand, and Marx’s objectivist ontology of sociality, on the other. For
both, any conception of critical rationality had to grasp how thought and the objective world related to one another, not as a construct of a rational subject (as in Kant and Fichte) but more correctly that cognition should pierce into the rational structures of the objects of consciousness. This is why Hegel presciently rejects the approach outlined by contemporary Kantian-pragmatists when he maintains that any moral truth or conception of the good or right cannot be based on “the external positive authority of the state or of the mutual agreement (Übereinstimmung) among persons, or through the authority of inner feeling and the heart or the spirit which immediately concurs with this.”\textsuperscript{14} What reason discloses to us is the rational structure of what actually constitutes those objects. Construed this way, rational thought has an ontological metric for gauging its own correctness or incorrectness.\textsuperscript{15} This is why the Kantian-pragmatist thesis elaborated by Habermas and others is insufficient as a valid critical theory of society.\textsuperscript{16} Critical rationality must disclose for us the ontology of sociality insofar as the social-relational structures and processes that constitute any given aspect of social reality forms the context for the constitution of its members and determines the extent to which those social forms can promote the kinds of relational, common goods requisite for a robust kind of social freedom. Even more, for Hegel and Marx, the concept of self-determination has to have the basic sociality of the agent in view because a person is only free and self-determined to the extent that they cognize themselves and act within interdependent social-relational contexts that promote their own welfare and the good of the social whole and that these are reciprocally constituted. The problem with approaching objective moral truths through the process of justification and the exchange of reasons alone is that the “reasons” no longer have the requisite ontological ballast to grant them critical (i.e., properly rational) weight. Indeed, even more, the exchange of reasons and processes of justification that eschew ontological concerns are open to the socialization pressures of the existent reality and its norms and value patterns, thereby distorting the noumenal capacities of agents.\textsuperscript{17} When reason is dissolved into the practice of discourse, there is little room left for the importance of speculative (begreifende) thought and how certain truth claims should be evaluated based on ontological considerations. The reason for this was that both men saw—Marx perhaps more strongly than Hegel—that the power of social-institutional forces was too strong for mere pragmatics to overcome. The main issue was that cognition was shaped in intricate ways by the power relations and structural-functional pressures of the existent reality—a reality that was seen to be a distorted form of sociality. Operating in that framework means that we would simply reproduce many of the basic assumptions and value patterns that underwrite the basis of moral cognition and the semantic basis of communication. Epistemic reasons are not sufficient to defend rational agency against the pressures of reification. We should be clear about what reification means in this context. Since we are the agents of creation of social forms, the key problem of reification is its deformative capacity for agents to be able to hold the norms and practices that guide our lives as expressions of social dominance, particularly norms and practices that uphold social relations, structures, and processes
that create an unequal and surplus benefit for others. Reification is the result of a web of norms and practices that orient collective intentionality toward relations of social dominance. Because this entails a corruption of our second-order capacities for reflection, it means that a merely noumenal and praxiological approach to judgment is insufficient. What is necessary is a form of thinking and reflecting that takes into account the broader social ontology within which our practices, norms, and values are embedded and to interrogate how this social totality should be shaped and organized to promote a common life based on social freedom. Once the social ontological domain is hidden from view and we begin to accept the intersubjective, noumenal, and pragmatic turn, we lose any objective basis for critical reflection. We begin to be imprisoned in a relativism of value pluralism without any means to call these values into question. Hence what we can call a problem of epistemic refraction takes hold once we see that concrete forms of social power have the capacity to shape the presuppositional categories of thought that will serve as the formal foundation for communicative forms of reason—the epistemic hall of mirrors problem returns. As such, discursive forms of justification are open to epistemic relativism insofar as it is unable to secure universalistic claims outside of mere mutual agreement, something that cannot be secured in any truly rational sense without some degree of appeal to the structure of the object of reference. We cannot rely on reflexivity or some sense of a “situated yet universalistic reflective judgment” to get us out of this problem. An ontology of society can help in securing claims about the valid, rational structure of social life to diagnose pathologies of that sociality and the kinds of defective forms of cognition that accompany them. Second, it reproduces (rather than overcomes) Hegel's charge of the impotence of the mere ought. Since the nature of objectivity is moved from the object-domain, or the ontology of sociality, to that of the “structure of justification” or the internal syntactic structures of language constituting communication, we become unable to address how power relations distort and affect the cognitive powers of subjects as well as how norms and practices come to cement and infiltrate the conceptual powers of agents.

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