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Antinomies of Progress. Notes on Adorno's Critical Theory and the Concept of Progress in Our Time

Abstract
Today, the idea of progress is confronted with four distinct but interrelated challenges: global authoritarian regressions and democratic backsliding; the looming climate catastrophe; the partial dissolution of recognizable boundaries between human agency and artificial intelligence; and omnipresent forms of digital reproduction through which seemingly every human interaction is identified, measured, counted, objectified, and valorized. Turning especially to Adorno's essay on "Progress," I address these four steep challenges facing contemporary society and their meaning for (moral) progress from the perspective of Frankfurt School Critical Theory. Rather than resigning to a negative telos and the realistic threat of disaster, I propose a critical and dialectical notion of (both moral and social) progress that takes inspiration from Adorno's work. It contains and upholds the possibility of genuine betterment, of averting catastrophe, and of redemption while critically reflecting on the conditions and societal trends towards destruction and what I call hyperreification. I argue that Adorno's idea of progress continues to shed light on problems and antinomies in the contemporary age of unreason, recognizing both its entanglement in society and its critical qualities.

Keywords
Artificial Intelligence; Humanity; Moral Progress; Posthumanism; Social Media

> "As little as humanity *tel quel* progresses by the advertising slogans of the ever new and improved, so little can there be an idea of progress without the idea of humanity."
> Theodor W. Adorno, *Progress* (1964)

1. Introduction: On Answering the Question "What is Progress?"

In his famous essay on progress, initially delivered as a lecture at the Philosophers' Congress in Münster in 1962, Theodor W. Adorno laid

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Filosofia morale/Moral Philosophy, vol. 2, 2024 • ISBN: 9791222318318 • DOI: 10.7413/fmmp0055

out the contours of a dialectical notion of progress in "the age of catastrophe," as he aptly put it (Adorno 1998a, p. 147). In so doing, Adorno closely linked the idea of progress, on the one hand, to several key concepts indebted to Kantian moral and political philosophy, featuring reason, enlightenment and, most importantly, humanity, as well as the theological image of redemption, to which, according to Adorno, the idea of progress ultimately points. For him, genuine progress was needed, as "no good can exist" without progress (Adorno 1998a, p. 147). As there cannot be any good, no morality without progress, progress without morality, and the idea of the good or of human betterment, seems equally impossible and certainly undesirable. Against the backdrop of a society which is, for Critical Theory, constitutively shaped by social domination, the good life is intimately linked to progress, while moral progress appears to be a tautology of sorts.

Yet, on the other hand, Adorno also stressed tensions of "progress" both as a concept and as an empirical reality: its profound antinomies in our empirical world, which is full of ambivalences and contradictions, and its entanglement in a global society actually facing humanity's extinction—a society which celebrates progress while progressing towards disaster. Without throwing the baby out with the bathwater and giving up on the promise of progress altogether, Adorno's Critical Theory hereby criticizes a seemingly omnipresent "fetishization of progress" (Adorno 1998a, p. 160) in the modern world of permanent reifications and transformations—a "progress" that is restricted to refined techniques, technological advances, commodity value and valorization, as well as increased mastery over nature and perfectioned social domination, yet sold to us citizens as true progress altogether. Adorno thus rejects a ubiquitously advertised progress, which is deceptive and which furthers, actually, humanity's delusions about progress while blindly reproducing conformist subjugations to social pressure, comprehensive adaptations to societal demands, and ultimately humanity's quite possible extinction. Contemporary apologists of blind progress of our time, including so-called posthumanists, just as those during Adorno's, tend to render resistance to such progress "conservative" and "backward-looking", fallen out of time. However, in what seems to have fallen out of time, a Critical Theory of progress indebted to Adorno, by contrast, recognizes the critical potential of progress in conditions, ideas, claims and subjectivity that societal and technological "progress" seemingly tends to undermine: human freedom, democracy, subjectivity, cosmopolitan solidarity, and humanity.

In our contemporary world, how can we answer the question: "What is progress?" How can we uphold a critical notion of progress today in view of multiple challenges to the very conditions of (moral and social) progress, and what may we learn from Adorno's reflections in order to

advance such a concept? In what follows, I will reread some of Adorno's reflections on the notion of progress, as developed in his influential lecture, and shine light on his dialectical understanding of the concept in view of our contemporary condition—of what I have called a new age of unreason (Rensmann 2017a). Our present time is shaped by authoritarian regressions and democratic backsliding the world over; an autocratization trend bolstering authoritarianism in both democracies and autocracies that is in various ways reminiscent of the rise of the fascist movements Adorno witnessed in the 1930s, before the catastrophe of the Shoah. Adorno's arguments about progress will also be situated in the contemporary context of the climate crisis, which brings our planet ever closer to extinction; and be discussed in view of the enormous technological transformations we are facing, featuring the digitization of our communication and socialization as well as the advent of ubiquitous artificial intelligence. Any meaningful reconstruction and actualization of Critical Theory's notion of progress needs to take account of these changing conditions. However, I will argue that Adorno's dialectical understanding, while facing limitations, offers important paths for preparing a critical notion of progress today, illuminating some persistent antinomies and problems in a different, new, but no less contradictory "age of both utopian and absolutely destructive possibilities" (Adorno 1998a, p. 143).

First, I will turn to Adorno's understanding of the "antinomies of progress", and how these antinomies may play out in our time. I will specifically address and complicate Adorno's dialectical view of progress in an age of digitization, in which subjects are socialized through societal institutions such as TikTok, and in the face of new authoritarianism. Second, I will spell out the significance of humanity, as an ideology and as a claim yet to be universally realized, for any critical notion of progress in light of Adorno's writing and in view of the antihumanistic, relativistic political and intellectual environment such understanding faces today. Against the backdrop of his emphatic cosmopolitan understanding of humanity as an idea still to be realized, I renew the link from Adorno's notion of progress to his call for a new global subject as the necessary condition to avert disaster in the horizon of the climate crisis. Third, I will briefly address the challenging effects of artificial intelligence and robotization and their potential meaning for human subjectivity, humanity, and the notion of moral progress in an Adornian take. And fourth, I will conclude my reflections against this background with a plea against posthumanism in all its technological cyborg and non-technological jellyfish variants. They both ultimately render the inclusive idea of humanity superfluous but without which, I argue, no emphatic idea of progress can exist. Hence, I put forth a plea against post- and metahumanist irrationalism, which constitutes the philosophical soundtrack to an authoritarian age of unreason unfolding in front of our eyes.

2. From the Slingshot to TikTok: The Antinomies of Progress in the Age of Digital Reproduction

For Adorno, the concept of progress is intertwined with the modern condition and its inherently transformative dynamic, both normatively and in terms of societal practices. Claims to progress are part and parcel of the modern world. For a critical theoretical account of progress, then, "it is necessary to scrutinize the category so closely that it loses its semblance and obviousness, both in its positive and negative usage." However, by the same token, insisting on exactitude only misguides us because of its inherent tensions and ambiguity: "where the impossibility of the unambiguous appertains to the subject matter itself, dogmatic epistemology misses its object, sabotages insight and helps to perpetuate the bad by zealously forbidding reflection upon what … the consciousness of those entangled would like to discover: whether there is progress." (Adorno 1998a, p. 143)

For preparing a dialectical notion of progress inspired by Critical Theory and providing an answer to the question of whether there is progress in our time, Adorno offers us some direction. The "antinomian character of progress" (Adorno 1998a, p. 147) today points to the contradictions and ambiguities in the contemporary world but also to the need to avoid writing histories of success or decline. While progress proceeds, on the one hand, from the slingshot to the megabomb, there is also, undeniably, actual progress, on the other hand, "from slavery to the formal freedom of subjects" and "from deprivation to provisions against epidemics and famine" (Adorno 1998a, 148). Most importantly, it is essential for a Critical Theory of progress, *pace* Adorno, to not renounce thinking the idea of progress altogether, even in the "age of catastrophe": "Progress should be no more ontologized, unreflectively ascribed to Being, than should decline, though indeed the latter seems to be the preference of recent philosophy. Too little of what is good has the power in the world for progress to be expressed in a predicative judgment about the world, but *there can be no good, not a trace of it, without progress*." (Adorno 1998a, p. 147, emphasis added)

The idea of progress, as a promise yet to be realized, has both a modest and a redemptive quality in Adorno's take. On the one hand, it means averting total disaster, catastrophe, "radical evil" (Adorno 1998a, p. 160), maybe allowing, at last, for breathing a "sigh of relief" (Adorno 1998a, p. 144). On the other hand, progress for Adorno is unthinkable without the redemptive idea of the emancipation of humanity and the end of societal domination. Progress allows the "possibility of redemption to flash up" (Adorno 1998a, p. 148) and thus contradicts what is. And such progress requires self-reflective reason that can possibly transition to praxis: "The

explosive tendency of progress is not merely the Other to the movement of a progressing domination of nature, not just its abstract negation; rather it requires the unfolding of reason through the very domination of nature. Only reason, the principle of societal domination inverted into the subject, would be capable of abolishing this domination." (Adorno 1998a, p. 152)

Progress, says Adorno, is entangled in reason, from which it cannot be separated if progress is to have any meaning at all. Progress is thus also entangled in society and history, and it does not exist outside either. Without society, "the notion of progress would be completely empty; all its elements are abstracted from society." (Adorno 1998a, p. 148) For Adorno's Critical Theory societal, political, and historical dimensions of progress can never be neatly distinguished from the moral and ethical ones, which are the primary concern of moral philosophy. The latter is embedded in and complicated by the social and historical conditions under which it operates. It is the neglect of this insight what is most problematic, in Adorno's take, about Kant's formalism and moral philosophy—and his notion of moral progress.

Hence, the concept of progress, according to Adorno, "is philosophical in that it articulates the movement of society while at the same time contradicting it." (Adorno 1998a, p. 148) Progress belongs to the quasi-mythological circulation of modern capitalist society and the dynamic of modern social domination; it is part of an "antagonistic unity of movement and standstill" (Adorno 1998a, p. 160), the "interlocking of ever-same and the new in the exchange relation" which "manifests itself in the imagines of progress under bourgeois industrialism." (Adorno 1998a, p. 159) Yet, progress also has the potential to explode the mythical spell to which it belongs: "Progress means: to step out of the magic spell, even out of the spell of progress that is itself nature, in that humanity becomes aware of its own inbred nature and brings to a halt the domination it exacts upon nature and through which domination by nature continues. In this way it could be said that progress occurs where it ends." (Adorno 1998a, p. 150)

"Part of the dialectic of progress," argues Adorno, "is that historical setbacks, which themselves are instigated by the principle of progress…also provide the condition needed for humanity to avert them in the future." (Adorno 1998a, p. 154) Progress can, indeed, be conceived as the "resistance to the perpetual danger of relapse." (Adorno 1998a, p. 160) But the dangers of universal regression, of authoritarian backsliding and even of human/environmental catastrophe are real, and today, as at many critical junctures in the past, (technological and organizational) progress actually seems to be allied with such political and societal regression.

In contemporary digital social interactions, which are partly governed by and embedded in social media corporations' algorithms, and which are constantly, "progressively" perfectioned, enhanced, or directly generated by artificial intelligence, every image seems stylized, staged, and manufactured for the purpose of social or economic valorization. Moreover, technological progress here also means that every reaction is identified, objectified, measured, counted, and valorized for economic gain. This is digital "progress" for you. Rather than rendering objectification, reification, and utilization obsolete as powerful social mechanisms to which all members of modern societies are subjugated, social life under conditions of 21st century global digital capitalism has become increasingly commodified or, as I call it, *hyperreified*. Initial studies indicate that the digital restructuring of the public sphere tends to destroy a vivid public realm and replace it with a seemingly never-ending flood of disinformation, post-factualism, and tribalism.

Moreover, current social media, a result of technological progress serving capitalist ends, now constitutes a key institution of socialization. This has also dramatically destructive effects on the cognitive and moral capacities of citizens and denizens as consumers, and particularly children. Consuming TikTok videos for hours, as many children and young adults do, literally kills your brain. Alongside progressing the loss of key critical faculties, consciousness and conscience, I suggest, that such hyperreification tends to engender and reward both social conformism and authoritarian aggressions. By and large, empirical research suggests that the technological progress of digitization further weakens the competences of weakened human modern subjects to resist stupidity, moral bankruptcy and, most importantly, blind authoritarian submission towards both general societal pressures and towards dictators or wanna-be autocrats among the "technologically educated masses" (Horkheimer & Adorno 2002, p. xvi). The result may be increasingly weakened, authoritarian personalities in present and future generations: amorphous, totally flexible, stupefied. The contemporary, hyperreified structure of, and interactions on, social media hence appear to nurture new forms of authoritarianism among younger generational cohorts. They are doing so by direct, unmediated technological means, rather mediated forms of primary and secondary socialization. Rather than democratizing socialization, education, and the public, the digital transformation of the social and public sphere, dominated by powerful corporations and their algorithms, has both autocratized and disinhibited social interactions. It points to an increasingly radical expropriation of subjectivity and weakening of critical faculties or competences, including moral conscience and consciousness—far beyond what Adorno could have imagined.

This fits neatly the societal demands and control mechanisms of neoliberal global capitalism. It subjugates humans globally to the requirements of global production and trade in the name of progress (and freedom, for that matter). Under transformed societal and digitized conditions, individuals have seemingly become ever more ready to conform to all-pervasive new economic demands for flexibility, voluntary self-exploitation, and constant self-enhancement (Jäger 2022, Bueno 2021; Gandesha 2018). Adorno's 'radio generation' of the 1940s, then, has arguably been replaced by the 'social media generation(s)' of our time. What may have been exaggerated claims in Adorno's time, namely that socialization processes have largely expropriated the nuclear family and its mediations while society directly reaches into all aspects of socialization from early childhood onwards, seems to have come to fruition in the age of digital technology and social media. Induced by the new stage of technological progress for profit, technology-driven social and communicative conditions of modern digital capitalism shape an individual's subjectivity, composition, and reactions on the earliest and most intimate levels. Such conditions may engender the blind acceptance of both authoritarian political systems and a social world without thought, driven by the abstract authority of powerful and omnipresent technological companies. This development signifies the progress from the slingshot to TikTok, the destructive possibilities of which are only foreshadowed so far, though the writing is on the wall. It points to a situation of "universal regression that allies itself with progress today." (Adorno 1998a, p. 160)

Still, it would be an uncritical and undialectical notion of progress to view technological progress with all its destructive possibilities solely in terms of a history of decline. While seemingly outdated social practices that enable critical thinking, such as reading books, may be more beneficial to preserving the condition of possibility for progress than consuming social media, technological advances of the digital age may also be put to productive use once they are no longer under the spell of valorization and the exchange principle.

3. Averting Total Disaster: Moral Progress in the Face of Humanity's Extinction and the Need for Cosmopolitan Solidarity, Democracy, and Critique

Answering the question whether genuine progress exists today means ultimately no less than answering the question "whether humanity is capable of preventing catastrophe." (Adorno 1998a, p. 144). Averting total disaster as the modest measure of progress: This was true for Adorno,

and it is no less evident in an age of climate crisis, of which Adorno could not have had any idea.

Possibly even more self-evident than during his time is the need for an intervening global subject against the globalized condition of environmentally destructive capitalism undermining the future of humankind and life on the planet. Adorno calls for the rehabilitation of the "Kantian universal cosmopolitan concept" (Adorno 1998a, p. 145) in the face of global disaster, rather than the return to authoritarian-nationalist particularism, if progress as averting catastrophe stands any chance of coming to fruition (Rensmann 2016): "The forms of humanity's own global societal constitution threaten its life. The possibility of progress, of averting the most extreme, total disaster, has migrated to the global subject alone." (Adorno 1998a, p. 144) For Adorno, the avoidance of global catastrophe thus requires the free and "rational establishment of the whole society as humanity" (Adorno 1998a, p. 144), and the realization of Kant's cosmopolitanism.[1]

Progress, then, "would be the very establishment of humanity in the first place, whose prospect opens up in the face of its extinction." (Adorno 1998a, p. 145) Progress understood as the rational establishment of society as humanity, that is, a global subject capable of preventing disaster of a global scope, is inevitably attached to the cosmopolitan idea of humanity and cosmopolitan solidarity (Basnett 2023; Rensmann 2016). Through Adorno's lens, as indicated, there cannot be an idea of progress "without the idea of humanity" (Adorno 1998a, p. 145) in all of its meanings and connotations; indeed, genuine progress, from a Critical Theory perspective, can only be conceived as progress towards—yet unrealized—humanity. This also requires, of course, critical reflection on the conditions that have caused humanity's crisis and brought humanity to the brink of total destruction, once again.

Cosmopolitan solidarity and the realization of humanity today undoubtedly depend on ensuring the conditions for humanity's reproduction: to do everything possible to save the planet, the environment, and avert the climate catastrophe. This ultimately requires a different, self-reflective rather than entirely objectifying relationship of humanity to (both inner and external) nature, instead of the blind "triumph of society over nature—a triumph which transforms everything into mere nature." (Horkheimer & Adorno 2002, p. 153) This means that there is the need

[1] Of course, within Kantian enlightenment, which "first of all puts progress towards humanity in people's own hands and thereby concretizes the idea of progress as one to be realized, lurks the conformist confirmation of what merely exists." Yet critically recognizing Kant's limitations, including the subtle "conformist confirmation" of what exists within Kant's philosophy, does not disqualify Kant's cosmopolitan idea(l).

to intervene into the dialectic of blind, objectifying mastery of humankind over nature that deprives human subjects of their own critical potential and subjectivity and turns everything equally into jellyfish without critical consciousness and emancipatory agency, including the agency to prevent humanity's extinction. Climate change, which Adorno could not anticipate but which is one of the consequences of the blind mastery, reification, and exploitative relationship of society to the natural world, makes the need for progress towards humanity acting as a self-conscious global subject, the need for the rational establishment of the whole society as humanity, as Adorno puts it, all the more pressing.

The establishment of humanity as a global subject, which for Adorno is a condition for moral progress and for the possibility to avert disaster, also implies a commitment to democracy as the framework for critique. Democracy provides the condition—the space—for critical and free public reflection and guarantees individual and collective rights. Without democracy—"nothing less than defined by critique"—and without the "conception of the separation of powers" (Adorno 1998b, p. 281), there can also be no moral philosophy in any meaningful way that points to actual (moral) progress in society. Without the context of democracy and its prerequisite, "political maturity" (Adorno 1998b, p. 281), then, there can also be little chance of averting disaster—the genuine form of progress one can realistically hope for in our time.

An abstract moral philosophy of progress in our time has become even more dubious, from a Critical Theory perspective, than it was in the past. A moral philosophy of progress can no longer avoid reflecting on the need for a new cosmopolitan solidarity that establishes humanity, i.e. a democratic, free and just global society, and extending solidarity to animals and the natural world we inhabit. Likewise, Adorno's Critical Theory presses us to recognize that any moral philosophy of progress risks becoming ideological and delusional—and arguably more so today than in Adorno's time—if it does not reflect on the actual political and societal contexts and material conditions under which it operates. Indeed, today neither progress, nor moral philosophizing about progress that does not fully betray the very idea of progress as linked to humanity, as an ideal and practice *pace* Kant, can happen if, for instance, grave injustices and autocratic conditions cannot be addressed, confronted, and criticized. Indeed, in the executioner's house, moral philosophers today need to talk about the rope—and of societal conditions further advancing destructive dynamics of progress which tend to eliminate the conditions of possibility for genuine progress, for human emancipation and humanity to emerge.

How do you practice moral philosophy, for instance, in China today, which has in recent years eclipsed all hitherto remaining spaces, in

universities and the public realm at large, to prevent any critique of the Chinese regime? The personalist dictatorship of Xi Jinping regime silences and jails dissidents (and worse), including those who display any disagreement within the Communist ruling elite; the regime terrorizes its population, radically curtails free speech, persecutes the Uighurs and other minorities, and has built one of the most authoritarian, oppressive, immoral systems of rule in the 21st century. Under Xi, a system of near total surveillance has been established. It is enhanced by digital means designed to extinguish the very idea of human freedom and any hope for betterment, let alone genuine human progress; a system which can be called, *pace* Shoshana Zuboff's concept of digital "surveillance capitalism" (2019), digital *surveillance dictatorship*. Is it possible to actually advance moral philosophy in this context, and in particular applied moral philosophy? How do you teach ethics of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in China, where the ruling regime uses AI for its domestically enforced and globally oriented "tech-enhanced authoritarianism" (Hoffman 2022, p. 76) and its so-called "social credit system" (see Yang 2019), which detects, registers, and sanctions every human behavior based on total surveillance employing face recognition systems? The European Union, for instance, just established ethical guidelines on AI based on the advice, among others, of moral philosophers. Most prominently, this features a complete ban on AI-based face recognition within the EU: "The new rules ban certain AI applications that threaten citizens' rights, including biometric categorization systems based on sensitive characteristics and untargeted scraping of facial images from the internet or CCTV footage to create facial recognition databases. Emotion recognition in the workplace and schools, social scoring, predictive policing (when it is based solely on profiling a person or assessing their characteristics), and AI that manipulates human behavior or exploits people's vulnerabilities will also be forbidden." (European Parliament 2024) For moral and ethical reasons, hence, the EU bans AI uses which are central to the Chinese regime's totalitarian project.

So how can we engage with Chinese scholars and universities today in any meaningful way that allows for open debate and progress, when the most basic forms of critique, ethical reflection, and moral philosophy are impossible and lead to political persecution? This constitutes an empirical and moral dilemma which needs to be the subject of reflection. The dilemma does not imply advocating for boycotting Chinese scholars, or principled disengagement with those raising objections to torture and persecution, however veiled. Yet the idea that exchange with authoritarian or totalitarian institutions and their representatives is always beneficial and leads to progress and opens up paths to humanity and societal betterment, no matter the parameters that these institutions establish, is

empirically delusional and in moral terms deeply problematic. Simply accepting radically oppressive or totalitarian conditions, the darkness at noon around you, is not a sign of cultural openness, diversity, tolerance, or postcolonial inclusivity—no matter if the regime is European, Asian, or African. To the contrary, conforming to such conditions in the name of cultural difference, or pretending they do not exist and do not affect moral philosophy, constitutes a profound moral failure. It means a general betrayal of a Kantian cosmopolitanism that extends to every human being—and should today reach beyond humans—as well as a particular betrayal of those human beings and groups who are arrested, persecuted, deprived of their human rights, and struggle for their survival, if in China, Iran, Russia, or elsewhere.

In this spirit, Adorno also sides with Kantian formalism because it recognizes "the bourgeois equality of all subjects" that can be contrasted to "the allegedly a priori differences that are supposed to exist between people according to fascist principles." (Adorno 2006, p. 252-3) In the "universal legal norm…despite and because of its abstractness, there survives…something of substance: the egalitarian idea." (Adorno 1973, p. 236) A difference-sensitive cosmopolitanism indebted to or inspired by Adorno can never be oblivious to the violation of basic human rights and dignity, the substantive egalitarian idea that is the condition of being different without fear (Rensmann 2017b). Universal human rights remain true as an idea, hitherto unfulfilled. The critical image of human rights matters even if it still falls short in bringing about justice and freedom; the reification of alleged cultural differences and collective particularisms that trump such universal rights, by contrast, violates the very idea of humanity, freedom, and progress by locking humans into identities from which they allegedly cannot escape. Without humanity as an idea and practice and without global human responsibility, it is difficult to even imagine what progress could mean in our time. This is what Adorno already recognized well before the current age of authoritarian unreason and the looming environmental disaster.

4. Of Humans, Robots, and Artificial Intelligence: Progress, Autonomy, and the Dissolution of the Boundaries of the (Moral) Self

Just as Adorno recognizes all sorts of actual societal progress, such as the progress towards democratic constitutions and separations of power, which enable the formal freedom of subjects as well as public freedom and critique, Adorno's dialectical notion of progress also emphasizes, as mentioned, various forms of social progress in many parts of the world, including measures against "epidemics and famine". His conception of progress

is thus not simply entangled in a *Verfallsgeschichte*, a history of decline. It would be equally misguided to construe Adorno as an opponent to technological and scientific progress. Taking inspiration from Adorno's notion of progress, a Critical Theory of progress I gesture towards recognizes enormous progress especially in the medical field. Modern society is capable of developing crucial vaccines against new global pandemics in a stunningly short amount of time, for instance. All sorts of cancer and other diseases can be cured today, raising life expectancy in many parts of the world. And the advancement of robotic and other medical technologies, including AI, can help humans better detect diseases, conduct better surgeries, and live better lives, even after grave injuries. Moral progress, in this way, can be engendered by technological progress if it makes human life better (and animal and planetary life, for that matter). In general, Critical Theory recognizes that medical technology in the service of human subjects (or animals), humanity, and the good, can mean progress, even if it was originally generated in contexts of social domination and production for profit. The primary problem here is not the progress of medical technologies and science helping humans live a better live but, as with other social goods, their fair and equal global distribution and accessibility (or the actual lack thereof under conditions of neo-liberal global capitalism).

Technological progress today, featuring AI-based technologies, certainly challenges the boundaries of the moral subjects as well as human agency and autonomy as the condition to act morally, on a new level. The challenge is also epistemological, as it becomes increasingly difficult, so it seems, to draw strict boundaries between human morality, agency, and autonomy, on the one hand, and artificial activity on the other (including the "independent" capacity of chatboxes to write better papers than students). Alongside conventional limits of the self, the emergence and increasing relevance of humanoid robotics, nanorobotics, and other new technologies thus also seemingly dissolve conventional human ethics and epistemologies. In particular, conceptions of moral and epistemological autonomy are undermined by automatization processes and developments penetrating the boundaries of alleged autonomous subjects and moral selves.

In contrast to the clear-cut boundaries which classical, Kantian or Rawlsian moral philosophy thought to establish and uphold, including strict epistemological ones, however, Adorno's Critical Theory prepares us for the new challenge presented by automatization, robotization, and artificial intelligence. Adorno's work does so considerably better than conventional moral philosophy because Adorno thoroughly illuminates the limits of any conception of individual or moral autonomy, situating the self in its relationship to nature and society and deciphering the claim to autonomy as both true and false.

From the perspective of Critical Theory, autonomy is true as humanity's and the subjects' aspiration to be free from coercion and blind, heteronomous dependency vis-à-vis powerful societal mechanisms—and from being subjected to social domination, including social domination by means of technology (for which also AI can be and is often used today). The idea of autonomy is false and fictitious, however, inasmuch as it suggests an already realized (moral) freedom that can be isolated from its societal conditions and contradictions; and that autonomy can be exercised in disregard of an object by an autonomous subject making independent decisions and judgements, as exemplified by Kantian moral philosophy: What "is decisive in the ego," Adorno argues in *Negative Dialectics*, "its independence and autonomy, can be judged only in relation to its otherness, to the nonego. Whether or not there is autonomy depends upon its adversary and antithesis, on the object which either grants or denies autonomy to the subject. Detached from an object, autonomy is fictitious." (Adorno 1973, p. 223) The idea of autonomy, Adorno recognizes, is also fictitious insofar as it replicates constitutive, but false philosophical and epistemological dichotomies between subject and object, identity and non-identity, reason and nature, reason and emotion, consciousness and body, ego and nonego, the moral self and society. We may include: human capacities and technological resources. Adorno writes: "The subjects are not only fused with their own physical nature; a consistent legality holds sway also in the psychological realm, which reflection has laboriously divided from the world of bodies." (Adorno 1973, p. 221) As Katariina Holma and Hanna-Maija Huhtala show, Adorno's critique of the Kantian notion of (moral) autonomy "attends to the obstacles to genuine autonomy that arise from real-life circumstances." (Holma & Huhtala 2016, p. 373) These circumstances and conditions change. For Adorno, moral autonomy is always embedded, historical, and relational; it is social and linked to nature, needs, feelings, as well as the objective empirical world—all of this, as well as the evolution of modern technologies, constantly challenges the boundaries of the autonomous self that moral philosophy asserts.

Adorno's dialectical notion of progress rejects an idealist reification of the subject blinded towards its objective natural and societal conditions, and the historical and physical transformations thereof. Reflection makes "the subjects aware of the bounds of their freedom is that they are part of nature, and finally, that they are powerless against society, which has become independent of them" (Adorno 1973, p. 221) Such self-reflection on the dialectically interwoven relationship between the subject's inner nature and its relationship to external nature and society, the awareness of the dialectics of identity and non-identity, equips Critical Theory with an epistemological advantage. This also the case when coping with new

technological developments that profoundly affect conventional boundaries of the human body as well as concepts of moral autonomy and progress.

Facing questions of AI and medical robotics, we can learn from Adorno that the boudaries of the self, moral and bodily, are necessarily fuzzy and complex. They are entangled with changing natural, historical and societal conditions—and thus also intertwined with empirical and moral contradictions. Autonomy, however desirable as emancipation from heteronomy and material constraints, is partly fictitious, limited, constantly shaped by nature and penetrated by the object world; autonomy can certainly never be absolute. The human subject cannot assert hardened boundaries of identity detached from nature or society without deluding itself. In this framework, the progress of new technological conditions affecting human identities and bodies does not present a profoundly new moral or epistemological challenge. Yet, Critical Theory's dialectical framework still insists on the realization of reason, humanity, autonomy, and emancipation as key points of reference for genuine (moral) progress, rather than affirming their dissolution. This also applies to assessing far-reaching technological changes affecting human subjectivity. In fact, insofar as the dissolution of the subject and its integrity serves expanded social control, hyperreification, domination, heteronomy, and instrumental valorization and tears down all differences between subject and object, instead of problematizing a fictitious antagonism between them, such dissolution further undermines the condition of possibility of freedom and (moral) autonomy, i.e. genuine progress.

5. Against Posthumanism: Progress as Regression in a World of Cyborgs and Jellyfish

This leads me to a final, related argument about progress today to which Adorno's Critical Theory may provide a useful approach. It concerns the new trend of posthumanist thought and its relationship to progress. Critical Theory may help shine light on posthumanism, the fashionable philosophical ideology that tends to abstractly affirm and blindly endorse, without regrets, the aforementioned idea of the dissolution of humanity, subjectivity and autonomy, as well as the full-fledged dissolution of ethical and conceptual boundaries between humans and technology, human activity and artificial intelligence, or humans, non-human life and material substrates.

Posthumanism intends to decenter and devalue the human subject. There is some validity to that. Critical Theory also challenges the Promethean human subject which seeks blind mastery over nature and the

inner and external object world, no matter the price subject and nature have to pay for this (Hofstätter 2019). Similarly, some proponents of posthumanism mainly call attention to non-human life and natural conditions on earth (and their ethical meaning) and confront "senseless and self-destructive" (Horkheimer & Adorno 2002, p. 19) forms of domination over nature that are practiced by human subjects. Global human society is indeed on course towards ecological disaster, and would do well to treat animals and other non-human life in a profoundly different way. Progress, understood as economic progress towards growth, can also be rightly questioned and criticized in this light, and there are moral issues that should legitimately be extended beyond the realm of the human species and include animals and the environment, which provides the conditions for life on earth.

Yet, all too often, posthumanism tends to throw out the baby with the bathwater, falling for anti-humanist impulses and rendering humanity superfluous if not justifiably ready for extinction. Such thought represents a form of abstract negation, driven by anti-enlightenment or counter-enlightenment impulses, in its well-known modernisti and esoteric variations. Following destructive paths in the history of ideas, they either blindly endorse or reject technological "progress" but equally giving little value to humanity. Erasing the differences between humans, robots, plants, and worms, posthumanism generally denigrates humanity, treating humanity as just one of many natural species or as an outdated concept.

We can distinguish between technological and non-technological, esoteric posthumanism. The first, technological branch of posthumanism, tends to fetishize technological or technical progress. This branch finds expression, for instance, in the "transhuman" endorsement of genetic selection, gene editing and "genetic engineering", which Stefan Sorgner elevates to humanity's "most important scientific invention" (Sorgner 2021, p. 61)—however radically such selective editing may march towards inhumanity. Representatives of this branch usually welcome any "posthumanization" of society. This means they seem to applaud human dissolution, by means of robots or artificial intelligence, and seek to grant new robotic entities full membership.

Rather than celebrating this type of "technological progress", the second, non-technological or esoteric branch of posthumanism fetishizes the beauty of the life of stones and jellyfish, giving up on the notion of progress altogether. Here plants or even bricks tend to be magically equipped with subjectivity, which appears as either equal or superior to human subjectivity. Some 'new materialist' posthumanists like Rosi Braidotti at least recognize that some notion of human betterment or advancement, inevitably attached to the concept of humanity and hu-

manism, needs to be upheld, and thus a commitment to human needs, social justice, and human 'becoming' (see Braidotti 2013, p. 29; Bennett 2016, p. 61). Yet even the more reflective representatives of this branch also propose new forms of integration into some nebulous forms of social or natural organisms mimicking nature, which always smacks of justifications for, and has traces of, direct oppression (Hofstätter 2019, p. 8). In this group of scholars, we also find posthumanist new materialists such as Donna Haraway, who proposes a conception of 'compost society'. She endorses "a fuller consideration of nonhuman agency at a material level" that celebrates the total breakdown of boundaries between subject and organism, human and non-human (see Timeto 2021). Such esoteric engagement with stones and jellyfish as partners for dialogue represents a mystical re-enchantment of the world. As Antonia Hofstätter observes, for Haraway a critical thinker like Adorno has thus "little to offer as his 'resolute secularism'… leaves him unable to 'really listen to the squids, the bacteria, and angry old women of Terra/Gaia.'" (Hofstätter 2019, p. 8, quoting Haraway 2016, p. 73-74, endnote 50) Likewise, Francesca Ferrando advances esoteric posthumanism by going fully against the enlightenment while openly replacing moral reason and reflection with "spirituality". She suggests that "the notion of spirituality dramatically broadens our understanding of the posthuman" and claims that "existence, in a spiritual sense, contemplates a non-separation between the inner and outer worlds." (Ferrando 2016, p. 243) The posthumanist "new materialist option," then, ultimately points not just to esoteric spiritual subjectivities projected even to a reenchanted material world but also to the self-destructive, entirely irrational liberation of the environment from the domination of the human species (Hofstätter 2019, p. 8). Such posthumanist irrationalism, passionately directed against anthropocentric thinking and practice, points to philosophical and political forms of "voluntary human extinction" in a posthuman future, conceived as a future entirely without humans. It is a world in which no moral progress is thinkable and possible.

Critical Theory helps illuminate that both forms of posthumanism, call it the cyborg variant and the jellyfish adoration variant, are two sides of the same coin: they render subjectivity, humanity, or reason altogether superfluous, while indulging in witnessing their downfall. Pretending to be either coolly rational by glorifying the alleged superiority of machines over humans, or happily celebrating life forms devoid of all reason in the first place, posthumanism, then, represents the perfect philosophical drumbeat of our time. It ultimately offers an ideology, rather than a philosophical horizon, for an authoritarian new age of unreason. Hand in hand with other resurging authoritarian-irrationalist ideologies and philosophies of our time in this "regressive moment", posthumanism

signifies a contemporary branch of "the mysterious willingness of the technologically educated masses to fall under the spell of any despotism" (Horkheimer & Adorno 2002, p. xvi).

Posthumanism, in all its variations, seems to prepare humans to unreflectively accept their fate, if not their annihilation. Posthumanism, then, seems to either aim at making humans blindly accept whatever technologically supported digital dictatorship enhanced by artificial intelligence may have in store for them—or posthumanism openly advocates for human self-destruction by dismissing all humanity and enlightenment as "oppressive". In the guise of technically engineered progress, or by advocating the complete negation of the very ideas of progress, reason, and humanity, posthumanism ultimately advances authoritarian regression and submission. They do so in the name of decentering the world by degrading human subjectivity. Contrary to all too common misunderstandings, however, such proposed decentering by denigrating humanity represents the opposite of Critical Theory's critique of the Promethean subject seeking total mastery over internal and external nature. An overdue rethinking and reconfiguration of humanity's relationship to the natural world requires more self-reflected reason and *Eingedenken der Natur im Subjekt* ("remembrance of nature within the subject"), not less; it requires the realization of more humanity in society and a more humane society, not, to the contrary, the sacrifice of humanity as an idea and practice.

Hence, the eclipse of reason does not only find expression in new forms of social and political authoritarianism, the widespread consumption of and damage caused by digital media such as TikTok, or in humankind's practical oblivion towards the climate catastrophe. Unreason also translates into regressive forms of philosophy and ideology such as posthumanism, which openly render the idea of humanity superfluous and affirm the dissolution of human subjectivity and morality altogether—and reject the idea of progress in any meaningful way. By contrast, a critical understanding of progress ultimately points to humanity's still unfulfilled realization and remains deeply indebted to the notion of humanity even in the face of its potential dissolution.

6. Conclusion

I have argued that Adorno's work continues to illuminate problems of progress and its (conceptual, moral, and empirical) antinomies, recognizing both its entanglement in society and its critical qualities, in the contemporary age of unreason. Today, the idea of progress is confronted by global authoritarian regressions, the looming climate catastrophe, the partial dissolution of recognizable boundaries between human agency

and artificial intelligence, as well as omnipresent forms of digital reproduction in which seemingly every human interaction and reaction is identified, measured, counted, objectified, and valorized. Rather than resigning to a negative telos in light of today's hyperreified digital society and the all too realistic threat of human-made disaster, however, a critical and dialectical notion of (both moral and social) progress that takes inspiration from Adorno's writings upholds the possibility of genuine betterment, of averting catastrophe, and of redemption while reflecting the societal trends and conditions leading to potential destruction.

With Adorno I suggest that without the idea of and attachment to humanity yet to be genuinely realized, there can be no progress, and vice versa. A critical understanding of progress thus ultimately points to both democratization and humanity's still unfulfilled realization, its self-conscious reconstitution as a global subject (Rensmann 2016). Progress, which is inevitably also moral progress, remains deeply indebted to the notion of humanity even in the face of its potential dissolution. Furthermore, no philosophical and moral progress seems possible, and no path to avert societal breakdown towards total irrationality, dictatorship, and ultimately human extinction—including the looming climate catastrophe threatening humanity, animals, and the environment as we know it with eradication—seems realizable without the critical resources of human subjectivity. Adorno reminds us that no moral, social, and political progress seems feasible without advancing toward a better, more enlightened, just, and democratic society providing the condition of possibility of humanity's realization.

In addition to soberly reflecting on powerful oppressive and regressive societal trends undermining the very possibility, indeed the very idea of moral progress and freedom, there is the ongoing need to work toward a positive concept view of enlightenment and of progress liberated from the "entanglement in blind domination." (Horkheimer & Adorno 2002, p. xviii). These are the enduring conceptual and normative lessons we can draw from Adorno in preparation of a Critical Theory of progress in and for our time.

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