I. On the Contemporary Relevance of Fritz Mauthner

Päivi Mehtonen, in her illuminating essay, *Nominalistic Mysticism, Philosophy and Literature*, sets out to describe the radical linguistic criticism of Fritz Mauthner, a crucial but, at times, today, somewhat marginalized figure. Mauthner, Mehtonen argues, anticipated key themes of the subsequent development of 20th century philosophy and its core feature of a critique of language—and I think that she shows this beyond any doubt. This, however, does not necessarily render Mauthner an important thinker in his own right. For that to hold true, it is not enough to merely note Mauthner’s influence, neither is it sufficient to focus on the parallels between his critical attempts and similar notions in later writers, whether these latter were directly influenced by Mauthner or not. For Mauthner to matter today—for him to matter, not only as a historical figure, but as a relevant contemporary thinker—it has to be shown why, and in which sense, he matters.

As for the parallels between Mauthner’s critique of language and later developments of 20th century philosophy, these are indeed striking—there are similarities between Mauthner’s notions and Wittgenstein’s early logical atomism, as well as his later philosophy of language games. And the radical conclusions reached later on by Heidegger and Adorno seem anticipated by Mauthner as well, in his “conception of literature and poetry that is connected to the possibility of philosophical language, too […].” Such parallels, however, can do little more than, at best, secure Mauthner a place
in intellectual history; they do not of themselves render him a great or even important thinker.

If Mehtonen’s aim is only to argue in favour of Mauthner’s place as an important figure in intellectual history, she has surely succeeded. But there are hints in her essay, suggesting that there is also something else going on; something pertaining to the eventual political relevance of Mauthner’s thought: “His philosophy inspired contemporary vanguard literature and politics […] Thus his *Sprachkritik* […] seemed to aspire in philosophy to what avant-garde poetics somewhat later would manifest in literature and revolutionary socialism and anarchism in society […]” And it is here we find, I believe, the signs pointing towards a crucial nexus which I would like to comment on. Firstly, then, in the following, I will attempt to retrieve the core of the matter, the tension between the possibilities of progressive politics, on the one hand, and a radical critique of reification or instrumentality in thought and language, on the other. Thereafter, we shall seek to ascertain whether and to what an extent Mauthner may remain relevant in this regard. Rather than concluding decisively, one way or the other, I shall seek to outline one of the possible conditions for his continued relevance.

II. Progressive Politics and the Reification of Language

The radical is often thought of as an uprooting—the old and decayed is destroyed, and replaced with the new. A radical politics, however, cannot merely be a matter of uprooting. It must itself, to avoid becoming an exclusively destructive exercise, be rooted in something. Let us, then, return to the roots of radical politics. The very term “radical,” indeed, stems from the Latin word *radix*, meaning exactly “root.” In what, then, is radical politics rooted? Without attempting a final and all-encompassing definition, we may still observe a pervasive tendency for radical politics to be profoundly rooted in an ideal of *utility*. It thus tends to become—and the expression is still used today by some, as a sign of something desirable and
sought after—“progressive.”

That radical politics should often turn “progressive” is not difficult to perceive: it is progressive because it is allied with progress, understood both as a march forward in time, towards some desirable ideal state of affairs, if only vaguely imagined, or conceived of in the forms of negations, and as the continuous creation, in the present, of a better world, through instrumental means. And both of these seem to presuppose some notion of utility—if we are to create a better world, or at least improve the one we have already got, we need some means of doing so. We need instruments to be used in the pursuit of our aims. Hence, one may easily conclude that as long as our aims are the right ones, the means will be more or less neutral. However, the notion of utility is itself a problematic one, and a powerful polemic against its pervasive influence, even within the deepest layers of the human psyche, within thought and language, arose and spread widely within German-speaking intellectual culture in the generations succeeding Mauthner’s, and became a powerful theme all over the political and ideological spectrum of the Weimar period and beyond.

1 An interesting contemporary example, and a case in point, is Chantal Mouffe’s usage of the term “progressive” in her influential treatise On the Political (London: Routledge, 2005), e.g. “The events of 1989 should have provided the time for a redefinition of the left, now liberated of the weight previously represented by the communist system. There was a real chance for a deepening of the democratic project because traditional political frontiers, having been shattered, could have been redrawn in a more progressive way.” (31)

2 To follow the web of influences in the recurring formulations of a critique of instrumental rationality and the threats of its attendant processes of technological transformation into and out of the Weimar period is to simultaneously move between widely distinct ideological positions and shifting political allegiances. For example, Max Weber and Georg Lukács influenced Carl Schmitt, whose friend, author Ernst Jünger, similarly sought to characterize the contemporary world in terms of the domination of a certain kind of instrumental rationality tied to technology, and whom was read extensively by Martin Heidegger, who was also influenced, of course, by similar critical notions in the works of Edmund Husserl. For a review of the influences on Schmitt, see e.g. John P. McCormick, Carl Schmitt’s Critique of Liberalism: Against Politics as Technology (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). Ernst Jünger’s influence on Heidegger is well known and is apparent from the recently published nineteenth volume of the Gesamtausgabe (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2004). On the left side of the political spectrum, thinkers associated with the Frankfurt School of critical theory pursued similar trains of thought, with partly parallel influences, a type of critique which was carried on by Herbert Marcuse, who exercised a great influence as an inspirational figure for the radical student protests of the 1960’s. Marcuse is also interesting, however,
It is against this very briefly sketched background that I would like to bring up two of the crucial thinkers of the generation following after Mauthner: Martin Heidegger and Theodor W. Adorno. Both of these thinkers, while divided politically and ideologically, came to actualize the problem of an unrestricted instrumental rationality, and in so doing, indicate an underlying dilemma of contemporary political thought.3


3 There are of course significant differences between the two thinkers, but the overlap seems to me much more striking, especially given their opposed political and ideological stances. This overlap, however, is hardly wholly incidental: not only were Heidegger and Adorno, despite their different backgrounds, arguably part of the same wider cultural and intellectual context, they also shared more specific formative influences in a confrontation with Husserl’s phenomenological project as well as being crucially involved in the transformation and reinterpretation of religious themes that was a key element of their respective critical attempts—indeed, what Walter Benjamin said of his own work in *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press), could equally well be applied to them: “My thinking is related to theology as a blotting pad is related to ink. It is saturated with it.” (471) The same thing, however, could arguably be said of contemporary critical reflection as a whole. Indeed, in the end, it is extremely difficult to distinguish clearly between versions of a Judeo-Christian Messianic heritage along ideological lines. Both Adorno (cf. e.g. Arnold Künzli, “Irrationalism of the Left” in Judith Marcus and Zoltán Tar, eds., *Foundations of the Frankfurt School of Social Research* [New Brunswick: Transaction Books, 1984]) and Heidegger (cf. e.g. Herman Philipse, *Heidegger’s Philosophy of Being: a Critical Interpretation* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998]) have been severely criticized on these very grounds. However, such polemics must be careful not to lapse into conceptually dubious arguments, at the very moment that they seek to restore conceptual rigor or defend a historically grounded interpretation of reason; when Philipse, for example, suggests that Heidegger tried, in his later writings, to develop “an authentic German religion” (382) he conveniently forgets that the very notion of “religion” is much too ambiguous for such sweeping statements, making it difficult to judge whether this statement is justified or not, and which its implications would be. Similarly, when Habermas, in *Religion and Rationality: Essays on Reason, God, and Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002) distinguishes (157) between a “dialectical” and a “mystical line of thought” within (primarily German) intellectual history, one is somewhat astounded to find Jakob Böhme within the former, and not only Heidegger but also “perhaps Wittgenstein” within the latter. The notion that one could, in such a manner, distinguish between “mysticism.” on the one hand, and “dialectical thinking.” on the other, must appear compromised at best when applied historically in order to divide thinkers neatly into one category or the other. While it is certainly legitimate to point out the ways in which distinct thinkers in different works interpret and reinterpret a Jewish or Judeo-Christian heritage, one should probably abstain from drawing too sweeping inferences from the fact in terms of set conceptual categories.
While many theorists are concerned, mostly or even exclusively, with how to decide between individual and collective rights and interests—a problem which keeps resurfacing, in the discussion concerning “positive” and “negative” freedom, in debates surrounding “multiculturalism,” in the dilemmas of humanitarian intervention, in the attempts at formulating a “communitarian” critique of liberalism, or of resurrecting a tradition of “republicanism” or “civic virtues,” and so on—Adorno and Heidegger explored a distinct dilemma, inherent to instrumental thinking. One way of expressing this dilemma would be to say that the future *captures* the present, but this is of course not entirely true. Rather, *an image* of the future captures *the moment*. For that is the only way to be secure in the enjoyment of what has yet to come, what remains, in the present, blurred shapes, indistinct shadow figures, which appear to approach the self, slowly; and then only speak—become, at least for a fleeting moment, *real*—in exchange for a sacrifice of blood.

In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and Adorno use the metaphor of Odysseus binding himself to the mast of his ship, in order to listen to the song of the Sirens, while not being forced by it to change his steadfast, disciplined course; and earlier on, in the same work, they suggest that “The distance between subject and object, a presupposition of abstraction, is grounded in the distance from the thing itself which the master achieved through the mastered.” Whether this is historically true or not, its implications, even as a mere analogy, are in themselves quite revolutionary, at least as far as radical thinking is concerned: for what Horkheimer and Adorno are claiming is that the very division into subject and object presupposes a *violent mastery*. And since it concerns, not only the interrelations between human beings—which is most often the subject of the various formulations of human rights or justice within the confines of a universalizing ethics or morality—but also the interrelations between humanity and its surrounding world, in full, it becomes a kind of *ontological mastery*. A mastery, not only of human over human; a mastery which transcends the division into life and death, and those conceptualizations of a universalistic ethics which usually pervade “radical” or “progressive” politics, in one shape or another.

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And Heidegger agrees: the division into subject and object, where both come to be increasingly understood within the parameters of a mathematically conceived, spatiotemporal grid, “banishes man into that kind of revealing which is an ordering. Where this ordering holds sway, it drives out every other possibility of revealing.” This “revealing” even constitutes, in analogy to what was declared by Horkheimer and Adorno above, a kind of “violence” which, Heidegger claims, “makes an assault upon” things. And this is where we enter our dead end, our final cul-de-sac.

III. Cul-de-Sac: Does Mauthner Matter?

The problem is that the two dilemmas alluded to above appear to coexist in a state of tension: when we reduce the world according to set conceptual schemes, in order to secure a future gain—a presupposition of much radical, “progressive” politics—we simultaneously appear to exercise violence over the present, the moment. Of course we may hope for a new language that does not reify and for an experience of wonder in the moment, which is bereft of any connection to the institutional hierarchies that we associate with the churches. But which are the minimal requirements of entering something similar to, as Mehtonen formulates it, “the God-seeking progress of a religious mystic towards the imageless realization of a sort of immanent transcendence”? Set free, what do such experiences tell us, and what do they presuppose? They tell us that any “reified” understanding of the world and of existence as a whole is reductive. But in the latter case, many “mystics” have been clear on one thing: they demand a reigning in of desire. So if radical politics desires to

6 Heidegger, Martin, Basic Writings: from Being and Time (1927) to The Task of Thinking (1964) (London: Routledge, 2002), 150–151.
7 The complexities of defining the concept of “mysticism” cannot be dealt with at length here; however, the attempts at pursuing or inviting intense experiences by means of asceticism may surely be said to be a prominent feature of what we today commonly call “mysticism.” even if the meanings of that concept itself has changed historically. John Cassian, the founder of Western monasticism, certainly does not hide the aim of his Institutes (Mahwah, New Jersey: The Paulist Press, 1997): “When desire has died all the vices wither away.” (102) Cassian is not primarily a theoretical thinker in this respect; rather, he provides us with the whole “language-game” of the ascetic life, telling us how
reduce reification away, it must also be prepared to assume the heaviest burden: to reign in desire.

The dilemma, then, is this: in so far that we merely seek to distribute resources within a given political community, there is no guarantee against the instrumentalization of even the deepest layers of language and thinking—it may go on unchecked and unaddressed. And if we take this critique seriously, the question then arises as to its implications for political thought and praxis: not only do we need to mitigate between distinct individual and collective desires—there is also the question of assuming responsibility for desire as such. This, however, naturally, does not entail a mere repetition of early Christian asceticism; rather, it needs to be conceived of in relation to our respective conceptualizations of the specific questions surrounding the flows of desire pervading the contemporary world.

This, then, to conclude, constitutes perhaps the final frontier of radical politics: the possibilities of a renewed asceticism, situated in a present context, with its perceived problems, meet the claims of a progressivism which, as one of its most eloquent contemporary defenders puts it, aims “to radicalize the liberal democratic regime and to extend the democratic revolution to an increasing number of social relations.”8 In so far as Mauthner can aid us in thinking this dilemma anew, he remains a supremely relevant thinker.

much to eat, work, sleep, and pray. But the point that should be emphasized here is that this is not merely a matter of a negative reducing away, but also of opening ourselves up to that which is otherwise hidden away, or forced away, by the flows of desire: to those intense experiences of an unfathomable, divine presence which Cassian describes so poetically.