

Dal loro esilio americano, negli anni tragici del secondo conflitto mondiale, Max Horkheimer e Theodor W. Adorno riflettono sul nesso tra scienza, tecnica e dominio. Ispirandoti alle loro osservazioni, proponi una tua riflessione, anche critica, sostenuta da argomentazioni filosofiche e riferimenti storici pertinenti.

L'illuminismo, nel senso più ampio di pensiero in continuo progresso, ha perseguito da sempre l'obiettivo di togliere agli uomini la paura e di renderli padroni. Ma la terra interamente illuminata splende all'insegna di trionfale sventura. Il programma dell'illuminismo era di liberare il mondo dalla magia. Esso si proponeva di dissolvere i miti e di rovesciare l'immaginazione con la scienza. [...] Benché alieno dalla matematica, Bacone ha saputo cogliere esattamente l'*animus* della scienza successiva. Il felice connubio, a cui egli pensa, fra l'intelletto umano e la natura delle cose, è di tipo patriarcale: l'intelletto che vince la superstizione deve comandare alla natura disincantata. Il sapere, che è potere, non conosce limiti, né nell'asservimento delle creature, né nella sua docile acquiescenza ai signori del mondo. [...] La tecnica è l'essenza di questo sapere. Esso non tende a concetti e ad immagini, alla felicità della conoscenza, ma al metodo, allo sfruttamento del lavoro altrui, al capitale. [...] Ciò che gli uomini vogliono apprendere dalla natura, è come utilizzarla ai fini del dominio integrale della natura e degli uomini. Non c'è altro che tenga. [...] Lungo l'itinerario verso la nuova scienza gli uomini rinunciano al significato. Essi sostituiscono il concetto con la formula, la causa con la regola e la probabilità.

Il mito trapassa nell'illuminismo e la natura in pura oggettività. Gli uomini pagano l'accrescimento del loro potere con l'estraniamento da ciò su cui lo esercitano. L'illuminismo si rapporta alle cose come il dittatore agli uomini: che conosce in quanto è in grado di manipolarli. Lo scienziato conosce le cose in quanto è in grado di farle. [...] Nella trasformazione l'essenza delle cose si rivela ogni volta come la stessa: come sostrato del dominio.

[Max Horkheimer – Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialettica dell'illuminismo* (1947), trad. di R. Solmi, Einaudi, Torino 1966, pp. 11-13.]

Giulia Franchi

To understand this extract by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno it is undoubtedly appropriate to give some historical background first: the two were part of the so-called “School of Frankfurt”, a group of philosophers active during the time of the Weimar Republic, who would later emigrate to the United States. While this might seem unimportant, it is particularly significant here, as they lived through the horrors of WW2, witnessing both Nazi regime in Germany, but also the brutal effect of the atomic bomb built in the US. Taking these notions into account, it doesn't come as a surprise that this text strongly underlines the disillusionment with human power over everything else, asking if man's rule over nature and man itself is

worth the price of the loss of meaning. The answer to this very legitimate question isn't immediate, but to prove that the authors are quite right in criticizing the thirst for knowledge of the Enlightenment (here meant in a broad sense), we are now going to make a few observations.

First of all, let's make some clarifications on the meaning of the extract. We shall consider the role of epistemic responsibility to begin with. According to philosopher W. K. Clifford it would be wrong to believe anything upon insufficient proof; one should rather withhold judgement until enough evidence to back up our belief is gathered. This statement is interesting to consider because it does imply that, whatever we believe in, we need to have scientific knowledge that we can hold our beliefs for them to be valid. Now, according to this claim, it would be impossible to believe with absolute certainty anything, if it wasn't for epistemic knowledge, therefore underlining the need for a certain amount of control over nature. This isn't an uncommon argument, and at first it might seem in contrast with the thesis presented by Adorno and Horkheimer, as they are after all being critical of our excess of rule over what surrounds us. We should bear in mind, however, that the authors never claim that knowledge isn't necessary at all, but rather the methods and the use of this aforementioned knowledge is crucial in determining whether it is useful, purposeful and moral or not.

To further explore this concept let's examine these two characteristics: method and use of science.

The enlightened method is one that knows no boundaries: the more knowledge is acquired, the more freedom we will have and the less scared man will be. While it's debatable whether we can speak of freedom or not (considering for example a deterministic point of view), that is a topic we won't be exploring right now; we can, however, state with certainty that having power over what surrounds us makes us feel more in control, therefore assuring us. This surely seems like a significant position to consider, as it begs the question: if the more we know the better we feel, why shouldn't we aspire to know everything?

That is a legitimate observation, and the answer lies in the next feature of the Enlightenment we'll elaborate on: the use of science. While, hypothetically speaking, the sole purpose of knowledge gained by man should be the benefit of man, we know that isn't necessarily the case. Science can be undoubtedly be used for good, for example, when we speak of "natural evil" (natural catastrophes, diseases and so on), we can't deny that the more we know the better we can fight these common issues that plague all of humanity. The complexity of the question arises when we take into account the existence of "moral evil", though: as long as knowledge serves to obtain something that is in the interest of the whole human race very few people would disagree to its utility, but when science ends up in the hands of imperfect beings such as we are, the consequences of its application to our lives are disturbingly unpredictable.

As the "masters of suspicion" Marx, Freud and Nietzsche showed, there can always be hidden intentions behind the opinions and actions of people, which is something we should bear

in mind when we think about the use of science.

A pertinent example of what we just explained can be found simply by looking at history: when Galileo conceived his theories about Earth and the Sun he definitely didn't cause any harm, because with his new discoveries because he unveiled a truth that was useful and purposeful for every human being. We can't say the same thing about what happened in WW2, though: the degenerate use of technology caused a display of a behaviour lacking even the slightest bit of humanity. Taking us back to the matter of responsibility, this is exactly what the authors point out. We could say Galileo had the responsibility of sharing his knowledge with the world as well as we can say that

Oppenheimer had the responsibility not to help with the construction of a mass destruction weapon to be used in a war. What technological advancement does in the wrong hands evens out the beneficial progress we gain more often than not, as the risk of dehumanization caused by an excessive craving for power and control is extremely high.

It is isn't far-fetched to assume that this ambitious longing for control stems exactly from the anthropocentric view and faith in science and progress that belong to the Enlightenment and Positivism so criticized d in the text. Those values had inevitably begun to sink already during the second half of the 19th century, which, coincidentally, was also the time when the industrial revolution and capitalism were relevant topics. In particular, it is interesting to bring up the concept of alienation that is talked about in the text: Karl Marx had perfectly explained how working-class people felt distant from the products of their work, in a way that nothing they produced was recognizable to them any longer, because they were trapped in a continuous and oppressive cycle. This is a perfect metaphor to sum-up and reinforce the argument made by Horkheimer and Adorno: we are so eager to understand the mechanisms of nature that we begin seeing reality as a mere combination of formulas, fixed laws, percentages and mechanical components, until what remains isn't reality anymore, but rather a filtered view of the actual meaning and content present nature. Far from leading us the truth that we so desire, this attitude towards the world transforms the pleasure of the quest for knowledge into an obsessive task, which then turns into the sole objective of our research. This unquenchable thirst for knowledge, in the end, comes to paradoxically represent the very wall that separates us from reality and traps us in a cycle of unsatisfactory ambition.

It's also appropriate to point out that this view also defeats the purpose of gaining freedom entirely, as we can show through an ad absurdum argument: if man was able to know everything, to perfectly conceive everything that surrounds him, that would mean he would be able to understand every single physical law, including the ones that rule his brain. If he was able to know all of this, it would be extremely easy to predict everything that we do, but no-one could change it as we're also part of a world that obeys by universal laws that can't be changed. For

humanity, that would represent loss of freedom rather than its conquest, it would mean being trapped in a reality over which we'd have no control.

This is another point in favour of the authors' argument, naturally: how much does knowledge cost? Without any boundary, it seems like it would cost us everything we were hoping to gain.

Finally, a question we should always ask ourselves when we speak of philosophy is: does this matter? Is man's power over nature something significant or is it purposeless to think about this matter at all, in the end? The answer depends on what each one of us decides to think, of course, but we can make a few observations. From an existentialist point of view, looking for answers in an answerless world is completely absurd, as the world wasn't created with a purpose. According to them, the core properties of something or someone aren't predetermined or, better said, existence comes before essence. If one looks at the world with this view, then we can see that an alternative to the infinite quest for absolute knowledge of the Enlightenment, which considers the essence of things to be control over things itself, we should rather look at nature as something that we can assign our own meaning to.

One could argue that the existentialist point of view goes against what Horkheimer and Adorno think: after all, they suggest that this topic has a certain importance, especially considering their experience of WW2, while Existentialism as well as Nihilism implies an ultimate meaninglessness of life, so why should we care about how science is used and how it affects us? The answer is because, even though in the end it might not matter, our life is the only thing we have for sure, and it does matter while we live, because life is the only thing we get to experience.

In conclusion, the authors make a very significant point in this extract, especially in the light of the enormous amount of progress made in the last few decades: knowledge, science and technology are usually perceived as good things, but we shouldn't discount the danger and risks that come with them, because, ultimately, we don't get to pick the advantages of progress only. Because of this, some limits to what we know are necessary, as without them the view of reality would be inevitably replaced by our will to exploit it and control it, leading to an alienation from nature that would have us repeat tragic events such as the ones of the great conflicts of the 20th century. Whether we use science for good or bad should matter, as that affects our life greatly, but we should be able to give our own meaning to our existence without craving the absolute understanding of what surrounds us.