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Mammoth, or: the Dialectic of Human Afterlife

Stefan Niklas

It is a troubling thought: Humanity might be at its best only in hindsight, when its afterlife will be its sole mode of existence. In other words, only when humanity will no longer exist in the 'actual' sense – not as humanity, at least – but as a retroactive projection, will it finally become the fulfillment of its own Concept. Yet, who will project it?

I find this troubling thought expressed in aphorism 74 of *Minima Moralia*, called "Mammoth". Here, Adorno refers to the reported discovery of a well-preserved dinosaur (not a mammoth, which is in fact nowhere mentioned except for the title[1]). This specimen is said to have outlived its kind, being a million years younger than all other known specimens. How the enormous gap in the timeline of that species could be explained – whether it is due to false assumptions about this specific discovery or the earlier ones – is not Adorno's concern. His focus is rather on the public imagination that absorbs such paleontological information alongside "the repulsive humoristic craze for the Loch Ness Monster and the King Kong film" (§ 74), thus treating all these different phenomena and sources on the same imaginative plane.

There are two functions Adorno ascribes to this occupation of the public imagination. The first one goes roughly like this: In familiarizing themselves with the gigantic images, people imaginatively prepare for the terrors of the "monstrous total State", desperately trying "to assimilate to experience what defies all experience" (§ 74). The result is a happily fatalistic anticipation of the end of spontaneity as the heart of human life.

However, Adorno is quick to admit that this cannot be all there is to it. He therefore adds the second function which confronts happy fatalism with its dialectical inversion: miserable hope. "The desire for the presence of the most ancient is a hope that animal creation might survive the wrong that man has done it, if not man himself, and give rise to a better species, one that finally makes a success of life" (§ 74). It is mostly in this quote that I find expressed the speculative thought about the realization of the suppressed better possibilities of humanity – i.e., the better species which is to arise only after humankind has made way for it by suspending itself. For if a dinosaur can live a million years beyond its official extinction, thereby taking its kind into the future, maybe humankind could do the same.

Admittedly, the quote could also be read as saying that hope for the better species means the abolition of all things human. The animals suffering under the human rule over the world would then be surviving the oppression, even outliving their oppressors, and, finally, be left alone in peace. It would be left in the unoppressed paws and flippers of these animals then to make life a success. This interpretation, however, would not only be prone to a fatalistic kind of romanticism, but it would also jump to a constitutively external standpoint that potentially invalidates the central impulse of *Minima Moralia* to offer *immanent* critique of society and humanity at large. Furthermore, it creates the epistemic and logical problem that this vision of life as either successful or failed (rather than indifferent) is after all a projection of the human mind. And it is the human mind which imaginatively passes on this vision to the animals. If making life a success means

to realize the good life, and if the good life means "entering a truly human[e] state", as the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (2002, xiv) suggests, then humans – or humanity – cannot yet be ruled out of the speculation entirely. The question, or paradox, is rather how humanity – i.e., the existing human species – could abolish itself without abolishing the claim of humanity – i.e., the humane state which humans, apparently, are themselves unable to enter. In a way, this is a variation, or rather a farewell to the *Übermensch*-theme where the idea of humans uplifting themselves by way of their own will and strength is given up.

Besides the kind of Hegelianism that explains the problem of simultaneously abolishing and not abolishing something in terms of "sublation", I consider the mammoth-aphorism to express a transposition and complication of the Warburgian motif of *Nachleben* – meaning afterlife as material remembrance – which Adorno himself praises in his *Aesthetic Theory* (1997, 5). Early modern Europeans had to know enough about ancient Greek culture to be able to affirm the respective "pathos formulas" (Warburg) while transforming their meaning (including a great deal of misunderstanding and misrepresentation) in its acts of reappropriation. Analogously, though on the scale not just of historical cultures, but of evolutionary (or even cosmic) species, those who will come after the abolition of humanity will still have to be human enough to identify with the conserved remnants of the human life-form; but at the same time they have to be sufficiently beyond humanity – or in any case beneath it – to make a fresh new start in realizing the hitherto unrealized better possibilities of that human heritage. The unmentioned mammoth of Adorno's aphorism might indeed be an adequate image to describe this: Returning from the ice in one piece, this specific specimen is still dead, but its life-form can be re-enacted (to borrow a concept from R. G. Collingwood) in more than one sense. It can be re-enacted theoretically by using the evidence the specimen provides for understanding and learning from the kind of life the mammoth was leading. Beyond that, the mammoth may even be reconstructed genetically, meaning that the mammoth as an organic life-form could literally be resurrected as a living species. Its appearance in a world in which the mammoth had been extinct, however, would still amount to a real-life re-enactment, a simulation, or a performance of mammoth-life in a non-mammoth-world.

So, what could this mean for the question of humanity outliving itself in the (metaphorical or cryonic) ice? As with all transgressive consequences of thought, it is not only the understanding but mostly the imagination that must do the job here. It does so by calling on the nexus of speculative possibility. What the human mind needs, in other words, is a medium that offers the seemingly impossible standpoint of thinking and complementing humanity in hindsight; a way of imaginatively experiencing the afterlife of humanity in order to make the better possibilities, which remained suppressed, tangible In speculative fiction the imagination has indeed found a powerful medium for doing just that.

Isaac Asimov's *Foundation* series (which, among other things, is about creating a necessarily selective archive as the eponymous foundation for the reconstruction of humanity after its psychohistorically prognosticated downfall); Liu Cixin's *Death's End* (the concluding novel of the *Trisolaris* trilogy which, among other things, radicalizes

the problem of gathering material that can be stored for the future remembrance of humankind, and which also spells out the fate of humans that are no longer human without being sub- or superhuman); Joanna Russ' *We Who Are About To [Die]* (which amplifies the troubling nature of the problem of human afterlife, by having the protagonist, among other things, meditate about how pointless a record of human history would be which nobody will find, or which will be found by creatures that will not be able to understand it at all); or Dietmar Dath's *The Abolition of Species* (which takes the subjunctive standpoint of the advanced animal kingdom after humanity's irrecoverable downfall), and many, many other science-fictional artworks may each be interpreted as contributions to taking the impossible vantage point of anticipated hindsight from which the unrealized – often surprising and never definite – possibilities of the human species can be explored.

The minimal morale of this, I believe, is that through speculative fiction – which, for sure, is an outlet of the culture industry – we can in a way experience humanity in hindsight already. In other words, a vital sense for the better possibilities – which, presumably, will remain unrealized – is itself not only possible but actual, and is in no way compelled to surrender to the dogmas that claim to already know how to tell the better possibilities from the worse. It is only speculation! And luckily so, because speculative fiction – despite speculation's bad name in unimaginative society – does not mistake itself for "the way things truly are", as some non-fictional metaphysics may have done. As fiction it is the playful try-out behavior of rigorously imaginative minds. The thought that humanity might become humane only in hindsight does not appear any less troubling in this way, but at least its conscious fictionalization has more to offer than just fatalism (happy or not), or the stale kind of solace that is attractive only to the fanatics who comfort themselves by holding that life will truly begin only after it has ended.

For as long as the promise of humane humanity remains constitutively unfulfilled, we will have to be content with hope. And as far as Adorno is concerned, this hope is miserable. It will still be enough to defy complete surrender.

Notes

1 Not only does joking about the 'mammoth in the room' force itself onto the mind or the reader of this aphorism, also was "mammoth" in fact the nickname of Max Horkheimer, to whom Adorno, the "hippo", had dedicated the *Minima Moralia*. (Thanks are due to Josef Früchtl for reminding me of Horkheimer's nickname.)

Biography

Stefan Niklas is Assistant Professor in Philosophy at the University of Amsterdam where he is part of the Critical Cultural Theory group. His work focusses on aesthetics and the critical philosophy of culture.

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