The Paralysis in Criticism

1.

It is a curious accident of history that the central works of critical theory entered into English translation at a moment in the late 1960s and early 1970s when it seemed necessary to raise the question of their relation to what already by that point was called the “linguistic turn.” This accident was in many ways not unhappy; much of what soon came to be called “Theory” was invented through the misunderstandings opened up by this encounter. But it also created the conditions of possibility for the consolidation of a tradition of critical theory governed by one of the definitive features of the linguistic turn more generally: a consistent foreclosure of the concept of life. On the terms of critical theory so construed, questions of communicative rationality would rise to prominence while a series of other problems would be set to the side. Under these conditions, it is hardly surprising that the work of Herbert Marcuse—thinker of the repression of instincts, the possibility of non-alienated work, the politicization of biology, and the desire “to live without anxiety”—would fall

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3 This series would contain, at the very least, the discussion of “bare life” in Benjamin’s “Critique of Violence,” the notes on “Man and Beast” in Dialectic of Enlightenment and on “Dying Today” in Negative Dialectics, Adorno’s persistent use of the term “physiognomy,” the fragments on animality in the writings collected under the name Toward a New Manifesto, and even Habermas’s relatively understudied The Future of Human Nature.

1 Herbert Marcuse, Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966), 149-150. It worth noting that the phrase “to live without anxiety,” which is so often attributed to Herbert Marcuse, is in fact Marcuse’s citation of a phrase Adorno uses in his 1952 book on Wagner. This in turn is a clue that one should treat the proper name “Marcuse” less as the object of intellectual history than as a metonym for a more extensive series of problematizations of life internal to works of Critical Theory. The claim under consideration here, in other words, is not that Marcuse is the only member of The Frankfurt School to have thematized life as a problem for thought, but only that
into such neglect within the same academy that canonized the works of his Frankfurt School colleagues. At some point in the future, this selectivity may seem bizarre; today, at the very least, it already has lost its obviousness. The more the linguistic turn gives way to what we might call the “biopolitical turn,” and the more that the crises of our present force questions of livability and unlivability to the very center of politics and thought alike, the more necessary it has become to reread works of critical theory with renewed curiosity about what critical theory proposes to teach us about emancipation in an age in which life and politics have become indistinct.

This essay is a small contribution to that task. Its purpose is to outline the way in which a certain concept of life comes to operate as the problematic of Marcuse’s thought—which is to say, as the unstated question to which Marcuse’s critical theory is itself is the elaborate answer. After raising a series of questions about the enigmatic title of Marcuse’s preface to his 1964 One-Dimensional Man (Sections 2 and 3), it then seeks to clarify those questions by turning to Marcuse’s 1932 book Hegel’s Ontology and the Theory of Historicity, which it reads as part of Marcuse’s dispute with Martin Heidegger (Section 4). The essay concludes by suggesting that Marcuse’s work revolves around an antithesis to life that is neither death nor unlivability, but paralysis—which is to say, stated differently, the inability of life to not-be life—and by outlining how attention to the problem of paralysis guide our rereading of Marcuse today (Sections 5 and 6).

2.

No attentive reader can fail to linger over the title Herbert Marcuse gave to the text that introduces his famous 1964 book One-Dimensional Man. The title in question, “The Paralysis of Criticism,” would seem to suggest that criticism has lost some sort of power of movement. The reader who seeks a clearer understanding of this loss in the text that follows, however, may not be satisfied what she reads. The word “paralysis” does not appear once in Marcuse’s Introduction; nor, in fact, does it appear anywhere in One-Dimensional Man.

the relative silence on Marcuse’s thought is the most acute sign of a general consolidation of The Frankfurt School in which its persistent problematizations of life have remained curiously underthematized or even unthematized altogether. For a valuable corrective, see Critical Theory and Animal Liberation, Ed. John Sanbonmatsu (Rowman & Littlefield, Publishers, Inc.: Lanham, Maryland, 2011).


This absence alone, of course, is hardly dispositive; it does not imply, for example, that Marcuse’s Introduction fails to substantiate the claim its title appears to make. But it does pose a problem for any reader of One-Dimensional Man who wishes to read the text on its own terms. In particular, it poses a problem for any reading of One-Dimensional Man that assumes Marcuse’s text to be self-evidently and obviously a work of criticism, since the title Marcuse gives to his Introduction would seem to propose, to the contrary, the inoperativity of the very form of knowledge his book appears to exemplify. What then might it mean for Marcuse to begin his criticism of his present with what seems to be a claim about the paralysis of criticism itself? And what might a reflection upon this question teach us about the limits and tasks of critical theory today, fully a half century after the initial publication of Marcuse’s text?

In order to take up this question, let’s first consider a preliminary question: what is criticism, such that it could enter into relation with something called “paralysis” to begin with? A “critical theory of contemporary society,” Marcuse writes, implies the possibility of “historical alternatives” to the society it criticizes: it is “a theory which analyzes society in the light of its used and unused or abused categories for improving the human condition.” “Critical theory,” accordingly, is not value-free social science purporting to give a neutral description of social facts. Its critique is grounded on two value judgments. The first of these, that “human life is worth living,” quickly subdivides into a second and separate proposition: that second that human life “can and ought to be made worth living.” Marcuse calls this first value judgment the “a priori of social theory,” and claims that its rejection amounts to the rejection of theory itself. But there’s a non-identity between the two propositions that comprise it. The second of these propositions turns out to be derivative of the first: it presupposes the possibility, desirability, and necessity of actualizing a life that presently is not worth living into a life that is worth living. As such it marks a point of dialectical transition to Marcuse’s second value judgment: that possibilities exist, within established society, for the amelioration of human life (which Marcuse later will call, repeatedly, the “optimal development” of human life, a phrase he takes from Erich Fromm, and ends up deploying against him as well). Grounded in these two judgments, Marcuse argues, critical theory’s aim is to produce abstractions from established society. These abstractions are not of course merely abstract. They have a precise purpose: their aim is to express actualizable possibilities that dwell latently within that society, and that as such are concrete even if they are inexistent. Critical theory so construed passes seamlessly into

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Marcuse, Eros and Civilization, 258.
social practice: the logical conclusion of the concretely actualizable possibilities its abstractions express is the actual transformation of society itself.

The critical theory that confronts Marcuse, however, appears to him to be in a very different situation. Contemporary society, according to Marcuse, is constituted in such a way as to deprive criticism of its “basis.” Marcuse does not say explicitly what this basis is, but the answer seems clear from his second reference to “life.” The signature of contemporary society would seem to be that it has invented “forms of life” that appear to effect reconciliations between longstanding oppositions within society (e.g. between capital and labor) and that, as such, integrate within themselves the judgments of criticism itself. The most central of these integrated judgments would seem to be the judgment that society has not fully actualized the possibilities for the amelioration of human life. A “society without opposition” would appear to be a society that has inoculated itself against criticism by introducing a dose or quotient of criticism into itself as a condition for its own preservation. “Society without opposition” is not then uncritical; it is more precisely self-critical or (better) auto-critical—and its auto-critique would appear to center, above all, on the question of the “ameliorization of human life.”

From this, already, one could derive an initial formulation of the origins and basis for the paralysis of “critical theory.” On this read, “critical theory” will have centered, from the very beginning, on the category of actuality (or Wirklichkeit). Its paralysis, accordingly, will have come about because the movement specific to critical theory—itself abstraction from established society, but in a manner that expresses actual possibilities concretely latent within that society—is now performed by society itself. More precisely: the amelioration of life is performed by the auto-criticism of a society the discourses and institutions of which constantly and repeatedly judge its own unlivability with reference not only to its constant and repeated evaluations of its own “standards of living,” but also to its constant and repeated attempts to respond to its own admitted failures to achieve those standards. Critical theory, on this read, would find itself in paralysis not because its abstractions lack relation to the actualization of concrete social possibilities, but because its abstractions are, in their innermost movement, excessively close to the movements of actuality and the modes of auto-criticism that constitute established society: a society that constantly and repeatedly ameliorates its own unlivability is itself the living demonstration that revolutionary social practice is unnecessary. Criticism that criticizes society on its own terms, that accepts the basic premises of society it criticizes, likewise isn’t criticism at all. On this read, critical theory wouldn’t be afflicted by paralysis because it has lost the power of movement; it would be afflicted by paralysis because its movements have become indistinct from the movements of a social order that is centered around concrete improvements in the quality of life. Critical theory would seem to be in paralysis, in short, because it has been sublated—eliminated, conserved, and raised to a higher level—by the very society it proposes to judge. Having been fully actualized, it now persists merely

"Marcuse, “Paralysis of Criticism,” xliv."
in the mode of inactivity: not unphilosophical, to be sure, but outdated and ineffective, neither questioning the present nor thrown into question by the present. Once politics becomes biopolitics, critical theory becomes uncritical theory.

3.

Any reading of One-Dimensional Man that proposes to ground itself in the Hegelian concept of actuality (Wirklichkeit), however, would need to presuppose the coherence of the very element of Hegelian thought that an earlier Marcuse—beginning at least with his 1941 Reason and Revolution, if not even before that, with his 1930 review of Karl Korsch’s Marxism and Philosophy—would seem to have wanted, precisely, to rethink: the maxim that what’s rational is actual, and what’s actual is rational. It wouldn’t then yet be a reading of “Paralysis of Criticism” on its own terms.

Critical theory in Marcuse’s sense, after all, cannot be confused with philosophy—especially the Hegelian philosophy that critical theory proposes at once to negate and to sustain. This distinction, which Marcuse formulates in Reason and Revolution, is also apparent in “Paralysis of Criticism.” Just as critical theory unrelated to actuality increasingly reverts to “philosophy,” Marcuse argues in his 1964 text, so too any “political economy” that goes unjudged by criticism increasingly creates social conditions that are unlivable. The result would seem to be an actuality that is, on its own terms, progressively irrational. This is a possibility that would be unthinkable for Hegel, whose philosophy of history may allow for the irrationality of existence but does not and cannot allow for the irrationality of actuality itself. Marcuse’s critique of irrationality, by contrast, would seem to be capable of encompassing the very movement of actuality itself: for Marcuse, even, especially, the reason that realizes itself in history can come to be irrational.

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“Marcuse, “Paralysis of Criticism,” xlvi.


“See the distinction between “negative thinking” and “philosophy” in Marcuse, “Preface,” Reason and Revolution, viii-ix. See also Marcuse, One-Dimensional
On the basis of what concept of historicity, then, does Marcuse declare contemporary society irrational? His two value judgments provide a clue. Established society’s plan for the actualization of the potentiality of human life (the welfare state) is equally and manifestly also, Marcuse argues, a plan for the elimination of human life (the warfare state). The state—an apparatus designed for the purpose of protecting and developing human life—now itself poses a danger to the very populations it proposes to safeguard. The irrationality of this arrangement, in other words is that it negates the very human life it also claims to affirm, because it rationalizes the means of preserving human life to the point of endangering human life, to the point where the means for the protection of human life becomes inseparable from the means for the destruction of human life. And yet human life itself, which is increasingly unlivable in light of new developments in military technology (e.g., the atomic weapon), nevertheless also, because of the same technological advances that intensify the destructive capacities of contemporary society, finds its situation ameliorated by this society’s cultivation of advances in the standard of living. Contemporary society therefore presents, as a concrete fact, the possibility of ameliorated a life that presently is not worth living into a life that becomes worth living, even as the same society that effects this amelioration also develops unprecedented means for the destruction of the very life the amelioration of which remains its central justification.

The integration of these opposites—welfare and warfare, improvement and destruction, protection and danger—certainly does neutralize the dialectical categories that critical theory hitherto had mobilized. In Marcuse’s view, for example, it used to be the case that the category of “society” stood opposed to the category of “politics” (understood as the State). In this usage, “society” was a category that drew its energy from the actualization of concrete and determinate contradictions: for an earlier generation of criticism, the notion of a “society without opposition” would have been a contradiction in terms. The emergence of the welfare state, however, would seem to have canceled not only any possibility of oppositions internal to society but also the possibility of any opposition between society and politics. If the welfare state is equally a “social state,” it’s not then because it’s apolitical, but because it introduces a depoliticized politics, a politics centered not on oppositions but only on increases in the living standards of populations—in short, a biopolitics. Stripped of its oppositionality, in other words, the category of “society” comes to lack any criticality whatsoever. Under these conditions, “society” no longer expressed a value judgment; it lapses into a merely descriptive term, a neutral category to guide the positivist research of value-free social science.

Man, 227 (on the relation between “critical thought” and “established rationality”).

Marcuse, “Paralysis of Criticism,” xlvi. This is a claim that derives from Marcuse’s early analysis of National Socialism. See Herbert Marcuse, “Struggle against Liberalism in Totalitarianism,” in Negations, 36.
And on what basis, in Marcuse’s view, was it possible for opposition to oppose in the first place? In the name of what did opposition proceed when it truly was opposition—before it dissolved into integration and neutralization? Here too Marcuse’s two value judgments serve as a reliable guide. On the one hand, critical theory must derive energy from some concept of human life if it’s to remain what it is. If critical theory is to theorize alternatives to established society, critical theory must presuppose the double value judgment that (a) human life is worth living and that (b) human life that is not presently worth living, or not yet worth living, must be ameliorated so that it becomes worth living. And yet, on the other hand, under conditions of the warfare-welfare state, critical theory no longer can draw energy from the concept of life: the concrete and current unlivability of life (threatened not only by unprecedented forces of destruction but also, for some populations more than others, immiseration) is neutralized in advance as a premise for critical theory by means of the auto-criticism that concede[s] the unlivability of life only insofar as that unlivability then can be corrected by improvements in the standard of living.

The dialectic here is clear. Contemporary society’s integration of Marcuse’s second self-described value judgment (that life can and ought to be made worth living) negates the criticality of his first value judgment (that human life is worth living). The result is a society in which what once was the sharpest edge of criticism (the notion that even, especially, the most unlivable life remains worthy of life, remains worthy of improvement and amelioration) is blunted not because it has been excluded but, to the contrary, because it has been included—indeed because it has been elevated to the inner principle of the welfare state itself. Under conditions where the welfare-warfare state has reduced politics to the work of securing increases in standards of living, “life” no longer can serve as the ground for critical theory. “Life” instead comes to function as the perpetually deferred telos of the very same welfare-warfare state that increasingly acquires the power to deny a livable human life. A criticism grounded in life would not then be directly uncritical; it would not, in other words, be intrinsically or essentially uncritical. But it would be vulnerable to the possibility of becoming uncritical under certain historical conditions, and those conditions are met when critical theory aims its abstract criticisms of unlivability at a state that in turn governs by auto-criticisms regarding its own concrete living standards. In short: if under such conditions critical theory should find itself “paralyzed,” this is because contemporary society is structured as the sublation—the cancellation but also the elevation—not only of critical theory but also, and more radically, of the concept that hitherto had grounded critical theory’s value judgments of society. Even if the precise domain and operation of that concept are not clear, its general profile is clear: some concept of life—prior to actualization, as that which actualization actualizes whenever it actualizes anything at all—seems to serve as the pivotal category for Marcuse’s analysis of the paralysis of criticism, even as it itself remains inexplicit and unthematized in that analysis, manifesting itself only in the mode of ungrounded assertions, axiomatic declarations, and “value judgments.”

4.
This thesis gains traction once we reread “Paralysis of Criticism” now within the horizon formed by Marcuse’s 1932 book Hegel’s Ontology and the Theory of Historicity. Sometimes understood as a juvenile work that precedes Marcuse’s contact with the Frankfurt School, and that as such is discontinuous from Marcuse’s great works of critical theory in the 1950s and 1960s,\(^7\) Marcuse’s 1932 book in fact works out ontologically what Marcuse in 1964 would assert only deontologically, as the value judgment that ground the same critical theory that he would then declare to be in paralysis. More precisely: Hegel’s Ontology outlines a series of claims with respect to which Marcuse’s “value judgments” reveal themselves to be not merely ungrounded assertions or axiomatic declarations, but logical corollaries of a very specific concept of life—one that, as it happens, differs subtly but decisively from the conceptual couplet, \(\text{zōē}\) and \(\text{bios}\), that has become so central to the biopolitical turn that is underway today.

At its most general, Hegel’s Ontology is an attempt to rethink Hegel’s concept of Spirit from within the horizon of Dilthey’s \(\text{Lebensphilosophie}\).\(^8\) On Marcuse’s reading, Dilthey’s reading of Hegel left unposed a concept of life that, once fully elaborated, has as little to do with the pure self-consciousness that is often associated with Hegel’s name as it does with the irrational vitalism or vague pantheism that sometimes is attributed to Dilthey. To the contrary, life in Dilthey’s reading of Hegel implies an ontology that, in turn, is the common nexus for the natural sciences and human sciences alike, and as such is the condition of possibility for any rationalism whatsoever, up to and including Hegelian self-consciousness.\(^9\) The hallmark of life, on Marcuse’s reading, is its \(\text{Bewegtheit}\), which Seyla Benhabib translates as “motility.” As distinct from movement conceived merely in terms of efficient causality (where a being moves only if it is caused to move), motility is self-movement. More to the point, it is the movement by which beings divide themselves from themselves and, in this way, come to overcome their own self-division.\(^9\) Because this self-movement is characteristic of Being in general, any being that is alive—regardless of whether that life manifests itself in the mode of physical (natural) life or in the mode of

\(^7\) In his entry on Marcuse in Roberto Esposito and Carlo Galli’s Enciclopedia del pensiero politico, for example, Edoardo Greblo doesn’t even mention Hegel’s Ontology.

\(^8\) It is worth noting that Adorno’s 1931 inaugural lecture at Frankfurt, “The Actuality of Philosophy,” sought to distinguish critical theory from Lebensphilosophie, although Adorno’s target was not Dilthey but Simmel. See Theodor Adorno, “The Actuality of Philosophy,” \(\text{Telos}\) 31 (March 20, 1977), 121.

\(^9\) Marcuse, Hegel’s Ontology, 27, 322.

\(^9\) Marcuse, Hegel’s Ontology, 47.
historical (human) life—will have been determined by the ontology of motility so construed.

This includes even, especially, thought itself—or, in Aristotelian terms, noesis and noesos—which Marcuse will come to call “a special mode of Being of Life itself.” In a passage that appears at a crucial threshold in his text, Marcuse asks the reader should understand the early Hegel’s distinction between zoē (which he translates as “Animated Life”) and phōs (which he translates as “conceptual Life”).

Life, as the unity which underlies all the changing determinations in which it can exist, is at once subject; it is also predicate, for it exists only in a determinate form or is itself only determinacy. At the same time it is this “relation” between subject and predicate and this conceptualization (Auffassen) of itself as the unity of subject and predicate. If we were to state this in terms of the terminology of the Logic, we would say that Life exists essentially as the originary division of judgment (Ur-teil). When Hegel distinguishes “life” (zoē) and “conceptual life” (phōs), this does not mean two different “forms” of Life and the like. Rather, both are ontological forms of the same Life: zoē is Life as it is immediately, prior to the conceptualization of itself, prior to self-determination. In grasping itself (im Auf-fassen), this Life grips itself (fasst sich); it comprehends (erfasst) and grasps (ergreift, begreift) itself as a self existing through the “division” and the “juxtaposition” of its various determinations.

— Marcuse, Hegel’s Ontology, 213-8.

— Marcuse, Hegel’s Ontology, 43.

— Marcuse, Hegel’s Ontology, 215.

Marcuse’s text is divided into two sections. The first is a reading of Hegel’s Logic that works out the sense in which “Being as Motility” is a central category for the mature (systematic) Hegel. The second returns to Hegel’s earliest works to trace the genesis of “Being as Motility” to Hegel’s early reflections on “Life as Motility.” One of the red threads binding together these two parts of Marcuse’s text is his attention to the early Hegel’s claim that “the task is to think Pure Life,” which in the later Hegel morphs into a set of claims about the transcendental unity of self-consciousness (compare Hegel’s Ontology, 11 and 208-211). The passage on which we now focus appears in the first chapter of the second section of Hegel’s Ontology, where Marcuse begins to work through the earliest traces of “Life as Motility” in Hegel’s thought. The passage in question allows Marcuse to introduce his sustained examination of Hegel’s claims about “Pure Life.” It is not then one among many passages in Hegel’s Ontology; it is the first passage, in Marcuse’s recuperation of the concept of Life in Hegelian thought, in which Marcuse can show the early Hegel beginning to confuse consciousness and Being (206), and as such beginning to become the mature Hegel.
“Grasped” in this fashion Life exists as phos, as light which allows beings to be seen in their truth.\textsuperscript{25}

For unreflective thought, Marcuse proceeds to argue, phos and zoe remain grasped only in their finitude. In this case, phos and zoe remain opposites, divided from one another, with the result that light is one thing and life another. On the terms of this division, the task of judgment is to allow thought to become self-conscious of its attempt to achieve adequatio (“correspondence” or “agreement”) between subject and object.\textsuperscript{2} This framing of this task of thought comes into question, however, once we ask how subject and object (or, differently, thought and being) enter into non-correspondence or non-agreement in the first place.\textsuperscript{2} The answer to this question becomes clear once we think the opposition between phos and zoe within the horizon of life as motility—and, moreover, once thought itself is, as Marcuse’s prose here playfully shows, understood as the action of grasping or gripping. Within this horizon, the very act of grasping the relation between light and life as a division itself comes to light as a manifestation of Being as Life. What Hegel later will call “consciousness” (a concept which Marcuse reads as an iteration, now within the secular horizon of phenomenology, of Hegel’s earlier religious discussion of phos\textsuperscript{2}) is not then, on Marcuse’s read, one among many modes of Life. It is, to the contrary, the mode in and through which Life comprehends the truth of its infinity—the infinity, to be clear, of its self-moving self-divisions—and, in so grasping itself, finally becomes what it already incipiently was in the first place.

In accordance with the more general structure of Marcuse’s unusual reading of Hegel, which breaks with academic conventions by prioritizing Hegel’s early works over Hegel’s late works as its point of departure, Marcuse’s reflections on phos focus on a passage in Hegel’s 1798-9 “Spirit of Christianity and Its Fate.”\textsuperscript{2} Although relatively obscure, and not often considered central to

\textsuperscript{25} Marcuse, Hegel’s Ontology, 205, emphasis in original.

\textsuperscript{2} Compare Marcuse, Hegel’s Ontology, 129.

\textsuperscript{2} Compare Marcuse, Hegel’s Ontology, 138.

\textsuperscript{2} Marcuse, Hegel’s Ontology, 206. Given the limited task of this essay, I here set aside the otherwise pressing question about what it would mean to think the drift from phos to self-consciousness in Hegel not in Marcusean terms, where the distinction between early and late Hegel is central, but within the horizon of secularization, under the more general condition of the “twilight of the idols.”

\textsuperscript{2} G.W.F. Hegel, Early Theological Writings, Trans. T.M. Knox (Chicago, Univ. of Chicago Press, 1948), 256-9.
Hegel’s oeuvre, Marcuse nevertheless calls this passage “decisive.” This unorthodox interpretive move becomes clearer once we consider it in light of Marcuse’s relation with his teacher Martin Heidegger, and in particular Heidegger’s 1931 lectures on Book VII of Plato’s Republic. There Heidegger not only took up the question of light (phos) in Plato’s parable of the cave, thus providing the unstated coordinates within which the young Marcuse could, in turn, come to attribute such importance to Hegel’s otherwise relatively unimportant commentary on the Gospel of John; he also showed how the question of light structures the relation between philosophy and politics, as well as the relation of both to a term that would become central to the thought of the mature Marcuse: liberation.

Heidegger’s aim in his 1931 lectures was to show, through a reading of the allegory of the cave in Plato’s Republic, how truth as unhiddennes (aletheia) transitions into truth as correctness (orthotes), thus inaugurating the event of Western metaphysics. Heidegger opened his course by naming four stages in the allegory of the cave: (1) the situation of men in the underground cave; (2) the initial, unsuccessful liberation of a prisoner from the underground cave; (3) the genuine liberation of man in the primordial light; and (4) the freed prisoner’s return to the cave. Starting with his commentary on the allegory’s second stage, Heidegger’s reading begins to give special attention to the problem of light (phos). If the initial liberation of a prisoner is a failure, Heidegger argues, it is because the prisoner’s merely physical unshackling does not, in fact, prepare him to exit the cave. To the contrary, the prisoner’s initial exposure to the sunlight outside of the cave only serves to dazzle him, causing him pain and producing in him a desire to retreat back to the artificial light inside the cave. Genuine liberation begins only when the unshackled prisoner is violently forced up along the rugged path that leads from the cave to its exterior. Even after being compelled to leave the cave, however, the freed prisoner still does not attain genuine liberation: once outside the cave, he remains blinded by the sunlight (or, in less allegorical terms, he continues to prefer the forms and practice of self-evidence over the form of non-sensory seeing enabled by the idea of the Good). Genuine liberation is only attained when the prisoner finds the persistence and courage to bind himself permanently to the sunlight, understanding sunlight as

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10 Marcuse, Hegel’s Ontology, 206. (“This is the decisive sentence by means of which the world is absorbed into the Being of Life, and through which the knowledge of this unity breaks open into the midst of Life’s historicity.”)


the enabling condition for the form of non-sensory seeing Plato calls “thought” (nous)."

Light in this allegory, Heidegger cautions, must not be taken as self-evident. At once the enabling condition for a certain sort of sight and a blinding force that is capable of permanently destroying that same sight, light is, on its own terms, intangible—almost nothing, very nearly a void. The essence of light is brightness, but the essence of brightness is transparency, and transparency in turn is characterized by a “giving-way” or “enabling.” Understood in primordial terms, therefore, light is that which allows or lets beings be, which grants being and enables unhiddenness. Precisely because it is almost nothing, in other words, light is also itself essentially freeing: if freedom is to be more than just a mere negation of imprisonment (the insufficient unshackling of the second stage), freedom therefore will consist of a bond to light as light. If genuine liberation can be attained only by binding oneself permanently to light (or, again in less allegorical terms, by becoming a philosopher who is committed to live with the idea), in other words, it is because light itself is, on its own terms, already essentially freeing.

Given that genuine freedom emerges in the third stage of the allegory, it’s surprising that Heidegger should find in the allegory of the cave a fourth and final stage: the return of the freed prisoner to the cave. In this stage, the freed prisoner understands that his attempt to violently liberate those who remain prisoners will, in turn, expose him to almost certain death at the hands of those very prisoners. For Heidegger, who regards this stage of the allegory to be the most difficult to interpret, the return of the freed prisoner to the cave is decisive: it is the fulfillment of the allegory of the cave as such, and no interpretation that neglects its implied teaching about untruth will be able to understand the allegory of the cave at all. For Heidegger, the freed prisoner’s return reveals the necessity of the antagonistic co-belonging between truth as unhiddenness and untruth as concealment (which in turn explains why the one who beholds truth must expose himself to those who dwell in untruth). By extension, however, it also reveals the necessity of the antagonistic relation between the philosopher and the polity (and, in the concrete, Socrates’s execution by Athens). As Heidegger reads Plato, those who philosophize must be the “authentic guardians of human association in the unity of the polis,” even and especially if that duty

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54 Heidegger, The Essence of Truth, 36-7, 69.
55 Heidegger, The Essence of Truth, 70, 79.
56 Heidegger, The Essence of Truth, 92.
57 Heidegger, The Essence of Truth, 61, 65-6, 80.
58 Heidegger, The Essence of Truth, 73.
should require the guardians to have recourse to *bia*—force, violence—to compel non-philosophical troglodytes to see the light."

Especially when one recalls that, in *Being and Time*, Heidegger had located *phos* at the root of phenomenology itself, it’s hard to imagine a more volatile and overdetermined concept for Heidegger to have emphasized in 1931. *Phos*, on the terms of Heidegger’s reading on Plato’s allegory of the cave, is intrinsically political: as that which touches every stage of the philosopher’s emergence from and return to the cave, light governs the innermost essence of philosophy’s relation to the polity. The same cannot be said, however, for Marcuse’s discussion of *phos* in *Hegel’s Ontology*. Marcuse’s Hegel, like Heidegger’s Plato, certainly does understand light to reveal the Being of beings. But as distinct from Heidegger, Marcuse’s commentary on Hegel remains conspicuously silent on any relation light might have to politics, even though his writings before and after *Hegel’s Ontology* were closely engaged with problems internal to the Marxist tradition. On the terms of Heidegger’s reading of the allegory of the cave, in fact, Marcuse’s book would seem to present a Hegel whose emphasis on Life falters at philosophy’s most crucial stage: by failing to say how *phos* structures the transition from philosophy to politics, Marcuse would seem to suppose the possibility of a philosopher who could dwell in the light of the truth without also letting that light govern his relation to the polity in which he dwells. Understood on the terms of Heidegger’s reading of Plato, therefore, *Hegel’s Ontology* not only would be an apolitical text; it also would be an unphilosophical text: its abstention from the political would mark its failure to

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*It should be noted that this is a manifestly pedagogical use of force. The philosopher relates to the non-philosopher by “teaching him a lesson,” in the most ambivalent possible sense of that idiomatic phrase. *Paidia*, for the Heidegger of 1931—as for the later Marcuse, although in a very different way—has nothing to do with the acquisition of techniques or skills: it is a question of the liberation of the very being of the human* (83).


* In both cases, at issue is what it means to think the truth of beings themselves, where for Heidegger’s Greeks this designates “the totality of nature: the human world and the work of God” and for Marcuse’s Hegel it designates the Being of Life in its manifold self-divisions, most especially nature as it is cognized by human life in divine light. See *Hegel’s Ontology*, 205-8; Heidegger, *The Essence of Truth*, 9.

see that the untruth of politics is an inescapable and essential part of philosophic truth."

"Tell me what you think of Plato," argues Alain Badiou, "and I will tell you who you are." The interpretation of Plato Heidegger developed in his 1931-2 lectures, which repeatedly emphasized the need for bia in the philosopher’s relation to the non-philosophical multitude, prepared the conditions for Heidegger to perceive philosophical substance in Hitler’s seizure of power the following year. And the young Marcuse—what might he have thought of Heidegger’s Plato? What if, straining our ear toward the vacuum where Marcuse does not speak to this problem, we were to reconstruct the searching questions that Heidegger’s turn to Nazism could not but have posed for the author of Hegel’s Ontology? What unstated question is it that will have joined Marcuse to Heidegger precisely in his division from Heidegger? In Marcuse’s pronounced silence on politics in Hegel’s Ontology, one can almost hear that question stirring. A question that doubles as a criticism: what can phenomenology possibly teach us about politics, if the philosophic and political liberation occasioned by the phos at phenomenology’s core is capable of authorizing philosophy to embrace unpolitical force?

If Marcuse’s text were governed by some iteration of this question, it certainly could not have been answered on the terms of Heidegger’s phenomenology, which to the contrary would have exemplified the problem itself. Marcuse’s surprising interpretation of phos in Hegel, by contrast, would have constituted the beginnings of an answer. By going out of his way to reconstruct a reading of the genesis of Hegelian thought beginning with a phos that is immanent to Life without also being reducible to Life, Marcuse would have put himself in a position to respond to the question posed by Heidegger’s lectures, but with recourse to a declension of phenomenology that already would have refused what Heidegger had decided about the way that phos structures the relation between politics and philosophy. On this read, in other words, it would be off the mark to conclude from Marcuse’s silence on politics in Hegel’s Ontology that Hegel’s Ontology is therefore, for this reason alone, an apolitical text. Quite the opposite: the politics of Marcuse’s text would consist in its philosophic refusal to speak of the relation between philosophy and politics in a present where philosophy’s concept of politics—and, in particular, its concept of


“Alain Badiou, Deleuze: The Clamor of Being, Trans. Louise Burchell (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2000), 100.

a Johannes Fritsche, “With Plato into the Kairos before the Kehre: On Heidegger’s Difference Interpretations of Heidegger,” in Heidegger and Plato: Toward Dialogue, Ed. Catalin Partenie & Tom Rockmore (Northwestern University Press, 2006), 160. Not without reason, therefore, Fritsche argues that Heidegger’s lectures on the allegory of the cave may be understood to mark “a watershed in Heidegger’s understanding of Plato as well as his own self-understanding” (141).
liberation in and through the light of truth—had prepared the way for an anti-
philosophical anti-politics, a doctrine of truth grounded in bia. Marcuse, in other
words, would appear to see Heidegger’s discussion of politics in a light that
diffs from Heidegger’s. “Life as Motility,” from this perspective, is less a
juvenile thought that Marcuse will outgrow than an aporia to be interpreted
immanently to Marcuse’s thought. A photographic negative of a concept of
liberatory politics the young Marcuse had yet to fully develop, it also itself
would be the mute residue of the first conflict Marcuse will have conducted in
the name of that politics.

5.

To reread Marcuse’s “Paralysis of Criticism” with reference to Hegel’s
Ontology, is to read Marcuse in the same way that Marcuse himself read Hegel:
in each case, the problem is how to treat a thinker’s early works as the
hermeneutic key for deciphering the swerves and silences of later works. At the
same time, it allows us to arrive at a clearer response to the question of what it
means for criticism to begin with paralysis.

The ontological question that dominated the early years of the twentieth
century, as Alain Badiou has argued, was the question of life: “What is the true
life—what is it to truly live—with a life adequate to the organic intensity of
living?” Marcuse answers this question in an unexpected way. If critical theory is
obliged to begin with paralysis, this is because the life expressed in the concepts
of critical theory—a life that is, ontologically, motility—is itself in paralysis. But
the conditions under which life finds itself in paralysis are not exclusively or
even primarily ontological. They are also, and above all, historical. The motile life
theorized by the early Marcuse is life that passes beyond itself, that lacks itself,
that is in excess of itself; it is life that can only be itself under historico-physico
conditions where it can be other than itself. Under historical conditions where
life cannot be other than itself, by contrast, it is not itself.

On these terms, paralysis would have a very specific meaning: it would be
life’s inability to initiate its own self-differentiation—or, in short the inability of
life to not-be life. Life’s excessive identity with itself, its incapacity for
nonidentity, its coming-to-be as itself and only as itself, never to be other than
itself or to find itself outside of itself—never, in a word, to negate itself—this
“indifference” of life then would be the most powerful effect, within the
ontological horizon of life as motility, of advanced industrial society (determined
in the concrete, again, as a society that construes life as the object of
administration; a political economy that itself produces needs and desires; and as
a state that develops nuclear weaponry even as measures itself with reference to
increased living standards).

This claim has as an important implication for the biopolitical turn. In
many cases, the biopolitical turn has not so much problematized the relation of
life and politics, tarrying with their disjunction, as inflate and expand the

concepts of “life” and especially “bios,” applying them so widely and in so many domains that the concepts largely have ceased to have any meaning at all." So far is it from being the case that the concept of life deployed by the biopolitical turn operates in a critical mode that, to the contrary, it would be better to say that it has assumed forms that, at least understood from within the horizons of Marcusean critical theory, are manifestly uncritical. Instead of posing the excessive identity of life with itself—the inability of life to not-be life—as the very mark of the administered life, the tendency within the biopolitical turn is to presuppose exactly this excessive identity (most notably in the form of the symptomatically reflexive construction “life itself”) as the prior condition for a series of critiques of political institutions and practices that produce conditions of biological death or unlivability, as though it were obvious that these conditions were the only, or even just the most exemplary, forms of life’s determinate negation.

Hegel’s Ontology, it is worth noting, is the first time that Marcuse would use the phrase “one-dimensional."" Motility, as Marcuse construed it in 1932, is nothing other than the capacity of life to differ from its own one-dimensionality, and in so doing to pass beyond its mere immediate being, to externalize itself and explicate itself in and through what Marcuse, in that same text, then calls its “two-dimensionality.” "Through this two dimensionality this movement [what he earlier had called the ‘Motility of Essence’] comes to constitute the essential ground and unity of beings.” For Marcuse, obviously, motility means much more than simple physical movement in empirically determined time and space. Motility extends to include the movement by which historicity manifests itself in a thought that thence, by virtue of its grasp of this historicity, becomes alive to its self-divisions both from its historicity and from the world. As such, the paralysis of critical theory will extend to include the paralysis of a life that no longer is capable of actualizing itself through historicity, and a historicity that no longer is capable of actualizing itself in thought. The paralysis in one-dimensional life is not then unactualized potential. It is unactualizable potential, pure impotence, impotence purged of any nonidentity with itself. And this—more than biological death—is the true antithesis of life."

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c Marcuse, Hegel’s Ontology, 71.

d Marcuse, Hegel’s Ontology, 71, emphasis in original.

e The need to read “paralysis” within a horizon formed by the problematic of “life” is confirmed in Marcuse’s use of the word “paralysis” in his “Critique of Neo-Freudian Revisionism.” There Marcuse seizes upon Karen Horney’s use of
One-dimensionality, accordingly, is not a primarily political term: it is not, in other words, primarily a nickname for a society without opposition, or even a flattened-out society with no distinction between the given and the possible. It is primarily a term designating the limit of the political where life and history touch, and where the mark of life’s exteriority to history consists precisely in its nonidentity with itself. That life as motility is always already less than itself—that it is, by virtue of its essence, always already at risk of being grasped, administered, and thereby confined to one-dimensionality—certainly does mean that Marcuse’s thought is a reflection on damaged life, where “damaged life” is the object that is thought whenever critical theory thinks the politicization of life. More important, however, is the sense in which Marcuse’s discourse necessarily also will have been a reflection from damaged life, where “damaged life” designates the subject who thinks whenever critical theory thinks, the life of a mind for which the thought of mind itself—where “mind” registers in its most irreducible sense, as a phos that enables gripping and grasping—has become impossible.«

A reflection on damaged life that issues from a life that is itself damaged—these phenomenologico-political coordinates, in turn, provide a different way to understand what it means for Marcuse’s text to begin with paralysis. His introduction of the distinction between being and appearance—or, more to the point, the introduction of the distinction between zoë and phos, where the light of phos is precisely also that wherein the appearance of beings manifests itself—suggests that the very form of Marcuse’s text hosts and perhaps even incites the very motility that is lacked by the administered life his text describes in its content. Stated more simply: the critical theory that begins by naming its own paralysis is, by virtue of that naming, already no longer paralyzed. But if this is so, it is not, however, because reflection introduces self-

the word to describe the “death instincts” in New Ways in Psychoanalysis. “The revisionist argument,” Marcuse writes, “minimizes the degree to which, in Freudian theory, impulses are modifiable, subject to the ‘vicissitudes’ of history. The death instinct and its derivatives are no exception. We have suggested that the energy of the death instinct does not necessarily ‘paralyze’ the efforts to obtain a ‘better future’; on the contrary, such efforts are paralyzed by the systematic constraints which civilization places on the life instincts, and by their consequent inability to ‘bind’ aggression effectively” (Marcuse, Eros and Civilization, 272). Here, more explicitly than in the Introduction to One-Dimensional Man, paralysis is paralysis of life. A symptomatic displacement: whereas in 1955 Marcuse would think paralysis in relation to life, in 1964 he would think it in relation to criticism. It’s as if criticism were close enough to life, were similar enough to life, that like life itself, or perhaps as a mode of life itself, it too, it especially, could suffer paralysis.

consciousness into unself-consciousness. It is because reflection itself just is the second dimension of life that sunder one-dimensional life from its one-dimensionality.

If the form of Marcuse’s text, in other words, is itself motility, then the content of that form is life. But a very specific form-of-life: a life in which life grasps its excessive identity with itself, and in grasping this excessive identity immediately also differs from itself, seeing itself in a light that itself breaks life’s paralyzing identity with itself, and thence too begins to liberate life from its inability to not-be itself. Animated life (zoe) here enters into relation with itself according to a technique—grasping—that already partakes of the form of the hand, that already is both technical and human, that already is no longer mere zoe. The claims one finds in Marcuse’s text cannot then be read on purely, or even primarily, epistemological terms (to be evaluated with reference to the correctness or incorrectness of its representation of life). Read on its own terms, the text is itself the trace of an ontological self-relation, this becoming-phos of zoe. Even, especially, the very phrase “concept of life” itself therefore cannot be read as though it were obviously epistemological in character. Properly understood, a critical theoretical concept can neither be correct nor incorrect; it can only be manifestation of life—or better, it implies a manifestation of light that life requires in order to be life, that relates to animated life (zoe) according to a form that is not animated life (zoe) and that, on the terms of animated life, is not even alive (it is phos, light). This self-relation is not exactly a phenomenology of Spirit; nor does it mark the homecoming of self-consciousness to some prior whole. It is the illumination of history from an unnatural standpoint (call it damaged life) that allows for historicity itself to be comprehended in the mode of defect and lack, and that as such presupposes the opacity of the very category of history, the very experience of history, as a condition for its illumination.

Undialectical historians of political thought, more concerned with imputing proper names to thoughts than with thinking thought itself, have tended to separate out Marcuse’s early “Heideggerian” work from his later “Hegelian” and “Marxist” work, with the latter being the only really relevant work for critical theory. To reread Marcuse’s Introduction within the horizon formed by Hegel’s Ontology, however, is to call into question not only this intellectual historical periodization, but also the portrait of critical theory it enables. The decisive question posed by Marcuse’s “Paralysis of Criticism” is not only how critical theory should reconnect itself to the project of utopian social and political liberation. It is also, or even primarily, how a certain concept of life comes to operate as the problematic of critical theory—as the unstated question to which the discourse of critical theory is itself is the elaborate answer—and how critical theory should respond when an “integrated” society sublates that question.

6.

Marcuse, *Hegel’s Ontology*, 207.
Once posed, this question points to a number of surprising answers. The concept of “life as motility” seems to have developed in Marcuse’s thought along lines that could not have been easily predicted on the basis of the inquiry Marcuse outlined in 1932. In 1934, at the very outset of his affiliation with the Frankfurt School, Marcuse wrote an essay outlining the dialectical relation between, on the one hand, the “naturalist liberalism” of Ludwig von Mises (which would be better termed a “neoliberalism,” since the text of Mises’s from which Marcuse quotes contains one of the very earliest uses of that term) and, on the other hand, the “irrationalistic naturalism” of the totalitarian regimes (which, he mentions in passing, “resembles Dilthey’s Lebensphilosophie in name only”). This essay presents a Marcuse who, as distinct from the Marcuse of Hegel’s Ontology, is intensely interested in the concept of the political (in an explicitly Schmittian sense), and who moreover seizes with great acuity upon the problematic of life (in the form of a series of metonyms: “naturalism,” “organicism,” “the organic order of life,” “blood,” and “race,” among others) as the dialectical hinge allowing for an identity of opposites between liberal and totalitarian politics (thus anticipating, up to a point, Giorgio Agamben’s thesis in Homo Sacer). And yet, in the same text where the concept of life finally emerges for Marcuse as the object of an explicitly political critique, it also seems to fade as a premise for critique itself. In place of “life as motility,” Marcuse turns in 1934 to a very different basis for critique: a “rationalist” theory of society, which comes into its own “when the practice [theory] enjoins is subject to the idea of autonomous reason.” If in 1932, Marcuse thought life as motility to the exclusion of any explicit engagement with politics, in other words, in 1934 he would seem to have engaged explicitly with politics, but to the exclusion of any implicit recourse to the concept of life as motility.

In his 1936 A Study on Authority, meanwhile, Marcuse’s turn from this concept would seem to be complete. In this text, Marcuse’s critique of Hegel bears very little resemblance to his 1932 commentary on Hegel. In 1936 Marcuse elaborates a Hegel with respect to a conceptual series (private property, State, master-slave dialectic) that would reappear in more systematic fashion in his 1941 Reason and Revolution. In these two texts, it seems fair to say, the problematic of life as the foundation of critical theory is completely suppressed: the concept of “life as motility” plays no part whatsoever in the genesis of the

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Marcuse, “The Struggle Against Liberalism,” 9-10. For Mises’s 1927 use of the term “neoliberalism,” which has been strangely overlooked given the copious amount of work that has appeared on topics related to neoliberalism, see Ludwig von Mises, Liberalism: The Classical Tradition, Ed. Bettina Bien Graves (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2005), 27.

Marcuse, “Struggle Against Liberalism,” 5


question for which emancipatory politics are then the practical answer. For that purpose, Marcuse would have recourse to a very different theoretical practice: “social critique.” The thesis of a break with Heidegger, and the corresponding distribution of Marcuse’s thought into “early” and “late,” would thus appear to be well-founded.

In Marcuse’s mature works, however, we would seem to begin to encounter something very much resembling a return of the repressed. Life would appear as a problem for politics first of all in Marcuse’s 1955 Eros and Civilization, which set for itself the task of recuperating Freud’s concepts of “Eros” and “Life Instinct” as keywords for emancipatory politics. In a clear sign that Marcuse was already by this point rereading his earliest work on Hegel, he would criticize Neo-Freudianism for its “lack of depth” and its “flattening out” of Freud’s theory of the instincts. For Freud, on Marcuse’s read, the individual exists “as it were, in two different dimensions,” the reality principle (a form of what he calls “law and order”), on the one hand, and the “bundle of animal drives,” on the other. In 1932, as we have seen, Marcuse rendered two-dimensionality intelligible within an ontological horizon formed primarily with respect to life as motility. In 1955, meanwhile, Marcuse would problematize two-dimensionality not only with respect to the ontology of life but now also with intense, almost redoubled emphasis, upon a term and the concept that, as we have seen, was rigorously absent from his 1932 book: politics.

The attempt to couple life and politics is even more pronounced in certain of Marcuse’s later works. In his 1966 “Political Preface” to Eros and Civilization, Marcuse would present a portrait in which politics itself consists of the struggle of life (“arrested organic, biological needs,” “liberated rather than…repressed Life Instincts,” “the energy of the human body”) against the introjected traces of law (whether through “innerworldly asceticism” or “repression”). Here Marcuse recognizes that the politics of “mak[ing] the human body an instrument of pleasure rather than labor” could be neutralized in advance by a “high standard

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a On the status of Marcuse’s 1936 Authority as a transitional text, and on Marcuse’s “two Hegels” more generally, see Laudani, Policia come movimento, 19-84, esp. 56.

b See, for example, Douglas Kellner, Herbert Marcuse and the Crisis of Marxism (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 130-1.

c Marcuse, Eros and Civilization, 267, 273-4; see especially 5-6.

d Marcuse, Eros and Civilization, 12, 14-5.


of living” and by “‘social engineering’ of the soul,” and that any critique of affluent, overdeveloped society consequently must center on the meaning, potencies, and actualization of life: “Today the fight for life, the fight for Eros, is the political fight.” As such, Marcuse would even say, the phrase “in defense of life” is an “explosive” phrase (and “explosive” is a charged word for him in “Paralysis of Criticism” as well); and this is so not despite but because this maxim already is integrated in advance by a society the imperative of which is, as it were, that “society must be defended.”

Nowhere was Marcuse’s attempt to politicize life more explicit, however, than in his 1969 Essay on Liberation. Because the counter-revolution has become “second nature,” Marcuse argues there, it follows that “[t]he radical change which is to transform the existing society into a free society must reach into a dimension of the human existence hardly considered in the Marxian theory—the ‘biological’ dimension in which the vital, imperative needs and satisfactions of man assert themselves. Inasmuch as these needs and satisfactions reproduce a life in servitude, liberation presupposes changes in this biological dimension, that is to say, different instinctual needs, different reactions of the body as well as the mind.” As Andrew Knighton notes in his contribution to this Special Issue, the inverted commas Marcuse places around the adjective “biological” here are far from self-evident. It’s tempting to retroactively read these commas as if they were the sort of scare quotes that would become the norm within the discourse of critical theory during the 1980s and 1990s, at a moment when critical theory assimilates into its reflections the various philosophies of language that then seemed imperative (but at the cost of creating the conditions, within critical theory, for “cynical reason” and for a curiously juridified, even prosecutorial, practice of criticism). Nothing, however, could be more off the mark. It would

Marcuse, “Political Preface,” 98.

Marcuse, “Political Preface,” 105, emphasis in original.


There is truth to Rita Felski’s claim that contemporary literary criticism is largely governed by unstated juridical forms, setting for itself the task of detecting and denouncing texts’ complicities with various sorts of crimes (Rita Felski, The Limits of Critique [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015]). But Felski misses the mark when she names the “hermeneutics of suspicion”—a usual suspect if ever there was one—as the culprit for this juridification of critique. It would be more precise to say that from Kant forward, the practices of critique always already tarried with the practices of judgment in a strictly juridical sense. One hardly should be surprised, therefore, when criticism should turn out to proceed according to forms that, as in Kant’s work, are rigorously derived from Roman Law. Beneficiary, agency, entitlement, privilege, sanction,
be better to read Marcuse’s commas here as the shadow cast by a light that is immanent to life but that is not life—a light that liberates life from the grip of the one-dimensional concepts of life that are generated by the natural and human sciences and integrated into the practices and institutions of established society. And although the life in question is a human life, it will have become human only through a form of manual labor—a thinking that is also a grasping, gripping, comprehension, or manipulation—that damages the very life whose anthropogenesis it also, by virtue of that damage, sets into motion. Paradoxically or not, therefore, the damaged life that here emerges as a problem for critical theory cannot be regarded exclusively or even primarily within the horizon of philosophical anthropology. Its conditions of possibility remain a nonhuman life (zoë) and an extrahuman light (phos) that are prior to the human, constitutive of the human, and ultimately irreducible to the human."

Marcuse’s emphasis on the ‘biological’ is therefore not at all synonymous with an emphasis on biology as a scientific discipline. Quite the opposite: the point of this emphasis is to designate the nonidentity of the object that discipline—organic life—with itself. The ‘biological’, for the Marcuse of 1969, is the dynamic by which an initially nonbiological need (Marcuse, hardly by accident, gives the example of freedom) “sinks down” and become part of the very biology of the human.6 Stated differently, the ‘biological’ designates the

divest, complicity, abolition, person, thing, emancipation, domination, suspicion—it is, in fact, rather fascinating how consistently it is that some of the most charged keywords of the most active activists and the most critical critics—the scholars who, to their credit, think most deeply about crimes that can’t be forgiven or punished—prove upon examination to be late modern reiterations of pre-modern juridical terms. This goes above all for recent proposals to think the agency of things alongside the agency of persons. As Roberto Esposito has argued, the indeterminacy of persons and things is not exterior to Roman Law; it is, to the contrary, “the basis for Roman Law” (Persons and Things, Trans. Zakiya Hanafi [Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2015, 27]). One wonder how a discourse so securely rooted in Roman Law somehow will escape the juridification of criticism Felski criticizes.

6 “Philosophy exists in order to redeem what you see in the look of an animal,” writes Horkheimer and Adorno (Towards a New Manifesto, Trans. Rodney Livingstone [London; New York: Verso, 2011], 71). Derrida seems not to disagree, opening his lectures on “the autobiographical animal” by asking what it means to see himself seen in the gaze of a cat (The Animal That Therefore I Am, Ed. Marie-Louise Mallet, Trans. David Wills [New York: Fordham University Press, 2008], 4). In both texts, extrahuman light is the unproblematized condition of possibility for the critical theoretical problematization of the play of gazes that take place in the nonrelation between human and animal.

7 Marcuse, An Essay on Liberation, 10 n1.
dynamic by which the object of biology (organic life) becomes organized according to logics that are not themselves biological but political. This alone allows us to grasp the originality of Marcuse’s reinterpretation of the nineteenth century concept of “solidarity.” “Solidarity,” for Marcuse, is certainly inclusive of the biological concept of the human species, but it in no way can be reduced to that concept. For Marcuse, we might say, solidarity is the unnatural form of self-relation assumed by the human species as it begins to engage in a political struggle for human life as human life, i.e., a struggle to relate to itself, for the first time, explicitly as a species. The political struggle to attain what Marcuse will even come to call “new life” therefore cannot and will not be undertaken along class lines; it will take place only through a thoroughly politicizing relation to human life as such—or what Marcuse calls “biological solidarity.”

An intriguing chiasmus therefore would seem to govern the development of Marcusean critical theory. On the one hand, beginning with the disjunctive synthesis that structures the early Marcuse’s relation with Heidegger in 1931-2 (where the very absence of any explicit mention of politics in his discussion of phos and zoē is itself the photographic negative of a then undeveloped concept of liberatory politics), moving to Marcuse’s abrupt turn from the concept of life as a basis for criticism during the initial period of his affiliation with the Frankfurt School (where life is no longer a name for Being in general but now appears only as the object of a dialectical criticism of the totalitarian state), and then culminating in the redoubled return of life as a problem in Marcuse’s mature works (where liberation as such emerges within a horizon determined by an indeterminate coupling of life and politics), it would seem that the more explicitly political Marcuse’s thought became—the more, in particular, that Marcuse came into his own as a theorist of liberation—the more fully life emerged both as the object and as the subject of that politics. And yet, at the same time, it seems clear that the “new life” that Marcuse named in 1969 as the desideratum of liberation bears very little relation to the life he theorized in 1932. The latter seemed to be more ontological than biological: it elaborated a conceptual nexus between the natural and human sciences that extended to include the life of the mind itself. The former, meanwhile, seemed to be more biological than ontological: it took as its subject and object the human organism as a “living cell” in society. The path leading from the latter to the former, finally, seems to be unambiguous: the more explicitly that life emerged both as the object and as the subject of Marcuse’s politics—or again, in the concrete, the more that Marcuse came into his own as a theorist of liberation—the more fully he seems to have abandoned the ontology of life as motility.

And yet the more we narrate the history of Marcuse's thought on the basis of Marcuse's own thinking about historicity, the more we become able to adjust our eyes to another dimension of his œuvre. If life for the early Marcuse exists not only as zoē but also as phos, as “light which allows beings to be seen in their

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Marcuse, An Essay on Liberation, 14, 52.

truth,” then even and especially those texts that seem to lack reference to life as motility nevertheless would remain intelligible as exemplary expressions of exactly that life. On this read, life as motility will have remained the underlying dimension that silently enabled all of the changing determinations of Marcuse’s work, up to and including those texts that, because of their self-described paralysis, would seem to mark the constitutive limit of this ontology. Even and especially when one can see nothing other than the non-being of motility, Marcuse will have taught us, one’s very capacity to see at all will have been enabled in the first place by a transfixing light that first dawned on him during some of the darkest days in the history of phenomenology itself. Even as that light stops us in our tracks, it also reveals what an emancipated life will have been. We are not off the mark to find in our very immobility the roots of new critical ‘obstinance’ that allows us to press back against everything that presses in on us today.⁷ We shall not be moved: first maxim for a critique of paralysis that has dialecticized the paralysis in criticism itself.