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Autonomy and Ambivalence

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Von weiser Frische,

Ein Wundchen hält meine Glieder.

Gute Nacht, geliebte schwangende Bau-

Ich sehe euch morgen wieder.

--- vocal part dedicated to Robert Kuen
--- piano part dedicated to Robert Jurgrau

Summer 1984
As a teacher of philosophy, what I am constantly struck by, and ultimately concerned about, is the literalness with which students understand reality in all its aspects. Time and again, I must remind them, as they ask for "the answer" to one of philosophy's "big questions," that this way of knowing does not offer answers which can be stated in clear and easily digestible sentences. Rather, I suggest, philosophy is a way of making meaning out of our rich experience of the world. Its goal is to provide the rational tools for discerning the viability of various meaning-options presented to us as we struggle to authenticate our existence in relation to the world around us. They are not easily convinced.

In our contemporary society, there exists an ever increasing tendency towards accepting the concrete as the only unit of reality with the status of meaning and truth. Students, but not only students, seem less and less able to penetrate below the surface of phenomena in order to expose those aspects of reality which are not immediately visible. The ability to abstract from the immediate seems all but lost. The richness of reality is reduced to discernible objects neatly encompassed within the object's own particularity. We are, I think, witnessing the acquisition of a strict empiricist mentality among members of society at all levels. For what the empiricist has claimed for the relation of knowing to the known has been internalized as a methodology for acquiring knowledge; and this methodology has become the accepted yardstick for determining the truth of all modes of knowing. The ascendancy of the "fact" as the sole unit of the true, the equation of one-word-one-meaning, and the fostering of a one-to-one cor-
respondence between the observed world and the terms used to describe it, all threaten to subordinate, if not eliminate, the richness of symbol, myth, and metaphor as repositories of truth. The making of meaning is not encouraged; rather, meaning is deductively articulated. The result is an intellectual poverty which threatens the critical project of empowering people to make sense: to give meaning to the world in which they live. It is the autonomy of individual experience which is at stake.

As is always the case, however, there are those thinkers who sound a warning against the overwhelming tendency, thinkers whose critical project is to articulate and foster an alternative to this reductionistic tide. It is always a wonder to me that such thinkers are heard, and once heard, that their work continues to appear. Such a thinker was Theodor W. Adorno. Through his theory of non-identity, and its resultant dialectical style of presentation, Adorno attempted to present a model of meaning-creation which laid an epistemological foundation for conceptualizing, and an emancipatory means of redeeming the autonomously lived experience of individuals—experience threatened by the political, social, economic, and cultural modes of domination fostered by contemporary society.

If we were to judge the impact of a thinker by the number of articles published by or about him, surely Adorno would rank as one of the more important of contemporary thinkers. Articles and books by him in the form of translation, as well as critical assessments of his work, continue to abound in any number of journals in a variety of disciplines including sociology, philosophy, musicology, and cultural studies. One of the most recent critical expositions is Adorno, by Martin Jay, a scholar who, for many of us, brought critical theory and the Frankfurt School into our theoretical spectrum with his important work, The Dialectical Imagination. I found Jay’s work to be a significant contribution to the literature on Adorno. Still, I sense an ambivalence on Jay’s part which is typical in many ways of the reception to Adorno’s complex theoretical project.

Jay opens his book with an introduction in which he attempts to rationalize having written the study at the same time that he argues for the importance of its existence. “Adorno,” Jay claims in his very first sentence, “would have been appalled at a book of this kind devoted to him;” for he “would have had a principled
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One additional reason why an accessible rendering of Adorno is so inherently difficult is, as Jay notes, that "however one appraises it, Adorno's style stubbornly resists effective translation." Adorno had a penchant for the German language which he felt best suited the dialectical/emancipatory task he claimed for himself. Thus, for "the English speaking reader, it has been difficult to avoid the sense of missing something essential in our reception of his thought." Jay is particularly conscious of these realities.

In wanting to explicate Adorno's work authentically, to let him speak for himself, Jay gives numerous quotations from primary sources, then interprets a given passage in an attempt to clarify it and make it accessible and then, once again, rephrases his interpretation as if to make sure that we will not miss the point. Such persistence is to be applauded, and I would argue the repetition is necessary. Still, one cannot but feel that, like listening to a set of complex variations on a complicated theme, unless one has come to grips with the central motif, the variations continue to be puzzling. The "inaccessibility" of Adorno's prose resides in the fact that the ideas seeking expression are complex and are meant, quite consciously, to resist being easily reducible to conceptual clarity. "Clarity," Adorno said, "is a moment in the process of knowledge, but it does not exhaust this process." Adorno, Jay states, "was highly suspicious of any attempt to extricate the content of ideas from the form of their presentation. The artistic side
of his temperament: bridled at the suggestion that thought could be reduced to a series of unequivocal and straightforward propositions unaffected by the mode and context of their expression."

This attempt to dialectically mediate form and content is, to be sure, not new with Adorno, but parallels the development of philosophical thought itself. Adorno's project is to explode language in order to allow for the possibility of reviving or redeeming experience. And, what is clear, is that for Adorno, the liberation of our language and the liberation of our experience go hand in hand. His style is meant to jar us out of our easily referenced and cliché'd language and to force us to rethink the status of its use and the ways in which it both refines and redeems. Adorno is one of a number of contemporary writers who argue that linguistic usage has the power to create meaning which in turn can change the very way we think about the world.

I would claim that accessibility is not, nor has it ever been, the real issue. Adorno's ideas and their presentation are as accessible as are any in the history of philosophy which attempt to articulate, or bring-to-speech, original ideas which stand opposed to the theoretical mind-set of the status quo. The issue really is, once his thought is understood and found valuable, how are we to incorporate it into our theoretical vision, if we choose to do so? This should not be understood as the need to realize some pragmatic end, describable in explicit political strategies—which does seem to be the desire of most of Adorno's critics. Rather, it is a quest for appropriating Adorno's thought in order to rethink our being-in-the-world. The problem seems to be that we are losing our ability to appropriate thought—not just Adorno's, but all thought. To be sure, we can explicate it, criticize it, compare and contrast it, but we have lost our ability (need) to be changed by it. I am, of course, assuming that thought has this power, and there are those who would disagree.

There is, however, a peculiarity when it comes to Adorno. It is as if we sense the importance of his work, we acknowledge the complexity of his thought and style, the prolificness of his studies, but are never quite sure, over and above critically articulating it, what sense to give it, how to incorporate it. Most of what is written regarding Adorno both by the "New" and the "Old" Left, indicting him for his extreme pessimism, his lack of concrete political strategies or revolutionary agent, is critical to the point of dismissal. Yet, his work continues to be translated and to be critically assessed.

It is most certainly true that the general tendencies of Adorno's work—the critique of instrumental rationality and positivism, the role of art in the emancipatory project, the critique of domination in its "right" as well as "left"-wing manifestations, and especially, as Jay notes, his critique of contemporary mass culture, have been enlisted as integral to the critique of 20th-century political structures by "New" Left sympathizers. We must be cautious, however, for the tendency is to reduce thought to already standardized categories or vocabulary fully accepted; new understandings are no longer searched for, new meanings no longer sought after. To some extent, this has already occurred with regard to Adorno's ideas. His name is too easily identified with (or reduced to) general tendencies cited above. Such reductions allow for easy dismissal. It seems that we have succumbed to the very tendency that Adorno himself warned against. "No theory," Adorno stated,

escapes the marketplace. Each is offered as a possibility among the competing opinions; all are put up for choice; all are swallowed. There are no binders for thought to den against this, and the self-righteous conviction that my own theory is spared that fate will surely deteriorate into self-advertising.

In his book Societies Amnesia, Russell Jacoby identifies the same problem. "Society," he states, "remembers less and less faster and faster. The sign of the times is thought that has succumbed to fashion... The activity of thinking decays to the passivity of classifying." As we can witness in our own time, thought can be as trendy as fashion; it is conceptualized, explained and ultimately shelved as soon as a "new" direction is glimpsed. Thus, in recent times, we have seen in rapid succession the rise and fall of critical theory, semiotics, structuralism, post-structuralism, and deconstruction theory. What is refreshing about Jay's book is that he seems to have gotten past these categorizations, allowing Adorno's thought to remain in its truly unsettled, unreconciled state. He squarely faces the antinomic nature of Adorno's thought and rather than finding this a means of dismissal, cites it as a challenge:
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came the sources of Adorno’s analysis. These included philosophical texts, musical scores and performances, works of literature, and even, in the case of his book Minima Moralia, the objects of everyday life. As indicated above, Adorno argues that such objects can never be theoretically exhausted—there is always a surplus of meaning to be extracted from them. I have suggested above that the ultimate end of identitarian thinking is to make unlike things alike. That is, to think that a concept completely covers its object when it cannot, is to think falsely that the object and the concept are equivalent. This is to reify the object, Identitarian thought, then, is reified thought. The task of philosophy as Adorno teaches is to continually discover meaning in the object, to redeem it by reinterpreting it. Philosophy is “the interpretation of the intentionless content of reality irreducible to the meaning invested in it by the human subject or by a community of subjects.” Adorno argued that by focusing immanently on the object, i.e., on its structure, organization, or composition, by recontextualizing it through what he termed “theoretical constellations,” the object would release new meanings which would reveal its non-identity with the concept and consequently dissolve its reified appearance. Jay sees the implications of the theory of non-identity as follows: “First, any adequate theory of knowledge must recognize the impossibility of finding concepts congruous with the objects they attempt to describe. . . Second, rather than proceeding deductively from a series of carefully demarcated premises, philosophy must begin in medias res . . .” And finally,

to move from error to truth requires a critique of concepts that pits their ambiguous implications against the social world to which they imperfectly refer; the result will not merely be that the concept is inadequate to the world, but also that the world as presently constituted is inadequate to certain meanings of the concept. It is the interaction of these complementary inadequacies, its critical power to transcend the status quo.”

What is at stake, then, is the very possibility of rational thinking as it has been traditionally articulated. For if reality is not identical with the concepts used to explain it, if objects always “leave a remainder” after being conceptualized, then objects threaten to

Rather than reduce Adorno to any one star in his constellation, be it Western Marxist, elitist mandarin, aesthetic modernist, or whatever, we must credit all of them with the often contradictory power they had in shaping his idiosyncratic variant of Critical Theory. For what made Adorno so remarkable a figure was the fact that the negative dialectics he so steadfastly defended, with its valorization of non-identity and heterogeneity, was concretely exemplified in his own intellectual composition, which never produced any harmoniously totalized worldview. 31

Or again, “to reveal as best we can the unique phenomenon that was Adorno, we must therefore conceptualize him in a manner which will be as true to the unresolved tensions in his thought as possible, rather than seek to find some putative coherence underlying them.” It is this unreconciled and unreconcilable stance which typifies Adorno’s integrity as a thinker and embodies his own epistemological premise of “non-identity.” This concept is of central importance in understanding Adorno’s project, and, paradoxically, is the concept which has had the least influence on contemporary thought. Jay, however, accords this concept the importance it deserves.

In his inaugural address to the philosophy faculty of the University of Frankfurt in 1931, Adorno presents a theme which abounds throughout his work: “Whoever chooses philosophy as a profession today must first reject the illusion that earlier philosophical enterprises began with: that the power of thought is sufficient to grasp the totality of the real.” This, in essence, is Adorno’s notion of the non-identity of subject and object. In his last major completed work, Negative Dialectics, he reiterates this thought when he states that “the concept does not exhaust the thing conceived,” or again, “objects do not go into their concepts without leaving a remainder.” Adorno affirmed neither concept nor reality, subject nor object in itself; rather, he affirmed only their dialectical mediation of one another. He warned that any philosophy which systematically subordinates one moment of this dialectic or which, conversely, is grounded in one at the expense of the other, would reify its concepts and ultimately become ideological.

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lose their familiarity, and remain transitory and elusive to complete categorization. It is in this sense that Adorno’s philosophical task was to reveal the appearance of bourgeois social reality and the inadequacy of bourgeois concepts to ever fully comprehend that reality.

If, according to Adorno, conceptualization had become the dominant method by which to understand social reality, then an alternative use of concepts that transform the relationship between the concept and its object needed to be employed. Concepts, it must be stressed, are all we have to communicate; and, Adorno had no intention of doing away with them. He only wished to transform their use. The aim of Adorno’s critical theory was to “disintegrate” the dominance of concepts and allow for the unmasking of reality in the process. An alternative use of concepts, however, would necessitate an alternative mode of communication or presentation. For Adorno, the question of communication is the question of what the reader could experience when confronting a text.

Since, according to Adorno, an object cannot be completely apprehended by a single concept or conceptualization, only multiple groupings of concepts or conceptual presentations could approximate it. Adorno called these presentations “constellations,” and characterized them as concepts “gathering around the object of cognition.” Thus, the various aspects of what is given are rearranged into a variety of relationships until “the ciphers of a possible redemption,” the object’s truth, becomes cognitively possible. This truth “emerged only through the arduous process of interpretation that Adorno termed ‘exact fantasy.’” It is “fantasy” in the sense that it allows the subject critical distance from the object, permitting multiple perspectives. It is “exact” in the sense that adherence to the concrete particular must be maintained. Thus, it is not fantasy without limits, but one bound by the parameters of the material phenomenon being analyzed. It is fantasy “which abides strictly within the material which the sciences present to it, and reaches beyond them only in the smallest aspects of their arrangement: aspects, granted, which fantasy itself must originally generate.”

“Exact fantasy,” then, allows for the dialectical mediation of subject and object without allowing either to predominate. It is interpretation through rearrangement, the outcome of which is not simply the object’s reduplication in thought (leaving it unchanged), but rather its verbal re-presentation which results in its transformation. By “exact fantasy,” objects, which themselves are silent, are brought to speech, giving expression to their inner logic. This “bringing-to-speech” is the hermeneutical dimension of Adorno’s thought, and it is this critical hermeneutics which is the task—perhaps more correctly, the obligation of philosophy in relation to the object. It is also key to an understanding of the role of experience in Adorno’s epistemology.

Adorno’s project, although it spanned over many subject areas and a wide diversity of objects, primarily centered on exposing the unresolved and unresolvable tensions in authentic human experience. Experience, which included cognitive experience, he argued, had been reduced to the “always the same”; it had become reified. And, the reification of experience was the greatest threat to any emancipatory project. Consequently, his aim was to redeem experience which he understood to be “the counter-concept to reification.” The interpretative rearrangement through conceptual constellations must, in turn, have an effect upon the reader. The constellations at work in Adorno’s writings are meant to constitute, or re-constitute the experience of the reader. Thus, this bringing-to-speech calls things by their proper names in order to break through the modes of domination fostered by contemporary society.

Although Adorno set his philosophical gaze on the object, allowing it to dictate the methodology as well as circumscribe the concepts used to expose its meaning, he also integrated the active subject into his theoretical project through the activity of “exact fantasy.” Thus, knowledge in Adorno’s scheme “was a process of self-reflection dependent on the conceptual mediation of the given. There is thus an inevitable circle in which apparently immediate sense experience is mediated by theoretical concepts, which in turn are founded in and judged by sense experience.” In Adorno’s works, then, there is no reduction of thought to either subject or object. There is only a creative, unresolvable tension between them. It is thus not at some end or perfect harmony, but in the very midst of this tension where one locates knowledge, meaning, and truth.

The multidimensional goals of this project all account for the depth of Adorno’s thought and the complexity of his prose. These
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The multidimensional goals of this project account for the depth of Adorno's thought and the complexity of his prose. These
goals include: politically, to critique the cultural and social structures which dominate or suppress autonomous experience; epistemologically, to create a mode of theorizing which counters these structures in the realm of thought; and experientially, to jar the reader out of submission and complacency by way of anti-systematic, dialectical presentation of ideas. On this latter aspect of Adorno's project, Susan Buck-Morss, an Adorno scholar, has written:

Adorno didn't write essays, he composed them and he was a virtuoso in the dialectical medium. His verbal compositions express an "idea" through a sequence of dialectical reversals and inversions. The sentences develop like musical themes: they break apart and turn in on themselves in a continuing spiral of variations... But there is no affirmation, no "closing cadence." The contradictions are unraveled; they are not resolved.26

Jay, unlike many commentators on Adorno, sees the unresolved tensions in Adorno's thought as a challenge not only to conventional philosophy, but to the theorizing of the contemporary "Left" as well:

Adorno stubbornly resisted choosing between flawed alternatives or positing a harmonious mediation between them. Adorno himself is best understood as occupying the nodal point of a dynamic force-field of tensely untotaled energies represented by many of the most creative intellectual currents of our age. Much of the explosive power of his thought derives from the complicated way in which these elements fuse and burst assunder.25

But, what are we to make of this? Where are we to take it? On the theoretical level, Jay suggests an intriguing and important departure. He claims that Adorno's project has connecting links with the deconstructionist thought associated with such names as Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault. This link has yet to be fully articulated and developed. Adorno's hermeneutical tendency, exhibited in his re-conceptualizations of objects through "exact fantasy" and "constellations," may prove to be a useful bridge between these two modes of thought. As important, however, is Adorno's claim on a continuing political-emancipatory project. In an attempt to salvage Adorno from a historical present which, by reducing his thought to the familiar, threatens to forget him, Jay in his conclusion states that what Adorno said of Arnold Schoenberg, the serial composer (who, to Adorno's generation, represented the most emancipatory trend in contemporary music) would apply to Adorno himself: "It is not the composer who fails in the work; history, rather, denies the work in itself."27 Jay continues: "... it was impossible, given that history, for Adorno to find a way out; whether or not those of us who retrieve his bottles tossed into the sea will have better luck remains very much to be seen."27

What Adorno has given us is an inductive method of knowledge possession which counters the tendency towards literalism fostered by the culture industry and other structures of domination in our society. His is a statement of caution concerning future political and theoretical demands, directions, and analysis. What Adorno is offering is a morality of theoretical conceptualization according to which we must be continually mindful of our attitude and theoretical posturing towards what we say and think (and what we think about what we say and think) lest we mistake what is an open-ended project with a surplus of meanings for a closed fact. Adorno is not suggesting that because there can be, and should be, no absolute methodological impulse towards theoretical finitude, that it is perhaps better not to engage in theorizing at all, but only that we must learn to proceed with a sense of vertiginous expansiveness rather than settle for the attainment of closure. "Open thinking," says Adorno, "points beyond itself."28 And although it is true that Adorno's interpretive style of conceptual "constellations" and "exact fantasy" "courted the possibility of arbitrary willfulness, as [his critics] often noted,"29 it is the risk that we must take. The alternative is more of the "ever-the-same" which threatens our ability to respond in a way which breaks open the reified and reifying trappings of our contemporary life-world. We can, then, either blame the messenger who has warned us of the perilousness of our stance and dismiss his thought as pessimistic or inaccessible, or accept it as a challenge and create new departures. In other words, there are,
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FOOTNOTES


2. Ibid. p.11.


4. Ibid. p.12.

5. Ibid. p.12.


12. Theodor Adorno, “The Actuality of Philosophy,” *Teils*, No. 31, Spring, 1977, p. 120.


14. Ibid.


16. Ibid., p.60.

17. Ibid., p.61.


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12. Theodor Adorno, “The Actuality of Philosophy,” *Telos*, No. 31, Spring, 1977, p. 120.


