

Adorno Today

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Adorno's concern with how history affects the very nature of philosophy raises the question of how our own understanding of Adorno is affected by historical changes. We are, after all, now further from Adorno, when he died, than he was from the end of the First World War, so using his ideas to analyze contemporary issues necessarily involves considerable mediation. One can here only very briefly sketch a few responses to this issue, but how we think about certain developments in philosophy, about the role of art, and about how to understand key social and political developments can profit from a critical contemporary reflection on Adorno's work in these areas.

Adorno says of Kant's philosophy that it is a "force-field," where "behind the most abstract concepts which come into conflict with each other ... stand what are in reality extraordinarily vivid forces of experience."¹ In today's indeterminately diverse philosophical landscape it would be hard to single out such a philosophy

1 Theodor W. Adorno, *Kants "Kritik der reinen Vernunft"* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1995), 13.

in this way. At the same time, seeing influential parts of this landscape, not predominantly in terms of the validity of their substantive claims, but rather as expressions of the experience of social and political tensions, offers a way of responding to what Adorno suggests. The revival of analytical metaphysics since Kripke and others can, for example, be understood in these terms as another rear-guard action against the increasing occupation of the territory of metaphysics by the sciences. Exploring “what fundamental kinds of things there are and what properties and relations they have”² in metaphysics seems in this light peculiarly otiose in the face of the discoveries of contemporary science, and of the notable lack of any serious consensus among philosophers about “fundamental kinds of things.” Putting it bluntly: what difference would a philosophical account of “fundamental kinds of things” make, compared with the very evident ways in which the accounts given by physical sciences change how we act in the world, and change the world itself?

Dewey, whose thought is sometimes close to that of Adorno in ways that have yet to be fully explored, argued that metaphysical conceptions—of the kind that Williamson pursues—involve “the complete hold possessed by the belief that the object of knowledge is a reality fixed and complete in itself, in isolation from an act of inquiry which has in it any element of production of change.”³ Focusing metaphysics in Williamson’s manner arguably also conspires with the failure of contemporary philosophy to adequately respond to questions, already posed in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, about how the cumulative practical effects of the sciences can become so destructive. This can be seen as part of a wider failure, particularly of analytical philosophy, with its predominant focus on epistemology, to take adequate account of the differing ways in which humankind relates to nature, which are not exhausted by cognition. Such failure results not least from a lack of reflection on Adorno’s insistence that nature and history cannot be definitively separated. One simple way of seeing this is to ponder the fact that with the rise of the commodity form, as Adorno suggests, what things *are* radically changes, and metaphysical attempts to get at fundamental kinds of things cannot do justice to such changes. Indeed, they can function as ideology and occlude the significance of such changes. As the ecological crisis deepens, Adorno’s insights into how we think about nature and history here gain in importance, but need now to be developed in relation to the specific forms capitalism takes in the era of new media.

Adorno’s interpretations of aesthetic modernism, in contrast, can at times lead to dead-ends. As Albrecht Wellmer puts it, for Adorno art is the “pres-

2 Timothy Williamson, *The Philosophy of Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 19.

3 John Dewey, *The Quest for Certainty* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008), 19.

ence in the forms of semblance of a state which does not yet exist,”⁴ and this leads him to a—in some ways historically understandable—‘Gnostic’ rejection of artistic attempts to communicate in terms that seek to make sense of a world that produced the Holocaust. But this restricts the kind of sense art can make in a manner that ties it too exclusively to a historico-philosophical judgement on the modern world as a whole. Wellmer suggests, against Adorno, that one has to “grant to art *a function in connection with* forms of non-aesthetic communication, or with a real change of relationships between self and world,” and points to “the growing capacity for aesthetic processing of what, precisely by dint of its becoming language in the work of art, is no longer merely negated, i.e., excluded from the realm of symbolic communication.”⁵ While the aim of interpreting art such that “form, the aesthetic connection of everything individual, represents the social relationship in the work of art,”⁶ can be a productive way of approaching art in some situations, it can neglect the ways art still functions as a vital participatory practice in widely varying social contexts.

The idea of a ‘state of the material’ that has to be lived up to by true art, which dominates much of Adorno’s aesthetic thinking, particularly about music, now seems hard to defend, in the face of the diversity of contemporary musical production. The simple fact that the music which develops out of free atonality and serialism tends to play a relatively marginal role in contemporary musical life suggests the problem. That innovation is crucial to keeping music and other art alive goes without saying, but innovation, albeit often in very different ways, can play a role in any music that is more than just a product of the culture industry. Adorno’s linking of the story of Western philosophy to the history of modern music produces many insights, but does little to account for the central role of music in contemporary culture all over the globe because it does not engage with some dimensions of musical practice which are extraneous to that link. This does not, one should add, by any means invalidate all he says about the ideological effects of the means of cultural production on the music industry.

Adorno’s work seems in some respects to have sustained its actuality most emphatically in relation to the analysis of social and political pathologies. What might have seemed perhaps rather overblown in the increasingly prosperous period in the West after the War before the rise of neoliberalism now feels disturbingly prescient. When he says, in relation to the value of psychoa-

4 Albrecht Wellmer, *Zur Dialektik von Moderne und Postmoderne* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1985), 29.

5 Wellmer, *Zur Dialektik*, 29.

6 Theodor W. Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann et al., vol. 7 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1997), 379.

nalysis for social analysis, that the “overwhelming majority of people puts up with relations of dominance, identifies with them, and is induced by them to adopt irrational attitudes whose opposition to the most simple interests of their self-preservation is completely obvious;”⁷ one is these days irresistibly reminded of examples from the COVID pandemic. Consider this, reported in *The Independent* newspaper: “Emergency room patients in the USA often don’t want to believe Covid-19 is real even after testing positive for the virus, according to a South Dakota nurse: ‘they don’t want to believe that Covid is real ... their last dying words are, ‘This can’t be happening, it’s not real.’”⁸ The links between far-Right politics and such COVID denialism suggest how the notion of a “context of delusion,” despite its frequent over-totalization by Adorno, is alive and well in contemporary neoliberal economies. In this respect his warning that “the social veil is constituted by the fact that social tendencies assert themselves over the heads of people, that they do not know those tendencies as their own”⁹ suggests, in a world where fascism is once again infiltrating the politics of ever more countries, why a continuing engagement with the resources Adorno offers for trying to break through the social veil is more necessary than ever.

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7 Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 8:331–2.

8 Mayank Aggarwal, “Covid Nurse Says Some Dying Patients are Still Refusing to Believe Virus is Real: ‘This Can’t be Happening,’” *The Independent*, November 17, 2020. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/covid-us-cases-latest-nurse-patients-biden-virus-b1724026.html>

9 Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 8:54.