

Protocol, Graduate Seminar – Adorno and Heidegger**Class Session: 4 - Date: September 23, 2010****Minute taker: Christian Lotz****Topic: Adorno's critique of Heidegger; Adorno, *Introduction to Negative Dialectics***

Abbreviations

ND = Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*; AP = Adorno, *The Actuality of Philosophy*; TH = Heidegger, *The Thing*; NPT = Adorno, *Notes on Philosophical Thinking*; EF = Adorno, *The Essay as Form*; IM = Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*; LH = Heidegger, *Letter on Humanism*; SO = Adorno, *Subject and Object*; MTP = Adorno, *Marginalia to Theory and Praxis*; WCT = Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking*; WSP = Adorno, *Why still Philosophy?*

Adorno's Critique of Heidegger in *Why Still Philosophy* (1962)

Adorno presents two critiques of Heidegger in his radio address *Why still Philosophy?* in 1962. [A] On the one hand, he criticizes Heidegger for falling back into a higher form of positivism; [B] on the other hand, he criticizes Heidegger's alleged "pseudo-concreteness."

[A] In regard to the first critique, Adorno writes:

"Being in whose name Heidegger's philosophy increasingly concentrates itself, is for him – as pure self-presentation to passive consciousness – just as immediate, just as independent of the mediations of the subject, as the facts and the sensory data are for the positivists" (WSP 9)

Adorno's critique is not appropriate in two regards: [1] Adorno underestimates Heidegger's concept of receptivity and affectivity. Heidegger's BT is one of the most successful attempts to overcome naïve theories of the given. Sensory data, as is bluntly clear in BT as well as in the concept of listening developed in the later writings, refers rather to the opposite, namely, to an "openness" that is *not* taking in what is immediately "there" since "listening" is the openness towards what makes any "there" possible. [2] Adorno underestimates that Heidegger's determination of Being as an "event" is precisely the attempt to break out of something that is "immediate," as Being is not simply something that is there; rather, by it is meant a temporality that makes the Being of beings possible. Heidegger's claim that thinking has something to do with what *arrives* in thought implies that there is a temporal structure prior to the giving of objects as something "positive" and posited. In addition, similar to Adorno's attempt to think against fixations on both the positivist and idealist side, Heidegger tries to think against the same fixations: for the determination of either subject or object as something that is "there" presupposes a concept of representation [*Vorstellung*; "stellen"=to posit]. Indeed, what makes thinking possible is not something that can be represented (event). As we will see, in his brief essay *The Thing*, even if expressed in "mythological" terms, Heidegger takes "the thing" to be a mediation of four aspects.

[B] In regard to the second critique, Adorno writes:

"Precisely the existence of the subject and its conditionness indicate a being that has not sprung whole out of Being: societalized individuals" (WSP 11)

Although Adorno's critical focus on the problem of givenness is justified, we need to underline that Heidegger does not assume that Being is *socially* mediated, since, as he would point out, every reference to *existing* social relations and to *existing* natural history *presupposes* a concept of Being. Finally, although Adorno determines the subject-object relation as dialectical, and as "real and

semblance” (see above), he cannot avoid postulating this structure itself as a metaphysical “given” and nowhere in Adorno’s work do we find a clear attempt to resolve this structure itself through a socially mediated process (though it is a real social process). Accordingly, Adorno himself is forced to posit this as a given and it is here where Adorno and Heidegger – rather than being opposed to each other – work on exactly the same problem. Adorno’s attempt to conceive the subject-object structure as being based in natural history and in the anthropological history of mankind does not solve the metaphysical problem underlying his basic concepts. Furthermore, Adorno argues that Heidegger’s philosophy suppresses the role of the concept and, as a consequence, suppresses the role of subject and spirit in thinking (see WSP 11), which in turn leads to the consequence that “the doctrine of Being would like to be a thinking still within the ambit of resolute anarchism” (ibid.). Though I think that Adorno is partly correct with his critique, we need to take into account that giving up the Hegelian claim of an absolute self-relation of thinking to itself must necessarily lead to a return to Kant and to the reintroduction of thinking about the “receptive” side in thought. Heidegger does not deny the activity of the thinking being (humans). For example, he clearly claims that thinking is “noein,” “*Vernehmen*,” “reception,” and “listening.” A phenomenological investigation of these “activities,” however, must lead to the inner paradoxical structure of these “activities” as something in which activity *turns* into what I called above “openness.” Nevertheless, we should – with Adorno (WSP 10) – be sensitive to the strong “authoritative” tone in Heidegger’s thinking, according to which listening [*hören*] often gets mixed up (or, even, conflated) with “following” [*gehören*] and “subjection” [*Hörigkeit*], which then leads us to take into account the horrifying identification of being and the *Führer* in 1933 (even if we take this to be a circumstantial passage in Heidegger’s work that cannot be supported by much outside of the context of the utterance).

Adorno’s Introduction to his *Negative Dialectics*

One of the main impulses in Adorno’s philosophy is, as it is in Heidegger, to reflect on our relationship to objects, issues, and things, as a non-dominating relationship. Here is what he says in this regard:

“A thinking that approaches its objects openly, rigorously, and on the basis of progressive knowledge, is also free towards its objects in the sense that it refuses to have rules prescribed to it by organized knowledge” (WSP 13).

One could claim that Adorno contradicts himself here, especially since two pages earlier he claims that concepts are a function of thinking (WSP 11). If we assume that concepts are the “function” of thinking (as in Kant and Hegel), then our experience of the object would *not* be free towards its objects. In Kant the categories are defined as *rules* of thinking. Accordingly, a “free” relationship to objects presupposes precisely what Heidegger has in mind, namely, an “open horizon” within which objects appear as such and in which nothing predetermines them to appear in specific ways. He goes on:

“It turns the quintessence of the experience accumulated in it to the objects, rends the veil with which society conceals them, and perceives them anew” (ibid.)

This theme and motive certainly goes beyond Heidegger’s philosophy, since it is an attempt to liberate philosophy and thinking from the inner and self-imposed limitations of “positions” and standpoints. Paradoxically, though, it returns, as Adorno underlines, to the main motive of early phenomenology, understood as the idea of going back to “the things themselves” as well as to “the longed for things” (ibid.). However, in order to reintroduce fetishized concepts, Adorno calls for a non-schematized and radically open thinking that is able to *change* its underlying concepts *in the very process* of encountering its objects. According to Adorno, thinking should be flexible and should be able *to experience* (he calls this “intellectual” or “metaphysical experience”), which is to say, thinking should lead to the encounter with *new* things during its reflection and meditation. In this way, it is both creation and discovery. It

seems, though, as if this is only possible because Adorno also introduces a central motive in his philosophy, namely, the motives of listening and receptivity. Thus, it is not by chance that Adorno's main topic throughout his lifetime is classical music: for in music the process of listening unfolds *with* the organization of the musical material. Put in its utopian shell,

“Philosophy desires peace with that Other, being, that the affirmative philosophies degrade by praising it and adapting themselves to it” (ibid.).

Sensitivity: the new relation to the object

In the introduction, we get a “pre-taste” of how Adorno wants us to think in a non-dominating way about our issues, that is, about “the object.” Traditional thinking, according to Adorno, is identificatory:

“The appearance [Schein] of identity dwells however in thinking itself as a pure form from within. To think means to identify. Conceptual schemata self-contentedly push aside what thinking wants to comprehend. Its appearance [Schein] and its truth delimit themselves” (ND 5)

Reification [*Verdinglichung*] is the consequence of a thinking that separates the object or elements of the object from its web of conceptual and experiential relationships:

“To comprehend a thing itself, not to merely fit it in, to register it in a system of relationships, is nothing other than to become aware of the particular moment in its immanent context with others. Such anti-subjectivism stirs beneath the crackling shell of absolute idealism, in the impulse to open up the thing in question, by recourse to how they became. The concept of a system recalls, in inverted form, the coherence of the non-identical, which is exactly what is damaged by deductive systematics” (ND 5).

Here, Adorno takes up motives from phenomenology, since he claims that the mimetic impulse to reach the non-conceptual through the conceptual (ND 9) remains one of the “inalienable features” (ibid.) of philosophy but that a “disenchantment of the conceptual” does not imply that we must give up the conceptual (which would be an impossible task); rather, it means that we are aware of the *limitations* of the conceptual through the non-conceptual:

“This refers to present alternatives in such a way that one would have to choose between one or the other. Administrations frequently reduce decisions over plans submitted to it to a simple yes or no; administrative thinking has secretly become the longed-for model of one which pretends to be free of such. But it is up to philosophical thought, in its essential situations, not to play along.

Adorno calls the opposite of administrative thinking “differentiation,” namely, the utopian goal to merge with the object and to cover conceptually even the finest distinctions that we encounter in the object. It seems to be clear by now why Adorno's philosophy follows an aesthetical impulse: the philosopher is here taken in analogy with the artist who forms and organizes the material in a way that *the material* can reach and unfold its highest articulation. Forming in the arts does not imply the destruction of the material; rather, it is the attempt to articulate the possibilities of the object itself. He writes:

“The ideal of the distinction [*Differenzierten*] and the nuanced, which cognition never completely forgot down to the latest developments in spite of all ‘science is measurement’ [in English], does not solely refer to an individual capacity, which objectivity can dispense with. It receives its impulse from the thing. Distinction means that someone is capable of discerning in this and in its concept even that which is the smallest and which escapes the concept; solely distinction encompasses the smallest. In its postulate, that of the capability to experience the object - and distinction is the subjective reaction-form of this becoming experience - the mimetic moment of cognition finds refuge, that of the elective affinity of the cognizer and that which is to be cognized” (ND 45).

Again, this ideal of differentiation is not only applied to philosophy and the philosopher, but also to all persons: the “ideal” human being would be an emancipated and non-schematized personality who really thinks in terms of a negative dialectics. The philosopher is, hence, pushed into a special position: she “demonstrates” how a reconciled humanity would look.

The motive: thought and external “impulses”

We discussed two reasons for why Adorno claims that there is a “remainder” in each conceptual process: [1] first, according to Adorno, conceptual thinking is motivated by what he often calls “impulses,” such as either psychological and natural impulses (our instincts), ethical impulses (suffering), and “the” impulse, namely *happiness*, by which Adorno always has the *containment of a happy childhood* in mind. The ideal *image* of a fulfilled [*geglückt*] life contains a playful and protected form of dealing with the world.¹ The ethical impulses come from any form of oppression and extinguishing of what remains other to reason or to even narrower forms of rationality.² The most prominent motivation for thinking, for Adorno, though, is Auschwitz, but not, as we underlined in class, as simply being evil; rather, it is the *suffering* underlying what happened in the concentration camps, which also motivated his remarks on death after Auschwitz (we will come back to this): suffering in Auschwitz meant that death itself was turned into something that can be *totally* manipulated and reified [*verdinglicht*].

“What in thought goes beyond that to which it is bound in its resistance is its freedom. It follows the expressive urge of the subject. The need to give voice to suffering is the condition of all truth. For suffering is the objectivity which weighs on the subject; what it experiences as most subjective, its expression, is objectively mediated” (ND 17)

The ethical impulse of Adorno’s negative dialectics also leads to the inclusion of *affections* for rationality, and therefore for philosophy itself. As Axel Honneth remarks, the *sensitivity* of the thinking subject makes possible that the qualitative properties of objects come out and can be made visible through *expression*.³ We should repeat the following point: for Adorno, this claim always refers to a descriptive and normative aspect, the latter of which has again two aspects: (1) we *should* think in terms of a negative dialectics if we do not want to become oppressive in philosophy, and (2) we *should* live in a world of subjects that no longer dominate their objects. Accordingly, the sensitivity of thought through it being tied back to experience would lead to sensitive subjects who would be able to follow all of their affective motives and a whole range of psychological and intellectual activities.⁴ We can easily see how the administered world does not allow us to flourish as subjects, and, in addition, how Adorno takes this over from Freud and Nietzsche: conceptual thinking constantly encounters its limitations, as it remains bound to drives and impulses outside of our rationality. As a consequence, Adorno submits that the suppression of these impulses lead to destructive personalities and destructive rationalities. In the section on rage, for example, Adorno refers to the first type of impulse. His claim that idealism is based on rage [*Wut*] is based on the speculation that the drive to turn everything into one’s own has an animalistic origin. The source here is twofold: on the one hand, Adorno has the beginning of Hegel’s chapter on self-consciousness in mind, specifically, where Hegel refers to *desire* as the total appropriation of the other, which leads to a fight between two self-consciousnesses and the sublimation of desire into an objectively shared world in labor and enjoyment. On the other hand, he has psychological phenomena in mind, such as the observation that the drive to *possess the other*, as it can

¹ The usual translation of “geglückt” with “successful” is an awful translation, especially since Adorno does not have a utilitarian idea in mind; rather, the German word contains “Glück” – a life in happiness.

² Philosophical thinking, theories, science, and other intellectual activities tend to deny their origin in something that is *external* to them, namely experience. Accordingly, Adorno often refers to his own personal experiences when he explains abstract ideas.

³ For this, see Honneth, Axel, *Pathologien der Vernunft. Geschichte und Gegenwart der Kritischen Theorie*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp 2007, 105 and 108 [an English translation of this essay is available]. As was earlier stated, we will come back to the topic of language.

⁴ Ibid.

be observed in pathological forms of love, leads to the destruction of what is loved.⁵ The overall point, though, should be clear: all forms of possessive thinking in the form of dominating the object lead to the extinguishing of what *remains* other: “Less and less was left outside” (ND 23). We can observe this process both in the history of philosophy and in the real history of our civilization. Current phenomena, such as the further virtualization and technological mediation of the world, as well as the replacement of everything natural with the rational (our body, genes, plants, etc.), seems to come out of such a “rage” motive: we are in the process of destroying the other through making it our own. The only alternative to this identificatory form of thinking is negative dialectics:

“Thought-forms want to go beyond what is merely extant, “given”. The point which thinking directs against its material is not solely the domination of nature turned spiritual. While thinking does violence upon that which it exerts its syntheses, it follows at the same time a potential which waits in what it faces, and unconsciously obeys the idea of restituting to the pieces what it itself has done; in philosophy this unconsciousness becomes conscious. The hope of reconciliation is conjoined to irreconcilable thinking, because the resistance of thinking against the merely existent, the domineering freedom of the subject, also intends in the object what, through its preparation to the object, was lost to this latter” (ND 19).

The idea presented here is important for understanding Adorno’s repeated claim that thinking has something to do with “guilt” and “sacrifice:” since the subject is forced to do violence to nature, from which it tries to liberate itself, it is forced to sacrifice (a) its own self through self-domination and (b) nature through external domination. This guilt remains one of the impulses of thinking.

To be continued next week

Questions

Nope. Everything is crystal clear. Wittgenstein would have loved this...

⁵ Adorno’s ideal of a “communication with things” seems to be influenced by Hegel’s concept of love in his early Jena manuscripts.