

Protocol, Graduate Seminar – Adorno and Heidegger**Class Session: 1 - Date: September 2, 2010****Minute taker: Christian Lotz****Topic: Introduction to the seminar and discussion of Adorno's *The Actuality of Philosophy***

AbbreviationsND = Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*; AP = Adorno, *The Actuality of Philosophy*; TH = Heidegger, *The Thing***Introduction**

The class session began with general remarks about the seminar and introductory remarks on Heidegger and Adorno. Lotz underlined that this seminar will be challenging for everyone, him included, for the following reasons: [1] we are unable to focus on a single text, [2] it is difficult to overstep the ideological barriers between critical theory and fundamental ontology, and [3] Adorno's and Heidegger's writing styles require slow and meditative readings. Though we are dealing with two different intellectual backgrounds, scholars before have remarked that Adorno and Heidegger come to similar interpretations of modernity.¹ Nevertheless, in order to overcome the surface interpretation, we should, according to Lotz, identify an issue that both thinkers deal with.² Toward this end, Lotz proposed that we try to make our way into Adorno and Heidegger by selecting issues that allow us to see more clearly the similarities *and* the differences between both philosophers. At least one of the things we want to learn is how to think about *the same* issue within two different frameworks. Lotz, with his infinite wisdom, determined beforehand that we will focus on the following questions: [1] what is a thing?, [2] what is thinking?, and [3] what is language?

Announcements

Lotz announced that Prof. Hedrick, Prof. Vessey (GVSU), and Prof. Painter (WCC) will join us for our retreat at the Ralph McMullan Retreat Center at Lake Higgins. He is willing to provide wine for the retreat, though he expressed his concerns about the drinking level encountered at the last retreat. He therefore proposed that everyone should give a couple of extra dollars for an "emergency drinking fund." In addition, there will be an extra session with Prof. Harries (Yale) on Saturday, Oct. 30, and an extra session at Lotz's place on Friday, Oct 15. Brown announced that he plans to crash on Lotz's sofa (which Lotz stoically refused to comment upon). (BTW: Lotz's wife says that the correct word in this context is "crash," but what do I know: I am just a German?!). Johnson, a future master of Heidegger, graciously agreed to inform us about Heidegger's take on poetic language during our retreat. Finally, Prof. Thompson and Prof. Whyte will join us on Oct 21 for a discussion both of Feenberg, Heidegger, and Thomson, as well as of Thompson (himself) on technology. The following class sessions have been cancelled: Oct 7 (exchange: Oct 15), Nov 4 (exchange: Oct 30), Nov 18, Nov 25, Dec 2 (exchange: retreat). Lotz expressed his hope that this seminar will become a larger social and academic enterprise than is often the case in traditional seminars. He also highlighted that everyone in this seminar should treat others with respect and without aggression (so no fist-fighting, or saying "that is so lame"). Should there be any issues of this or some other kind, please bring them to Lotz's attention immediately, as he is sometimes remarkably insensitive to "tensions" in the classroom. Lotz also remarked that he will demonstrate that a recent remark on "lazy" professors in graduate seminars is unwarranted in his case.

¹ See especially Mörchen, Herman, *Adorno and Heidegger. Untersuchung einer philosophischen Kommunikationsverweigerung*, Frankfurt: Klostermann 1981. In his impressive 800 page masterpiece, Mörchen presents and analyses all quotes of and references to Heidegger's work that Adorno used during his lifetime. See also Düttmann, Alexander Garcia, *The Memory of Thought: An Essay on Heidegger and Adorno*, New York: Continuum 2002 [originally German 1991].

² Though Adorno's *Jargon of Authenticity* could be used for meta-questions about language, Lotz refuses to use the book for the seminar. Lotz underlined that the extremely polemical and partly unfair critique by Adorno will not help us to settle the dust and learn something positive.

He warned that he will lecture for 2 hours and 50 minutes every Thursday followed by a 10 minute discussion (just kidding!!).

The Thing

Heidegger's attempt to rethink the tradition and the whole corpus of metaphysics is guided by his thesis that Being became (mis)understood as 'objecthood' [*Gegenständlichkeit*], which is based on a specific conception of thinking that Heidegger, in his later writings, tries to overcome. In addition, the topic of "world" in *Being and Time* is transformed into the question of "the thing" in Heidegger's later writings. Astonishingly, the questioning of objecthood is central for Adorno, too, though the topic is here addressed through the Marxist concept of reification. Though Adorno never gave up on the subject-object schema, he nevertheless also attempted to re-think what it means to be "related" to objects and his critique of idealism lead him to a new take on objecthood. Lotz ingeniously laid out paragraphs from Heidegger's brief essay *The Thing*, from Adorno's *Negative Dialectics*, and from Heidegger's lecture course *What is a Thing?* in order to demonstrate his initial remarks:

"Dialectics is so little to be reduced to reification as to any other isolated category, were it ever so polemical. What human beings suffer from, the lament of reification would in the meantime rather gloss over than denounce. The woe lies in the relationships which damn human beings to powerlessness and apathy and yet would have to be changed by them; not primarily in human beings and the manner in which the relationships appear to them. In contrast to the possibility of total catastrophe, reification is an epiphenomenon; all the more so is the alienation coupled to it, the subjective state of consciousness, which corresponds to it. It is reproduced by fear; consciousness, reified in the already constituted society, is not its constituens [Latin: what constitutes]. Those who regard the thingly as what is radically evil; who would like to dynamize everything, which is, into pure contemporaneity, tend to be hostile towards the other, the alien, whose name does not resound in alienation for nothing; to that non-identity, which would need to be emancipated not solely in consciousness but in a reconciled humanity. Absolute dynamics however would be that absolute handling of the facts, which violently satisfies itself and misuses the non-identical as its mere occasion. Unbroken universally human slogans serve thereby once again to make what is not the same as the subject, into what is the same. The things harden themselves as fragments of what was subjugated; the latter's rescue means the love for things. What consciousness experiences as thingly and alien is not to be expelled from the dialectic of the existent: negatively, compulsion and heteronomy, yet also the distorted figure of what ought to be loved, and what the bane, the endogamy of consciousness, does not permit to be loved. [...] The reconciled condition would not annex the alien [Fremde] by means of a philosophical imperialism, but would find its happiness in the fact that the latter remains what is distant and divergent in the given nearness, as far beyond the heterogenous as what is its own." (ND 168)

Lotz explained this passage in detail. He claimed that the most important aspects are the following: [1] reification means that the world appears to us in a "fixed," "stable" and independent "in-itself" (Adorno often refers to Lukacs's interpretation of Kant's *Ding-an-sich*; see also Marx on commodity fetishism in *Das Kapital*). As such, the world seems to be non-controllable for individuals, though paradoxically it is the *result* of their actions. [2] Nevertheless, the attempt to *transform* and *think* that everything objective is the result of subjective activity (=overcoming alienation) leads to the destruction of what remains ultimately "foreign" to consciousness and the agent, namely, the "non-identical" (or, 'the other'). Thus, the urge to make everything "the same" (of one's own) is not a way out of the reified nature of our society and the world we live in. [3] The utopian core of Adorno's thinking becomes visible in this important paragraph: instead of destroying the distance between us and 'the reality,' he proposes saving this distance through a relationship that he characterizes as *love*.³ the other keeps its distance *and* in this distance it can be "near" to us. Now, compare this with a passage from Heidegger's *The Thing*:

³ This topic has its roots in [1] the early Hegel, [2] Marx's early philosophy, and [3] German Romanticism.

“Man stares at what the explosion of the atom bomb could bring with it. He does not see that the atom bomb and its explosion are the mere final emission of what has long since taken place, has already happened. [...] The terrifying is unsettling; it places everything outside its own nature. What is it that unsettles and thus terrifies?⁴ It shows itself and hides itself in the *way* in which everything presences, namely, in the fact that despite all conquest of distances the nearness of things remains absent. What about nearness? How can we come to know its nature? Nearness, it seems, cannot be encountered directly. We succeed in reaching it rather by attending to what is near. Near to us are what we usually call things. But what is a thing? Man has so far given no more thought to the thing as a thing than he has to nearness. The jug is a thing. What is the jug? We say: a vessel, something of the kind that holds something else within it. As a vessel the jug is something self-sustained, something that stands on its own. This standing on its own characterizes the jug as something that is self-supporting, or independent. As the self-supporting independence of something independent, the jug differs from an object.” (TH 164)⁵

Heidegger’s thesis is clear: the true destruction and nihilism is not the atomic bomb itself; rather, a prior “frame of thought”⁶ (no longer conceived as a subjective activity) establishes a specific interpretation of Being, of which the atomic bomb is only one result: “the *atom bomb* and its explosion are the mere final emission of what has long since taken place, already happened” (TH 164). The really terrifying thing, according to Heidegger, is the fact that what should be thought of as closest to us (Being) has been transformed into a universal “annihilation of the thing” through universal availability [*Verfügbarkeit*].

Accordingly, though Adorno’s and Heidegger’s philosophies operate on different grounds, they come astonishingly close in their concrete analyses (though we need to find out what exactly each thinker means by “nearness.”)

Motivations for ideological differences

According to Lotz, the harsh and often unfair critique of Heidegger by Adorno can be traced back to the following larger issues of the intellectual background in Germany: [1] there were rumors that Heidegger was an anti-Semite even before 1933 (most scholars agree that despite Heidegger’s Nazism he was neither an anti-Semite nor followed other major elements of the Nazi-ideology, such as biological racism).⁷ [2] Adorno’s background was his “damaged life” and his sensibility for any suffering from reality. Heidegger’s philosophy is interpreted as *affirmative*.⁸ [3] Heidegger is taken as the representative of a “teutonic” tradition that has destroyed itself with his involvement in German politics between 1933 and 1934. [4] Heidegger’s philosophy was interpreted as a form of elitism and removal from the actual social and political reality of his times, which is also supported by an extremely different *life style* of Heidegger and Adorno: whereas Heidegger lived in his hut in the *Schwarzwald* and never conceived himself as an “intellectual,” Adorno was extremely open, worldly, and cultural. Adorno was also publically visible and spoke and wrote about a whole range of philosophical, sociological, political, and cultural issues. [5] Heidegger, dissimilarly, was accused of being silent about Auschwitz after 1945 without drawing the appropriate consequences personally *and* philosophically. Finally, [6] one should not underestimate the overall educational background of Adorno and Heidegger: whereas Adorno came out of a 19th century bourgeois context, which included Romanticism, modern art, poetry, Marxism, Brecht, and Benjamin, Heidegger emerged out of a simple southern religious background. The defining

⁴ Heidegger discussed the topic of the “unsettling” first in his *Antigone* interpretation in his *Introduction to Metaphysics*, as well as in his Hölderlin lecture course *The Ister*.

⁵ “Jug” [*Krug*] can also be translated as “pitcher,” “mug,” or “stein.” In Southern Germany both beer and wine traditionally was served in clay pitchers. The *Krug* also appears in Adorno’s essay on Bloch entitled “Handle, Pitcher, and Early Experience,” as well as in Simmel’s essay “The Handle.”

⁶ At this point we need to tie the “thing” issue to the “thinking” issue.

⁷ However, he supported other aspects, too. For example, a recent publication of a protocol of a seminar in 1934 shows that Heidegger tries to justify the “expansion” of Germany’s borders and the myth of a “people without space.”

⁸ The issue of affirmative philosophy will come back in our discussion of Adorno’s *Metaphysics after Auschwitz*, where he claims that all metaphysics leads to making reality *meaningful*.

experience for Adorno is (modern) classical music, the defining experience for Heidegger is theology. On the other hand, the philosophical background at the beginning of their careers is astonishingly similar: the first two books that Adorno wrote offered a critique of Husserl's epistemology and a critique of Kierkegaard's subjectivism, both of which are topics that define much of Heidegger's early philosophy. Both Adorno and Heidegger had Neo-Kantians as their teachers.

The Actuality of Philosophy (1931)

Lotz pointed out that it is interesting to see that in his inaugural lecture *The Actuality of Philosophy* (1931), Adorno identifies Heidegger's philosophy as the major opponent of his own philosophy. Adorno's critique is carried out in the following way: [1] Heidegger's philosophy is a form of subjectivism and idealism (AP 27). According to Adorno, in *Being and Time* Heidegger reduces the "fullness of reality" (AP 27) into a revised version of the German idealist notion of inwardness. Though Adorno is correct to claim that Heidegger does not deal with the whole range of social and political issues and presents a new way of understanding subjectivity, the conception of *world* in BT, which is explicitly *not* subjective, makes this claim doubtful, in Lotz's view. [2] Heidegger assumes an "undialectical and historically pre-dialectical" (AP 28) reality (ready to hand). However, although Heidegger's concepts are certainly not dialectical and should be taken as a form of transcendental philosophy, it seems incorrect to claim that the ready-to-hand "reality" is a-historical. It is rather the opposite: *Dasein* is based on a form of temporality, which lets us encounter things only in historically constituted worlds. [3] Heidegger's philosophy returns to the vitalism that it rejects (AP 28). [4] Heidegger "ontologizes" time. What Adorno has in mind here is Heidegger alleged essentialism: Adorno thinks that Heidegger makes time the essence of history and, accordingly, that he has an *abstract* conception of history, which leads to the "narrowness of the Heideggerian existential categories" (AP 28). Finally, [5] Adorno accuses Heidegger of overlooking the dialectical character of the reality by his attempt to go back to beginnings. This "deception of beginning" (AP 35), i.e. roots, origins, primordiality, etc., leads back to old metaphysical structures, in Adorno's view. Overall, Adorno's strategy seems to be twofold: he moves Heidegger closer to other philosophies that he had earlier critiqued as a form of formalism (Husserl, Neo-Kantianism, Scientism, Positivism, see AP 25-27), and, in addition, he prepares his own conception of philosophy as an attempt to understand *both* subjectivity and reality dialectically [1] by giving up any claim to understand the totality of being and [2] by giving up a transcendental approach a la Kant.

Dialectics and interpretation of a fragmented reality

Dialectics, in Adorno's conception, means that the relation between *concept* and *issue* [*Sache*] can never coincide: the issue transcends any attempt to fully grasp it and forces us to constantly change our conceptions. Accordingly, the *experience* that philosophy is based on, for Adorno, is this going back and forth between concept and issue. The roots of this conception can be found in Hegel's *Phenomenology*; for in Hegel's early work, consciousness discovers itself as constantly having the *wrong* conception both of itself and of knowing (=subject-object relation); it makes the experience that its conception has to change, which in turn also leads to a different reality. For example, the chapter on perception consciousness discovers that what it took itself to be, namely, perceptive consciousness, is not satisfactory, given that a fuller conception of what it means to know must include the "hidden" and non-perceptive properties of the world (such as reason, categories, etc.). This discovery shows that reality itself must change as well: for it turns out that a simple empiricist conception of consciousness cannot account for the fact that reality is *both* experienced *and* thought. Adorno's concept of "interpretation" [*Deutung*] expresses this notion of dialectic nicely, insofar as it captures the sense in which every interpretative process is indeed a process of "adjustment" throughout which both interpretation and the understood are a *process*.⁹ As Adorno puts it, "philosophy persistently and with the claim to truth,

⁹ This process is driven by what Adorno in *Negative Dialectics* calls "self-reflection." We should also be aware that Adorno's notion of interpretation does not have much in common with Heidegger's notion of interpretation [*Auslegung*] in BT.

must proceed interpretively without ever possessing a sure key to interpretation; nothing more is given to it than fleeting, disappearing traces within riddle figures of that which exists and their astonishing entwinings” (AP 31). As a consequence, total concepts, such as “class” and “ideology” become unusable (AP 36). What can be “revealed” in the form of a temporarily fixed “dialectical image” is a specific historical “constellation” (AP 32) and “configuration” (AP34) of the reality in the form of an “unintentional truth” (AP 33). Through philosophical interpretation and the configuration of aspects and of (the) issue(s), as Adorno puts it, “reality springs open” (AP 35). It is clear that Adorno’s conception of philosophy as he presents it in 1931 is diametrically opposed to Heidegger’s. We will see, nevertheless, that both thinkers will engage in a re-conceptualization of *the same*, namely, thinghood.

Questions

Nope. Brilliant class by our honorable teacher, Prof. Lotz.