

TOM HUHN

Introduction

Thoughts beside Themselves

Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno was a philosopher, composer, essayist, and social theorist. He was born in 1903 in Frankfurt, Germany, where his father, Oskar Wiesengrund, was a prominent wine merchant and assimilated Jew who had converted to Protestantism. His mother, Maria Cavelli-Adorno della Piana, was a Catholic and had enjoyed a successful career as a singer until the time of her marriage to Adorno's father. (In 1938 Adorno had his name changed from Wiesengrund to Adorno.) Adorno was an only child in a quite well off household that he described as presided over by two mothers. His other "mother" was his mother's sister, Agathe Calvelli-Adorno. She too had had a successful musical career, as a pianist.

At the age of fifteen, Adorno began weekly study meetings with Siegfried Kracauer, a man fourteen years his senior and then editor of the liberal newspaper *Frankfurter Zeitung*. The weekly meetings continued for many years and had Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* as their first object of study. Adorno later reported that he owed far more of his intellectual development to these meetings than to his academic teachers. Adorno began his university studies in Frankfurt in 1921, studying philosophy, sociology, music, and psychology. It was during the time of his studies that Adorno met and befriended Max Horkheimer and Walter Benjamin; the latter would become especially influential for Adorno's philosophical work. In 1924 Adorno completed a doctorate in philosophy. In 1925 he went to Vienna, where he stayed on and off for months at a time through 1927, with the idea of continuing his musical training and possibly pursuing a career as a composer and concert pianist. In Vienna Alban Berg taught him composition and Eduard Steurmann piano; both were members of the Schoenberg circle. Adorno also continued writing the music

criticism he had begun publishing in 1921. As Richard Leppert notes in his introduction to the recent collection of Adorno's writings on music, "Between 1921, while still a teenager, and 1931 he published dozens of opera and concert reviews, reviews of published new music, as well as essays on aesthetics, and heavily favoring new music."¹

Back in Frankfurt in 1927 Adorno began to associate with Horkheimer and other members of the Institute for Social Research, which later would be referred to as the "Frankfurt School."² The Institut für Sozialforschung opened in Frankfurt in 1924 and had as its mission the combining of philosophy and social science into a critical theory of social existence. Adorno's publications for the Institute began in 1932 in the first issue of its journal. As the Institute's commitment to a version of Marxist insight was never concealed, the police closed its offices six weeks after Hitler assumed the power of the German state on January 30, 1933. A few months later the Nazis took from Adorno his official right to teach. After the Second World War the Institute was officially reopened in Frankfurt in 1951. The members of the Institute spent the Nazi period in exile, many of them in the United States, where they established ties with Columbia and Princeton Universities. Adorno arrived in New York in 1938 and remained there until 1941, when he moved to Los Angeles, where he would spend almost eight years and adopt United States citizenship. In a 1957 letter, Adorno wrote of his eleven-year exile in America: "I believe 90 percent of all that I've published in Germany was written in America."³ Adorno returned to Germany in 1949; in 1953 he was appointed to a tenured faculty position in Frankfurt. He became the director of the Institute after Horkheimer's retirement in 1958, and he remained director until his death from a heart attack, on holiday in Switzerland, in 1969.

Though Adorno is perhaps best known in the English-speaking world for two major philosophical publications, *Negative Dialectics*, published in German in 1966, and *Aesthetic Theory*, not quite finished at the time of his death, we would do well to heed two recent observations regarding Adorno's work. The first is Richard Leppert's reminder of the large place that music occupied in Adorno's life. Indeed, Adorno continued composing throughout his adult life, and, as Leppert calculates, nearly a third of Adorno's 23 volumes of published writings (the posthumous writings are estimated to appear in roughly the same quantity) are concerned with music.⁴ The second is

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Henry Pickford's acknowledgment of the very wide public life that Adorno led in West Germany from 1950 to 1969. Pickford writes, "His engagement in the mass media was a logical consequence of his eminently practical intentions to effect change."⁵ Adorno participated in more than 150 radio programs and published often in the leading newspapers and journals.

As a thinker Adorno shunned systematic philosophy and doubted whether true thinking could ever achieve transparency: "True thoughts are those alone which do not understand themselves."⁶ His complaint against systematic philosophy was of a piece with his sweeping objection to *methodological* thinking: Both suffer an avoidance of the purported object of inquiry by the very constraints that allow them to have a goal or isolate a phenomenon in the first place. Systematic philosophy and methodological thinking share a predilection for reaching conclusions that too often cannot help but confirm whatever presuppositions are embedded in their premises. In this way, thinking becomes not only opaque to itself but also rigid, like a thing, before it has the opportunity to allow things to encounter it or for it to become something else. Adorno's involvement with music, art, and literature, but so too especially his interest in philosophy, is then best considered as a means of overcoming, or rather at least eluding, the rigidification of experience by thought. And yet Adorno was no anti-thinker, no Luddite of the mind, but rather one of the most probing and accomplished *thinkers* of the twentieth century.

The most extensive effects of the pervasiveness of the stiffening character of thought can be found in the forms of subjective life. The human subject, bound up by its hard edges, comes to be like – even especially to itself – an object. But just as Adorno is not against thought *in toto*, so is he also not against subjectivity. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and coauthor Horkheimer famously read Odysseus as the prototype of rigid, albeit successful, subjectivity. It is the cunning calculation of Odysseus, as well as his readiness to sacrifice his men and himself, which makes him the prototype of subjectivity. We might say that the clever strategies of Odysseus are the precursors of systematic thought. This aspect of subjective life is best characterized according to the ascendancy of reflexivity in it. That is, what makes Odysseus so successful is not just his heroic mastery over and domination of the men, matter, and monsters that

he encounters but also his having raised mastery and domination to the guiding principle of all his actions. And the success of this principle is to be attributed, according to Horkheimer and Adorno, to its peculiar reflexive character.

At first glance, this reflexivity seems rather curious in the case of mastery and domination, for how could reflexivity be appropriate when the whole point of mastery and domination – their concept, we might say – is that they submit to no other force. And yet, consistent with their concept, mastery and domination require subjectivity to submit itself to them. In short, whatever mastery Odysseus achieves requires a previous submission and mastery of the self. It is thus by means of its ability to submit that subjectivity becomes masterful. This is no small accomplishment; great and terrible things have followed hard upon it. The victorious thumping of the chest is the most vivid illustration of this reflexivity; the victor thereby demonstrates his willingness to subdue and master himself as the very sign – and the price – of his victory over others.

Now one might imagine that Adorno's response to this critique of the structure and provenance of subjectivity would be to recommend its transcendence, a kind of Nietzschean overcoming of all the previous forms of mastered (and submitted) subjectivity. But such an imagined response forgets Adorno's commitment to avoiding the sweeping obfuscations and dead ends of systematic philosophizing. To respect that commitment means then that Adorno's critique implies that subjectivity needs, at most, reform rather than revolution. Yet this realization does not diminish the scope and penetration of Adorno's critique of subjectivity. It means instead that Adorno understands the development of subjectivity as a dialectical, historical process. Therefore, what is required, according to him, is not a return to an earlier form of subjectivity but rather some forward movement from within what subjectivity has already become. And it's just here that the centrality of aesthetics, and especially the dynamic of mimesis, is to be understood in his thought. One might arrive at this central insight of his by following Adorno's critique of the limitations of subjective thought.

If the historical task for thinking is like that for subjectivity, then the forward path is not through some overcoming but rather by way of a certain reflexiveness in, and reflection upon, thought. In this regard, one might hazard that Adorno could not be more traditionally

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philosophical, if traditional philosophy is taken to have its ground in self-examination. But what here sets him apart from so much of western philosophy is the place where and the manner in which reflection occurs. If thinking cannot turn upon itself to reflect without bringing along its rigidifying tendencies and objectifying impulses, it would thereby doom whatever reflection it might achieve to become but another reified version of what it has already been. And yet the dialectical advantage of objectifying thought – like that of reifying subjectivity – is that it leaves in its wake a great many deadened things. The aim is not to revivify these ossified objects, as if we might unlock some life trapped in them, but instead to allow subjectivity to become, reflectively, something else in response to them, perhaps by allowing them to become something other than what systematic, strategic thinking would have us continue to make of them.

Thoughts and other dead things might be taken to be object lessons for life because they exhibit the stasis wherein life, for whatever reason, neglected to continue, except in a damaged and damaging fashion. And this means that life might be something more than whatever it is that blossomed and withered in the coming to be of objects, including especially that premier object, the subject. The thoroughness of Adorno's dialectical thinking is apparent in *Negative Dialectics*, one of his most important works. There he reconsiders the supposed inevitably forward trajectory of the dialectic and examines whether what Hegel called "determinate negation," the antithetical moment of the dialectic, has always been followed by a recuperative, integrative synthesis. Adorno famously contends that historically it has not and that the best evidence of this failure lies in the fact that even philosophy missed its own opportunity to realize itself as a form of life.

Thinking tied too tightly to concepts – philosophy's tragic flaw – is to be countered by objects that elude, and thoughts that turn away from, the objectifications of thinking. How might we think here about experience without reducing it to the contours of thought or conversely valorizing it as some transcendent category? Adorno's attempt seems to have been to try to follow, intellectually and experientially, the shape of certain objects, namely those that themselves seemed irreducible to thoughts alone. This intellectual mimetic tracing of the object might be called experience, if by that term we intend an encounter with an object that itself is something not wholly

objective. Artworks – and especially the experiences they spark – are just such objects for Adorno. But rather than characterize artworks as resisting thought or objecthood, thereby enjoining just the kind of agonistic struggle that helped Odysseus make himself into an opposition to that which he imagined resisted him, we might instead pragmatically describe artworks as objects which, in their incompleteness, invite a like-minded subjectivity. Artworks are incomplete in at least two senses. One is that they unavoidably address subjects whose experience or interpretation of them they presuppose. The other constitutive incompleteness of artworks can be mined from Hegel's insight that each artwork is a symbol – or sole inhabitant – of a world that is nonetheless implied by the very achieved singularity of its existence. This incompleteness is then a kind of dislocation, for the artwork is the displaced and lonely sole example of a world that cannot otherwise bring itself more completely into existence. The incompleteness of the object becomes for thoughtful experience a symptom of an incompleteness elsewhere. Put differently, what we might call the robustness, or the very existence, of the admittedly singular object is evidence of an incompletely realized world. Why don't other objects imply incompletely realized worlds? Perhaps they might, if only we did not encounter so much difficulty imagining them.

Marx's analysis of the commodity also proceeded by taking an object's identity to be premised upon a constitutive absence. In the case of the commodity, its appearance depended on the disappearance of the social relations that allowed its coming into being. We might imagine the artwork for Adorno as a kind of reverse image of the commodity: The artwork, rather than efface a world for the sake of its coming into being, instead projects a possible world. But it seems this projection must avoid both the sweep of conceptual thought as well as its impulse toward completion. For Adorno the most striking possibility of a world is not glimpsed by thought alone. Rather, possibilities reside in the particular ways in which experience has been thwarted. Adorno's dialectical appreciation of experience – aided by Freud's psychoanalytic theory – entails the observation that experience is constituted also, or even especially, by the specific ways in which it has been thwarted.

But how does experience come to be thwarted if it comes to be possible only by the very limitations that constitute it? Space and

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time, as Kant observed, are not encroachments upon experience but are instead the boundaries within and according to which experience is made possible in the first place. So too might we observe for Adorno that dialectically the object, and subject, are not mere impediments to some imagined experience. They are instead the very stuff of, in, and out of which experience is made. Hegel understood the artwork as the object *par excellence* for subjective experience precisely insofar as it could not – despite its overwhelmingly subjective character – escape the constraint that it remain objective, which is to say an object rather than a thought. That is, for Hegel, just as beauty must always be a human artifact, so too can the artwork never entirely escape its materiality, which seemed to guarantee its remaining objective. For Hegel then, the artwork's inescapable objecthood – which signals the inability of subjectivity to ever fully consume the art object without remainder – makes the artwork the most fruitful object in the path of subjective becoming. The artwork object is thus a goad rather than impediment to experience. And this characterization of the productive thwarting of experience by art is not so far afield from a psychoanalytic conception of experience, which posits the ego as the rigidification and armature within which experience comes to be. And just as the force of the ego is fundamentally negative, as that which throws itself up against whatever is imagined as opposed to it, so too is the artwork a mimetic projection of where subjectivity might most productively founder. Perhaps the artwork is a kind of cunning mimetic device that subjectivity somewhat unwittingly puts up in front of itself as a trap. The artwork is a mimetic reenactment of subjective foundering.

Artworks and the aesthetic judgments that follow them are mimetic reproductions of thoughts and objects which themselves are deadened bits of subjectivity. They thereby provide cues for what subjectivity once might have been – or failed to become. Could there not then be a form of life, a form of subjectivity, which takes up these mimetic residues as objects for reflection? Thus we might understand reflection as the further unfolding of subjective possibility. Here mimesis in Adorno becomes the name for the projection and re-projection of subjectivity, of an unfolding of aspects. Mimesis is not then the copying or imitation of what has been but the continuity from reflection to reflection, of the multiple aspects and movements of subjective possibility.

The artwork is central to the project of reflection and the possibility of further subjective unfolding because, for Adorno (following Hegel), the artwork is the most thoroughly subjective of objects. The subjectivity of the artwork is due to the peculiar character of its objectivity: The artwork is an unfinished, incomplete object, and by dint of this it invites reflection. We might observe that all objects are incomplete insofar as they are but truncated aspects of subjectivity. But the artwork, unlike all other objects, is also mimetic and reflexive insofar as it is an image of the ongoing incompleteness of subjective activity. The task of subjectivity is not of course to become complete, for that would signal but another version of static rigidification. The task is rather for subjectivity to go on with itself, to become more of what it already is. But to become more of what it already is is problematic because, not only is it difficult to distinguish what is living from what is dead in the form of the subject, it is also unclear how to distinguish between those dead objects that might repay subjective regard and those that might not.

The artwork – and in this Adorno follows the Kantian tradition regarding the efficacy of aesthetic judgment – is an occasion for subjective dissolution and reconstitution. It is precisely the artwork's unfinishedness that holds the greatest promise for the subject. The artwork is not the occasion for the subject to complete itself; instead, what Adorno calls its truth content is the open-endedness of an object at rest within its lack of completion. Its content is not something, especially not some truth, to be deciphered by the subject. The artwork is instead an occasion for the subject to liken itself to a state of unfinishedness. The subject is thereby afforded a mimetic model of the pitfalls of subjective becoming, of how to forestall becoming fixed and fixated, rigid and further bound up.

The larger issue here is the relation of objects to subjective becoming. I want to suggest that, for Adorno, mimesis was the key term according to which he came to understand the dialectical relations between subjectivity and objects, and, more importantly, between subjective and objective becoming. Were Adorno not so adverse to metaphysics, not to mention sweeping philosophical formulations, we might even claim that all things come to be mimetically. But what might this mean? And why do art and aesthetic theory come

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to be the primary modes for Adorno of encountering crucial aspects of mimetic production and reproduction?

To begin to answer these questions requires that we heed Adorno's oft-repeated critique of "first philosophy," that is, of philosophy having any first principles from which everything subsequently is to be deduced. This means that to continue here is to give up the hope of finding some origin of mimesis. Instead, Adorno in effect posits mimesis as having always been there, or here. He characterizes it as "archaic," indeed as an "impulse," suggesting even in one passage of his *Aesthetic Theory* that to trace back its history might well deposit us in the realm of biology.⁷ And in response to the more or less common art historical supposition that cave drawings are the first instances of mimesis, Adorno responds that "the first images must have been *preceded* by a mimetic comportment" and adds – in what I take to be the most direct, though nondialectical, specification of mimesis in his *Aesthetic Theory* – that this mimetic comportment is "the assimilation of the self to its other" (AT, 329).

There is much to be gleaned from this single passage: Mimesis precedes image making, by extension all thing making (production), and is thereby initially a praxis rather than a poiesis, a doing rather than a making. If we then ask, "A doing of what?" the answer appears: the assimilating of self to other. There is a still more pressing opposition, which we might approach by asking what activity in particular mimesis, as a dynamic act of assimilation, stands in contrast to. Adorno's answer might be harvested from the following: "Mimesis is an archaic comportment that as an immediate practice... is not knowledge" (AT, 111). Knowledge, we might say, stands at the farthest remove from the archaic mimetic comportment. Of course, this constellation changes drastically when art comes to be the vehicle of mimesis. We can understand this turn of events by appreciating another consequence of mimesis being subject to the critique of first philosophy. That is, for Adorno, the inability to say how or when mimesis originates entails the dialectical consequence that the contrary of mimesis is posited simultaneously with it. In other words, the dialectical complement to the mimetic impulse is what Adorno designates the mimetic taboo. And though we likewise cannot identify the origin of this taboo on mimesis, we nonetheless are given some inkling of what undergirds it when Adorno remarks that

“immediately back of the mimetic taboo stands a sexual one: Nothing should be moist” (AT, 116).

This provocative formulation calls forth two brief digressions. The first is perhaps out of place in a discussion of Adorno, as it begins with a film reference (Adorno noted that, despite his vigilance, film viewing always made him stupid). In David Lean’s film about T. E. Lawrence, titled *Lawrence of Arabia*, Peter O’Toole, playing Lawrence, says, “I love the desert, it’s so clean.” The desert is of course not so much clean as it is *not* moist, hence the best instantiation of the sexual taboo. This leads to a second digression, by way of Freud’s *Civilization and Its Discontents*, whose original German title relates directly to Adorno’s definition of mimesis as assimilation, since *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur* might better be translated as *The Inassimilable in Civilization*. Recall Freud’s remark in that book that the history of civilization might be written according to a chart documenting the increase in the use of soap. I take the thrust of that remark to be not simply that we are now cleaner than we have ever been but that what appears to us inassimilable – dirt by definition is the inassimilable *par excellence* – looms larger than ever, leading to the call for ever more soap to flush out whatever nooks and crannies still serve as refuge for dirt. Soap is anti-mimetic; it is the means by which the fear of an object’s deliquescence – its assimilating return to nature – is thwarted. In this light, soap appears as the primary instrument of Nietzsche’s *principium individuationis* – the principle of individuation – a recurring motif in the *Aesthetic Theory*. Soap not only polices but also helps erect the boundary between self and other.

Though we cannot fix the origin of the mimetic taboo, we nevertheless can perceive its contours by understanding this taboo’s relation to art making and artworks, as follows: “Mimetic comportment... is seized in art – the organ of mimesis since the mimetic taboo – ...[and] becomes its bearer” (AT, 110). Not only does mimetic comportment migrate to art – perhaps it might be appropriate to say it now hibernates there – it also thereby becomes a dialectically entwined impulse and taboo. But why does art become the “refuge” and organ for mimetic comportment? This seems easy to answer, but I’m not sure how satisfying the answer is, for it appears to be founded on a preexisting *likeness* between mimesis and art. Adorno characterizes both as a “comportment” [*Verhalten*].