Introduction

The kinds of commitments associated with Adorno's aesthetics – high modernism in the arts, a sharp distinction between high and low art, radical aesthetic autonomy, an ambitious conception of deep artistic truth, etc. – may today sound rather anachronistic, belonging, as in the most straightforward sense they did, to a historical condition that has come to pass. Whether as the result of commodification, a general exhaustion of the Kantian idea of aesthetic experience as an end in itself, or a diminished capacity or readiness for the type of absorption that works of high modernism require, contemporary art is widely viewed as torn loose from institutions and practices that would purport to secure its autonomy and aura, and produced and received in a wide variety of contexts that resist description in terms of anything like a unified *aesthetic theory*. The rise of the so-called expanded field entails that there is no longer a working consensus about what counts as a given medium, distinguishes art more generally from non-artistic artifacts, or is relevant when trying to stake out a view concerning its very value – why we think it is desirable, worthwhile, or even worthy of a continued existence.[1] While present in some unruly space of communication, issues of form may seem irrelevant when

[1] Rosalind Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernity Myths* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), p. 279: "We had thought to use a universal category to authenticate a group of particulars, but the category has now been forced to cover such heterogeneity that it is, itself, in danger of collapsing. And so we stare at the pit in the earth and think we both do and don't know what sculpture is." Krauss distinguishes the modernist period of abstraction and negativity, "the monument as pure marker or base, functionally placeless and largely self-referential" (p. 280) from the postmodern period in which artistic work is not dictated by the conditions of a particular medium and in which the work, in this case sculpture, is "only one term on the periphery of a field in which there are other, differently structured possibilities" (p. 284). In this influential essay, Krauss further suggests that "within the situation of postmodernism, practice is not defined in relation to a given medium – sculpture – but rather in relation to the logical operations on a set of cultural terms, for which any medium – photography, books, lines on walls, mirrors, or sculpture itself – might be used."

compared with issues to do with the transmission and reception of mere information.[2]

Adorno conceived of and wrote *Aesthetic Theory* at the end of a long era whose sustaining commitments can be traced back to (and read off from) Kant and German Idealism via Kierkegaard, Marx, Nietzsche, and Heidegger: it is, as the author makes clear at the outset of the book, a swan-song. As such, it is also a requiem for the arts that Adorno saw as defining of this epoch: in literature the line from Goethe and Schiller to Büchner, Proust, and Beckett; in music that from Bach and Beethoven to Wagner, Mahler, and Schönberg; in painting that from Rembrandt and Vermeer to Manet, Klee, and Picasso. One of the many and perhaps ironical senses in which *Aesthetic Theory* is a *Spätwerk* is that it was precisely during the 1960s, when Adorno worked on the material that posthumously would be published as *Ästhetische Theorie* (with its double meaning of "theory of aesthetics" and "aestheticized theory"), that high modernism in painting, with its commitment to originality, visual absorption, medium-specificity, and transcendence, was most vigorously and effectively challenged by new developments such as minimalism, pop-art, *arte povera*, various forms of neo-avant-gardism, installation art, land-art, and conceptualism.[3] While strangely oblivious to much of the art that surrounded him when he composed this book, Adorno clearly sensed that an epoch was reaching its end. "It is self-evident," he writes, "that nothing concerning art is self-evident anymore, not its inner life, not its relation to the world, not even its right to exist … The sea of the formerly inconceivable, on which around 1910 revolutionary art movements set out, did not bestow the promised happiness of adventure."[4]

What Adorno sought was nothing less than an attempt to bring before his readers a complete account of the *modernist* art-work. He wanted to comprehend art's social justification, what he saw as its claim to express truth, as well as its formal structure and inner dialectic. Less a movement than a tendency or an orientation, the origin of modernism lies deeply buried within the modern project as a whole. No understanding of modernity – its significance, its aspirations – can be complete, he argued, without a comprehension of its most advanced art. Equally importantly,

[2] For a philosophically informed attempt at formulating an account of contemporary art, see Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art* (London and New York: Verso, 2013).

[3] For a reflection on the notion of *Spätwerk* in Adorno, see Edward Said, *On Late Style: Music and Literature against the Grain* (New York: Vintage, 2007).

[4] Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. and ed. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p. 1.

however, Adorno viewed modernist art as arising from a crisis in the very project of modernity itself.

One may of course ask what such a project would look like, why anyone would want to provide it, or even whether the concept of anything like "a *project* of modernity" can be made sense of in the first place. If "modernity" is a notoriously slippery notion, then "the project of modernity," with its suggestion of some sort of collective effort, may seem completely unpromising. Why, for example, isn't "modernity" just the term we use in order to designate a particular period of recent history – the period, say, of liberalism and capitalism, of science and technology, or of the loss of pervasive forms of organized religion? Or, in more value-laden terms, what is wrong with thinking of modernity as a period of progress or regression, of liberation or nihilism? Why this emphasis on a project?

Working in the tradition from Kant and Hegel, Adorno thinks of the project of modernity as arising from the very possibility of entertaining and sustaining an awareness of oneself as *actively self-determining*. In Hegel, the project of modernity – if this is the adequate gloss on spirit's attainment of full self-transparency in absolute knowledge – is precisely oriented towards the achievement of freedom. That is what modernity, starting with the Reformation, the rise of liberal institutions, and the turn to free interiority in thinkers like Descartes and Kant, demands. It is freedom actualized at all relevant levels from individual self-mastery to citizenry grounded in rights, and it is awareness of oneself as free – the active, self-reflecting relation to oneself as fully rational, facing no alien other, "the being of oneself in absolute otherness."

Adorno accepts the emphasis on freedom, where freedom means being able to own up to, justify, and stand behind one's deeds as a rational agent – responsive *to* norms and reasons, but also responsible *for* them. Freedom in this sense is internally linked to reason, making modernity an aspiration not just towards freedom but also towards reason. Adorno also accepts that freedom in this sense will require the existence of institutions – ethical life (*Sittlichkeit*) – within which agents are able to adopt and cultivate meaningful, rational ends with which they are able to identify. Where Adorno starts to mark out his own trajectory vis-à-vis this view is with his claim that, while remaining valid for us, the traditional project of self-determining and self-sufficient subjectivity, in the way it has been conceived and sought actualized, has largely been a failure. It has been a failure, he thinks, because, for various complex reasons, the form of life to which we belong has almost exclusively concentrated on cultivating instrumental or co-ordinating practices, rather than practices

involving the kind of active responsiveness that the idealist or Kant/Hegel picture identifies as freedom. What this amounts to is the familiar "critique of instrumental reason," the vision of modern society as obsessed with utility and effectively indifferent to standards other than those prescribing the most efficient means to achieving given ends. At the social level, what Adorno sees is the dominance of bureaucratic procedure over individual response and responsibility – the celebration of the general, the rule, that which is repeated, mindlessly, in every instance of its application – over the capacity rationally to set ends and actualize them without arbitrary constraint. Of particular importance to this account is Adorno's assessment of capitalism, which he views in Marxist and Lukácsian terms, as bringing about a reduction of all qualitative distinctions and judgments to the formal orientation required by rational behavior in a market. In stark opposition to Hegel, who seemed to believe that the basic institutional presuppositions for achieving a fully satisfying form of freedom were in place as early as the post-Napoleonic Europe of his own days, Adorno watched with horror at what he saw as an essential collapse – epitomized, obviously, in twentieth-century totalitarianism, and especially in Nazi Germany – of the central institutional framework within which the cultivation of free subjectivity, if possible at all, should have taken place.

The modern project has, however, also failed because the *ideal* itself – the ideal of freedom – has been misinterpreted. While related in ways that will later be explored, this is a different claim than the "instrumentalization"-claim. The "instrumentalization"-claim focuses on external constraints on the actualization of freedom. In part, this claim will have to appeal to empirical considerations taken from anthropology, economy, psychoanalysis, etc. By contrast, the notion that there has been a failure to interpret the ideal itself is exclusively a philosophical claim: it can only be made good through philosophical attempts at elucidation and reconstruction.

Readers of Heidegger, for example, or Wittgenstein, will be familiar with the idea that the fundamental task of philosophy is to explore a set of commitments that modern agents have lost sight of, repressed, or even actively rejected. In Heidegger, the idea takes the form of trying to rethink the very basis of our practices and our ways of making the world intelligible to us – and all of this in explicit opposition to the modern *Seinsvergessenheit*, involving ideals of sense-making and disclosure of meaning that Heidegger finds are compromised, false, or even destructive of our most fundamental interests and self-understanding. In the late Wittgenstein, the idea is played out in terms of a failure to identify

with the commitments entailed by our own language games. In Adorno, the form this claim has taken is to suggest that the type of responsiveness that the Kant/Hegel tradition has seen as crucial – responsiveness to reasons that on the whole are general, valid in all purportedly similar cases, transposable to new contexts without any change of meaning – while a required capacity in any agent, does not capture the full meaning of rational responsiveness. Thus, Adorno's critique of reason in thinkers like Kant and Hegel is less aimed at rejection (like Hegel, Adorno rarely rejects any view head-on but almost always tries to determine its social significance and, if possible, register its partial correctness) than it is at correcting a one-sided vision of what reason demands. Among the provisions Adorno brings to the table in this regard is his conception of a form of free or unconstrained responsiveness to particularity, to the particular, being different from, and not to be confused with, a mere causal triggering. Included in this account of responsiveness is a vision of reason as inherently reflective, responsive to reasons and reason-giving, and therefore conceptual in its nature, but also as capable of responding to forms of authority and significance (identifying particulars or relations between them as mattering) that transcend the level of straightforward conceptual determinacy.

The debates surrounding this issue are complex and often wide-ranging. There are those who consider the commitment to a free life along Hegelian lines deeply problematic, or even a destructive philosophical fiction. Heidegger is certainly in this camp, and there are passages in which even Adorno seems to interpret the aspiration to a free, self-determining life as not much more than a fantasy of dominance and transparency, as though the subject imagined itself to be a wholly self-reliant author of its world.[5] What the Heideggerian urges is that discovering what matters, how items and actions become significant, cannot be the result of individual decision alone. There must be some wider framework in relation to which we commit ourselves; if not, deciding between X and Y, where X and Y are beliefs, will always contain an element of arbitrariness. To see that something is a good reason for X rather than Y, we need not only to be receptive to evidence in the most straightforward observational or conceptual sense (*observing* something, perhaps, or realizing that a given view coheres with

[5] For one of the more extreme passages, see Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1973), pp. 22–3: "Idealism – most explicitly in Fichte – gives unconscious sway to the ideology that the not-I, *l'autrui*, and finally all that reminds us of nature is inferior, so the unity of the self-preserving thought may devour it without misgivings."

other accepted views), but to *acknowledge that something matters to us in a certain way*.

The proponent of a Kantian view of rationality will at this point be suggesting that, if there is a commitment to the truth of a particular belief, and if this commitment is going to be *mine* as opposed to being the result (so the alternative is often formulated) simply of impersonal processes involving causal impact, then it will have to be undertaken because I think it is the right one; and since thinking it is right to commit oneself in the way one does entails at least a sense of having good reasons for undertaking the commitment, it must be the case that even the solicitation of which a Heideggerian such as Hubert Dreyfus speaks must be grounded in conceptually mediated, self-reflective reason-giving.[6] On the Kantian view, there can be no subjectively mediated escape from this stance. The only alternative is to refrain from describing the commitment as mine, as having been undertaken by me. If the apperceptive taking of myself as doing this – undertaking the commitment, making the promises entailed by doing so, observing the inferences involved, and referring to reasons – is not available, then what happens can no longer be described in terms of rational agency. The first-person stance and language of free subjectivity (in and through which I recognize myself as an agent) will have to be replaced by a third-person description of an event: thus, the subject disappears from view. Although the Kantian agrees that descriptions of this sort will often be required and, since, on transcendental idealist views, there is no direct ontological conflict between the two types of claims, that they will largely be compatible with accounts based on an appeal to reflective subjectivity, she will resist the view that third-person accounts can ever

[6] See the debate between Dreyfus and John McDowell in *Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy* 50:4 (2007): John McDowell, "What Myth?" (338–51); Hubert Dreyfus, "The Return of the Myth of the Mental" (352–65) ; McDowell, "Response to Dreyfus" (366–70); Dreyfus, "Response to McDowell" (371–7). For a lucid expression of the stance of rational agency, see Steven Crowell, *Normativity and Phenomenology in Husserl and Heidegger* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 90–1: "What distinguishes the stance of the rational agent from that of the self reflecting on itself is that one's mental states are taken as responsive to the world in a normative, and not merely a causal, way. This indicates the conceptual connection between first-person immediacy and authority and rational agency as such – namely, the conceptual connection between rational agency and self-responsibility. In a deliberative stance, a person treats his or her beliefs not as mental occurrences that can be *explained* in terms of interactions with the world, but as *justified* by the world. An avowal expresses my commitment to the truth of my belief because it takes the world as the set of justifying reasons for my beliefs. To treat my beliefs in light of explanatory reasons is to treat them from a third-person point of view, just as others can treat my beliefs as explanatory of my behavior whether or not the beliefs are true. But to consider my beliefs in light of justifying reasons is to treat them in a distinctively first-personal way – that is, to *decide* about them on the basis of facts distinct from and independent of my beliefs, to decide what does or does not justify my taking a certain stance toward the world."

replace first-person ones. Indeed, the Kantian will hold that even the making of third-person accounts – the attempt to characterize, say, my action X in neurophysiological terms – is only possible insofar as a rational subject vouches for their truth in light of reasons, thereby claiming that the account *ought* to be accepted. Without accountable reason-giving, there would, for the Kantian, be no such ought; thus, the very edifice of scientific theorizing aiming, normatively, to formulate truths about the world, would collapse into a mere rubble of signifiers being mindlessly pushed here and there.

The conflict between the Kant/Hegel account of rationality and normativity, on the one hand, and Heidegger's appeal to non-conceptual responsivity to layers of significance, on the other, may on some construals permit a stable resolution. Certainly, leading proponents of both camps think that such a resolution is available. On other construals, however, the conflict may seem to generate a stalemate of the sort that sometimes divides different schools of philosophy: none of the opponents' arguments seem convincing or even fully relevant to the options one is exploring.

What characterizes Adorno's position is that, on the one hand, he refuses to believe that a resolution is at hand, while, on the other, he approaches the division as a socially and historically generated "rift" in our conception of reason itself. On Adorno's account there is ideally a continuity between conceptual behavior – conceptual synthesis and judgment – and the kind of non-conceptual abilities we possess to discern significance and be motivated by it. Indeed, a central claim in Adorno is that the two capacities mutually presuppose one another: while our conceptual capacities rest on and require a pre-predicative receptivity (a mimetic capacity, as Adorno sometimes calls it), the pre-predicative receptivity needs a framework of conceptual capacities in order to generate insight of a communicable, intersubjectively verifiable, and fully accountable kind. The division, however, to the extent that it exists cannot be breached by philosophical argument alone but must be theorized as one aspect (the other being the "instrumentality"-issue) of modernity's one-sided process of rationalization.

This is one of the key senses in which art enters the more broadly philosophical picture that Adorno outlines in central writings such as the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and *Negative Dialectics*. Art and aesthetic behavior display for us the ways in which reason is divided. While a refuge of "mimetic" behavior and response, they are reminders of the loss we have incurred as the result of cultivating one dimension of reason (the pursuit in the service of instrumental reason of rigid conceptual determinacy) at the expense of the other (receptivity, openness). At the end of the day,

then, what art is supposed to do for us is to offer a space within which we may experience ourselves as subjects endowed not only with normatively regulated conceptual capacities (*Verstand*, in Kant's sense), but also with forms of receptivity that promise a fuller and more meaningful existence in the union of sense, need, impulse, and action – ultimately a fully significant action and selfhood, and with that freedom in a more complete and satisfying sense than we find in the standard Kantian and Hegelian accounts.

Adorno's position is in certain key respects in line with previous attempts to view art as offering a critique of reason of this sort. Schiller's project of letting art and beauty, via the "play drive" (*Spieltrieb*), serve as mediators between reason and sensuousness offers a particularly poignant example.[7] What especially motivates Schiller is the desire to see reason fully embodied in artistic activity such that human dignity can be made visually manifest for inspiration and celebration in the art-work itself. Behind Schiller, however, stands the Kant of the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, who in various ways seeks to overcome the division he himself opened up in the first two *Critiques* between reason as the capacity for free, principled self-determination and sense as the natural capacity for receptivity, to be accounted for in terms of causality under natural laws. Kant follows this strategy when arguing that beauty should be regarded as a symbol of the good (and therefore as expressing reason's interest in free self-determination), but also when he bases his model of aesthetic judging on the notion of pleasure taken in the apprehension of purposiveness, however subjectively postulated. However, for those who do not recognize art as capable of playing such a role, or are skeptical of the very desire for such a reconciliation, the Kant/Schiller line will remain unpromising. Indeed, it may even seem provocatively otherworldly, invoking art as a means to resolve a problem that would require a much more direct approach, either in social or philosophical terms. (Marx is not the only thinker to sense the artificiality of such approaches: on the Marxist view expressed in Georg Lukács and Walter Benjamin, the idea of art as "realizing" freedom is viewed as a prime example of bourgeois ideology.)

Ultimately, Adorno's dissatisfaction with the Kant/Schiller line of invoking beauty as an arbiter between the order of freedom and the order of necessity, our active and passive sides, mind and body in the widest

[7] Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man in a Series of Letters*, trans. Reginald Snell (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1965). For what is probably the most direct appropriation of Schiller's vision of art within the Frankfurt School tradition of Critical Theory, see Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1966), pp. 185f.

sense, stems from the fact that he can only accept this as an aspiration, something close to Fichte's unending striving, rather than an achievement within our reach. For Adorno, "reconciliation" and the full overcoming of the dualisms of modern life – what Hegel calls *Zerissenheit* – are not for art to bring about but, at best, only to intimate or anticipate. There are several reasons why this is the case, the most prominent being that Adorno views art as *Schein* (semblance). Art cannot "change anything" or "solve problems" for us; nor can it present any claims that are not bracketed by the general *scheinhaftigkeit* of art. The claims made in it are more like promissory notes that, in order to be validated for members of our social form of life, require other forms of clarification, reflection, and perhaps action. However, while *Schein* is often translated as "semblance" or even "illusion," it also means "appearance," suggesting, as Adorno does, that serious art contains its own structures of self-overcoming or negation. What that involves and how the work of art is said to be able to conduct such a negation of itself as *Schein* will be one of the key issues in the reconstruction I seek to present.

Another reason why art can only intimate the terms of a proper reconciliation is its relative distance from society and the mechanisms keyed towards the reproduction of social life in general. With more than a nod to a Marxian account, Adorno maintains that the very existence of art presupposes a division between manual and intellectual labor. While dependent for its very existence on material reproduction, on the economy in the widest sense, art is necessarily produced and experienced in a more or less autonomous space. Art, in other words, enjoys its *Spielraum*, its apparently unrestricted freedom, in part because someone is out there laboring under non-ideal, potentially oppressive conditions that, in all likelihood, will forever be unaffected by what goes on in the studio or the concert hall. In Adorno's account, this enabling distance from the sphere of work and material reproduction – the sphere, in short, of "necessity" – leaves art not only with a flair of "otherworldliness," but with something like bad conscience and self-hatred, taints that, in his view, can be read off as exemplary manifestations of high modernism. There appears to be a complete mismatch between art's claim to present radical social critique and the intransigent world it confronts.

One might think that this would suggest that art which aspires to change things should be as overtly "political" as possible. To some extent, this was Walter Benjamin's (no doubt Brechtian) response to Adorno's emphatic defense of the integrity of high modernism. Rather than cultivating its own autonomy and "negativity," "committed" art – art that

deliberately takes a stance – should be realistic and moralistic, producing overt messages or perhaps even propaganda rather than aesthetic form to achieve its ends. For Adorno, however, committed art, whether in Brechtian production, Sartrean existentialist theater, or Lukácsian social realism, will always in some way reproduce and hence affirm whatever it is that it seeks to criticize. At the risk of seeming irresponsible or indifferent to social problems in the way Adorno complains is the predominant psychological make-up of so-called bourgeois subjectivity, Adorno's favorite art exists light years away from immediate social reality: it is cold, abstract, non-communicative, and not in any way directly engaged.

This brings up yet another reason – hard to state, challenging to defend – why Adorno resists the view that art can directly partake in any social change with a view towards "reconciliation." As many commentators have pointed out, this reason takes the form of something like a variation of the prohibition of graven images. In a "false" society – a society that is unreconciled, deeply and structurally unfree – any image of reconciliation will risk giving the false impression that reconciliation is socially within reach. Images of reconciliation will in that sense be "false." Only images that do not imply the possibility of reconciliation are able – so Adorno – to anticipate a genuinely reconciled state of being.

It is worth pondering for a moment how extreme this view actually is. In opposition to virtually any aesthetician in modern times, Adorno is deeply suspicious of, and indeed even hostile towards, art that in some way or another is ready and able to *please*. For Kant, art that aesthetically pleases is beautiful. Human agents naturally take pleasure in beautiful objects; and aesthetics is the study of aesthetic pleasure in precisely this sense. Adorno, by contrast, dismisses beauty in the conventional sense of the word. To present a beautiful object or image is tantamount to saying that there is hope when no such hope is justified. Art that truly seeks to be hopeful must renounce all (false) hope, for it is only by means of stark negativity or negation that anything like reconciliation can be anticipated.

For these and other reasons, Adorno is both pessimistic and optimistic about the role of art in modern society. He is pessimistic because art will never be able to engage directly with society. Rather than participating, advanced art stands outside, following internal laws of development that remain to be spelled out. He is also pessimistic because, for a number of reasons, the art he thinks really matters – the high modernism of figures like Berg, Beckett, and Picasso – seems in a context of apparently universal commodification transient and incapable of survival. Adorno is optimistic, however, about the capacity of such art to bring about insight and