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# **ADORNO**

## **A Guide for the Perplexed**

**Alex Thomson**

# **ADORNO: A GUIDE FOR THE PERPLEXED**

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# **ADORNO: A GUIDE FOR THE PERPLEXED**

**ALEX THOMSON**



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## ABBREVIATIONS

- AE      *Against Epistemology: A Metacritique* trans. Willis Domingo, Oxford: Blackwell, 1982.
- AP      ‘The Actuality of Philosophy’, *Telos* 31 (1977): 120–33.
- AT      *Aesthetic Theory* trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor, London: Athlone, 1992.
- CI      *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture* ed. J.M. Bernstein, London: Routledge, 1991.
- CM      *Critical Models* trans. Henry Pickford, New York: Columbia University Press, 1998.
- DE      *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments* with Max Horkheimer, trans. Edmund Jephcott, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002.
- EOM      *Essays on Music* ed. Richard Leppert, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002.
- INH      ‘The Idea of Natural History’, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor, *Telos* 32 (1977): 111–24.
- MCP      *Metaphysics: Concepts and Problems* trans. Edmund Jephcott, Cambridge: Polity, 2000.
- MM      *Minima Moralia* trans. Edmund Jephcott, London: New Left Books, 1974.
- ND      *Negative Dialectics* trans. E.B. Ashton, London: Routledge, 1973.
- NL I, II      *Notes to Literature* vols. I & II trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen, New York: Columbia University Press, 1991–92.
- OPM      ‘On Popular Music’, with the assistance of George Simpson, in EOM, pp. 437–69.



## ABBREVIATIONS

- P        *Prisms* trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981.
- PMP     *Problems of Moral Philosophy* trans. Rodney Livingstone, Cambridge: Polity, 2000.
- QF       *Quasi Una Fantasia: Essays in Modern Music* trans. Rodney Livingstone, London: Verso, 1992.
- RS       ‘The Radio Symphony’, trans. Susan H. Gillespie, in EOM, pp. 251–70.
- TPC     ‘Theory of Pseudo Culture’, trans. Deborah Cook, *Telos* 95 (1993): 15–38.

## INTRODUCTION

*Seldom do intellectual difficulties stem from mere lack of intelligibility;  
they are usually the result of shock.*

(NL II 228–9)

*The value of a thought is measured by its distance from the continuity of  
the familiar.*

(MM 80)

The philosophical and critical works of Theodor Adorno (1903–69) are some of the most challenging produced in the twentieth century. Challenging in two senses of the word: in a weaker sense, that they present formidable difficulties of understanding and interpretation to the reader; and in a strong sense, that they seek to force us to rethink many things we take for granted, and to make us question the very possibility of philosophy, of art and of moral life in the contemporary world. Adorno's writing can often seem obscure, impenetrable and forbidding; doubly so for those with little knowledge of the philosophical traditions on which he draws. But more troubling is the way he often sets out to confound what we take for common sense, and to attack what he sees as the dominant trends in twentieth-century European and American culture, trends which have only intensified since his death. As a result, most readers experience a sense of resistance to reading Adorno, a jolt to the system which can be almost as physical as it is intellectual: if the first question raised by his texts is: 'what does he mean?', the second question will often be: 'can he really mean that?'

Adorno sometimes characterized this effect in terms of shock, a shock which he also associated with certain kinds of modern art,

particularly the work of the composer Arnold Schoenberg. But by shock, Adorno does not simply mean to *épater les bourgeois*, to scandalize a complacent public with obscenity, or violence, or immorality. Unlike his great intellectual inspiration Walter Benjamin, Adorno had little time for surrealism, which he saw as a celebration of irrationalism, just as he was suspicious of the revolutionary Marxist politics embraced by his friend. No, for Adorno shock is something which he associates with philosophy itself: the fundamental impulse of metaphysics to transform the world, by going beyond the immediate surface of things, by not being content with appearances, by striving to replace mere opinion with truth. In *Negative Dialectics*, the most systematic statement of his philosophical position, Adorno comments that 'the power of the status quo puts up the facades into which our consciousness crashes. It must seek to crash through them' (ND 17). A thought that would be worth having would have to be difficult. This fundamental and principled commitment to difficulty raises subsidiary problems, which have perplexed many of Adorno's readers. In this introduction I will discuss a number of these secondary difficulties, in order that we might focus on the essential difficulty which alone matters to Adorno.

So why bother with Adorno? Simply that he is one of the most profound thinkers of the twentieth century; and he is so precisely to the extent that his work is difficult, in raising questions which we would prefer to avoid. At the heart of his work lies a profound sense of ambivalence over the possibility of freedom in the contemporary world, and an interrogation of the promises made for our freedom by the western intellectual tradition since Kant: that freedom depends on the assertion of our autonomy as individuals; that freedom comes from our submission to – or our rebellion against – social norms; that freedom comes through aesthetic experience; that freedom comes through conformity to the moral law. But this is an ambivalence which spreads to touch on pretty much the entirety of Adorno's work: the key questions for whom are simply: Is art possible? Is freedom possible? Is philosophy possible? Although Adorno's responses may be unusual, he addresses concerns which have been at the heart of western intellectual life for the last three hundred years.

If I insist on this philosophical dimension of Adorno's work, it is partly because it has been consistently underrated. Adorno is often presented, by both his critics and admirers, as some species of sociologist. It is certainly true that the great attraction of Adorno's work

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is that his work is not abstract but precisely engaged with the smallest details of the world around us. But Adorno does not just set out to *describe* the world: as we have seen, he wishes to break open the world of appearances and show how things really are. But since any attempt to go beyond the way the world presents itself to us must always be a matter of speculation, Adorno can best be described as a philosopher, even though his work challenges or even perverts some deeply held philosophical assumptions. The specific difficulty this raises is that when Adorno sketches out what look like historical arguments, they must be understood as speculative rather than sociological.

For all his concern with the effects of capitalism on the ways we act and on the ways we think, Adorno's task is not simply that of cataloguing the deformation of reason under the impact of particular economic or historical transformations. That would be to presume in advance that we know what history is, or where economics begins and ends. Rather, Adorno tries to find ways to interrogate the incapacity of reason to account for the evident failings of social life, given that thinking historically or economically might be just as much a part of the problem as they are the solution. Impatient critics have seen this as contradictory: surely Adorno relies on reason to interrogate reason? But this criticism only makes sense if we know in advance what reason is: whereas for Adorno the power of thought is precisely that it can, and must, leave secure ground and head into uncharted waters. Without the necessary risk this involves, we surrender the possibility of anything other than dogmatic metaphysics: founding our understanding of the world in conformity with a particular set of beliefs. In this Adorno continues the tradition of Enlightenment thought which he also seeks to put into question. In *Negative Dialectics* he comments that 'thought as such, before all particular contents, is an act of negation, of resistance to that which is forced upon it' (ND 19). What is forced upon it are rigidified, frozen patterns of thinking. Resistance to dogma means opposition to religious forms of thought, even where those forms claim to have been fully secularized, and whether they depend on faith in God, in the laws of the free market, or the triumph of the proletariat owing to the immutable laws of history.

Failure to adequately distinguish the transcendental dimension of Adorno's work, closely connected to the near constant reference to Kant in his methodological writings, has been responsible for much

misunderstanding. For example, Adorno has often been compared to the British tradition which runs from Matthew Arnold to F.R. Leavis to Raymond Williams, in which the alienation and exploitation evident in industrialized mass society is criticized from the standpoint of culture. Adorno might equally be said to compare society as it is with the claims made on its behalf by culture. But the others do not share his remorseless scepticism about the powers usually attributed to high culture: art, poetry, music, philosophy. Both our flawed societies and the arts which have claimed to resolve their problems must be criticized. So for all Adorno's passionate commitment to the potential of art and of philosophy to change the world, his work also entails an essential hesitation about that power.

Distinguishing the philosophical dimension of Adorno's work, which governs the way we need to read it, is made harder by the fact that many of his key strategies and much of his philosophical vocabulary refers to the work of Hegel, a philosopher who until recently remained deeply unfashionable in Britain and America (largely as a reaction to the enthusiasms of an earlier generation of British philosophers). A comment such as: 'dialectics is the self-consciousness of the objective context of delusion' (ND 417) will make little sense unless we bear in mind that Hegel's dialectic purports to be a speculative construction of the self-consciousness of the universe: philosophy in his sense was the total self-comprehension of the world from both an objective and a subjective viewpoint. Adorno inverts this idea: dialectics does not deliver us the truth of the world, but rather knowledge of its untruth. In *Minima Moralia*, 'whose method' Adorno remarks was 'schooled' by that of Hegel, he writes: 'the whole is the false' (MM 16, 50). The title of *Negative Dialectics* itself should tell us that to understand Adorno's work we need to understand the claims made by Hegel, and why these are so compelling to Adorno, as well as why they need to be modified or revised. But the title of one of Adorno's idiosyncratic essays on Hegel, 'Skoteinos', a Greek word meaning darkness or obscurity, should be enough to warn us that this may not make things any easier.

Having said all this, we should bear in mind Adorno's comment in *Negative Dialectics*: 'Philosophy is the most serious of things; but then again it is not all that serious' (ND 14). Indeed, Adorno's entire attitude to philosophy is sceptical and critical. His work consists less in building up systems than in knocking them down. In this demolition project his inspiration is Nietzsche, one of the most notorious

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and iconoclastic figures of the late nineteenth century, as a passing comment made by Adorno in his 1965 lecture course on moral philosophy reveals: 'of all the so-called great philosophers I owe him by far the greatest debt – more even than to Hegel' (PMP 172). Of particular interest to us in preparing to read Adorno is the extent to which he takes over Nietzsche's conception of philosophy as a double task of destruction and creation. Adorno's revised understanding of dialectics means allowing philosophical and cultural alternatives to destroy each other: for example, by showing the complicity of knowledge with power, of morality with violence, of historical progress with the destruction of the natural world. By taking to its extreme the logic he sees as evident within the ways we generally think, Adorno seeks to unsettle us, and leave us without a certain ground on which to base our moral judgements. He believes that our desires for certainty, for absolutes, for fixed foundations or for security, are themselves violent and destructive forces which need to be challenged. In this Adorno is closer to pragmatism than to a thorough-going rationalism: his thinking is experimental, which means risking failure, but is a necessary condition of any possible progress: 'In principle philosophy can always go astray, which is the sole reason it can go forward' (ND 14).

Part of the experimental aspects of Adorno's writing is the unusual form of his work. Unlike many philosophers who work in the English language, Adorno does not see an absolute distinction between the content of a philosophical text and the manner of its presentation. The shock value of Adorno's work, which determines its critical potential, stems in part from his sense that the individual moments of an argument cannot be unfolded from a simple beginning, nor should they be subordinated to its conclusion. The essay is the most characteristic vehicle of Adorno's work, and we need to remember that 'essay' also means something experimental, an attempt. Adorno often refuses to define his terms, and arranges his material in such a way that there is often no clear hierarchy available between the various statements. Like an art work, the essay is defined by the 'reciprocal interaction' between the whole and its parts: 'the specific moments are not to be derived from the whole, nor vice versa' (NL I 14). The philosopher should not pretend to be able to provide a clear and rational explanation of the world, since the attempt to impose such patterns on the world is bound up with man's violent domination of nature. Adorno's interest in dialectics means that he sees identity as

relational. Concepts are not clearly distinct logical entities, but mobile and slippery frames for apprehending reality, whose interactions are always evolving. Rather than seek to freeze this movement, the form of the essay should try to imitate it.

This undoubtedly means hard work for every reader of Adorno, however familiar they are with the general outline of his thought. His work needs to be read with the same care with which we would listen to complex music. Adorno himself compares reading Hegel to listening to a Beethoven symphony, and these comments are one of the best guides to how to read his own texts:

Highly organized music too must be heard multidimensionally, forward and backward at the same time. Its temporal organizing principle requires this: time can be articulated only through distinctions between what is familiar and what is not yet familiar, between what already exists and what is new; the condition of moving forward is a retrogressive consciousness. One has to know a whole movement and be aware retrospectively of what has come before. The individual passages have to be grasped as consequences of what has come before, the meaning of a divergent repetition has to be evaluated, and reappearance has to be perceived not merely as architectonic correspondence but as something that has evolved with necessity.<sup>1</sup>

All of Adorno's works demand patient and sympathetic reading, which seeks to press beyond any initial shock to examine their overall coherence and structure. But we must also remember that he believes that the confidence of Beethoven or Hegel in the ultimate resolution of the parts within the harmonious totality of the work is no longer possible. So what we are really looking for is the way his work gestures to a coherence which it must also fail to achieve. This deliberate failure to resolve is an attempt to keep faith with the resistance of the world to objectifying thought. Adorno's favourite motif to characterize his approach is that of the constellation:

[The essay's] concepts are to be presented in such a way that they support one another, that each becomes articulated through its configuration with the others. In the essay discrete elements set off against each other come together to form a readable context; the essay erects no scaffolding and no structure. But the elements

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crystallize as a configuration through their motion. The constellation is a force field, just as every intellectual structure is necessarily transformed into a force field under the essay's gaze. (NL I 13)

Adorno's essays do not necessarily proceed from basic premises to clear conclusions: they are more playful, seeking to explore the ways concepts interact with each other from different angles. Often this can seem repetitive, as the same point is taken up again and again, but in a different light each time.

As a result of his ambitious objectives, of their range of reference, and of the fact that the form and style of his work is part and parcel of its power, Adorno's texts place exceptional demands on their readers. While it is often obvious which positions Adorno does not agree with, he rarely makes a positive conclusion explicit: if the burden of decision were to be taken off the reader, he would be betraying the Enlightenment principle that freedom comes through the free and autonomous use of reason. The aim of this book is to make it easier to read Adorno: but in doing so it risks betraying that premise of his work. Consequently, it cannot be intended to *replace* a reading of Adorno's work, but to precede and accompany it. Getting to know the work of a philosopher is not like buying a piece of flat-pack furniture and this *Guide for the Perplexed* cannot be a simple instruction book. Even in his own lifetime Adorno faced the challenge of continually testing his own theory against evolving historical circumstances. His readers must do the same: there can be no question of taking it up as an off-the-shelf solution. The specific historical configuration in which Adorno's ideas took shape may well have passed; but so long as the philosophical ailments for which Adorno's work offers treatment remain dominant his work will be not only of relevance but of great importance. To understand Adorno in English rather than German, at a point in time at which both the political and philosophical upheavals of the twentieth century may seem *passé*, out of date, lingering spectres, requires a complex gesture of translation. Adorno must be brought towards us; but we must reach out to Adorno too. The intransigence of these problems should not be underestimated, and we should certainly be suspicious of assuming or seeking a casual familiarity with Adorno's thought: when we are no longer perplexed by his work, we are no longer reading; we are no longer thinking. How we are to read Adorno must remain a problem.



For many commentators on Adorno such difficulties are so great that they cannot be overcome; or perhaps they do not judge the results worth the effort. I do not believe this is true or I could not have even begun to write this book, which has also of course been part of my own struggle to come to terms with Adorno. The historian of Marxism Leszek Kolakowski prefaces his discussion of *Negative Dialectics* with the claim that 'the pretentious obscurity of style and the contempt that it shows for the reader might be endurable if the book were not also totally devoid of literary form'; Martin Jay begins the only other short introductory book in English on Adorno's work by arguing that his subject 'would have been appalled at a book of this kind dedicated to him' and 'would have had a principled objection to any attempt to render his thought painlessly accessible to a wide audience'.<sup>2</sup> But Adorno's style is designed to challenge, perhaps even to provoke: since any allergic responses must be automatic, a matter of instinct, overcoming our own shock must be the necessary condition of a free response. There is no question of contempt for the reader; nor does Adorno believe in anything other than engagement with the widest possible audience. What he does not believe is that one should pander to an audience by presenting work in forms which betray its fundamental principles, or by flattering them that they will find the work easy. This is not because he judges his audience incapable of understanding, but because he continues to imagine, despite all the evidence, that human beings are rational creatures capable of overcoming their own resistance to thought. In this, Adorno remains a philosopher, even as he probes the moral and epistemological limits of rational knowledge of reality, and thus brings philosophy itself into question.

In *Adorno: A Guide for the Perplexed* I have chosen to focus on three aspects of his thought: his work on art and culture; the relationship between his social and moral thought, organized around the problem of freedom; and the interaction between philosophy and history. Each of these is dealt with in a single chapter, which might be read on its own, although there are many cross-connections between them, and a relatively sophisticated picture of Adorno will only emerge from bearing all three in mind at once. Because of the difficulty of Adorno's thought I have added a preliminary chapter in which I provide some background information on Adorno's life and times, and sketch out what I see as the primary political motivation of his work. On the basis of such an outline I believe it is much easier

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to see what is distinctive about Adorno's work, and particularly his insistence on the categories of mediation, dialectics and negativity. For all their philosophical weight, such terms in Adorno's work are deployed as strategic responses to particular configurations of historical forces; indeed at points the strain shows as the terms are subjected to greater loads than they may reasonably bear.

However much he admired his friend's work, Benjamin, Adorno suggests, remains at heart a *believer*: there are traces of a slightly naïve faith in a better future – what Adorno calls an 'undialectical positivity' – equally present in both his early and later thought, despite his apparent shift from a religious to a Marxist point of view (ND 17). What Adorno offers instead, attributing it to his idiosyncratic reading of Hegel, is an absolute insistence on negativity, on a relentlessly critical stance, an opposition not only to the world as it is today but to all ameliorative programmes and proposed alternatives. The real difficulty of Adorno's work is to read it in such a way that this negativity can be made to surrender its own utopian content, but without forfeiting its critical potential. For Benjamin, God or politics will save the day; for Adorno, only the painful struggle of every individual who is capable of it to overcome their own prejudices and habits of mind. As he puts it in conclusion to his essay 'Opinion Delusion Society' (three words that are almost synonymous for Adorno): 'Critical thought alone, not thought's complacent agreement with itself, may help bring about change' (CM 122).

## CHAPTER 1

### AGAINST AUTHENTICITY

*'It is even part of my good fortune not to be a house-owner', Nietzsche already wrote in the Gay Science. Today we should have to add: it is part of morality not to be at home in one's home.*

(MM 39)

*'Philosophy is really homesickness,' says Novalis, 'it is the urge to be at home everywhere.'*<sup>1</sup>

'Paradoxical, ironic, mercilessly critical,' writes Edward Said, 'Adorno was the quintessential intellectual, hating all systems, whether on our side or theirs, with equal distaste.'<sup>2</sup> There is certainly some truth in what was rapidly becoming a cliché by the time Said raised it in his 1993 radio lectures for the BBC. What most characterizes the writing of Theodor W. Adorno is exile: from the reassurance and familiarity of home and family; from mother tongue and from fatherland; from political or philosophical movements and schools. That Said discusses Adorno several times in his work suggests a partial identification with him, based on their shared love of music, but also on their common identity as exiles. There is a crucial difference, however. As a Palestinian whose wealthy family chose to have him educated in English-speaking schools and then the United States, Said found himself displaced through decisions made on his behalf. But Adorno's exile was self-imposed. He had made himself an intellectual exile even before the rise of the Nazi regime in the 1930s forced this musician, critic and philosopher, from an assimilated Jewish background and with Marxist leanings, to leave for Oxford and then the United States.