

An abstract painting of a city skyline at night. The foreground is filled with dark, jagged, and colorful shapes representing buildings and lights. The background is a vast, textured expanse of blue and purple, suggesting a sky or a distant horizon. The overall style is expressive and painterly.

# ADORNO AND THE ENDS OF PHILOSOPHY

Andrew Bowie



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## *Preface*

Adorno has been intriguing and irritating me since the mid-1970s, and at times in the intervening period I have given up on him as a major source for my philosophical reflections. The present book is not intended as any kind of definitive account of Adorno, which would anyway be at odds with basic assumptions of its subject. Rather, the reason for my writing it is that changes in the focus of attention of contemporary philosophy, as well as recent political and economic developments, made me appreciate that there was more to Adorno, above all as a philosopher, than I had sometimes thought. Increasing numbers of contemporary philosophers on both sides of the institutional divide between European and analytical philosophy have started to realize that this divide makes little sense. Where change has begun to happen, the reasons often have to do with a new willingness to look at the ways in which philosophy can inform pressing concerns of social, political, and cultural life. It is here that Adorno has come to seem very relevant, in ways which were previously not always apparent.

The further factor leading to the book has been the intellectual, but sadly not the political and real, demise of the neo-liberal model of capitalism that has wrought such destruction since the 1970s, and the need to rethink the contemporary historical, political, and economic situation of the world. This might sound wildly generalized, but Adorno's connection of philosophy to the idea that modern capitalism makes the world into a totality, in which systemic factors deeply affect aspects of everyday life all over the globe, has become hard to ignore. Whatever problems there are with this Marx-derived conception, it helps to suggest that the metaphysical aim of seeing how sense can be made of things, as A.W. Moore puts it, 'at the highest level of generality' (Moore 2012, p. 7) is connected to the concrete functioning of the socio-historical world. Adorno's work is predicated on the idea

that the traditional metaphysical aim of grasping things at the highest level of generality is likely to obscure or repress what does not fit into the metaphysical picture. For Adorno the concrete realization of the highest level of generality in modernity is actually the wholesale commodification of the natural and human worlds. This situation creates the difficulty for philosophy of seeking to do justice to the inherent particularity of things and people, at the same time as realizing that the world is more and more dominated by universalizing forms. Adorno's perception that the task of philosophy is to negotiate such contradictory perspectives contrasts with many approaches to philosophy, because resolving such contradictions is for him not a conceptual issue, but a political and social one. This is why Adorno should be looked at in terms of the ambiguous notion of the 'end of philosophy'. What Adorno offers here is flawed in some respects, but he confronts head-on things that never appear on the agenda of too much philosophy as practised today. At the same time, the contemporary changes in philosophy, epitomized in particular by the revival of Hegelianism and developments in pragmatism, have made it possible to think of new ways of addressing Adorno's concerns, so shifting the agenda of contemporary philosophy in directions which address issues that interest more than a small number of professional philosophers.

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## Introduction: *Contemporary Alternatives*

In an essay on 'The Wider Significance of Naturalism', Akeel Bilgrami (2010) suggests why the ends of contemporary philosophy are shifting in significant ways. What makes the essay startling is that a philosopher known for his work on specialized aspects of analytical philosophy addresses head-on central concerns of European philosophy which have been neglected in the analytical tradition. Bilgrami's criticisms of contemporary scientism echo *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, one of the most well-known (and problematic) books, written together with Max Horkheimer, by the philosopher, social theorist, and music theorist Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno (1903–1969).<sup>1</sup> In order to understand the contemporary debate about the scope of naturalistic explanations, Bilgrami insists on a genealogy of the tendency to regard nature, including the human world, in mechanistic terms that exclude considerations of human value. He focuses on events in the development of modern science in the seventeenth century in Britain which paved the way for Nietzsche's announcement of the 'death of God', and the 'disenchantment' of nature, one of whose manifestations is contemporary reductive naturalism.

Like Adorno, Bilgrami is not interested in hopes for a return of theology, or in questioning the validity of advances made by the modern sciences. He is concerned rather with how a particular questionable version of the idea of disenchantment comes to dominate thinking about nature. His genealogy focuses on a paradigmatic split between the 'Newtonians', such as Robert Boyle and Samuel Clarke, who 'began to dominate the Royal Society' (ibid., p. 38), and the 'dissenters'. The split originated in differences over theology, but had wider ramifications. The theological difference lay in the fact that the Newtonians removed God from nature, in the form of 'an exile into inaccessibility from the visions of ordinary people to a place outside the universe'

(ibid., p. 36), while the dissenters were essentially Pantheists, believing in God's 'availability to the visionary temperaments of all those who inhabit his world' (ibid.). The latter were not 'anti-science', because they too played an active role in the genesis of modern science, but they objected to the 'metaphysical outlook' (ibid., p. 38) of the Newtonians.

Clearly the theological debate here no longer has any great call on our philosophical attention. However, the implications of what lay behind the debate have considerable contemporary resonance, as well as directly echoing aspects of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: '[S]ome of the dissenters argued that it is only because one takes matter to be "brute" and "stupid", to use Newton's own term, that one would find it appropriate to conquer it with nothing but profit and material wealth as ends, and thereby destroy it both as a natural and a human environment for one's habitation' (ibid., p. 39). This latter view, Bilgrami argues, is too often conflated with a general 'Enlightenment' view of the exclusive superiority of scientific explanation, in order to reject any form of criticism of the potential consequences of the metaphysical assumptions behind the Newtonians' idea of nature as something to be conquered.

Neither the Newtonians' nor the dissenters' conceptions of nature are necessary for a 'thin' notion of modern scientific rationality, which both shared in any case: 'What was in dispute had nothing to do with science or rationality in that sense at all. What the early dissenting tradition was opposed to is the metaphysical orthodoxy that grew around Newtonian science and its implications for broader issues of culture and politics' (ibid., p. 47). The outcome of this genealogy is manifest in 'the fact that Weber and Marx were able to mobilize terms such as "disenchantment" and "commodification" and "alienation"' (ibid., p. 49) against the descendants of the Newtonians' conception. Bilgrami suggests that '[t]hese are all terms that describe how our relations to the world were impoverished in ways that desolate us, when we severed these deep connections in our conceptual and material lives' (ibid.), and he asks how much the 'wider significance of the dispute about naturalism in the early modern period [. . .] survives in our own time' (ibid.). He concludes by suggesting that analytical philosophers should address this question and 'come out of their more cramped focus and idiom' (ibid., p. 50) to do so.

The fact that Bilgrami makes such a demand can be seen as part of a contemporary sense that some of the concerns and methods of Anglo-American analytical philosophy are themselves a product of a 'Newtonian' attitude, and that they are therefore part of the problem he identifies. As Bilgrami's essay implies, even within analytical philosophy there are signs of dissatisfaction of the kind just suggested. Anyone wishing to reflect on issues associated with questions of alienation and disenchantment, such as the meanings of modern art, questions of ethics after the Holocaust, or why epistemology became so dominant

in modern philosophy, is these days unlikely to make their first port of call theories by analytical philosophers of art, ethics, or epistemology. The ever-growing volume of radically incompatible theories in such areas suggests that something is awry with seeing philosophy predominantly in terms of theory construction based on the 'analysis' of concepts.

This situation is one source of the interest in the work of European/Continental philosophers elsewhere in the humanities, arts, and social sciences. One cannot simply give up the attempt to arrive at adequate responses via conceptual clarification to issues which we cannot ignore. Philosophy has never been noted for its production of consensus, and as such it is doubtful whether a methodological line can really be drawn between 'analytical' and 'European/Continental' philosophy. However, the fact is that attempts to arrive in the analytical manner at solutions in the form of theories defining the real nature of the object of the theory produce more and more contradictions. This should give pause for thought, not least, as Bilgrami contends, because there are areas of the natural sciences which do produce substantial degrees of durable consensus.

Evidently science progresses via the destruction of untenable consensus, and theories may never be definitive, but problem-solving technological advances show that science can produce predictable effects based on warranted agreements, even if the level of agreement tends to differ, especially with regard to issues concerning living beings. In philosophy, in contrast, the debate, say, over 'realism' and 'anti-realism' generates ever more books and articles, but it is by no means clear that the substance of the debate has many effects outside philosophy.<sup>2</sup> Given that most thinkers on both sides of that debate do not doubt the validity of well-confirmed scientific theories, it is sometimes hard to see exactly what is at stake, and the participants rarely spell it out in a way which would make it clear to non-philosophers. The debate here is in some respects an echo of the differences between the Newtonians and the dissenters, insofar as neither side tends to be 'anti-science' in any significant sense. As we shall see, such a difference would in Adorno's terms therefore be more interesting for what it reveals about contemporary culture than for whether it settles the issue of 'realism'.

A stance which no longer sees such debates as decisive is sometimes, though, seen as leading into what is often referred to in terms of 'post-modernism'. The pursuit of truth as something universal and timeless is here renounced in favour of a concentration on difference, particularity, and a renunciation of many of the traditional goals of philosophy. The appeal of such an approach lies in the sense that its aim is to keep open the response to the 'Other'. Does such an aim, though, require the rejection of 'Western rationality', as *necessarily* involving repression of