

ADORNO'S DIALECTICAL REALISM

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The idea that Adorno should be read as a “realist” of any sort may indeed sound odd. And unpacking from Adorno’s elusive prose a credible and useful normative reconstruction of epistemology and metaphysics will take some work. But we argue that he should be added to the growing group of epistemologists and metaphysicians who have been developing post-positivist versions of realism such as contextual, internal, pragmatic and critical realisms. These latter realisms, however, while helpfully showing how realism can coexist with ontological pluralism, for example, as well as a highly contextualised account of knowledge, have not developed a political reflexivity about how the object of knowledge—the real—is constructed. As a field, then, post-positivist realisms have been politically naïve, which is perhaps why they have not enjoyed more influence among Continental philosophers.

Introduction

Bruno Latour has recently called for a reconstructive moment in the critiques of science and truth.¹ Rather than repeatedly calling out *the problems* with truth concepts, or critiquing the strategic context within which regimes of truth are produced, Latour argues that the discursive moment in which we find ourselves today requires an ability to *make and defend* truth claims. Surely he is right that much hangs in the balance concerning ongoing debates about issues such as global warming, the etiology of HIV/AIDS, the cause of the economic collapse, the nature of gender differences. Surely we can mark out better and worse candidates for truth in regard to these debates, even if capital “T” truth remains fallible. But

¹ Bruno Latour, “Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern,” *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 30, n. 2 (Winter 2004), 225–48.

these obvious points are sometimes obviated in a climate of academic hyper-criticism. The important project of criticising received views has been disabled by the excesses of a politically inflected social constructionism that can appear to dismiss all facts and theories as equal projections of power and strategic interest. This amounts to, in his words, a “critical barbarity.”² Instead of more critique of epistemology, we need a reconstructed empiricism and a new version of realism, he suggests, not to hearken back to the idea of unconstructed facts, but to guide and ground a new criterion for validity in matters of concern.

One might be reminded here of Habermas’ critique, now twenty years old, targeting the Nietzschean excesses of critical theory itself.³ Habermas accused his own mentors of abandoning rationality wholesale in their critical analysis of the Enlightenment’s quest for enhanced self-knowledge and in their hyperbolic characterisation of this project as a simple cover for domination. Even Adorno’s complicated and dialectical approach to rationality came under attack by Habermas: because, he claims, it “abides in paradox,” it manifests an epistemic defeatism justified only when one believes there is “no way out.”⁴ For Habermas, Adorno’s critique of Enlightenment reason blocks redemption or reconstruction, at least in the form of a universalisable, normative rationality. Without the latter, Habermas believed Adorno’s dialectics is really only based in the non-rational domain of myth, i.e., aesthetics.

Recent work on Adorno, particularly that by Deborah Cook, Jay Bernstein, Raymond Geuss, Simon Jarvis and Roger Foster, as well as others, has been thankfully helping to resuscitate the normative achievements in his philosophy and, in particular, his normative approach to rationality, thus defending Adorno against the widespread dismissal of his work as “too negative.”⁵ These commentaries have also addressed the

² *Ibid.*, 240.

³ See esp. Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourses of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, (tr.) Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987).

⁴ *Ibid.*, 128.

⁵ Deborah Cook, “From the Actual to the Possible: Nonidentity Thinking,” *Constellations*, vol. 12, n. 1 (2005), 21–35; Deborah Cook, *Adorno, Habermas, and the Search for a Rational Society* (London: Routledge, 2004); J. M. Bernstein, *Disenchantment and Ethics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Roger Foster, *Adorno: The Recovery of Experience* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2007); Raymond Geuss, “Suffering and Knowledge in Adorno,” *Constellations*,

apparent contradictions in Adorno's voluminous writings—for example, his claim that we can no longer do metaphysics even while he espoused such elusive concepts as “metaphysical experience”⁶—in order to show that, and how, Adorno had a constructive vision for philosophy. Against the way it is often portrayed, Adorno's actual argument was not that negation is all we can manage in the current era, or that negation is itself *sufficient* for thinking our way out of current impasses, but, rather, that the sorts of comparative and relative critiques we can realistically make—those that avoid making reference to transcendental arguments about the nature of the human condition, for example—provide an opening for another way of thinking.⁷ We wish to contribute to this reassessment by arguing that Adorno espoused neither, as has been charged, epistemological defeatism nor a refusal of metaphysics (a legitimate charge of Latour's in regard to others), but what we are calling “dialectical realism.” This version of realism is capable of responding to Latour's useful call for reconstruction and of avoiding the defeatism Habermas rightly rejects, even though it, in turn, rejects the universal, or non-dialectical, rationality that Habermas thinks necessary.

The idea that Adorno should be read as a “realist” of any sort may indeed sound odd. And unpacking from Adorno's elusive prose a credible and useful normative reconstruction of epistemology and metaphysics will take some work. But we argue that he should be added to the growing group of epistemologists and metaphysicians who have been developing post-positivist versions of realism such as contextual, inter-

vol. 12, n. 1 (2005), 3–20; Simon Jarvis, “Adorno, Marx and Materialism,” in *Cambridge Companion to Adorno*, (ed.) Tom Huhn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Simon Jarvis, *Adorno: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 1998).

⁶ Or “spiritual experience,” if one follows Roger Foster's argument for a retranslation of Adorno's concept *geistige Erfahrung*, which is also sometimes translated as “intellectual experience.” Foster is right to reject the latter translation for connoting a disembodied mind, and he is right to note a certain transcendental nature of the concept, as we will discuss, but the term “spiritual” carries theological baggage that seems antithetical to Adorno's materialist bent. Thus we will use the usual translation: “metaphysical experience.” See Foster, *Adorno: The Recovery of Experience*, 2–7.

⁷ Deborah Cook, “Theodor W. Adorno: An Introduction,” in *Theodor Adorno: Key Concepts*, (ed.) Deborah Cook (Stocksfield, UK: Acumen, 2008), 17.

nal, pragmatic and critical realisms. These latter realisms, however, while helpfully showing how realism can coexist with ontological pluralism, for example, as well as a highly contextualised account of knowledge, have not developed a political reflexivity about how the object of knowledge—the real—is constructed. As a field, then, post-positivist realisms have been politically naïve, which is perhaps why they have not enjoyed more influence among Continental philosophers, whom Latour is addressing.

Adorno's dialectical realism is anything but politically naïve. In fact, he develops a version of realism unique in its attentiveness to the political mediations not just of knowledge, but of reality itself as we experience it. In particular, he develops a politically reflexive ontology of truth, marking him as distinct from those who have eschewed ontologies of truth altogether, such as Derrida and Lyotard (and, interestingly, Habermas). In brief, Adorno's realism affirms the socially constructed or mediated character of the object without diminishing its stubborn, recalcitrant nature, its *otherness*, providing a politically reflexive reconstruction of the referential operations of truth. It is realist because it affirms the ontological primacy of the object, repudiates subject-centred idealisms, and champions a kind of empirical openness to the irreducible particularities of the material world. But Adorno's realism also incorporates a temporal dimension, without assuming a timeless account of the final structure of reality, or a final story of the world achieved at the idealised end of inquiry. He develops this temporal account of reality primarily through his critique of "identity thinking," or the idea that concepts can be wholly adequate to the particulars to which they refer. Such approaches reify our current representations of reality into a "death mask."⁸ By ignoring the principal feature of reality—its temporal dimension—they effectively kill our ability to perceive its movement.

Against identity thinking, Adorno poses dialectics, which, he claims, is the "only possible treatment of the question of metaphysics."⁹ Only with dialectics, he argues, can we respect reality's constant poten-

⁸ Theodor Adorno, *Prisms*, (tr.) Samuel and Shierry Weber (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981), 30. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as P.

⁹ Theodor Adorno, *Metaphysics: Concepts and Problems*, (ed.) Rolf Tiedemann, (tr.) Edmund Jephcott (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), 100. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as MCP.

tial for change and becoming, as well as the embedded character of philosophical knowledge itself in its own time and culture. Only in this way can we understand the limits of concepts, while retaining their utility, or, as we might say today, their truth-function. Only through dialectics can we find our way to a non-dogmatic materialism, or to critical thought without a transcendental method.¹⁰ This is why the term “dialectical realism” strikes us as the most apt.

Adorno's arguments throughout his writings tightly combine philosophical, moral and political considerations. For example, he gives political reasons to reject Idealism (because it makes knowledge the prerogative of experts), and develops a metaphysical explanation of how suffering is rendered invisible (because identitarian thinking produces a “false whole,” beyond which we think there is nothing to be seen). (P, 33) By combining such disparate types of reasoning, Adorno disregards the practice of segregating philosophical projects as well as reasons and methods. He argued that the project of understanding reality itself requires what some today call trans-disciplinarity and intersectionality. As Geuss puts it, he “consistently denied the possibility of a completely free-standing theory of knowledge,” or, we might add, metaphysics or ethics.¹¹ Adorno refuses to segregate projects of inquiry because to do so would be to operate non-dialectically, and non-dialectical approaches, especially to realism and to epistemology, neglect philosophy's cultural embeddedness and, in so doing, risk lapsing into ideology. Therefore, the political analysis of existing ideologies as well as normative considerations germane to the overcoming of current ideologies become legitimate reasons in arguing for or against various metaphysical positions. We shall say more about precisely how Adorno develops these combinatory arguments further on.

Adorno's approach calls for a non-reified conception of knowledge, as well as a non-reified representation of the subject who knows and of the object that we seek to know. The real is something like a process for Adorno, a fluid and historicised potentiality; as he famously puts it, “what is, is more than it is.”¹² The currently perceptible world is

¹⁰ Jarvis, *Adorno: A Critical Introduction*, 148.

¹¹ Geuss, “Suffering and Knowledge in Adorno,” 15.

¹² Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, (tr.) E. B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1973), 161. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as ND.

not the whole of the real, and so we need an understanding of the real as dynamic. But unlike others who espouse a kind of process or fluidity as the ultimate reality, Adorno makes the political implications of such an account more clearly evident. Potentialities are curtailed, and stabilisation is presented as inevitable and thus coercively prolonged, by ideologies to which philosophy too often plays willing accomplice. The solution to this stasis requires a reconstructed metaphysics that exhibits a political reflexivity about how the real becomes stable. Adorno's concept of the constellation is meant to provide an antidote to identity thinking through just such a reconstructed metaphysics. The idea of the constellation, which we consider in more depth below, also provides a reconstruction of normative accounts of knowledge and an account closely linked to coherentism in analytic epistemology. It is also a concept that foregrounds the constitutive link between politics and epistemology.

I.

Adorno develops his own account of realism primarily through his critiques of Aristotle, Kant and, most importantly, Hegel. Although Adorno admires Aristotle's empiricism as well as his concern with the physical and not merely the ideal, he faults Aristotle for ignoring the subjective mediations of knowledge.¹³ Aristotle cannot be truly dialectical, according to Adorno, because the knowing subject in his account does not understand itself to be playing a constitutive role in knowledge. In an important sense, then, the subject is invisible to Aristotle, and this has the effect of making the need for epistemic reflexivity about the mediated nature of inquiry invisible as well.

Kant, by contrast, overemphasises subjectivity, according to it an irrefutable domain of knowledge in the synthetic *a priori*. Indeed, in Kant's "doctrine of the subjective constitution of the physical world" (MCP, 11), the causal powers active in this domain are all on the side of mind itself, Adorno claims, and are "constituted by the spontaneous activity of consciousness." (MCP, 45) As Cook points out, Adorno actually finds in Kant elements of both identity thinking and non-identity thinking; Kant realises that the concept in some sense *covers over* the object,

¹³ This discussion occurs mainly in his *Metaphysics: Concept and Problems*, Lectures 4–9.

although he also affirms that the object in itself can never be known.¹⁴ This leaves us with a truly unworkable paradox, in Adorno's view, between the identity thinking exhibited in the concept of the synthetic *a priori* and the non-identity thinking that is manifested in Kant's scepticism toward knowledge of the transcendental. By positing such a radical distinction between concept and object, Kant's metaphysics mars our ability to understand causality, freedom and reason, all of which Adorno argues involve a positive relationship between concept and object, knower and known.¹⁵

Unlike Kant, Hegel at least aspires to a dialectical approach that would acknowledge and accommodate the dynamic character of reality, yet ultimately, he, too, provides only a static and reified account of being. (MCP, 81, 86–87) Hegel intended to reconcile rationalism with empiricism, sublating both through dialectics, but in the end, Adorno claims, given the overinflated role he accords subject-centred negations, he failed to overcome Idealism. Hegel's dialectic moves from subject to object to subject, and thus, "all his statements to the contrary notwithstanding, Hegel left the subject's primacy over the object unchallenged." (ND, 38) Moreover, Hegel's dialectics is, at the end of the day, formulaic, particularly his notion of a determinate negation that would render all negations of negation as having positive or constructive results or implications. Adorno views this as a bit of *a priorism*. He says, "The structure of his [Hegel's] system would unquestionably fall without the principle that to negate negation is positive, but the empirical substance of dialectics is not the principle [or formula] *but the resistance which otherness offers to identity.*" (ND, 160–61, emphasis added) For Adorno, the otherness of the object, not the capacity of the subject to negate, drives the dialectic forward. The object has primacy.

¹⁴ Cook, "Influences and Impact," in *Theodor Adorno: Key Concepts*, (ed.) Deborah Cook (Stocksfield, UK: Acumen, 2008), 23.

¹⁵ Adorno's analysis of Kant is mainly found in *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, (tr.) Rodney Livingstone (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001). Here he develops a somewhat unusual interpretation of Kant, defending him against those who overplay the subjectivism in Kant and arguing that what ultimately motivates Kant's account is his concern with the "objective nature of cognition," or its capacity for externalism. For Adorno, the problem with Kant is just that he fails to develop a consistent or coherent treatment of knowledge and his argument devolves into an unworkable paradox. See esp. lectures 1, 9 and 10.

Dialectics, then, for Adorno, cannot be reduced to form, such as the form of determinate negation, but must be embedded in a kind of engagement with materiality. It is this engagement with materiality that brings about the openness, reflexivity and indeterminacy that is encapsulated in dialectics, rather than any *a priori* formal features. Adorno thinks Hegel makes the further mistake, like Kant in this instance, of putting the active element—the critical, negating element—entirely on the side of subjectivity. (ND, 160–61, 38–39) Both Kant and Hegel, in Adorno’s view, implausibly idealise the autarkic subject, thereby retreating from the full implications of a dialectical approach to subjectivity. To the extent that Hegel believes there are contradictions in the object, or that there is a dialectical character to the object world itself, it is only because *we* have put it there through our own manner of dialectical thinking.

Hegel’s dialectics, then, conceals an ulterior monism or non-dialectical account in its treatment of reality. This monism is then aligned to an Idealism that privileges the immanent movements of thought as if these were a sufficient motive force for the progression of the dialectic. One instance of Adorno’s rejection of this subject-centred reason can be found in his argument against the sufficiency of immanent critique, the method that he and Horkheimer used in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, but which he later noted has significant limitations. The problem with immanent critique is that it does not operate through openness to otherness or through indeterminacy, but remains bounded, which renders it insufficient as a means to break free from ideology. “Immanent criticism,” he says,

cannot take comfort in its own idea. It can neither be vain enough to believe that it can liberate the mind directly by immersing itself in it, nor naïve enough to believe that unflinching immersion in the object will inevitably lead to truth by virtue of the logic of things if only the subjective knowledge of the false whole is kept from intruding from the outside, as it were, in the determination of the object. (P, 33)

This first mistake is the mistake of Idealism (“to believe that it can liberate the mind directly by immersing itself in it”); the second is the mistake of positivism (“that unflinching immersion of the object will inevitably lead to truth”). In place of these mistaken approaches, Adorno argues for

dialectics. Given that pure immersion in neither mind nor the object world is reliable on its own, or really possible, we need a reflexive understanding that resists reifying either domain.

Dialectics provides a “dynamic device” for just this purpose of steering clear of reification. Dialectics is not, he says, an abstract principle that lords over being, but an idea that only becomes fully manifest and operationalised when it is empirically applied. At bottom, dialectics is simply the understanding that objects, or individual particulars, are never exhausted by concepts, and thus that objects “come to contradict the traditional norm of adequacy.” (ND, 5) Note that the driving force here is not the mediations of the subject whose concepts negate the given or the in-itself, but the recalcitrance of the object that resists completion. Reality is not, for Adorno, in any sense in-itself, and thus there is no danger that a properly dialectical realism will become reified or positivistic. “If matter were total, undifferentiated, and flatly singular, there would be no dialectics in it.” (ND, 205)

Hegel recognised Aristotle's failure to understand properly the non-reified, mediated nature of things, and Kant's failure to escape fully the primacy of the subject, but he was unable in the end to escape his own identitarian approach. Adorno sees Hegel as a failed dialectician because he believed in the possibility of matching concepts to objects, thus escaping the dialectic. Like Marx, Adorno also disagrees with the primacy that Hegel accorded to the subject over the object in directing and developing the movement of thought through its capacity for negation. In contrast, Adorno maintains that “materialist thinking,” a type of thinking he strove for, “demands a ‘priority of the object.’”¹⁶

Adorno believed that Hegel's inadequacy as a dialectical thinker could be corrected by maintaining an emphasis on concrete, social origins and the somatic expression of all philosophical thinking. Such a focus would lead directly to “non-identity thinking,” or a resistance to the closure toward which Idealism tends. Empiricism, he says, is more cognizant of the need for openness in metaphysical thinking, the need to resist closure. Therefore, Adorno suggests, we should take a second look at that moment in the dialectic of epistemology—the moment of empiricism—that Hegel mistakenly thought he had overcome. And, as we will

¹⁶ See Simon Jarvis' helpful discussion of this in his *Adorno: A Critical Introduction*, 175.

see, Adorno's revisionary empiricism will further substantiate our claim that his account is aptly understood as a dialectical realism.

II.

Adorno certainly agrees with Hegel's criticism of those versions of empiricism, such as positivism, that portray the object as immediate or unmediated. Only a naïve realism would regard the object of knowledge as a simple factuality. The object is always more than this, more, even, than it is in the present, as he says, because of the relational aspects that unfold in its ongoing, varied mediations. This is just to say that objects are subjected to many mediations in their numerous encounters with multiple subjects. When we think of what an object is, we need to include the mediations of the subjects that encounter it, but just as importantly, we need to remember the object's own potentialities to undergo more mediations and, indeed, to transform. Mediation is not simply a projection of knowers onto the object, but an interpenetration of subject and object. Given the number of different possible mediations, and their respective moments in time, Adorno suggests that the mediations of an object will multiply and reverberate around it, forming something like a constellation. And thus, whenever we encounter an object anew, we have phenomenal access to a constellation of concepts or connotations. Idealism would make of the object a simple projection of subjective mediations, but in so doing it paradoxically ontologises or reifies the subject itself, rendering subjects immune to objective determinations that push them beyond their own current conceptual capacities. Thus, both Idealism and naïve realism share a metaphysical orientation toward a certain stability and closure. Neither is sufficiently alive to the possibility of openness and the non-identity of difference. It is by acknowledging the primacy of the object, then, that we will make our way, oddly enough, out of identity thinking.

It would be a mistake to understand Adorno's notion of the constellation as the sum total of the object's classifications, or of the numerous subjectively derived mediations performed on it. The primacy of the object would be lost in such a formulation, and instead, objects would be reduced to being, as Jarvis puts it, "merely illustrative, of interest only as examples of the concept," just as in Hegel.¹⁷ Adorno's claim that the ob-

¹⁷ Jarvis, p. 165.

ject is primary initially follows the ancient transcendental argument that one can think of objectivity without subjectivity, but not vice versa. (ND, 196) The subject, after all, is an object in the world, and its very capacity for sensation is due to its physical character. (ND, 193) Hence, he calls his view materialist, not in the sense of Feuerbach or Mach, for whom only materiality is real, but in the sense of Marx, for whom materiality is the primary moment in the dialectic. He does not wish to “place the object on the orphaned royal throne” once occupied by Idealism’s subject; the very claim of the *primacy* of the object is only meaningful within dialectics itself, as its primacy refers to its status within the dialectical process.

Yet Adorno also bases his claim about the primacy of the object on the nature of empirical observation, which, he says, “argues for the primacy of the object, and against its own omnipotence.” (ND, 188) Empiricism, he goes so far as to claim, is “involuntarily dialectical in spirit.” (ND, 188) The natural sciences necessarily operate through subjective experience—that is, theory-laden observation—but they “turn... subjective observation against the [Kantian, Idealist] doctrine of subjective constituents.” (ND, 188) And this is because the object observed is not itself inert, nor is it identical to the sum total of fact and concept. (ND, 188) “The object is more than pure factuality; at the same time, the fact that factuality is irremovable forbids contentment with its abstract concept and with the dregs of factuality, the recorded sense data.” (ND, 188) The object is not exhausted by our knowledge of it, by our classifications or conceptualisations; it resists, deflects and retains its distance. Adorno believed that the proper epistemic attitude in the face of this ineffable thing-in-itself is not scepticism or withdrawal, but a renewed appreciation for the need of the practice of empiricism to remain open (in certain versions, anyway) to the further developments of conceptualisation based on (mediated) observation. Empiricism retains an appreciation of the independence of the object and the inadequacy of the subject’s epistemic projections to achieve finality.

In his interventions in this long-standing dispute—a dispute ongoing in analytic metaphysics and philosophy of science—Adorno does something unique by weaving together political and meta-philosophical considerations, even in the context of his discussion of the need to maintain the primacy of the object. What makes political considerations germane here is his overall view of philosophy as symptomatic of its cul-

tural context's particular ideological challenges, or, in other words, the fact that philosophy does not transcend, but rather reveals, the intellectual limits of its era. This Hegelian idea was not followed through by Hegel himself in his own approach to philosophical argumentation: Hegel did not offer avowedly political reasoning for the metaphysical positions he took. Marx, however, did advance theoretical claims in this way in, for example, his arguments for the labour theory of value.

Adorno argues that the maxim of the primacy of the object is related to a political sensibility: the capacity to accept otherness and difference, to remain open, and to resist closure. This is because engaging with or knowing an object requires accepting that its recalcitrance to our attempts at complete conceptualisation is not a mere projection of our own subjectivity. He explains, "If a man looks upon thingness as radical evil, if he would like to dynamize all entity into pure actuality [in other words, if he is an Idealist], he tends to be hostile to otherness, to the alien thing that has lent its name to alienation." (ND, 191) The object is the ultimate alien other whose difference cannot be entirely captured, reduced or controlled by some theory of the dynamism of subjectivity in a world of passive objects. "Absolute dynamics... would be that absolute action whose violent satisfaction lies in itself, the action in which nonidentity is abused as a mere occasion." (ND, 191) Idealism is tantamount to a form of egomaniacal disrespect.¹⁸

For Adorno, Idealism is also the result of philosophy's excessive hubris about its ability to achieve autonomy from its cultural context as well as from the realm of materiality that is experienced as an alien thing, existing independently of us, as an opponent or competitor, as it were. "Philosophical subjectivism," he says, which in this instance is the sort of Kantian Idealism that accords primacy to the subject, "is the ideologi-

¹⁸ There is an interesting concordance between Adorno's arguments here and those made by Enrique Dussel, some four decades later, in his book, *The Invention of the Americas*. There, Dussel interprets the inflated individualist epistemology of Descartes as a systematic conception of the masterful, conquering ego. Also like Adorno, Dussel does not view this error as an isolated mistake, but as significantly related to the material, cultural context in which Descartes wrote: in the beginning stages of Europe's conquering of the New World and its assumption of global cultural and epistemological mastery. See Enrique Dussel, *The Invention of the Americas: Eclipse of "the Other" and the Myth of Modernity*, (tr.) Michael D. Barber (New York: Continuum, 1995).

cal accompaniment of the emancipation of the bourgeois I. It furnishes reasons for that emancipation.”¹⁹ Subjectivism enthrones philosophy, and particularly epistemology, as free of the dreaded coerciveness of heteronomy, but in so doing, it closes them off to the perpetual dynamism of the object. Interestingly, Adorno warns that the critique of reification, or thingification as it is sometimes translated, can sometimes give support to such excessive hubris, even in the writings of Hegel, Lukács and the early Marx. “We can no more reduce dialectics to reification than we can reduce it to any other isolated category, however polemical.” (ND, 190) Where the critique of reification can sometimes promote a tendency toward Idealism, dialectics requires an acknowledgement of things, objects, anything that is experienced as alien and other: there can “be no dialectics without the element of solid things...without such things it would level off into a harmless doctrine of change.” (ND, 192) In short, dialectics needs to be paired with a materialist acknowledgement of the primacy of objects, for it is materialism that gives dialectics its mandate to remain open to otherness. Only in this way can we remain open to the possibility of recognising the suffering of others who lie beyond our own hermeneutic limits of understanding and empathic identification.

III.

Situated within this materialist framework, Adorno asserts that the subject and the object enter their dialectical mediation differently, not in the sense of a metaphysical process of actualisation, but in the sense of their relation to the dialectic. Adorno has a materialist reading of mediation, and it is this, we argue, that grounds his version of realism. Unlike Kant, Hegel and more contemporary philosophers in this tradition (such as phenomenology), Adorno understands mediation not as a subjective act or posit that works to negate and transform the inert, material given, but as, rather, something that follows from the temporally dynamic nature of the object itself, i.e., from materiality. It is true that the object is only

¹⁹ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 189. See also his *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, 55, where he suggests that Kant's philosophy articulates “a very dark secret of bourgeois society,” that freedom, or reason, is subservient to the law, or a closure of concepts independent of all experience.

conceivable through the subject, but the object remains otherwise than the subject's projection. The object, in other words, harbours something beyond the concept. By contrast, the subject is "from the outset an object." (ND, 183)

This "more" or "remainder" in the object are not other names for an in-itself that the autarkic subject cannot catch. After all, for Adorno, the subject is but a moment of the object and not an abstract thing. The "more," Adorno believes, is "immanent" reality, in what exists, while the ineffable, by contrast, in the way that it is understood by some philosophers, simply does not exist: "Whatever part of nonidentity defies definition in its concept goes beyond its individual existence; it is only in polarity with the concept, in staring at the concept that it will contract into that existence [i.e., become a remainder]. The inside of nonidentity is its relation to that which it is not, and which its managed, frozen self-identity withholds from it." (ND, 161, 163)

Hence, Adorno's non-identity thesis is not concerned with—or better, is not targeting—the mystical, that which is beyond language, or the pure immediacy of reality, all of which might be, and has been, portrayed as the sphere of the ineffable. Rather, the point of non-identity is to indicate the potentiality for further understanding, further conceptualisation and further development that inheres in the concrete thing/object/reality, a "possibility that sticks to the concrete." (ND, 57) Adorno's project is to move beyond the myth of both the autarkic subject and the ineffable in-itself.

Here is a good moment to consider Adorno's notion of "metaphysical experience," which may indeed invoke ideas of the ineffable or inexpressible, and may also be taken as evidence against our argument that Adorno should be read as a realist, albeit a dialectical one. The idea of metaphysical experience (*geistige Erfahrung*) indicates our experience of the contradictory nature of metaphysics itself—its quest to conceptualise reality and its inability to achieve this conceptualisation with any finality or completeness. The production of concepts cannot express the potentiality inherent in objects and the dynamism of their mediation; Adorno expresses this truth as negative dialectics in an attempt to convey the idea that the object is always ahead of itself and, therefore, that "the essence is always historical." (MCP, 19) The tendency to view ontology as a "doctrine of the invariant," or a pursuit of timeless truths, is an act of philosophical impoverishment. (MCP, 71) Against this tendency, nega-

tive dialectics would bring the concept back to life, reanimating it with movement and potentiality. It is in this sense that Roger Foster calls negative dialectics a spiritualisation.²⁰

However, the motivation behind Adorno's argument here is very much aligned with his interest in renewing empiricism. Metaphysical experience, for Adorno, is related to the idea in both Aristotle and Heidegger that human beings have an essentially concerned relation to truth. It is this concern that produces an experience of "the moment of tension" when the dynamism of the empirical world is "taken seriously." (MCP, 19, 23) As Henry Pickford puts it, "...constellations that succeed in rendering the mediations of a phenomenon legible produce what Adorno calls 'genuine' or 'metaphysical experience,' which consists in the awareness of the negativity between the emphatic concept and its present unfulfillment."²¹ Metaphysical experience is the aporetic experience of dynamism-within-the-concept, reflective of the genuine momentum of reality, rendering "...the whole of philosophy [into] an infinitely extended and elevated stammer."²² Dialectical realism expresses this caring for the truth without supporting the metaphysical quest to claim more than what one knows one can know. Negative dialectics is the attempt to produce a constellation that recognises dynamism and fallibility. But what drives this recognition forward is clearly, once again, the materialism encapsulated in Adorno's insistence on the primacy of the object, not the usual connotations of spirituality.

Adorno is best understood, then, as a realist, yet his realism must not be mistaken for a version of positivism. When Adorno talks about potentiality, that is, the dynamism immanent in the object or the difference-within-the-object, he is not alluding to something positive and immediate within the object. Rather, he is indicating that the object is a free becoming, elusive of the concepts by which it is tracked. His dialectical realism, therefore, is negative in the sense that it is meant to free dialectics from the urge to assimilate or arrest that which is beyond the concept in the object. It is also a form of realism because what motivates this negative insistence is a concern with the true nature of the object itself.

²⁰ Foster, *Adorno: The Recovery of Experience*, 38.

²¹ Henry Pickford, "The Dialectic of Theory and Practice," in *Adorno: A Critical Reader*, (eds.) Nigel Gibson and Andrew Rubin (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 327.

²² Pickford, quoted in Foster, *Adorno: The Recovery of Experience*, 55.

The doctrine of the primacy of the object is not another version of first philosophy or unmediated foundationalism: it is not a “first” prior to conceptualisation, or what Adorno refers to as the “first” of identity thinking. (ND, 136, 205) The object is itself historical, and not simply because the subject that knows it is historical.

This is one way in which Adorno keeps open the possibility of ongoing and genuine political activity against the putrefaction of instrumental rationality and its handmaiden, identity thinking, which moves always toward shutting down the process of critique and transformation. From a dialectical perspective, the freedom to change, or the potentiality for change is inscribed in the concrete reality of everyday life and the dynamic constellation of mediations. As Horkheimer writes, critical theory “confronts history with that possibility which is always concretely visible within it.”²³ For Adorno, therefore, political activity is accounted for by the very cognitive/material reality that harbours potentiality/the non-concept—which cannot be captured by our concepts in the present. Thus, dialectical realism, in this instance, far from hypostatising foundations, invokes a political activity that mandates openness and maximises freedom.²⁴ Dialectical realism embodies *the promise* that the realm of reality, that is, the realm of the actual, exceeds what is currently conceptualised, understood, even imagined, the promise that the possibility of a good life is indeed “within” the actual. It is this promise that gives meaning and momentum to Adorno’s politics.

IV.

How, then, is the concept of dialectical realism related to the sphere of the political? First, it is worth noting that Adorno does not need to contrive an ontology of political activity in order to show how political agency is possible in the first place, since the real openness of political activity follows from his conceptualisation of the constellation. Remem-

²³ Max Horkheimer, “The Authoritarian State,” in *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, (eds.) Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt (New York: Continuum, 1982), 106.

²⁴ See Jerome Kohn, “Freedom: The Priority of the Political,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt*, (ed.) Dana Villa (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

ber that Adorno defines truth as “a constellation of subject and object in which both penetrate each other.”²⁵ As Alison Stone explains, “Adorno’s constellations capture the *particular* historical relations that have shaped an object, rather than whatever universal kinds the object may embody.”²⁶ “The constellation changes,” Adorno states, “in the dynamics of history.” (ND, 306) The constellation, then, is tantamount to a “social *a priori*” of meaning, a phrase we use specifically to invoke comparisons to Foucault. (ND, 190) A specific constellation is a specific mode and moment of the endless dialectical mediation of subject and object, which is simply the pattern of relationships that we call society. “Society” Adorno states, “comes before the individual consciousness and before all its experience.” (ND, 181) Historical change is an alteration of the constellation.

Adorno’s idea of constellation, therefore, is that it is the site of dialectical interplay among different mediations, the variety and multidimensionality of which reflect society’s potential for change. Constellations manifest non-identity because of the open-ended and contradictory character of their mediations.

It is also important to note that Adorno’s notion of constellation gestures toward the fact that a conglomeration of elements, both epistemic and non-epistemic, operate on the intelligibility and truth-value of concepts. Like Foucault’s idea of the *episteme*, the constellation is more than a set of beliefs and subjective practices, but also includes material relations, or mediated objects, in their historical or temporal specificity. Today, for example, we are living in a constellation of late capitalism, which is the socio-political reality of the exchange system, and it is here in particular that identity thinking—the idea that the subject’s projected concept can fully capture its object—flourishes, insisting that real-estate prices represent value, or that wages represent labour’s actual worth. Another way to put this point is that the constellation made up of the exchange system of late capitalism is, in part, constituted by the idea of the primacy of the subject, which has the real effect of making the latter appear to be a meaningful claim. In a limited sense, Adorno concedes truth

²⁵ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 127, quoted in Cook, *Theodor Adorno: Key Concepts*, 12.

²⁶ Alison Stone, “Adorno and Logic,” in *Theodor Adorno: Key Concepts*, 59 (emphasis in original).

to this claim or reference, but he wants to hold onto the idea of a larger sense of truth and falsity in which this abstraction of objectivity as the projection of the subject is indeed false. Adorno thus signals his realism precisely by invoking a realm beyond currently justified claims.

A constellation *possibilises* the emergence of the object as this *specific* object. In other words, the constellation is a site for the opening of the object as this individual object. The fluidity of the constellation indicates that the object exists within the sedimented history of previous moments, including all of the moves in the ongoing mediation. “This history is the individual thing and outside it; it is something encompassing in which the individual has its place.” (ND, 163)

The object known is thus the “process stored in the object” within the ever-changing constellation. The new moments of this ever-changing constellation facilitate and become concretised in the process/object, and it is this dynamism of the constellation’s myriad of relationships which makes the object dynamic through and through. When naïve realism seeks the object as existing apart from its constellation, it forgets that the very meaning of this doomed project depends on a specific constellation in which it becomes possible to talk about an ineffable object-in-itself. It is the false constellation of the current exchange system, for example, that makes possible identity thinking and naïve realism. This constellation suppresses the freedom of the object in both a linguistic/cognitive and material sense. The effect is a social suppression, a “suffering under society.” (ND, 67)

Adorno diagnoses the constellations of late capitalism, in both their epistemic and political formation, as characterised by “objective abstraction.” This diagnosis is especially helpful today, in a period when derivatives determine value, as if abstractions are a fit for exchange and even for setting limits on actual productive activity and the terms of daily living among the working poor, whose mortgages (and material shelter) can be rendered as a new source of profit based on abstract, projected rates of default. Such diagnoses establish the possibility of political change, making Habermas’ charge of negativity against Adorno mystifyingly unfair.

The process of mediation involves materialist moments and political ones. To implement a change in the mode of mediation requires a social change. Thus, as stated above, far from being a reifying metaphysical verdict, the primacy of the object simply means that “the subjec-

tive moment is framed, as it were, in the objective one." (ND, 180) To reverse this by making subjectivity determinant, as some epistemologies have done, causes us to forget, or cover over, our mutually constitutive relationships within society and the political foundation of the practico-inert. It is within the moment of remembering this that the possibility of political action comes to the fore.

Adorno's dialectical realism is an attempt to bring an element of dynamism back to the current constellation of the exchange system. This attempt aims to free a site of possibility for the emergence of new objects and realities by reconfiguring new patterns of relationship between linguistic realities and things, concepts and objects. The "potentiality within the thing/object" to become a new object is indeed the other name of the possibility of this political enactment: each round of the enactment of the constellation can potentially reconfigure a new reality. Accordingly, a conservative enactment can reproduce and solidify the present constellation.

The introduction of new concepts, interpretations, theories and so forth, which may require a political transgression, affects the myriad of multidimensional mediations between subjects and objects. Accordingly, both meaning and truth values are partially constituted by this political function. Adorno's own political action targets the superstructure, which, due to the dialectical interdependence of superstructure and structure, results in the alteration of reality in both its cognitive and material form. In Antonio Gramsci's language, this understanding of political action establishes "the dialectical position of political activity...as a particular level of superstructure. One might say, as a first schematic approximation, that political action is precisely the moment in which the superstructure is still in the unmediated phase of mere wishful confirmation, confused and still at an elementary stage."²⁷ By the "unmediated phase," Gramsci indicates a naïve superstructural moment that does not realise its own dialectical relationship with structure, which it thus regards as autonomous. For Adorno, identity thinking is the hallmark of such a phase.

²⁷ Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, (ed.) Q. Hoare and G. Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 137.

Conclusion

To conclude, we argue in this paper that Adorno's work is a productive site from which to do the work of rebuilding *a normative reconstruction* of knowledge and of realism. Habermas criticised Adorno's account on precisely this point, claiming that it failed to advance beyond passivity and critique or to provide any alternative account of rationality that could counter the instrumental form of rationality that he and Horkheimer had rejected. Against this critique, we argue that Adorno provides an alternative, normative account, but one that fails, given the criteria Habermas demands, because it is non-universal in character. For Adorno, a new universal rationality, as Habermas called for and tried to construct, will inevitably devolve into reification once again. Adorno's idea of the constellation is not meant as a theory of justification or general account of reason, but as an elaboration of the ontology of truth that clarifies its political constitution. Reifications of truth have led to a variety of errors, and not merely philosophical ones. Reification occurs under a specific set of social and historical conditions, Adorno argues, and thus its solution requires a political transformation.

Contrast Adorno's approach with the idea that truth is infinitely deferred. Other twentieth-century philosophers have closely associated politics with epistemology, yet their arguments provide no normative reconstruction. Much of Derrida's critique has focussed on the issue of centralism—logocentrism, phallogocentrism—concerning meaning. Reading Derrida through Adorno, we might say that Derrida's target was an approach to constellations that attempted to centralise the organisation of its elements. Adorno's own approach is clearly de-centred, yet, unlike Derrida or Lyotard, who focus on the ultimately paradoxical, paralogical nature of meaning, Adorno's approach does not foreclose the possibility of any real (or serious) truth talk. Truth and justice retain their meaningfulness, their capacity to act normatively on the present, and their ability to intervene in oppression, not by their elusive absence that works as a kind of judgemental superego on, or against, all positive claims in the present, but by their non-reified, open-ended, decentred manifestations. The deconstructive approach would render both truth and justice beyond our grasp as ontological absolutes. This is deserving of Habermas' con-

cern. Adorno's account, by contrast, moves beyond the platitudes of an ever-present fallibilism. In his view, fallibilism, or the opposite of reification, is not where we end, but where we begin.

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