Adorno Reading Kant

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Theodor W. Adorno, *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, edited by Rolf Tiedemann, translated by Rodney Livingstone, Cambridge: Polity, 2001, xi+300pp, £15.99 (pbk), ISBN 0745628451.

In one way or another, all modern philosophers are concerned with Kant. Indeed, it is arguable that every modern philosopher, at least in Germany, is concerned with *not being Kant* – with addressing questions arising from Kant's philosophy in a different way from Kant himself. In one way or another, consequently, each major modern philosopher in Germany, has defined his/her own philosophy via its relation to Kant; as a correction or alteration of certain elements of Kant's own work. This is especially (but not exclusively) the case with Kant's epistemology, whose problems provide the critical starting point for every theory of knowledge from Hegel to the present.

It is very fortunate, therefore, that we now have access to this translation of Adorno's very important lectures on Kant from 1957, which accessibly trace the key lines in his debate with Kant. These lectures are of especial significance as they reflect the genesis of the Kant-critique in *Negative Dialectics*, and they serve to elucidate the very compressed version of similar ideas which appears in certain sections of that work, especially in 'Meditations on Metaphysics'. Moreover, this publication also follows the recent translation of Heidegger's lectures on Kant, which throw light on the background to his *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, and it thus makes possible an extremely illuminating counter-point between the very different ways of interpreting Kant deployed by Adorno and Heidegger, which between them set the foundations for the defining positions of recent German philosophy.

Before addressing specific aspects of Adorno's reading of Kant, however, it is useful to outline the basic position of Kant's philosophy, and to consider the main characteristics of the most important philosophical responses to Kant.

Primarily, Kant is a critic of the heteronomous determination of human thought and human action by principles for which these cannot account. He is therefore, in short, a critic of metaphysics, and his epistemology and his ethics (whatever the formal differences between them) are both intended to explain how human reason and human action might autonomously define the conditions of their own authority and validity as independent of metaphysics. In this quest for autonomy, Kant sets out an epistemology which has two main preconditions: the first is that human reason cannot obtain valid knowledge about objects themselves, but only about the appearance of objects; the second precondition is that human reason loses its validity if it begins to make claims about metaphysics. Consequently, Kant ascribes to human reason a 'legislating' function. He views reason as an ideal centre arena of agency, whose function is to create a regulatory matrix for ruling on the totality of what can and cannot be known by human reason, and thus for ensuring that the conditions under which knowledge might sustain its own autonomy are upheld. On these grounds, Kant implies that valid reason always has an internally *unitary* character. Reason can only legitimately claim knowledge if it is formally other than metaphysics and formally other than being itself; it can only obtain this condition if it reflexively unifies itself with its own transcendental preconditions, and if it produces an inner unity of categories which allow it synthetically to interpret objective phenomena. Knowledge thus occurs through a unity of consciousness, which precedes, accompanies and regulates all operations of reason towards its contents, and through which reason autonomously stabilizes itself (as a totality) against the impossible plurality of objective meanings and the transcendent order of metaphysics.

Not surprisingly, it has often been argued that Kant's purchase of

human epistemological and ethical autonomy, on the ground of a transcendentally realized unity of consciousness, is rather overpriced. The mainstream of Kant-critique reacts generally against the first precondition of his epistemology, and it laments Kant's premising of cognitive autonomy in the exclusion of all vital, natural and particular historical experience from reason. The rejection of Kant's purificatory impoverishment of reason in fact forms the bedrock for a critical line of Kant-reception, which begins with Hamann, which then runs through Hegel, Nietzsche, Dilthey, Simmel, Heidegger, Lukács, Jaspers, and Habermas – and which also includes Adorno.

For this discussion, it is of key importance that each important critical reading of Kant contains either an implicit or manifest discussion of the *reification* of reason in Kant's philosophy. Each of these perspectives – even those developed before the word 'reification' (*Verdinglichung*) existed – claims that in Kant's epistemology reason is abstractly located in a role of formally immutable, or *reified*, stasis towards its phenomena. The implication of the allegation of *reification* is, clearly, that Kant turns reason into a *thing*; as a thing, reason is falsely extrapolated from the plural arenas of local and experiential knowledge, and it reduces thinking to a formal act, whose content is merely a variable in an infinitely extensible sequence of cognitive functions. The reification of reason might thus equally be viewed as the functionalization of reason, or, perhaps most accurately, the *juridification* of reason, as it reflects a condition in which reason is dualistically separated from the objects of knowledge, and in which it itself prescribes and regulates the terms through which knowledge is rendered valid. Each major critique of Kant has thus been articulated from an interest in a mode of cognition which does not act as ghostly legislator towards its contents, and which can account for the *freedom* of human knowledge and ethics as substantial or experienced moments of being, not merely as pure contentless *autonomy*.

However, despite this concerted opposition to the first precondition of Kant's epistemology, critical reflection on Kant has in general agreed

with the second precondition of his epistemology, and therefore usually sympathizes with Kant's original limitation of human reason against speculative metaphysics. Indeed, the most influential critiques of Kant (especially that set out by Heidegger) might in some key respects be viewed as radicalized continuations of Kant's own initial attempt to separate human reason from the embracing order of metaphysics, and so to identify human validity as an arena of meanings which are independent of metaphysics, or which can only assimilate metaphysics in the form of a this-worldly metaphysics of being. Broadly, therefore, although post-Kantian philosophers almost invariably reject Kant on technical epistemological grounds, his philosophy still remains the seminal moment in the theoretical dislocation of human reason from its primary metaphysical underpinning. Later arguments against Kant, whether in the form of Hegel's phenomenology, Nietzsche's naturalism, Dilthey's historical reason, Simmel's existential functionalism, Heidegger's phenomenology, Lukács's subject/object, or Habermas's communicative reason, do not disagree with Kant's basic demand: namely, that human reason should be reflexively (and therefore *humanly*) accountable for its own freedom. The attempt to overcome the reification of reason in idealism does in general, therefore, not include a fundamental re-posing of Kant's attitude to metaphysics. Indeed, all these post- or anti-Kantian perspectives only advocate an overcoming of reification because they view reification as a last regrettable intrusion of metaphysics into the region of authentically human reason and meaning.

Perhaps most striking in the tradition of critical reflection on Kant, however, is the fact that, in their common opposition to metaphysical heteronomy, all subsequent positions concur with Kant's argument that human reason legitimizes itself against metaphysics by generating its own *unity*. From Hegel to Habermas, each perspective rejects the idea that reason forms a transcendental system of operations abstracted from being. But each still upholds the insistence that reason can only claim legitimate knowledge where it produces an order of meaning in unity with the innermost structure of human consciousness.

Even in the writings of Heidegger, where the anti-foundational instinct is perhaps most profound, human reflection justifies its validity on an always (or always-already) instituted unity of consciousness, and it interprets its contents on the basis of a commonly engendered historical situation – the world. Habermas would be equally reluctant to see his philosophy aligned to apparently foundational positions; but he too argues that human reason can only valorize its insights through a communicatively mediated unity of consciousness, in which each partner in the pursuit of acceptable knowledge reflects and elaborates the defining anthropological principles of human interaction, and so establishes truth as an internally consistent overarching agreement.

On this basis, therefore, it is tempting to argue that the most influential critiques of Kant are really only marginal corrections to Kant's initial formal method. All still uphold Kant's critique of metaphysics, and all still found human ethical and cognitive autonomy on a demonstrable unity of consciousness, through which they oppose the original heteronomous unity of metaphysics. Each perspective therefore also replicates (albeit in nuanced form) Kant's basic perspective on humanism: namely, that the end of the *metaphysical* marks the advent of the *human*.

In some respects, naturally, Adorno focuses on familiar aspects and problems of Kantian thought. Like other interpreters, for example, he is attentive to the problem of reification in Kant's epistemology, and he too sees reification as 'a function of subjectivization', resulting from Kant's attempt 'to relate all phenomena, everything we encounter to a unified reference point and to subsume it under a self-identical, rigid unity' (114). Unlike earlier critiques, however, Adorno's consideration of reification is not developed as an intuition that Kant's idealism is in fact still metaphysics. Instead, his discussion of reification is one aspect of his broader concern with what he defines as the 'Kantian block' – a concern which actually contains a defence of metaphysics.

The term 'Kantian block' expresses Adorno's thought that Kant's con-

ception of reason is always subject to a twofold limit. Reason is, quite literally, *blocked* against modes of knowledge for whose validity it cannot autonomously account. In Kant's philosophy, therefore, reason is blocked, on the one hand, against ontological or metaphysical truth (174-7), and on the other against the truth of the world, and of the phenomena in the world (179). Consequently, Kant's philosophy, as read by Adorno, is not primarily a doctrine of knowledge. On the contrary, it is a document of the *ends of knowledge*, and, although it purports to define the totality of human knowledge, it succeeds only in determining how the mind is '*unable* to comprehend the totality' (178). Reification is therefore, for Adorno, not false (or quasi-metaphysical) knowledge. Rather, it is the condition of formal unknowing into which reason must withdraw wherever it insists on itself as the unitary origin and author of all its insights.

With this theory of the Kantian block, therefore, Adorno positions himself against the 'stock of bourgeois wisdom' which has sought to legitimize itself by claiming Kant's idealism as a limiting foundation for the bounds of sense (ie. positivism and fundamental ontology) (178). Against such perspectives, firstly, he construes the block as a signum of the factual degeneration of knowledge and of the impoverishment of cognitive experience caused by the emergence of the modern economy and by the ensuing pre-formation of reason by the supra-subject of exchange-imperatives (179). Secondly and most importantly, however, he also sees the block as the trace of a 'kind of metaphysical mourning' (176), in which the desire of reason to be other than its reified forms is a constant presence, but in which reason always acknowledges that, in its own reified forms, it cannot elucidate or effect the conditions of such knowledge (177). For Adorno, therefore, the block in Kant's philosophy always covertly intimates the possibility of non-reified knowledge; it is a secret lament on the absence of this knowledge. Yet this possibility, quite literally, always requires *unblocking*, for sedimented in Kant's philosophy is always also a direct reflection of his own demystified world, which purchases its order by formally ostracizing the threatening natural and metaphysical contents which it can-

not regulate (111). This process of unblocking might in fact be defined as Adorno's basic project in his reading of Kant.

It is crucial for Adorno's reading of Kant's idealism, therefore, that he always senses a despair over metaphysics. Formal reason, he states, makes 'the experienced world, the immanent world, the world in its this-ness, commensurate with us'. The result of this is 'a radical metaphysical alienation', in which meaning is 'eliminated from the world' (110). For all the labour of its formalization, therefore, Kant's epistemology (for Adorno) always both suppresses and reflects a deep sadness about the substantial meanings which it must banish in order to propose the subject as an autonomous unity. Indeed, Adorno even senses in Kant's philosophy an 'objectively inspiriting force' (111), which still clings to some echo of the sense that the subject might escape the 'metaphysical night' of reified reason (112). Even that formal 'immersion in inwardness', through which Kant's idealism segregates itself from substantial and speculative content, testifies – however dialectically – to a *wish* for metaphysical knowledge, and it still betrays a 'salvaging act' in the quest to imagine truth as a distinction against objective or material being (112). Kant's subjectivization of knowledge is, so to speak, reason's last-gasp endeavour to reflect a totality of knowledge, even where it is unable to bring this totality to safety except in the false totality of subjective knowledge, limited always by the formal constraints of reason. The reality of totality in Kant's formal reason, thus, indicates to Adorno a dream of truth, or a metaphysics *as if* (111). For these reasons, Adorno suggests that Kant's philosophy is never truly about the exclusion of metaphysics from reason. Instead, Kant's reason painfully experiences its formal incarceration, and it thus reflects, at least, a contingent (even existential) wish to place itself beyond the bounds of realized cognitive totality (112).

In close relation to this, Adorno also argues that Kant's subject is not truly closed (or blocked) against objective meaning or particular life. The apparent abstraction from the 'I' as an empirical-social-experiential agent in Kant's idealism is (Adorno claims) always self-undermin-

ing, and the transcendental subject is in fact always called upon to confess its foundation in 'factual existence' (147), and thus to admit its own objective determinacy. The pure subject as *constituens* is therefore also required to acknowledge itself as a *constitutum*. At the heart of Adorno's Kant-interpretation is thus the suggestion that Kant, however involuntarily, always indicates the implausibility of his own construction of the subject as the unitary source of knowledge. The *constituens*, he states, 'stands in need of an individual subject as the precondition of its existence, and thus of a *constitutum*' (158); 'subject and object or transcendental factors and human reality' are therefore 'mutually interdependent' (167).

On Adorno's view, in short, Kant's philosophy is, in truth, neither the critique of metaphysics nor the invariable theory of cognitive unity for which it takes itself. Even as it postulates a totality of meaning in the transcendental subject, idealism still intimates the abiding possibility of metaphysics. Even as it considers itself a philosophy of first foundational principles (a 'philosophy of origins') (159), idealism always secretly advocates the abandonment of the formal subject as the 'absolute *first* principle to which all knowledge can be reduced' (158). Contrary to its unitary intentions, therefore, Kant's idealism reflects a fractious and unhappy desire for the metaphysical, and it always discloses its experiential origins in factual reality.

Of the greatest importance in Adorno's interpretation of Kant, consequently, is his implication that Kant fails to uphold the postulated unity of human consciousness, on which he founds the independence of reason from particular experience and from metaphysics. The Kantian consciousness is in fact most properly characterized by its *disunity*, for it always unwittingly includes (as the ground of its own truth) what it intentionally excludes (as the ground of its own reality). In this respect, Adorno sees in the crisis of Kant's epistemology an unexpected opportunity for a possible reconceptualization of 'thinking', and he outlines against Kant a way of thinking about thinking which opposes Kant's definition of thinking as the operation of that 'unity

that combines to make all my representations *mine*' (197). Adorno thus sees in the underlying collapse of Kant's epistemology grounds for the claim that reflection capable of truth is only that reflection which attempts to hold itself in openness (or *dis-unity*) towards its contents. It is necessary, he argues, to imagine 'thinking' as a process which expressly maintains the differentiation between subject and object, and which holds 'fast to this ineluctable duality, a duality which cannot be ignored and that recurs in concrete form at every stage of history, but at the same time, within this state of differentiation, to define the element of unity as its other' (165). In short, therefore, Adorno argues that idealism, however counter-intentionally, documents the impossibility of any 'assumption of underlying unity' in human reflection and cognition (165), and it opens a terrain in which reason might propose itself as a configured, ceaselessly unresolved relation with objects. This fragmentation of the unity of consciousness in idealism is in fact the deepest motive for Adorno's hermeneutic of *unblocking.*

In short, therefore, whilst the general tradition of Kant-reception takes Kant as first witness in the critique of metaphysics and in the postulation of an autonomous unity of human consciousness, Adorno reads Kant as a covert metaphysician, and he reconstructs idealism as an immanent critique of taxonomic, instrumental or unitary reason. For this reason, Adorno's own path beyond (or through) Kant leads him in directions which directly contradict the historicizing motives behind other influential critiques.

Firstly and most obviously, his reflections on the unitary subject form the basis for his negative-dialectical method; Kant serves him as an unwitting ally in the endeavour to show that the projection of knowledge as the result of the functions of a formal subject is unsustainable, and that identity-thinking is always 'compelled to acknowledge the fact of *non-identity*' (234).

Secondly, however, Kant also acts for Adorno as an equally improbable accomplice in his attempt to re-open the debate on metaphysics;

Kant's significance in this respect is bound up with his theory of the *transcendental*. As discussed above, Kant wishes to frame knowledge within the regulative system of transcendentally deduced totality. To this end, he defines the transcendental ideas of reason as first regulative principles, which provide the primary unifying conditions for human knowledge. On Adorno's interpretation, however, the transcendental never finally obliterates the *transcendent* (metaphysics), which it is intended to replace. The transcendental is in fact always an aporetic concept (217), in which reason imagines itself to be the 'true essence of things' (221), but in which it merely fictitiously and symbolically enacts its own objective despair over not being metaphysical, over not being transcendent.

In these reflections, Adorno indicates that what Kant sees as the real *form* of consciousness – the transcendental – might in fact be indicative of the true *content* of consciousness: transcendence. The transcendent*al* might at least be interpretable as something other than the realized closure and unity of reason it might even be an index of a possible condition of objective transcendence, in which reason might place itself in an entirely different (transcendent) constellation with the contents of its knowledge. Metaphysics, coded here as *transcendence*, thus describes to Adorno a profoundly *human* logic of experiential and reflexive emancipation, and it promises to reason a mode of knowledge which is not tied to formal cognitive unity.

In sum, therefore, the twofold block in Kant's concept of reason, namely its closure to objects and its closure to metaphysics, has two closely related implications. Firstly, the block against objects always actually implies that 'our knowledge does not exhaust itself in pure mediation, in its purely formal aspect, but that it remains attached to something to which it refers' (234). Secondly, the block against metaphysics actually intimates the existence of a 'metaphysics that, by turning towards the subject seeks to salvage transcendence by concealing its existence at the heart of subjectivity' (222). In both these respects, consequently, Kant's subject actually indicates a condition of knowl-

edge in which it is not merely a subject, in which its own unitary forms are constantly *transcended*, and in which the object also transcends its reduction to a formal variable in reason's unity. This transcendence might be viewed as the object's otherness to the subject and the subject's otherness to itself.

At times, Adorno's critique also shows a surprising proximity to certain existential readings of Kant. His focus on the limit of formal reason as a block, which holds back the uncontrollable contents of metaphysics and the contingent experiences of particular life, obviously places him in the environment of certain existential-Kantian ideas. Indeed, by construing Kant's philosophy as a philosophy of *dis-unity*, in which reason approaches its truth only in its otherness to its obtained forms, he is at times remarkably close to the negative-hermeneutical reconstruction of idealism set out by Jaspers.

Despite this, however, Adorno's immanent critique of Kant's epistemology contains a direct critique of the ontologization of the 'block' in Heidegger's fundamental ontology. For all his condemnation of the reification of consciousness in idealism, Heidegger's philosophy is premised on a straightforward reconstruction of Kant's formal totality as *Dasein*, and in this he simply transposes the Kantian epistemological *difference* between the totality of obtainable knowledge and the totality of all things into the ontological *difference* between *Dasein* and *Sein*. Like Kant, therefore, Heidegger characterizes human reflection as a unity of operations which create formal arenas of sense and validity, but which are always *different* from the truth of objects and from the true totality of meaning. To Adorno, consequently, Heidegger merely replaces transcendental idealism with a rather crudely temporalized (but equally foundational) form of idealism, and he – like Kant – fails to account for 'thinking' as anything other than a unifying (albeit historicized) operation, in which the agency of reason produces prior terms for its interpretation of objects. For all his passing similarities with existential critiques of Kant, it is only in Adorno's reading of Kant (perhaps in conjunction with that undertaken by Jaspers) that we

find a position in the tradition of Kant-reception which rejects the claim that historicizing idealism inevitably leads to its convincing (or even meaningful) correction.

In a broader, practical context, it is worth considering that Kant's original critique of metaphysics (heteronomy) was conceived as a philosophy of human *autonomy,* and therefore also as a theoretical foundation for humanism. As discussed above, all the more important critiques of Kant have tried to give greater experiential substance to his concept of the autonomous human being. The formally reified subject is, all agree, *not truly human*, or *not yet human*: but these critiques have, in general, not doubted that Kant was correct to see the beginning of the human in the end of metaphysics. Even Heidegger's apparent rejection of the tradition of Enlightenment humanism does not disagree with Kant's view that the humanity of humanity resides in its capacity to be and to act in post-metaphysical validity.

Adorno, however, draws a practical conclusion from his reflections on Kant, which moves him away from the broader line of reception, and which has been regrettably marginalized in recent philosophy. This conclusion is, namely, that metaphysics, as a realm of contents which transcend the unitary forms of reason, can reflect to human consciousness a particular condition of truthful humanity; indeed, metaphysics reflects this condition exactly insofar as it intimates a region of objective meaning for which the particular subject cannot claim autonomous authorship. Adorno is certainly a philosopher of humanism and human autonomy. Indeed, like his interlocutors in the interpretation of Kant, he too indicates that humanity emerges as reason overcomes the formality of its relation to its contents and experiences. However, Adorno does not envision the human, after reification, as the unitary substrate of some interpretive epistemology or communicative anthropology; nor does he see the human as a condition which produces itself as a historically elaborated unity of meaning. The human, rather, is always *deferred*; it is always other than any cognitive or ethical unity which might claim it. For this reason, however dialectically, the

human always requires metaphysics; indeed, it might in some way always be metaphysical.

Kant charts the end of metaphysics. However, for Adorno at least this end coincides not with the birth of human knowledge, but with its mutilation. The block which Kant puts on metaphysics thus still elucidates the desire of consciousness to dispose itself meta-physically to its contents and to the forms which it has created for itself.

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