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The Possibility of a “Felt Contact with Objects”

Sudeep Dasgupta

In the “Dedication” to Max Horkheimer which opens *Minima Moralia*, Adorno reflects on the personal aphorisms which follow thus: “Subjective reflection, even if critically alerted to itself, has something sentimental and anachronistic about it”. Sentimentality, because the reflections of the subject seem irrelevant or deluded in the face of the objective conditions which have precipitated “the dissolution of the subject” (ibid). Reflections *from* a damaged life, the subtitle of the collection, will have something anachronistic about them, because the life out of which the subject reflects has been thoroughly debased by the social relations of production: “Our perspective of life has passed into an ideology which conceals the fact that there is life no longer”. However, in typical Adornian fashion, the dim and depressing picture being drawn will be given a negative dialectical turn of the screw. Adorno continues: “But the relation between life and production, which in reality debases the former to an *ephemeral appearance* of the latter, is totally absurd ... Reduced and degraded essence [life] tenaciously resists the magic [produced by production] that transforms it [life] into a façade” (ibid., emphasis added). In what follows, I will glean those moments in *Minima Moralia* where Adorno’s reflections from this debased and degraded life offer ways of thinking resistance.

In his defense of the particular Adorno assigns “individuation” not “the inferior status” in relation to the whole Hegel constructs, but “a driving moment in the process” of a social and historical totality marked by contradiction. Precisely *because* “the socialization of society has enfeebled and undermined him”, Adorno argues “the individual has gained [...] in richness, differentiation and vigour” (17). A politics of the possible emerges from the very rifts and contradictions engendered by objective conditions and registered at the level of subjective experience. That is why the violent conditions of socialization are both the context and the very conditions of possibility for resisting it. *Minima Moralia* closes in the “Finale” with the suggestion “Perspectives must be fashioned that displace and estrange the world, reveal it to be, with its rifts and crevices” as both “indigent and distorted”. Yet these perspectives can only emerge from perspectives “marked [...] by the same distortion and indigence which it seeks to escape” (§ 153). How can estranging perspectives on the world emerge from “felt contact with objects” (§ 153)¹ in an estranged world, and what help could Adorno’s reflections in *Minima Moralia* offer?

The resistance of the object to conceptual capture, and the ways in which this resistance is felt at the level of subjective experience, is precisely what the subject feels in its contact with, rather than violent appropriation *of*, the object. The use of style defamiliarizes the subject’s exposition of its relation to the object and registers, through writing, the immorality of the demand to be clear and communicate. In “Morality and style”, Adorno avers “Regard for the object, rather than for communication, is suspect in any expression” (§ 64). The demand for “certain understanding”, that is the certainty produced by perfect comprehension, negates what emerges when style registers “the regard for the object” rather than its subsumption to concepts. Subjective experience which registers “felt contact with objects” will sabotage the demand that the exposition

of thought must be made familiar to the reader through showing “explicitly all the steps that have led him to his conclusion” (§ 50) to enable duplication.² Estranging perspectives on reality are expressed and registered through the form given to thought’s relation to the object: “For the value of thought is measured by its distance from the continuity of the familiar” (§ 50), its distance from “the instantaneous sizing-up of the situation” in order “to see what is ‘going on’ more quickly than the moments of significance in the situation can unfold” (§ 92).³

The non-transparency of the objective world, sought to be made clear by communicative reason and lucid language, requires a reformulation of the knowledge produced by the subject. Reflections that emerge from the damaged life of a subject produce knowledge that registers precisely the contradictions, rifts and fissures which accompany the subject’s experience of what Shierry Weber Nicholson (2019) calls “malignant normality”. That is why in “Gaps”, Adorno asserts “knowledge comes to us through a network of prejudices, opinions, innervations, self-corrections, presuppositions and exaggerations, in short through the dense, firmly-founded *but by no means uniformly transparent medium of experience*” (§ 50 emphasis added). Estranging perspectives emerge then precisely from the felt experience with objects of the partly opaque and contingent process by which thought reflects on life as “a wavering, deviating line” (§ 50). Experience registers the contingency of the normalcy of domination, of life being otherwise, of another “possible” life, and that is why Adorno casts life as “an ephemeral appearance” rather than the permanent and achieved effect of reification. Miriam Bratu Hansen (2011) has explored precisely the importance of bodily experience in Adorno’s aesthetic theory where the contradictions, rifts, and violence of damaged life are registered. The concept of “dissonance” also describes precisely an aspect of subjective experience from which Adorno begins to glimpse the possibility of a critical reflection on damaged life⁴.

Estranging perspectives on the given to think the possible, the deployment of style to register the felt contact with the object, the potential of subjective experience to register an indigent and distorted reality, the centrality of rifts, dissonance, and contradiction in thinking the relation of the particular to the general – through the form of the aphorism –, *Minima Moralia* configures modalities of resistance for a possible other life as it itself, and as a collection/constellation the book exemplifies the process of “thought thinking itself”⁵ through a felt contact with objects.

Notes

1 Elsewhere Adorno begins to expand on this aphoristic phrase: “in philosophy, we literally seek to immerse ourselves in things that are heterogenous to it, without placing those things in prefabricated categories [...] to adhere as closely to the heterogenous” (Adorno 2000, 13, emphasis added).

2 In “genuine style”, Adorno offers a counter-formulation to systemic thinking. Here, he argues that “style is a promise” to the extent that it refuses “achieved harmony, in the questionable unity of form and content, inner and outer, individual and society” and registers the tension between the poles of the general and the particular (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002, 103; see also Edward W. Said 2007).

3 Critiquing the static character of systems in which thought places objects and thus subsumes them to concepts, elsewhere (2000, 25) Adorno states: “To comprehend a thing itself, not just to fit and register it in its system of reference, is nothing but to perceive the individual moment in its immanent connection with others”. An estranging perspective refuses precisely the temporality of a system, of thought as “instantaneous sizing-up”, and notes the unfolding moments of the object in its relation to others.

4 “What we differentiate will appear divergent, dissonant, negative for just as long as the structure of our consciousness obliges it to strive for unity” (Adorno 2000, 5; See also Dasgupta 2019).

5 Cook analyzes Adorno’s call that “metaphysics today should question whether, and to what extent, thought can transcend the sphere of concepts, or of thought objects, to think material things” (2007, 229). The essay is one place which fleshes out what “the felt contact with things” for Adorno might mean for philosophy. The subject’s feeling through contact with things, as Adorno argues and Cook explains, is quite different from the recent focus on objects in Object-Oriented Ontology.

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Biography

Sudeep Dasgupta is Associate Professor in the Department of Media Studies, the Amsterdam School of Cultural Analysis (ASCA) and the Amsterdam Centre for Globalization Studies (ACGS) at the University of Amsterdam. His publications focus on the aesthetics and politics of displacement in visual culture, from the disciplinary perspectives of aesthetics, postcolonial and globalization studies, political philosophy, and feminist and queer theory. Publications include “The Aesthetics of Indirection: Intermittent Adjacencies and Subaltern Presences at the Borders of Europe”, *Cinéma et Cie* 17:28 (2017), the co-edited volume (with Mireille Rosello) *What’s Queer about Europe ?* (Fordham University Press, 2014), and *Constellations of the Transnational: Modernity, Culture, Critique* (Rodopi, 2007).