

Review of: Raymond Geuss, *Morality, Culture and History: Essays on  
German Philosophy*

Raymond Geuss's erudite, incisive and beautifully structured essays on German philosophy are informative and a pleasure to read. Although it is possible to quarrel with this or that detail of interpretation, one can have nothing but admiration for the skill and patience with which Geuss makes accessible the thought of some of the most complex and elusive German philosophers.

None more complex and elusive than Theodor Adorno, who is the subject of two of the essays and plays a substantial role in two more. Adorno was born in 1906 and taught in Frankfurt, his home town, as a professor of philosophy and sociology until his death from a heart attack in 1969. He was not a stranger to Britain. Forced into exile in the 1930s, he spent several years in Oxford, writing (but never submitting) a D. Phil. thesis. During his time there Adorno knew many of the leading figures of the day. The impression of him that comes from his Oxford contemporaries, however, is not flattering. In his autobiography, Ayer describes Adorno as a "comic figure" while Berlin (who counted Adorno as a personal friend) thought that as a philosopher Adorno was "simply not serious". Adorno himself, not surprisingly, saw things rather differently. In a letter of the time, he describes himself as having to reduce his thinking to "a childish level" in order to be understood by those by whom he was surrounded in Oxford. Geuss's achievement is to make the high esteem in which Adorno is held in Germany comprehensible to the

Anglo-Saxon reader without flattening or understating the distinctiveness of his enterprise.

One of the reasons why Adorno is so difficult is that his preferred approach to philosophy is the critical interrogation and transformation of the thoughts and positions of other philosophers whom he considers intellectually significant, a method that he calls “determinate negation”. Thus an understanding of Adorno presupposes mastery of Kant, Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, Husserl and Heidegger, amongst others. Geuss meets this requirement with ease. Quite rightly, he considers Adorno’s relationship to Hegel to be crucial and he explains it in some detail in an essay, “Art and Theodicy”, that seems to me the most interesting of the pieces collected here.

The problem of theodicy, says Geuss, arises when we perceive a discrepancy between the way that the world is and the way that we believe or, at least, hope that it might be. Thus there are, in principle, two ways in which the problem might be successfully resolved: either we might show that the world does, ultimately, if not at first sight, meet our requirements or that our requirements are not, as we originally took them to be, discrepant with the way that the world is. For Hegel, the problem of theodicy is the central problem towards which all of his philosophy is directed and his solution combines both elements: we must attain a deeper understanding both of the way that the world is and of our own most fundamental interests, our “absolute need”. Yet in this context art is, for Hegel, as Geuss explains, a kind of “necessary failure”. Although art’s objective is indeed the kind of reconciliation that the problem of theodicy requires, it cannot fully successfully carry that objective through, given the discrepancy between the

conceptual complexity required for a proper understanding of the nature of reality and art's necessarily sensuous basis.

It is in the light of this project – “art for God’s sake”, as we might call it – that Adorno should be understood, according to Geuss. Yet Adorno’s position represents a direct inversion of Hegel’s: so far from being, ultimately, in order, Adorno believes, the world that we live in is so much at odds with human needs that the more deeply we come to understand it the more unacceptable it will become for us. If art is cognitive (as Adorno, like Hegel, believes) then its role is precisely to unmask the false consensus of advanced capitalist societies. Instead of reconciliation, art should promote the awareness of contradictions and a kind of melancholy resignation. Geuss is unsatisfied with this conclusion. He suspects that the attitude of withdrawal that Adorno endorses is best explained in relation to the particularities of Adorno’s – in many ways unattractive – personality: “his extreme narcissism and the self-serving nature of his melancholy”.

There is much in what Geuss has to say here – and it is certainly possible to find statements in Adorno’s extensive writings that support this picture – yet it seems to me that the image that it leaves of Adorno as a kind of bereaved mourner for the Hegelian Absolute underplays certain aspects of his thought. Paradoxical though it may sound, Adorno’s aesthetics seem to me to be at once more mystical and more materialist than Geuss allows. More mystical, in the sense that Adorno (following his friend, Walter Benjamin) sees art as embodying a quest for what he describes in relation to music as a “non-conceptual language”: the attempt to produce art-works which, notwithstanding their fragmentary character, will have a special kind of

transcendence. This undercuts (or at least drastically changes the sense of) the idea that art is primarily cognitive. More materialist, because Adorno's pessimism, it seems to me, is premised on something much more like the orthodox Marxist theory of the division of labour – something that could, in principle, be overcome in a new social order – than on the existence of an insuperable metaphysical discrepancy between human existence and our fundamental needs.

That this book provokes questions and rejoinders of this sort is, of course, a tribute to it: as with all the best expositors, the clarity with which Geuss has described the intellectual structures that concern him does not simply serve to inform his readers but invites them to take up the discussion.

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