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The Twitching of the Hand

Introduction

Adorno observes in *Negative Dialectics*: ‘For thought there is really no other possibility, no other opportunity, than to do what the miner’s adage forbids: to work one’s way through the darkness without a lamp.’¹ The overpowering bleakness of the social, political and cultural context he analyses makes it difficult, almost impossible, he observes, to find an escape from the status quo, to find the freedom to act or even to think in a world that he characterizes as a ‘strait-jacket’,² and in a culture in which ‘there is not even the possibility of something outside it becoming visible, something that is not caught up in the general inclusiveness’.³

It is for this reason that Lukács placed Adorno in the ‘Grand Hotel Abyss’, together with Schopenhauer, as discussed in the Introduction to this book. Both Schopenhauer and Adorno, Lukács argues, affirm the overpowering nature of the whole in which the subject finds itself and thereby undermine the idea that we are able, as rational and autonomous creatures, to grasp our environment and attempt to change it for the better. This results in a fatalistic and passive acceptance of the horrors of the world that leaves no room for the actual possibility of change, to set oneself in motion and attempt to revise the structures that dominate the world, Lukács claims.

A similar point was made by Jürgen Habermas, who famously stated that Horkheimer and Adorno ‘surrendered themselves to an uninhibited scepticism regarding reason, instead of weighing the grounds that cast doubt on this scepticism itself’.⁴ In Habermas’ view, this ‘really problematic move’ results in an almost universal condemnation of the capacities of reason and a dismissal of its potential for the
constitution of autonomy. The almost totalizingly negative tendencies of Adorno’s philosophy hereby seem to push him into the same camp as Schopenhauer’s ahistorical formulation of the enslavement of reason by Will: according to both, the subject seems to be too unfree to be able to influence itself or the conditions under which it lives.

This is ironic, since Adorno explicitly tried to distance himself from Schopenhauer’s ahistorical essentialism. In his lectures on History and Freedom, for example, he follows Lukács and criticizes the ‘totalising view’ of Schopenhauer’s pessimism for destroying the possibility that things could be different and for not believing in the idea of rational emancipation. Schopenhauer’s philosophy, Adorno writes, ‘tends to leap to the assistance of individual evil in the world. It does so by arguing that attempts to change the world as a whole are doomed’.

In the following, I want to look at the manner in which Adorno tries to distinguish the dark nature of his own philosophy from Schopenhauer’s pessimistic conclusions. Following Lukács’ and Habermas’ critiques, I will do this by analysing Adorno’s understanding of rationality and by discussing which aspects of the faculty of reason he praises. This discussion will bring us to Adorno’s references to the body as well, especially to his ideas on the connection between reason and corporeality. Since Adorno’s analysis of rationality, like Schopenhauer’s, is mainly based on a reading of Kant’s philosophy, the latter’s defence of reason will play an important role in this chapter.

**Critical self-reflection**

In spite of the barbarity in which the enlightenment culminated, Adorno argues that we should try to cling to the basic promise of enlightenment thinking and stress the emancipatory qualities and possibilities of the faculty of reason. He and Horkheimer clearly state in the introduction to Dialectic of Enlightenment: ‘We have no doubt – and herein lies our petition principia – that freedom in society is inseparable from enlightenment thinking.’ Immediately, however, the authors add the following to this statement:

> We believe we have perceived with equal clarity, however, that the very concept of that thinking, no less than the concrete historical forms, the institutions of society with which it is intertwined, already contains the germs of the regression which is taking place everywhere today. If enlightenment does not assimilate reflection on this regressive moment, it seals its own fate.