

Review Essay

Two New Interpretations of Adorno: Pippin and Honneth

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The Persistence of Subjectivity: On The Kantian Aftermath. By Robert B. Pippin. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

Disrespect: The Normative Foundations of Critical Theory. By Axel Honneth. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007.

The recent works of Robert B. Pippin and Axel Honneth offer two distinct revisions on the thought and legacy of Theodor W. Adorno for contemporary political philosophy. Their reinterpretations mark an important shift for the tradition of critical theory as it moves from what Honneth has labeled the “negativist form of social critique” – which flowed from a particular reading of Adorno’s work, most notably in French post-structuralism – towards new horizons.¹ In this review essay, I contend that Pippin and Honneth offer compatible, yet distinct, views on Adorno and offer an alternative trajectory for the future developments of critical theory. On the one hand, Pippin, through the work of Adorno, offers a cogent defense of realizing the ideal of bourgeois freedom for achieving the self-conscious, active, self-determining subject.² On the other, Honneth has reinterpreted Adorno’s thought as a means to ground critical theory’s type of normative social theorizing and its concern with human emancipation in existing social reality.

Pippin’s *The Persistence of Subjectivity* forms part of the growing trend amongst scholars to re-explore and critically assess the Kantian and Hegelian legacy in social theory and political philosophy. Much of this book has been published previously – as has Honneth’s *Disrespect* – but it is only here that Pippin comprehensively examines what he calls the highest values of the “modern West,” the idea of bourgeois philosophy.³ For Pippin, what lies at the heart of this ideal is a philosophy of freedom that looks to how individuals may direct the course of their own lives as *independent, rational* and *self-reflective* beings. Today, “bourgeois” denotes images of self-indulgent hedonism and connotes a form of egoism, a “well-organised selfishness” and “cultural crudity.”⁴ Pippin illustrates that post-Hegelian thought has maintained a profound suspicion of the claims of bourgeois philosophy and the idea of individuals as self-determining centers of causal agency. Yet for Pippin, the problem is not that the “‘bourgeois’ picture” is false but that it is “simply ‘incomplete’” and should therefore not be rejected but “properly ‘realised.’”⁵

The problem that Pippin grapples with is the post-Kantian denial of the ontological claim and hostile rejection of the potential for a self-conscious, active, self-determining subject elsewhere described as the free and rational individual subject.⁶ He also deals with the loss of the ideal of freedom that has accompanied this rejection. Pippin argues that the attempt to jettison the commitment to a bourgeois subject has involved throwing out the proverbial baby with the bathwater – the loss of the aspiration for a free, self-determining life.⁷ For Pippin, the most important implication of bourgeois freedom is the idea of natural right, that

by just being *human*, everyone is placed under an obligation to act in ways consistent with the availability of action for all. For Pippin, the Owl of Minerva still rests firmly on its perch and the appeal of the bourgeois notion of right cannot, and has not, been explained away by some new philosophical insight.⁸ Ultimately, the problem is not the ideal of a free subject but the matter of its incompleteness in modern life – how the subject continues to be torn apart in the conditions of modernity. Hence Pippin appeals to overcome what Marcuse correctly identified as the “one-dimensionality” of the modern subject.⁹

Pippin approaches the problem of what he calls *genuine* subjectivity through asking what are the conditions under which one could actually “*lead a life*,” that is, acting as and experiencing oneself without being determined by exogenous requirements, the will of others, or the distortion of false consciousness. He condemns modern life for obliterating this possibility and yet remains hopeful in finding *shared reasons* that may provoke transformation in the normative structure of society through modernist art, literature and philosophy. These areas are deemed as particularly important in attempting to understand the “fate” of the bourgeois ideal of the free, rational, self-determining subject. In this vein, Pippin critically interrogates a host of theorists who challenge the legitimacy or potential of a free, bourgeois subject.¹⁰ And, in what I regard as one of the central chapters of the book (Chapter 5), Pippin offers a critique of Adorno by questioning what characteristic of modern society (broadly conceived as Western, Enlightened, and capitalist) allowed Adorno to regard it as “false.”¹¹ The typical criticism of modernity suggests that while bourgeois societies understand themselves to be expanding individual liberty, such societies are, in reality, “systematically unfree” so that either the ideal of freedom within modern society is internally false or its representation of freedom is false. Pippin finds however, that Adorno moves far beyond such arguments and goes so far as to treat Kantian, bourgeois philosophies of freedom as manifestations of what he terms the “philosophy of identity.”¹² For Adorno, the psycho-dynamic logic within modernity is excessively “identitarian” and involves a process by which the subject is identified (or totalized) and that regulates the subject and experience, leading ultimately to reification. This form of identitarian thinking is taken as the cause of the modern world’s pathologies as described in Adorno’s *Negative Dialectics*, which is the focus of Pippin’s analysis.¹³

Pippin challenges Adorno’s account by arguing that it is based on a distorted picture of Western modernity and that the assumed drive to reification/identitarian thinking functions as an “unexplained explainer” within his theory. That is, Adorno gives the impression that all predication is a form of identification whereas, for Pippin at least, Adorno should have distinguished between “identifying” and “identity thinking” and perceived that the object need not be exclusively identified within conceptually determining markers.¹⁴ Pippin observes that within the critique of identity thinking, Adorno treats bourgeois freedom as *ideology*, criticizing both its incompatibility in the modern world and its implication with scientific determinism.¹⁵ Firstly, Adorno alleges that when the bourgeoisie changed from a revolutionary to a conservative class, its concept of freedom grew obsolete without being realized.¹⁶ The Kantian notion of the self-legislating subject existed and exists within the historical “bourgeois world” – replete with its myriad forms of inequality – and hence modernity’s “contradiction” lies in the incompatible way in which the modern subject experiences themselves as “now free, now unfree.”¹⁷ Secondly, Adorno views Kant’s *Third Antinomy* as implicating freedom within scientific determinism, which Adorno contends cannot be rationally combined. It is this impossible marriage that is the source of the many pathologies in bourgeois society.¹⁸ While Pippin agrees with Adorno that the problem of this modern idea of freedom arises not because of *bad* philosophy but because it was set in a world

of property-owners committed to rigid scientism, Pippin diverges with Adorno at the point where Adorno links this conception of identity thinking “with little or no justification” to bourgeois society itself, which for Pippin is “too great a stretch.”¹⁹

Yet despite Adorno’s concern against identity thinking, Pippin believes that Adorno nevertheless gestures toward an extension of the bourgeois ideal of “realized freedom” as evidenced in Adorno’s praise of Kant’s *Principle of Justice*.²⁰ Pippin thus attempts to reduce the postmodern or negativist qualities of Adorno’s thought and goes so far as to contend that Adorno in fact provides utopian anticipations of a “reconciled life of the free.”²¹ By combining Kant’s explanation of the susceptibility of man to weakness or immorality as a profoundly social condition *with* the insight into the necessity of social conditions to form an independent, rational, self-reflecting life, Pippin ultimately argues that there are social conditions in which such a life would be more, or less, likely. Pippin then uses this foundation as the basis by which to conclude that reconciliation (without identitarian domination) must await the transformation of our understanding of freedom to a fuller conception that does not defer to the non-identical but is made in relation to human others – freedom as “being with self in others.”²² As such, it could be argued that we can critically re-direct the thought of *Negative Dialectics* towards the affirmative ends of subjectivity, i.e. to employ non-identity to champion the plurality of subjectivity and to preserve identity as a means of human freedom. Such an approach, I deem, would be consistent with Pippin’s defense of the ideal, “rational and free” subject without the need to throw out Adorno’s valid criticism of identitarian thinking with the bathwater – to exercise this tired metaphor once again. That is, we could maintain the principle of non-identity without deference to its essentially negativist social implications (as exuded in postmodern literature) and instead view it as a means to promote the free, rational, self-determining subject by rendering a fuller conception of freedom embedded amongst social relations.

It is this type of approach that has animated Honneth’s thought. And his most recent work, *Disrespect*, makes yet further inroads into this groundbreaking form of social theory. It is for this reason that Nancy Fraser has rightly called Honneth’s recognition theory “the most ambitious philosophical undertaking of our time.”²³ Many of the essays contained in this new volume make reference to Adorno and in ways that, like Pippin, eschew its perceived orientation towards “negativist social critique” and attempt to re-capture its critical function for social theory.²⁴ So while both Pippin and Honneth agree that Adorno “vacillates helplessly” between philosophical reflection and aesthetic experience,²⁵ Honneth re-interprets key aspects of Adorno’s thought in ways far different from Pippin – though their conclusions are seemingly compatible. For Honneth, the early work of the Frankfurt School was marked by “historical-philosophical hopes of progress” and none of them, even Adorno at this time, “doubted the prospect of an emancipatory transformation.”²⁶ However, with the rise of fascism and Stalinism, such hopes faded and were replaced with critical pessimism, which is most clearly set down in Horkheimer and Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.²⁷ Here, Horkheimer and Adorno traced back the causes of totalitarianism to the beginnings of human history and argued that the social-pathologies of totalitarianism could only be understood as a pathological development in the *entire* process of civilization, that is, from the very “first act of rational control over natural processes.”²⁸ This instrumental command over nature led directly to the formation of social systems of domination, with totalitarianism being its logical endpoint. The dialectic proceeds from an attempt to control the forces of nature around us (as the actions of the mythical hero Odysseus attest to the beginning of the book), and ends with our being controlled by the seemingly uncontrollable forces of instrumental domination in modernity. However, Honneth argues that the problem with this thesis is that it

excludes many factors that do not stand in direct relation to either instrumental rationalization processes or totalitarianism and, therefore, casts an all-encompassing net of “pathology” over the process of civilization as a whole. The advancements of legal freedoms, democracy, and the broadening of individual action – the very developments that “provide the background against which social pathologies can appear as historical misdevelopments at all” – are recast as being pathological themselves.²⁹ In distinction, Hannah Arendt’s analysis in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* finds that totalitarianism can only emerge in modern societies whereby the technical activities of production suppress the practices of public deliberation³⁰ and, for Honneth, it is Arendt’s view that is “more close to reality” than the ruminations found in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

Honneth continues to focus on the work of Adorno, the historical formation of domination, and the juxtaposition between immanent and external forms of social critique in Chapter 2, which is, in many respects, the key chapter of *Disrespect*. This chapter is dedicated to offering a re-interpretation of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* which Honneth fears is in danger of becoming a “stranger” to us, without any hope of “relevance in the present.”³¹ While Honneth affirms that the theme of Adorno and Horkheimer’s work is still topical, the theoretical means by which it attempted to show the convergence of fascism and Stalinism and the processes by which forms of domination are established is no longer convincing. Honneth locates the fundamental issue as being a methodological one; between a social criticism based on the “immanent” ideas of the good and those that possess standards of “external” value.³² The latter’s use of some transcendent standard adopts an alien perspective that is too distant from society to be applicable within it, leading ultimately to totalitarian consequences. Here, “the idea of the good is drafted over the voices of those affected, an idea just waiting to be misused politically by a power-obsessed elite.”³³ Some have interpreted the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in this way as a dangerous form of “apocalyptic social critique,” others as poetic work of art – both of which, Honneth alleges, displace its relevance as a form of social critique for contemporary society. In distinction, Honneth shows how this text is a “special type of world-disclosing critique” which reveals the pathological character of social relations but *not*, in accordance with Arendt’s views advanced earlier, that they are a problem of civilization *in toto*.³⁴

Here, Honneth argues that there are two problems with forms of social criticism that rely on “context-transcending” standards. Firstly, any normative critique of society presupposes a certain “affirmation” with that culture in order for it to identify the social maladies therein. Social critique can only be understood, and can only understand society, by being part of the same “language game.” Secondly, those forms of social criticism that refer to external standards assume an approach that is far too distant and represents an elite form of knowledge that is prone to manipulation.³⁵ Richard Rorty is representative of this first position as he advances the epistemological claim that beyond “language games” there is no truth that could ground such a context-transcending critique.³⁶ Michael Walzer, on the other hand, relies on the perspective of the “local judge” to provide a justifiable form of critique *within* an established society.³⁷ By focusing on the normative question of whether the norms we rely on have to originate in local culture or correspond to context-transcending principles, both suppose that a condition of social injustice is the legitimate object of a critique of society.³⁸ Consequently, Honneth finds that both approaches agree with the method of an “immanent correction of social maladies,” but he argues that this is a restrictive schema as it looks *only* to such “social maladies.” Fortunately, Honneth suggests that there is an alternative: if liberal societies experience violations of the “norms of justice” then this will be able to ground a second, “external” form of social critique. He proposes that we should consider

“not just the way claims are satisfied to be false, but to regard these claims themselves as being in some respect ‘false’. We could also be convinced that the entire mechanism by which our claims or desires are generated is suspect.”³⁹ The first part of this statement deals with violations of principles of justice, whereas the second refers to “unwholesome” or “anomalous” conditions that presuppose “social perfection” as its standard. By claiming that a society’s characteristics have taken a “wrong turn” to such unwholesome and anomalous conditions implies that a “set of social relations has violated the conditions which constitute a necessary presupposition of the good life.” And it is these *misdevelopments* that Honneth conceptualizes under the term “pathology” and which are the focus of specific judgments of social criticism.⁴⁰

The problem is the hopeless task of attempting to give a “rational justification” for this type of social criticism of “perfection” or the “good life,” and it is on this issue that the work of Adorno and Horkheimer is reinterpreted by Honneth as a means of overcoming this impasse. Honneth concedes that we cannot reason “carelessly of universal conditions of the good life” or the objectivity of assumptions about “human nature,” nor can we overshadow value pluralism which seems to exclude the possibility of “assuming socially shared beliefs of the good.”⁴¹ This would seem to preclude any rational way of justifying the normative judgment of social pathologies, despite the abject need for such “critical diagnosis.” Yet Honneth suggests that the possibility for such a “therapeutic self critique” in which “we can reach agreement on the appropriateness of our way of life” can be found in the rhetorical devices employed in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. The approach taken by Horkheimer and Adorno in this seminal work does not justify its normative judgments “rationally” but seeks to “evoke it intentionally in the reader” by “presenting such a radically new description of social living conditions that the latter suddenly acquire the new meaning of a pathological condition.”⁴² So instead of employing ethical arguments to defend an alternative vision of the good life, Honneth favors what he calls a “disclosing form of social criticism” that gives “such a radically new description of social reality as to alter our view of it fundamentally and change our value beliefs in the process.” This form of critique draws on existing “linguistic resources” and by shifting meanings “reveals facts hitherto unperceived in social reality,” thus opening up “a new context of meaning.” It changes the preconditions of the “evaluative discourse” of society, and by shifting the meanings of given social “facts,” makes the facets of social reality more visible.⁴³

As such, Honneth offers an alternative way of reading the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as a “device of rhetorical condensation” that rejects any anthropological or metaphysical interpretation. In this light, Adorno and Horkheimer deliberately provoke us to “perceive parts of our apparently familiar life-world in a different way, so that we might become attentive to their pathological character.”⁴⁴ Honneth identifies a series of such rhetorical devices through which Horkheimer and Adorno apply this radical critique: the *narrative metaphor* or *illustration*, such as of the Odysseus myth, which aims to reveal the violence behind the mechanisms of social discipline; the use of *chiasmus*, the joining of two phrases or words that casts a new light on combinations of meanings which collapses their familiarity (i.e. the phrase the “culture industry”); and *exaggeration*, by which a certain characteristic is presented in a “grotesque or shrill way” that renders visible what was hidden within accepted meanings.⁴⁵ In this way, Honneth argues that the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* offers a “model of evaluative world disclosure” through narrative illustration, chiasmus and exaggeration that reveals familiar aspects of capitalist culture in a “completely new light.” These social practices become visibly “pathological” through the use of this array of rhetorical devices, which unveils them as contradicting “the conditions of the good life.” Yet, Honneth is not

blind to the limitations of such an approach and alerts them to us unswervingly. While it offers an “unfamiliar perspective” on our existing social world, it does not provide a device to prove that things *are* actually that way. Its truth is dependent on the possibility that the “society it describes will one day agree to accept its new descriptions, and thus change their social life practices”⁴⁶ – an end that cannot be determined but only hoped for.

Following from this, Honneth argues in the third chapter that the original project of the Frankfurt School – its attempt to critically diagnose social reality – has ceased to exist in unmodified form.⁴⁷ Horkheimer and Adorno had remained bound to a Marxist “functionalism” but the problem arose that they were dependent upon a “pre-theoretical resource for emancipation whose very existence could no longer be proved empirically.” Particularly after the post-World War II period, Adorno could no longer find any trace of an “intramundane transcendence” in the social culture of everyday life.⁴⁸ The turn towards Adorno’s “historico-philosophical negativism” in *Negative Dialectics* thus marked the point where critical theory could no longer link critique *back* to social history and in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the sole remaining place for such “intramundane transcendence” was said to be in modern art.⁴⁹ Adorno’s negativist social critique in his later writings became “radicalized” and prognosticated the “self-dissolution of the social core” – a theme that was taken up particularly by French post-structuralism.⁵⁰ According to this tradition, every form of critique that attempted to locate itself within social reality must itself be considered “impossible” since reality itself is taken to no longer “harbour social anomalies even emancipatory interests of attitudes.” These “negativist social theories” tied to Adorno’s work attempted to diagnose the types of instrumental reason that were seen as “life-threatening”; the power of “technology, science and systems of control.”⁵¹ For Honneth, even the other theoretical current of critical theory, Habermas’s theory of communicative action, ultimately agreed with the “pessimistic” form of social critique found in the “negativist current” of contemporary critical theory. This is because the colonisation of the life-world threatened to “dissolve the social core of society.”⁵² Appropriating Adorno’s critique of reification in this way, both of these trajectories of critical theory held that social theory is closed to any “intramundane elements of transcendence.”⁵³

However, Honneth offers an alternative path away from these negativist trajectories. The task for contemporary critical theory is to identify some other empirical experience that offers a “pre-theoretical indication that its normative standpoints have some basis in social reality”⁵⁴ and Honneth locates such an interest in the pathologies of disrespect. For Honneth, an alternative approach to social theory can be found in the direction of moral experiences that are not “aroused by a restriction of linguistic capabilities, but by a violation of identity claims acquired in socialization.”⁵⁵ Here we see clearly that as much as Honneth relies on the legacy of Adorno, that he offers a way beyond and around its negativist implications for social theory by pursuing the real life moral experiences of recognition. For Honneth, the “social protests of the lower classes” are not set by moral principles “but by the experience of having their intuitive notions of justice violated” – the violation of their expectations of respect for their “own dignity, honour or integrity.” Disrespect, or “moral injustice,” occurs whenever “human subjects are denied the recognition they deserve” and this denial creates the moral feelings of “shame, anger or indignation.”⁵⁶ Honneth thus moves away from the negativist legacy of Adorno to his recognition theory and, in this way, the pathologies in the social forms of recognition move to the center of “critical diagnosis” in order to grasp the “disorders or deficits” in the social framework of recognition.⁵⁷

To conclude, in each of their unique ways, both Pippin and Honneth have offered challenges to, and reinterpretations of, the legacy of Adorno. In so doing, they have shifted the trajectory of contemporary critical theory from the precipice of negativist tendencies which

threatened to dissolve its emancipatory project, towards a defense of subjectivity and the conditions of recognition, respectively. While Pippin and Honneth are disparate thinkers in many respects, their thought converges on the question of the possibility of a genuine subjectivity through, and with, others. The phrase “being with self in others” (*bei sich Selbstsein im Anderen*) is a sentiment they both share.⁵⁸ Pippin’s commitment to attaining the “realised freedom” of the *independent, rational and self-reflective* subject and Honneth’s grounding of the normative foundations of critical theory in social reality through the processes of recognition remit a myriad of possibilities for the future emancipation of humankind.

NOTES

1. Axel Honneth, *Disrespect: The Normative Foundations of Critical Theory* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), 66–67.
2. Robert B. Pippin, *The Persistence of Subjectivity: On The Kantian Aftermath*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 5.
3. *The Persistence of Subjectivity*, 1.
4. *Ibid.*, 3.
5. *Ibid.*, 2.
6. *Ibid.*, 5, 9.
7. See *Ibid.*, Chapter 2.
8. *Ibid.*, 7–8.
9. Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man: The Ideology of Industrial Society* (London: Sphere Books, 1968).
10. These include Heidegger (Ch 3), Arendt (Ch 7), Strauss (Ch 6), Gadamer (Ch 4), Frank (Ch 8), McDowell (Ch 9) and Adorno (Ch 5). The latter half of the book then deals with the diverse “Modern Mores” (Part III) and “Expressions” (Part IV) that illustrate the status of the subject and the modern ideal of freedom through such diverse subject-matters as abstract art (Ch 13), medial practices (Ch 11), and literature (Ch 12) amongst others.
11. *The Persistence of Subjectivity*, 99.
12. *Ibid.*, 103.
13. Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1973).
14. *The Persistence of Subjectivity*, 104–105.
15. *Ibid.*, 107.
16. *Negative Dialectics*, 215.
17. *Ibid.*, 294–299.
18. *Ibid.*, 214 and Pippin, *The Persistence of Subjectivity*, 110.
19. Pippin, *The Persistence of Subjectivity*, 111.
20. *Negative Dialectics*, 239 and *The Persistence of Subjectivity*, 111.
21. *Negative Dialectics*, 263 and *The Persistence of Subjectivity*, 112.
22. *Ibid.*, 120. This is the general thrust of Pippin’s claims throughout *The Persistence of Subjectivity*, though the specific content obviously differs in relation to the nuances of the different theorists. What is stridently maintained however is the continued return to the theme of defending the legitimacy of bourgeois freedom and demanding of society a “fuller” realisation of it.
23. Nancy Fraser, quoted in *Disrespect*, 2007.
24. For a general review of Honneth’s *Disrespect* see Shannon Brincat, “Book Review – Axel Honneth’s *Disrespect*,” *Dialogue*, 6, no. 2 (2008).
25. *The Persistence of Subjectivity*, 106, note 17 and Honneth, *The Critique of Power: Reflective Stages in a Critical Theory of Society*, trans. K. Naynes (Cambridge, MI: MIT Press, 1991), 69.
26. *Disrespect*, 28.
27. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002).
28. *Disrespect*, 29.
29. *Ibid.*, 30.
30. *Ibid.*, 28, note 46, citing Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, (New York: Harcourt, 1951).
31. *Disrespect*, 49.
32. *Ibid.*, 50.

33. Ibid.
34. Ibid., 50–51. Refer also to his discussion of Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* on 30ff.
35. Ibid., 51–52.
36. Ibid., 52. See Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).
37. *Disrespect*, 53–54. See Michael Walzer, *Interpretation and Social Criticism*, (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1987).
38. *Disrespect*, 54–55.
39. Ibid., 55.
40. Ibid., 56.
41. Ibid., 56.
42. Ibid., 57.
43. Ibid., 57–58.
44. Ibid., 59.
45. Ibid., 59–60.
46. Ibid., 60.
47. Ibid., 63.
48. Ibid., 65.
49. Ibid., 65.
50. Ibid., 66–67.
51. Ibid., 73.
52. Ibid., 68.
53. Ibid., 67.
54. Ibid., 69.
55. Ibid., 70.
56. Ibid., 71–72.
57. Ibid., 74.
58. *The Persistence of Subjectivity*, 120 and Honneth, *Suffering from Indeterminacy: An Attempt at a Reactualisation of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, Trans. Jack Ben-Levi (Amsterdam: Van Gorcum, 2000), 7–17.

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