

THE CHANGEABILITY OF NEEDS, THE TENUOUS PERSEVERANCE OF LOVE. INTRODUCTION FOR THESIS ON NEED

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Behind this short text, to be found in Theodor W. Adorno's *Gesammelte Schriften*¹ and written in 1942, still during the undecided World War, with a defiant optimism and in the process of the critique of both traditional Marxism and bourgeois thought that was unfolded in subsequent years in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, hides an aporia that concerns a question about the constitution of nature and, paradoxically, the nature of thinking. Its tacit polemics against, among other things, the reductionist materialism of Marxism-Leninism, is also applicable to the positivism of today's neuroscience and biology. It expresses the historical changeability of needs. Natural needs—this is how Adorno's claim can be interpreted—are what in humans are things-in-themselves, and nevertheless they are subject to historical change—for the subject itself is part of nature. The assertive thoughts set a stage for explicating conditions for philosophical thinking and critique that can grasp the reality of this antinomy. They were composed for one of the seminars which the members, affiliates, and critics of the Institute for Social Research alike—all of whom still chose to flee ultimately to the United States rather than elsewhere—were conducting in their Los Angeles apartments, with an eye to an analysis of the emerging catastrophe in Europe, the scope of which may even not have been obvious at the time.² The *Theses* imply a concept of nature that detaches itself from

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¹ Theodor W. ADORNO, *Thesen über Bedürfnis*. In: *Gesammelte Schriften. Band 8: Soziologische Schriften I*, Frankfurt am Main 1998, pp. 392-396 [AGS]. For an alternative translation see Theodor Adorno: *Theses on Need*, transl. by Keston Sutherland, *Quid* 16 (2005).

² This particular seminar was *On the Theory of Needs*, held in July-August of 1942. Günther Anders characterizes it as part of an “effort undertaken in those critical years to establish an intellectual connection between two circles that actually were not closely connected to each other, the Brecht circle and the circle of the Frankfurt School.” Max Horkheimer: *Gesammelte Schriften. Band 12: Nachgelassene Schriften 1931-1949*. Frankfurt am Main 1985, pp. 560 et seqq. Theodor W. Adorno, Günther Anders, Bertolt Brecht, Hanns Eisler, Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse, Ludwig Marcuse, “Nbg.” (unidentified), Friedrich Pollock, Hans Reichenbach, and Bertholt Viertel participated. The minutes of presentations by Ludwig Marcuse, Horkheimer, Adorno, and Anders follo-

the one presupposed by the mathematical quantification of the natural sciences, without, however, proclaiming speculatively a reduction of what nature is to a mere idea of it.³ If in the meantime, it has become difficult to even grasp what these needs, the so-called bodily ones, linguistically capture, their reality is nevertheless that which constitutes the individual as a bodily one with self-awareness, and is precisely non-identical to the individual as the instance of the social category of universal individuality. It seems rather easy today to claim that there is nothing natural in the constitution of a human as an individual; its determinations are presumed to be solely socially constructed, hence variable and contingent upon shifting historical conceptions that originate in manifold cultural practices. Just as the *Theses on Need* discard any thought of immutable natural needs, and, as historical materialism with a critical stance, claim the variability of nature itself through the mediation of a free consciousness emerging out of this nature, the bodily character of suffering and satisfaction, of the fulfillment of needs, is held fast. These needs are not fixated; rather, they can modify themselves according to what individuals bring forth and establish as social relations. Yet for them to truly become new social needs, the relations themselves, defined as those of production, must be freely changed. False hedonism, from this perspective, is but an obstacle to the realization of the possibility of fulfillment for the entire society. As an ethically inevitable aim, the right fulfillment of all one's individual needs implies the fulfillment of those of everyone else, and it would presuppose that every individual act according to a model in which one follows a particular object—which in this particular case is at the same time an individual subject. Because one aims at the fulfillment of all the needs of this one particular other, while simultaneously the other strives to the same with respect to oneself, the abandonment of individual freedom, that is commonly criticized in such unrestricted mimetic behavior, does not occur. Manfred Dahlmann questions "the core statement of [Jean-Paul] Sartre's philosophical project": "The subject is free, and because this freedom is valid for all subjects identically, because it determines their existence—both in particular and in general—they, who as individuals immediately negate each other with respect to

wed by discussions are published in: *ibid.*, *Diskussionen aus einem Seminar über die Theorie der Bedürfnisse*, pp. 559-586.

³ The speculative concept of nature is what Jörg Huber bemoans in much of contemporary critical theory following Adorno. See *Subjektive und objektive Momente physikalischer Erkenntnis*, presentation for the series "Interstellar: Eine kritische Theorie von Gesellschaft, Technik und Fortschritt," TU Dresden, 2015 (Manuscript).

this freedom due to their decisions, are, as each individual, responsible for everything that happens in the world.”⁴ His objection is: “If everybody is responsible for everything, without any gradual difference, in the substance this amounts to the statement: Nobody is responsible for anything.”⁵ Keeping in mind the gradual difference, Dahlmann further argues that it is necessary to “‘incorporate’ [...] Sartre’s definition of the [free, D. D.] subject into critical theory, to present it as basically immanent to it,” and he refers to the sociological contraption of ‘two-person-relationships’ as a domain of its possible actualization: “There are, for instance, in a ‘two-person-relationship,’ e.g. between a man and a woman, even today immediate bonds, or bonds free of reflection, such as between a dog and a master, that are brought about by desire and are immediately lived out, which cannot be disregarded, ‘relationships’ indeed captured by behaviorism (in the conceptual pairs of impulse and reaction, gratification and punishment) and which, according to Sartre, determine behavior without an additional, *autonomous* third (notwithstanding whether the latter is the state, money, commodity or reason).”⁶ In an added footnote Dahlmann states: “The notion of mimesis in Adorno, by the way, aims at such ‘immediate’ relationships.”⁷ Indeed, he objects: “Though capital proves, against Sartre and the behaviorism, and this is its ‘historical mission’ according to Marx, that in principle this also would be possible differently –in this society, *the* value can enter any relationship as its distancing mediation– from this it follows that, should capital be substituted by reason, these relationships can be stripped of immediate violence.”⁸ The argument to be made here, however, is that, though this is not warranted and persists only vulnerably, in the love between two individuals such mediation can take place against capital, despite the latter’s mediated violence. What appears as immediate in love, namely not mediated by capital or state, is in truth mediated, albeit by the semblance of a spirit that is not reducible to instrumental reason precisely because it does not want to dominate its object. Yet, indeed, to paraphrase Adorno, there is no right life in the wrong one; this reason exists only to the extent that the individuals who bear it in each individual circumstance determinately negate the imperatives of the predominant reason of capi-

⁴ Manfred DAHLMANN, *Subjekt und Souveränität. Kritik der Existenzphilosophie Jean-Paul Sartres*. Freiburg i.Br.: ça ira, 2013, p. 189.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 193.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 193 et seqq.

tal by, at the same time, using and modifying them. If they should succeed in holding fast the contradiction instead of exploiting their love as façade for adjustment, love as a continuously imperiled relation between two perseveres only to meet another situation, constituted by capital, that requires a right decision for its upholding. Love, as is society, is a process rather than a factual state of matter that can be summarized in a set of objective features. Because of this, it retains an always living potential to transfigure itself—then apparently wrongly—into redemption which is considered already achieved.

In love, which in its fractured and non-reciprocal form, according to Adorno, is the model for aesthetic experience and hence an unregimented imitation of the natural, because one desires what *one* particular other desires, and the other reciprocally endeavors to fulfill what the one wishes, rather than encountering an instance of an absolute unity—for such is already the form of the subject-object relation in the false totality⁹—or of the recognition of the one will being forced upon the other, as is implied by the Hegelian dialectic of master and slave along with its contemporary revitalizations¹⁰, a “communication of the differentiated”¹¹ takes place. In it the notion of the preponderance of the object can be realized to the extent that the one is, by one’s own decision, making one’s own goal to fulfill *everything* that the other desires, and since this implies that *all* one’s desires are in turn to be fulfilled by the other, there is no renunciation in their relation. Renunciation, on the contrary, is the intrusion of society in all its manifold shapes into this relation of love, in which it is freedom itself that makes it possible to follow the desire and life of the individual other, however changing—for if the one was bound only by empirical determinants in one’s own actions, there would be no possibility of imitating the spontaneously moving other. And not only would one instead obey external impulses, be they of the unconscious or another empirical force, but one would also be unable to mimic the actions and desires of the other minutely so as to, in their realization—at the same time by expressing one’s own needs, and letting the other make them freely his or her own—include their fulfillment. That such a relationship is the opposite of the exchange, even though it

⁹ Theodor W. ADORNO, *Zu Subjekt und Objekt*. In: AGS 10, p. 743; *On Subject and Object*. In: Theodor ADORNO: *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, Translated by Henry W. Pickford. New York 2005, p. 247.

¹⁰ Cfr. Alexandre KOJEVE, *Hegel. Eine Vergegenwärtigung seines Denkens*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1997, here p. 33.

¹¹ Theodor W. ADORNO, *Zu Subjekt und Objekt*, op. cit., p. 743; *On Subject and Object*, p. 247.

necessarily relies on the latter's spiritualization for comprehending what the other needs, as opposed to blindly imposing one's own conscious or unconscious actions upon the other, appears clear enough. In the exchange the manifold non-identical qualities of a thing that are inaccessible to universal concepts are reduced in a synthesis, which is a practical one of labor, that brings forth representations of identical objects; these are nothing but specific use values molded according to the demands of value. For the exchange value, following Marx, is itself an expression of the value form. As a particular social quality of things, epistemologically the value form is tantamount to their constitution as objects with identifiable, and thus quantifiable, qualities. Love between two individuals may be real even in today's society, yet this society, which imposes on all to adjust to the movement of capital, and lets the political sovereign maintaining this movement intervene whenever there is a deviation, will interfere with it –because there is no reconciliation. The necessity of sacrifice, either for labor or in the form of labor, will require the denial of the fulfillment of both one's own needs and those of the other individual in question. In art, Adorno would further claim, in a fleeting way a one-sided fulfillment of the promise of happiness can be achieved, but only to the extent that this fulfillment fails –for the artwork is not a subject, even in the so-called body performance, but an object, though as an “absolute commodity”¹² it is not identical to a commodity. An artwork is an image, and thus a fragment, although this fragment itself is defined as a particular unity of the whole and its parts, in which the former does not do violence to the latter.¹³ If they succeed, both art and love –one transient in itself, the other possibly not– indicate that in natural history itself, the truth of which is claimed to have a temporal nucleus, there is that which Adorno, with Kierkegaard, refers to as “hope”: –the “sense for the possibility,”¹⁴ namely that of redemption.¹⁵ Of the latter there can be no positive knowledge, insofar as knowledge's categories themselves are a function of the self-preservation of commodity exchange-based society. It may be, however, experienced aesthetically, if an artwork holds still the truth content of its time, and as long as, despite the resistance of

¹² Theodor W. ADORNO, *Ästhetische Theorie*. In: AGS 7, p. 351.

¹³ Theodor W. ADORNO, *Beethoven. Philosophie der Musik. Fragmente und Texte*. Hg. von Rolf Tiedemann. Nachgelassene Schriften. Ed. by Theodor W. Adorno Archiv, Bd. I.1, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1993, S. 62; *Beethoven: The Philosophy of Music*. London 2002, p. 34.

¹⁴ Theodor W. ADORNO, “On Kierkegaard's Doctrine of Love”: *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung / Studies in Philosophy and Social Science* 8, no. 3 (1939), p. 426.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 429.

social life to it, love as a relation of two individuals, which is a mode in that all could “be different without fearing it,”¹⁶ can be kept up.

To the extent that love, too, inevitably runs against counter-forces, whose origin is in oneself as a bodily and hence social individual, it can be regarded as a *movens* of social critique. Once reflected in oneself, and brought to the extreme of desperation, the desire for love can lead to grasping the logical absence of an alternative to the critique. This logical possibility by no means warrants a practical one; it is not only the criticism of Hedy Lamarr or Campbell’s soups that appears antiquated today, but this idea of the antiquatedness of unadjusted man itself.¹⁷ The catastrophe of Auschwitz, which eradicated any possibility of assuming that reason is positively present in history¹⁸, and yet today continues to live on as an actual possibility in the political delusion of anti-Semitism, the critique of which is the necessary base for the critique of all other forms of domination, and which exposes its adherence to the anti-logic of the capital relation, has intensified what Adorno calls the spell of society in order to signify the unconscious nature of its reproduction.¹⁹ Individual self-reflection, the necessary and only non-fungible condition of critique, appears all but socially marginalized; even in critical academia thinking tends to assimilate itself to the commodity form. This is the reason why, first and foremost, in the name of a utopia that cannot be a positive one, in today’s society the social conditions which make critique as an independent use of an individual’s own self-reflection possible would need to be preserved in order to criticize both social reality that seems as ahistorical as a wrongly conceptualized nature and rightly cognize of the nature in humans without equating it with a spiritual origin. This would provide a social basis for the possible realization of the best, however distant it may seem.

For Adorno, it appears clear that the unconscious, the depository of all needs, whether the so-called fundamental or superficial, is a social result analogous to art. The unconscious is not an eternal given. Just as the concluding thesis claims, in a classless society, because the discord between the possible and the real would be overcome, art, the speech of the possible, would also become something other, to

¹⁶ Theodor W. ADORNO, *Minima Moralia. Reflexionen aus dem beschädigten Leben*. AGS 4, p. 116.

¹⁷ Cfr. Günther ANDERS, *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen*, München: Fink/UTB, 2009.

¹⁸ Rolf TIEDEMANN, “‘Not the First Philosophy, But a Last One.’ Notes on Adorno’s Thought” Theodor W. ADORNO, *Can one live after Auschwitz? A philosophical reader*. Ed. by Rolf Tiedemann. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003, p. xii.

¹⁹ Further corroboration required for this claim is hardly possible in this present essay.

the same extent the unconscious itself, a reality scandalously and undeniably present, can open up the field for a constitution of consciousness in which the repression of needs may no longer be a constitutive element. Scandalously yet again, the classless society mentioned in *Theses* as a telos, in a certain sense, has long become a reality –merely to the extent also stated in the theses, that after the abolition of the market and competition the class relation is preserved, because production is still oriented at the extraction of surplus value for valorization of capital, while at the same time those belonging to classes barely know themselves as such. The distinction between the classes of the workers and the capitalists, that characterizes the aforementioned depth or essential relations distinguishable from the empirical appearance of the so-called surface, is as real as it was when the capital relation was spreading in the early industrial countries of the 19th century. Yet the level of integration of empirical capitalists and workers, to name representatives of just two economic classes, is a more thorough one, and this thoroughness seems to be epitomized by the historical experience of the needless –the drive of death itself all but universally having become a basic need. The *Theses* are a fragment, more a program than a result of an investigation already completed. What they capture is the necessity of a critique both of the supposedly immutable natural needs and the nominalist constructivism of a society that falsely believes itself to be the master of history. With all the blank areas between them, the claim they leave the reader with is that the salvation of humanity could only be achieved through a free transformation of its own natural needs by means of a social production oriented toward their immediate fulfillment. This is true not despite the catastrophe that the Enlightenment not only could not prevent, but also helped to bring about, but for the Enlightenment's own sake and by means of it. If the conditions which make individual freedom actual are social, and this means brought about by natural history, then also the capacity to think of oneself as an individual empirical I, who in one's own self-reflection encompassing self-reference also presupposes a rule that expresses the unity of I's mental activity²⁰, is conditioned by the false course of

²⁰ Béatrice LONGUENESSE, discussing the differences between Sartre's notion ofthetic and nonthetic self-consciousness and the Wittgensteinian distinction between the use of 'I' as subject and as object, concludes in the following manner: "I propose that the use of 'I' as subject is either a use in which we refer to ourselves as bodies (albeit in a way that is immune to error through misidentification relative to the first person pronoun) or a use in which we refer to ourselves by virtue of the simple rule ("I" refers to whoever thinks or says "I"), where using 'I' in this way serves to express and promote the unity of the mental activity by reference to which we make ourselves accountable for our own thoughts and actions." "Self-Consciousness and Self-Reference: Sartre and

history. Nevertheless, only this capacity allows its own transcendence, and only by means of the false unity of the empirical and transcendental I can the change of conditions be achieved in which the transcendental I will have been practically proven false in reality. Yet to detach oneself immediately from this reason is to directly affirm what remains the negative totality of the exchange-based society. It is to falsely imagine oneself to be independent and already free from its lawlike nature. A thinking that can at the same time grasp the opposites of the ever-same's naturalism and the enthusiastic subjectivism without dissolving them in favor of one or the other extreme would be necessary to hold fast the dualism of the empirical and the transcendental I as a characteristic of the discord between the individual and the universal in social life. This is another of Adorno's motifs, manifest in the *Theses*, that appears unavoidable for critique. The hope for a classless society is unexpectedly straightforwardly stated in them. Yet according to Adorno, there is no reason for this hope to disappear; for if hope is not a pre-given principle, its disappearance would also be a deed of the society in its totality, though it doubtlessly can be relinquished by individuals. There is no self-moving Messianic promise in history. If at all, this promise is established by the critique, yet it can be established and, possibly, realized, only because its beginning is entailed in natural history itself as an activity. Not a phrase of an abstract mysticism, this is rather both a sociological and epistemological problem that critical theory as practice seeks to resolve.

Wittgenstein." *European Journal of Philosophy* 16, no. 1 (2008), p. 17. Longuenesse, too, refers to the necessity of relying on the Kantian distinction between the empirical and transcendental I in any analysis of self-consciousness, and approaches the problem of interconnection between a body's awareness and self-awareness, dealt with elsewhere. It seems questionable whether a straightforward actualization of a Kantian epistemology in this respect would be tenable without considering Hegel's and ultimately Marx's arguments against its formalism.