

# The Work of Art and the Promise of Happiness in Adorno

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## I.

One of the most striking and intriguing theses of Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* is that art is the promise of happiness.

Stendhal's dictum about the *promesse du bonheur* says that art thanks existence by accentuating what in existence prefigures utopia. This is a diminishing resource, since existence increasingly mirrors only itself. Consequently art is ever less able to mirror existence. Because any happiness that one might take from or find in what exists is false, a mere substitute, art has to break its promise in order to keep it.<sup>1</sup>

Nothing about this dictum is self-evident, not least its attribution to Stendhal, who wrote not that art is the promise of happiness, but that "beauty is but the promise of happiness" (*la beauté n'est que la promesse du bonheur*).<sup>2</sup> Stendhal's saying about beauty occurs in a footnote to a passage in *De l'Amour* in which he states that it is possible to love the ugly. He illustrates the point with an anecdote about a man who, in the presence of two women, one beautiful and the other thin, ugly and scarred with smallpox, falls for the latter, who quite by chance reminds him of a former love. The moral of the story is that beauty has little or nothing to do with physical perfection.<sup>3</sup> Stendhal's definition of beauty, and his thought that the idea of beauty lies far from nature and from the physical form of the object of desire, impressed Baudelaire.<sup>4</sup> He comments in *Le Peintre de La Vie Moderne* that, although it "submits the beautiful too much to the infinitely variable ideal of happiness and divests the beautiful too quickly of its aristocratic character," Stendhal's idea nonetheless has the considerable merit of "breaking decisively with the mistakes of the academicians."<sup>5</sup> The mistakes to which Baudelaire refers are presumably those of taking nature as the ideal of beauty, and of having a misguided moral conception of nature. Baudelaire, under Stendhal's influence, works up a theory of the beautiful, a theory reminiscent of Platonism.<sup>6</sup>

The beautiful is made of an eternal, immutable element the quantity of which is excessively difficult to determine, and of a relative and circumstantial element which will be in turn or at once, the era, the fashion, morality or passion. Without this second element...the first element would be indigestible, inappreciable, maladapted and inappropriate to human nature...Consider, if you please, the eternally substantial element as the soul, and the variable element as its body.<sup>7</sup>

The main lesson Baudelaire takes from Stendhal is that the beautiful is an idea that can and must take on a myriad of historical guises, just as the lure of happiness can entice the flâneur into a thousand different alleys and arcades.

Adorno's dictum that art is a *promesse du bonheur*, then, though it draws on Stendhal and Baudelaire, is in an important sense his own. The dictum is a recurrent motif in Adorno, suggesting not just that he was fond of it, but that it is also a central thought, or at least that we can regard it as central, provided that we disregard Adorno's programmatic claim that in philosophical texts all propositions should stand equally close to the centre.<sup>8</sup> We can put aside that startling prescription, I believe, since it does not apply even to his own work: some propositions stand much closer to its center than others. The thesis that art is a promise of happiness is one of them and it radiates out in different directions. To understand it properly, is to understand

something important not just about Adorno's philosophy of art, but also about his wider social and political theory, and finally about the close and fraught interrelation between these, an interrelation which is thematized in a significant passage from the opening of *Aesthetic Theory*.

Art is not only the plenipotentiary of a better praxis than that which has to date predominated, but is equally the critique of praxis as the rule of brutal self-preservation at the heart of the status quo and in its service. It gives the lie to production for production's sake and opts for a form of praxis beyond the spell of labour. Art's *promesse du bonheur* means not only that hitherto praxis has blocked happiness, but that happiness is beyond praxis. The force of negativity in the artwork gives the measure of the chasm separating praxis from happiness.<sup>9</sup>

Here Adorno unambiguously sets out the social and critical role of art: the happiness it promises serves both as a foil for criticising existing society, and as an ideal for constructing a better one. Yet the passage raises a whole cluster of questions. What notion of happiness is in play? How exactly can art promise happiness? And what, according to Adorno, does the fact that art promises happiness tell us about art and its relation to society?

Before we move on to these questions, we need to make two cautionary remarks about what Adorno means by "art" and by "promise" respectively, in order to prevent certain misunderstandings from arising. The first is that when Adorno talks about art, he is only talking about European literature and music, from about 1750 to 1950, roughly, that is, from Johann Sebastian Bach to Samuel Beckett.<sup>10</sup> The second is that Adorno is not talking about promising in the sense of making a verbal commitment to a person that one will do something in the future. To promise in the sense in question is to exhibit a potential for something good or better, as when one says that it promises to be a fine day, or that young Carlota is a promising artist: to promise is to give hope or raise expectations. The French verb "*promettre*" and the German "*versprechen*" share this sense with English.

## II.

Now let us zero in on the notion of happiness. The claim that happiness can serve as an appropriate ideal and measure of a society has more *prima facie* plausibility, and much deeper roots in the philosophical tradition than the idea that art can: the latter dates from German idealism and German Romanticism; the former dates back to the ancients. Adorno knows this. In the beginning of *Minima Moralia*, Adorno remarks that the ancients took it for granted that happiness, the question of the good life, to be "the true field of philosophy".<sup>11</sup> In classical philosophy happiness is the purpose and the point of the individual life and the common social life of human beings, and the measure of their success or failure. To take a striking example, consider Socrates reply to Adeimantus's objection in the *Republic* that the austere diet of philosophy and gymnastics imposed on the guardians—no family, no private property etc.—would prevent them from being happy. Socrates replies as follows:

Our first task then, is not to form the happiness of a few, by isolating a few and ensuring their happiness, but of the whole polis....It is as if we were painting a statue and someone should approach us and censure us for not applying the most beautiful colours to the most beautiful parts of the body, because the eyes, which possess the highest beauty, were not painted in purple but in black. I think we should make a reasonable reply to him by saying, My good sir, do not imagine that we must make the eyes so beautiful that they would not appear to be eyes, or that we should do the like to the other parts; but observe whether by giving to the

several parts what rightly belongs to them we make the whole beautiful. Therefore do not now compel us to bestow upon our guardians happiness of such a kind as shall make them anything but guardians.<sup>12</sup>

In this passage Plato is not talking about happiness as individual enjoyment, but as a structural property of the polis as a whole. This is perfectly normal for Plato, though not for us, since we are used to thinking of happiness as enjoyment or delight in one's own existence, a good feeling about and positive attitude toward one's own life. The structural property of the polis at the open end of Plato's analogy consists in the harmony of the three classes, guardians, auxiliaries and workers, the good government of the guardians, and the functional principle of one person one job that cements society together. The ideal of beauty as aesthetic harmony at the fixed end of the analogy is also a structural property of the relation of part to whole, where everything is in its proper place. Plato considers the latter more familiar and less controversial than the idea of social happiness, which it elucidates.

Socrates' answer totally misses the point of Adeimantus's objection, which is that the individual lives of the guardians might not go well *from their perspective*, since they might remain unhappy even if the ideal of social harmony is realized in the polis as a whole. Aristotle presses the same objection in the *Politics*.

Plato deprives the guardians even of happiness and says that the legislator ought to make the whole polis happy. But the whole polis cannot be happy unless the most or all, or some of its parts enjoy happiness. In this respect happiness is not like evenness in numbers, which may exist in the whole but not in the parts...<sup>13</sup>

One has to take care here. It would be wrong to think that Aristotle is objecting to Plato's view of happiness as a structural property of social whole. He is not. It is just that he has a different structural property in mind, namely one in which each citizen individually participates in and personally partakes of the happiness of the polis. To judge the happiness of the polis, on Aristotle's account, is also to judge the happiness of its individual members. This distributive ideal of happiness is at work also in Aristotle's criterion of a correct or good constitution, which is that, however political power be structured and administered—as monarchy (rule by one), as aristocracy (rule by the few), or as republic (rule by all), it is wielded in the common interest of all the citizens—that is to say all the inhabitants—of the polis, and not in the private interest of the rulers.<sup>14</sup>

Again, just like Plato, Aristotle denies that a happy life is merely a life of pleasure or enjoyment.<sup>15</sup> Happiness, or *eudaimonia*, according to Aristotle's definition in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, is an "activity of the soul in conformity with virtue".<sup>16</sup> That said, virtue need not be had at the expense of individual enjoyment, for if people have been correctly trained to love virtue for its own sake, then the life of virtuous action will be satisfying, provided first, that their major needs and deepest desires, which are themselves the product of good upbringing and education—and thus appropriate in content and degree—are satisfied, and provided second, that they have not suffered great ill-fortune. Thus qualified, Aristotle claims that the happiness of the individual and the happiness of the polis are the one and the same, without this implying that the individual cares only for the whole city-state and not for himself.<sup>17</sup> Aristotle's point is a far reaching one. Political happiness here refers to the flourishing of the city, and the collective virtue of the citizenry, and there is an internal connection between these and the virtue of individuals. The soul of the happy person is one in which reason has the better part, and regulates the appetites, desires and emotions. The statesman, insofar as he is virtuous, in making laws in the common interest and exercising his practical wisdom, is expressing the rational part of his soul.<sup>18</sup> The laws and policies

that result from the statesman's activity are expressions of his reason. At the same time, the good practices and laws he brings into being foster the virtuous actions of the citizens, and help build their excellence of character and give rational form to their soul, which finds expression again when they, as citizens, are elevated to office and take turns at ruling. Looked at in this way, when all goes well, the collective happiness of the polis the individual happiness of citizens, coalesce in a metabolic harmony.

Plato and Aristotle, then, conceive happiness as a predicate both of the lives of individuals, and of society as a whole. As the highest good, namely that for the sake of which everything else is sought, and which itself is not pursued for the sake of anything else, as the most final end of the individual and collective life of man, happiness serves as a foil for the critical evaluation of human life and human, which is to say political, association. A society that is not happy is not a good society. And, at least for Aristotle a society most or all of whose inhabitants are not happy, is not a good society.

### III.

To see how all this relates to Adorno it will help to travel back to the origins of Frankfurt School critical theory.<sup>19</sup> In Max Horkheimer's essays of the 1930s, the seminal period where *avant la lettre* he developed what later came to be called "critical theory," he puts forward a theory of happiness very similar to the classical one we have just looked at, where it is a standard for the evaluation of society. The point of Horkheimer's doing this was both to position critical theory on the side of Aristotle and Plato, and to take aim against Kant, who was one of Horkheimer's chief *bêtes noires*. (It is easy to forget that in the early half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century neo-Kantianism of one variety or another was the dominant intellectual force in Europe, and that consequently Kant's shadow was everywhere.) Horkheimer followed Marx and Lukács, in levelling his criticism of Kant as the epitome of bourgeois thought. Kant's moral theory takes the form of a radical repudiation of *eudaemonism*. He gives various reasons why morality (and moral theory) cannot be based on the principle of happiness. First, happiness, unlike the good will, is not unconditionally valuable. Hence, second, it is incapable of being the ground of moral worth of actions. Third, the content of happiness is contingent, variable and indeterminate. Fourth, psychologically speaking, happiness and virtue, when not accompanied by a good will, produce over-confidence.

The principle of one's own happiness...is the most objectionable, not merely because it is false and experience contradicts the pretence that happiness always proportions itself to good conduct, not yet merely because it contributes nothing at all to the establishment of morality, since making someone happy is quite different from making someone good...; it is the most objectionable because it bases morality on sensible motives which undermine it and destroy all its sublimity...<sup>20</sup>

For Kant, the aim of morality as the expression of pure practical reason is not for moral agents to achieve happiness, but for them to become *worthy of happiness*. Similar arguments against the principle of happiness can be found, *mutatis mutandis*, in Kant's theory of right, and in his conception of political association.<sup>21</sup>

In these early essays Horkheimer attempts to rescue the concept of happiness as a tool for critical theory, while subjecting Kantian deontology to a materialist critique. He claims that Kant's deontological insistence that the moral worth of an action depends exclusively on the conviction [*Gesinnung*] of the agent, no matter the consequences of the action, is a "regressive tendency," and the idea that the good will is the sole source of moral value, an "idealistic delusion."<sup>22</sup> The worth of an action according to Horkheimer is determined consequentially by whether or not it

actually conduces to the transformation of bourgeois capitalist society into a rationally organised society, to the elimination of human suffering and oppression, and to what he calls the “happiness [*Glück*] of life as a whole.”<sup>23</sup>

Horkheimer rejects Kant’s central claim that one can explain the peculiar obligatoriness and overridingness of the moral “ought,” by showing that they are the manifestation of pure practical reason to a human nature that is both rational and sensible, i.e. not merely rational. That is why, according to Kant moral laws appear as imperatives. However there are alternative explanations. Both Hegel and Schopenhauer argue that the command like nature of morality is a relic of Mosaic law within the Judeo Christian tradition. Nietzsche traces the severity of moral commands back to rather gruesome origins of contract law, whilst Freud puts it down to the internalisation of fear of the father figure. Horkheimer sides with the dissenters. He attributes these features of Kantian morality to their religious origins.<sup>24</sup> He also portrays them as an internalization of social compulsion and as a psychic consequence of the suppression of the instincts.<sup>25</sup>

Horkheimer’s rejection of both the rationalism and the universalism of Kant’s moral theory is related to this point. As these early essays make clear, he has a historical understanding of morality. He claims that in the bourgeois era the human psyche is stamped with the imprint of possessive individualism. However, motives of individual self-interest are not sufficient to cement society together. Hence, once religious traditions and hierarchies have ebbed away, other mechanisms are needed to provide a repository of altruistic or non-prudential motives that will do this. Morality comes to fill the void, by trying to shore up an historically contingent set of behavioural norms and values with the illusory metaphysical backing of a “transcendent order of reality.”<sup>26</sup>

Horkheimer argues that the Kant’s whole attempt to ground moral prescriptions as requirements of pure practical reason, together with the widespread idea that moral actions stand in need of rational justification, is an illusion.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, this illusion is “ideological” insofar as it misrepresents what are in fact the contingent needs, interests and aspirations of a particular class as “universally binding postulates, anchored in transcendent authorities, as principles that correspond to the eternal essence of the world and of humanity.”<sup>28</sup> Consequently, Horkheimer rejects what he sees as a “metaphysically grounded morality” in favor of a rich conception of humanity, which foregrounds the moral feelings of love, compassion and solidarity, and the anthropological fact that humans desire happiness. These moral feelings, and the associated “claim to happiness” [*Glück*], Horkheimer claims, do not stand in need of any “justification or grounding.”<sup>29</sup>

Horkheimer, then, holds that happiness, not morality, is the appropriate basis for social criticism and the evaluation of social life. And like Plato and Aristotle before him, he holds that happiness is a property of social harmony belonging to life as a whole: happiness is the ideal of a rationally organised social totality in which the individual interest harmonises with the common interest, and where the individual citizen is at one with society. Horkheimer gives his concept of happiness an Hegelian-Marxist twist, in claiming that labour is the vehicle of individual self-realization through which the individual’s self-conscious activity become integrated within the social whole.<sup>30</sup>

In the future society towards which the moral consciousness aspires, the life of the whole and of individuals alike is produced a not merely as a natural effect but as the consequence of rational designs that take account of the happiness of individuals... In place of the blind mechanism of economic struggles, which presently condition happiness and—for the greater part of humanity—unhappiness, the purposive application of the immeasurable wealth of human and

material powers of production emerges.<sup>31</sup>

The harmonious social whole in which happiness will eventually be realized is a rationally organized totality, consisting partly in a planned economy.<sup>32</sup> In the absence of such a rational, self-conscious organization of society, morality functions as a socially integrative mechanism only by suppressing individuals' demands for a happiness the existing order denies them anyway.

It would be wrong to pass over the point that Kant means something very different by happiness to Aristotle. Aristotle, for his part, conceives happiness as an expression of human reason, as the ultimate good, and as the most final end of human life. For Kant, by contrast, happiness consists in the satisfaction (or possibly the co-satisfaction) of a plurality of sensible desires, which are part of man's empirical make up, are only conditionally good, and are separate from and not automatically in harmony with the aims of human reason. It can thus be claimed with some justification that Kant has a hedonistic conception of happiness and that this hedonism motivates his rejection of eudaemonism, i.e. his denial that happiness can form the supreme principle of morality and the ultimate ground of right.<sup>33</sup> In a way, then, it is misleading to play Aristotle off against Kant, as Horkheimer does, since both Aristotle and Kant reject the life of mere pleasure as one unworthy of human beings, and both recommend that life be lived according to the demands of reason. The difference, then, is this. For Kant, the ideal of happiness, as he understands it, cannot serve as an apt standard for the evaluation of human life or political association. That citizens or moral agents are happy or unhappy is a side issue. That they heed the demands of morality and conform to just laws is of overriding importance. Horkheimer sides with Aristotle and Plato, not only in his conception of what happiness is, but also in the claim that it is the appropriate measure of a good life and a good society, and thus an apt tool of social criticism.

#### IV.

This is not the place to tell the long and by now well known story about the development of Frankfurt School critical theory, but it is important to note that, although Adorno passes different judgements on Kant's ethics at different times and to different audiences, he shares Horkheimer's general discontent with Kant's rationalism and formalism, and that Adorno's preoccupation with happiness is also both a refurbishment of a central topic of ancient philosophy, and a self-conscious act of critical resistance against contemporary philosophy. In the opening remarks of *Minima Moralia* Adorno claims that the teaching of the good life, or rather what he calls the doctrine of right living ("die Lehre vom richtigen Leben"), was once "the true field of philosophy," but has fallen into neglect since philosophy converted to method.<sup>34</sup>

Adorno's concern with happiness in *Minima Moralia* is, however, far more fraught and problematic than Horkheimer's in the 1930s. For one thing, the young Horkheimer did not doubt that happiness was an expression of human reason. By the time of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* this faith in reason had vanished. Adorno's and Horkheimer's thesis in that work is that, in the process of social modernisation, human cognition and practical reason atrophy to the rational calculation of the most efficient means to given ends, and become the driving force in man's domination of internal and external nature. Thus understood, human reason can no longer offer an unblemished ideal of human happiness. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment* this aspect of the Aristotelian conception of happiness as a "rational activity expressing virtue" is sacrificed on the altar of the critique of instrumental reason, which initiates a sea change in critical theory.

Adorno abandons the Marxist idea, still present in Horkheimer's "Traditional and Critical Theory," that the idea of social happiness is "immanent in human labour."<sup>35</sup> Labor is no longer the

healthy expression of man's species-being but the cancerous outgrowth of man's instrumental rationality and his domination of internal and external nature. This is why the *promise of happiness* is always the promise of a form of praxis "beyond the spell of labor." Moreover, happiness can no longer be construed as the virtuous character arising from participation in the traditions and practices that make up the ethical life of the political community. In the aftermath of the collapse of the Weimar Republic, the rise of Nazism, War, Auschwitz, in short, in a context where an entire culture—its morality and its art—dismally failed, a neo-Aristotelian or Hegelian account of the social, cultural and institutional bases of happiness qua virtue is no longer possible.<sup>36</sup> In this context the question pressing on Adorno was whether "culture, and what this so called culture has become, leaves anything that even resembles right living [*richtiges Leben*], or whether it is a context of institutions, which to an increasing degree actually hinders such a thing as the right life."<sup>37</sup> In the lectures post-humously published as *Problems of Moral Philosophy* Adorno suggests that, under current conditions, *Sittlichkeit*, or the morality of custom, rather than *Moralität*, the morality of principle, presents the immediate danger.<sup>38</sup> The former, with its pressure towards group adaptation and conformity, is far less likely to be a source of possible resistance and criticism and more likely to harden into totalitarianism than the latter.

The peculiar difficulty Adorno now faces, given his diagnosis of social conditions, is to reliably locate and make available to critical theory something like happiness or the good life. This is the problem that lies behind one of his most memorable and most difficult aphorisms: "*Es gibt keinen rechten Leben im falschen.*" What makes this sentence is so difficult to interpret, also makes it difficult to translate. Literally it means that *there is no right living in the false life.*<sup>39</sup> A good, idiomatic translation of this crucial sentence into English would be something like: "The false life cannot be rightly lived." Jephcott's translation—"Wrong life cannot be lived rightly"—captures some of the oddness of Adorno's sentence but has disadvantages. For one thing, where Adorno stresses the absence of "rightness," Jephcott's translation indicates the presence of "wrongness." Where Adorno uses the adjective "*richtig*" and "*falsch*," Jephcott uses "right" and "wrong", which have a more moral timbre. Finally, it fails to pick up the resonance with the reference in the opening line of the book to the ancient "doctrine of right living, which Jephcott renders (not unreasonably) as "the teaching of the good life."

This remarkably pithy sentence suggests two very different ideas about happiness. The first idea is that happiness can be found only in fragments of reality that bear no significant relation to the structure of social reality. This is a line of thought Adorno develops in "The Essay as Form" and is most prevalent in his earlier work. After writing that the essay, by self-consciously embracing and manifesting its artificiality "honours nature by confirming that she no longer exists for human beings," he goes on to say that the essay's "Alexandrinism responds to the fact that by their very existence, lilacs and nightingales—where the universal net has permitted them to survive—make us believe that life is still alive."<sup>40</sup> Here, then, Adorno rejects the straightforward idea that art should imitate nature, and advances instead the view that art honours nature in not imitating it, but in celebrating its own artifice. Yet Adorno concedes that the idea of happiness—or at least the closely related idea of life that still lives—is immanent in the perfection of some of nature's "creations," like lilacs and nightingales, which remain outside the "universal net." Our perception of the perfection of these natural beings, which makes them stand out against the background of social imperfection, helps us to form an idea of happiness. This incomplete negativism, as I call it, is compatible with Adorno's habit of occasionally breaking his self-imposed prohibition on images, and saying what happiness would consist in. For example, he claims that once it has broken free of the spell of labor, of production and planning, enjoyment would itself be transformed:

*Rien faire comme une bête*, lying on water and looking peacefully at the sky, "being,

nothing else without further determination or fulfilment” might take the place of process, act, satisfaction, and so truly keep the promise of dialectical logic that it would culminate in its origin. None of the abstract concepts comes closer to fulfilled utopia than that of perpetual peace.<sup>41</sup>

The second idea, suggested by the famous aphorism, is that there is literally no happiness in the world, and that nothing within the world can help us to picture happiness, or even so much as to form an idea of it. I call this second idea austere negativism. Austere negativism is consistent with Adorno’s thought in *Negative Dialectics* that philosophy’s true interest lies in what is non-conceptual and non-identical to thinking.<sup>42</sup> The thought is roughly that one cannot but think by means of concepts, which by Adorno’s lights means to think representationally. This is what one might call the rationalist moment in Adorno’s thought. Consequently, in philosophy one has to *think* what necessarily escapes conceptual (and representational) thought. Adorno has no truck with forms of Romanticism or mysticism which arrogate to the subject some kind of non-conceptual access to what is non-identical to thought: for Adorno, no kind of intimation or feeling can show us happiness, utopia, non-identity or whatever. And because what nevertheless has to be grasped is something that necessarily resists conceptual thought one’s only option is to use concepts against themselves, or as he says, to go beyond concepts by means of them.<sup>43</sup> Only by such a means, by pushing thought against its limits, and as it were cracking open its surface, is the good, or the right life, to be glimpsed.

[I]t is only in that absence of images that the full object could be conceived. Such absence concurs with the theological ban on images. Materialism secularises it by not permitting utopia to be positively pictured; this is the substance of its negativity.<sup>44</sup>

There can be no doubt that Adorno endorses now one, now the other of these discrepant conceptions of negativism—incomplete and austere negativism. There can be no doubt also that Adorno does not much mind about discrepancy, or—which comes to the same thing—care much for consistency, the preoccupation with which he believes to be a major fault of contemporary forms of philosophy. He far is more concerned with the depth of insight his thought affords. Indeed he sometimes claims that if thought is too preoccupied with aiming for consistency it will not achieve depth of insight. Adorno’s work is much less like a theory—in the traditional sense—and more like a thicket of different ideas in tension with one another.

When offering a philosophical interpretation of his work, though, it is quite proper to treat him as if he had a settled view. After all there is no obligation on the interpreter to accept Adorno’s qualms about philosophy. I tend to treat him as an austere negativist, because I think that this view is more in line with the fundamental tenets of his work. One implication of this reading of Adorno as an austere negativist is that the thesis that art is a *promesse du bonheur* cannot be understood as a subjective genitive, which says that the happiness occasioned by art promises a better world. Rather, it has to be read as an objective genitive, which says that art promises happiness to those who engage properly with it, yet does not itself embody or impart happiness. This I believe is the most natural way to interpret it anyway.

## V.

We can now return with renewed focus to Adorno’s dictum. Richard Wolin gives a concise expression of what I take to be a fairly standard view of it, and of the whole relation between Adorno’s aesthetics and social theory.

Adorno seeks to redeem the vaunted *promesse de bonheur* (sic) that art counterposes to an antagonistic social totality. Art comes to represent a world of happiness and fulfilment that is denied in the workaday world of bourgeois material life.<sup>45</sup>

The standard view makes good sense of Adorno's claim that art provides a foil against which the social world can be criticized, and an ideal worthy of imitation. Bear in mind that Adorno does indeed make statements such as that "the doctrine of imitation should be reversed" and that "*reality ought to imitate artworks*, not the other way round."<sup>46</sup> However, the standard view thus expressed is in need of qualification and revision. For one thing, it is by no means clear how it is to be squared with Adorno's austere negativism: given the implications of the *Bilderverbot* as Adorno conceives it, it cannot be right to say that art *represents* happiness, for happiness—along with "utopia," "reconciliation," "right living," and a whole cluster of related ideas such as "non-identity," "otherness"—defies representation. Adorno is not claiming either that happiness consists in the contemplation of works of art, or that art works transmit ideas of happiness to those who pay them due attention.<sup>47</sup> Yet he does hold that art works *promise* happiness, and thus somehow vouchsafe the ideal of a better society that provides a foil for the criticism of the existing world and the construction of a better one.

To understand Adorno's view properly, we must ask the question: by virtue of what features or qualities do art works show this promise? The standard view, which was our point of departure, suggests that the property in question is something like a harmony of part and whole, an organic unity of the work. And we have already seen how this might offer a vision of happiness in something like the sense Horkheimer used it in his early essays. The view resembles Georg Lukács's theory that what makes the European realist novels of Balzac or Stendhal so successful is an organic unity of general and particular based in the "type."<sup>48</sup> Great art is characterized by organic unity. This is, claims Lukács, why Marxists are "jealous guardians of our classical heritage," a heritage that consists in "the great arts which depict man as a whole in the whole of society."<sup>49</sup> Now what Lukács calls the type is better understood as a feature of the content of the work, than of its form, though it embraces both. Adorno's view, by contrast, is that art works promise happiness in virtue of their form alone, or, as he sometimes says, their style, not in virtue of their content or message.<sup>50</sup> This is the substance of his criticism of the politically engaged art of Brecht and Sartre. And this is also why, contra Lukács's preference for the realism of Balzac and Stendhal, Adorno defends the modernism of Beckett, Kafka, and Proust: "What these works say, is not what their words say."<sup>51</sup>

Of course, the standard view can accommodate this: art promises happiness in virtue of its form. To quote Wolin again: "utopian content is conveyed indirectly through the moment of form."<sup>52</sup> But what formal feature of art conveys its utopian content and how exactly? The first answer that suggests itself is that it promises happiness through its *organic totality*. The view is that the reciprocal relation between the part and the whole calls forth an ideal of social harmony to which the world—the actually existing relations between individual and society—fails to live up. Adorno sometimes espouses this view, albeit tentatively and in passing.<sup>53</sup> Still, a lot more needs to be said if we are to explain why this formal feature can supply an ideal that is relevant for a criticism of this (Adorno's) society.

Three points in particular, each of which is linked to Adorno's interpretation of Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, are relevant to this explanation. First, Kant famously links judgements of beauty with the perception of what he calls "finality without an end," or to use the more literal but less idiomatic phrase "purposiveness without purpose." In other words, objects of beauty look as if they are for something, and yet are not for anything. Paradigmatically, for Kant, natural objects display this formal feature of finality without an end. Thus, for Kant, organic nature provides the

paradigm of beauty. So the form of finality without end provides a connection between nature, organic form, and beauty. Adorno, follows Kant in claiming that art works manifest through their form that they are without a purpose, and hence useless. Art does not fit in with, it is rather at odds with, the universally fungible world, and thus has the ability to convey happiness as an “awareness of the possibility of relations without purpose”.<sup>54</sup> Adorno sees this as an aspect of art’s autonomy which he gives a historical and social theoretical interpretation very unlike Kant’s.

Second, art’s not being for anything, has another implication for Kant, that Adorno lights upon, namely that its meaning is not available for interpretation in existing categories. Art is not paraphrasable; it is essentially inscrutable and enigmatic.<sup>55</sup> In Adorno’s eyes, this is what lends art its peculiar affinity with the non-identical, and the non-existent. For Adorno, these two interlinked features, art’s uselessness and its non-paraphrasability, mark it out as being as it were in this world, but not of it.

In bourgeois society, now fully organized and driven to subsume everything as totality, the spiritual potential of another society is to be found only in what does not resemble it.<sup>56</sup>

Third, there is Kant’s view that beautiful art *pleases* without any interest.<sup>57</sup> The beauty of art pleases in a way that is fundamentally different from the way in which agreeable objects please. It does not gratify, in that it does not merely satisfy our present desires. Art pleases, on Kant’s view, only in the sense that its formal property of finality without end occasions a harmonious free play of the cognitive faculties, as they try and fail to bring the sensible intuitions presented by the art work under a concept. For Adorno too, art pleases, but does not gratify: it does not give people what they immediately want. One reason that it does not gratify is that it is enigmatic, not immediately intelligible *as* a this or a that: it is not for anything.

Adorno recognises that artworks are not alone among the things in the world with these features, things that are purposeless, useless, enigmatic; things that please but do not satisfy. Fireworks, pranks, circus acts, among other things also do. They also bear the stamp of non-identity and have the same ability to promise happiness.<sup>58</sup> These features, which in art are linked with organic form, and with the harmony of part and whole, make art works peculiarly able to convey the idea of happiness in just the sense which that idea had for the critical theory of the 1930s.

## VI.

There are two notable difficulties standing in the way of the view we have been developing, even with all these modifications. For one thing, Adorno’s aesthetics thus construed, is in flagrant violation of the *Bilderverbot*, and is incompatible with his austere negativism. There is nothing particularly negative about art so conceived. The promise of happiness, as a standard for criticising a society does not flow from what in the significant passage from *Aesthetic Theory* cited above Adorno calls “the force of negativity in the artwork.” Secondly and more worryingly, the view cannot be Adorno’s, for it makes art’s ability to promise happiness depend on a kind of aesthetic classicism and organicism. Recall that as we have told the story so far, works of art promise happiness because they actually embody a certain organic harmony between part and whole, which suggests a certain relation between individual and society that is denied to individuals in the present social world and provides a vivid point of contrast to it. Artworks thus transcend the existing world, with its principle of functionalization, and its economic and administrative domination, just as they transcend the whole associated cognitive and ideological apparatus that according to Adorno serves and perpetuates those institutions. By virtue of the harmony realized in their aesthetic form, artworks bring to light the absence of harmony in the

social world. But Adorno flatly denies this.

Works of art are not internally structured like organisms: the greatest creations are refractory to their organic aspect as to what is illusory and affirmative.<sup>59</sup>

Whilst he agrees that classical artworks indeed strive toward an harmony of part and whole, the reconciliation of the one and the many, he also denies that what is transcendent and utopian in art is their successful realization of this ideal.<sup>60</sup>

That factor in a work of art which enables it to transcend reality certainly cannot be detached from style; but it does not consist of the harmony actually realized, of any doubtful unity of form and content, within and without, of individual and society; it is to be found in those features in which discrepancy appears: in the necessary failure of the passionate striving for identity.<sup>61</sup>

So it is not their success in realizing this ideal harmony of aesthetic form, but, on the contrary, their failure to do so, which enables art works to promise happiness—to manifest the possibility that society could be different and better.

Adorno is notorious for his critique of mass culture and light music, and is often erroneously caricatured as a mandarin intellectual and partisan of high culture. So it is worth emphasizing that he subjects classicism to an equally thoroughgoing criticism. In eighteenth century Germany classical art had been elevated to a universal aesthetic ideal by Johannes Joachim Winckelmann, who famously wrote in his essay “Thoughts on the Imitation of Greek Works” that in its “noble simplicity and quiet grandeur” Greek sculpture manifested a Platonic idea of beauty that transcended all of nature. This ideal, Winckelmann asserted, marked a cultural highpoint that was to serve henceforth as model for all art, and even for all literature and philosophy.<sup>62</sup> Adorno’s view, contra Winckelmann, is that the successful realization of the classical ideal is always bought at the price of an “oppressive tension, which itself is brought to bear against the ruling spirit that is subdued by the work.”<sup>63</sup> He brings the same criticism to bear on Greek sculpture.

The unity of the universal and the particular contrived by classicism was already beyond the reach of Attic art, let alone later centuries. This is why classical sculptures stare with those empty eyes that alarm – archaically – instead of radiating that noble simplicity and quiet grandeur projected onto them by eighteenth-century sentimentalism.<sup>64</sup>

In Adorno’s eyes, to propose an ahistorical ideal of how art should be, as Winckelmann did, is to sanction its petrification, and to kill off what was once living and important in classical art, and erect in its stead “the pernicious universality of myth as a norm of creation.”<sup>65</sup> This tells us something very important about Adorno’s conception of successful art. Even if the promise of happiness of some classical artworks is due the organic wholeness and harmony of their form, it is a serious mistake to think of this as a formal property that can serve as a “norm of creation”, as a recipe or formula for great art. (The latin word for norm—*norma*—meant for the Romans a try square that carpenters or masons used to check right-angles. It is in this sense that Adorno is using the word.)

Adorno’s critique of the classical view that art can and should aim to realize formally an ideal of aesthetic harmony and organic wholeness, then, requires us to give our interpretation of his dictum another twist on its axis. Art works should not aim to realize aesthetic harmony and organic wholeness; rather, through their form they should strive to resist this ideal, even while

they are inherently attracted to it. Moreover this negative desideratum of successful art through its form to resist succumbing to the demands of aesthetic harmony must not be understood as an ahistorical requirement for all works of art at all times. Adorno is not in the business of replacing classicism with an inverted, but equally ahistorical, ideal. Rather, his view is that under different historical conditions, the very truth content of art—its immanent ideals and aspiration, and hence its meaning and social significance—shifts.

On the story he tells, in the early bourgeois period of the eighteenth century artworks such as J. S. Bach's fugues could naively embody the ideal of harmony. Similarly, through their synthetic efforts the great works of Beethoven's middle period, the *Eroica* symphony and the *Appassionata* and *Waldstein* sonatas, still could and did convey their utopian vision through the aesthetic harmony and organic totality of their form: "In Beethoven the category of totality still preserves a picture of the right society..."<sup>66</sup> A work such as Beethoven's Third Symphony naively embodies an aesthetic harmony and organic totality, which offers a picture of the right life. This is a *promise* of happiness in the sense that what it pictures is not actual, but only beautiful appearance or illusion, a semblance.<sup>67</sup>

After a certain historical point, however, such naïvety is no longer available and what is required of artworks is a self-conscious elaboration of the impossibility of aesthetic harmony. As the nineteenth century developed, music (and art in general) became ever more preoccupied with subjective expression and its own form. Unlike Lukács, Adorno did not see this as a disease or degeneration of modernism. In his late works, Adorno claims, Beethoven himself intuitively begins to move away from this ideal. In the *Missa Solemnis* he "rejects the illusory appearance of subjective and objective, a concept practically at one with the classicist idea."<sup>68</sup> In his late string quartets he unconsciously discovered the "compulsion toward disintegration" as he pushed the idea of integration to an extreme.<sup>69</sup>

Later still, in the early twentieth century, modernist art breaks more decisively as well as more explicitly and self-consciously with the classical ideals.<sup>70</sup> As an example Adorno adduces the first movement of Schoenberg's Third String Quartet, which—by means of the twelve-tone technique—replaces the free play of traditional classical music "which produces a whole out of a movement from sound to sound...by the juxtaposition of mutually alienated sounds."<sup>71</sup> Instead of the "anarchic attraction between the sounds" within an organic whole, the sounds display only their "monadic lack of relationship and at every point administrative domination over the whole."<sup>72</sup> In tonal music, which is written in a key, some notes are assigned greater significance than others. Tonal music is thus marked by a hierarchy of vertical relations between notes. The tone row of twelve notes, all of which must be sounded, allows the music to avoid being in a key, to avoid this vertical hierarchy, and accords equal importance to each note. However, Schoenberg's real success, Adorno suggests, is to incorporate tonal moments within twelve-tone compositions, such as chords in which the notes have broken free from harmony. On the one hand, dissonant sounds are heard as dissonant in relation to the suppressed consonance. On the other hand, each note is differentiated and distinct from every other, and the dissonances and discordance are heard in themselves and not in relation to the suppressed consonances. Something like an Hegelian *Aufhebung* transpires (which it often does not in Adorno): "The dissonances arose as the expressions of tension, contradiction and pain...They become characters of objective protest. It is the enigmatic happiness of these sounds that, precisely as a result of their transformation into material, dominates the suffering they once announced, and does so by holding it fast. Their negativity remains loyal to utopia."<sup>73</sup> Somehow, the consonance that is suppressed is kept alive, but takes refuge in the individual sounds where it remains concealed. Happiness here is a name only for the foil that throws the unhappiness and pain of the sounds into relief and makes them simultaneously dissonant and yet more than merely dissonant. In this way an imageless image of

happiness is conveyed through the transfiguration of tonal elements in atonality. This is one concrete example of how the “force of negativity in the artwork” can give rise to the promise of happiness.

## VII.

Adorno’s view, fully expounded, is dialectically complex, historically supple and also aesthetically vague. There is no single formal property that all successful art works have that allow them to promise happiness. There are, rather, various different ways in which, and degrees to which, artworks through their form, according to the historical circumstances, promise happiness. At a certain point in the development of musical form, which is not to be separated from a certain point in historical and social development, art works can only promise happiness by their formal strategies of resistance to and repulsion of the attraction of aesthetic harmony and organic wholeness. This point was reached long before the cultural catastrophe that Adorno calls synecdochically by the name of Auschwitz. Yet, after Auschwitz Adorno thinks it is barbaric and unpardonable to attempt renew the classical ideal. Art must pay the price of a culture’s having entirely failed. It can no longer enjoy any illusions, or give rise to any naive semblances of happiness à la Bach and Beethoven. Art’s promise of happiness depends henceforth not on its successfully realizing an aesthetic harmony and organic unity through their form, i.e. on its “immanent success,” but on its immanent failure to realize such an idea, on the formal strategies it puts in play to eschew and resist the intrinsic pull of this ideal.

Art works of the highest rank are distinguished from the others not through their success—for in what have they succeeded?—but through the manner of their failure.”<sup>74</sup>

There is a reason for this. Any art, which through the aesthetic harmony of its form in the context of a totally administered and hence radically evil social world, would be guilty, as Raymond Geuss puts it, of “at least a quasi-moral failing.”<sup>75</sup> Artworks must from now on remain failures. They are damaged, fragmentary, and bear the scars of their resistance to the social world. This is why Adorno always couches his description of contemporary art in language of failure. Successful art works “shatter,” they “go under,” they “self-destruct,” they “fail,” and thus they resist absorption and assimilation into the culture that entirely failed: the administered society. Adorno likes to counterpose works which self-consciously fail, because in their very form they run up against their limits and transcend these limits, and thus succeed, to what he considers to be truly failed works of art, such as the music of Stravinsky’s neo-classical period. Adorno is notoriously uncharitable in his interpretation of Stravinsky, whose work he considers to betray happiness, by aiming to convey it directly through the “restoration” of the classical ideal, after its secret complicity with the totally administered world has been uncovered.<sup>76</sup> By contrast, the immanent failure of works of modernist art—failure of this special aesthetic kind—is in fact a “measure of their success.”<sup>77</sup> Only thus can they succeed in not betraying the very idea they fail to live up to.

Through the irreconcilable renunciation of the semblance of reconciliation, art holds fast to the promise of reconciliation in the midst of the unreconciled.<sup>78</sup>

Only thus can they still promise happiness.

## VIII.

This final twist brings Adorno’s dictum into a more or less stable and intelligible relation with his

aesthetic modernism, with the austere negativism of the *Bilderverbot*, and finally with the historical and sociological aspects of his theory. Still, the question arises whether these loosely conjoined doctrines do not push him *malgré lui* towards a kind of aesthetic asceticism—the joyless intellectual appreciation of the technical accomplishment of certain difficult and astringent works of avant-garde art, which in turn undermines the idea that art is a promise of happiness. For Adorno, successful (failed) art works must withhold sensible gratification, such as the pleasure of recognizing a familiar tune or subsuming a configuration of sensible particulars under a concept. Successful failed works of music, for example, thwart the expectations conditioned by traditional listening patterns, whereas light music, or even classical music that truly fails, occasions a “culinary” pleasure, by matching up with these patterns, and gratifying the untutored demand for familiarity. Thus successful artworks make people aware of their own unhappiness, and of the gulf between the potential for happiness contained in the technological and economic wherewithal of modern societies and the catastrophic state of the actual world. How, then, can Adorno claim that art promises happiness, while maintaining that, in its negativity, it withholds pleasure, thwarts expectations, and increases actual unhappiness?

Adorno emphatically denies that he is advocating an unremitting asceticism about art. Unlike Kant’s aestheticism, which, he claims, offers a “castrated hedonism, desire without desire,” his aesthetic theory offers a true hedonism, albeit at a higher order of reflection.<sup>79</sup> One takes true pleasure in reflecting on the fact that works of art must, and sometimes successfully do, withhold gratification. And their thus prescinding from enjoyment, which ultimately yields true pleasure, is the reverse side of their self-conscious failure to realize aesthetic harmony and organic totality.

In the false world all ἡδονή is false. For the sake of happiness, happiness is renounced. It is thus that desire survives in art.<sup>80</sup>

Now it would be very wrong to interpret this as a version of the ancient view that one should refrain from the life of pleasure for the sake of happiness. Plato’s critique of hedonism in the *Gorgias*, the *Philebus*, and also the *Republic*, and Aristotle’s repudiation of the life of pleasure in the *Nichomachean Ethics* have a very different motivation.<sup>81</sup> Adorno’s worries are closer to the attitude of modern German philosophers, Kant, Fichte and Hegel, who, generalizing slightly, saw the satisfaction of untutored sensible inclinations as a threat to free human activity. But there is a very important difference. Adorno holds that mere gratification is suspect, because under conditions where needs are manufactured by advertising, and desires and expectations manipulated by the culture industry to fit in with the administrative and economic demands of capitalist society, to succumb to immediate satisfaction is to volunteer for the false life, and the false life is no real life at all.<sup>82</sup> There is here a strong Rousseauian strand in Adorno, and in critical theory in general—one also finds it in the work of Herbert Marcuse, Eric Fromm.<sup>83</sup> One aspect of this Rousseauianism is the assumption that the false life has been disfigured by the civilizing process itself. So the “given” desires and sensible inclinations that we find ourselves with are to be overcome not because they are raw and untutored, but because they have been falsified and disfigured.<sup>84</sup>

I am more interested here, though, in how this strand of hedonism bears on Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory*. Adorno claims that not just happiness, but also *true pleasure* has taken refuge in art, and although there is no going back to immediate, untutored “true” desire, there is a way of going forward to it, by wresting it from the experience of art through reflection. In withholding pleasure at the first level, artworks repay due attention by offering pleasure at a second level and at a heightened degree of intensity.

There is more joy in dissonance than in consonance.<sup>85</sup>

Pleasure and pain, Adorno recognizes, are as intimately related as dissonance and harmony. Dissonance, he claims, is the truth about harmony, which is unattainable “according to its own concept.” Dissonance is not imposed as an idea, but arrived at because of a “friction in harmony itself”; similarly with artworks that initially do not afford pleasure, but pain.<sup>86</sup> Once one has through reflection on their form, on the social and historical situation of the artwork, and on the effect of the latter on the former, gained an understanding of why these artworks must appear painful and difficult, they afford a kind of deferred and transposed gratification. We should be clear here. Adorno is not talking about a highly refined, sublimated and ultimately cognitive pleasure, like the pleasure, according to Aristotle, that we take in acting virtuously, or in philosophizing. He is talking about visceral enjoyment, bliss, sensuous, somatic satisfaction, indeed a sexual pleasure: less happiness as organicism; more happiness as orgasm: “If anywhere, it is here, [in its processual character—GF] that aesthetic experience resembles sexual experience. The way the beloved image is transformed in this experience...effectively makes it the bodily prototype of aesthetic experience.”<sup>87</sup>

Adorno’s hedonism is not confined to *Aesthetic Theory*; it is present also throughout *Minima Moralia*, where he claims that truth demands that utopia be “determined in blind somatic pleasure” [in der blinden somatischen Lust].<sup>88</sup>

Happiness is obsolete: uneconomic. For its idea, sexual union, is the opposite of slackness [Gelöstheit—relaxed satiety], a blessed straining, just as that of all subjected labour is cursed.<sup>89</sup>

The lesson that sexual love (or heterosexual union) is the prototype of aesthetic experience is *one* that Adorno might have drawn from Stendhal and Baudelaire, who in agreeing that beauty is the promise of happiness, do not try to hide that it is also the promise of sexual pleasure, had he looked more closely at the context of the dictum. However, it seems that quite different considerations move Adorno to embrace hedonism: the mutuality of sexual intimacy, the fact that sexual intercourse is a kind of pleasure without function, and finally that orgasm involves on the one hand strenuous effort and on the other receptivity and self-abandonment.

Anyway by endorsing a hedonistic conception of happiness, Adorno sets himself against Aristotle, Plato, and Kant, all of whom repudiate the life of pleasure as a life unworthy of human beings. That said, his hedonistic conception of happiness is far closer to the one that Kant rejects as an account of moral value, and as a criterion of political right, than it is to the one that is—broadly speaking—endorsed by Plato, Aristotle, and the young Horkheimer. As ever, Adorno’s philosophical allegiances are mercurial.

The difficulty is that, while Adorno’s hedonism emphatically answers the question of whether his modernist aesthetic pushes him towards an intellectualist asceticism, it sits ill with the other elements of his theory. Not only is it a very different notion of happiness to the one we have been expounding, it is less amenable to the aims of critical theory. It is difficult, for example, to see heterosexual union as symbol of the good society, in as much as sexual intimacy usually tends to be a private and exclusive affair, rather than a collective, cooperative group activity.<sup>90</sup> It also is difficult to square with Adorno’s rationalist moment, which in his aesthetics manifests itself in the view that art *requires* philosophical criticism and reflection to bring its truth to light.<sup>91</sup> Adorno’s *eudaemonism* and Adorno’s hedonism look like different and incompatible notions of happiness, or as he might prefer to say, two halves of a theory of happiness that do not add up to a whole.

## IX.

I have tried to show how Adorno's dictum that art is the promise of happiness radiates in different directions and connects with various significant themes in his philosophy. In this interpretation of the dictum five interrelated themes in Adorno have come to prominence. First, Adorno's *eudaemonism*: i.e. the notion that that philosophy must return to the teaching of the good life, even under adverse conditions, and the associated doctrine that the idea of happiness can serve as a foil for the criticism of existing society and at the limit as an ideal to which existing society should live up. Second, there is Adorno's austere negativism: the view that there is no right living in a false world and that currently we cannot so much as reliably form a positive conception of a good life or a good society. Thirdly, I touched upon Adorno's rationalist moment, which is contained in the thesis that philosophy's task is to think what is non-identical to concepts, by means of concepts, and that true happiness, as well as what he calls non-identity or the utopia of cognition, is a form of transcendence that is only to be gained by breaking through conceptual thought by means of reflection. Fourth, we examined Adorno's modernism, namely the view that, after a certain historical point, art succeeds to the extent that it prescind from being merely enjoyable and that it eschews the idea of aesthetic harmony and organic unity to which it is nonetheless inherently attracted. Fifthly and finally, there is Adorno's hedonism, namely the view that the pleasure of sexual intercourse is the *Urbild*—the original image—of aesthetic experience, and thus the epitome of the idea of happiness.

So far as I can see, these five themes cannot be arranged comfortably into a single coherent theory. The first four themes, however, can be so arranged that they form, if not a single coherent theory, then at least a stable and intelligible overall view that makes sense of the idea that art is a *promesse du bonheur*. However, the last theme—Adorno's hedonism—disrupts the picture I have been painting. Whether one thinks this a problem will depend on one's view of the requirements of interpretation. One task of interpretation, certainly, is to take into account all the significant textual evidence. This being so, we cannot drop any of these five themes, at least not without bowdlerizing Adorno's writings for the sake of attributing to him a more coherent view. On the other hand, *philosophical* interpretations of Adorno will not rest content with analyzing and separating out these different ideas, but will aim to unite them into a coherent overall view.

Adorno would no doubt be pleased with the fact that his work does not yield readily to the aim of *philosophical* interpretation. He is deeply suspicious of and opposed to philosophy's attempt to fit phenomena of whatever kind a single unified view. He believes that philosophical theory, like any body of beliefs, is inherently affected by the social and historical conditions under which it is formed. To that extent he believes modern philosophy, and its drive for completeness and coherence, is complicit with the culture that entirely failed, i.e. that gave rise to the Final Solution, nuclear holocaust, and other appalling human wrongs of the twentieth century. Secondly, he holds that reason and rationality are themselves forms of domination, as well as the only available answer to domination.

Our difficulty in uniting these five themes into one theory has brought to light one of the animating concerns of Adorno's philosophy in general and of *Aesthetic Theory* in particular. *Aesthetic Theory* is so named not just because it is about art, but because it is arranged, as most of Adorno's written works are, aesthetically, according to principles drawn from musical composition, an arrangement which deliberately frustrates the demands of theory. In this respect *Aesthetic Theory* is an *aesthetic* theory in that it enacts the same "success" achieved by successful works of art, on Adorno's account of art: it resists assimilation into a *single*, unified whole, and thus deliberately *fails* as a theory. This is why interpreting Adorno can be such a frustrating and exhausting experience for a reader who wants to make philosophical sense of his work, and why contrary to Adorno's views about the appreciation of art, that experience is not an ultimately

satisfying one. Adorno is alive to this. “This inadequacy,” he claims, with which his theory is convicted by philosophers, “resembles that of life, which describes a wavering, deviating line, disappointing by comparison with its premises, and yet which only in this actual course, always less than it should be, is able, under given conditions of existence, to represent an unregimented one.”<sup>92</sup> For Adorno, only an unregimented life would be a happy one.<sup>93</sup>

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## Notes

1 Hullot-Kentor’s translation is a little inaccurate. He translates the passage thus: “Stendhal’s dictum of [art as] the *promesse du bonheur* implies that art does its part for existence by accentuating what it prefigures in utopia. But this utopic element is constantly decreasing, while existence increasingly becomes merely self-equivalent. For this reason art is ever less able to make itself like existence. Because all happiness found in the status quo is ersatz and false, art must break its promise in order to stay true to it.” Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. R. Hullot-Kentor (London: Athlone Press, 1999), 311; *Theodor W. Adorno, Gesammelte Schriften* 7 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1997), 461. Hereafter abbreviated as *Aesthetic Theory* and GS 7 respectively.

2 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 82/GS 7, 128. In the passages I have cited, it is implied that the promise is given by art. Hence Hullot-Kentor’s translation is not erroneous. Besides in *Aesthetic Theory*, 136/GS 7, 205 Adorno states that, “Art is the ever broken promise of happiness.” He does the same at several other places, e.g. *Aesthetic Theory* 135-6/GS 7, 204-5; GS 10.1, 192; and GS 14, 19. Note that Tom Huhn claims that Adorno “often repeats Stendhal’s dictum that beauty ‘is the *promesse de (sic) bonheur*’” unconsciously correcting the saying that Adorno, quoting from memory, usually gets wrong. Huhn, “Kant, Adorno, and the Social Opacity of the Aesthetic,” *The Semblance of Subjectivity. Adorno’s Aesthetic Theory*, Tom Huhn and Lambert Zuidervaart eds. (Cambridge Mass.: MIT Press, 1997), 239.

3 *De L’Amour XVII* (Paris: Gallimard, 1980), 58–59.

4 In “The Genealogy of Morality”, Nietzsche also compares Stendhal’s saying about beauty with Kant’s definition that the beautiful pleases without interest. Nietzsche is more interested in attacking Kant’s view. *Friedrich Nietzsche: Sämtliche Werke*, 5 ed. G. Colli and M. Montinari (München: Deutsche Taschenbuch Verlag, de Gruyter, 1999), 347.

5 ‘Le Peintre de La Vie Moderne’ in *Charles Baudelaire: Variétés Critiques* vol. II (Paris: Editions G. Crès & C-IE, 1924), 39ff. [*The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, ed. J. Mayne (London: Phaidon Press, 1995)].

6 “*Tout ce qui est naturel, toutes les actions et les désirs du pur homme naturel, vous ne trouverez rien que d’affreux. Tout ce qui est beau et noble est le résultat de la raison et du calcul.*” Ibid., 73.

7 Ibid., 39–40. “*Le beau est fait d’un élément éternel, invariable, dont la quantité est excessivement difficile à déterminer, et d’un élément relatif, circonstanciel qui sera, si l’on veut, tour à tour ou tout ensemble, l’époque, la mode, la morale, la passion. Sans ce second élément, qui est comme l’enveloppe amusante,*

*titillante, apéritive, du divin gâteau, le premier élément serait indigestible, inappréciable, non adapté et non approprié à la nature humaine...Considérez, si cela vous plaît la partie éternellement subsistante comme l'âme, et l'élément variable comme son corps."*

8 On philosophical style, see Adorno, *Minima Moralia* (London: Verso, 1974), 70-4, 80-5/ GS 4, 78-82, 90-1; and "The Essay as Form" in *Notes on Literature I* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 3-24; GS 11, 9-34.

9 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* 12. See also *ibid.*, 227: "Artworks are plenipotentiaries of things that are no longer distorted by exchange, profit and the false needs of a degraded humanity."

10 This is a point that Raymond Geuss makes well in "Art and Criticism in Adorno's Aesthetics," *Outside Ethics*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

11 Simon Jarvis is right to claim that "Adorno's thought, unlike Habermas's, thematizes happiness, including bodily delight and an end to material suffering, as strongly as it does free and rational intersubjectivity." Jarvis, *Adorno: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), 220. That said, Adorno's thematization of happiness is highly problematic (see IV and V below.) I find the comparison with Habermas unhelpful, though.

12 Plato, *Republic*, 419a, 420c-e.

13 Aristotle, *Politics*, 1264b15ff.

14 Aristotle, *Politics*, 1279a16-30.

15 In a well-known passage at *Nichomachean Ethics*, 1095b19, Aristotle characterises the life of gratification and pleasure as "slavish" and "a life for grazing animals" [*boskēmatōn bion*].

16 Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics*, 1098a16; *Politics*, 1332a10.

17 Aristotle, *Politics*, 1324a5-6.

18 Because the practical life is a rational life, some commentators claim that it is an analogue of philosophical contemplation, albeit a secondary and lower form. See Richard Kraut, *Aristotle on the Human Good* (Princeton New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1991).

19 I am assuming here that the lineaments of what has come to be known as first-generation Frankfurt School critical theory, in particular the critical theory of Adorno and Horkheimer, germinated in their work of the 1930s, when Horkheimer had the intellectual lead.

20 Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 48.

21 "[T]he principle of happiness (which is not in fact a definite principle at all) has ill effects in political right just as in morality..." "On The Common Saying: 'This May be True in Theory, but it does not Apply in Practice'," *Kant: Political Writings*, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 83.

22 Max Horkheimer, "Materialism and Metaphysics" in *Between Philosophy and Social Science* (Cambridge Mass.: MIT Press, 1993), 24. *Max Horkheimer. Kritische Theorie: eine Dokumentation*, ed. A. Schmidt, vol.1 (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Verlag, 1968), 8 [in two volumes, hereinafter KT 1, & 2].

23 Horkheimer, *Between Philosophy and Social Science* 30/KT 1, 88.

24 'The fear which moral prescriptions...still carry from their origins in religious authority is foreign to materialism.' "Materialism and Morality," *Between Philosophy and Social Science* 32/KT 1 91 (translation amended). See also "Materialism and Metaphysics" in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, M. O'Connell ed. (New York: Continuum Press, 1999), 18/ KT, 1 39.

25 Horkheimer, *Between Philosophy and Social Science*, 33/KT 1 92.

26 Horkheimer, *Between Philosophy and Social Science*, 14-22/KT1 71-6. See also *Critical Theory: Selected Essays* 12/KT , 33.

27 Horkheimer, *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, 23/KT 1, 44.

28 *Ibid.*, 22/KT 1, 42-3 translation amended.

29 *Ibid.*, 44/KT 1, 64. See also Horkheimer, *Between Philosophy and Social Science* 34-5/KT 1 94.

This way of arguing had an enduring effect on Adorno. Think of the “new categorical imperative” he claims that Hitler has imposed on people, namely “to order their thought and actions such that Auschwitz never reoccur, nothing similar ever happen.” He claims that it would be a “sin” to try to justify the new categorical imperative. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (London: Verso, 1993), 358; GS 6, 365. Compare also his earlier remark: “One ought not to torture: there ought to be no concentration camps . . . These sentences are only true as impulses, when it is reported that somewhere torture is taking place. They should not be rationalised. As abstract principles they lapse into the bad infinity of their derivation and validity” *Negative Dialectics*, 281/GS 6 285. See also Adorno: *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. and ed. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 202.

30 Horkheimer, *Between Philosophy and Social Science*, 20, 37/KT 1, 77, 98.

31 Horkheimer, *Between Philosophy and Social Science*, 29/KT 1, 88.

32 In this, Horkheimer is influenced by the work of the economist at the institute, Friedrich Pollock: ‘Die Gegenwärtige Lage des Kapitalismus und die Aussichten einer planwirtschaftliche Neuordnung’ in *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* 1 (1932).

33 It is true, as Timo Juetten pointed out to me, that this does not mean that Kant has a general animus against happiness, even on his hedonistic account of it.

34 Adorno writes of “a region that from time immemorial was regarded as the true field of philosophy..which since the latter’s conversion into method, has lapsed into intellectual neglect, sententious whimsy, and finally oblivion: the teaching of the good life”. Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 1991), 15/ GS 4, 13. Presumably Adorno thinks this applies to positivism in Austria, neo-Kantianism and Husserl in Germany, and analytic philosophy in England and the United States.

35 Horkheimer, “Traditional and Critical Theory,” *Critical Theory: Selected Essays* 213/KT 2, 162.

36 Adorno, GS 6, 128; Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 122. See also Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 44; GS 4, 49.

37 Adorno, *Probleme der Moralphilosophie. Theodor W. Adorno: Nachgelassene Schriften* IV, vol. 10 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1996), 28.

38 Indeed Adorno praises Kant’s moral law for its infinity and sublimity, which (in his eyes) make it incompatible with any existing form of totalitarianism. Adorno, *Probleme der Moralphilosophie*, 214.

39 In a previous article (Finlayson, “Adorno on the Ethical and the Ineffable,” *European Journal of Philosophy* (2005), 10: 1, 1) I misread the sentence as saying that there is no right living “im Falschen” i.e. in the False, where the False is a noun which I took to be an inversion of what Hegel means by “das Wahre” – the True – in his dictum: “Das Wahre ist das Ganze” which Adorno ironically inverts in *Minima Moralia*: “Das Ganze ist das Unwahre/The whole is the Untrue.” Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 50/GS 4, 55. Although the allusion to Hegel still holds, in the sentence of *Minima Moralia* 18, strictly speaking the word “false” in the phrase “the false” is used as an adjective qualifying the noun “life”, which is suppressed. I have benefitted greatly from discussing the meaning of this sentence on different occasions with Christian Skirke and Fabian Freyenhagen.

40 “The Essay as Form,” *Notes to Literature* vol. 1., trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 11/GS 11, 19.

41 Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 157/GS 4, 179. Another place where he revealingly transgresses his own prohibition is in *Probleme der Moralphilosophie*, 249. “The only thing that can perhaps be said is, that the good life [das richtige Leben] today would consist in the shape of resistance against the forms of a false life [eines falschen Lebens], which has been seen through and critically dissected by the most progressive minds.

42 Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 8–9.

43 Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 21 and *passim*.

44 Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 207/ GS 6, 207.

45 Richard Wolin, "Art and Politics in Aesthetic Theory," *Theodor W. Adorno. Sage Masters in Modern Social Thought*, ed. G. Delanty, Vol. II (London/Thousand Oaks/New Delhi, 2004), 40.

46 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* 199/ GS 7, 199.

47 See, however, section VI below.

48 "The central character of realist literature is the type, a peculiar synthesis which organically binds together the general and the particular both in characters and situations." Lukács, *Studies in European Realism*, tr. E. Bone (London: Merlin Press, 1978), 6. For Adorno's critique see *Aesthetic Theory*, 184-5.

49 Lukács, *Studies in European Realism*, 5.

50 Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 130/ GS 3, 152

51 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 184/GS 7, 274. See also Adorno's essay "Engagement" in *Noten zur Literatur*, GS 11, 411-30.

52 Wolin, "The De-aestheticization of Art," *Theodor W. Adorno. Sage Masters in Modern Social Thought*, ed. G. Delanty, Vol II. (London/Thousand Oaks/New Delhi: 2004), 22.

53 "Every undistorted relation, even perhaps the reconciliation (*das Versöhnende*) in organic life itself, is a gift." Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 43/GS 4, 47.

54 Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 41/GS 4, 45.

55 This is a main point of difference with Hegel. Things of nature for Hegel are essentially cryptic and inscrutable, unlike artefacts or products of spirit which are essentially intelligible, albeit, he claims, that their spiritual content is embodied in a form that is not adequate to it, namely that of sensible particularity.

56 Adorno, *Philosophy of New Music* trans. and ed. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 23/GS 12, 32.

57 Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, trans. W. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), 45-47; *Kant's gesammelte Schriften. Königl. Preußliche Akademie der Wissenschaften* vol. 5 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co. and Predecessors, 1902- [vol 5, 1908], 204-6.

58 "At the highest level of form, the deserted circus act is reenacted: the manifest absurdity of the circus – Why all the effort? – is *in nuce* the aesthetic enigma." This sentence kept coming to mind when I watched James Marsh's documentary, *Man on Wire*, about Phillippe Petit's tightrope walk between the Twin Towers in 1974.

59 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 89/GS 7, 138.

60 "Ultimately to call a work classical refers to its immanent success, the uncoerced yet ever fragile reconciliation of the one and the multiplicitous." Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* 162/GS 7, 242.

61 Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (London: Verso, 1999 [1972]), 131/GS 3, 152.

62 Johann Joachim Winckelmann, "Gedanken über die Nachahmung der griechischen Werke in der Malerei und Bildhauerkunst" (1755/6). Note that, unlike Plato, Winckelmann, says nothing about brightly painted statues, and one assumes that he believed their weathered whiteness to be part of their noble simplicity. After all, the fact that he could read his idea of serenity and simplicity into Laokoon, a statue representing a man and his sons trying to escape the clutches of two huge sea snakes, is an indication that Winckelmann, like many others of his era, was determined to find his preferred ideals in Greek art whatever the evidence.

63 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 160/240.

64 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 161/241. It seems churlish to point out that they would not have stared blankly, had they been painted, as they originally were, which we now know. Our passage from Plato's *Republic* confirms this.

65 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 163/243.

66 Adorno, *Introduction to the Sociology of Music*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Seabury Press,

1976), 63/GS 14, 245. See also *ibid.*, 130 and 243.

67 How does this view of the music of Bach and the early Beethoven fit in with Adorno's doctrine view of the *Bilderverbot*? One thought here is that no music transgresses the prohibition on images since music is essentially imageless, and what Adorno calls imageless images are permitted. Another thought is that it is a contravention of the *Bilderverbot*, but that in art this prohibition did not apply at all times, and is itself to be understood historically.

68 Adorno, "Alienated Masterpiece: The Missa Solemnis," *Essays on Music*, trans. Richard Leppert (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 581/GS 17, 159.

69 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 45/GS 7, 73-4.

70 "Its [art's] highest products are condemned to a fragmentariness that is their confession that even they do not possess what is claimed by the immanence of their form." Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 90/GS 7, 139. See also *ibid.*, 185/GS 7, 276.

71 Adorno, *Philosophy of New Music*, 67/GS 12 84-5.

72 *Ibid.*

73 Adorno, *Philosophy of New Music*, 68/GS 12 85. See also Adorno, *Probleme Der Moralphilosophie*, 260ff. Note that Adorno allows a relation of resemblance to obtain between the dissonant sounds of the quartet and the unhappiness of actually existing society and the alienated individuals who comprise it. The *Bilderverbot* pertains to happiness, to the right life, reconciliation and Utopia, not to actually existing society.

74 Adorno, *Beethoven: The Philosophy of Music*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), 99.

75 Geuss, "Art and Criticism in Adorno," *Outside Ethics* (Princeton New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2005), 165.

76 *Philosophy of New Music*, 103-159/GS 12, 127-197. Adorno sees in Stravinsky an example of the not so secret complicity between totalitarianism and neo-classicism, of the kind that one might think is more obviously present in the music of Aram Khachaturian, Stalin's favourite composer, and the buildings and plans of Albert Speer, Hitler's beloved architect.

77 Adorno, *Essays on Music*, 581/GS 17, 159.

78 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 33/GS 7, 55.

79 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 11/GS 7, 25.

80 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 13/ GD 7, 26.

81 For Aristotle, it is true that pleasure of a certain highly sublimated sort is a legitimate accompaniment to the life of virtue, and that furthermore a *eudaimon* life would contain its own proper amount of sensual and sexual pleasure – neither too much, nor too little. Still he agrees with Plato that to succumb to the demands of immediate enjoyment of food or sex (or music) is slavish and bestial, and unworthy of human activity.

82 Adorno's notion of right living also means 'genuine' or 'real' living.' See Raymond Geuss, *Morality Culture, and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 103.

83 See Marcuse's important article "On Hedonism" in *Negations* (London: Penguin, 1968), 159-200, first published in the *Zeitschrift der Sozialforschung* VII as "Zur Kritik des Hedonismus" (note the change of title). See also Eric Fromm's *Man for Himself: an Enquiry into the Psychology of Ethics* (London: Routledge, & Kegan Paul, 1982 [1947]), 172-95.

84 To go into this in any detail would take us too far afield. Suffice it to say that it is at least a bold and optimistic assumption to think that there are no untutored desires that are anarchic, violent, selfish and anti-social, and that have to be channelled in more appropriate directions, or managed, and at the limit suppressed. And if there are at least some such desires, then responsibility for the present dismal state of society cannot be lain entirely at the door of civilising and socialising processes, and there can be no expectation that, should those processes can be removed, human desires in their raw state will prove to be self-regulating and as it were, humanly acceptable.

85 “Radically darkened art...which the aesthetic hedonism that survived the catastrophes defamed for the perversity of expecting that the dark should give something like pleasure, is in essence nothing but the postulate that art and a true consciousness of it today can find happiness only in the capacity of standing firm. This happiness illuminates the artwork’s sensuous appearance from within. Just as in internally consistent artworks spirit is communicated even into the most recalcitrant phenomenon, effectively rescuing it sensuously, ever since Baudelaire the dark has also offered sensuous enticement as the antithesis of the fraudulent sensuality of culture’s façade. There is more joy in dissonance than in consonance: this metes out justice, eye for eye, to hedonism.” Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 40/GS 7, 66-7.

86 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 110/GS 7. 168.

87 Sabine Wilke and Heidi Schlipphacke’s translation of this passage—“Orgasm is a bodily prototype of aesthetic experience” biologizes Adorno’s language, and also omits the qualification with which it begins. “Construction of a Gendered Subject: A Feminist Reading of Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory*,” *The Semblance of Subjectivity. Adorno’s Aesthetic Theory*, 302. Hullot-Kentor’s translation is much better and closer to the original. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 176/GS7 263.

88 Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 61/GS 4, 68.

89 Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 217/GS 4, 248. The German phrase “geschlechtliche Vereinigung” means heterosexual union, although this might just be Adorno’s default phrase for sexual union. 90 There is a distant resemblance here between this strain of Adorno’s thinking about the subject’s relation to the wholly Other, and certain variants of what the Germans call *Brautmystik*, where religious worship and often extreme asceticism and hardship culminates in an immediate, sometimes visionary experience of the presence of God or Christ. Oliver Davies, *God Within: The Mystical Tradition of Northern Europe* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1988). Denys Turner has persuasively argued that the *apophatic* tradition of negative theology, has little to do with this kind of mysticism, which is in fact not negative at all but rather a kind of religious positivism, of which apophatic negative theology offers a sustained critique. Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God. Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 259 & 268.

91 This may be why J. M. Bernstein, in his interesting and imaginative discussion of Adorno’s dictum omits to mention these passages. Bernstein gives a Kantian interpretation of Adorno’s dictum, according to which art promises happiness, in the sense that it offers a ‘possible experience’ of it, and happiness means something like what Kant called the *summum bonum*, namely the proportionate unity of subjective happiness – in Kant’s sense of sensible satisfaction – and virtue, also in Kant’s sense of the practical expression of pure reason. Bernstein, “Why Rescue Semblance?” *The Semblance of Subjectivity. Adorno’s Aesthetic Theory*, 198. I take a different view, partly because of Adorno’s hedonism, and partly because, as I argue in II above, happiness originally occurs in Horkheimer’s influential early work as a tool of evaluation for critical social theory and as an explicit move against Kant and Kantianism, and it continues to have this critical animus in much of Adorno’s later work.

92 Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 81/GS 4, 91.

93 I am grateful Suchita Paul, Keston Sutherland, and to all the member of the *Minima Moralia* reading group at the University of Sussex, 2009: Arthur Willemse, Simon Mussell, Chris O’Kane, Chris Allsobrook, Laura Finch, Becky Hancox, Doug Haynes and Danny Hayward. Special thanks are due to Timo Juetten, John David Rhodes, and to Danny Hayward for bringing my attention to two passages.