

Adorno's Dialectical Cul-de-sac

While re-reading Theodor W. Adorno's 1966 opus, *Negative Dialectics*, I was struck once again by his tortuous lucubrations as he struggled in vain to ground phenomenology on Marxist Materialism. I found my mind returning to the classic philosophical problem of the Subject-Object dichotomy. Adorno's solution appears to be to enshrine the "Object" as the true and real foundation of all human knowledge, preponderant over the "Subject" –considered by him a mere amalgam of mechanical subconscious drives projected by a moribund capitalist society.

One can forgive the cynicism and negativity of this truly outstanding thinker, as he was one of the intellectual victims of the horrors of Nazi totalitarianism; but his version of dialectics fails to solve the key philosophical problems his contemporaries tried to tackle. Granted that the task he took on was herculean in its magnitude: To analyze –and revolutionize– the very core of Western logic and science; but **the fact is... he failed.**

Take, for example, this sentence from page 3, of Adorno's *Negative Dialectics*. (English edition by Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd. 1973): "...philosophy is obliged ruthlessly to criticize itself." What could such a statement mean?

Let's analyze it both grammatically and philosophically.

If the subject of the sentence is "philosophy", then the direct object becomes a self-imposed moral obligation. This assumes that philosophy has a will of its own as a conscious entity –which is grossly anthropomorphic.

On the other hand, "philosophy" could be construed to be the indirect object of the statement, in which case the true subject is hidden: In other words, who obliges philosophy to criticize itself?...The Court of History?...The author? It's not clear.

The Subject / Object conundrum can always be exemplified by analyzing a simple sentence such as: "I smell a rat." The subject in this case is "I" and the direct object is "a rat". What the ancient thinker asked himself when writing this sentence was: "Is it really a rat I'm smelling, or am I deluded? Could it be garbage? Am I hallucinating?, etc." He knew that our senses can deceive us. He knew about a mirage appearing to be a lake. Upon further pondering, our philosopher asked himself: "What is real and what is illusory?"

Plato based his whole philosophy on the χωρισμός (chōrismós)—or ontological chasm between the world of real and eternal forms or Ideas —the kosmos noetos— and the world of mere ephemeral appearances —the kosmos aisthetos— thus creating the Idealist school. Idealism went on to become the foundation of most Western philosophy and science for more than a thousand years, the Scholastic philosophers equating the Subject to the immortal Spirit and phenomena to Matter and the Flesh. This form of equivocation was inherited by thinkers such as Adorno.

Decartes, for instance, began his philosophical explorations with his famous *Cogito, ergo sum*: I am thinking, therefore I am real. The subject is real. The object may or may not be. After him, and thinkers like Sir Francis Bacon, the sceptical inquiring subject became the basis of modern Empiricism and modern science.

Even today, the nature of the “Object” remains merely theoretical or hypothetical; whereas the world-wide community of scientist has become the final judge —the Subject— of what is real or illusory.

Thus, Adorno anoints Marxist “Matter” as his πρώτη ούσία —or real essence, while relegating all other phenomena —i.e., individuals, formal logic, previous philosophies, economic and political institutions, etc.— to the trash bin of History.

In attacking both Empiricism and Individualism, Adorno threw out the baby with the bathwater. In his radical dialectic, only an uncompromising (and utopian) Marxism seems to be spared from total demolition. He fails to explain how a global mass of thoroughly alienated and oppressed semi-human subjects can ever organize themselves to overthrow his nightmarish Orwellian Machine-State.

I would have liked to respond —were Adorno still with us— that, as Marx said in his 11th Thesis on Feuerbach: "Philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it."

Or, in other words: The rat you smell is really dead. So get a shovel and bury it.