

# THE Adornio

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Adornio



# THEODOR ADORNO

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The range of Theodor Adorno's achievement and the depth of his insights are breathtaking and daunting. His work on literary, artistic and musical forms, his devastating indictment of modern industrial society, and his profound grasp of Western culture from Homer to Hollywood have made him one of the most significant figures in twentieth-century thought.

As one of the main philosophers of the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory, Adorno's influence on literary theory, cultural studies and philosophical aesthetics has been immense. His wide-ranging authorship is significant also to continental philosophy, political theory, art criticism and musicology.

Key ideas discussed in this guide include:

- art and aesthetics
- fun and free time
- nature and reason
- things, thought and being right

This *Routledge Critical Thinkers* guide will equip readers with the tools required to interpret critical Adorno's major works, while also introducing them to his interpretation of classical German philosophy and his relationship to the most significant of his contemporaries.

**Ross Wilson** is Leverhulme Trust Early Career Fellow in the Faculty of English, Cambridge University, and Fellow of Emmanuel College. His research interests include the history and theory of literary criticism, philosophical aesthetics, British Romantic poetry and poetics, and eighteenth-century and Romantic theories of language.



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# THEODOR ADORNO

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*Ross Wilson*



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## SERIES EDITOR'S PREFACE

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The books in this series offer introductions to major critical thinkers who have influenced literary studies and the humanities. The *Routledge Critical Thinkers* series provides the books you can turn to first when a new name or concept appears in your studies.

Each book will equip you to approach a key thinker's original texts by explaining her or his key ideas, putting them into context and, perhaps most importantly, showing you why this thinker is considered to be significant. The emphasis is on concise, clearly written guides which do not presuppose specialist knowledge. Although the focus is on particular figures, the series stresses that no critical thinker ever existed in a vacuum but, instead, emerged from a broader intellectual, cultural and social history. Finally, these books will act as a bridge between you and the thinker's original texts: not replacing them but rather complementing what she or he wrote.

These books are necessary for a number of reasons. In his 1997 autobiography, *Not Entitled*, the literary critic Frank Kermode wrote of a time in the 1960s:

On beautiful summer lawns, young people lay together all night, recovering from their daytime exertions and listening to a troupe of Balinese musicians. Under their blankets or their sleeping bags, they would chat drowsily about the gurus of the time ... What they repeated was largely hearsay; hence my lunchtime suggestion, quite impromptu, for a series of short, very cheap books offering authoritative but intelligible introductions to such figures.

There is still a need for 'authoritative and intelligible introductions'. But this series reflects a different world from the 1960s. New thinkers have emerged and the reputations of others have risen and fallen as new research has developed. New methodologies and challenging ideas have spread through the arts and humanities. The study of literature is no longer – if it ever was – simply the study and evaluation of poems, novels and plays. It is also the study of the ideas, issues, and difficulties which arise in any literary text and in its interpretation. Other arts and humanities subjects have changed in analogous ways.

With these changes, new problems have emerged. The ideas and issues behind these radical changes in the humanities are often presented without reference to wider contexts or as theories which you can simply 'add on' to the texts you read. Certainly, there's nothing wrong with picking out selected ideas or using what comes to hand – indeed, some thinkers have argued that this is, in fact, all we can do. However, it is sometimes forgotten that each new idea comes from the pattern and development of somebody's thought and it is important to study the range and context of their ideas. Against theories 'floating in space', the *Routledge Critical Thinkers* series places key thinkers and their ideas firmly back in their contexts.

More than this, these books reflect the need to go back to the thinker's own texts and ideas. Even an interpretation of an idea, even the most seemingly innocent one, offers its own 'spin', implicitly or explicitly. To read only books on a thinker, rather than texts by that thinker, is to deny yourself the chance of making up your own mind. Sometimes what makes a significant figure's work hard to approach is not so much its style or content as the feeling of not knowing where to start. The purpose of these books is to give you a 'way in' by offering an accessible overview of these thinkers' ideas and their works and by guiding your further reading, starting with each thinker's own texts. To use a metaphor from the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951), these books are ladders, to be thrown away after you have climbed to the next level. Not only, then, do they equip you to approach new ideas, but they empower you, by leading you back to a theorist's own texts and encouraging you to develop your own informed opinions.

Finally, these books are necessary because, just as intellectual needs have changed, the educational systems around the world – the contexts in which introductory books are usually read – have changed radically, too. What was suitable for the minority higher education system of the 1960s is not suitable

for the larger, wider, more diverse, high-technology education systems of the twenty-first century. These changes call not just for new, up-to-date introductions but new methods of presentation. The presentational aspects of *Routledge Critical Thinkers* have been developed with today's students in mind.

Each book in the series has a similar structure. They begin with a section offering an overview of the life and ideas of each thinker and explain why she or he is important. The central section of each book discusses the thinker's key ideas, their context, evolution and reception. Each book concludes with a survey of the thinker's impact, outlining how their ideas have been taken up and developed by others. In addition, there is a detailed final section suggesting and describing books for further reading. This is not a 'tacked-on' section but an integral part of each volume. In the first part of this section you will find brief descriptions of the thinker's key works, then, following this, information on the most useful critical works and, in some cases, on relevant websites. This section will guide you in your reading, enabling you to follow your interests and develop your own projects. Throughout each book references are given in what is known as the Harvard system (the author and the date of a work cited are given in the text and you can look up the full details in the bibliography at the back). This offers a lot of information in very little space. The books also explain technical terms and use boxes to describe events or ideas in more detail, away from the main emphasis of the discussion. Boxes are also used at times to highlight definitions of terms frequently used or coined by a thinker. In this way the boxes serve as a kind of glossary, easily identified when flicking through the book.

The thinkers in the series are 'critical' for three reasons. First, they are examined in the light of subjects which involve criticism: principally literary studies or English and cultural studies, but also other disciplines which rely on the criticism of books, ideas, theories and unquestioned assumptions. Second, they are critical because studying their work will provide you with a 'tool kit' for your own informed critical reading and thought, which will make you critical. Third, these thinkers are critical because they are crucially important: they deal with ideas and questions which can overturn conventional understandings of the world, of texts, of everything we take for granted, leaving us with a deeper understanding of what we already knew and with new ideas.

No introduction can tell you everything. However, by offering a way into critical thinking, this series hopes to begin to engage you in an activity which is productive, constructive and potentially life-changing.



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# ABBREVIATIONS

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AP  
'The Actuality of Philosophy'  
AT  
*Aesthetic Theory*  
CI  
*The Culture Industry*  
CM  
*Critical Models*  
DE  
*Dialectic of Enlightenment*  
HTS  
*Hegel: Three Studies*  
KCA  
*Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*  
KCPR  
*Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*  
ME  
*Against Epistemology: A Metacritique*  
MM  
*Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*  
ND  
*Negative Dialectics*  
NL I  
*Notes to Literature, vol. I*  
NL II  
*Notes to Literature, vol. II*  
P  
*Prisms*  
PDGS  
*The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*  
PMP  
*Problems of Moral Philosophy*  
PNM  
*Philosophy of New Music*  
SDE  
*The Stars Down to Earth*  
TLP  
'Theses on the Language of the Philosopher'



# WHY ADORNO?

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Before I can attempt to answer the question 'Why Adorno?' an even more basic and pressing question needs to be addressed: *what* was Theodor W. Adorno (1903–69)? This question has an unusually long list of answers. Adorno was a philosopher, a sociologist, a musicologist, a critic of music and literature, and, indeed, a composer. He was also defined by Hitler's National Socialist regime as being 'of half-Jewish origin' and, in order to avoid otherwise inevitable persecution, became a refugee, first in Great Britain and then in America. Adorno was a prominent intellectual in postwar West Germany where he was involved in widely broadcast and controversial debates with other intellectual figures. He was a stringent critic of modern society, diagnosing the precariousness of a world with the potential either to establish peace and security for all its inhabitants, or to slide at any moment into unimaginable horror. He died during the period of self-proclaimed revolutionary agitation by the student movements of the late 1960s, with which he had, in many ways, a particularly uncomfortable relationship.

I give neither this list of Adorno's interests nor this indication of the historical circumstances through which he lived in order to daunt you into awe of the subject of this book, although the breadth of those interests and the turmoil of those circumstances are indeed daunting. Rather, it is necessary from the outset to have some understanding of the range of Adorno's interests and concerns, and of the historical context in which they emerged. It is not just the case that we should engage with Adorno's work because he was a remarkably cultured and highly educated German Jew who lived through tumultuous times, although these are already good reasons for reading him. One especially significant reason why Adorno's work is distinctive is that the connections between the apparently quite different areas of his thought are extremely important to the shape and meaning of his work as a whole. It is not simply that Adorno turned his hand to a lot of different intellectual disciplines, but rather that he was especially attentive to the ways in which, for example, literature might be philosophical, in which philosophy might be literary, in which the study of society demands both historical and philosophical reflection. That is, Adorno's literary criticism cannot be separated from his philosophical concerns, which cannot be separated from his theory of society, which, of course, cannot be separated from what he made of the circumstances in which he lived.

Adorno conceives of these connections in an especially radical way but without, crucially, diminishing the importance of the specific features of each area of thought. A work of literature would not, according to Adorno, be of philosophical interest merely because it contains statements, for example, about the existence of the soul, the problem of evil, or the nature of space and time. Were that to be the case, literature would just have been translated, so to speak, into philosophy, and its specific status as literature would have been ignored. For Adorno, the philosophical significance of a work like *Finnegans Wake* by the novelist James Joyce (1882–1941), for example, has much more to do with its narrative form, its diction and syntax, and what it does to the very idea of a work of art, rather than with any pre-established philosophical position that it might be taken to illustrate. This means, for Adorno, that a philosophical interpretation of literature would have to be the closest possible reading of any given text, rather than the identification of whatever general ideas it might be held to contain. A student of literature, then, might read Adorno not for any extractable 'literary theory' but rather for an approach to literature according to which literary criticism already requires the posing and answering of fundamental philosophical questions.

In a similar way, Adorno insists that any theory of society must attend to the details of actual social experience. The best way of elaborating a theory of society is not, in Adorno's view, to turn to gener-

accounts of social trends, but to attend as carefully as possible to what might initially seem to be the insignificant bits and pieces of day-to-day experience. We can learn as much about society when we reflect attentively enough on whether people are in the habit of closing doors behind them when they enter a room or on what people talk about on the train as we can from a pie-chart. None of this is meant to provide an excuse for breezily ignoring the rigours of academic research and for simply going with your hunch. On the one hand, a significant part of Adorno's work does draw on large-scale sociological research. On the other, intellectual hunches and prejudices, as well as the whole stock of what is established as 'common sense' precisely in order that it not be questioned, is to be as carefully – if not more carefully – scrutinized as anything else. Saying this does not simply get rid of the dangers that work like Adorno's faces. Thinking like his thought insists upon attention to the apparent trivia and detritus of the world, and to the nuances of subjective experience, is liable to be rejected as, precisely, trivial and merely subjective. But before we rush to condemn Adorno as a quirky, self-indulgent essayist, we should ask whether we are really sure that the criteria according to which we would make such a judgement are as reliably objective as we assume. Adorno aims to combine scrupulous attention to detail with serious reflection on the most apparently abstract philosophical concepts. Indeed, one of the main aims of his thought is to explore – and ultimately, to question – this division between particular detail and abstract category. This questioning is central to Adorno's understanding of 'dialectic'. (Explanation of this word is one of the main purposes of this book.) The articulation of Adorno's striking commitment to the philosophical significance of those experiences usually dismissed as least worthy of critical thought, along with his tracing of even the most apparently abstract ideas back to actual experience, is one of the main reasons for reading his work.

## ADORNO'S INTELLECTUAL DEVELOPMENT

Adorno's distinctive and challenging intellectual vision, which he developed and modified throughout his career, began to be formed remarkably early in his life. He benefited greatly from the cultural and intellectual milieu of early twentieth-century Frankfurt-am-Main, a prosperous, vibrant and liberal city in south-west Germany. Adorno was the precociously talented only child of devoted parents. His father was an assimilated Jew and successful wine-merchant; his Catholic mother had been a celebrated singer from a musically gifted family. Indeed, Adorno's experience of music is one of the most prominent features of his intellectual development. In his youth and early career, Adorno produced a considerable amount of music journalism, including, in particular, reviews of performances of contemporary music. What is striking about this early journalism is its anticipation of some of the central features of Adorno's mature work. Crucially, he refuses to treat music – and art in general – as a pleasant diversion; rather, he wants to consider as strictly as possible the way in which art is related to social conditions, to hope for a better world, and to the idea of truth. Some readers view the centrality of art and artworks to Adorno's work as something of an embarrassment. Adorno makes very large claims for the significance of art: that it must be seriously considered in terms of truth and untruth; that it has a significant – and complex – relationship to society; and, perhaps most challengingly of all, that it in some sense prefigures a world radically different to this one. This significance of art is not to be located, according to Adorno, in particular statements that artworks make or in positions that they might be seen to represent, but in their specifically artistic characteristics. The influence of Adorno's interest in music in particular is worth mentioning again here. Music does not – unless in the most abstract way – represent or tell us anything, and it does not – at least straightforwardly – contain ideas. (It was for this reason that music was accorded a low rank in certain strands of eighteenth-century aesthetics.) But despite – or, indeed

because of – music's problematic relationship with philosophy, Adorno insists on its intellectual significance. If music can be thought of in terms of its truth or untruth, then the philosophical interpretation of art is not to be directed to the statements that artworks contain, but rather to the way in which artworks are put together, how they are composed. This kind of musically inspired thinking, so to speak, is one of the most difficult and distinctive aspects of Adorno's thought.

The importance of Adorno's early attempts to consider music not just as entertainment but as in some way socially and philosophically meaningful can hardly be overestimated. One of the most important features of his reflection on art generally is that art is not a matter of mere personal taste. His commitment to the philosophical significance of art is complemented by Adorno's sense that philosophy cannot without damage be separated from the way in which it is expressed, that is, from the way in which it is put into words. Indeed, the importance of music in particular to Adorno's characteristic mode of thought again needs to be emphasized. For Adorno, works of philosophy are 'philosophical compositions', and he argues that, as in music, what is important in philosophy is what happens in it – how it develops and unfolds, how certain concerns are reprised – rather than the position-statements that can be extracted from it.

In an essay on his friend, the German sociologist, film critic and novelist Siegfried Kracauer (1889–1966), Adorno recalls how he and Kracauer would meet on Saturday afternoons to read the *Critique of Pure Reason* (first edition, 1781; revised second edition, 1787), by the German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) (NL II: 58). There is already something significant in the bare outline of this recollection: Saturday afternoon did not represent, for the young Adorno, a time for idle relaxation but rather for engagement with one of the most important texts in the Western philosophical tradition. As I will show in [Chapter 2](#), Adorno was acutely suspicious of the way that pleasure has become segregated from thinking in modern society, each strictly allotted their own part of the schedule. Indeed, this is one of the most potent claims of Adorno's theory of modern society and culture: that the separation of work from pleasure is fatal to both. Moreover, Adorno and Kracauer read Kant's founding text of modern philosophy in a highly imaginative and unorthodox fashion. For Kracauer, Adorno relates, the point of reading a text like the *Critique of Pure Reason* was not simply to grasp its systematic coherence; rather, the conflicts and contradictions of such a text reveal something about its fundamental motivations and aims. Lecturing on Kant's philosophy in the early 1950s, many years after his initial reading with Kracauer, Adorno noted the difference between his approach to Kant and that of influential commentators such as Klaus Reich (1906–1996) (KCPR: 80). Reich (1992) attempted to establish the systematic coherence and stability of Kant's account of the fundamental structures of human understanding. Adorno states, in contrast to Reich, that he is much more interested in the way that the apparent contradictions in Kant's thinking – which, in most standard philosophical commentary, are ignored, condemned or remedially reinterpreted – reveal something essential about his thought.

What Kracauer had shown Adorno about philosophy was something very different, therefore, from the method in which philosophy was studied in an official, academic setting. Kracauer demonstrated to him that 'the expressive moment in philosophy: putting into words the thoughts that come into one's head' is not a mere inconvenience for the philosopher but rather a crucial aspect of what philosophy is. Adorno recounts that as he came to study philosophy academically he realized that 'among the tensions that are the lifeblood of philosophy the tension between expressiveness and rigor is perhaps the most central' (NL II: 59). What Adorno is claiming is that we must have the utmost attention to the logic of what is said, to the way that it is said, and to the relation between the two. This entails that Adorno is not intimidated by official philosophy's rejection – as mere poetry – of everything that does not meet its established criteria. One of Adorno's chief aims is to examine as closely as possible without simply overcoming them by an act of will – the divisions whereby philosophy has been

separated from its expressive element and, moreover, the divisions according to which intellectual disciplines themselves – philosophy, sociology, literary criticism, history – are each quarantined in their own departments.

## ADORNO AND THE INSTITUTE FOR SOCIAL RESEARCH

Adorno's concern with the relations between supposedly discrete intellectual disciplines had a specific institutional setting from early on in his career. Before his exile from Germany, he secured a position with the recently founded Institute for Social Research at Frankfurt University (hence the employees and associates of the institute came to be known as members of the 'Frankfurt School'). Adorno's connection with the institute lasted his entire life and it was to join other exiled members that he went to live in America during the Second World War. According to the statute enshrining the institute's affiliation with the university, its main aims were to foster a particularly comprehensive kind of research into social conditions, including those which prevailed in both the past and the present, and in different countries (see Müller-Doohm: 2005:516 n.3). From 1931, the head of the institute had been the philosopher and sociologist Max Horkheimer (1895–1973). Adorno's intellectual relationship and personal friendship – with Horkheimer was to remain fundamental to the development of his work throughout his life. One of the chief concerns central to both Horkheimer and Adorno during the 1930s was precisely what direction the institute should take. Adorno was certainly sympathetic to the aim that individual disciplines – social and political science in particular, but also history and literary criticism – should gain some sort of philosophical impetus as a result of the institute's work. For instance, social science should not simply gather evidence, say, about population densities in certain geographical areas, or about fluctuations in levels of employment in certain industries. It must also interpret these findings from the broader and more essential perspective offered by philosophy (Horkheimer 1993:1–14). While sympathetic, Adorno had reservations about this kind of aim expressed in this manner, and he thought that it should be qualified in some significant ways. It is not, in Adorno's view, simply philosophy's task to animate specialist disciplines which, although they could do with some help from philosophy to broaden their horizons, are essentially adequate to themselves. Those disciplines are not to receive their philosophical animus, so to speak, from outside. Sociologists, historians and literary critics cannot simply put their feet up once they have collected their data and then wait for a philosopher to come along and do their philosophizing for them. Specialist disciplines devoid of philosophical reflection – and the reasons for how this situation (that is, this division of intellectual labour) has come about – must be submitted to criticism as well as being helpfully informed by philosophy. It is not good enough for intellectuals to demur from philosophical thinking because it does not fall within their area of competence or because it was not part of their professional training. For Adorno, an intellectual discipline that does its work and then waits for another discipline – philosophy – to come along and animate it cannot be complete in itself. Rather, it is dead.

This quick tour of Adorno's early intellectual development and institutional affiliations is not meant to provide the key to his work. In order fully to master Adorno, one would certainly wish to have some acquaintance with aspects of the work of those writers by whom he was most influenced and with the setting in which he conducted his academic career; I will return to Adorno's relations to a number of prominent philosophers, critics and artists throughout this book. The purpose of this summation of Adorno's intellectual development is to give a sense of the landscape within which his own highly original thought emerged and moved. Adorno quickly – although, of course, with great intellectual effort – developed a distinctive philosophical character and, from the earliest phases of his career, elaborated a number of significant differences from his forebears. Precise demonstration of Adorno's

claim on our attention is the burden of the rest of this book.

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## NOTE ON THE PROCEDURE OF THIS BOOK

Most of the already-published short accounts of Adorno's thinking – and many of the long ones, too – begin with an apology for their existence. This book is no exception. Such an apology is as little false modesty as Adorno's insistence that thinking – especially *his* thinking – cannot be paraphrased is glacial self-aggrandisement. What Adorno meant when he argued that thinking cannot be paraphrased is that the way in which philosophy is written is inextricably bound up with its truth and untruth. As we have already seen, this is a lesson that he took from his early reading of Kant with Kracauer. I will explore this insistence on the way in which philosophical truth and philosophical expression are intertwined at greater length at the beginning of [Chapter 4](#).

Given Adorno's suspicions regarding the possibility of paraphrasing his work, a book that attempts to introduce him is faced with a number of difficulties which necessitate potentially irritating – albeit brief – consideration of its own procedure. This book does not offer a general overview of Adorno but rather proceeds by way of attention to some of the specific problems and concerns addressed in his most significant and influential works. This is not to say that it will not address his 'key ideas'; it is to say that those 'key ideas' will be developed through discussion of the detail of those specific questions that Adorno posed and attempted to answer. What this entails, of course, is that this book, like any such introduction, leaves out a lot. However, I attempt to give an indication of some of the ways in which Adorno's work has been received in 'After Adorno' and I give a guide to how areas of his authorship relatively underexamined in this book might be opened up in 'Further Reading'.





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