

5. Some Notes on Philosophy and Redemption: Adorno and Cavell

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In an earlier essay, I once drew a comparison between Theodor W. Adorno's remark that, "philosophy, which once appeared obsolete, sustains itself because the moment for its actualization has been lost,"¹ and Stanley Cavell's suggestion that Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Investigations* can be seen as a philosophy of culture, one that relates itself to its time as a time in which the continuation of philosophy is at stake.² In this essay, I'd like to compare Adorno's remark to a different but related remark of Cavell's, namely his thought that "philosophy ends in a recovery from a terminable loss."³ He pursues this thought in remarks on Emerson, noting that "philosophy begins in loss, in finding yourself at a loss, as Wittgenstein more or less says."⁴ Many different traditions—Marxism, American transcendentalism, ordinary language philosophy, just to name a few—animate these thoughts. This is not the place to detail and tease out the ramifications and significances of each; instead, I want to take this very short essay merely to raise a different point of relation than I raised before (in a deep way, then, this essay—and especially its short length—may be seen as a sort of afterword to my earlier remarks).⁵ Note that in the quote above, Cavell continues, claiming that, "Philosophy that does not so begin is so much talk" (in Emerson's pejorative sense).⁶ Cavell continues, pointing out that, "loss is *as such* not to be overcome, it is interminable, for every new finding may incur a new loss."⁷ Recovering from a

1. Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 1973), 16.

2. Cavell, *This New yet Unapproachable America: Lectures after Emerson after Wittgenstein* (Albuquerque: Living Batch Press, 1989), 72.

3. *Ibid.*, 114.

4. *Ibid.*

5. Martin Shuster, "Education for the World: Adorno and Cavell," in *Dissonant Methods: Undoing Discipline in the Humanities Classroom*, ed. Ada Jaarsma and Kit Dobson (Alberta: University of Alberta Press, 2019).

6. Cavell, *This New yet Unapproachable America*, 114.

7. *Ibid.*

terminable loss, then, is one way to end philosophy; philosophy that doesn't end after that, but continues on, in Cavell's words, "before or beyond that" is also "talk" in the pejorative sense. What interests me, however, are not these options, but rather Cavell's idea of the relationship between philosophy and interminable loss.

To make a start here, take it that Adorno's point is something like what his colleague, Herbert Marcuse, suggests: that philosophy as an enterprise might become unnecessary to the extent that human freedom might come to be realized. Here's how Marcuse puts the point in 1937:

But a social situation has come about in which the realization of reason no longer needs to be restricted to pure thought and will. If reason means shaping life according to men's free decision on the basis of their knowledge, then the demand for reason henceforth means the creation of a social organization in which individuals can collectively regulate their lives in accordance with their needs.⁸

With respect to the quote cited from Adorno above, then, the idea appears to be that perhaps at a certain moment, the rational organization of society was possible (we may call this a revolutionary moment or we may call it a political one, it seems to me equally [im]plausible either way, and in any case there may some overlap between the two: the idea, as the first generation of the Frankfurt School of critical theory often stressed, is that the possibility exists for society to be so organized that all human needs could be met, that "the material and intellectual attainments of mankind [sic] seem to allow the creation of a truly free world").⁹ When Adorno suggests that philosophy once appeared obsolete, he is referencing such a moment; philosophy lives on, however, because such a moment has not come, it was missed—and yet, it continues (perhaps) to remain a possibility.¹⁰

There seems to be an interesting congruence between the kinds of loss invoked by both Cavell and the early Frankfurt School: for both philosophy begins in loss. For

8. Herbert Marcuse, "Philosophy and Critical Theory," in *Negations: Essays in Critical Theory* (London: MayFly Books, 2009), 104.

9. Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966), 4.

10. There's a lot more to say here, see Iain Macdonald, *What Would Be Different* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2020).

Cavell, this loss can take many forms, while for the early Frankfurt School, the loss is of a distinct kind: the loss of utopian possibilities. But the suggestion for these members of the Frankfurt School seems thereby to be that philosophy *can* come to an end were utopia to be achieved.¹¹ Adorno will thus claim that “a right condition would be freed from dialectics,”¹² while Marcuse stresses that, “with the realization of reason in [...] society, philosophy would disappear.”¹³ It is here, though, that a tension emerges. For the Frankfurt School, philosophy is oftentimes contracted to the boundaries of critical theory, a pursuit summarized at a very high altitude as aiming “to liberate human beings from the circumstances that enslave them,”¹⁴ i.e., material suffering. For Cavell, on the other hand, “philosophy’s virtue is responsiveness.”¹⁵ He continues noting that, “what makes it philosophy is not that its response will be total, but that it will be tireless, awake when others have all fallen asleep,” and this is because, “*Any* word my elders have bequeathed to me as they moved obscurely about me toward the objects of their desires, may come to chagrin me.”¹⁶

Emerging here is a tension that revolves around the—I would say likely quite peculiar sounding—question of whether philosophy would be necessary in the society that critical theory aims to usher in by means of its procedures (alternatively, we might summarize this future society as simply “the standpoint of redemption” as Adorno does in his famous claim that, “the only philosophy which can be responsibly practiced in the face of despair is the attempt to contemplate all things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption”).¹⁷ On one hand, the question of whether philosophy would be necessary in such a (possible? future?) state, makes perfect sense—we can ask: is philosophy *just* critical theory in the sense Horkheimer

11. See, e.g.: “A right condition would be freed from dialectics” (Adorno) and “with the realization of reason in such a society, philosophy would disappear.” See respectively Marcuse, “Philosophy and Critical Theory,” 104; Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 11.

12. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 11.

13. Marcuse, “Philosophy and Critical Theory,” 104.

14. Max Horkheimer, *Critical Theory: Selected Essays* (New York: Seabury, 1972), 243.

15. Cavell, *This New yet Unapproachable America: Lectures after Emerson after Wittgenstein*, 74.

16. Ibid. Even in Cavell, there are tensions with this view that push it back towards views more like the Frankfurt School, as when, for example, Cavell notes in the same passage that, “We are all elders and all children, wanting a hearing, for our injustices, for our justices.” (Ibid.). On this point, see the discussion of Cavell wanting to “have it both ways” in Espen Hammer, *Stanley Cavell: Skepticism, Subjectivity, and the Ordinary* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002), 166f.

17. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections of a Damaged Life* (London: Verso, 2005), §153. It is interesting that a different but related version of this question emerges even in the pragmatist work of Richard Rorty. See Martin Shuster, “Rorty and (the Politics of) Love,” *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 40, no. 1 (2019).

conceives of it, or does it have some sort of broader function related to the very powers and capacities of human language, an enterprise bound up with responding to—acknowledging—the sort of skepticism that all language can at any time engender?¹⁸ On the other hand, questions about such a future state or existence appear to be sort of like asking about how many angels can fit onto the head of a pin, since any such question appears as “the utterly impossible thing,” ultimately presupposing “a standpoint removed, even though by a hair’s breadth, from the scope of existence.”¹⁹

As a point of response, and one which is here by no means anything more than the most provisional step towards one, take stock of Marcuse’s suggestion that, “without phantasy, all philosophical knowledge remains in the grip of the present or the past and severed from the future, which is the only link between philosophy and the real history of mankind [sic].”²⁰ This line comes after a discussion of the importance of the imagination for philosophy, obvious, as Marcuse notes, already in Kant’s prioritization of the imagination in the 1st Critique’s account of synthetic activity and cognition.²¹ What Marcuse suggests is that philosophy can further harness the imagination to accomplish exactly what Adorno suggests above—the contemplation of things from the standpoint of redemption. If it fails to do so, then philosophy becomes divorced from “the real history” of humankind (i.e., “so much talk” in the sense Cavell diagnoses in Emerson).²² Would even possibility conceived in this way then disappear in a redeemed state?

Again, the question suggests a sort of scholasticism foreign to Cavell and the Frankfurt School. At the same time, there is something to it, and considering it, se-

18. On this point, see especially the fourth part of Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979). See also Cavell, “What Is the Scandal of Skepticism?,” in *Philosophy the Day after Tomorrow* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005). I pursue this theme in detail in the last chapter of Martin Shuster, *How to Measure a World? A Philosophy of Judaism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2021). And I note the theme of acknowledgment here exactly to reference Cavell’s thoroughgoing engagement with this notion.

19. Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, §153.

20. Marcuse, “Philosophy and Critical Theory,” 114.

21. Marcuse is referencing here the threefold synthesis, especially the synthesis of reproduction in imagination, as prioritized by Kant in the A Deduction of the 1st Critique. This line is also developed, e.g., in Martin Heidegger, *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, trans. Richard Taft (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997).

22. See above and Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York: Modern Library, 2009), 325.

ems to me at least to suggest a possible sort of instrumentalism that has wound its way into critical theory despite Horkheimer's suspicions of instrumental reason,²³ namely that philosophy concerns itself only with *problems*. For example: is the fact that I am going to die only a problem because of unjust material conditions, or do these only exacerbate something that is fundamentally not understood *solely* as a "problem" (especially one we can solve)?

Emerging here is a problem as mammoth as the history and definition (histories and definitions?) of philosophy itself (themselves?). In conclusion, I can only note that to take seriously philosophy's ancient calling as learning how to die may be to understand that there is nothing "more human"²⁴ than to deny that such a project (learning how to die) is philosophy; if that's true, then this will remain the case regardless of material conditions, regardless of whether we live in a redeemed world. Or, perhaps, another way to make this point is in phenomenological terms: as long as we remain the sort of creatures that have a future (and also a past and a present), then we remain the sort of creatures that need philosophy to bridge the space between our temporal domains, regardless of the qualitative nature of those domains (i.e., whether they are redeemed or not). Or maybe not? Perhaps redemption changes the very nature and experience of time? (It seems to me figures as diverse as Walter Benjamin, Emmanuel Levinas, Henri Bergson, Franz Rosenweig, Jacob Taubes—just to name a few—emerge as significant constellation points from such a vantage point). To properly map this terrain would require far more work than I have available here and now, and the desirability of doing so is at least tempered by Adorno's suspicion that before us is potentially an impossible task (hence its scholastic appearance). I might conclude, then, by suggesting that everything hinges here on whether Simone Weil's claim, lodged in a different context, that "the future is made of the same stuff as the present,"²⁵ is an inflection of this broad phenomenological point or a rejection of it.

23. Horkheimer, *Critique of Instrumental Reason* (London: Verso, 2013).

24. Cavell, "Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy," in *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 96.

25. Simone Weil, "Some Thoughts on the Love of God," in *On Science, Necessity and the Love of God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), 148.