Adorno and the Ends of Philosophy
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Adorno has been intriguing and irritating me since the mid-1970s, and at times in the intervening period I have given up on him as a major source for my philosophical reflections. The present book is not intended as any kind of definitive account of Adorno, which would anyway be at odds with basic assumptions of its subject. Rather, the reason for my writing it is that changes in the focus of attention of contemporary philosophy, as well as recent political and economic developments, made me appreciate that there was more to Adorno, above all as a philosopher, than I had sometimes thought. Increasing numbers of contemporary philosophers on both sides of the institutional divide between European and analytical philosophy have started to realize that this divide makes little sense. Where change has begun to happen, the reasons often have to do with a new willingness to look at the ways in which philosophy can inform pressing concerns of social, political, and cultural life. It is here that Adorno has come to seem very relevant, in ways which were previously not always apparent.

The further factor leading to the book has been the intellectual, but sadly not the political and real, demise of the neo-liberal model of capitalism that has wrought such destruction since the 1970s, and the need to rethink the contemporary historical, political, and economic situation of the world. This might sound wildly generalized, but Adorno’s connection of philosophy to the idea that modern capitalism makes the world into a totality, in which systemic factors deeply affect aspects of everyday life all over the globe, has become hard to ignore. Whatever problems there are with this Marx-derived conception, it helps to suggest that the metaphysical aim of seeing how sense can be made of things, as A.W. Moore puts it, ‘at the highest level of generality’ (Moore 2012, p. 7) is connected to the concrete functioning of the socio-historical world. Adorno’s work is predicated on the idea
that the traditional metaphysical aim of grasping things at the highest level of generality is likely to obscure or repress what does not fit into the metaphysical picture. For Adorno the concrete realization of the highest level of generality in modernity is actually the wholesale commodification of the natural and human worlds. This situation creates the difficulty for philosophy of seeking to do justice to the inherent particularity of things and people, at the same time as realizing that the world is more and more dominated by universalizing forms. Adorno’s perception that the task of philosophy is to negotiate such contradictory perspectives contrasts with many approaches to philosophy, because resolving such contradictions is for him not a conceptual issue, but a political and social one. This is why Adorno should be looked at in terms of the ambiguous notion of the ‘end of philosophy’. What Adorno offers here is flawed in some respects, but he confronts head-on things that never appear on the agenda of too much philosophy as practised today. At the same time, the contemporary changes in philosophy, epitomized in particular by the revival of Hegelianism and developments in pragmatism, have made it possible to think of new ways of addressing Adorno’s concerns, so shifting the agenda of contemporary philosophy in directions which address issues that interest more than a small number of professional philosophers.
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Introduction: Contemporary Alternatives

In an essay on ‘The Wider Significance of Naturalism’, Akeel Bilgrami (2010) suggests why the ends of contemporary philosophy are shifting in significant ways. What makes the essay startling is that a philosopher known for his work on specialized aspects of analytical philosophy addresses head-on central concerns of European philosophy which have been neglected in the analytical tradition. Bilgrami’s criticisms of contemporary scientism echo Dialectic of Enlightenment, one of the most well-known (and problematic) books, written together with Max Horkheimer, by the philosopher, social theorist, and music theorist Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno (1903–1969).¹ In order to understand the contemporary debate about the scope of naturalistic explanations, Bilgrami insists on a genealogy of the tendency to regard nature, including the human world, in mechanistic terms that exclude considerations of human value. He focuses on events in the development of modern science in the seventeenth century in Britain which paved the way for Nietzsche’s announcement of the ‘death of God’, and the ‘disenchantment’ of nature, one of whose manifestations is contemporary reductive naturalism.

Like Adorno, Bilgrami is not interested in hopes for a return of theology, or in questioning the validity of advances made by the modern sciences. He is concerned rather with how a particular questionable version of the idea of disenchantment comes to dominate thinking about nature. His genealogy focuses on a paradigmatic split between the ‘Newtonians’, such as Robert Boyle and Samuel Clarke, who ‘began to dominate the Royal Society’ (ibid., p. 38), and the ‘dissenters’. The split originated in differences over theology, but had wider ramifications. The theological difference lay in the fact that the Newtonians removed God from nature, in the form of ‘an exile into inaccessibility from the visions of ordinary people to a place outside the universe’
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(ibid., p. 36), while the dissenters were essentially Pantheists, believing in God’s ‘availability to the visionary temperaments of all those who inhabit his world’ (ibid.). The latter were not ‘anti-science’, because they too played an active role in the genesis of modern science, but they objected to the ‘metaphysical outlook’ (ibid., p. 38) of the Newtonians.

Clearly the theological debate here no longer has any great call on our philosophical attention. However, the implications of what lay behind the debate have considerable contemporary resonance, as well as directly echoing aspects of Dialectic of Enlightenment: ‘[S]ome of the dissenters argued that it is only because one takes matter to be “brute” and “stupid”, to use Newton’s own term, that one would find it appropriate to conquer it with nothing but profit and material wealth as ends, and thereby destroy it both as a natural and a human environment for one’s habitation’ (ibid., p. 39). This latter view, Bilgrami argues, is too often conflated with a general ‘Enlightenment’ view of the exclusive superiority of scientific explanation, in order to reject any form of criticism of the potential consequences of the metaphysical assumptions behind the Newtonians’ idea of nature as something to be conquered.

Neither the Newtonians nor the dissenters’ conceptions of nature are necessary for a ‘thin’ notion of modern scientific rationality, which both shared in any case: ‘What was in dispute had nothing to do with science or rationality in that sense at all. What the early dissenting tradition was opposed to is the metaphysical orthodoxy that grew around Newtonian science and its implications for broader issues of culture and politics’ (ibid., p. 47). The outcome of this genealogy is manifest in ‘the fact that Weber and Marx were able to mobilize terms such as “disenchantment” and “commodification” and “alienation”’ (ibid., p. 49) against the descendants of the Newtonians’ conception. Bilgrami suggests that ‘[t]hese are all terms that describe how our relations to the world were impoverished in ways that desolate us, when we severed these deep connections in our conceptual and material lives’ (ibid.), and he asks how much the ‘wider significance of the dispute about naturalism in the early modern period […] survives in our own time’ (ibid.). He concludes by suggesting that analytical philosophers should address this question and ‘come out of their more cramped focus and idiom’ (ibid., p. 50) to do so.

The fact that Bilgrami makes such a demand can be seen as part of a contemporary sense that some of the concerns and methods of Anglo-American analytical philosophy are themselves a product of a ‘Newtonian’ attitude, and that they are therefore part of the problem he identifies. As Bilgrami’s essay implies, even within analytical philosophy there are signs of dissatisfaction of the kind just suggested. Anyone wishing to reflect on issues associated with questions of alienation and disenchantment, such as the meanings of modern art, questions of ethics after the Holocaust, or why epistemology became so dominant
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in modern philosophy, is these days unlikely to make their first port of call theories by analytical philosophers of art, ethics, or epistemology. The ever-growing volume of radically incompatible theories in such areas suggests that something is awry with seeing philosophy predominantly in terms of theory construction based on the ‘analysis’ of concepts.

This situation is one source of the interest in the work of European/Continental philosophers elsewhere in the humanities, arts, and social sciences. One cannot simply give up the attempt to arrive at adequate responses via conceptual clarification to issues which we cannot ignore. Philosophy has never been noted for its production of consensus, and as such it is doubtful whether a methodological line can really be drawn between ‘analytical’ and ‘European/Continental’ philosophy. However, the fact is that that attempts to arrive in the analytical manner at solutions in the form of theories defining the real nature of the object of the theory produce more and more contradictions. This should give pause for thought, not least, as Bilgrami contends, because there are areas of the natural sciences which do produce substantial degrees of durable consensus.

Evidently science progresses via the destruction of untenable consensuses, and theories may never be definitive, but problem-solving technological advances show that science can produce predictable effects based on warranted agreements, even if the level of agreement tends to differ, especially with regard to issues concerning living beings. In philosophy, in contrast, the debate, say, over ‘realism’ and ‘anti-realism’ generates ever more books and articles, but it is by no means clear that the substance of the debate has many effects outside philosophy. Given that most thinkers on both sides of that debate do not doubt the validity of well-confirmed scientific theories, it is sometimes hard to see exactly what is at stake, and the participants rarely spell it out in a way which would make it clear to non-philosophers. The debate here is in some respects an echo of the differences between the Newtonians and the dissenters, insofar as neither side tends to be ‘anti-science’ in any significant sense. As we shall see, such a difference would in Adorno’s terms therefore be more interesting for what it reveals about contemporary culture than for whether it settles the issue of ‘realism’.

A stance which no longer sees such debates as decisive is sometimes, though, seen as leading into what is often referred to in terms of ‘post-modernism’. The pursuit of truth as something universal and timeless is here renounced in favour of a concentration on difference, particularity, and a renunciation of many of the traditional goals of philosophy. The appeal of such an approach lies in the sense that its aim is to keep open the response to the ‘Other’. Does such an aim, though, require the rejection of ‘Western rationality’, as necessarily involving repression of
the Other, with which it is often associated? There might seem to be an unbridgeable distance between, on the one hand, analytical positions which seek answers to supposedly perennial questions about truth, meaning, and rationality and, on the other, positions deriving from Nietzsche and others in the European tradition which seek to show that rationality is a manifestation of the attempt to exercise power over the Other. However, more and more analytical philosophers, like Bernard Williams and John McDowell, have extended the scope of their work to take in the European tradition, including Hegel, Nietzsche, and Heidegger. The question suggested by Bilgrami’s demand to his fellow analytical philosophers is how to respond to the apparent gulf between some ‘analytical’ and some ‘European’ approaches, and it is here that I am interested in looking at the work of Adorno in new ways.

Adorno has played at best a minor role in the recent interest in the European tradition on the part of analytical philosophers. He is notorious for contending that we live in a ‘universal context of delusion’ brought about by the effects of capitalism on modern society. For him only dissonant avant-garde music and other radical modernist art is appropriate to the modern cultural situation, because it expresses what is obscured by an unjust and destructive cultural status quo. The books in which he advances such views are characterized by an at times unnecessary complexity, and his philosophical arguments are sometimes either implausible or insufficiently elaborated. The reasons he advances for his extreme positions also often seem less than convincing: if, for example, the ‘context of delusion’ is total, how can he reveal its delusory nature? Given such problems, it might, then, seem odd that I want to suggest that Adorno can be a major resource for contemporary philosophy.

Isn’t it rash, moreover, even to think that one can generalize sufficiently to talk of the state of contemporary philosophy in this way? Hasn’t philosophy become a discipline requiring specialized training? That academic philosophy in the Western world has turned out this way is clear. However, complexity, difficulty, and specialization in philosophy have different significances in differing historical contexts. Kant, Fichte, Schelling, Hegel, and others were hardly immediately accessible to the uninitiated, but they still played a significant role in shaping aspects of modern culture. Many forms of contemporary analytical philosophy, by contrast, cannot be regarded as playing a major cultural role (though their progenitors in the Vienna Circle and elsewhere sometimes did play such a role). This diminished cultural role may come about either because these forms require considerable specialized knowledge and technical expertise, or because the claims made in such philosophy often have so few consequences for other human practices. Among those approaches to philosophy that see themselves as closely connected to the methods of the natural sciences,
there seems, then, to be a mismatch between their aims and methods and their results.

The contemporary situation of philosophy in relation to the sciences can, though, be interpreted in a variety of ways. The reason for the phrase ‘the ends of philosophy’ in my title, with its play on the idea of ‘aims’ and the idea of ‘conclusions’, is that one can interpret the development of contemporary philosophy both in terms of competing goals and in terms of the notion that certain kinds of philosophy, most notably those based on large-scale, positive metaphysical claims, and those based on the empiricist assumptions characteristic of many kinds of analytical philosophy, are ceasing to be living options. Adorno can be used as part of a challenge to contemporary philosophical attitudes because of how he responds to the ways in which philosophy generates more and more contradictions, rather than producing new consensuses. A still very widespread perception of philosophy is that it consists in proposing arguments about metaphysics, ontology, epistemology, ethics, aesthetics, and so on, based on such fundamental oppositions as those between idealism and materialism, which will lead to a resolution of an opposition in favour of one of its sides. This approach has the advantage that there is always something to do, because there is no philosophical agreement on virtually any of the competing positions. A book or essay which has some coherent argumentative moves in favour of one side of a conflict will generally find a philosophical audience.³

Adorno does advance philosophical arguments, and engages in close examination of concepts, but this does not constitute the core of his approach to philosophy. It is impossible to do philosophy without making assertions which can command or fail to command assent, but if one thinks of the later Wittgenstein’s manner of philosophizing, which is not based on arriving at argumentative conclusions, a different perspective emerges. Both Adorno and Wittgenstein pose the question as to what sorts of alternatives there are to what for many people is the only real way to do philosophy. Some philosophers despair of how Adorno produces texts which do not proceed in an argumentative straight line. Indeed, many of his published texts may not justify the complexity of their construction and their style. However, there is a decisive point here, which relates to the issue of contradictions. The core of many established approaches to philosophy is precisely the resolution of contradictions, hence the basic approach of offering theories defending idealism, materialism, and so on, which seek to overcome what seems lacking in one position in favour of another. In terms of a logical approach to contradiction, this is a necessary stance: contradictions do not involve determinate thoughts and, as such, are in a strictly logical sense meaningless.

What, though, of the fact that the contradictions that recur in the history of philosophy never seem to be definitively resolved by
philosophical arguments? The dominant professional response here is to continue making moves in the particular argumentative game that constitutes a philosophical ‘problem’. From this perspective the main alternative response is not really philosophy at all, being rather the ‘history of ideas’, in which one traces the moves in past versions of the game. ‘Real’ philosophy therefore consists in making new moves. In order to indicate the alternative direction in which Adorno’s approach leads, let us briefly consider his notion of ‘experience’ (see Foster 2007 for Adorno on experience).

Adorno does not think of experience in the empiricist sense, where it consists of probably mythical ‘sense-data’, but in the sense of what is required if one is really to comprehend something. Understanding therefore cannot be established in terms of clear, final definitions, as the basis of any such definition has to be constituted in experience itself, which is a complex weave of sometimes contradictory factors. The weave is not resolvable into a series of propositions, because the sense of the terms in such propositions will shift in relation to the other terms. This might sound unlikely to be philosophically convincing, though since Quine the basic idea should be familiar. Think, however, of something as familiar as how one experiences another person: this can be distorted by the attempt to establish a fixed idea of the person, even though some degree of stability is also required in order to be able to engage with someone successfully. The experience of contradiction in the sense intended here, where opposed judgements coexist without being able to be resolved, is, then, very much part of everyday life, and is constitutive, for example, of the way characters become manifest in great novels. Most, if not all, of us live with contradictory stances on a whole swathe of issues and people, without ever being able to bring the contradictions to a definitive end. This kind of living with contradiction is, nevertheless, as the remarks above suggest, strikingly at odds with many prevalent attitudes to philosophy.

It might be objected here that if philosophy does not propose stances on issues, it is likely to end up with either ‘relativism’ or ‘syncretism’. However, when one looks at the ways in which philosophical problems are manifest in real contexts, things are not so simple. The contemporary debate on, for example, whether the ‘mind is the brain’ seems to generate contradictory stances in such a way that adjudicating between claims does not lead anywhere which does not itself involve further contradictions. Take a crude version of a standard objection in the debate. If the mind is just the brain and the brain is a ‘machine’, as it would appear to be from the point of view of some versions of neuroscience, this gives us no purchase on the dimensions of mental life involving self-determination, deliberation, creative imagination, and so on. The question that generates the contradictions is how to see the world in terms of these two incompatible accounts. One of the
most interesting and original aspects of Adorno’s thought will be his rethinking of the notion of nature, and this will throw a different light on questions of free-will and determinism that arise in relation to neuroscience and the philosophy of mind (see Cook 2011; Stone 2006).

It is precisely the sense that these differing factors involved in understanding human action are both ineliminable and potentially incompatible that is philosophically significant, as is the sense that one needs ways of negotiating the consequences of these incompatibilities. These ways cannot consist just in arguments that resolve the dispute in favour of one side against another. In Adorno’s terms, such contradictions become the very content of our self-understanding. The implication here is that there are meta-philosophical questions inherent in any such issue, and the task is therefore to understand how the issue relates to the world of which it is a part. The meta-philosophical reflections involved need not lead to a new kind of answer, but neither do they have to lead to a regress of meta-philosophies; that would only be the case if one gave the meta-philosophical position the same foundational status one is denying to the original position.

The difficulty here can be suggested by the fondness in Anglophone philosophy for asking questions of the form ‘Can lying/violence ever be justified?’ This sort of question will generally give rise to a lively seminar, but is largely vacuous if the assumption is that one is striving for a definitive answer. It is in Adorno’s terms more interesting to ask why philosophy of this kind could get so stuck in a mode of questioning which has too little connection to the dilemmas faced by real-world actors. Just asking what follows from the positive or negative response to the abstract question can make clear what I mean: without locating the response in relation to practices in law and elsewhere, one is left with a bit of mere moralizing.

The failure to see that the history of a philosophical problem is itself part of what that problem is vitiates significant amounts of contemporary philosophy. The assumption that what Plato meant by art is the same as what we, in the light of modernism, Dada, and so on, mean is, for example, simply untenable, though some analytical aestheticians seem unaware of this. There is, however, a further important twist here, on which Adorno repeatedly insists: if there were no continuity at all between Plato’s concerns and ours, even the claim that what he meant by art differed from what we mean would be incomprehensible. Concepts are seen by Adorno as inherently involving movement, but that also entails them having some kind of identity, if what moves is not to dissolve into its successive moments. It might seem as if all we are now left with is a to and fro between competing viewpoints, each of which reveals some inadequacy in the others, but none of which can be definitively established. The fact is that this seems to me, if it is understood in the right way, precisely where one should be with regard to
such issues. Establishing why such a stance might be defensible, and what consequences this has for the idea of the ends of philosophy, will be a major task in what follows. Why, though, should Adorno be so significant in this context?

Who is Adorno?/Which Adorno?

The following sketch of Adorno’s life can be complemented by the wealth of biographical material in Claussen (2003), Jäger (2005), and Müller-Doohm (2005). Adorno was born in Frankfurt am Main in 1903. After showing early talent as a musician he began lessons in composition at the age of 16, and by the age of 18 was studying philosophy, music, and psychology at university, and publishing music criticism. Having completed a largely derivative Ph.D. on the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl in 1924 under the supervision of Hans Cornelius, he moved to Vienna in 1925 to study composition with Alban Berg. After returning to Frankfurt he withdrew, on the advice of Cornelius, a Habilitation dissertation on ‘The Concept of the Unconscious in the Transcendental Doctrine of the Soul’, the last part of which manifests a new Marx-influenced concern with the relationship between the emergence and adoption of philosophical theories and socio-economic developments. At the end of the 1920s, while editing the musical journal Anbruch (‘Dawn’), Adorno encountered Georg Lukács’s History and Class-Consciousness and developed a more intensive contact with Walter Benjamin, whom he had got to know in 1923. In 1931 he completed his Habilitation (later published) on Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic, which bears many of the traits of his mature work and is influenced by Benjamin. Adorno at first regarded the seizure of power by the Nazis as a merely passing phenomenon, and continued to visit Germany until 1937, while working as an ‘advanced student’ at Merton College, Oxford (an environment he found pretty intolerable). In 1938 he moved to America to work with Max Horkheimer as a member of the Institute for Social Research, living in New York until he moved to Los Angeles for the years 1941–9. During this time he wrote Dialectic of Enlightenment with Horkheimer, completed Minima Moralia, a collection of short pieces which bears the subtitle ‘Reflections from Damaged Life’, and Philosophy of New Music, which deals mainly with the work of Schoenberg and Stravinsky and which influenced Thomas Mann’s novel Doktor Faustus, and he was a member of the group that wrote The Authoritarian Personality as part of the Berkeley ‘Project on the Nature and Extent of Antisemitism’. Adorno returned to Frankfurt in 1949, where he finally gained his first (and only) tenured professorship, at the re-established Institute for Social Research, in 1956. In the early 1960s he was involved, along with, among others, his academic assistant Jürgen
Habermas, in the ‘Positivism Dispute in German Sociology’, in which his main opponents were Karl Popper and Hans Albert. Throughout the 1960s he was engaged in writing major works, such as *Negative Dialectics, Aesthetic Theory*, and a host of other projects, some of which remained incomplete. He died on holiday in Switzerland in 1969, at the time of disturbances associated with the Student Movement.

The intention here is not to provide another survey of Adorno’s thought, of which there are plenty already (see Brunkhorst 1999; Buck-Morss 1977; Jarvis 1998; Jay 1984; Wilson 2007; see also Gibson and Rubin 2002 and Huhn 2004 for representative selections of essays), let alone of his character or his life. For the time being the most we need to infer from the biographical details is that Adorno lived through a time of the utmost disruption and crisis, though he managed to do so whilst himself remaining, given what happened to so many people, comparatively unscathed. What is beyond doubt is that Adorno had a significant effect on post-war German society and culture, and assessing how his philosophy relates to some of its performative effects will be important for the present account. There is no simple way of matching philosophical contentions with the effects of those contentions in real historical contexts. There must, though, be an ethical dimension to philosophy, which sustains an awareness that making theoretical contentions is a form of practice which can involve ethical consequences. Adorno is concerned with precisely the kind of gap between the desire for complete knowledge of what such consequences could be and the sceptical sense that there is no way of knowing how philosophy has its effects. His best work confronts the contradictions generated by the idea that positive metaphysics which makes sense of things as a whole is no longer possible, but that the needs on which it was based have not and cannot go away, and so demand new responses.

Adorno’s own life provides an obvious example of the relationship between philosophical theory and social practice. Even though he regarded the Student Movement of the later 1960s as generally misguided and naïve, his ideas played a major role in its rejection of the post-war West German consensus which repressed the fact that Germany had done little to come to terms with the Nazi period. The political aims of the Movement itself may have been for the most part illusory, but its enduring liberating effect on the nature of German society is unquestionable. The fact is that the Movement’s inflated political stances often had more to do with the younger generation’s reactions to Nazism than with an adequate appraisal of the contemporary issues which formed its immediate focus. Justified outrage at events in Vietnam and elsewhere was intensified by unarticulated outrage at the failure in Germany to confront the deeds of the preceding generations. Adorno’s refusal to take the economic success of post-war Germany as a reason to pass over the horrors that preceded
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it was, along with some of the effects of the Student Movement, part of what led to a liberal German culture for which coming to terms with the Holocaust remains a central goal.

Adorno had a more problematic effect on German and other European musical culture, where his often dogmatic preference for a certain kind of musical modernism created something of a strait-jacket for many composers from the 1950s onwards. At the same time, his concern to connect music to social issues made possible debates which kept alive theoretical discussion of music in Germany and elsewhere, and helped sustain an innovative musical culture. Adorno’s influence on discussion of music outside Germany has generally been a much more recent phenomenon. It seems clear that this influence often has to do with the questioning of a predominantly empirical approach to the history and practice of music that relates to philosophical changes of perspective which will concern us in what follows (see de Nora 2003).

When it comes to Adorno’s impact on philosophy the questions become more complex. A prominent contemporary German philosopher once wrote to me that Adorno was not really a philosopher, though he might be more than a philosopher. What he meant was that Adorno tended not to address philosophical issues in a consistent manner; this did not mean that his work might not still offer a great deal, just that it did not do so in a way which was ‘strictly philosophical’ in that it provides theoretically elaborated arguments. What appears here as a deficit from one perspective is, however, seen by defenders of Adorno as germane to his thinking: they often cite the writing style of his published work as a reason not to see him in the same terms as one sees mainstream philosophers. The complex web of the writing is meant to be part of the content of what he is saying. Adorno himself makes this point concerning philosophical style, when he insists, following Walter Benjamin, that ‘Darstellung’, the manner of its ‘presentation’, is part of what a work of philosophy means. That the manner of his writing affects how we understand Adorno’s philosophy (or anybody else’s, for that matter) is unquestionable, but there are two important points here.

The first is that it is arguable that Adorno’s failure to become part of mainstream debate may be a result of his manner of writing sometimes getting in the way of adequate engagement with the durable substance of his work. The second, related, point is that Adorno’s thinking exists not just in the form of written texts, but also as transcripts of lectures and other kinds of text. The transcripts of lectures from the later 1950s until the later 1960s are very often of improvisations from quite minimal notes on the topics which then became the books, or on topics dealt with in his essays and books. Topics which in the books are often cryptic, unexplained, unnecessarily exaggerated, very often appear in a lucid, developed form in the lectures. Adorno himself has lots to say about why he does not trust lecture presentation, and about why