

The Concept of Mediation in Hegel and Adorno

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Given its centrality to the intellectual thought processes through which the great structures of logic, nature, and spirit are unfolded it is clear that mediation is vital to the very possibility of Hegel's encyclopaedic philosophy. Yet Hegel gives little specific explanation of the concept of mediation. Surprisingly, it has been the subject of even less attention by scholars of Hegel. Nevertheless it is casually used in discussions of Hegel and post-Hegelian philosophy as though its meaning were simple and straightforward. In these discussions mediation is the thesis that meanings are not atomic in that the independence of something is inseparable from its relation to something else. Hence being is mediated by nothing, the particular by the universal, the individual by society. But does Hegel ever explain mediation in a way which justifies such use of the concept? The same easy employment of mediation is found in Theodor Adorno whose works are replete with the use of this concept and, indeed, acknowledgements of its Hegelian origin. But the concept of mediation in Adorno's negative dialectic is operative in an entirely different context from that of Hegel. How, it might be asked, can a concept be so adaptable? I want to argue that mediation is, in fact, an equivocal term which in both Hegel and Adorno covers a variety of entirely different conceptual relations. Furthermore, as propounded by both Hegel and Adorno it lacks the rigour which could allow the particular conclusions which the concept allegedly facilitates.

1. Hegel on Mediation

In Hegel mediation explains, in effect, why the properties of certain objects are such as to allow us to move beyond an initial one-dimensional conceptualization. For that reason it might be seen as essential to the possibility of transition. Anyone familiar with the logic in particular will readily appreciate how important that property must be in Hegel's unfolding of certain concepts. If we pay close attention, however, to the way in which Hegel explicitly uses mediation we find a variety of different senses, not all of which contribute to the general function of transition, just mentioned. I want to

* In *Bulletin of the Hegel Society of Great Britain*, No. 20 (1-2), (1999) (pp. 84-96).

look at the *Encyclopaedia of Philosophical Sciences* to which Hegel himself refers us in the “Doctrine of Being” section of the *Science of Logic* for a preliminary discussion of the concept of mediation.¹ It seems to me that Hegel’s exposition of the concept of mediation gives rise to four different versions of mediation. This is problematical given that Hegel presents mediation as a unified intellectual phenomenon. I name those versions as follows:

- (i) *Elevation Thesis*: mediation is the intellectual mechanism by which we proceed from contingency to necessity;
- (ii) *Transcendental Thesis*: the process of knowledge cannot be coherently explained without reference to a non-immediate element (and that element is mediation);
- (iii) *Contentual Thesis*: the possibility of content is determined by the form of judgment, and that must include mediation;
- (iv) *Genetic Thesis*: since a necessary precondition of any fact is its historical production it is, in this sense, mediated.

Despite the associations that some of these ideas might suggest I do not want to read Hegel as a Kantian of some type. I want, rather, to look at these different theses in the contexts in which they occur without, if possible, making any deeper claims as to what sort of position in general we can ascribe to the logic.

(i) *Elevation Thesis*

The elevation thesis explains how we can allegedly adjust our attitude to a given content and move from an understanding of it as contingent to an understanding of it as necessary. Hegel does not explore this idea abstractly. Rather this idea arises in the context of his critique of a particular philosophical position. The context of that discussion is therefore important. Hegel establishes the elevation thesis in argument with romantic irrationalism in the form of F. H. Jacobi, who, in particular, holds the position that an exclusively immediate knowledge of God is possible. It is the absolute uniqueness of God, as understood by Jacobi, which leads him to this conclusion. God cannot be known through the conceptualist apparatus that Kant had outlined for cognition in general. Rather, God must be known in a wholly non-conceptual way since concepts are epistemic only when applied to sensuous

¹ G. W. F. Hegel, trans. A. V. Miller, *Science of Logic* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1969),

particularities or serving as general abstractions. The idea is that only if conceptualization can be somehow eluded is a knowledge of God possible. And since Jacobi, like Hegel, holds that knowledge of God is indeed attainable he offers the thesis of immediate knowing. In the course of his discussion of Jacobi's position Hegel uncovers what he takes to be fatal incoherences in the thesis of immediate knowing. Yet, significantly, Hegel has designated this position the "Third Position of Thought towards Objectivity" (*Dritte Stellung des Gedankens zur Objektivität*) thereby according it a pre-eminence over the previous two positions, (1) naïve correspondence and (2) empiricism and critical philosophy. Hegel indicates that the pre-eminence of the third position — that of immediate knowing — can be appreciated because it alone has preserved "the absolute inseparability of the thought of God from his being" (*EL* §51).²

Jacobi's contemporary recasting of the ontological argument places him, in Hegel's view, above Kant who famously rejects all arguments for the existence of God. Kant repudiates these arguments in line with of the general commitments of his critical philosophy, commitments which Hegel rejects. The discussion of Kant takes place within the section, "Second Position of Thought towards Objectivity."³ Since his concern is with the Absolute — rather than simple epistemology — Hegel, not unexpectedly, provides a specific examination of Kant's criticism of the arguments for the existence of God. The reason for this is clearly that Kant's criticisms reveal his attitude to the Absolute. The essence of Kant's position is that necessary existence

p.68.

² *EL* = G. W. F. Hegel, trans. T. F. Geraets, W. A. Suchting, and H. S. Harris, *The Encyclopaedia Logic* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1991)

³ Kant for a number of reasons is held to have offered a theory deficient in its ability to understand the Absolute. *First*, Kant's investigation of the structure of perception sets out to account for only the subjective components of perception. However, the range of what is subjective is extended to all elements of perception. The result is that objectivity is collapsed into subjectivity since nothing can be posited as other than the empirical subject except by the subject (*EL*§41). Thus the empty forms of the categories are determined by a content which, in the form of intuition, is "equally itself merely subjective" (*EL*§43). *Second*, Hegel turns Kant's critique of Aristotle against Kant himself and argues that the categories are haphazardly taken from traditional logic, rather than deduced: deduction alone making then suitable philosophical concepts (*EL*§42). *Third*, because the categories are determined only through sensibility they cannot be employed to explain "the Absolute, which is not given in perception" (*EL*§44). It is interesting note that there is a whole subsequent tradition of philosophy which takes its lead from Hegel's critique of Kant. That is, it follows Hegel in rejecting an overdeterminate category thinking. At the same time, however, it is even less enchanted by the

cannot be deduced from contingent being. Furthermore, valid judgments are possible only in the realm of contingent being thus excluding valid judgements with respect to the Absolute. If Kant is correct then Hegel's philosophy is conclusively misconceived, so naturally Hegel tries to show that, in fact, there is an intelligible way of making the intellectual transition from contingency to necessity. The way in which Hegel shows this, as we shall see, is by means of some strange presuppositions which, to put it gently, are extremely difficult to follow. It is at this point in the *Encyclopaedia* that Hegel first uses the concept of mediation. He notes that "thinking the empirical world essentially means altering its empirical form and transforming it into something universal" (EL§50). This is not the specialized activity of philosophy, but an ineradicable characteristic of human thought. So when the empirical world is thought, or becomes the object of reflection, it is no longer merely empirical but indeed an object of thought. Hegel describes this thinking as a *negative* activity which brings out "the inner *import* of what is perceived" (EL§50). He claims that the negative moment involves the reflective transformation of the material into the spiritual. In this way the material is allegedly mediated into the spiritual: that is, the being of the world can be explained only as the necessary being of God. By itself, or independently of God, the world is only contingent being. The idea, then, is that the world is mediated though God in the sense that the world achieves its significance only by reference to its truth in God: "This elevation (*Erhebung*) of the spirit means that although being certainly does pertain to the world, it is only semblance, not genuine being, not absolute truth; for, on the contrary, the truth is beyond that appearance, in God alone, and only God is genuine being" (EL§50). On the other side the existence of God is mediated through the world, in the sense that we must pass to His existence from the contingency of things. However, the passage from world to God is anything but one of interdependence. If it were then the existence of God would be "*grounded and dependent.*" This allows Hegel to conclude that "while this elevation is a *passage and mediation (Vermittlung)*, it is also the sublation of the *passage (Übergang)* and the *mediation* since that through which God could seem to be mediated, i.e. the world is, on the contrary, shown up as what is null and void. It is only the *nullity* of the being of the world that is the bond of the elevation; so that what does mediate vanishes, and in

motivations behind Hegel's critique, namely, the need for a philosophy which can rationally express the Absolute. Clearly some strange transformation has taken place.

this mediation, the mediation itself is sublated” (*EL*§50). The world, understood as independent being, is superseded by God whose existence is the nullification of the independent existence of the world.

The sense in which mediation is intended in this context is crucial to Hegel’s ultimate programme. It is a mechanism of reflection which allows us to see that an object — in this case the world — is not independent, and reflection forces us to move to its further condition. Mediation is thus, to use Hegel’s word, an elevation, not a lateral implication. Furthermore, and precisely because it is an elevating move, it must eventually end when a certain satisfactory position has been attained: in that way it sublates itself — it becomes what it is through the negation of the prior stages of mediation. (The motion of mediation resembles the triadic structure in which dialectic negates a given judgment and transforms itself into something beyond that judgment.) It is worth noting that the criteria of this sublation are not specified with the result that we do not know what conditions of satisfaction Hegel requires. That is to say, when is a sublation not just a negation? The major difficulty with this account of mediation is that it appears to be a custom-built concept serving the process of justifying a certain traditional theological conception of being. The philosophical enterprise of finding conditions, which Hegel takes to be quite natural, becomes, willy nilly, a moment of thinking the Absolute.

(ii) Transcendental Thesis

In the “Third Position of Thought towards Objectivity” Hegel attempts to offer a further refinement of the concept of mediation (*EL*§62). Mediation, Hegel suggests, is a quality of anything comprehended through categories: “these categories are restricted determinations, forms of what is conditioned, dependent, and mediated.” So a mediated object is not unlimited (restricted), not absolute (conditioned), not independent. Categories, Hegel goes on to say, are synonyms of concepts. To comprehend — to think through concepts — is to grasp an object (*Gegenstand*) “in the form of something conditioned and mediated.” Mediation has the property, like concepts, of determining an object and in that sense mediation is a formal quality. Hegel adds to this transcendental implication when he asserts that mediation is not a dispensable middle point standing between the object and the subject. It seems, in

fact, that the object is rationally unavailable except through mediation. Hegel makes a further claim when he argues that explanation and comprehension are matters of movement from a particular mediation to another particular mediation. We might put this simply by saying that knowledge is ineluctably conceptual. Gathering these thoughts together we can see that two claims are thereby made: that (a) *we cannot know an object except conceptually*, and (b) that *what we can know about objects depends on what mediations are entailed*, rather than what we can directly claim of the object. In making these two claims Hegel is obviously committed to a conceptualism. His position is that the conceptual possibilities of an object determine the knowledge that we might achieve. Mediation is thus no middle point — as concepts or ideas are in realist representationalism — between the judging subject and the indifferent object.

Hegel presents this position transcendently. He demonstrates that if we do not explain knowledge as containing mediation then our language falls into incoherence. This, he contends, is precisely what happens in Jacobi. Hegel argues for the ineluctability of mediation by exploring Jacobi's attempt to exploit an antithetical meaning of reason and to make it equivalent to faith: "since mediated knowledge is supposed to be restricted simply to a finite content, it follows that reason is *immediate knowing, faith*" (EL§63). Hegel's criticism of this is especially acute. What he wants to do, in effect, is to show that Jacobi's distinctions are necessarily bogus in that they incoherently claim a realm of thought in which mediation might not be operative. In particular Hegel questions the use of terms for the psychological dispositions that we allegedly have when we attain this immediate knowledge of God. For instance, Jacobi opposes knowing to believing, and yet also claims that believing is immediate knowing. What is the difference between these two senses of knowing? Jacobi, according to Hegel, never explains. Another instance of this confusion centres around Jacobi's idea of intuiting. Jacobi opposes intuiting to thinking (since the latter seems to be suggestive of finitude). But what else is intuiting other than thinking? Surely intuiting has to be an intellectual process. If this is the case then, to finish Hegel's argument, intuiting must also contain mediation. It is interesting to note that this important argument has nothing to say about the Absolute. Instead mediation is presented purely in the context of a necessary structure of knowledge.

(iii) *Contentual Thesis*

We have already seen that the elevation thesis is explicated in the context of our knowledge of God. This context is also operative for the contentual thesis. In the contentual thesis Hegel argues that immediate knowing is one-sided in that it fails to include the mediated element of knowledge. As something one-sided its very form allegedly reduces its content to one-sidedness and ultimately to abstraction. That is to say, the content is necessarily deformed into a uni-dimensionality. As such it is an abstraction from the concreteness of the original and is thereby false representation. What Hegel is pointing out here is the now familiar idea that a method pre-determines the possibility of the content. Since immediate knowing excludes mediation its objects are objects that themselves contain no mediation. If we were to concede that the objects were internally mediated then we would already have admitted to a form of knowing that is different in kind from immediate knowing.

This theory introduces two new ideas: the one just stated that (a) form determines contentual possibility, and (b) that a content can have mediational structure. What (b) means is that there are objects in which we discern diversity in unity; a substance as traditional metaphysics would term it. Hegel wants to allow this as otherwise the philosophical account of content would, contrary to certain experiences, always be discrete and atomic. When knowledge of God is considered, however, we discover what a mistake this is since, as Hegel claims, God can “only be called spirit inasmuch as he is known (*gewußt*) as inwardly *mediating himself with himself*. Only in this way is he concrete, living and spirit; and that is just why the knowing of God as spirit contains mediation within it” (*EL*§74). In other words, God, as he is known to us, is not a lifeless abstraction, and that entails that this knowledge is not reducible to the one-sidedness of immediacy. Knowledge of God, then, is always mediation. In this way Hegel offers a complex thesis: in so far as a thing is inherently mediational, it must be known through mediation. Mediation is both the property of the object and knowledge: knowledge, as it were, moulds itself to the object by its own processes of mediation.

We should note that in pursuing this model of mediation Hegel is proposing a theory designed to capture something like the knowledge of God or of the Absolute. Consequently, this theory has no interest in particularity since particularity, as we have yet to see, cannot be known as inwardly mediating contents. This is a crucial step of the theory. In its abstraction immediate knowing relates the particular instance to itself. That is, since it is one-sided it takes the immediate particular to be related to itself alone. But this will not work even for particulars, Hegel argues, since “the particular is precisely the relating of itself to *another* outside it.” The case of God, however, is rather special. Since all knowing contains mediation we might think that God is mediated “to *another* outside it.” But that is not so. God, apparently, is not a particular. As the polemical argument has put it: he is reduced to particularity by immediate knowing, so a method which is not reductive will allow God to be known as a concrete universal. The result of this is that Hegel is required to explain mediation in a different context. The Aristotelian formulation that we have already seen is used to explain the nature of God: “as inwardly *mediating himself with himself*.” So Hegel has to provide an explanation of mediation in which the content — in this case God — is not “the relating of itself to *another* outside it.” At this point some pyrotechnics are introduced: “But a content can only be recognized as what is true inasmuch as it is not mediated with an other, i.e., is not finite, so that it mediates itself with itself, and is in this way both mediation and immediate self-relation all in one.” What Hegel seems to be saying is that when we judge the truth of our knowledge of God it cannot be a matter of referring the content to conditions outside God. That procedure is applicable to particularity. God, however, is unique. The experience of God is immediate in that we do not infer it, but it is mediated in the sense that it is the experience of a unity in diversity, not a flat particular. So the function of mediation as we see it here is entirely that of explaining the way in which God can be known. The argument relies on an unusual sense of the isomorphism of God and knowledge, and, more fundamentally, on an agreed notion of God.

(iv) *Genetic Thesis*

Hegel, as we have seen, argues that the doctrine of immediate knowing adopts an “*excluding posture*” (EL§64) in that it holds that mediation is not only insufficient for knowledge of the Absolute, but should be abandoned. Thus far, the discussion of

mediation is related in various ways to the question of the knowability of the Absolute. By means of three examples (*EL*§66), however, Hegel makes a strikingly different claim to the effect that the genesis of a thing or a state of affairs is its mediation. The senses in which that genesis can be explained are all, apparently, inclusive within what we might understand as the genetic mediation. Examples are of course unusual in Hegel's logic. They are all the more perplexing here in that the examples he provides give rise to an understanding of mediation which is quite at odds with cognition of the Absolute. Furthermore, the examples are internally problematic, as we shall see, in that they fail to distinguish genesis from validity.

The first example in which we find the genetic thesis examines the case of mathematical knowledge. A mathematician may have sophisticated answers to mathematical problems immediately available, though that sophistication is the product of long education. In that sense the immediacy is apparently inseparable from the conditions that produced it. What mediation does not explain here, however, is the truth status of the uttered mathematical proposition, merely the extra-mathematical and empirical conditions that in a particular sense made it possible. The mathematician's knowledge and her education are obviously not disconnected, but what are we to make of the connection? The validity or otherwise of those proofs that the mathematician may effortlessly and immediately produce cannot be validated by recounting the process through which the mathematician has come to be a mathematician. It would, of course, be rather odd were the mathematician to claim that these proofs were known to her independently of education. But even so, their invalidity could not simply be assumed. (It might be said that mediation refers to the process which, to pursue the instance, normally produces a mathematician, though that is to apply an interpretation to Hegel's words which is far from obvious.)

The second example provided by Hegel is that of the parent as offspring. He notes that "the seed and the parents are an immediate, originating existence with regard to the children, etc., which are the offspring. But, for all that the seed and the parents (in virtue of their just existing) are *immediate*, they are offspring as well; and, in spite of the mediation of their existence, the children, etc., are now immediate, for they *are* too." The point here is that the parent is immediately a parent, but mediated ("in

virtue of their just existing”) in that a parent is the offspring of someone else. Insofar as one is a parent one is simply that. Insofar as one is a human being, in any respect with any determination, one must be a product of parents. Hegel calls this a “trivial” insight. But it is less than that. The conditions in which one is specifically determined as a parent are not to be explained by reference to my other determination as a child of some else.

Hegel takes a further example with respect to spatial location: “That I am in Berlin, which is my *immediate* present, is *mediated* by the journey I made to come here.” We might ask why it is an immediate fact as opposed to just a fact. Indeed, given the problem with this case Hegel might want to call it nothing more than a fact. The fact that I am in Berlin might be an immediate fact — unmediated, so to speak — by any condition if, in fact, I was born in Berlin and never left it at any time. Kant’s legendary presence in Königsberg might be an impossibility under Hegelian strictures.

As we see, then, mediation can be used to name the genetic process of any given. Without that process the given simply could not be. Such a claim is not, indeed, controversial, as Hegel points out. But its place within the exposition of the concept of mediation is difficult to understand since the genetic thesis is, in essence, anomalous. First, the crucial point that had been gained as an achievement of mediation — that it is not one-sided — can only have artificial application in the genetic thesis. Second, it has an entirely different application from what we have seen in the elevation thesis in which mediation takes us from contingency to necessity. It is not clear that the elevation framework can be seen in the three expository examples. In a more general philosophical context the genetic thesis suffers from a confusion of genesis and validity. A comprehensive explanation of any phenomenon requires both, though the conditions in which a genetic explanation would be adequate to its object would be impossible to determine: each object may have an infinity of genetic conditions. But that both might form part of a comprehensive explanation does not justify Hegel’s collapsing them into each other.

Hegel wants to bring us to the point where we realize that mediation and immediacy are intrinsically connected. The connection is clear enough to Hegel: “It is thereby

shown to be a *factum*, that the determination of mediation is contained in that very immediacy, against which the *understanding* (in accordance with its own fundamental principle of immediate knowing) is not allowed to have any objections. It is only the ordinary abstract understanding that takes the determinations of immediacy and mediation to be absolute, each on its own account, and thinks that it has an example of a *firm* distinction in them; in this way, it engenders for itself the insurmountable difficulty of uniting them — a difficulty which, as we have shown, is not present in the *factum...*” (EL§70). But has Hegel done enough to facilitate this confident conclusion? As we have seen the *elevation thesis* is worked out in the context of the Absolute, or, more specifically, God. When we ascend to the theological explanation of the world a process of mediating the apparently immediate is involved. It is clear, however, that Hegel is using mediation in a way that is specific to this unique transition and for that reason no further conclusions can be drawn about the general nature of immediacy and mediation. The *transcendental thesis* tends to support Hegel’s conclusion in that it demonstrates the difficulties that a position has in expressing itself once mediation has been excluded. Insofar as it is effective against Jacobi who represents immediate knowing Hegel’s claim can be deemed reasonable. The *contentual thesis* once again looks like a custom-built thesis designed to facilitate expression of the Absolute. We ourselves cannot apply the findings of that thesis to other phenomena because of what Hegel has said about particularity. So once again we must accept a controversial pre-condition. Finally, *the genetic thesis* certainly allows for the interdependence of immediacy and mediation. But the drawback is that it does so in a context which is both artificial and internally problematic.

2. Adorno on Mediation

Although Adorno regards Hegel’s metaphysical project as inimical to the true task of philosophy, that of accounting for particularity, he nevertheless borrows several concepts from Hegel in order precisely do philosophical justice to particularity. The idea of mediation is the most important of these concepts. Adorno attempts to reconstruct what he understands by mediation within the post-metaphysical requirements of contemporary thought. He employs the concept of mediation in two ways: first, as a solution to the subject-object problem and, second, as a conceptualism which is close to what we have seen in Hegel (particularly the

contentual thesis). There is immediately something odd about two such claims being made in the name of the same concept. The subject-object question is one of epistemology and invariably returns to philosophy because of the ineradicable idea that there is an independent object which concepts grasp in some way. Conceptualism, however, is a position which looks only at the internal relations of concepts. I shall briefly examine both of Adorno's employments of mediation and assess the compatibility of his claims.

(i) Subject-Object Mediation

Adorno holds that the concepts of subject and object cannot be established as though independent of each other. He also contends that the subject-object theories which have emerged from representationalism (empiricism and idealism) fundamentally misconstrue the nature of experience. Unlike certain other philosophers, however, he does not go on to claim that the subject-object enterprise is fundamentally misguided and should simply be abandoned. He argues, rather, that the available subject-object models lead to difficulties. In contrast to representationalism's various subject-object models Adorno opts for a model, based on some kind of reciprocity, which he terms *mediation*. It is clear that Adorno believes this concept to be essentially Hegelian.⁴ Mediation is expected to carry a heavy burden in Adorno's philosophy. It sometimes seems to be proposed as a solution to virtually every problem in modern philosophy. It may be that Adorno has struck gold with the discovery of such a potent concept. I believe, however, that the truth is rather more mundane, and only mundane at most. It seems to me that mediation conflates, rather than synthesizes, two very different claims: first, a materialist claim about the priority of non-conceptuality and second, an idealist claim about the conceptual nature of experience. The result is that we find two competing strands of thought which ultimately prevent Adorno from resolving what he sees as the various problems of representationalism.

Even this brief characterization of Adorno's subject-object enterprise alerts us to an entirely different set of concerns to those that give rise to Hegel's concept of mediation. What, we might ask, allows Adorno to employ the concept? The way in

which I have identified the different tendencies of Hegel's concept of mediation is a possible starting point. First, the elevation thesis clearly cannot fit the programme conceived by Adorno. He proposes a subject-object theory whereas the elevation thesis is designed to get us from contingency to necessity. The same difficulty might be noted of the contentual thesis since Hegel demonstrates the thesis by showing that a particular content, God, must be known in a particular way. However, Adorno emends it for his own purposes. He takes it to be applicable to all possible objects, not simply God. Hence all objects, all particulars, contain mediation. (Adorno, as a result of a deflationary reading of Hegel's metaphysics, makes virtually no effective distinction between dialectic and mediation.) The genetic thesis is simply unsuitable as an act of knowledge. That leaves the transcendental thesis which, given some reconstruction of Adorno's position, is the place from which his concept of mediation originally derives. Of course, the general context needs to be abandoned, but that still leaves, in Adorno's view, a fruitful framework.

The exact nature of subject-object mediation — at least as Adorno intends it — is at best obscure. Mediation does not name a purely logical relationship. That is to say, the very idea of a subject or of an object does not immediately entail the other. A logical relation remains logical and does not apply to the epistemological issues of the subject-object relationship Adorno is attempting to describe. Mediation, for Adorno, involves wider claims about the sort of thing an object must be understood as and how that object affects concepts and the users of those concepts, subjects. In this light, mediation appears to be a causal relationship. Traditionally causal theories have reduced epistemology to two options, and these options are based on relationships of subordination. These are the options, as Fichte put it, of “whether the independence of the thing should be sacrificed to the independence of the self, or, conversely, the independence of the self to that of the thing.”⁵ What Adorno appears to attempt is a conflation of the two strands of representationalism: the subject engenders the object in the sense that the meanings of objects are not independent of humans; however the object occasions the subject in the sense that as an experiencing and thinking entity

⁴ “There is nothing that is not mediated, and yet, as Hegel emphasised, mediation must always refer to some mediated thing, without which there would be no mediation” (*ND* 171, emended).

the subject must respond to the object. The object, in this way, provides the environment in which the subject is realized. In this respect Adorno identifies the subject as the “how” and the object as the “what” of the mediational process (ND 183).⁶ That is — to use Adorno’s terminology — the subject mediates the object through concepts, whereas the object mediates the subject through meaning. In effect, a subject becomes a subject, and an object an object by virtue of the respective and reciprocal act of meaning constitution. As Adorno himself puts it, subject and object “constitute (*konstituieren*) one another as much as — by virtue of such constitution — they depart from one another” (ND 174). In essence, this thesis preserves the subject-object relation in a way which is quite distinct from empiricist and idealist models of that relation. This is most evident in the role that Adorno gives to the object. Unlike the unilinear as opposed to reciprocal or mediational causal theories, Adorno’s version sees objects as neither the effect of an individual’s ideas (idealism), nor as inherently meaningful (realism). Rather, the object is independently meaningful in just the sense that it is not reducible to an individual. Its meaning is, as the metaphor puts it, its “sedimented history” (ND 163). That, of course, does not put it beyond the subject since the object is explicable in terms of meaning. It is in this context that Adorno offers the thesis of the priority of the object. This thesis provides the possibility of a regeneration of the epistemological programme which hitherto, in Adorno’s view, has proceeded along exclusively subjectivist or objective lines: “Subjectivity changes its quality in a context which it is unable to evolve on its own. Due to the inequality inherent in the concept of mediation, the subject enters into the object altogether differently from the way the object enters into the subject. An object can be *thought only by a subject* but always remains *something other than the subject...*” (ND 183, my italics). Adorno’s way of stating the reason for the object’s priority is that the object must be given priority in mediation since it is *mediated according to its own concept* (that is, according to what it is) (SO 502), whilst the subject must “adjust” and unfold according to the object (ND 138). And here we come to the central issue: if the object is mediated according to its own concept then it is mediated according to what it is itself. It must therefore be more than sense data

⁵ J. G. Fichte, trans. Peter Heath and John Lachs, *The Science of Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p.14.

⁶ ND = Theodor W. Adorno, trans. E. B. Ashton, *Negative Dialectics* (London: Routledge, 1973).

awaiting description, a qualitatively different act. But because it is mediated it is brought to knowledge through consciousness. From this it appears that Adorno sees the object as conceptually independent (as opposed to independent of concepts). There is no need to see the object as a material thing waiting to be sucked in by thought. Rather consciousness adjusts to the object precisely as a conceptual given.

This leads to the question: does Adorno not thereby fall into a conceptualism which need not touch or include the idea of a material given? An avowed idealist, Michael Oakeshott, puts the conceptualist position succinctly: “The notion that thought requires raw material, a datum which is not itself judgment, and the consequent eagerness to discover its character, may be traced to the fact that in experience, so far as we can recollect, we find ourselves always manipulating some material independent of the actual process of manipulation. But it is false to infer from this that what is manipulated is not itself judgment.”⁷ As John McDowell has made clear: either we concede a given or we posit the priority of concepts.⁸ The implications of either are unattractive. Yet Adorno uses the idea of mediation somehow to encompass both. Conflations are, of course, notoriously volatile. Some questions have to be asked about the idea of reciprocity that is being presented in the thesis of mediation. Adorno, as we have seen, maintains that there is an asymmetry in this process. What his theory needs to show is that mediation is not simply an equivocal term which covers two operations of different species. Yet no justification is to be found. The effect in Adorno’s work is that the respective processes of object mediation and subject mediation do not amount to reciprocity. Furthermore, both could exist without reference to the other. Mediation therefore remains fundamentally equivocal in that it is a cover term for two different operations corresponding to two different relationships. Object mediation is nothing more than Adorno’s attempt at materialism; subject mediation is his attempt at idealism. At no point does Adorno offer a satisfying account of a possible synthetic relationship between these such as to permit him to use mediation in the way he does.

(ii) Conceptual Mediation

⁷ Michael Oakeshott, *Experience and its Modes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1933), p.19.

Adorno provides an account of the relations between concepts, relations which he terms mediation. The idea is simple enough. Adorno claims that no concept can be essentially unmediated, and that feature of concepts in some way undermines any foundationalist hypostatization of any concept: “The first if the philosophers makes a total claim: it is unmediated and immediate”⁹; “The doctrine that everything is mediated, even supporting immediacy, is irreconcilable with the urge to ‘reduction’...”¹⁰ For Adorno concept mediation entails that the incompleteness of concepts necessitates other concepts. This latter is a Hegelian idea, corresponding, as already noted, to part of the contentual thesis. But the self-generated conceptualism of which Hegel is accused by Adorno is replaced by a conceptualism apparently guided solely by the subjective response to objectivity. This alone, Adorno thinks, is sufficient to avoid an abstract conceptualism. In his logic Hegel insists that mediation is the rational way of understanding the relations between the concepts that underpin our world: “one of the determinations has truth only through its mediation by the other” (*EL*§70). This idea of truth does not refer to any non-conceptual state-of-affairs (the idea that our knowledge is grounded in ontological states-of-affairs which are not directly accessible to us). At a crucial point, indeed, Hegel makes clear that the concept of mediation can have nothing to do with objects in any ontological sense: “With regard to the equally immediate consciousness of the existence of *external* things, this is nothing else than *sensible* consciousness; that we have a consciousness of this kind is the least of all cognitions. All that is of interest here is to know that this immediate knowing of the *being* of external things is deception and error, and that there is no truth in the sensible as such, but that the *being* of these external things is rather something-contingent, something that passes away, or a *semblance*; they are essentially this: to have only an existence that is separable from their concept, or their essence” (*EL*§76). This may seem to be the kind of position that Adorno takes as evidence of an unfettered idealism. Curiously, Adorno himself uses similar language without, it seems, regarding himself as the proponent of an abstract conceptualism. In his discussion of constellations Adorno seems to get at something which sounds like

⁸ Cf. John McDowell, *Mind and World* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1996), Lecture I.

⁹ Theodor W. Adorno, trans. Willis Domingo, *Against Epistemology: A Metacritique* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1982), p.7.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.4.

this. The theory of constellations reads like a conceptual coherentism, not unlike the one espoused by Oakeshott. It is the idea that although experience is ultimately conceptual no single concept can adequately express the totality of experience. In this regard Adorno claims that the “determinable flaw (*bestimmbare Fehler*) in every concept makes it necessary to cite others” (ND 53). The idea of a determinable flaw in concepts is rather strange. If it is a merely rhetorical way of saying that concepts are incomplete then we have thereby no reason to commit ourselves to materialism. That is, truth is the result of an adequate arrangement of concepts. Further comments on constellations suggest just this: “as a constellation, theoretical thought circles the concept it would like to unseal, hoping that it might open like the lock of a well-guarded safe-deposit box” (ND 163). The emphasis of this idea is the conceptual basis of knowledge. At no point in his discussions of constellations does Adorno say that they reach a non-conceptual something. In this respect, at least, Adorno offers a conceptualism which simply fails to cohere with the materialism he espouses in subject-object mediation.

It is clear that Adorno’s sense of mediation is unsatisfactory in that it is essentially ambiguous. Rather than providing a synthetic account of subject-object mediation he provides two competing strands which are misleadingly named under the one idea. The fear of a vulgar materialism drives Adorno towards an idealism that is at odds with the materialism he really wants to offer. Furthermore, his conceptual mediation cannot fit with the reciprocity claim of subject-object mediation. It is clear enough too that his epistemological employment of mediation has no obvious parallel in Hegel’s philosophy. Of Hegel himself we might note that what I designate as the transcendental thesis appears more congenial to contemporary philosophical tastes. But from what we have seen of its exposition Hegel’s intentions for the concept of mediation are fundamentally cast within his concerns with the Absolute. As such the concept of mediation is conceived by its oriental author in a variety of competing forms for purposes quite the contrary of those intended by Adorno.