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## **Adorno on Mimetic Rationality: Three Puzzles**

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### **Abstract**

I examine Adorno's controversial claim that human rationality is inherently mimetic. To do so, I break this claim down into three puzzles (the natural historical puzzle, the metaphysical puzzle, and the epistemic puzzle) and consider each in turn. The first puzzle originates in Adorno's assertion that in the course of human history the mimetic moment of human thought "is melted together with the rational moment". On his narrative, mimesis has become an intrinsic component of human rationality, it appears that we are oblivious to this state of affair and unable to recognize the workings of mimesis in what we otherwise refer to as rationality. The second puzzle concerns the traditional metaphysical question regarding the possibility of knowledge. Adorno holds that the key to this question lies in the "mimetic moment of knowledge", which he characterizes as the "moment of the elective affinity between the knower and the known." The third puzzle concerns his views on how the mimetic moment of thought plays out in our epistemic practices. As he puts it, "consciousness knows of its other as much as it resembles that other," which seems to entail that our very efforts to conceptualize objects somehow rely on imitative processes. I work out what I take to be the basics of Adorno's understanding of mimesis and use them to make sense of each puzzle. I argue that Adorno's insistence on the mimetic component of human rationality isn't meant to promote more mimetic modes of comportment, but a reflexive awareness of the extent to which our rational activities already rely on imitative (or immersive) processes, even those we view as embodying the strongest claims to the contrary.

### **Keywords**

Adorno, rationality, knowledge, mimesis, immersion

IN what follows, I would like to examine a series of puzzles that Adorno's concept of mimesis raises. I'm interested in the way he uses the concept of mimesis to work out issues regarding our understanding of what rationality is about—the set of processes it involves, the way it is embodied, and the pathologies that may affect it. More precisely, I want to understand the role it plays in his critical examination of predominant forms of rationality.

One blunt way of putting the problem would be to ask why Adorno even considers using the concept of mimesis to characterize human rationality, let alone lending such importance to it. The reason I put the problem in this way is that at the outset it is far from obvious that the concept of mimesis can be of any help in clarifying what human rationality is about. In fact, many would consider the very idea of a *mimetic rationality*, that is, the idea that what we have come to refer to as rationality would rely on imitative processes, an oxymoron. Doesn't rationality, in the proper sense, begin precisely where mimesis stops—or so goes the question?

From this vantage point, it seems that the only satisfying answer to why Adorno gives such weight to the concept of mimesis would be that he thinks that he *must* do so, such that without it, defining aspects of human rationality would remain unaccounted for. To put the point more broadly: without this concept not only would defining aspects of human cognition elude us to some extent, but we would also be oblivious to essential features of the way norms and codes shape our interactions, practices and institutions. If this is accurate, then the question is: what exactly can't we make sense of without that concept?

The issue is broad and my aim is not to provide a solution to the whole of it. Instead, I will break it down into three puzzles pertaining to the way Adorno uses the concept of mimesis in his characterization of rationality (the natural historical puzzle, the metaphysical puzzle, and the epistemic puzzle) and examine each in turn to gain some clarity on the general issue.

### I. The Natural Historical Puzzle

The first puzzle brings together the phylogenetic perspective and the social-historical perspective on the development of our mimetic capacity. On the one hand, Adorno shares the view that our mimetic capacity belongs to the basic set of dispositions that we have acquired in the course of our evolution as a species in response a set of natural necessities. The primary function of this capacity is thought to be that it enables humans to adapt to their environment. On the other hand, Adorno claims that in the course of enlightenment, our mimetic activity has been profoundly altered. As we moved away from the universe of myth, we progressively abandoned the practices that most patently relied on our imitative abilities, that is, magical and ritualistic practices. This points to Adorno's much-debated claim that in the modern world “[a]rt is a refuge for mimetic comportment.”<sup>1</sup> But the claim I'm interested in hasn't received

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<sup>1</sup> T.W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 53. The list of contributors to this debate is extensive. See, for instance, Jay Bernstein's *The Fate of Art: Aesthetic Alienation from Kant to Derrida and Adorno* (Cambridge: Polity, 1993), in particular chap. 4-5; Christoph Menke's *The Sovereignty of Art: Aesthetic Negativity in Adorno and Derrida*, trans. Neil Solomon (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press), 1999; and Lambert Zuidervart's *Adorno's Aesthetic Theory: The Redemption of Illusion* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press), 1993.

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as much attention. As Adorno puts it in *Negative Dialectics*, “the mimetic moment is melted together [*verschmilzt*] with the rational moment on the way to its secularization.”<sup>2</sup> This can be interpreted in various ways. It can be taken to suggest that in relying on our cognitive abilities we have developed more sophisticated ways of pursuing the same basic imitative activities or of pursuing similar imitative activities; or it can suggest that we have found new or alternative ways of making use of this most basic disposition. However one reads Adorno’s statement, the purported melting of the two moments marks a transition from a world in which a quite ostensible use of our mimetic abilities is made to one in which our self-understanding is impervious to the mimetic dimension of our activities.<sup>3</sup> So the first puzzle lies in what Adorno means by this merging of the mimetic moment with the rational one.

I want to propose that Adorno and Horkheimer are already trying to make sense of this transition when, in the first excursus of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* on Ulysses, they examine the magical and ritualistic mimetic behaviors and contrasts them with what is involved in the formation of the self. If we follow the main argumentative lines of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, we can distinguish two problems here:

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<sup>2</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1973), 45 (translation altered); *Negative Dialektik*, in: *Gesammelte Schriften*, Volume 6, (Frankfurt a./M., Suhrkamp, 1973) (hereafter: GS 6), 54 .

<sup>3</sup> As Adorno formulates the claim, the puzzle really is that while this melting together of both moments means that mimesis has become an intrinsic part of human rationality, we genuinely seem unable to recognize this state of affair and appreciate the workings of mimesis in what we otherwise refer to as rationality. In that regard, the contrast with the overtly mimetic character of magical and ritualistic practices is quite striking.

The first problem is how to make sense of our basic imitative abilities and of the practices they give way to in the universe of myth. Adorno and Horkheimer address this problem as they elaborate on the first of the two main theses they introduce in the foreword of the book, namely that myth is already enlightenment (the second thesis being of course that enlightenment reverts into mythology).<sup>4</sup> On their account, making sense of magical and mythical mimetic practices means showing in what way and to what extent these practices already are rational. In that regard, their account directly challenges the view that rational behavior begins when humans depart from primitive modes of behavior.

The second problem is what becomes of our mimetic capacity in the process of enlightenment, as we transition from conspicuous forms of mimetic behavior to much more subtle ones. This poses the question of how to make sense of the way in which the practices we regard as rational somehow extend magical and mythical mimetic practices.

On Adorno and Horkheimer’s view, the key to this transition lies in the formation of the self, which they articulate through the perplexing idea of a “mimesis of death.”<sup>5</sup> This suggests that an account of their conception of the mimesis of death would shed light on the melting together of mimesis and rationality and the historical transition it constitutes.

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<sup>4</sup> See *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), xviii.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

Before I go on to explain what is at issue in the idea of a mimesis of death, I want to take a closer look at the mimetic capacity in question.

Whereas the claim that we have something like a mimetic capacity isn't controversial, the claim that this capacity would pertain to what rational thought is—i.e., to what we have come to conceive without any reference whatsoever to something like that mimetic capacity—clearly is. So what exactly does this capacity consist in? Is it a capacity in the proper sense, or something for which we have otherwise accurate characterizations (such as sensibility, perception, memory, imagination, understanding, etc.)? What is specific to it? In short, what does the term mimesis in this context mean to capture exactly that no other descriptive adequately captures?

To answer these questions, I believe we ought to highlight two features of mimesis. First, if we are to properly recognize it as a capacity, alongside our other capacities, it will be as one whose complex enactment requires the support of other capacities (such as specific modes of attention, imagination, and memory) like reflection does, for example. I compare mimesis to reflection for a reason. Though the capacity to reflect is considered one of the hallmarks of human rationality, in many respects it proves just as challenging to determine precisely what is involved in what we call reflection as it does to determine what mimesis consists in. (Let us note that in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, judgment, understanding, imagination, and perception are instrumental to what Horkheimer and Adorno refer to as reflection or self-

reflection.<sup>6</sup>) In both cases, part of the difficulty resides in the multifaceted and intricate character of the processes involved.

The second feature of our mimetic capacity I wish to highlight is its relative opacity. The most recent findings in developmental psychology tend to confirm the traditional view that from the earliest stages of infancy decisive aspects of our development rely on our mimetic ability.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, it proves extremely difficult to understand precisely what is involved in the child's mimetic activity. The issue doesn't get any simpler when we consider creative artistic processes, for example, which since Plato and Aristotle have also been taken to involve one form of mimesis or another.<sup>8</sup> Adorno himself speaks of our "mimetic impulse"<sup>9</sup> to capture the spontaneous and pre-reflective character of our mimetic activity, which is another way of saying that while requiring specific modes of attention (and thus being conscious), this activity eludes to a certain degree our immediate rational control.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example, *ibid.*, 156ff.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Michael Tomasello's *The Cultural Origins of Human Cognition*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), in particular chap. 3, 81ff. In keeping with a long tradition going back to Aristotle, Adorno claims that "[t]he human is indissolubly linked with imitation: a human being only becomes human at all by imitating other human beings" (*Mimima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (New York: Verso, 2005), §99, 154).

<sup>8</sup> See Plato, *The Republic*, trans. C.D.C. Reeves (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2004), in particular book 3 and 10; and Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. by Malcolm Heath, (London: Penguin Classics, 1997), IV, 1448b4-20.

<sup>9</sup> *Hegel: Three Studies*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), 40 (translation altered); *Zur Metakritik der Erkenntnistheorie. Drei Studien zu Hegel*, in: *Gesammelte Schriften*, Volume 5, (Frankfurt a./M.: Suhrkamp, 1970) (hereafter GS 5), 285.

<sup>10</sup> Jean-Marie Schaeffer proposes two additional features of our mimetic activity to account for its opacity: first, "although the behaviors that they model appear regulated, the mental processes that end up constituting models of mimetic

Having said that, we still need to identify what specific accomplishment distinguishes our mimetic capacity from other capacities. Assuredly, one distinguishing mark of the mimetic capacity is what it produces: the imitation itself. In his short essay “On the Mimetic Faculty”, Benjamin defines our mimetic capacity as the “capacity to produce similarity”<sup>11</sup>—not to *recognize* similarity, but to *produce* it. In fact, he goes as far as to contend that our ability to recognize similarity “is nothing but the remnant of the once powerful compulsion to become similar and to behave similarly [*ähnlich zu werden und sich zu verhalten*].”<sup>12</sup> In *Why Fiction?*, Schaeffer develops an elaborate conception of our mimetic capacity along similar lines. He uses the term *mimeme* to refer to the relation of similarity produced by our imitative behavior. He insists that this relation of similarity is a *new* one in the sense that it “did not exist in the world before the mimetic act” and that its existence “is caused by this act.”<sup>13</sup> On both these accounts, then, our mimetic capacity is recognized by the production of *relations of similarity* between what imitates and what is imitated.

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competence don’t actually comprise the elaboration of rules that would be abstracted by induction on the basis of individual cases: they proceed by holistic assimilation of exemplifications that are mimed at the motor or imaginative level”; second, “the competences acquired mimetically comprise sub-routines of which some aren’t cognitively penetrable in the sense that they cannot be detached from the *mimeme* that exemplifies them” (*Why Fiction?* trans. Dorrit Cohn (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 2010), 96 (translation altered); *Pourquoi la fiction ?* (Paris: Seuil, 1999), 119).

<sup>11</sup> In *Selected Writings, Volume 2: Part 2: 1931-1934*, ed. Michael W. Jennings et al., (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 720.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* (translation altered); Benjamin, Walter, “Über das mimetische Vermögen”, in: *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. II.1, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, (Frankfurt a./M.: Suhrkamp, 1977), 210.

<sup>13</sup> *Why Fiction?*, 69.

In light of this characterization, I would like to examine what is at issue in the idea of mimesis of death. As indicated, our capacity to produce similarity is thought to result from our evolution as a species. Leaving aside the broad idea that this capacity has built-in adaptive features, we can identify two necessities that prompt the use of our mimetic capacity:

First, imitation is a highly efficient way of learning. (Imitative learning is also referred to as social learning, observational learning, or learning by immersion.) Thus, human beings acquire a whole range of basic skills through imitation without having to master any explicit rule. From an ontogenetic standpoint, this is reflected in the importance of imitative learning for the early stages of the child's development as it enables the acquisition of the basic tools and skills necessary for the ulterior cognitive development of the child.<sup>14</sup> From a phylogenetic point of view, now, imitative learning enables the transmission of skills in the absence of sophisticated symbolic medium. Moreover, precisely in that it enables the acquisition of the cognitive skills that make cultural transmission through symbolic means possible, imitative learning is the condition for any cultural development.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Thus Tomasello claims: “Imitative learning... represents infants’ initial entry into the cultural world around them in that they can now begin to learn from adults, or, more accurately, through adults, in cognitively significant ways” (*The Cultural Origins of Human Cognition*, 83).

<sup>15</sup> Tomasello makes precisely this point (see *The Cultural Origins of Human Cognition*, chap. 3, p. 81ff.) By contrast, Richard Dawkins defends the radical view that cultural transmission too is submitted to natural selection. He coins the term *meme* (short for *mimeme* and cultural equivalent of *gene*) to describe units of culture differentially replicated through imitation. In so doing, he makes learning by imitation the driving force in the evolution of cultures. See *The Selfish Gene: 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), chap. 11, 189ff.

Second, the use of our mimetic abilities also responds to what has long been considered a constitutive feature of the human condition: free agency. The flip side of free agency is that knowing what to do and what we are capable of doesn't belong to our natural makeup. In his *Second Discourse*, Rousseau illustrates this point through the fiction of the natural man. He imagines that in the state of nature, the prime human ethos was developed through the imitation of nonhuman animals: "Men, dispersed among [the animals of every species], observe, imitate their industry, and so raise themselves to the level of the Beasts' instinct, with the advantage that each species has but its own instinct, while man perhaps having none that belongs to him, appropriates them all, feeds indifferently on most of the various foods which the other animals divide among themselves, and as a result finds his subsistence more easily than can any one of them."<sup>16</sup> He goes on to tell the story of how the development of certain dispositions can only be understood as the result a series of accidents that have presented mankind with new needs and new challenges. As we know, Rousseau has the complex moral question of inequality in view. My point is a much simpler one: What Rousseau's tale illustrates is that we are so made that *we have to make ourselves into something*. Whatever capacity we prove having, that too is something we discover along the way. To do this, it seems, we cannot but imitate; at the very least we begin by imitating.

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<sup>16</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality among Men*, in: *The Discourses and Other Political Writings*, trans. Victor Gourevitch, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 135. To be sure, on Rousseau's account, the need for imitation stems from free agency, as what properly distinguishes the human from the animal: "The one chooses or rejects by instinct, the other by an act of freedom; as a result the Beast cannot deviate from the Rule prescribed to it even when it would be to its advantage to do so, while man often deviates from it to his detriment" (140).

Let us consider, from this perspective, the question of the formation of the modern rational self and the mimesis of death that Horkheimer and Adorno take to be one of the keys to its formation. What this perspective suggests that for us to be rational selves (or subjects in the philosophical sense), we have had to make ourselves into these selves. The question then is: since knowing what that entails is no more given to us than anything else that we strive to know, or to recognize, how could we even achieve this? In other words, how was it possible for us to make ourselves into such selves, if we neither were such selves to begin with nor had a clear enough idea of what being a self amounts to? In short, how did we achieve this without a model to imitate? The idea that we could somehow stumble into being subjects seems just as unlikely as the idea that this would be the outcome of careful planning. This poses the question of what we find ourselves imitating as we make ourselves into subjects. The dramatic-sounding answer that Horkheimer and Adorno give is, as mentioned, that it is in imitating death that we make ourselves into selves—not just in playing dead, but in making ourselves into something *at least akin to death*.

In the tale of the *Odyssey*, Adorno and Horkheimer track the logic of renunciation. Ulysses renounces his inner drives (his needs, his compulsions and desires) in the pursuit of a greater goal: the return to Ithaca and what this entails—the enjoyment of his wife, his status and his property. In this way, he claims to be more than what his own nature prescribes. In resisting his natural inclinations (as well as the external powers, personified in the mythical figures), the hero distinguishes what truly makes him into what he is from his own nature. In doing so, he defines himself as that being which sets itself apart from all the rest by its own means in order to

pursue its own interests, embodied in this one goal: the return to Ithaca. The course of Ulysses through myriad dangers is presented as a model to understand the formation of the self. Of course, Ulysses determines his ultimate goal prior to becoming the self that he becomes through his adventures. So it is not the fact that he sets a goal for himself that makes him the prototype [*Urbild*] of the self; it's rather the fact that in the course of his travels the specific goal that he pursues becomes immaterial compared to the fact that he becomes what defines itself by the pursuit of its own goals, and what thereby sets itself apart from all else by its own means.

Viewed from what properly characterizes mimesis, namely the production of a new relation of resemblance, the logic of renunciation not only explains the formation of the self, but it also describes the self as that which resembles nothing but itself. Here's how I see it: In the chapter on antisemitism, Horkheimer and Adorno examine the nature of our mimetic activity in more detail. They stress its projective dimension. Our mimetic activity is precisely that: an *activity*. In order to produce a mimeme that has some cohesion, we need to immerse ourselves in that which we seek to imitate, that is, to project ourselves into it in some way. In keeping with this idea, it seems that the self is formed through the imitation of the projection that is constitutive of the activity of imitation. The projection that is inherent to any imitative act becomes the organ of the self. As the hero glimpses this projective dimension, he immerses himself into it and forms thereby an intricately threaded mimeme of this projective dimension, thus making himself into that which is defined by that element. As Schaeffer argues, the point of imitation isn't that mimemes be absolutely similar to what they imitate. In fact, reaching identity is by definition excluded. The relation of

similarity that is produced is one of *selective* similarity. Indeed, as we immerse ourselves into an object, we seek and retain only those traits that are relevant to the production of a mimeme, which in turn means that the object itself poses constraints to the selection of relevant traits.<sup>17</sup> What matters here is what the self makes itself into in the process and the new self-understanding that is reached this way. For what is specific to the self, from this vantage point, is this new awareness, a sense that mimesis is nothing but mimesis: the business of the self. This would explain Ulysses' detachment from the kind of mimetic behaviors characteristic of the mythical universe of his travels and the discovery of his unique resources for cunning. It can also explain why having reached his goal, he cannot find satisfaction in it. Through his travels, he has made himself into this being for whom Ithaca cannot be satisfying.

## II. The Metaphysical Puzzle

The next puzzle concerns the traditional metaphysical question regarding the possibility of knowledge. Adorno discusses this question in a characteristically elliptic manner, referring in a variety of ways to the Greek quarrel as to whether only the like can know the like,<sup>18</sup> which he transposes in the question of the affinity between the knower and the known. In *Hegel: Three Studies*, he claims: "If it is true that rationality as a whole is the demythologisation of mimetic behaviors, then the fact that mimetic motives stay alive in the reflection on knowledge cannot come as a surprise; perhaps

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<sup>17</sup> See *Why Fiction?*, 69f.

<sup>18</sup> See in particular T.W. Adorno, *Against Epistemology: A Metacritique: Studies in Husserl and the Phenomenological Antinomies*, trans. Willis Domingo, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1982), 143 fn and *Negative Dialectics*, 56 and 150.

not simply as an archaic remnant, but because knowledge itself cannot be conceived without the addition of mimesis, however sublimated it may be: without it the gap between subject and object would be absolute and knowledge would be impossible.”<sup>19</sup> In a similar vein, he holds in *Negative Dialectics* that the “mimetic moment of knowledge” is “the moment of elective affinity between the knower and the known.” Even if in the process of enlightenment that moment “gradually crumbles”, he contends, it simply can't be eradicated. This would mean the end of all knowledge: knowledge would “annul itself”,<sup>20</sup> as he puts it. In this sense, Adorno suggests that the mimetic moment of knowledge has “found refuge in the postulate [*Postulat*]” that we have the “capacity to experience the object [*Vermögen zur Erfahrung des Objekts*].”<sup>21</sup>

Fascinating though they may be, these insights leave us puzzling over Adorno's precise meaning. They first raise the question of what, exactly, the affinity between the knower and the known amounts to in Adorno's view. Even more puzzling is the question of the role he intends mimesis to play in his account of affinity. As such, the notion that our knowledge of an object implies our relating to that object in some way makes a good deal of sense. So if the ties between the knower and the known were completely severed, we don't see how it would be possible for us to continue relating to the object in any meaningful sense. Saying this, however, is not very helpful in understanding what Adorno means by our affinity with the object. As long as we don't get clearer on this issue, we won't

really understand in which sense our relation to the object could ever be severed.

On closer examination, it appears that Adorno's claim as regards the affinity between the knower and the known can be interpreted in at least two ways:

(1) One can first take him to mean that there is an affinity between our capacity to know and what is known by means of this capacity and that this affinity is the condition for any knowledge. On this reading, our capacity to know belongs to our natural dispositions, which means that the affinity between our capacity to know and the object itself is natural as well. Now, the fact that we are naturally endowed with this capacity doesn't imply that we naturally understand its bounds and scope use. Once we do understand them, however, the real issue is whether we succeed in making an effective use of this capacity within bounds set for its proper use. Kant devotes an important part of the *Critique of Pure Reason* to an inquiry into the legitimate use of our capacity to know. As he lays down one of the main building blocks of his enterprise in his transcendental deduction—the first one, to be sure—, Kant makes a distinction between empirical and transcendental affinity. He defines the first as the “ground of the possibility of the [empirical] association of the manifold, so far as it lies in the object”<sup>22</sup> and the second as the “thoroughgoing connection under necessary laws”<sup>23</sup> that all possible manifold stand in. Because he conceives the categories of the understanding as the universal and necessary laws for the synthesis of all

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<sup>19</sup> *Against Epistemology: A Metacritique*, 143 fn (translation altered); GS 5, 147 fn.

<sup>20</sup> *Negative Dialectics*, 45 (translation altered); GS 6, 55.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

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<sup>22</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith, Revised Second Edition, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), A113, 139.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, A114, 140.



possible manifold in the transcendental unity of self-consciousness, he proposes that the former affinity is the “mere consequence”<sup>24</sup> of the latter. In other words, on Kant’s account, what enables us to make any sense whatsoever of phenomena is, fundamentally, nothing else than the synthetic activity of the transcendental subject, that is, the activity by which the manifold is first given the form of what is intelligible to the subject.

In Adorno’s mind, this understanding of the question of affinity poses one main problem, which he points out as he notes Kant’s “abysmal remark concerning the heterogeneity [*Ungleichartigkeit*] between the pure concepts of the understanding and sensible intuition.”<sup>25</sup> As Adorno sees it, Kant makes this remark in spite of the fact that it creates an inconsistency in his system. The problem, in short, is that while Kant’s attempt to ground the affinity between the subject and the object in the constitutive activity of the subject’s transcendental self-consciousness shifts the focus of the question of affinity, it doesn’t really answer it. For one can always pursue the matter further and ask what the transcendental affinity he describes itself relies on. Of course, according to Kant, his own critical enterprise shows that any attempt at answering this further question is vain, since it requires that we step beyond the reach of possible experience. In other words, this question is a *metaphysical* one concerning the affinity between the subject and the thing in itself—i.e.,

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> *Against Epistemology*, 142-3 (translation altered); GS 5, 147. In this quote, Adorno is referring to the chapter on schematism: “But pure concepts of the understanding being quite heterogeneous [*ungleichartig*] from empirical intuitions, and indeed from all sensible intuitions, can never be met with in any intuition” (*Critique of Pure Reason*, A137/B176, 180).

the thing as it would appear to a non-discursive, intuitive understanding—, which we cannot hope to answer. In Adorno’s view, however, this means that Kant puts the question of affinity in such terms that it becomes impossible for us to gain any clarity on it.

It should be clear that Adorno neither denies that we do indeed know objects nor that our capacity to know does enable us to know. But saying this sheds no light on the question of the affinity between the knower and the known. For establishing that we have capacities that each contribute in a specific way (and to a specific extent) to our knowledge of objects doesn’t yet account for the idea that there is an affinity between these capacities and the objects we know.

For my purposes, this understanding of the question of affinity poses an additional problem: it leaves unaddressed the question of how, on Adorno’s account, the affinity at issue somehow involves our imitative capacity. In order to address that question, we need to cast the relation of affinity in a different way.

(2) A second interpretation would, instead, argue that the affinity between the knower and the known, as Adorno understands it, concerns the relation between what is subjectively produced in knowledge—which involves concepts, of course, but not necessarily just concepts—and what is known through it.<sup>26</sup> On this reading, affinity would be found in the relation of similarity that is created between the knower and known, that is, between the knower as it institutes a

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<sup>26</sup> In *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno characterizes mimesis as “the non-conceptual affinity of the subjectively produced with its unposited other” (53).

relation to the object, which, if successful, consists in a relation of selective similarity of some kind (however complex and sophisticated it may be), on the one hand, and, on the other, that which is thereby thought to be known.

Now this reading raises issues of its own. A first issue is what similarity here precisely means. To say that knowledge is a constructive activity is an idea we have grown familiar with, but to characterize the result of this activity as a network of relations of similarity remains quite paradoxical. If we are to do more than shift the problem from affinity to similarity, we need to get clearer on what such a relation of similarity could consist in. In that regard, it would be a mistake to portray Adorno as a proponent of the image-theory of representation. On that matter, his views are unusually straightforward. In fact, Adorno is highly suspicious of any attempt at reintroducing the notion that our conceptual representations resemble the things they represent or that resemblance of this kind between the representation and its object would ground the relation of representation. For example, he holds in *Against Epistemology* that “[t]he claim that knowledge or truth would be an image of its object is the substitute and the consolation for the fact that the like was irreparably torn away from the like.”<sup>27</sup>

It may also be tempting here to appeal to another of Benjamin’s insights to account for Adorno’s view. In “On the Mimetic Faculty”, Benjamin describes the kind of similarity we produce when we depart from basic forms of imitative behavior as “nonsensuous similarities.” Thus, we could interpret Adorno’s claim that “rationality as whole” is the

process by which we “demythologize mimetic behaviors”<sup>28</sup> in Benjamin’s terms: as mimesis is melted together with rationality, we no longer produce sensuous (i.e. ostensible) similarities but nonsensuous ones. This implies not only that the production of these similarities rely on our higher cognitive functions, but also that they can only be identified and assessed as such through the same abilities.

This raises a question, though: to what extent does it still make sense to speak of similarity here? We can readily agree on the fact that our mimetic capacity enables us to produce sensuous similarities, inasmuch as we can observe what relation binds the imitation to what it imitates. But if the only way to make sense of nonsensuous similarities is *by analogy* with sensuous ones, then it would perhaps be best to give up the analogy altogether.

It may be useful at this point to consider how Adorno relates to Benjamin’s characterizations of mimesis. Adorno’s critical appropriation of Benjamin’s concepts is well documented. Though Adorno doesn’t focus on Benjamin’s idea of how our mimetic faculty allows for the production of nonsensuous similarity, there is no reason to think that his criticism of Benjamin wouldn’t apply to that idea as well. Adorno rehearses the same point of criticism in a variety of forms in the discussions and exchanges he had with Benjamin. In essence, he fears that for all their nuance and perceptiveness, Benjamin’s interpretations just aren’t interpretative enough and enjoins his friend to carry out his conceptual interpretations of the material under scrutiny to their fullest extent. In particular, Adorno writes a number of

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<sup>27</sup> 143 (translation altered); GS 5, 148.

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<sup>28</sup> *Against Epistemology: A Metacritique*, 143fn (translation altered); GS 5, 147fn.

letters to Benjamin,<sup>29</sup> in which he expresses concerns for his concept of dialectical image. In short, in whatever way Benjamin thinks dialectical images are apprehended (unconsciously, in a dream, or like a flash in the imagination), Adorno rejects any characterization that would liken dialectical images to images. The paradox is that to prove an effective critical tool, in Adorno's view, dialectical images should be nothing like images. Now, Benjamin's rather impenetrable conception of dialectical images would as such require a lengthy treatment, which I cannot provide here.<sup>30</sup> The important point is this: whatever Adorno has in view in terms of similarity falls under his strict prohibition of images.

This second interpretation of Adorno's claim on the affinity between the knower and the known raises another, more pressing issue concerning the question of truth: How are we to conceive of truth after we attempt what appears to be a most deflationary move, namely the redescription of the question of knowledge in terms of the production of something like mimemes? Interestingly, in *Hegel: Three Studies*, Adorno rejects the traditional definition of truth in order to reconceive truth in terms of affinity. He claims that "truth is not *adæquatio* but affinity"<sup>31</sup>—a claim that is bound to remain

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<sup>29</sup> See in particular his letters from May 20, June 5, and August 2-4, 1935, in Theodor W. Adorno and Walter Benjamin, *The Complete Correspondence 1928-1940*, ed. Henri Lonitz, trans. Nicholas Walker, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999, (respectively) 83f., 93, and 105.

<sup>30</sup> For an overview of Adorno's relation to Benjamin's view, see Buck-Morss' classical study *The Origins of Negative Dialectics: Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and the Frankfurt Institute*, (New York: Free Press, 1979), chap. 9-10.

<sup>31</sup> 40; GS 5, 285. In *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno writes: "Affinity is the high point [*Spitze*] of a dialectic of enlightenment. It turns back into blindness, into a conceptless execution from the outside as soon as it completely sections affinity. Without affinity there is no truth..." (160 (translation altered); GS 6, 276).

inscrutable until we work out at least the outlines of an account of what affinity in this context can mean. Next, I will briefly examine whether the idea that the mimetic moment of knowledge institutes a relation of selective similarity necessarily threatens our core assumptions about truth.

Think of the way Kant discusses the question of the objectivity of knowledge in the *Critique of Pure Reason*: if we don't possess a criterion that would enable us to establish that our knowledge actually corresponds to the object we are trying to know, then what can we legitimately make the objectivity of our knowledge rely on? The gist of Kant's Copernican turn consists in claiming that the objectivity of knowledge is grounded in the universal, yet *subjective* conditions of knowledge. Whereas no criterion allowing us to measure the conformity of our knowledge to the object we know can be determined a priori, these universal subjective conditions are for their part a priori determinable—or so goes his claim.

So Adorno's suggestion that Kant's transcendental solution leaves the question of affinity unresolved (see above) presents us with an alternative. On the one hand, we can try to develop a more satisfactory justification for Kant's transcendental strategy. The question then roughly takes the following form: how do we account for the fact that the transcendental subject constitutes possible experience the way it does and not in any other way? What reason do we have to think that this is not just the only available way, but the right one? Hegel's absolute idealism can be read as an attempt of this sort.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Adorno claims: "[I]n many respect [Hegel] is a Kant come to his own..." (*Hegel: Three Studies*, 6). For an interpretation that focuses on how Hegel proposes an answer to the challenges posed by Kant's transcendental idealism, see, for example,

On the other hand, we can review some of our entrenched assumptions concerning objectivity and truth. If the point of knowledge is not to achieve *adæquatio*, because, qua principle, we can never establish that we have done so, then it may be worth exploring whether affinity better captures what is at issue in the idea of truth. The real question here is why Adorno thinks that it does.

To shed some light on that question, I would like to examine two sides of Adorno's conception of truth. Depending on how we look at it, it will be viewed as either (1) deflationary or (2) inflationary.

(1) It seems deflationary when contrasted with the strong requirement that truth be the conformity of thought and to its object (or correspondence). This requirement is so strong, in fact, that, as Kant holds, correspondence can't be anything but a nominal definition of truth. The very idea of deriving a universal criterion for truth out of the concept of correspondence is contradictory in Kant's view, since only our experience of specific objects (which is always particular) could reveal whether our knowledge conforms to those objects.<sup>33</sup> One can read Adorno, then, as registering the excessive demand made by this conception on our cognitive faculties and proposing instead an understanding of truth that, in his view, would be closer to our experience of it. If human knowledge proceeds through the production of relations of similarity to the objects we seek to know, then it makes sense that we wouldn't require a universal criterion for the truth of our

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Pippin's *Hegel's Idealism: The Satisfaction of Self-Consciousness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

<sup>33</sup> See his Introduction to the Transcendental Logic (*Critique of Pure Reason*, A 58-59/B 82-83).

knowledge. Our ability to assess similarities (even nonsensuous ones) enables us to determine whether and to what extent we succeed in producing the required relations of similarity.

Drawing a parallel with Hegel's discussion of the criterion of knowledge in the introduction to the *Phenomenology of Spirit* is enlightening here. In short, Hegel contends that we needn't look beyond consciousness itself to find a criterion for knowledge: consciousness *is* this criterion. To determine whether we accurately conceive of something, all that is available to us is the object, on the one hand, and our understanding of it, on the other. To test the accuracy of our conceptions, what is required is that we measure our understanding of the object against the object itself. But since we don't have any direct, unmediated access to objects, we must rely on our understanding of the objects to proceed. So we end up measuring our understanding of the object *against itself*, that is, we probe and reflect on our understanding until we can be satisfied with it.<sup>34</sup>

Now, as we know, Hegel defends that this ceaseless process of self-reflection is constitutive of consciousness. Whereas in Hegel, as Adorno notes, consciousness' constitutive striving towards a satisfactory understanding provides the momentum for the elaboration of the system,<sup>35</sup> Adorno himself emphasizes the striving. As he sees it, what drives thought is the

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<sup>34</sup> See G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller, (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 1997, §84-85, 53.

<sup>35</sup> See, amongst other passages, *Hegel: Three Studies*, 6: "Hegel... is driven by the idea that knowledge, if there is such a thing, is by its very idea total knowledge, that every one-sided judgment intends, by its very form, the absolute, and does not rest until it has been sublated in it."

experience of its own inadequacy in face of the object. Thought, he claims, “must aim beyond its target just because it never quite reaches it.”<sup>36</sup> From this standpoint, it seems that it would be our striving to get it right taken against our experience of dissatisfaction and failure that leads Adorno towards affinity. Thought must take “its own inadequacy more thoroughly into account.”<sup>37</sup> So a productive way of construing Adorno’s conception of truth might be as an attempt to make us more attentive to this inadequacy so that we better appreciate the measure of similarity and dissimilarity in thought’s relation to its object.

(2) But Adorno’s conception of truth can be also viewed as inflationary, if we consider that, as mentioned, truth as correspondence is a merely nominal, or formal, conception of truth. Indeed, from this standpoint, Adorno’s own conception appears to express both the limitation of truth as correspondence and the demand that truth be a more substantive concept than correspondence can ever be.

In fact, in his *Meditations on Metaphysics*, Adorno distinguishes two moments in the idea of truth: “the excess over the subject” [*Überschuß übers Subjekt*] and “the moment of truth in thingliness”<sup>38</sup> [*Wahrheitsmoment am Dinghaften*]. However perplexing this new claim may seem, it should be clear that Adorno is not proposing that we could somehow find a way out of, or beyond, the subject’s conceptual means in order that we may come to reach the thing itself, as it were. In

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<sup>36</sup> *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. E.F.N. Jephcott, (New York: Verso, 2005), § 82, 127; GS 4, 144.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> *Negative Dialectics*, 385 (translation altered); GS 6, 368.

fact, Adorno is adamant that we must strive “through the concept to reach beyond the concept [*über den Begriff durch den Begriff hinauszugelangen*].”<sup>39</sup> Behind his colorful prose, there simply lies Adorno’s attempt at revealing what is at issue in our deep-seated assumptions about truth and working out, in light of this, a more consistent understanding of how it is possible to meaningfully engage with the objects we seek to know. Our understanding of truth must move between the two poles, he explains, for “[t]here would be no more idea of truth without the subject who must wrest itself from appearance [*Schein*] than without that which isn’t subject and on which truth is modeled.”<sup>40</sup> So recognizing thought’s own shortcomings and striving to overcome them are in his view two sides of the same coin.

As outlined, Adorno’s conception of truth testifies to his awareness of the *normative dimension* of our claims to truth and, even more so, of our understanding of truth. This means that what we hold truth to be is defining not only for the kind of epistemic practices we can recognize as legitimate ones, but also for ones we will view as more rigorous, thorough and substantive—in a word: objective. What I take Adorno to be saying is that a conception of truth is pointless unless it enables us to understand how to better equip and orient our epistemic practices so that they may be more objective. If, as he stresses, knowledge is an activity, one that, moreover, unfolds amidst a complex set of well-defined epistemic practices, then our ability to reach objects depends as much on our understanding of how the practices we already are engaged in are defined to some extent by epistemological norms (albeit

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<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 15 (translation altered); GS 6, 26.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 385 (translation altered); GS 6, 368.

implicit ones) as on the understanding of what is required for their reshaping to actually occur. So far from expressing his relinquishment of any substantial claims to truth, Adorno's conception of truth as affinity means to take us a few steps towards the reevaluation of important features of our epistemic practices.

To return to the puzzle, now, how does mimesis enable us to understand the affinity between the knower and the known? On the reading I have been proposing, Adorno doesn't mean that our knowledge of object is made possible by some prior affinity between the knower and the known. Nor does he claim to have found a way of bridging an unbridgeable gap. Instead, what he means is that *the point of knowledge is to create the affinity between the subject and its object*. If my reading is accurate, we should look for how this affinity is produced in the activity of the subject as it threads a web of mimemes, which leads me to my last puzzle.

### III. The Epistemic Puzzle

I present that puzzle as an epistemic one because it directly concerns the inner workings of mimesis as a moment of knowledge. As such, the idea that knowledge has a mimetic moment appears quite puzzling, particularly if by "mimetic moment" we understand, as I have thus far, the production of a relation of selective similarity. There is something odd about the idea that our efforts to conceptualize objects rely to some extent on the production of mimemes, or to put the point in more striking terms, that knowing objects somehow requires that we behave imitatively. Yet Adorno holds that "[c]onsciousness knows of its other as much as it resembles

that other; it does not know its other by crossing itself out along with resemblance."<sup>41</sup>

To establish the plausibility of Adorno's view and work out what I take to be at issue in this third puzzle, I want to briefly examine Dreyfus' six-stage theory of learning. A core contention of Dreyfus is that immersion is the key to one's progression towards the higher stages of learning. For my purpose, the point is that what Dreyfus terms immersion is otherwise referred to as imitative learning. To be sure, he uses both characterizations.<sup>42</sup> Dreyfus' theory of learning draws on his work on Heidegger's existential analysis of Dasein's everydayness (and Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological description of embodiment, though I will focus on his Heidegger interpretation).

On Heidegger's analysis, our primary mode of being isn't that of a detached self, occupied with finding out what things truly are or deliberating on the reasons for her actions. Instead, Heidegger claims that we are always already immersed in a world. World is the operative term for the basic frame of meaningfulness in which the things we encounter are disclosed to us. Indeed, according to him, in our everyday dealings the meaning of what we encounter is disclosed from within the whole set of projects and activities we are engaged in. As a

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<sup>41</sup> *Negative Dialectics*, 269 (translation altered); GS 6,267.

<sup>42</sup> Dreyfus discusses his theory in various essays. I mainly rely on the version of that theory he presents in *On the Internet* 2ed., (New York: Routledge, 2009), chap. 2, where he adds a sixth stage (mastery) to the previous list of five (novice, advanced beginner, competence, proficiency, and expertise). Compare for instance "From Socrates to Expert Systems: The Limits of Calculative Rationality" (1985), in: *Skillful Coping: Essays on the Phenomenology of Everyday Perception and Action*, ed. Mark A. Wrathall, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 25-46.

result, the things we come upon are not objects in the sense of what is offered to the consideration of a subject, but so many tools seamlessly integrated in our activities. For example, it is what we use the hammer for in our projects that discloses the meaning of the thing we encounter as a hammer. Moreover, it is in this mode of being engaged in projects and activities that we develop the aptitudes and dispositions—“skills” in Dreyfus’ terminology—that allow us to smoothly transition from one context to next and so to move across our everyday world. To describe our everyday situated engagement in activities Dreyfus coins the phrase *skillful coping*.

Now, as we go about our daily business, our situated understanding remains for the most part implicit. For skillful coping to effectively go on, in Dreyfus’ sense, the activities we are engaged in, the skills they require and the specifics of what we encounter in the course of those activities needn’t be made explicit, much less articulated in reasons. If, at any moment, one aspect or another of our activities requires a more thorough scrutiny, it is from our very situatedness that it will be elicited and examined. As Dreyfus sees it, this doesn’t preclude our taking some distance from our actual engagement and to reflect in a more detached manner at the nature of our activities, challenges we face, and possible solutions to these challenges. But in keeping with Heidegger’s analysis, he insists that the adoption of the detached stance required to both theoretically engage with objects and to deliberate on the reasons and justifications for our actions (which has received so much philosophical attention) is a derived mode of engagement in the world. It is achieved through a modification of the primary mode of skillful coping, characterized by a pre- or nonconceptual understanding, as opposed to the conceptual understanding of our various modes of theorizing.

This conclusion allows Dreyfus to highlight what he views as a fundamental discrepancy in our understanding of the learning process. In his mind, the stress that has been put on the appropriation of concepts and rules stands in direct opposition to the way we actually learn. From novice (first stage) to advanced beginner (second stage), teaching explicit rules and specific tokens of information makes a good deal of sense because they provide a baseline upon which further learning becomes possible. But as we advance towards the higher stages of learning, breaking down the knowledge and skills to be acquired into explicit rules and information transmissible from teacher to pupil grows increasingly burdensome and ineffective. Dreyfus locates the threshold of higher learning somewhere between competence and proficiency (respectively, the third and fourth stages), as the pupil’s progression demands an increasing level of personal commitment and of direct involvement with her teacher. As he sees it, the competent learner is soon confronted with an overwhelming quantity of information to sieve through and orientations to choose from. This forces her to make strategic decisions in approaching problems. Doing so entails taking risks and facing the outcome of her decisions, which in turn means dealing with the emotional dimension of the process. The experience of fear, pressure, and anxiety, the disappointment of failure and the satisfaction of success thus become a crucial part of the learning process. Emulation of the teacher and retroaction are necessary to learning how to make the right decisions and to deal with their consequences.

As we draw near expertise (fifth stage), Dreyfus contends, the rules and patterns to be appropriated become so complex and the information to be integrated so tightly interwoven with these patterns that the only way forward is through

immersion into these intricate patterns as they take shape in the practice of the master (sixth stage). Whatever the field of study, expert learners take on the role of apprentices whose close proximity to their master allows for just this kind of immersion into her *style*—Dreyfus’ term for the whole set of perspectives, intuitive responses, and accompanying actions that define the practice of the master. “Even where the subject matter is purely theoretical”, Dreyfus contends, “apprenticeship is necessary.”<sup>43</sup> Whether in carpentry or in research, the aim of apprenticeship is to develop a *sense* of what the appropriate response to a complex problem is, without having to justify this response with reasons. On Dreyfus’ view, the ability to intuitively find the appropriate way of coping is the mark of expertise and mastery alike—mastery chiefly differs in the wealth and originality of the perspectives and accompanying actions intuitively available to the master.

I want to draw on Dreyfus’ analysis to make two points concerning Adorno’s understanding of the role of mimesis in our epistemic practices. My first point is that, on Adorno’s account, the claims that Dreyfus formulates as regards higher learning apply to any cognitive practice. Indeed, Dreyfus’ analysis suggests, against the prevailing view, that the higher cognitive functions whose exercise we commonly associate with expertise and mastery are in fact required precisely for the successful immersion into patterns, whose complexity far exceeds what our reflexive ability can effectively process.<sup>44</sup> In fact, it seems that the more complex and sophisticated the

skills, the more we need to rely on immersive processes to appropriate them. This point needn’t be restricted to theoretical complexity, though it appears particularly clear in the case of the appropriation of intellectual and scientific skills. Dreyfus suggests that, “in the sciences, postdoctoral students work in the laboratory of a successful scientist to learn *how their disembodied, theoretical understanding can be brought to bear on the real world*. By imitating the master, they learn abilities for which there are no rules, such as how long to persist when the work does not seem to be going well, just how much precision should be sought in each different kind of research situation, and so forth. In order to bring theory into relation with practice, this sort of apprenticeship turns out to be essential.”<sup>45</sup> By contrast, while Adorno thinks that the emulation of experienced researchers and the immersion into their practices is indeed necessary for young researchers to learn how their previously acquired theoretical knowledge can “bear on the real world”, he also thinks that they are necessary to acquire any theoretical knowledge in the first instance.<sup>46</sup> Regardless of how one may view one’s theoretical practices, in Adorno’s view, they are, in a way or another, *already embodied*, that is, they belong to an existing set of more or less well-defined intellectual or scientific practices. This means that one cannot display the theoretical knowledge without having appropriated, through immersion, the patterns that support this knowledge. What is more, it is not clear that one could ever achieve this kind of immersion without the support of a

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<sup>43</sup> Dreyfus, *On the Internet*, 38.

<sup>44</sup> Compare Benjamin’s statement: “There is perhaps not a single one of [man’s] higher functions in which his mimetic faculty does not play a decisive role” (“On the Mimetic Faculty”, 720).

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<sup>45</sup> Dreyfus, *On the Internet*, 38 (my emphasis).

<sup>46</sup> It strikes me as odd that, given his own views on learning, Dreyfus doesn’t take this further step. One reason for this might be that doing so would force him to attenuate his views on the essentially non-conceptual, intuitive character of the understanding at play in the expert’s and the master’s practices. I discuss the question in what follows.



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substantial capacity for abstraction and formalization and of at least some level of conceptual imagination.

Adorno's insight into the "unredeemable moment of mimesis in all knowledge"<sup>47</sup> should, I take it, be read along the same lines. Indeed, for Adorno, the real issue isn't whether or not our cognitive practices do rely on imitative processes, but that in the course of the enlightenment we have grown oblivious to the fact that they do. As I see it, the assumption that Dreyfus debunks as the myth of the mental, namely that "all intelligibility, even perception and skillful coping, *must be, at least implicitly, conceptual*,"<sup>48</sup> is roughly equivalent to what Adorno understands as the priority of the subject (or identity thinking) in his broadly construed understanding of idealism. Adorno, too, holds that this assumption in fact blinds us to the role that our imitative activity invariably plays in our cognitive practices.

That said, the line separating Dreyfus' account from Adorno's is perhaps still sharper than I have drawn it so far—which leads me to my second point. Contrary to Dreyfus (and Heidegger), Adorno does not propose that we recognize our reliance on immersive processes in order that we may better attune to them. Instead, he thinks that the fact that we have grown oblivious to this reliance is highly problematic since it prevents us from recognizing the kind of self-reflection necessary to make the mimetic component of our cognitive practices explicit and to reveal defining features of the frames

of intelligibility that we appropriate by immersion, and in which our cognitive practices unfold. In other words, for Adorno, *the problem is our inability to acknowledge our reliance on immersion*.

O'Connor compellingly argues that while Dreyfus makes a strong case for a more embodied understanding of thought and agency, his claim that that our familiar ways of engaging in practices is non-conceptual throughout introduces a separation between the space of action and the space of reason that is misleading.<sup>49</sup> I would add that, from Adorno's standpoint, Dreyfus's claim appears both descriptively and normatively misleading. First, descriptively: Of course, if we maintain a view of our conceptual practices as proceeding from a detached, disembodied standpoint, then the notion that articulated reasons, explicit rules and most conceptual matters are absent from our everyday practices makes a good deal of sense. But once we renounce this view, and resituate our conceptual practices in the social space in which they unfold, it becomes, perhaps, easier to acknowledge, as Adorno does, that these practices are, if not entirely construable in conceptual terms, then at least to an important degree conceptually layered. So Adorno's claim isn't that our everyday practices are non-conceptual, but that they are far from being *just* conceptual. (The point has a tremendous critical significance for Adorno who strives to reveal aspects of the non-conceptual that are defining for our practices but that we are blind to.) Second, Dreyfus' claim also appears normatively misleading: Of course, from his standpoint, Adorno's insistence may well amount to reintroducing a cognitivist bias in our

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<sup>47</sup> *Negative Dialectics*, 150; GS 6, 153.

<sup>48</sup> Dreyfus, "Overcoming the Myth of the Mental: How Philosophers Can Profit from the Phenomenology of Everyday Expertise" (2005), in *Skillful Coping: Essays on the Phenomenology of Everyday Perception and Action*, ed. Mark A. Wrathall, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 110.

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<sup>49</sup> See Brian O'Connor, "The Phenomenology of Everyday Expertise and the Emancipatory Interest," *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 39, no. 9 (2013): 930.

understanding of human practices. In Adorno's view, however, the fact that no comprehensive reconstruction of the expert's practices (in terms of explicit rules, justified reasons and tokens of knowledge) can be achieved in no way implies that experts shouldn't strive to articulate their knowledge and to become more self-conscious of why their take on complex issues is and should be regarded as the appropriate one.<sup>50</sup> Moreover, if it is true that, *through immersion*, "children begin to learn to be experts in their culture's practices from the moment they come into the world,"<sup>51</sup> as Dreyfus suggests, then short of promoting more reflexive modes of engagement (some indeed implying a more theoretical stance, though not necessarily a detached one), a great deal of the conceptual

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<sup>50</sup> O'Connor's discussion of Dreyfus' example of the master chess player is interesting in that regard. Dreyfus views the prowess of grandmasters in bullet games as a clear indication that their command of the game really does rely on the immense array of perspectives intuitively available to them. As O'Connor notes, however, grandmasters also play tournament games where, time providing, they show much more circumspection and spend considerable energy in carefully analyzing their moves (at least in the later stage of the game), which leads him to propose that "it is not a mark of expertise that it is always absorbed and non-deliberative" ("The Phenomenology of Everyday Expertise and the Emancipatory Interest," 929). To be fair, Dreyfus admits of deliberation in the grandmaster's chess practices, as in the practice of any master, for that matter. In fact, he distinguishes two kinds of deliberation the master engages in, none of which, in his view, requires the adoption of a detached stance, quite the contrary. On the one hand, the master can consciously decide to override conventional expertise and to improve his skill by looking "for opportunities to excel that are invisible to experts" (*On the Internet*, 41). On the other hand, she can reflect on her response to novel situations and deliberate as to what would have been a better course of action. In both cases, what Dreyfus refers to as deliberation is prompted by the depth of the master's engagement in his practice and aims at enhancing the range of intuitive perspectives at her disposal. Perhaps the problem here has to do with how one interprets what it means for a practice to be conceptual, or conceptually informed. O'Connor's criticism suggests that Dreyfus holds on to a narrowly-defined understanding of conceptuality, one that Adorno would certainly object to.

<sup>51</sup>Dreyfus, *On the Internet*, 44.

efforts that have gone into the elaboration of some of the defining practices that characterize our culture would be left unexamined. In addition, because of the way in which these practices are appropriated, we risk growing even blinder to some assumptions that have shaped these practices, as they come to be seamlessly integrated into the very fabric of these practices and become, thereby, unavailable to scrutiny. Assumptions of this sort include, Adorno thinks, the assumption that modern rational practices have nothing to do with mimesis.

#### IV. Concluding Remarks

On my reading, Adorno's insistence on the mimetic moment of human rationality isn't meant to promote more mimetic modes of behavior and cognitive activity, but an awareness of the extent to which our practices already rely on imitative processes, even in spheres we tend to regard as embodying the strongest claims to the contrary.

One could object that even after we dismiss the assumptions grouped under the myth of the mental, and recognize, in line with Dreyfus' analysis, that immersion is an integral part of sophisticated cognitive practices, Adorno's claim that mimesis is a key component of any knowledge remains contentious. Arguably, Dreyfus's analysis allows us to make sense of the paradoxical idea that our higher cognitive functions are required for the kind of immersive processes involved in the development of complex skills, in the way I have indicated, but one could contend that his focus remains on skills (knowing-how), and not so much on knowledge per se (knowing-that). So how does drawing on his views enable us to account for Adorno's claim that consciousness knows as much

of an object as it makes itself similar to it? Challenges of this kind are likely to abound until we reach clearer insights into precisely how Adorno thinks our mimetic abilities play out in knowledge (including self-knowledge). In that regard, Adorno's elliptic claims persistently frustrate our demands for clarification. Nevertheless, I would like to sketch out an answer to this challenge by distinguishing three aspects in Adorno's reflection.

First, Adorno seeks to reveal the immersive processes involved in our appropriation of cognitive practices at large. The second aspect consists in showing, against the epistemic self-understanding that obtains, that our conceptual activity does rely on imitative processes even when we take ourselves to be doing something diametrically opposed to mimesis—forming concepts, judging whether an object instantiates a concept, formulating propositions, making inferences, and the like. The last aspect focuses on the role of immersion in the kind of reflexive and self-reflexive conceptual practices that Adorno furthers. The first aspect is what I believe my Adornian take on Dreyfus' insights roughly enable us to make out. So I will focus here on the second and third aspects.

As regards the second aspect, the point is that our articulation and formulation of concepts relies on immersive processes similar to the ones to which Dreyfus refers regarding the appropriation of skills. Simply put, in order to conceive of something we need to focus our attention on the object at hand so as to more or less completely immerse ourselves into it. The way immersion works is through the projection of our understanding in such a way that we spontaneously produce and map out more or less broad patterns of intelligibility (a still loosely defined set of selective relations of similarity),

depending on the complexity of our object. These patterns remain inchoate until we begin working them out in conceptual terms. The formation of conceptual representations proceeds through the reflexive isolation and extraction of patches of meaning from within these patterns (as we immerse ourselves in objects). In giving stability and cohesion to these patches of meaning we reach what we refer to as conceptual representations, through which the content of such patches becomes available for scrutiny. In turn, working out conceptual representations enables us to give the same kind of stability and cohesion to the patterns of intelligibility from which these representations are first extracted. In this way, we can progressively build larger and more cohesive frames of intelligibility. The result is that we can navigate with relative ease in the frames we have created, using conceptual representations as landmarks.

According to Adorno, the focus of modern epistemology has been on whatever meaning we've already succeeded in articulating into concepts and on the cognitive processes that rely on readily available concepts. As a consequence, the immersive processes that make these further cognitive processes possible have fallen to the margin of our epistemological purview, which has made us unable to appreciate the cognitive dependency of our representations on the prior patterns produced through immersion.

The third aspect of Adorno's reflection expounds on this conclusion. He acknowledges that the bulk of our cognitive efforts aren't devoted to forming concepts. In fact, most of the time, as we engage in epistemic practices, we move in a cognitive space defined by representations we've acquired and appropriated through symbolic means. However, as long as we remain within that space and use the representations at our

disposal to fuel our cognitive activity, we limit our grasp of objects to whatever intentional content is readily available to us through them. To be sure, Adorno's point isn't that we should try to restore or recreate the elemental patterns of intelligibility out of which our concepts were first created. Instead, I take him to mean that we ought to use conceptual representations to initiate new immersive processes.<sup>52</sup> Reflection and self-reflection, as he understands them, are processes geared towards reigniting our conceptual representations, so as to make their strictly defined bounds porous again and to open up in this way patterns of meaning not otherwise available.

Two aspects of this process need to be underscored: First, this new immersion into the object is not the end point of the process. Adorno unambiguously asserts that the interpretative process he describes in terms of constellations, or trial conceptual arrangement, operates in the medium of conceptual representation. So what this kind of immersion into the object really aims at is a thorough conceptualization of the object. But he also thinks that the notion that conceptualization would amount to moving from one representation to next in chains of inferences simply doesn't capture what, on his account, our reflection-driven immersive processes enable us to do. The second aspect is yet more

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<sup>52</sup> Relying on Adorno's claim pertaining to the role of language in such immersive processes ("only as language can the like know the like" [*nur als Sprache vermag das Ähnliche das Ähnliche zu erkennen*]), *Negative Dialectics*, 56 (translation altered); GS 6, 65), Jay Bernstein proposes the following view: "[R]hetorical statements orient our attention away from the inferential commitments implied by the bald assertoric version and toward the matter of the judgment itself, they inflect the statement towards its own emphatic—experiential—content" ("Mimetic Rationality and Material Inference: Adorno and Brandom," *Revue internationale de philosophie*, 63, no. 1 (2004): 17).

striking: Clearly, the point of this process isn't simply to trigger immersive processes that would deliver new, more accurate and more substantial concepts. If my interpretation is correct, the point rather is to produce in this way what I have referred to as a mimeme of the object, but a *conceptual one*. That concepts could be used to form such mimemes is a point that is bound to remain controversial. Yet Adorno claims that "[t]he concept can only take on the affair of what it suppressed, mimesis, in that it adopts something of mimesis in its own conducts, without losing itself to it."<sup>53</sup> His trial conceptual arrangements, then, should be viewed a way of threading concepts together so as to produce a conceptual model of the object, one Adorno thinks enables us to reveal features of an object that were previously unavailable to scrutiny and, thus, to discover what that object really is about.<sup>54</sup> By all accounts, this is a tough point to sell, but I believe that interpreting Adorno in this way might help us in unlocking his unconventional views on the "mimetic essence"<sup>55</sup> of human rationality.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> *Negative Dialectics*, 14 (translation altered); GS 6, 26.

<sup>54</sup> Compare Schaeffer's claim: "when I construct a mimeme, I reach at the same time a knowledge of what I imitate: to the extent that the construction of an imitation is selective with respect to the properties of the imitated thing, it is, ipso facto, a tool of intelligence of this imitated thing." He insists: "the construction of an imitation *is* always a way of knowing the imitated thing" (*Why Fiction?*, 68).

<sup>55</sup> *Hegel: Three Studies*, 40.

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