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Peter E. Gordon, Espen Hammer, Axel Honneth

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Owen Hulatt
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Introduction

The title of this chapter, rather like Adorno’s use of the concept of ‘mimesis’ more generally, presents us with a deceptively difficult task. Put simply, it is not immediately clear what place mimesis occupies in The Dialectic of Enlightenment. This is a local example of a general problem in Adorno’s work. Everyone is very confident that mimesis is a crucial and important concept in Adorno’s philosophy, but the closer one draws to the concept the more difficult it becomes to fix precisely what it amounts to. Two simple facts help establish why this might be. First, Adorno uses the term ‘mimesis’ to signify a great many different concepts and meanings. Many of these can be harmonized; at least a few are flatly incompatible. Andreas Huyssen proposes a list of five different meanings (Huyssen 2000: 66–67); this is likely a conservative estimate. In the first instance, then, the term as used by Adorno is hardly stable in meaning.

Secondly, although mimesis is often held to be an utterly central concept, Adorno in fact uses the term remarkably sparingly. While this is a crude metric, this can be illustrated neatly by the fact that Dialectic of Enlightenment, Minima Moralia, and Negative Dialectics taken together only offer only 21 pages where the term ‘mimesis’ and its cognates directly appear, out of a combined total of 985 pages. (The posthumously published Aesthetic Theory, by contrast, offers a wealth of uses of the term.) As a consequence, different commentators offer radically different readings of the nature of mimesis, and its role in Adorno’s philosophy. We will touch on some of these readings as we go.

At least some of these difficulties emerge because mimesis is, for Adorno, a historical concept. By this I mean that Adorno takes it that mimesis has a history of development, receiving different expressions, and being embedded in and responsive to different structures, at different points in human history. Mimesis has different meaning and exhibits different behaviour at different points in its development. To get clear on the meaning of this concept more broadly, then, we are obliged to deliver a narrative, rather than a static definition. We are required to acquire a grasp of what it is that mimesis does, and how it mixes (or refuses to mix) with other, equally historical, phenomena.

The place of mimesis in Dialectic of Enlightenment is, in this sense, doubly historical. It represents perhaps the first significant appearance of Adorno beginning to make use of a concept which rarely if ever received a fully settled and successful definition or account across Adorno’s work – the beginning of the history of Adorno’s attempt to employ and
clarify this concept. It also represents Adorno’s most concentrated attempt to give the history of mimesis, and the history of its role in human cognition. For these reasons, despite the elusiveness and complexity of the status of mimesis in Adorno’s work overall and in the Dialectic in particular, the Dialectic is the best place to begin in starting to arrive at a proper understanding of what mimesis’ function is in Adorno’s work, and how it relates to Adorno’s other central concerns.

Mimesis as the Non-Origin of Human History

Adorno’s treatment of mimesis in the Dialectic is oblique; mimesis is rarely invoked by name, and the discussion delivered is intermixed with borrowings from a number of anthropological and quasi-anthropological sources, most importantly Hubert and Mauss’ paper ‘Esquisse d’une Théorie générale de la Magie’ (incorrectly cited under the shortened title ‘Théorie générale de la Magie’ by Adorno and Horkheimer), James George Frazer’s The Golden Bough, Sigmund Freud’s Totem and Taboo (although Beyond the Pleasure Principle also has a significant role, as we will see), and Roger Caillois’ papers ‘La Mante Religieuse’ and ‘Mimétisme et psychasthénie légendaire’. The emphasis on anthropology in connection with this concept is no coincidence. For Adorno and Horkheimer, mimesis is an intrinsic, likely organic, capacity – and the origins of human culture in general, and instrumental reason in particular, cannot be comprehended apart from it. This might imply that mimesis is a structured tendency – like abstraction or reason – which has an internal movement towards complexity and differentiation. This would be incorrect. While mimesis is crucial for comprehending the origin of rationality, instrumental reason, and human accomplishment more generally, it is not itself that origin; mimesis, by itself, is not the source of human accomplishment. Rather, it is against mimesis, and through conflict with mimesis that these achievements (and harms) were made possible. To grasp why this might be, we need to look again at how Adorno (with Horkheimer; but for economy I shall refer to Adorno alone for the remainder of this piece) makes use of these anthropological resources.

The majority of the attempts to cash out and define mimesis in the Dialectic come through quotation and reuse of other author’s remarks. One particularly stark example of this comes with the citation of Hubert and Mauss’ definition of ‘sympathy’ (which Adorno and Horkheimer take to be a cognate of mimesis) in ‘Esquisse d’un Théorie générale de la Magie’,

L’un est la tout, tout est dans l’un, la nature triomphe de la nature.

(Hubert and Mauss 1902–1903)

What is here being described, in the course of an account of ‘sympathetic magic’, is an absorption of the individual into and by the environment; a breaking down of the boundaries between the particular and the universal. This melding, or assimilation, is held to be the essence of mimetic behaviour. This is curious enough – and we will return to this notion presently. What we should here note is that mimetic behaviour is not governed by concepts or abstraction – it is rather a way of merging with nature, with the agent’s external environment. This is accordingly an epistemic relationship which involves complete openness to particulars, without any use of conceptual intermediaries.

Conventional experience, for Adorno, is of course entirely governed by conceptual intermediaries. On Adorno’s view, we always relate to particulars primarily by placing them under concepts. Accordingly, we experience (and try to know) the world primarily through concepts. This is a source of regret for Adorno, who is convinced that this causes us to misconstrue the world. Our concepts are imperfectly calibrated, and so do not capture all of the properties of the objects they apply to. This means we only know objects incompletely,
missing those ‘non-identical’ features which do not show up under the conceptual categories applied to them. As concepts for Adorno also do double duty, making possible the structure and texture of both our knowledge and our experience, this means that we are also increasingly cut-off from full experience of the world as it really is. For these reasons, we might think that raw mimesis is a salutary corrective to conventional experience – that we should seek to revert to a kind of preconceptual mimetic openness. The mimetic state, then, would have a kind of Edenic promise – a pre-Fall way of relating to objects which does not misconstrue or distort them. Our error, on this reading, would be taking up instrumental rationality; the solution would be a valorization of mimesis.

But all of this is false. It should not be ignored that raw mimesis (by which I mean mimesis as it first appeared, before the generation of reason) is understood by Adorno to be a threat – a counterproductive and damaging form of experience and knowledge. This claim appears in two key places: one clear, the other requiring some exposition. The first appears fairly early in the Dialectic:

For civilization, purely natural existence, both animal and vegetative, was the absolute danger. Mimetic, mythical, and metaphysical forms of behaviour were successively regarded as stages of world history which had been left behind, and the idea of reverting to them held the terror that the self would be changed back into the mere nature from which it had extricated itself with unspeakable exertions and which for that reason filled it with unspeakable dread.

(Adorno and Horkheimer 2002: 24)

The link drawn here between mimesis and ‘purely natural existence’ is notable. Note also that of the ‘successively regarded’ stages of world history, mimesis appears first. Note further that civilization had to ‘extricate’ itself out of mimesis; raw mimesis is a state to which civilization is opposed, and indeed one which is regarded with dread. Of course, here we are being told that ‘for civilization’ any such reversion is loaded with dread; this leaves open the possibility that Adorno held that civilization is mistaken in this position. We will now close this possibility.

Near the close of the Dialectic, a surprising link is offered between mimesis and criminality:

[Criminals] represented a tendency deeply inherent in living things, the overcoming of which is the mark of all development: the tendency to lose oneself in one’s surroundings instead of actively engaging with them, the inclination to let oneself go, to lapse back into nature. Freud called this the death impulse, Caillois' le mimétisme.

(Adorno and Horkheimer 2002: 189)

This comes embedded in a broader discussion of shifting notions of criminality. What is of interest here is the link between a ‘tendency to lose oneself in one’s surroundings’ with counter-civilized behaviour (criminality) and, importantly, Freud’s notion of the death drive. Equally important is the fact that mimesis appears through a mention of Roger Caillois’ notion of mimesis (‘le mimétisme’).

Freud’s death drive is an organic propensity towards a reversion into a primitive unity with the world. For Freud, all instinct operates through a drive towards repetition (Freud 2001: 36). The death drive, in particular, seeks to repeat not an event in the life of an organism, but the state from which organisms emerge; namely, lifeless matter on our hypothesis the ego-instincts arise from the coming to life of inanimate material and seek to restore the inanimate state.

(Freud 2001: 44)
The death drive is a drive towards the absence of action, and the disappearance of the boundaries between oneself and the material world. The death drive (which Adorno is here claiming stands in for mimesis more generally) is a dangerous part of our mental economy, which stands opposed to complexity, discipline, and rationality. Indulging it in a direct, unsublimated way leads not only to asocial behaviour but ultimately to the absence of reason and self-destruction.

Adorno reviewed a collection of Roger Caillois’ essays – *La Mante Religieuse: Recherche sur la nature et la signification du mythe* – in issue 7 of the Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung. And the reference to Caillois above in the Dialectic demonstrates that Adorno takes Caillois’ account of mimesis to be cognate with his own. Caillois has had a deeper influence on Adorno then perhaps has been hitherto appreciated. I pursue this theme in greater depth elsewhere (see Hulatt 2016c), but we can here remark on some of the important connections which help to further clarify Adorno’s account.

Like Freud, Caillois understands mimesis to be a tendency which runs counter to the well-being of organisms. In *Mimétisme et psychasthénie légendaire*, he writes,

> [We are prevented] from viewing mimicry as a defensive reaction [due to its inefficacy]… It seems we must therefore conclude with Cuénot that this is an ‘epi-phenomenon,’ whose ‘usefulness as a form of defense appears to be nil’… We are therefore dealing with a luxury and even with a dangerous luxury, as it does occur that mimcry makes the mimetic creature’s condition deteriorate.

(Caillois 2003: 97)

Mimesis, then, is not explicable in terms of survival value. In common with Freud’s account of the death drive – hence the parallel drawn by Adorno – mimesis in fact serves as a recurrent instinct or drive which is incompatible with and hostile to self-preservation:

> [My account] simply suggests that alongside the instinct of self-preservation that somehow attracts being towards life, there proves to be a very wide-spread *instinct d’abandon* attracting them towards a kind of diminished existence.

(Caillois 2003: 102)

Adorno makes direct reference to both of these accounts – Freud’s and Caillois’ – in order to clarify and disambiguate the core nature of raw, unalloyed mimesis. From this, we can infer that Adorno’s view is that mimesis, in and of itself, is intrinsically a dangerous state, not desirable for its own sake. And so raw, unalloyed mimesis is not a corrective to reason, nor is it a state we should seek to recapture.

**Mimesis and Self-Preservation**

The *Dialectic* is a narrative about the emergence of human culture, rationality, and instrumental reason. The account of mimesis we have discovered above shows that mimesis is an intrinsic drive, which produces nothing. It drives the organism which possesses it into an open, immersive relationship with its environment, and seeks to sink into that environment. It produces passivity, and a complete, unmediated openness to objects.

This explains my remark above that mimesis plays a role in the origin of human culture and rationality, but is not that origin itself. Mimesis, by itself, is not a source of increasing complexity in behaviour, nor of increasing finesse in our grasp of and relation to the world. Its chief virtue – complete openness to objects, without conceptual mediation – is completely undercut by its hostility to the very flourishing and cognition of the organism it is
found in. Nothing proceeds from mimesis – and so we cannot (as has been attempted – see Huhn 1997: 250; Jameson 2007: 161) see Adorno’s account as deriving human history from mimesis by itself.

This then raises the question of what the origin of this human history in fact is. Adorno traces a genealogy of instrumental reason, as first emerging out of sympathetic magic and sacrifice, and then becoming progressively more refined until the procedures of abstraction implicit in magic become dominant, to the extent that instrumental reason – together with its chief drawback, the occlusion of the ‘non-identical’ – is produced. If this does not proceed from the intrinsic drive of mimesis, where does it proceed from?

You will recall that neither Freud nor Caillois posited mimesis (or its alleged cognate, the death drive) as the only governing principle of the human organism. For Caillois (on whom I will focus), for example, mimesis was made coeval with ‘an instinct of self-preservation’, to which it was opposed. We find the same view in the Dialectic, where self-preservation is found to be ‘a natural drive like other impulses’ (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002: 72). While we have sparing reference to mimesis and mimetic behaviour, far greater emphasis is laid on the core role of a drive towards self-preservation:

> The system which enlightenment aims for is the form of knowledge which most ably deals with the facts, most effectively assists the subject in mastering nature. The system’s principles are those of self-preservation… reason is the agency of calculating thought, which arranges the world for the purposes of self-preservation and recognizes no function other than that of working on the object as mere sense material in order to make it the material of subjugation.

(Adorno and Horkheimer 2002: 65)

Indeed, self-preservation is allotted the central role in the production of the unified, rational self:

> The self wrests itself from dissolution in blind nature, whose claims are constantly reasserted by sacrifice. But it still remains trapped in the context of the natural, one living thing seeking to overcome another. Bargaining one’s way out of sacrifice by means of self-preserving rationality is a form of exchange no less than was sacrifice itself. The identical, enduring self which springs from the conquest of sacrifice is itself the product of a hard, petrified sacrificial ritual in which the human being, by opposing its consciousness to its natural context, celebrates itself.

(Adorno and Horkheimer 2002: 42)

This is the origin of human culture, not mimesis. It is the playing out of self-preservation, and self-preservation’s demands, which underwrites Adorno’s narrative of the production of rationality – its narrative of the movement out of mimesis, into magic, and then forward again into instrumental reason.

This might suggest that mimesis is simply a victim in this narrative; that Adorno’s account in the Dialectic gives mention to mimesis only as an illustration of a state and tendency which was overthrown entirely. But this would be too quick. Mimesis, as was mentioned, has a great many functions in Adorno’s work, and also has a history of its own. What we have examined so far is raw mimesis – mimesis as an unalloyed state and mode of relating to the world. Adorno’s narrative in the Dialectic is one of, initially, cooperation and then struggle between the twin drives of mimesis and self-preservation. Their interrelation, and the nature of mimesis, accordingly requires a more detailed account, to which we now turn.
Mimesis and Magic

Caillois, in ‘Mimétisme et psychasthénie légendaire’, notes of mimesis that

Indeed, certain [mimetic] potentialities appear to subsist in man that strangely correspond to these phenomena [of mimesis in animals running counter to self-preservation]. Even setting aside the issue of totemism, which it would be far too venturesome to address from this angle, there still remains the vast domain of mimetic magic according to which like produces like, and which is more or less the basis of all incantatory practice. It would be useless to rehearse every fact at this point; they have been sorted and classified in the classic works of Tylor, Hubert and Mauss, and Frazer... The crucial point is that ‘primitive’ man still has an urgent inclination to imitate, coupled with a belief in the efficacy of this imitation. Such an inclination remains quite strong in ‘civilized’ man, for it persists as one of the two processes whereby his thought pursues its course when left to itself.

(Caillois 2003: 97–98)

We will return to this closing thought from Caillois, about the modern recrudescence of mimetic thought where people’s thought is ‘left to itself’, in the context of Adorno’s account of modern art. But what is presently important is Caillois’ claim that mimesis is able to find expression in magic, a complex and quasi-conceptual practice based on associations drawn between objects, ideas, and magical practices. This finds similar expression in Frazer’s Golden Bough, to which Adorno approvingly refers in Philosophy of the New Music (Adorno 2007: xiii, 107). Frazer’s account of sympathetic magic is as follows:

For the same principles which the magician applies in the practice of his art are implicitly believed by him to regulate the operations of inanimate nature; in other words, he tacitly assumes that the Laws of Similarity and Contact are of universal application and are not limited to human actions. In short, magic is a spurious system of natural law as well as a fallacious guide of conduct; it is a false science as well as an abortive art.

(Frazer 1963: 11)

In the tight collection of sources on which Adorno is drawing – which are partly listed by Caillois above – magic is seen as not an irrational practice, but in fact a ‘false science’ comprised of an unwieldy conglomeration of mimetic and rational elements.

For Adorno and Horkheimer, likewise, magic is a species not of irrationality, but of ‘cunning’ (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002: 40–42). This ‘cunning’ is partially continuous with rationality, and indeed rationality is held to emerge from magic (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002: 42–43). However, together with this ‘cunning’, magic also sees a modified form of mimetic comportment. The assimilative behaviour of raw mimesis has been conjoined to the demands of self-preservation; the magician imitates the natural world not in order to sink into it, but rather in order to control it. Here, then, mimesis and magic are intermingled, and reciprocally influence each other. Mimesis is changed by its shifting relationship to the growing supremacy of self-preservation, and mimesis in turn affects the nature of the expression of self-preservation. Magic represents an amalgam of the two dominant drives in the human organism, as Adorno understands them in the Dialectic. Mimesis is suborned by self-preservation and used to help satisfy its demands. Self-preservation requires a fixed and structured epistemic relationship to the world (in seeing the world as comprised of identifiable, persistent objects), and a fixed and structured practical relationship to the world (in
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seeing these objects as manipulable and comprehensible). These two demands, which are mutually reinforcing, are incompatible with the kind of assimilatory practices which raw mimesis demands; they rather require the generation of universals, of concepts, which can divide up (rather than mimetically merge with) the world, structuring it into collections of object-types and causal laws which govern those types. Being furnished with these kinds of distinctions and these kinds of explanatory laws, consciousness is then in a position to control its environment and to predict its behaviour. Magic goes some way towards realizing this demand of self-preservation, by offering consciousness a means of controlling the natural environment through magical practices like sacrifice and ritual. Adorno, like Frazer, sees this as a ‘spurious system of natural law’:

What is done [by the shaman] to the spear, the hair, the name of the enemy, is also to befall his person; the sacrificial animal is slain in place of the god. The substitution which takes place in sacrifice marks a step towards discursive logic. […] Magic like science is concerned with ends, but it pursues them through mimesis, not through an increasing distance from the object.

(Adorno and Horkheimer 2002: 6–7)

Its aims are not entirely distinct from the natural sciences, but it goes astray by believing that natural processes can be controlled through the imitative use of sympathetic magic.

Magic, then, is an epistemic and practical form of relating to the world which is driven by self-preservation, but which seeks to make use of mimetic activity in order to realize its ends. It is a coalition between the two dominant drives of human consciousness – the mimetic attempt to fuse with the world and the self-preserving attempt to divide the world into predictable and identifiable object-types and laws. This coalition, however, proves unstable. The rational elements of magical practice increasingly come to dominate, with the consequence that magic is overthrown, and the lineaments of modern, instrumental reason emerge at this very early stage in the history of human culture. Mimesis and reason at this point become substantially disentangled.

What is the cause of this? Here, we return our attention to Caillois’ original account, on which Adorno draws, of the fundamental antagonism between mimesis and self-preservation. The former is essentially passive and unstructured, engendering a completely unmediated submergence into nature which Adorno elsewhere terms a state of ‘terror’ (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002: 10–11; for an explanation of this identification of the mimetic state with ‘terror’, see Hulatt 2016a, Chapter 1). Self-preservation, by contrast, firmly delineates the boundaries between the self and the external world, and through abstraction produces concepts and laws which make this environment comprehensible and controllable (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002: 31). Magic contains the beginnings of abstraction, and mimesis is tolerated by self-preservation only insofar as it serves the self-preservation of the human organism. With an intensification of abstraction, yet more sophisticated, and more accurate, forms of control than magic are made possible. Mimesis is antagonistic towards these newer forms of abstraction; it represents a continual tendency towards the weakening of the boundary between the self and the external world, and a continual drive to undermine and weaken the forces of abstraction. Once it becomes apparent that abstraction can be intensified without the use of mimesis, mimesis loses its function. Accordingly, Adorno sees modern reason as entirely free of any explicit use of mimesis. Indeed, he now sees instrumental reason as ‘repressing’ mimesis wherever it is found (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002: 44).

Mimesis’ time as a central motor of the majority of human endeavour is accordingly brief. From Adorno’s account of the ‘originary terror’ of mankind, it would seem that mimesis is one of, if not the dominant, original means of relating to the world. Bereft of any conceptual
distinctions – aiming at the kind of fusion Freud describes in his ‘death drive’ – raw mimesis is a conceptually ungoverned state. Adorno’s remarks on the terror of childhood, and its links with the origins of human culture (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002: 26), give cause to think that raw mimesis would be the kind of undifferentiated, ‘blooming, buzzing confusion’ which William James attributed to the experience of infants (James 1950: 488). Given that magic demonstrates the far superior ability of abstraction to satisfy self-preservation’s desiderata, it is no surprise that mimesis is discarded as a workable approach to the epistemic and practical demands of consciousness, and that mimesis is replaced with a fully abstract, instrumentalized version of reason.

This very overthrow of mimesis is not an unqualified victory, for Adorno. Adorno takes it to be the case that while the world may not be capturable through raw mimesis, it is not capturable through fully abstract reason, either. Adorno understands concepts to operate through subsumption; to apply a concept to an object is to be committed to the claim (no matter how implicitly) that the object and concept reciprocally satisfy each other. To claim that a blade of grass is green is to assert that it satisfies the abstract property of greenness, an abstract property which is equally satisfied by other green objects. The dominant problem, for Adorno, is that the world simply does not match up with the schematic structure of our concepts; it contains irreducibly particular properties which concepts cannot capture. A further problem is that, in Adorno’s view, such concept use contains a confidence in the ahistoricality of facts; that the objects described by concepts (particularly thick concepts like ‘justice’, ‘history’, or indeed ‘truth’) will always exhibit the same properties, and hence always satisfy concepts in the same way. Adorno, however, believes that the world demonstrates a high level of historical mutability in many areas. Those objects and practices which satisfy the concept ‘just’, ‘beautiful’, or ‘ethically mandatory’ at time $t^1$ will in all likelihood fail to satisfy them at time $t^{10}$. As instrumental reason has relinquished mimesis, it has also relinquished openness to the world and to those features of the world which are not capturable by conceptual schematism. While instrumental reason offers many immediate improvements over magic and raw mimesis, its consequent failure to fully comprehend the full layout of the world has dramatic consequences. We are increasingly unable to respond to the genuine layout of the world, including the ethical demands laid out in it; as a consequence, self-preservation is increasingly undermining itself. Failing to understand the world fully entails failing to understand ourselves (as members of that world), and accordingly the systematized and schematized forms of knowledge and praxis which derive from our approach to knowledge and practical wisdom increasingly fail to respond to our needs for flourishing. This is the historical irony picked out by the idea of a ‘dialectic of enlightenment’ – mimesis was sacrificed in the name of self-preservation; but increasingly, this move has come to greatly undermine the prospects for the survival of the human species (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002: 43).

The Dialectic proposes a sketchy anthropology, much of the detail of which is alluded to, compressed into references, or left implicit. The central outline of this anthropological account has been given above – human consciousness is possessed of at least two core drives, the confluence of which is the origin of human culture. Self-preservation has intensified its demands; and the incompatibility of raw mimesis with these demands generated first the short-lived composite known as magic, and latterly the removal of mimesis as a driving force from the structures of human knowledge and behaviour.

Mimesis, however, is an intrinsic drive; it cannot be destroyed as such. It is also clear that mimesis offers a partial mirror image of the deficiencies of instrumental reason. Instrumental reason makes possible detailed and discursive forms of knowledge, while increasingly forfeiting contact with the particularity of the experienced world. Raw mimesis makes impossible detailed or discursive knowledge of the world, and yet maintains an immediate and
assimilative contact with the external world. For these reasons, more remains to be said about the career of mimesis, after its overthrow by instrumental reason.

**The Remnants of Mimesis**

At the end of his brief definition of mimesis and its relationship to magic, Caillois wrote,

> The crucial point is that 'primitive' man still has an urgent inclination to imitate, coupled with a belief in the efficacy of this imitation. Such an inclination remains quite strong in 'civilized' man, for it persists as one of the two processes whereby his thought pursues its course when left to itself.

(Caillois 2003: 97–98)

Given that Caillois holds mimesis to be an intrinsic inclination – as Adorno does, and not without influence from Caillois, in my opinion – it is no surprise that Caillois sees mimesis still exercising a strong influence in the present day, long after the discarding of the 'primitive' belief in the efficacy of magic. Crucially, mimesis in Caillois' view reappears wherever civilized humans are permitted to allow their thought to pursue 'its course when left to itself'. Mimesis, then, is subject to a kind of hydraulic pressure in modern life, and the relaxation of this pressure allows it to re-emerge. The nature of this pressure – given that Caillois allows only two 'processes' of thought, the self-preserving and the mimetic – should be clear. It is where the demands of self-preservation are relaxed, that mimesis is given free range to exercise itself.

Adorno, in a very oblique and implicit way, carries over Caillois' account in this respect wholesale. Throughout the *Dialectic*, we are constantly assured that modern society continually forces self-preservation as a continual task. Wage labour, and the very nature of capitalist societies, presses us into constant attention to the requirements of our own advancement and our own preservation:

> The countless agencies of mass production and its culture impress standardized behaviour on the individual as the only natural, decent and rational one. [...] The individual[s] criterion is self-preservation, successful or unsuccessful adaptation to the objectivity of their function and the schemata assigned to it.

(Adorno and Horkheimer 2002: 21–22)

However, for a congeries of reasons this emphasis on self-preservation is not total. There are a number of areas where self-preservation is not given paramount importance – and indeed, it is in these areas that Adorno sees the impulse towards mimesis – an assimilative surrender to objects – as being allowed to be satisfied. Chief among these is art. Adorno writes, in the context of music, that

> music is separated from this same society by the deepest of all flaws produced by this society itself. [...] Music, however, insofar as it did not submit to the command of the production of commodities, was in this process robbed of its social responsibility and exiled into an hermetic space.

(Adorno 2002: 391–392)

Adorno often refers to art as a refuge for mimesis (Adorno 2004: 69). This has lead some to understand mimesis' banishment to the artwork as being due to a fundamental incompatibility between mimesis and reason (e.g., Zuidervaart 1994: 133). This is flatly inaccurate, not
least due to the fact that Adorno sees the artwork as entirely rationalized, making use of rational processes of construction and composition (Adorno 2004: 370). Rather, mimesis is found in the experience and creation of art because it is here that the social totality relaxes its self-preserving demands; art is a kind of nature reserve, as it were, for features of human experience incompatible with self-preserving calculation. This is what underlies Adorno’s claim above that art is separated from the self-preserving demands of society by society itself. This is a contingent fact about social life, and indeed one which Adorno sees as increasingly revoked, with pop culture increasingly commodifying art and experiences of art into means of generating profit and signifying membership of social groups. In this respect, mimesis’ ability to find expression in art is increasingly under attack, and in Adorno’s view likely to soon die out, along with art itself (see further Hulatt 2016b). In advance of that eradication of mimesis in art, and of art itself, we find licence in the art-sphere to assimilatively fuse with art-objects in an unguarded and self-abnegating way. Here, the original impulse of mimesis returns to the fore, and is given an opportunity to be exercised. What is of significance is that Adorno does not understand this to be merely a cathartic means of satisfying a long discarded mimetic instinct – rather, this execution of mimesis in the artwork is socially critical, and vouchsafes the artwork’s status as true. For example,

Philosophy and art converge in their truth content: The progressive self-unfolding truth of the artwork is none other than the truth of the philosophical concept.

(Adorno 2004: 172)

Adorno sees artworks as able to bear truth-content; to be critical of social conditions; and as to contain features which are both critical of given philosophies and as demonstrating epistemic virtues which philosophy should also itself, ideally, exhibit, even if in a different fashion (Adorno 2004: 74, 172). (For a curious example of this, see Adorno’s comparison between Beethoven’s use of motivic composition and Hegel’s philosophy; a comparison in which Hegel comes off worse, and Beethoven is held to be more Hegelian than Hegel (Adorno 1998: 13–14).)

These claims from Adorno are not intended to be allegorical or rhetorical; there is a genuine parity, if methodological difference, between the truth content of artworks and philosophical texts. Artworks in Adorno’s view exhibit a structural relationship between particularity and universality (for example in music between the demands of the compositional resources, and the broader compositional norms in which they are embedded) which philosophy is obliged to mirror, if it is not to relapse into mere instrumental reason and continue to obscure the ‘non-identical’. The artwork’s ability to mobilize mimesis is a key enabling condition for the artwork’s ability to be true, and to have these salutary features. Mimesis for Adorno is therefore not merely an archaic remnant which can be found wherever the demands of self-preservation are relaxed, but something of crucial importance for philosophy and knowledge, and which needs to be added to them. This can only seem puzzling, given the rather unimpressive career of raw mimesis, and the previous attempt to combine mimesis and abstraction in magic.

The Promise of Mimesis

While this is an accusation which has largely died off now that familiarity with Adorno’s key concerns has deepened more widely, the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* has been accused of advocating irrationalism. It can seem that Adorno and Horkheimer are simply inveighing against the evils of abstract reason and modern culture, and the natural inference to draw from this is that something other than reason is held to be desirable. The fact that Adorno
is advocating the importance of mimesis for knowledge – in light of the fact that mimesis is tightly associated in his account with magic and art – can seem to give support to this accusation. As has been made clear above, this cannot be so – mimesis in and of itself cannot be desirable, and in and of itself cannot sustain a satisfying epistemic relationship to the world. Even if we are not being asked to revert to pre-rational forms of life and knowledge, we certainly are being advised that instrumental reason is by itself insufficient and that it requires modification in a number of ways, not least of which is contact with mimesis. How can we avoid the charge of irrationalism, if Adorno is apparently claiming that instrumental reason requires modification by extra-rational resources?

To get clear on this, we need to refer to Adorno’s conception of an ‘emphatic’ concept. Conventional concepts seek to model the presented properties of objects as they exist presently. Emphatic concepts, by contrast, aim at future states – they have a normative core to them. Emphatic concepts do not match up with objects as we find them, and this is precisely what allows emphatic concepts to ground criticism of the world as we find it. Adorno gives the concept of ‘freedom’ as an example of this:

Emphatically conceived, the judgement that a man free refers to the concept of freedom; but this concept in turn is more than is predicated of the man, and by other definitions the man is more than the concept of his freedom. The concept says not only that it is applicable to all individuals defined as free; it feeds on the idea of a condition in which individuals would have qualities not to be ascribed to anyone here and now.

(Adorno 1973: 150)

If we made the concept ‘freedom’ purely descriptive and nominalist, then it would mean whatever the society it was applied to held it to mean. And so we could imagine states in which grossly mistreated people – through the influence of an ideology, or an imposed definition of the term – thought of themselves as perfectly free. This is why we require an emphatic concept of freedom, which goes beyond present-day conditions and points towards a future state of perfected freedom. This allows us to criticize harmful social conditions, even if under those conditions people would term themselves free.

The concept of rationality is, for Adorno, an emphatic concept. It is a statement of how things should be, not a description of what people presently call rationality. What people presently call rationality is, in Adorno’s view, in fact irrational. We have already explored why this might be – fully abstract instrumental rationality cuts us off from full epistemic and ethical contact with the world. Concepts come to obscure, rather than disclose, the genuine layout of the environment.

This is important just because it allows us to see exactly why Adorno’s remarks about mimesis are not in fact irrationalist, but firmly in favour of rationality. Present-day ‘rationality’ is, according to Adorno’s emphatic concept of rationality, irrational; in recommending modifications to this irrational epistemic practice he is attempting to heighten its rationality, to improve its rational status. Neither instrumental rationality nor mimesis is fully rational, but a confluence of them could be.

A Confluence of Mimesis and Instrumental Reason

The original confluence of mimesis and instrumental reason was magical praxis. Needless to say, while Adorno advocates an adulteration of instrumental reason by mimesis, he is not recommending a reversion to magical thinking and nor does he think that magical thinking is the emphatic rationality at which we are aiming. Recall again that for Adorno all
categories are historical, especially those of reason and mimesis. The way in which mimesis is and can be employed develops across history, and so too do the capabilities of rationality. While mimesis and instrumental reason, at the outset of their careers, could only be crudely combined to produce the rather desultory result of magic, this is no longer the case.

Instrumental rationality is, at base, an expression of self-preservation. Adorno goes so far as to claim that logical bivalence contains an oblique reference to, and ultimately derives its strength from, the demands of self-preservation (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002: 23). In the first instance, this demonstrates that instrumental rationality, by itself, is not rational; its ultimate aim is not the truth, but rather the furthering of the pragmatic demands of the human organism. Of course, servicing these needs matches up with the truth to a great extent. To adequately realize my ends in my environment, I need to be able to not mimetically merge with it, but to comprehend its structure, make predictions, arrive at an understanding of types, and so on. This naturally leads onto the formation of concepts, which allow me to have a stable and epistemically complex relationship to the world around me. Self-preservation, then, allowed for the generation of a conceptually fine-grained relationship to the world. However, these concepts were and remain couched in a project of control – of subsuming the external world under the demands of self-preservation. As a consequence, whenever the pragmatic demands of self-preservation and the genuine layout of the world diverge, concepts tend to distort and occlude that world. The full particularity of objects, for example, is not relevant to our abstract conceptual schemes of control over objects. As a consequence, these particular features simply fail to show up conceptually, in thought or in experience. Adorno derives a great deal of the failings of modern society – up to and including the holocaust – from this conceptual failure of responsivity to particularity.

While self-preservation produces and sustains an entirely vital set of epistemic structures, it also ensures they fail to be rational; their complexity is bought at the price of failing to fully understand and model how the world really is. Instrumental rationality, then, is not rational.

Mimesis, similarly, is not rational. It allows for full, unmediated contact with the real makeup of the world around us. In this sense, mimesis is on speaking terms with the goal of genuine rationality – a proper and full relationship to the full particularity of the world around us. However, by virtue of being unmediated, mimesis cannot produce understanding; only a hollow imitation of and ‘merging’ with the world around it.

What is required is clear; a means of harnessing the complex conceptual structures produced by self-preservation and giving them a mimetic turn; obliging them to serve not the drive of self-preservation, but rather the mimetic drive of modelling and fully grasping objects in the world.

Adorno drew deeply on anthropology, particularly sources which saw mimesis and human cognitive life more generally, as driven by impulse. Indeed, Adorno goes so far as to claim all cognitive activity, even pure reason, has its ultimate roots in impulses and drives, and continues to be fed by them:

Because even its remotest objectifications are nourished by impulses, thought destroys in the latter the condition of its own existence. […] It is true that the objective meaning of knowledge has, with the objectification of the world, become progressively detached from the underlying impulses; it is equally true that knowledge breaks down where its effort of objectification remains under the sway of desire. But if the impulses are not at once preserved and surpassed in the thought which has escaped their sway, then there will be no knowledge at all[.]

(Adorno 2005: 122)
The Place of Mimesis

The problem this raises is that mimesis and self-preservation, as we have explored and Caillois made explicit, are drives which move in opposed directions. While talk of creating a confluence of mimesis and instrumental rationality sounds like an elegant and neat solution, looked at in more detail it is difficult to see what this might amount to.

This is one of the governing problems of Adorno’s epistemology, which Adorno was content not to solve, but rather to flag up. Empathic rationality is produced by resolving the opposed demands of instrumental rationality and mimesis, and allowing each to make a contribution (structural complexity, and contact with particularity, respectively) to the other. Adorno characteristically talks about a measured syncopation of these two cognitive moments. For example, in what Adorno calls ‘exact fantasy’,

> An exact fantasy: fantasy which abides strictly within the material which the sciences present to it, and reaches beyond them only in the smallest aspects of their arrangement: aspects, granted, which fantasy itself must originally generate. If the idea of philosophic interpretation which I tried to develop for you is valid, then it can be expressed as the demand to answer the questions of a pre-given reality each time, through a fantasy which rearranges the elements of the question without going beyond the circumference of the elements, the exactitude of which has its control in the disappearance of the question [...] thinking which aims at relations with the object, and not at validity isolated in itself, is accustomed to prove its right to exist not by refuting the objections which are voiced against it and which consider themselves irrefutable, but by its fruitfulness [...].

(Adorno 1977: 131)

Adorno’s remarks here are promising, but also deeply incomplete (see also Adorno’s account of ‘metaphysical experience’ (Adorno 2006: 373–374)). They represent both the most promising and most difficult moments in his body of epistemic thought. Resolving the problems here would require a far longer discussion (for an attempt, see Hulatt 2016a). But what they have allowed us to see is that Adorno’s fragmentary and, at points, fugitive remarks about mimesis in the *Dialectic* are far more significant than their collected page count may suggest. There is no end of ambition in Adorno’s quasi-anthropological account of the emergence of reason; it quite clearly underwrites and informs the complex passages from *Negative Dialectics*, published some nineteen years later, excerpted above. It also has a great deal of import, I should mention, for Adorno’s various remarks about the fate of art, and a possible end of art, but I have explored these elsewhere (Hulatt 2016b).

In closing, Adorno’s account of mimesis in the *Dialectic* is delivered largely obliquely in the course of the passage of the book. The deepest and most important details must be unriddled from Adorno’s account of the generation of instrumental reason, which is his chief object of investigation, and still more from the small family of sources most often drawn on wherever Adorno develops his account of mimesis directly. What emerges is, I believe, a conception of mimesis which is substantially second hand (derived in chief part from Caillois, Freud, and Frazer), yet ultimately reset into a complex, historical, and provocative account of rationality as we know it, and rationality as it may yet be.

References


Further Reading


O’Connor, B. (2012) Adorno. London and New York: Routledge. (Chapter 6 contains an insightful account of the role of mimesis in Adorno’s aesthetics, and in his work more generally.)