

Brian O'Connor

Adorno.

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This book is a most welcome addition to the *Routledge Philosophers* series. Brian O'Connor's slim volume is perhaps the most concise yet wide-ranging of all introductions to Theodor W. Adorno's (1903–1969) thought currently in print today. Having edited *The Adorno Reader* back in 2000 and authored *Adorno's Negative Dialectics: Philosophy and the Possibility of Critical Rationality* in 2004, O'Connor has been steeped in Adorno's Critical Theory for some time now, and he thus makes for an ideal guide through Adorno's labyrinthine oeuvre. The fact that Adorno is such an intensely dialectical thinker makes it difficult to stay with him for the duration of the journey his texts provide. Indeed, for those who are familiar with his work, the task of providing a summary of Adorno's thought is a seemingly Sisyphean one. In this case, the path of the Sisyphean boulder is an apt metaphor for that which one encounters while engaging one of Adorno's texts, or even something as granular as a sentence from one of his texts. Just when the boulder is nearing the summit of comprehension, the boulder rolls backwards. In spite of this, Brian O'Connor has produced an overview where one of the most infamous members of the Frankfurt School gets his due. O'Connor's book does not delve too deeply into the influence that Kant, Hegel, or Marx may or may not have had Adorno's work; as befits an introduction, this is a text primarily about Adorno's original contribution to philosophy.

As a text for those in need or want of an introduction to Adorno, all of the important signposts to orient a reader are here. The text opens with a helpful chronology that details the landmark events in Adorno's life. The dates of the publication of his texts are intertwined with historic-social events that impacted Adorno directly. This chronology works as an important feature of the text, one that ought to be the hallmark of any introduction to a particular thinker's work. Additionally, not to be overlooked for orienting the reader are the suggested reading summaries at the end of each chapter, as well as a glossary of key terms, index, and bibliographies of primary and secondary works found at the back of the book. When done well, the combination of these pieces of a text can be vital to guide a reader, and it is no exception for those seeking a way into the thought of Adorno. As supporting elements for an introduction to this particular 20th-century thinker, these signposts are most helpful.

O'Connor chose the chapter themes wisely, both in their content and their organization. Between the introductory chapter focusing on Adorno's life and philosophical motivations and the concluding chapter, which discusses Adorno's philosophical legacy, O'Connor identifies five key themes in Adorno's thought that are given attention in individual chapters. These are, in order: 1) society, 2) experience, 3) metaphysics, 4) freedom and morality, and 5) aesthetics. O'Connor makes clear that of all of these themes it is the second theme – experience – that looms the largest in Adorno's thought and is of the utmost importance to his philosophy. For O'Connor, the basic overarching argument tying all of these themes together is that while Adorno passed away in 1969, his thought maintains its relevancy in the digital age in each of

these five dimensions. However, while Adorno's thought is still relevant, it is also still obtuse – this despite numerous attempts by others, including O'Connor, to offer some clarity. O'Connor's text is successful in shining a new light on old work. O'Connor outlines his authorial accomplishment as follows: 'A central objective of this book is to make clear just how deeply Adorno had thought through his most significant philosophical positions and to articulate justifications for those positions that are not in every case explicitly stated in his writings' (22). The goal, then, for O'Connor is to make these positions explicit.

Adorno published quite a lot of material during his lifetime – as is made apparent by the bibliography at the end of the book – and O'Connor is to be commended for integrating Adorno's vast catalog of primary sources into such a compact text. When done well, a pre-determined emphasis on brevity, dictated in this case by the framework of the series the book belongs to, is not readily apparent. Through a diligent unpacking of Adorno's wide-ranging texts, O'Connor is able to provide a quick and easy pathway into the seemingly impenetrable concepts Adorno utilized. Specialized terminology – totality, nonidentity, constellation, immanent critique, and so on – is carefully treated. These concepts are not as well known as some of Adorno's others more famous concepts, such as culture industry or negative dialectics, so it is well worth O'Connor's effort to flesh them out for the reader. O'Connor is adept at conveying the general thrust of many of Adorno's concepts without straying too far from the point being made.

Admittedly, on the one hand, there are a few occasions where the emphasis on concision does make it difficult to discern exactly what some of these terms are or how one is to understand them. On the other hand, O'Connor goes to great lengths to elaborate a particularly nebulous term in Adorno's work: mimesis. Through the use of multiple examples such as Baudelaire and Kafka, O'Connor delves into 'mimesis', a term that O'Connor regards as '[t]he most elusive notion in all of Adorno's philosophy' (149). O'Connor argues that mimesis is a foundational concept for Adorno, one that can be found in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and *Negative Dialectics*, and it is also one that is utterly vague. Since mimesis is not clearly defined anywhere in Adorno's work, such a treatment by O'Connor is beneficial for both newcomers and Adorno scholars. Even within the scope of an introductory text, O'Connor's analysis of mimesis will surely enlighten those who have been wading through the murky waters of Adorno's work for years.

In traversing these waters, what gradually reveals itself is the seemingly polymathic ability possessed by Adorno. Equally comfortable with philosophy, music, art, sociology, and other disciplines, Adorno's interdisciplinary approach was well ahead of the times, and his understanding of a variety of disciplines is presented as a rare form of brilliance. Ultimately, though, despite all of the topics or disciplines he would master in his time, Adorno was a philosopher at core. As O'Connor points out, despite the interdisciplinary tendencies found throughout his work, Adorno's 'critical theory is ultimately grounded in philosophy' (51). Regardless of the central theme of his texts, for Adorno, philosophy is the glue that binds all of the other disciplines together. So, while Adorno may have broad appeal for a variety of scholars, his work is based in philosophy. This is something that is not readily apparent when Adorno's work is often listed as required reading in a social science or interdisciplinary course, such as a sociology class or a media studies class. While Adorno is taught throughout universities in

North America, he is often neglected by philosophy departments dominated by those who favor the analytic variety of philosophizing. O'Connor's text provides an important reminder of Adorno's importance as a philosopher.

This book is primarily geared towards those among us who speak of philosophers on a last name basis, but have not seriously engaged the philosopher's work. Despite the praise I have given to O'Connor's welcoming analysis of Adorno's work, it should be made clear that a modicum of awareness of Adorno will go a long way here. While it is an introduction, it is not primarily for undergraduate students; rather, it is intended to introduce the work of a difficult thinker to those who are looking for a way in to all or part of his oeuvre. This is a concise text that will provide points of entry for newcomers to Adorno but also has enough depth and originality to offer insights for those immersed in the Critical Theory tradition. O'Connor's text deserves a spot on the shelf of anyone who is interested in the Frankfurt School in general or Adorno in particular. Those who are interested in learning more about the philosopher by the name of Adorno would be wise to pick this book up.

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