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Denkbilder
«Thought-Images» in
20th-Century German Prose

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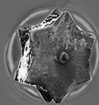
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*Towards a Topography of the Void.
Adorno on Silence and
Other Extremal Denkbilder*

Walter Pedriali

Abstract

In this paper, I raise a puzzle that arises out of two theses held by Adorno regarding meaning-determination. The first thesis claims that meaning is fixed by the positional value of an expression. The second thesis claims that history sediments in expressions and objects. The puzzle arises when we consider silences. Since silences are pure absences, it is not clear how history could sediment on them. If so, Adorno's theory of meaning seems to entail that silences are meaningless. Silences play a crucial role in his philosophy, however, both because of Adorno's musical interests and because his most famous pronouncement is, precisely, an invitation to silence. I propose what I take to be a fully Adornian solution to the puzzle that also illuminates some of the key aspects of Adorno's philosophy.

1. *Introduction*¹

In this paper, I raise a puzzle for Adorno, a puzzle that arises, or so I shall argue, out of two distinctive theses that he held. The first thesis holds that the semantic content of expressions (and therefore the individuation conditions for their referents, i.e., for the particulars, of whatever kind, the expressions stand for) is partly fixed by their “positional value” within a network of signification, a value that is non-absolute, non-intrinsic, wholly context-bound (V 9: 34)². The second thesis holds that the “immanent generality” of a particular (its holistically determined significance) is contextually fixed in a stronger sense too, in that the “sedimented history” that partly determines whatever meaningfulness the particular has acquired at that point in time is locked in the object itself (1966: 163/GS 6: 165; 1954/1958: 11/GS 11: 19).

For Adorno, then, the effect of context on content has a dual dimension, since it operates both synchronically (across the totality of the practice at

1 A version of this paper was presented at the Joint Annual Conference of the Society for European Philosophy and the Forum for European Philosophy, Regent’s University, London, August 27, 2016. Thanks are due to the audience there for useful feedback. In addition, I’m particularly grateful to Fabian Freyenhagen for extensive and insightful comments that helped improve the paper. Brian O’Connor’s comments were also extremely helpful. Finally, thanks are due to an anonymous referee for this journal for very helpful comments.

2 The parenthetic implication should be obvious: the semantic content of an expression includes its applicability conditions, which in turn contain individuation conditions for the objects involved. In line with Adorno’s own treatment, I shall be switching between talk of expressions and of their referents, and of meaning and content, in a rather cavalier, but for our purposes harmless, fashion. At any rate, it is as harmless as that which Sellars (1962: 263) finds in Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*, where talk of objects is treated as interchangeable with talk of names.

a given point in time) and diachronically (along the axis of the history of that practice).

The puzzle arises when we consider silences, caesuras, the breaks within and between texts, the elusive locations for those momentary disappearances of the creative gesture by and in a self-enfolding act of withdrawal (1968: 1/GS 13: 325). Properly analysed, silences are semantically extremal. They are the most radical, the most concentrated form of *Denkbilder* that Adorno countenanced, where a *Denkbild* is a point-like thought-image in which an overabundance of signification is concentrated into a single moment of insight that goes beyond what is strictly expressed by the overt meaning of the terms involved³.

It is precisely the radical extremality of silences, their constituent-free *Denkbildung*, that gives rise to our puzzle. Our difficulty stems from the fact that the content of silences is purely positional, since there are no terms internal to it. The content of silences is thus determined by relational properties alone, without any input from intrinsic, non-relational properties, because silences, the *Laut-los*, result from interruption, privation, absence – absence of sound, of writing, of speaking. Whatever internal character silences have is solely given by pure negativity, pure absence, pure nothingness. It follows that silences lack, necessarily, any internal structure, any intrinsic properties at all.

3 Adorno's discussion of Bloch's pitcher (1965a: 219/GS 11: 566) shows that *Denkbilder* can also be temporally extended. To the extent that Adorno recovered content from the Bloch text that he could not trace to its semantic content, the text as a whole acted as a *Denkbild*.

Here, then, is the puzzle: if silences lack intrinsic properties and internal constituents, how can they plausibly be taken to be the repositories of sedimented history, as Adorno's conception of meaning requires? How can history be locked into absences, how can the cloud of history condense on absent matter?

The puzzle is deep, and goes straight to the heart of Adorno's conception of content⁴. In fact, it goes right to the heart of his philosophy as a whole, since, after all, Adorno's most famous pronouncement is, precisely, an invitation to silence, a silence entirely determined by the *unspeakable* horrors of the history that would sediment in that highly pregnant, post-Auschwitz gesture of poetic withdrawal⁵. My main aim in this paper is to examine the puzzle and to propose what I take to be a fully Adornian solution to it. A further aim is to inaugurate the beginnings of that "topography of the void" foreshadowed in (Adorno 1965b: 136/V 14: 212), the attempt to map what inhabits nothingness, to make sense of what lives in those interstitial silences where the structure of their surroundings is made immanent and extremally absent at the same time. The plan for the paper is as follows. In §2, I shall offer a brief reconstruction of Adorno's contextualism. In §3, I raise the puzzle. In §4, I discard some attempts to evade the puzzle. In §5, I offer my own solution.

4 Silences exemplify nicely Adorno's (1965b: 52/V 14: 82) remark that philosophical problems are to be found "in the smallest nuances".

5 In Adorno's view, to properly recognise Auschwitz as the event it was is to recognise one's duty to silence. See his comments on Goethe's *Tasso* (1965/2008: 108/V 16: 158). See also (1965b: 110/V 14: 172–173) for an important gloss on his much-misunderstood *dictum*.

2. Adorno's Radical Contextualism

Let me start by articulating a little more fully the two theses that give rise to the puzzle.

First, let's look at the thesis that content is positionally determined⁶. In contemporary terminology, to say that meaning is positionally determined is to say that it is contextually determined, it is to be committed to some form of semantic contextualism, the view that the truth-conditional contribution made by an expression may vary from context to context⁷. Adorno's version of semantic contextualism is particularly radical, not least because it is conjoined with a bold anti-foundationalism and with a generalised hostility towards *philosophia prima* (any philosophy that starts from first, all-containing principles)⁸. What Adorno's anti-foundationalism ensures is that contextualist constraints on meaning brook no exception. In particular, no principle is so

6 Strictly speaking, there are two distinct theses compressed in each thesis, one relating to content-determination, the other to content-grasp. Although the two theses can be kept separate (they belong, respectively, to the metaphysics and to the epistemology of meaning), Adorno clearly held both theses and rarely distinguished between them.

7 The truth-conditional contribution of an expression (its semantic value) is what an expression contributes to the determination of the conditions under which sentences in which the expression occurs would be true. For some varieties of contextualism see Preyer and Peter (2005), Szabó (2005), Cappelen and Lepore (2005), Preyer and Peter (2007), Borg (2004, 2012), Stanley (2007), Carston (2002), Recanati (2004, 2010), Travis (2008).

8 See e.g. (V 9: 14, 17; 1963/1993: 9/GS 5: 258; 1956/2013: 6, 128–145/GS 5: 14–15, 134–150; 1966: xix, 153/GS 6: 9, 156; 1965/2008: 99/V 16: 145–146; 1960: 162–163/GS 11: 163). Adorno's contextualism is a non-incidental feature of his philosophy, constantly at work in some of his most memorable sayings, e.g. “no single thing is at peace in the unpacified whole” (1966: 153/GS 6: 156) and in his insightful analyses of works of art, e.g. his striking interpretation of Beckett's situations in *Endgame* (1961a: 253/GS 11: 295).

basic as to allow for “pure definitions” – definitions that would supposedly be able to exhaustively fix content ahead of enquiry. For Adorno, definitions only confer meaning in virtue of their *Stellenwert*, the positional value they, and their *definienda*, acquire through their placement within a “totality of developing thought” (V9: 24–25)⁹. Adorno’s theory of meaning, then, takes content to be wholly and everywhere determined by relational factors, so that semantic value is, always and everywhere, positional value. Change the totality-relative position of an expression, and you change its meaning. It follows that there is no unmediated, absolutely-given content, that no content is invariant, wholly independent of its position within a specific totality (1956/2013: 129/GS 5: 134). For all that, it is important to note that there are non-relational, intrinsic properties to content too. Since for Adorno content is shot through and through with irreducible relationality, however, even intrinsic properties may make a different contribution at different contexts because of the different totality-relative relations in which they may enter at those contexts¹⁰. The picture that emerges

9 Here are some quotes: “Isolated explanations of the meaning of words cannot be given; these explanations are merely a start and are made possible only by explicit reference to the context in which the words occur” (V9: 17); “each [concept] becomes articulated through its configuration with the others” (1958/1991: 13/GS 11: 21); “definitions are better located in the movement of thought, as its *terminus ad quem*, than as an introduction to it” (1965/2008: 95/V 16: 140). See also (V 2: 282ff.).

10 Adorno’s contextualism is much more radical than Quine’s (1951) familiar holism, since on his view, much as he loved Ravel’s *Une barque sur l’océan*, we cannot even invoke Quine’s favourite metaphor of the Neurathian boat that needs rebuilding out at sea (e.g. 1950: 79). Given Adorno’s negative dialectics, the very idea of a context-free boat from which the holist can operate is incoherent too. See e.g. (1965/2008: 31, 39–40/V 16: 53–54, 63–65; V 2: 309).

from the first ingredient to our puzzle, then, is one whereby meaning and content have both relational and non-relational properties. Positional value determines and modifies the semantic contribution made by both kinds of properties. Therefore, no expression can be assigned a context-free meaning.

Let me now turn to the other thesis, Adorno's insistence that content is sedimented history, that history is locked into objects and expressions¹¹. I propose that we call that constituent of semantic value determined by sedimented history the *sedimental* value of an object/ expression¹².

Adorno's two theses are clearly closely connected, since to say that history is locked in content is to think of contextual determination not just in a synchronic way but also in a diachronic way, it is to think that positional value is historical-positional, that the totality that determines meaning is not just the current practice, but the accumulated history of that practice too (any practice is the practice it is

11 Since history is pre-history (GS 8: 234, 374) in Marx's sense, what is locked in terms and objects is, for the most part, "historical violence" (GS 14: 223). The claim is again one of partial determination (1965b: 44/V 14: 71). Note that for Adorno the content of even the purest forms of art is never immune from historical contamination (1969/2013: 6/GS 7: 14).

12 It is sedimental value that sets Adorno and Heidegger apart. As O'Connor (2004: 59) helpfully notes, Adorno's concern with historical determination gives a "neo-Marxist version of the phenomenological life-world" familiar from Heidegger. This point also clarifies why we cannot think of sedimental value as the accumulation of all preceding positional values. The fact that positional value typically fails to be historically informed (that it typically gets the facts about the object wrong) is what prevents ascription of this view to Adorno. Incidentally, Adorno's sedimentalism is a variety of what is called presentism in the philosophy of time. Bigelow's (1996: 46–47) version of presentism has it that the world as a whole has properties that carry its causal history. Adorno simply adds socio-economic causal facts to the standard, anodyne conception that holds sway in analytic philosophy.

because of its history, a history that is reflected in every component of the practice)¹³.

The second thesis, however, brings to the puzzle two further components not entailed by the first, namely, the sedimentation metaphor and a normative claim that is the defining mark of Adorno's philosophy. These two components bring out the conceptual independence of the two theses, the fact that, although indissoluble in Adorno's framework, they play importantly different roles within it. Let me expand on this pivotal point. If we take the sedimentation metaphor seriously, as we must, we face the metaphysical problem that sedimentation requires some kind of carrier, a substrate-like bearer of sedimental properties. Now, as we noted two paragraphs ago, objects and expressions have both intrinsic and relational properties. It turns out that the distinction between intrinsic and relational bearers of semantic value is absolutely crucial with respect to Adorno's normative conception of meaningfulness. Recall that semantic value is a function of intrinsic and relational properties. These two kinds of properties carry out a very different meaning-bearing job. The relational properties

13 See e.g. (1965/2008: 175/V 16: 218): "history has congealed in the objects". See also (1969: 246/GS 10.2: 742; 1958/1991: 11/GS 11: 19; V3: 15; 1966: 52-53, 163/GS 6: 163; 1969/2013: 6-7/GS 7: 16; 1969/2013: 55/GS 7: 67; 1969: 250/ GS 10.2: 747-748). One may object that if meanings were holistically-historically determined in this way, communal understanding would be impossible, since speakers obviously enjoy very different degrees of access to the totality of socio-historical relations. The reply open to Adorno (see 1954/1958: 12/GS 11: 20) is to appeal to the notions of the division of linguistic labour (Putnam 1975) and incomplete understanding (Burge 1979). Communication can proceed unimpaired as long as less competent subjects defer to the authority of the experts within the practice.

reflect the way an expression/object is being individuated and treated at a given point in time in a given society. The intrinsic properties, the natural recipients of sedimented history, are instead the independent receptacles of historic sedimentation.

In fact, the intrinsic properties do more than just recording historical violence. They also embody the ethical demands made by objects and persons. To properly account for those demands, I therefore propose that, in addition to positional and sedimental value, we also posit a third kind of value, a value that I want to call *eudaimonic value*, or alternatively, *areteic value*. In effect, sedimental value is determined by one kind of modal-normative intrinsic properties of objects, namely, the past-directed properties that register the denunciation of historical violence, the recording of what ought not to have been the case¹⁴. Eudaimonic value, by contrast, is the value that objects possess with respect to their future-directed modal-normative properties. Eudaimonic properties are the properties that determine the range of possibilities for the proper, excellent use of objects, for the use that respects their *promesse du bonheur*, the (utopian) promise of a life without fear (1937-38/1981: 145/GS 13: 145).

The complete picture that emerges at this point is one where positional value is the synchronic, historically determined value, for objects and expressions referring to them. Positional value typically implements and embodies the reified social order in force at a particular point in time, what is said

¹⁴ Thanks to Fabian Freyenhagen (p.c.) here.

to be the case by the dominant paradigm¹⁵. Sedimental value instead bears the traces of the historical violence done to objects and persons, and is normally hidden behind positional value. Eudaimonic value, for its part, is the redemptive, utopian value that objects ought to be granted, the value whereby positional value is readjusted to properly fulfil the ethical demands built into objects¹⁶. Accordingly, it is eudaimonic value that fixes the normatively correct positional value of objects and expressions at a given point in time, signalling and indeed exemplifying the ethical-utopian drive towards freedom. It is eudaimonic value that represents a standing alternative to the forced forgetfulness imposed by the *status quo*, an alternative that tends towards the utopian condition of fully mature reflection, of fully owned *geistige Erfahrung* that alone would do justice to what is commemorated in sedimental value (V 16: 131).

This framework constitutes what I want to call Adorno's *socio-historical contextualism*¹⁷, an essential,

15 See e.g. (V 12: 104).

16 The unfulfillable need to align eudaimonic and positional value is what would both "realize" philosophy and thereby extinguish it (GS 6: 15). The remark, read in this way, is no longer puzzling. Positing eudaimonic value also explains another otherwise enigmatic remark by Adorno, namely, the claim that "in the redeemed world everything would be as it is and yet wholly other" (1969/2013: 7/GS 7: 16). What this means is simply that the properties remain the same, but are arranged differently because of the foregrounding of eudaimonic properties. A fuller articulation of Adorno's conception of the ethics of objects is a task for another day. Here, I only note that, on what I take to be his view, the combinatorial properties of objects include ethical properties too, in the sense sketched in the text. Adorno thus takes over and expand Wittgenstein's claim, in *Tractatus* §2.0123, that to properly know an object is to know all of its possible embedments in states of affairs and that those possible embedments are grounded in "the nature of the object".

17 An alternative, and equally appropriate label could be *socio-historical externalism* (where externalism is the thesis that meaning and content are partly determined

defining trait of his philosophy, as can be shown by three kinds of considerations, of a conceptual, methodological and ethical character, respectively.

First, Adorno argues in favour of the socio-historic contextual determination of meaning on the basis of the conceptual incoherence of thinking otherwise. For Adorno, the main task of philosophy is to provide the proper analysis of the subject-object relation (1969: 246/GS 10.2: 741). Otherwise put, the task is to coherently articulate the structure of experience. In articulating that structure, it would be incoherent to suppose that subject-hood could be defined by reference to an unmediated, invariant layer of meaningfulness, the so-called Given, located at the objectual level, since if the Given contains no epistemic hooks to the subject, it would be unintelligible to her; if it does, it is instead already presupposing the notion that it was intended to explain and indeed ground, namely, subject-hood itself¹⁸.

Secondly, according to Adorno it is methodologically incoherent to think that meaningfulness could be explained in terms of *a priori* definitions of the meaning of self-standing axioms from which the rest of the attempted systematisation of thought would follow. The incoherence here stems from the fact that the desired objectivity could only be attained by what

by environmental factors), by analogy with e.g. Burge (1979). For one example of Adorno's externalist tendencies, see his (1965/2008: 73, 107/V 16: 110–111, 156–157).

18 The incoherence could also be put more directly by saying that givenness is always givenness-to-someone. It is thus hopeless to think the notion could be used to ground subject-hood. See e.g. (1963/1993: 58–59/GS 5: 299–300; 1966: 185/GS 6: 186; 1969: 247/GS 10.2: 744; V 2: 155).

is in effect nothing more than “arbitrary subjective choice” (1965/2008: 73/V 16: 110) – the thinker-originating stipulations would be disconnected from what genuinely grounds objectivity, namely, socio-historical factors. Only by grounding meaning in those factors could we escape incoherence, since rationalistic strictures would inevitably appeal to psychological features of the thinker (either to explain the supposed self-evidence of the axioms, or the inconceivability of their negation)¹⁹.

Thirdly, the historico-contextual determination of meaning is mandated by the ethical character of language. It is part of the essence of language to provide a medium for the expression (the recording, the memory) of human suffering. To forget that meaning is historically determined, as non-Adornian theories of meaning routinely do, is to betray one’s ethical dimension and the obligations attached to it²⁰. Clearly, it would be hard to give an argument for this last kind of consideration (a consideration that embodies one’s ethical duty, rather than supporting it)²¹. Even

19 A related point concerns Adorno’s claim that concepts can only come into being after a practice is in operation. See e.g. (1965/2008: 75/V 16: 113; 1966: 154/GS 6: 156). The historical determination of meaning also serves another essential purpose for Adorno, since it helps avoid the charge that his radical holism rests on a relativistic, response-dependence account of meaningfulness (see Casati and Tappolet 1998 and Gert 2012). See (V 3: 20, 283; 1966: 313/ GS 6: 308; 1969/2013: 367/GS 7: 406) for his objections to response-dependent accounts.

20 (1965/2008: 103–104/V 16: 151–152). See e.g. Bernstein (2001), Foster (2007: 23–26) for discussion. Here, I’m largely in agreement with Freyenhagen’s (2013, ch. 9) insightful reading of Adorno’s position as negative *Aristotelianism*, the thesis that human flourishing can only be defined in negative terms.

21 Adorno actually endeavours to give arguments in its favour, largely based on the idea that to do justice to the richness of experience requires an ethical stance, a stance that is the essential requirement of any genuinely truth-aiming discourse (1966: 17–18/GS 6: 29).

so, the claim is constitutive of Adorno's conception of philosophy. For him, philosophy must be resistance to the status quo, it must show that the contingency we experience is precisely that, a contingency, and one that *ought* to be replaced by a better arrangement of social relations, truer to the nature of objects²². Moreover, the contingency, to be fully experienced, must be experienced as the contingency it is. Under Adorno's conception, then, those who disregard the ethical aspect of meaning are, *sensu strictu*, and homophonic impressions aside, speaking a different language, a language that is inadequate for tracking the full content of our experience. Thus, the injustice built into that language is dual; it is both ethical and representational, it leaves a residue at both levels. Similarly, the notion of givenness is not just conceptually incoherent. Because it constitutively erases history altogether, that notion is also ethically incoherent, in that it overlooks human suffering, and thereby betrays philosophy's elective task of rescuing that suffering, or at least of speaking to it²³.

22 See e.g. (1965/2008: 100–101/V 16: 147–148).

23 Is there a tension between Adorno's exhortation to the post-Auschwitz silence and his demand that philosophy recognise and bear witness to human suffering? Perhaps there is. Or perhaps we could instead suggest that on Adorno's view when we finally catch up with sedimental value (normally hidden by positional value) our first reaction ought to be silence. When we also get hold of eudaimonic value, however, we then have to speak to the suffering, and thus break our silence. The silence stage is nonetheless mandated. In the light of (V 14: 173/1965b: 110–111), one could also take Adorno's question to be "whether one can live after Auschwitz", whether one's life can ever be real, and hence whether one's words can ever be truly meaningful, whether they can genuinely hook up onto the world instead of onto an horror-denying fantasy. One could then read his dictum as an exhortation to *recognise* silence, to recognise that any word that we may utter is in fact empty, that it remains a dream-like "emanation" unless it is relentlessly measured against the normative standard set by sedimental value, a standard that pushes us to

Summing up, for Adorno semantic value is historico-positional, a contextually-determined value fixed by the position of an expression (and the particular it refers to) within a specific practice at a specific time in history. Objects are configured as intersections of cross-objectual relations. Crucially, the position an object occupies in the actual world (in its forced conceptualisation by the *status quo*) routinely comes apart from the position it ought to occupy. Becoming fully aware of the object's sedimental and eudaimonic value is the only way of restoring the object to its normatively correct positional value. Finally, these features of Adorno's conception of content are, one and all, non-dispensable features of his view. It is now time to turn to silences and raise our puzzle.

3. *The Puzzle*

To state the puzzle, we start by recalling that sedimental value can only attach to the intrinsic properties of objects and expressions²⁴. Now, since silences are pure absences, they lack any intrinsic

the further recognition of eudaimonic value. In short, any thought that does not face up to the horror of Auschwitz "cannot really be called a thought at all" and is thus wholly empty of content (it gives rise to silence of the bad kind, then). It is worth noting here that Adorno's dream in that lecture on metaphysics is truly Descartes' *Meditations* dream come of age: the world is well lost not to the sterile skeptical worries of a truncated epistemology, but rather to the unfulfilled duty to our better selves; it is a world lost because of our own ethical shortcomings (epistemology for Adorno is ethical through and through, and it's the ethical failure that loses us the world). Thanks to Brian O'Connor (p.c.) for pressing me to address this tension.

²⁴ To streamline my discussion of the puzzle, I shall concentrate on sedimental value alone. Clearly, the puzzle, if genuine, also arises with respect to eudaimonic value.

properties (there are no properties that are intrinsic to a *specific* silence-event, no properties that uniquely attach to *that* silence from within, as it were). And since Adorno's anti-foundationalism also entails that nothing can be assigned a fixed meaning, it follows that the content of silences is, and can only be, purely positional²⁵.

Any semantic property of silences, the meaning and significance they have, the structural role they may play within a narrative, are therefore one and all acquired *entirely* from their surroundings, from the entities that define their contours²⁶. Given all this, we seem forced to conclude that silences are metaphysically unable to play host to sedimental properties, and hence to sedimented history. In short, silences will necessarily lack sedimental value. They will thus be immune to historical determination, and therefore they will be an exception to Adorno's generalised socio-historical contextualism²⁷. Silences, however, clearly seems to have a diachronically fixed meaning, a specifiable narrative role, and, as we hinted already, a vital ethical role too. Hence the problem for Adorno: his theory of meaning seems to deprive

25 One might think that even non-contextualist theories of meaning would have the consequence that silences have purely positional value. Not so. A non-contextualist theory of meaning can assign a fixed, context-free semantic value to silences, an option not open to Adorno.

26 I'm here again treating objects and expressions on a par, in terms of those properties that assign them meaningfulness within the sphere of human concerns.

27 Is there a slip from the remark that silences lack sedimental value to the remark that they thereby lack historical determination? No. Positional value is not historically determined in the relevant sense. If silences have only positional value, they can only inherit the relational, and hence ahistorical, because potentially reified, properties of nearby objects.

palpably meaningful entities of the very possibility of historically-determined meaningfulness.

As is the want of puzzles, we are then led into a dilemma. Either semantic value includes sedimental value, as required by Adorno's socio-historical contextualism, in which case silences will not be able to bear the correct semantic properties (because they are unable to host sedimental value), or semantic value does not include sedimental value, in which case Adorno's contextualism cannot be strengthened to socio-historical contextualism. We have already seen reasons to think that the second horn of the dilemma would be unacceptable to Adorno. Let me now say something as to why the idea that silences are meaningless would be just as repugnant to him.

First, for Adorno silences have a privileged ethical-expressive role to play. As I noted at the outset, silence, *qua* deliberate suspension of our assertive efforts, is, often enough, the ethically mandated stance in our current historical situation. Famously, in Adorno's view the proper response to what we experience in our post-Auschwitz context is silence, because silence is the (only) place where the name of the catastrophe is (and could be) silently spoken (1961a: 249). Secondly, silences are familiar and ubiquitous devices in artworks, especially in those lionised by Adorno – conversely, his hostility to art forms such as jazz and the mechanistic tendencies of the early and middle Stravinsky can partly be explained by the marked *horror vacui*, the striking absence of absences, the refusal to

allow breaks, that is common to both²⁸. Given their ethical-aesthetic importance, to say that silences are meaningless is thus not an option for Adorno. But his theory of meaning seems to prevent attributing meaningfulness to them. We need a solution to the puzzle, then. I will give a solution in §5. On the way to it, I shall first discuss some other possible options.

4. *Two Ways of Looking at Silences*

4.1. Silences as Objects

As already noted, the sedimentation metaphor seems to require the existence of something matter-like, a bearer of properties of some sort or other, on which history could sediment²⁹. Relational properties cannot play that role because of the needed separation between actual positional value and normatively-informed sedimental value (between the ideology of the object and its proper ethical

²⁸ There are of course exceptions, e.g. the *Große Pause* before the start of *Danse de la Terre* and the sixteenth-rests in *Danse Sacrale* in *Le Sacre*, the silence-filled opening of *Le Rois des Étoiles* (but see 1962: 151, fn.7/GS 16: 387, fn. 2), the quasi-intentional near-stoppages in Miles Davis's *Bitches Brew*. However, jazz, even in its more progressive forms, and Stravinsky in his pre-twelve-tone period, by and large abhor silences – from Adorno's perspective, they're both imprisoned within "eternal sameness" (1962: 174/GS 16: 408).

²⁹ Recall that the semantic value of terms is entirely dependent on the values that attach to their referents. That's what justifies my constant switching between talk of objects and talk of expressions. Note that while positional value too requires object-like bearers, since first-order relations require objectual relata, the bearers' position can however be individuated without reference to their internal features. Incidentally, the positional value of concepts is given by the positional value of the objects that fall under them (the case of empty concepts requires some adjustments).

status). This remark, in fact, gives us another way of stating the puzzle: without intrinsic properties, the contrast between sedimental and positional value is unavailable, and so silences will also lack eudaimonic value³⁰. Now, according to Adorno, there is in fact a reciprocal metaphysical dependence between objects and relations. Here's what he tells us about a special case of this mutual dependence:

[T]here are no notes without relations, no relations without notes [...] each is to be strictly defined in terms of the other (1961b: 301)³¹.

Patently, notes are thing-like, they have intrinsic characteristics (attack, intensity, frequency, decay, and so on), they are objects, or events, of an easily specifiable kind. Could we treat silences, pure absences, as objects, so as to make them sedimental-value-apt? Well, an immediate difficulty is that with silences, as with holes, the natural thing to say is that they “are not made of matter”, but, rather, that they “result from the absence of matter” (Lewis and Lewis 1970: 3). If silences are not made of matter, they are only located in time and occupy no space at all. Material objects, however, are supposed to be spatio-temporally located. Silences thus fail this basic test for objecthood right away. And if silences can be characterised only along the temporal axis, there's also a further worry. Since at least McTaggart (1908) there have been arguments for the unreality

30 Thanks to Fabian Freyenhagen here (p.c.).

31 See also (V 2: Vorlesung 11).

of time that simply have no counterpart with respect to space³². If silences only have time-like features, and if it is conceivable that any time-like feature be merely psychological (as McTaggart maintains), it would then be hard to uncontroversially claim object-like status for silences. The idea that silences could be thing-like is not just intuitively dubious, then. It is something that can be challenged both on scientific and on metaphysical grounds.

A further problem is that material objects are also supposed to have spatial parts³³. Silences would fail the objectual test on this basis too, since they lack spatial parts. Additionally, it seems hard to make sense of the notion that silences have any discernible parts at all, since they lack any discernible internal articulation whatsoever³⁴. This is connected to yet another problem with thinking of silences as objects. Objects have determinate identity conditions and are countable entities (Lowe 2006: 75)³⁵. But while we can in some sense count silences (and say things such as: “there are more silences in Webern’s music than in Stravinsky’s”), it is impossible to provide identity conditions for silences, precisely because silences,

32 As e.g. Dainton (2001: 41) notes, even contemporary physicists question the reality of time.

33 The compositional structure of objects is on most views taken to bottom out in mereological atoms, parts that have no parts. Those who hold on to a so-called gunky picture of space think of spatial objects as bottoming out into gunk, thing-like stuff made of parts that all have proper parts themselves. See Hudson (2007).

34 On many contemporary views, time is continuous, and so silences, even if they had parts, would not be grounded in mereological atoms. By contrast, even if space too were proved to be continuous, there are fairly robust notions of atoms available – the kind of particle that physicists are after at e.g. CERN.

35 See Hawley (2009) for some difficulties here.

considered purely nonrelationally, are essentially indiscernible. It seems as if we can only identify silences positionally, that is, only in terms of the objects and events surrounding them³⁶.

Maybe we got into this muddle because we started from the assumption that silences were material objects. What if we instead thought that silences are objects of a *sui generis* kind, that they are immaterial bodies (Casati and Varzi 1994: ch. 3)? We could for instance propose that silences are tropes, non-substantial particulars, properties conceived as non-repeatable particulars (Lowe 2006: 10). Or perhaps we could think that silences are parasitic entities that rely on other objects in some unspecified way³⁷. If we go for the latter option, since silences lack intrinsic properties, their sedimental value would be parasitic too, wholly heteronomous, and thus not internal to them. If we instead took silences to be tropes, mere bundles of properties, we would still have no clear account of their ability to host sedimented history, since, once again, the properties in question would all be non-intrinsic³⁸. One last option to consider is that of taking silences as regions of time. The problem

36 Here we could adapt Lewis and Lewis (1970: 5) and say that silences are *silence-linings*. See however Casati and Varzi (1994: 26) for decisive criticism. Talk of boundaries of objects raises additional difficulties. See Weber and Cotnoir (2015).

37 By analogy with Casati and Varzi (1994: 6)

38 As should be clear, the metaphysical problem is that objects, and only objects can be the (primary) bearers of properties. See Loux (1998), Lowe (2006: §5.2). Note that the claim about property-bearing is not that objects are a kind of Aristotelian *substratum* over and above their properties, nor that their parts are to be equated with their properties. Rather, the claim is that the properties had by an object are metaphysically dependent on it (Lowe 2006: 27). As the Adorno quote in the main text makes clear, we need both terms of the metaphysical dependency relation. With silences, though, we lack the objectual side of that relation.

with this suggestion is that the same objections raised against similar moves with respect to holes (Casati and Varzi 1999: 19) would apply here too. While there is a good sense in which silences can be moved across time (every reading, performance and so on, locates them in different regions of time), regions of time cannot be so moved.

I conclude that in trying to apply Adorno's theory of meaning to silences we encounter a general difficulty, namely, that of trying to attribute sedimental properties to non-existing subjects of predication. The purely relational quality of silences prevents them from being the carriers of the very properties that, for Adorno, essentially determine meaning and meaningfulness³⁹.

4.2. *Silences as Punctuation Signs*

One recurrent theme that has emerged from our discussion is the fundamental parasitism of silences, their essential dependence on other entities. Let me now try to flesh out this theme by exploring the idea that silences are a variety of *Satzzeichen*, of punctuation marks, signs whose function and existence is parasitic on that of other, genuinely content-bearing signs.⁴⁰ Silences so conceived would in fact be

39 One could take silences to be gestures, and thus object-like to the extent that gestures-*qua*-events have object-like features. Adorno however seems to think of gestures as what hosts sedimentation: "In music, it's about gestures, not meaning. And to the extent that music is language, it is as the notation of their history that those gestures are sedimented language" (GS 18: 154).

40 On Adorno's view, punctuation marks can only be understood by someone who understands the totality that alone can give rise to them (1956: 93/GS

the extremal kind of punctuation signs; they would mark and constitute what Benjamin (1914: 92) called the internal boundaries of language, indeed, of any system of signs. Their extremality derives from the fact that while they give rise to breaks and lacerations in cognition that are devoid of a determinate, rule-specifiable content, silences are still firmly situated within language; they are linguistic gestures even if they signal momentary suspensions of the directly semiotic function of language.

Now, the analogy with interpunction is at first blush promising, especially because silences are, at least in music, notated pretty much in the way of punctuation marks, because silences can be differentiated and organised according to very specific mathematical proportions (e.g. quarter-rest, eighth-rest, sixteenth-rest and so on)⁴¹. Viewed in this way, they would have some physical traits, at least notationally, on which sedimented history could coagulate. The problem, however, is that silences *qua Satzzeichen* would be little more than rhythm-patterns, little more than (consonant-like) articulation of their surroundings (indeed, the

11: 108). Their content and one's grasp thereof are thus once again holistically constrained. Punctuation marks are, fairly clearly, prosodic silences that separate words not just phonetically but discursively too. For a particular case, that of exclamation marks, Adorno (1956: 92/GS 11: 107) notes that they are "like silent cymbal clashes". Similar images can be conjured up with respect to any other punctuation marks. For another take on punctuation marks and empty spaces, see Derrida (1970: 193) on Mallarmé, and Derrida (1981: 287-88).

41 It is a trivial remark that rests have positional value. For example, the quarter-rest in the theme of Mozart's *Rondo in D-Major* is hardly noticeable in the exposition due to the busy left-hand figuration. When that figuration is suspended at the start of the development, the once unnoticed quarter-rest acquires a highly dramatic significance.

insertion of un-notated rests is often suggested so as to improve phrasing, by forcing e.g. the lifting of the bow to better articulate a string phrase)⁴². What we would get out of this conception of silences as punctuation marks is, in effect, *metronomisiert* silence (by analogy with GS 17: 310). Such regimentation would be doing violence to the real objectivity of silences, however, since on closer inspection it becomes apparent that there is no direct metaphysical correspondence between silences and their notation. If so, it is hard to see how sedimented history could legitimately be said to congeal on a notation that is not faithful to the reality of the silence-event⁴³. The reason for this ineliminable unfaithfulness is two-fold. First, silences still remain absences, even when notated with relative precision. Sure, the gesture of e.g. lifting the bow of a string instrument may well correspond to or be triggered by a rest⁴⁴. But genuine silences are, again, the absence of gestures, and even if we insist that non-gestures are gestures of sorts, the difficulties we considered with the treatment of silences as immaterial objects would return. Secondly, and most importantly, there are

42 Here we could go Deleuze's (1981/2003: xv) way and treat rhythms as objects. Yet another way would be to treat silences *qua* punctuation marks as parts of the surrounding objects. The difficulty here is that there would be as many kinds of silences as there are words of which they could be part, without much prospect of a unified account.

43 *Vide* the joke at Webern's expenses played by Berg and Adorno, a quarter-rest notated with all imaginable modes of attack and dynamics attached to it (GS 18: 493). Similarly, Adorno's reservations regarding the Darmstadt School's totalising efforts to discipline silence within an inch of its absence-hood are best seen as motivated by his aversion to metronomisation in general. See e.g. (1961b/GS 16: 493–540; V 17).

44 Actually, strictly speaking the silence corresponds to the *lifted* bow, not to the lifting of the bow.

also irregular, unmetered, and perhaps unmeterable rests in music that disrupt the normal pulse of the work, such as fermatas and *Große Pausen*, whose notation leaves the actual temporal profile of the silence underdetermined, a matter for the individual choice of the performer⁴⁵. The suggestion would thus lack generality⁴⁶.

The proposal that silences have object-like features has proved very hard to make stable, then. Let me now turn to my own proposal.

5. *Towards a Topography of the Void*

The first step is to indeed take silences to be extremal *Denkbilder*, to grant that their content is entirely parasitic on that of other entities. The key move, however, is to think of their content as *displaced* content. The displacement comes about because

45 Perhaps the most striking example of the latter is the pause between movement I and II of Mahler's *Second Symphony* stipulated to last "at least five minutes". Hardly any performance respects Mahler's request. It is worth pointing out here that, as Buck-Morss (1977: 43) notes, Adorno's stress on the historical component of meaningfulness first arose out of his musical interests. I would also add that Adorno's conception of totality is in fact driven by his conception of musical totality (see e.g. his remarks on musical structure in GS 15: 245). Moreover, for Adorno the aesthetic experience is the privileged model of experience more generally, since it provides the way in which the subject takes in the object in all its richness, without residue (1965/2008: 84/V 16: 126). Finally, for Adorno, art does not just partake of rational traits. It is, rather, rationality itself (V 3: 22).

46 This in itself is not a conclusive refutation (after all, silences may well resist subsumption under a single category, a resistance anticipated in 1965/2008: 81/V 16: 122). If we could find an account able to cover all cases of silences, though, it would surely be methodologically preferable, an indication that perhaps we are indeed carving the phenomena pretty close to the joints.

silences jolt the narrative flow in works of art and in consciousness and experience more generally⁴⁷. The idea is that the sedimental value of the preceding object(s) *slides* forward in much the same way in which luggage lunges forward when a carriage stutters to a sudden halt. Thus displaced, sedimental value can then be said to inhabit silences. Let me expand on this. For Adorno, we should think of the totality of signification as composed of a criss-crossing of inter-objectual relations, profiling the possible ways for objects to be⁴⁸. It is this criss-crossing that determines the positional value of objects. In the normal case, those possibilities intersect at some object or other. Some intersections, however, are empty, object-less; they correspond to co-ordinates determining an unoccupied position⁴⁹. What effects the jolt, what triggers the displacement of sedimental value is the very emptiness of those extremal intersections⁵⁰.

Empty intersections have this special disclosing power precisely because they are a very special case

47 Alternatively, silences are the *outcome* of joltings of this kind.

48 (1954/1958: 13/GS 11: 21-22; V 2: 151, 294, 296-297; 1966: 163/GS 6: 165-166).

49 As Deleuze (1964: 4) notes, the role of intersections is one of the organising principles of *La Recherche*, a world of signs “that are organised in circles and intersect at certain points”.

50 One might object that if silences jolt semantic value, it's not clear why only sedimental value should slide forward. The reply is that positional value is only determined by a specific node in the network of possibilities. Once that node is left behind, the positional value disappears. Sedimental value, by contrast, accumulates on objects independently of their actual positional value, and hence its traces can survive displacement. One must also distinguish between empty intersections that generate silences and those that generate e.g. unactualised or unactualisable objects (flying donkeys, golden mountains and so on). With these latter intersections, there is an intentional object (*modulo* the usual worries re the graspability of illogical objects of thoughts) occupying the node. With silences there is no object of any kind, only traces of objects.

of the subject-object relation, a case where the subject is left alone with itself, without an object to abandon itself to. If proper experience is a matter of a certain “*Weichheit gegen die Dinge*” (1944/1972: 227/GS 3: 260), a certain weakening of the subject with respect to the “resistance that [thought] encounters” from its subject matter, from the objects it tries to have thoughts about, indeed with respect to the “coercion” exerted by thought, that weakness acquires a particularly poignant form when experience is deprived of objects, when it is (outward-directed) experience of nothingness⁵¹. In the case of silences, that is, the absence of the object, and indeed of all matter, means that the (memory of the) sedimented value of objects, normally hidden from sight in reified experience, *may* come to the fore for a receptive subject bereft of an object of contemplation, that the sediments may be brought to cognitive salience precisely because of the sudden absence of the other term in the experiential relation. Faced with no resistance from the object, the subject sinks in the emptiness and draws in the neighbouring sedimental value(s) towards itself. This is the sense in which silences are “vanishing points” (1962: 162/GS 16: 397) for agent-hood broadly conceived. The suggestion here is that silences are the moments when the “sudden, abrupt, desultory” insight into the non-commodified character of the object becomes salient to consciousness, as if in a flash, constituting a privileged kind of cognition (V2: 143-144).

51 See also (1965a: 215/GS 11: 561; 1965/2008: 81/V 16: 122; 1966: 188).

This view of silences seems to me to be fully in line with Adorno's (1954: 319-320/GS 11: 678) remark that in Monet and Debussy we witness gestures that effect a "kind of dissolution of the material object in its own aura"⁵². To the "microscopic look" (V 2: 149-150) afforded by dialectical reflection, the aura of the objects is revealed to be their internal "movement", their instability, their perennial attempt to escape from any conceptual cage, their ceaseless mapping of unactualised possibilities. Silences surprise and reveal that normally hidden movement, that internal tendency of objects towards utopia, towards the fulfilment of all that they can be, a tendency only truly disclosed in silences⁵³. With silences, we are left with nothing but the fragrance of the objects⁵⁴, nothing but the echo of their movements, since the objects, and their possibilities too, have disappeared – silences are not even a *χώρα*-like receptacle; they are just the purest of absences, leaving only memories of other spaces and other times⁵⁵. Or, to again adapt Adorno's own words (GS 18: 13): if it is true that the endings of Debussy's music are like a notated averting of one's gaze away from the music, with silences we are

52 Benjamin (2003: 177) also speaks of "silence as aura".

53 Full *geistige* experience would reveal that utopian content even in non-silent episodes of consciousness. But it's unclear that there is such a thing as genuine re-enchanted experience, for that would make of utopia a genuinely accessible place. Silences, by contrast, are, qua non-places, the elective location for utopian epiphanies.

54 To borrow and adapt from (1954: 319/GS 11: 677).

55 For John Cage, silence reveals what is not normally attended to behind everyday noise. The silence I have in mind here, by contrast, is pretty much absolute silence, an idealised notion, sure enough, but importantly distinct from Cage's notion of silence as a container for the normally unheard background *at that very node*. Adornian silence, by contrast, taps into the inaudible from other, and earlier nodes.

instead forced to gaze into the exploded fragments of the preceding objects. As we stare at silences, the positional value of the surrounding objects disappears (because we are, palpably, at a different co-ordinate point).

Their sedimental value, however, lingers on inertially, in its displacement to a no-place, to a no-time. Since sedimental value is no longer hidden by the reified, misleading, miscalculated, quotidian positional value of their host objects, we can finally contemplate it fully⁵⁶. It is thus only by the sudden halt, by the running out of contemplated matter, that the re-enchanted vision is attained. If this is along the right lines, we can then say that in silences it is indeed possible to have a sediment without an object because the sediment has shifted over from nearby objects. Silences can thus be said to have a content after all, but what they have is no more than displaced content, so that the cloud of history only coagulates on silences indirectly, parasitic on the original location of that content. This seems to me to be a coherent story to tell, and a fully Adornian one too. It is also a story that, I think, finally dissolves our puzzle.

In effect, what we witness with silences is a dual demise of objectuality. Because silences are purely relational, they are not objects. Because cognition of silences is a form of outward-directed experience without object, the subject-object relation loses its object-pole too (only the memory of objects is

⁵⁶ The positional value of silences is, intuitively, transparent, because purely positional, purely structural, and so raises no screen to hide the displaced content of the object.

retained)⁵⁷. The withdrawing gesture embodied by silences therefore signals the death of the subject-object relation.

It is precisely at this point that Adorno's topography of the void can get started. By thinking of silences in these terms, we are in effect conceiving of nothingness, just as (Adorno 1965b: 136/V 14: 212) urged, not as "merely nothingness" but rather as nothingness that is contemplated from "within complete negativity". That is, what silences show is that the placelessness of utopia, its constitutive, recursive dislocation, is but another mask worn by death, by annihilation, that eudaimonic value is unrealisable, that all we can hope for is the disclosure of sedimental value⁵⁸.

Our initial problem was to explain how history could be locked within silences. The answer I am now giving is that it is not history that is locked in silences, but rather a privileged viewpoint from which history becomes maximally visible⁵⁹. From within silences, that is, from within a space which is not a place, from

57 One might object that this view of silences is phenomenologically implausible. After all, silences do not obliterate cognition of currently presented objects. The reply is that what silences in fact do is suspend, or annul, the current content of our experiences and replace it with the displaced content of previous experiences (silences are, then, properly hallucinatory seeings). Or, silences may also disclose current tokens of experience as prototypes for all similar experiences, so that the displaced content from previous experiences slides over to them. In all cases, the key function of silences is the extraction of experiences from their standard contextual embedment. In this sense, silences are deeply Beckettian (see fn. 7).

58 As Adorno (1966: 18/GS 6: 29) would say, in experiencing silence it is human suffering qua objectivity that finally "weighs upon the subject".

59 Silences may also be taken to be the meeting point between the *unhappy consciousness* of the dialectical mind and that *promesse du bonheur* that runs through so much of Adorno's thinking.

a time which is not a time, we are contemplating a nothingness that is revealed from within, from its correct viewpoint, precisely because silences reveal history as what it can only be, pre-history, the history of class struggles and unfreedom (GS 8: 374), precisely because silences lay bare the sedimented value that disenchanted experience has concealed, the glimpse into the possibilities that no object could ever attain (1965b: 132/V 14: 206), precisely because silences show how far apart positional value and eudaimonic value actually and ineluctably are. We can then say that silences are the points where we can make contact, simultaneously, with the (displaced memory of the) full content of experience (the full gamut of unactualised and unactualisable possibilities for the objects), but also with the mortality that cheats everyone of everything, the denial that those possibilities could ever come into being (1965b: 136/V 14: 213). Accordingly, while silences can only bear displaced content (the sedimental value of neighbouring objects), history is nevertheless locked into them by proxy, in virtue of their providing the privileged viewpoint over history made possible precisely by their unique eligibility to give sanctuary to that displaced content.

The *Lautlos* in this sense, then, is what nothingness “actually contains” (1965b: 135/V 14: 211), that is, nothing but memories of consummated and impending loss. The *Lautlos*, if it is a *Denkbild* at all, is thus not a flash of light in the darkness, but rather a flash of the darkest of darkness in amongst

the damaged light⁶⁰. It is a *Bild des Verschwindens* (1968: 1/GS 13: 325), an image of the vanishing, the expression of that “complicity with death” that Adorno detected in Berg’s entire work. Adorno also said, famously, that Benjamin’s words were all last words. What I have suggested in this paper, in effect, is that if silences are *anything* at all, they can but be the traces of our most extremal words⁶¹.

60 If so, the idea of sedimented history could be one more example of what Freyenhagen (2013: 4) called Adorno’s epistemic negativism.

61 I’m confident that my proposal does indeed solve the puzzle we started from. If I’m wrong about this, I hope to have at least obeyed Adorno’s (1965b: 53/V 14: 83) recommendation that “one does not understand philosophy by *eliminating* contradictions”. Rather, “one understands a philosophy by seeking its truth content *precisely at the point* where it becomes entangled in contradictions” (my emphases).

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