Book Reviews

***Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics.* By J.M. Bernstein. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).**

Jay Bernstein's *Adorno* is a complex and challenging book. On the one hand, it continues the politico-aesthetic critique of modernity articulated in *The Fate of Art* (1992) and *Recovering Ethical Life* (1995), where Bernstein used Adorno's aesthetic modernism to question Habermas's communicative turn. On the other hand, *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics* pushes away from aesthetic topics to propose "ethical modernism" as an alternative to discourse ethics. Bernstein derives his alternative by reconstructing themes from Adorno's *Minima Moralia, Dialectic of Enlightenment*, and *Negative Dialectics*. Although Habermas lurks in the subtext, Kant and various Anglo-American philosophers are the primary interlocutors. The book aims to show philosophers who are not "Adorno aficionados" that Adornian ethical modernism "bears comparison with the best of contemporary ethical thought" (xii). So the book asks to be judged both as a work of Adorno scholarship and as a contribution to contemporary philosophical ethics.

I think Bernstein succeeds admirably in deriving an ethical conception from Adorno's mostly implicit approach. Precisely because his reconstructive effort succeeds, however, I have difficulty seeing how "ethical modernism" can become a "compelling voice in contemporary ethics" (xiii). For the notion of "fugitive ethical events," on which this conception turns, resists philosophical reconstruction from theoretical positions other than Adorno's. In summarizing Bernstein's rich, detailed argument, this review will indicate why such resistance is unavoidable.

Bernstein reads Adorno's implicit ethics as offering a response to the moral failure of the "project of modernity" (4–7). Paradoxically, this failure stems from modernity's achievements. By pursuing "a wholly secular form of life" in the name of science, Western cultures have undermined the "rational coherence" and "practical adequacy" of all values and ideals, including scientific rationality and truth. This condition of "disenchantment" (Weber) and "nihilism" (Nietzsche) threatens to generate "universal affective scepticism," in which human agents can find neither good reasons nor attractive motivations for pursuing any particular forms of practice. This is the deeper "hurt" to which contemporary ethical debates unwittingly respond, says Bernstein (11–17). On an Adornian diagnosis, both contemporary ethical theories and contemporary social practices suffer from a "systematic separation of universal and particular." Both theory and practice are forms of "identity thinking" that "squander the sensuously particular in its particularity." That is why we have no "normative account explaining *how a wholly secular form of life can be rationally compelling and intrinsically motivating*" (18). Bernstein aims to remedy this lack, with Adorno's help.

Initially it is not apparent how an Adornian diagnosis could give rise to such an account. So Bernstein introduces an independent description of the "grammar of moral insight." As parsed by Dieter Henrich (21–29, 321), this grammar involves four requirements: that practical reasoning is dependent on the object it is about; that what is recognized as morally good both demands and receives approval; that such approval helps constitute the self that approves; and that to approve the morally good is to affirm its existence. Acknowledging these four requirements, Adorno argues that modern disenchantment systematically undermines moral insight. The only way to resist is to expand rationality to include "ineliminable moments of dependency and particularity" (31). Hence Adorno offers alternative notions of experience, authority, and knowledge to fill in for those forms of "object relation" which once guided ethical reasoning prior to disenchantment.

Chapter 1 canvasses *Minima Moralia*'s commentary on damaged ethical life and positions it with respect to contrasting "centralist" emphases on *Moralität* and "naturalist" emphases on *Sittlichkeit*. Then chapter 2 argues from *Dialectic of Enlightenment* that modernity's disenchantment,

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rationalism, and universalism destroy auratic experience, charismatic and traditional authority, and ethical knowledge. In claiming self-sufficiency, instrumental reason disavows that dependency on particular and material objects which it nevertheless requires.

According to chapters 3 and 4, even Kant's formulation of *Moralität* instrumentalizes reason by making (theoretical) reason supreme in morality. This happens in response to an earlier, Hobbesian instrumentalization. Before such double instrumentalization, however, "material inferential" relations once held "between object and action," and empirical social practices always already normed human conduct: to see my neighbor in distress would inferentially commit me to giving her aid (160–61). Kant's moral universalism simply "seconds and doubles the [Hobbesian] disabling of the material inferences of everyday, moral reason" (163).

Adorno, by contrast, regards the moral object as a "locus of claims" confronting us with "the damaged face" that, through disenchantment, "we" have given "objects, persons, and things." Restitution and remorse become the appropriate ethical orientation (185–87). This orientation presupposes that reason itself arises from "living nature," which reason suppresses and disavows. Adorno reminds Kantian idealism "that human conceptuality is part of the natural world" (213). Indeed, "anthropomorphic nature within and without is the (ground of) the good" (sic, 225). Hence the contemporary beginning of wisdom, so to speak, would be to acknowledge the concept's dependence on independent objects, as well as the guilt the subject incurs by dishonoring its objects. Adorno's ethical philosophy seeks to rescue the damaged object through a self-critique of reason (226–34).

As articulated by Bernstein, the core to Adorno's alternative lies in a contrast between "the simple concept" and "the complex concept." The simple concept is both outcome and medium of the processes of disenchantment and rationalization. It is, one could say, a one-dimensional concept. The complex concept is two dimensional. It incorporates the simple concept as its "logical axis," but joins this with a "material axis composed of the mediating moments of object, image, language, and tradition" (33). Adorno's "original insight" is that the grammar of moral insight elaborates the complex concept, and that disenchantment destroys moral insight by operating with "an illegitimate, partial concept of the concept" (34). Restoring human agency under the onslaught of affective skepticism will require a concept of the concept that partially re-enchants the world. This doubled concept does not point toward Hegel's "absolute spirit," but toward Adorno's conception of "the nonidentical."

Against Albrecht Wellmer's claim that Adorno objects to "conceptual knowing as such" (266), chapter 6 argues that Adorno distinguishes between two conceptions of reason: "rationalized reason" governed by norms of logical inference, and practical reason governed by "some conception of material inference structures" (263). Rationalized reason relies on the simple concept. It emphasizes logical form, discursive communication, predicative identification, and an orientation to the subject. Practical reason relies on the complex concept. It emphasizes material content, expressive naming, nonpredicative identification, and an orientation to the object. Moreover, the two "axes of the concept" – logical and material – are both opposed and interlinked. The simple concept would not be possible without the material axis it suppresses, and the complex concept cannot dispense with the logical axis whose modern dominance it nevertheless resists.

Bernstein's argument for the necessity of the material axis, and thereby for the ethical priority of the complex concept, involves three controversial claims:

(1) "*all (empirical) predicative identification incorporates (presupposes) a moment of non-predicative identification*" (299);
(2) all conceptuality is prestructured by the difference between "living" and "nonliving" objects and by the related experience of susceptibility to pain and suffering; and
(3) the concept's material axis lies in the "*processual activities of concept acquisition, formation, and application*" (308) that Kant signaled with his idea of reflective judgment.

Together the notions of "non-predicative identification" and of reflective judgment as "intransitive understanding" allow Bernstein to claim that the object has a "material meaning," impinging on the subject, yet ever exceeding the grasp of simple concepts. These notions also sustain his claim that "*the logic of moral insight is nothing other than the unfolded logic of the complex concept*" (321).

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The complex concept allows one to see a particular injured body as needing help and to respond accordingly: "the bindingness of moral claims is . . . nothing other than material inferences from awarenesses of a state of affairs, from (the appreciation of) *bleeding badly* to (the response) *I will apply a tourniquet*" (322).

The outcome, according to chapter 7, is an "ethic of nonidentity" whose central principle is "the indexical binding of moral norms" (363). Derived from Wellmer, the indexical principle makes the validity of any moral norm or concept "*dependent* on the validity of its application to a particular instance" (362). A moral norm or concept is inescapably indexed to the situation(s) in which it originates. Its cognitive validity "is *exhausted* in the true judgments that can be made employing it" (363). This indexical principle explicates Bernstein's own thesis that "states of affairs" are the source or ground of ethical claims, where states of affairs are understood to be temporal, material, and particular, not eternal, immaterial, or universal. It also captures the "charismatic" authority of norms, an authority that derives from "transient states of affairs" (367–68).

Bernstein's indexical principle accords, he says, with Adorno's "new categorical imperative" (chapter 8), and it suggests new possibilities for ethical action (chapter 9). The new categorical imperative stems from Adorno's interpreting Nazi genocide as a "negative theodicy" revealing the nihilistic and life-destroying tendencies of "modern societal rationalization and rationalized reason" (384). Adorno asserts that Hitler has imposed a new categorical imperative on human beings in their state of unfreedom: so to arrange their thoughts and actions that nothing like Auschwitz will happen again. But Adorno also says instrumental "coldness" is required for someone like himself to go on living after Auschwitz. This suggests to Bernstein that, in a world so disenchanted that it lacks "the resources on which to construct an affirmative conception of life," all of "us" are survivors (398). He then counterposes to the "coldness of bourgeois morality" an ethos of "compassion" as active and felt solidarity with anything that suffers. This ethos presupposes "a conception of ourselves as injured and injurable animals" (38).

Yet Adorno himself does not think an ethos of compassion can be sustained in a disenchanted world. So the question remains whether and how "a wholly secular form of life can be rationally compelling and intrinsically motivating" (415). Bernstein would like to argue that it can be, indeed, that "secularity is not the end of significant meaningfulness, but the condition of its becoming intelligible *überhaupt*" (328–29). This argument, developed in chapter 9, relies on the notion of "fugitive ethical events." Given modern disenchantment, contemporary resistance to nihilism requires that "enchanted experience" and "auratic individuality" be an "actual possibility" (418). Whereas Adorno finds this actual possibility in authentic works of modern art, Bernstein also finds it in certain empirical actions and experiences. These are "fugitive ethical events." They occur within the disenchanted world, but they "flee from ordinary empirical experience and are intrinsically ephemeral and transient" (419). They are "promises" that both provide "the normative authority of secular norms" and point toward "a form of life in which these norms . . . would be fully instantiated" (38). As examples Bernstein mentions the Danish rescue of Jews during World War II (411–12, 442–43), the American civil rights movement (442, 455), and "the single mother who quietly . . . manages in the face of poverty and social disintegration to raise her children so that they escape the fate that awaits them" (447).

It is in such fugitive ethical events, he says, that metaphysical experience can occur, disrupting the nihilism of modernity. They are Bernstein's Adornian replacements, inner-worldly but transcendent, for Kant's "postulates of practical reason" (i.e., the metaphysical ideas of God's existence, humanity's freedom, and the soul's immortality). Fugitive ethical events promise a "transfigured nature" (434), genuine happiness (438), freedom from domination (441), and "an end to suffering" (443). Although theirs is an "exemplarity without succession," and although philosophy can neither "anticipate" nor "legislate" them (443), fugitive ethical events have the charismatic authority to "interrupt the context of immanence, to innervate new norms . . . and reveal the possibility of otherness" (444). Since instrumental rationality webs all institutions and communities, none provides a safe haven or dependable source for such events: "nothing mediates between fugitive, charismatic episodes and everyday practice" (446). Yet fugitive ethical events do uniquely "*disclose and promise* ethical concepts." Accordingly they not only constitute "the main bulwark against further societal rationalization," but also help us perceive

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"how . . . a wholly secular form of life can be rationally compelling and intrinsically motivating" (448–50).

As I suggested earlier, Bernstein's complex and challenging derivation of "ethical modernism" from Adorno is so successful that it fails. If one wanted to reconstruct a philosophical ethics from Adorno's writings, this would be the way to do it. But Adorno's "ethical" orientation toward the nonidentical means that the result must face strong resistance from other theoretical positions. Some of the resistance will come from other Adorno scholars who take the central target of Adorno's social critique to be advanced capitalism rather than the advance of nihilism. Other resistance will come from critical theorists who discover significant learning processes in modernity where Bernstein's Adorno spies disastrous disenchantment. And most Anglo-American moral philosophers will question the relevance of "fugitive ethical events" for either mundane or extraordinary cases in legal, medical, professional, and personal ethics. In many ways, what Bernstein has reconstructed from Adorno is an anti-ethics opposed to the conceptions of the moral (*Moralität*) and the ethical (*Sittlichkeit*) that have shaped philosophy since Kant and Hegel. That is why resistance to "ethical modernism" is unavoidable.

This does not mean that "ethical modernism" has nothing to offer contemporary ethical debates. Quite the contrary, for in avoiding the hard questions posed by Bernstein's *Adorno* about the rationality and meaning of secular life, many scholars have surrendered broad fields of normative and social-critical reflection to hacks and quacks. Still, I do not see how Bernstein's charismatic particularism will remedy this situation. Internally, his conception of the ethical fails to explain how transient states of affairs can either "issue" or "ground" ethical claims. To say that they can would seem to assign linguistic and communicative agency to entities and situations that can at most be objects and topics of conversation and deliberation. Externally, Bernstein's conception of the ethical fails to show how "fugitive ethical events" – presumably occasional experiences had by individuals rather than processes sustained by social movements, oppressed classes, communities, and institutions – can do anything more than make promises that are repeatedly broken. How would such events actually sustain contemporary struggles for justice, liberation, and recognition? How would they give agents a sense that such struggles are intrinsically worthwhile?

For both internal and external reasons, then, I do not think Bernstein's *Adorno* explains adequately how "a wholly secular form of life can be rationally compelling and intrinsically motivating" (415). Yet by using Adorno's writings to raise this issue, Bernstein has made it a compelling and motivating question for both Adorno scholarship and contemporary ethics.

Lambert Zuidervaart

***Tocqueville Between Two Worlds: The Making of a Political and Theoretical Life.* By Sheldon S. Wolin. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).**

Wolin describes his book as a "kind of biography" (4), but one whose subject has been de-centered (292–93, 561). Perhaps appropriately for this kind of biography, Wolin's study is only loosely integrated. This is not a tight, sustained argument, but a diffuse commentary that constantly shifts its focus among three different levels – theoretical, political, and personal – and among a broad range of different works. What holds Wolin's book together are a few recurring themes, chief among which (as the book's title indicates) is Tocqueville's attempt to mediate between different worlds.

Between what two worlds was Tocqueville situated? For one thing, Tocqueville found himself torn between thought and political action. While he is best known today for his theoretical insights, Wolin suggests that Tocqueville was drawn to a career in politics and assumed the role of theorist with reluctance (291, 298). Yet Tocqueville later concluded that he was "better at thinking than at action" (430). Moreover, Wolin argues, "Tocqueville came to suspect that theorizing and action were alternative, perhaps mutually exclusive forms of challenge and gratification, not simply alternating modes of activity to be picked up or laid aside as the occasion warranted" (298).

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Theoretical insight required "critical distance" and "detachment," which were threatened both by "idealism's project for overcoming the subject-object distinction" and by active participation in politics (157–58, 409).

Tocqueville also found himself mediating between aristocracy and democracy, "the Old and the New World, between past and present, between privilege and equality" (7). Mediation, as Wolin persuasively shows, was accomplished by infusing some elements of aristocracy into democracy and vice versa. Although Tocqueville insisted on "the impossibility of restoring the Old Regime," he smuggled aristocratic principles of individuality, difference, and resistance into his theory of democratic liberty while looking for functional equivalents to the aristocratic institutions of the past (130, 291). Conversely, Tocqueville found precursors of American participatory democracy in Old Regime France, prior to the destruction of municipal independence by a centralizing monarchy.

For Wolin, Tocqueville's liminality entailed estrangement from both worlds, the aristocratic and the democratic. Yet unlike Hegel and Marx, Tocqueville did not perceive estrangement as "a condition to be overcome and eliminated altogether. It was, instead, to be preserved as essential . . . to the resolve of political actors to resist the excesses not only of democracy but of modernity" and "to the power of theory to furnish insight" (130). Tocqueville "claimed that because he had been born between two worlds, he could see into them both in ways that others, coming from different origins, could not" (139). Although Tocqueville eventually abandoned his mediating role in the midst of France's 1848 revolution, he continued to seek critical distance in other ways. In *Souvenirs*, his memoir of the revolution, the basis for this claim of distance "was not the same as his earlier one that he was situated between worlds." Instead, it was "a parochial one, that he had his roots in one of those worlds, the nearly vanished world of the traditional countryside" (476).

Another recurring theme in Wolin's book is the revival of the political; he describes this as the "abiding concern of Tocqueville's thinking" and "the referent point by which he tried to define his life as well as the task before his generation" (5). Wolin argues that liberalism was "the vehicle [Tocqueville] chose for realizing the political," although this was a "halting" choice, and Tocqueville's liberalism was far from "characteristic or emblematic of liberal thinking in general" (6). Yet the America that Tocqueville encountered and described in the first volume of *Democracy in America* taught him "that any hope for reviving the political in the modern world depended on promoting democratic participation" (167). Thus, "Tocqueville's theory represents an important early engagement between liberalism and democracy" (8).

In Wolin's view, Tocqueville's early openness to democracy, his willingness to reconcile himself to the "providential" advance of equality, and his enthusiasm for the participatory politics he found in Jacksonian America all fade in his later works. Indeed, the second volume of *Democracy in America* (published five years after the first) already shows signs that Tocqueville was abandoning the "civic democracy" that he "celebrated in volume 1" (338). Wolin suggests that, "especially in volume 2, Tocqueville's emphasis drew him away from the civic democracy symbolized by New England and toward a fixation with the culture of equality and suggestions for its control" (379). Tocqueville's turn "to the right" is also said to be prefigured in "the repressive spirit" of *The Penitentiary System in the United States and Its Application to France*, co-authored with Gustav de Beaumont (433). However, for Wolin, the crucial turning point seems to have occurred during Tocqueville's parliamentary career under the July Monarchy and, later, the Second Republic. Disgusted by the materialistic, petty, interest-driven bourgeois politics of the July Monarchy, yet alarmed by French "workers demanding admission into public life as actors and socialist theories attacking the foundations of the bourgeois hegemony" (433), Tocqueville became increasingly preoccupied with maintaining social order and ultimately opted for "a less inclusive, more selective liberalism" (423).

Wolin argues that after the 1848 revolution, Tocqueville "tacitly discard[s] the role of mediator-healer, even though he sees his society as 'cut in two' by the threat of socialism. Socialism stands for the opposite, which his liberalism and conception of the political cannot or will not mediate" (436). Wolin sees this not only as a tragic mistake, but also as a great irony, since Tocqueville thereby missed a promising opportunity to revive the political. "Political clubs, associations, newspapers, and worker organizations – all of which would soon be suppressed or censored – represented precisely what Tocqueville had admired in America . . . . Tocqueville observed much of this but

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refused to see any possibilities of political revival" (485–86). Instead, "Tocqueville's response is consistently hostile," in large part because French "participatory politics" were "mixed up with revolutionary ferment" (432). (Tocqueville, perhaps in contrast to Wolin, saw revolutionary turmoil not as the negation of despotism, but as likely to engender it.) Adding to what Wolin sees as the irony of his hostile reaction, Tocqueville later "retrieves the America of participatory democracy and fashions it [in *The Old Regime and the French Revolution*] into an implicit criticism of the despotism of Louis Napoleon" (432).

Wolin's book ends on a gloomy note. In his view, Tocqueville's project of reviving the political must ultimately be judged a failure (565), which continues to haunt us long after Tocqueville's death. Today, Wolin argues, we are witnessing a "passing of democracy," in which the loss of self-government is concealed by the preservation of a "semblance of popular sovereignty" (567, 570). This "postmodern despotism consists of the collapse of politics into economics and the emergence of a new form, the economic polity" (571). In Wolin's conclusion, one hears echoes of the Frankfurt School: Adorno and Horkheimer's nightmarish vision of a totally administered society, Marcuse's one-dimensional man, and Habermas's decline of the public sphere. Not surprisingly, Wolin's conclusion suffers from many of the same weaknesses. Actually existing liberal democracies have real shortcomings, but Wolin's perspective exaggerates the death of political participation in them, and his fatalistic resignation encourages despair and quiescence instead of more vigorous political activism. In this last respect, Wolin's conclusion is curiously un-Tocquevillean. For Tocqueville, the task of political theory is to "identify the dominant direction of historical forces . . . and then, within those limits, to propose possible permutations" (318). While the trend toward equality may be a "providential fact," for example, "it is still within human powers to shape equality toward 'servitude or liberty, enlightenment or barbarism, prosperity or misery' " (373). Wolin is clear about what he sees as the "dominant direction of historical forces," but unlike Tocqueville, he provides no sense of the "possible permutations" they permit.

Wolin's claim that Tocqueville's later works reflect a "turn to the right" is also not entirely persuasive. On the one hand, Wolin misses or downplays the inclusive and democratic aspects that can be found even in Tocqueville's presumably more conservative works. For example, Wolin emphasizes Tocqueville's defense of private property against socialism, but not the importance Tocqueville placed on the widespread diffusion of property ownership among citizens. Wolin also suggests that Tocqueville's response to poverty was private charity, which would treat the poor as "dependents on private benevolence rather than as citizens" (463). As I have argued elsewhere, this is a one-sided reading of Tocqueville that neglects his skepticism about private charity as well as his preventive and associative proposals for addressing poverty. On the other hand, Wolin seems to forget the conservative aspects of Tocqueville's more democratic works. Early on, Tocqueville was concerned about the dangers of majority tyranny. He extolled America's participatory democracy in part because it was "self-limiting by practicing 'self-control'" (283). Self-limitation was provided by a political culture inherited from England, by a "legal aristocracy" that would help to moderate majority tyranny, and above all by religion. Wolin notes all of this himself, but he doesn't seem to grasp how it undercuts his larger claim that Tocqueville's later thinking took a "turn to the right." In short, while there may be a shift in emphasis, there is no sharp rupture between the first volume of *Democracy in America* and Tocqueville's other works.

Although Tocqueville did not become a reactionary, he did have a lifelong concern with moderating political extremism (the stance that "everything is permissible," as he put it in *Democracy in America*), which takes on renewed relevance after September 11, 2001. Wolin's book was written before that terrible event, but one wonders whether the book would have taken a different shape had it been written afterwards. In some respects, Tocqueville seems unhelpful for making sense of this kind of atrocity. He failed to see, for example, how religion is not always a moderating force, but sometimes encourages political extremism. In other respects, Tocqueville is more helpful. Given his argument in *The Old Regime* that people revolt when things get better, not worse, he may well have questioned the view that poverty is the root cause of terrorism. Instead, if he *had* seen religion as a potentially radicalizing force, Tocqueville might have concluded that radical Islamist political ideologies are most likely to take root in places where democratic government is absent – like the Arab world. Inexperience with the practical realities of governance, he argues in *The Old Regime*,

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fosters political extremism and blind confidence in radical, utopian ideologies. This may also help to explain the reformist trend in Iran, where Islamists *are* confronted with the practical realities of governance.

As interesting as this kind of speculation may be, it takes us too far afield from the book that Wolin did write. *Tocqueville Between Two Worlds* has many strengths to make up for its few short-comings, and it clearly reflects Wolin's broad grasp of political theory and deep erudition. His central metaphor of Tocqueville "stranded" between two worlds, and his sensitive exploration of this liminal position as a source of both alienated frustration and creative insight, is an interesting and fruitful contribution to our understanding of Tocqueville. It will no doubt be an enduring one as well.

Chad Alan Goldberg

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