

Dwarf Fruit, or: The Impertinent Self

Josef Früchtl

Krisis 41 (2): 74-75.

DOI

10.21827/krisis.41.2.38246

Licence

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License International License (CC BY 4.0). © 2021 The author(s).

Dwarf Fruit, or: The Impertinent Self

Josef Früchtl

One might think that dwarf fruit is fruit for human beings so small that in our imagination they tend to populate myths and fairy tales. But dwarf fruit is simply the name for fruit that grows on little trees, even in a big pot on the balcony. It does not differ from the fruit – apples, pears, cherries, plums – of bigger trees, but it ripens faster. Thus, though the tree seems ridiculously small, the fruit – the apple – is as sappy and sweet-sour as you like to have it. It may even give you a kick as if it were from the tree of knowledge.

“Dwarf fruit” is also the title of an aphorism – it is number 29 – in Theodor W. Adorno’s *Minima Moralia* that arranges a series of short sentences, among them the famous and last one: “The whole is the false”, inverting Hegel’s: “The true is the whole”. Another sentence has also become famous, or at least it has caused some trouble and personal criticism. It sounds laconic, and at first sight the implicit scandal may escape the reader: “In many people it is already an impertinence to say ‘I’”.

In principle, saying ‘I’ is the simple, and at the same time crucial, characteristic of that kind of being that is able to refer to itself and to identify itself in verbal language. It is the privilege of articulated self-consciousness in the shape of human beings. But – here we go again – Hegel has already told us that there is a specific contradiction or dialectic in using the pronoun “I”. Whoever uses it refers to a Self that is absolutely individual and at the same time thoroughly universal. By saying “I” we distinguish ourselves from all other beings able to say “I”, and this includes expressing what is common to all of us, namely the capacity to say “I” and thus express self-consciousness.

Given the historical conditions of the 1940s when Adorno wrote down his *Minima Moralia*, the Self that proudly presents itself by saying ‘I’ is nothing but a universal cover that includes in fact nothing, at least nothing individual. The whole that has become the false is the whole of a totalising systematic theory, the totalitarian state, the “iron cage” of capitalism (Max Weber), and the ideological manipulation of the “culture industry”. Saying “I” under such circumstances is the sad prerogative of a few critical intellectuals, artists, and philosophers, but for the majority of people it is an impertinence. They claim to be individuals, but in fact their individualism is fake. This can be confirmed by a prominent line of theorists after Hegel, a line that connects Marx and Kierkegaard (about whom Adorno wrote his first philosophical book) with Nietzsche, Freud and Weber. But following the aphoristically sharpened dialectical thinking of *Minima Moralia*, it can also be confirmed in apparently small gestures and expressions. For example, if we hear someone talking about a work of art – a Beethoven symphony or a play by Beckett – by simply saying: “I like it”, thus using a catch-all term to describe a specific experience, we have to admit – far from being impertinent ourselves – that we are confronted with faked individualism (Adorno 1992, 244).

This is the story Adorno is telling us. Or more precisely, it is the main story. For in between his firm and exaggerated statements there are differentiations and doubts. Above all in the 1960s, twenty years after having written *Minima Moralia* in his US-American exile, Adorno becomes more and more aware of a split consciousness

in all these people who are shaped by the absorbing power of a capitalist consumer society. Their individualism is not only fake. They show a tension between having fun and doubting it, or the other way round: despising something intellectually while liking it affectively. While a band playing traditional German music for brass instruments is marching past and the young intellectual standing at the wayside contemptuously twists his mouth, he realises that he is following the primitive beat by pounding softly with his right foot.

Since the 1960s, for a larger proportion of the readers of Adorno, popular music has been as important as the texts of the philosopher. They have learnt that they can do one thing – listening to the music of Beethoven – while not abandoning another – dancing to the music of Chuck Berry (and a lot of other rock ‘n’ roll bands). For them there is no demand for Beethoven to “roll over”. There is the demand to make room for rock ‘n’ roll, certainly, but not entirely, only to an equal extent. So, the revolting students of the 1960s (and later) also know about the contradiction they themselves incorporate. To express it simply with a refrain from the Rolling Stones: “I know it’s only rock ‘n’ roll, but I like it”. I really know that it is only rock ‘n’ roll, but I like it because it expresses what I – together with a lot of other people – feel. It is – expressed in fine Hegelian language – a form of cultural self-assurance or sensuous self-reflection. Adorno certainly is a burnt child and thus fixated on the continuing elements of a totalitarian society after World War II, but the re-educated children of the ruins start dancing and fighting in the street while carrying *Minima Moralia* in their pockets and digesting its bitter-sweet dwarf fruit.

References

- Adorno, Theodor W. 1992. “An Open Letter to Rolf Hochhuth.” In *Notes to Literature, Vol. Two*, transl. by Shierry Weber Nicholson. New York: Columbia University Press.

Biography

Josef Früchtel is professor of philosophy with a focus on philosophy of art and culture (Critical Cultural Theory) at the University of Amsterdam (UvA). He is publishing in the field of aesthetics (with a focus on aesthetics and ethics as well as aesthetics and politics), Critical Theory, theory of Modernity, and philosophy of film. His recent publication is *Vertrauen in die Welt. Eine Philosophie des Films* (München: Fink 2013), translated as *Trust in the World. A Philosophy of Film* (New York & London: Routledge 2018).