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Haustein, Katja (2019) How to Be Alone with Others: Plessner, Adorno, and Barthes on Tact. *The Modern Language Review*, 114 (1). pp. 1-21. ISSN 0026-7937.

DOI

<https://doi.org/10.5699/modelangrevi.114.1.0001>

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HOW TO BE ALONE WITH OTHERS: PLESSNER, ADORNO, AND BARTHES ON TACT

Die Entfremdung erweist sich an den Menschen gerade daran, daß die Distanzen fortfallen.

Estrangement shows itself precisely in the disappearance of distance between people.

(THEODOR W. ADORNO)¹

Introduction

In the course of François Truffaut's film *Baisers volés* (1968) the protagonist Antoine Doinel finds temporary employment with a detective agency. One of his jobs is to work as a shop assistant in a shoe shop in order to find out why everyone detests its owner, M. Tabard. Antoine is increasingly entranced by M. Tabard's wife, Fabienne. One day, Antoine is invited for lunch at the Tabards' elegant apartment. When M. Tabard leaves, Fabienne serves coffee, puts on some music, and asks: 'Vous-aimez la musique, Antoine?' To which he replies: 'Oui, Monsieur.' They both look at each other, alarmed. Antoine drops his cup, the coffee spills, and he runs off. Much later, Antoine returns to his apartment only to find a gift by his door. It is from Fabienne, who has attached a note containing a little story:

Quand j'étais au collège mon professeur nous expliquait la différence entre le tact et la politesse. Un monsieur en visite pousse par erreur la porte d'une salle de bain et découvre une dame absolument nue. Il recule aussitôt, referme la porte et dit: 'Oh, pardon, Madame!' Ça c'est la politesse. Le même monsieur poussant la même porte, découvrant la même dame absolument nue et lui disant: 'Oh, pardon, Monsieur!', çac'est le tact.²

I thank Andreas Corcoran, Lucy O'Meara, David Russell, Lucia Ruprecht, and the two referees at the *Modern Language Review* for their invaluable comments on earlier versions. I wrote most of this article while holding a research scholarship from the Gerda Henkel Foundation and I thank them, too, for their generous support.

¹*Minima Moralia: Reflexionen aus dem beschädigten Leben* (1951), in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann and others, 20 vols (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2003), IV, 45, trans. by E. F. N. Jephcott as *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life* (London, New York: Verso, 2005), p. 41, subsequently cited in the text as '*Minima Moralia*'. All quotations from Adorno's writings will be referenced to both the German original and the—occasionally modified—English translation whenever available.

² François Truffaut, *Baisers volés* (1968) (Munich: Concorde Home Entertainment, 2005), 1:05 and 1:12.

Fabienne's story implies that the social practice of tact is linked to the mental ability to empathize. Empathy can be defined as an affective and cognitive process that helps us to get a sense of what it may be like to be another person.³ It supports us in forming a concern for, and a connection with, others. Empathy, writes Richard Wollheim, is based on a form of 'twofold attention'. We feel, or imagine, what it may be like to be in another person's place while simultaneously retaining an awareness of not being in his or her place.⁴ This makes empathy a potentially valuable guide to suitable forms of responding, an 'informer', as Heinz Kohut notes, 'of appropriate action'.⁵ But there is a critical edge to empathy. For empathy does not only involve a general recognition of the existence of a world of experience beyond our own. By taking an 'other-oriented perspective' so as to 'replicate the target's experience', as Amy Coplan writes, the practice of being empathetic entails a potential threat of intrusion. The etymology of the term hints at this: 'empathy' as *empathia* comes from *en* 'in, at' and *pathos* 'passion, suffering'. The German term *Einfühlung* ('feeling into') further accentuates what Coplan specifies as the process of understanding the other person 'from the "inside"'.⁶ Empathy suggests more than just a sense of proximity. It implies the idea of being able to climb into and out of each other's minds. Herein lies an important distinction between empathy and tact. Although the ability to empathize may provide a route to tactful behaviour, tact, unlike empathy, does not aim to facilitate nearness. On the contrary, its goal is, as Fabienne's story suggests, to generate distance and to acknowledge difference.

The word tact stems from the Latin *tactus*, which means 'touch', 'tactility', 'feeling', 'influence', and, since the late fifteenth century, is also used to mean 'beat' or 'pulse'. These etymological connotations underline the spatial and temporal dimensions of the term. They emphasize the aspects of distance, duration, rhythm, and speed. Being tactful towards one another implies the shared negotiation of the right balance between approach and detachment, assonance and dissonance, coincidence and deferral. The image of dance or game formations that emerges here is further accentuated by the suggestive assonance between 'tact' and Greek *tachus*, meaning 'quick' or 'sudden', as

³ Amy Coplan defines empathy as a 'complex imaginative process in which an observer simulates another person's situated psychological states (both cognitive and affective) while maintaining clear self-other differentiation' ('Understanding Empathy: Its Features and Effects', in *Empathy: Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives*, ed. by Amy Coplan and Peter Goldie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 5–18 (p. 5)).

⁴ Wollheim introduces the term to describe the way in which a person who looks at an artwork is simultaneously aware of the object represented and of the fact that he is looking at its representation, in *Art and its Objects* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980).

⁵ 'On Empathy', in *The Search for the Self: Selected Writings of Heinz Kohut*, ed. by Paul H. Orstein, 4 vols (London: Karnac, 2011), III–IV: 1978–1981, IV, 525–36 (p. 530).

⁶ 'Understanding Empathy', p. 18.

well as Greek *taxis*, meaning ‘arrangement’ or ‘order’, ‘status’, and ‘position’.⁷ Despite the etymological connection with ‘touch’ and ‘contact’, tact, unlike empathy, is often associated with discretion and respect for the space of the other. Tact, we might say with Jacques Derrida, who plays with the etymological implications of the term, ‘is the name for the aporia of a touching that does not touch, a “touch without contact”’.⁸ Fabienne’s story thematizes this. The tactful behaviour of the gentleman caller is based on the pretence of not noticing what caused the embarrassment. The aim is to preserve and respect the intimate sphere of the other person, and in this way to restore her dignity. Being tactful is here defined by what one does not say (Lat. *tacere* = ‘to be silent’, ‘to conceal’) and yet it presupposes mutual awareness of the unspoken thing. This should not be confused with repression, denial, or lying. If anything, it could be understood in the sense of a certain form of role-play which, in order to function, needs to be recognized and adopted by all individuals involved. Tact, writes Niklas Luhmann, is based on the expectation of expectations. More specifically, tactful behaviour does not simply consist in the fulfilment of the other’s expectations. Instead, Luhmann defines it as a ‘behaviour with which A presents himself as the one whom B needs as a partner, to be able to be the one that he would like to present in A’s eyes’.⁹ The goal is to mend a face-to-face relationship that is temporarily damaged or broken, and to restore what Erving Goffman calls the ‘normal state’ between the interlocutors.¹⁰ This cannot be achieved simply by means of politeness. Politeness, as Fabienne’s letter suggests, is based on convention, a set of tools, a code (of etiquette). Tact, by contrast, is an individual’s variation of that code. It is a deviation. Tact, we could say, is situated in between the demands of social roles and their actual execution. Tact organizes the relations between the social persona (Lat. *persona* = ‘mask’) and the intimate self.¹¹ Its goal is the sparing of someone’s intimate self. Unlike politeness, tact is a form of behaviour that is difficult to teach. Seemingly effortless, it must be lived, like taste or grace, for tact, as David Caron rightly emphasizes, is based on the

⁷ Günther Götde and Jörg Zirfas, ‘Die Kreativität des Takts’, in *Takt und Taktlosigkeit: Über Ordnungen und Unordnungen in Kunst, Kultur und Therapie* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2012), pp. 9–30 (p. 19). See Carl von Clausewitz’s tract *Vom Kriege* (1812) for an exploration of the military connotations of tact.

⁸ *On Touching: Jean-Luc Nancy*, trans. by Christine Irizarry (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), p. 296.

⁹ *A Sociological Theory of Law* (1975), trans. by Elizabeth King and Martin Albrow, ed. by Martin Albrow (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985), p. 27.

¹⁰ *The Interaction Ritual: Essays in Face-to-Face Behaviour* (1967) (New Brunswick: Aldine Transaction, 2005), p. 97.

¹¹ Max Scheler makes the distinction between ‘Sozialperson’ and ‘Intimperson’ in *Der Formalismus in der Ethik und die materielle Werteethik: Neuer Versuch der Grundlegung eines ethischen Personalismus* (Bern: Francke, 1954), pp. 563–64. Goffman, in a similar vein, differentiates between the ‘individual and his role’ in ‘Role Distance’, in *Encounters: Two Studies in the Sociology of Interaction* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), pp. 73–134 (p. 95).

individual's high degree of awareness, sensitivity, and attention.¹² Tact is—and this is perhaps what Fabienne's husband, the unloved M. Tabard, fails to comprehend—what Theobald Ziegler calls 'die Treffsicherheit des Gefühls' ('the accuracy of sensitivity').¹³

I have dwelt on the example of Truffaut's *Baisers volés* because the film dramatizes one aspect of tact in particular that I wish to explore in this essay. Tact, Truffaut shows us, is based on a dialectical relationship between nearness and distance, identification and separation. Its purpose is to determine the appropriate distance between individuals. The crucial diagnosis Truffaut makes here is that the key problem of modern subjectivity is not, as one might suspect, the increased distance between individuals but, on the contrary, its erasure.¹⁴ This observation is also at the heart of the theories of tact formulated by the three writers that are the object of the following discussion: Helmuth Plessner (1892–1985), Theodor W. Adorno (1903–1969), and Roland Barthes (1915–1980).¹⁵

At first glance, Plessner, Adorno, and Barthes appear an unlikely group for comparison. Although Plessner's and Adorno's periods of intellectual productivity overlapped with that of Barthes between the 1950s and 1970s, neither Plessner nor Adorno acknowledged Barthes in their work or vice versa. The relation between Plessner and Adorno is more complicated. Both returned from exile to Germany in 1949. They knew each other well and were temporary colleagues in Frankfurt am Main. They were rivals who essentially stood for two competing and mutually exclusive schools of thought: the Critical Theory of Society (Adorno) and the Philosophical Anthropology of Modernity (Plessner).¹⁶ And yet the works that will serve as the core material

¹² David Caron discusses this point in *The Nearness of Others: Searching for Tact and Contact in the Age of HIV* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), p. 262.

¹³ *Das Gefühl: Eine psychologische Untersuchung* (Stuttgart: Göschen, 1893), p. 177 (my translation).

¹⁴ Slavoj Žižek quotes Fabienne's letter within this context in 'Good Manners in the Age of Wikileaks', *London Review of Books*, 33.2 (20 January 2011), 9–11 <<http://www.lrb.co.uk/v33/n02/slavoj-zizek/good-manners-in-the-age-of-wikileaks>> [accessed 31 May 2017]. For more recent references to Truffaut's scene see the above-cited David Caron, who builds much of his argument around it, and Haruki Murakami, whose, Dr Tokai, the protagonist of one of his short stories, is dedicated to the principle of tact (see 'An Independent Organ', in *Men without Women* (2014), trans. by Philip Gabriel and Ted Goossen (London: Harvill Secker, 2017), pp. 77–113; the reference to Truffaut is on p. 87). Caron's observations in particular have inspired my own interpretation of Fabienne's letter. See also, within this context, Richard Sennett's theory about 'the tyranny of intimacy' in *The Fall of Public Man* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), a work that resonates particularly well, I think, with some of Plessner's ideas.

¹⁵ To my knowledge the present essay is the first attempt to bring these three writers together. For rare examples of comparative work on Adorno and Barthes see Doris Kolesch, *Das Schreiben des Subjekts: Zur Inszenierung ästhetischer Subjektivität bei Baudelaire, Barthes und Adorno* (Vienna: Passagen, 1996), and Lucy O'Meara, "'Not a Question but a Wound": Adorno, Barthes, and Aesthetic Reflection', *Comparative Literature*, 65.2 (Spring 2013), 182–99.

¹⁶ While Plessner actively engages with Adorno's work, references to Plessner's work are no-

for this essay—Plessner's *Grenzen der Gemeinschaft: Eine Kritik des sozialen Radikalismus* (1924), Adorno's *Minima Moralia* (1951), and Barthes's lecture series at the Collège de France, *Comment vivre ensemble* (1976–77) and *Le Neutre* (1977–78)—share a number of similarities that are crucial, I believe, when thinking about tact.

The works in question were produced in times of immense socio-political upheaval and, in the case of Plessner and Adorno, ensuing fascism and war. Plessner wrote *Grenzen der Gemeinschaft* in 1923 as a direct response to the politically and socially unstable situation in the Weimar Republic and as a passionate warning against the rise of social and political radicalism from the right and the left.¹⁷ Adorno wrote *Minima Moralia* during the 1940s, contemplating the effects of fascism on German society and exploring how the smallest occurrences in everyday life may reflect the most catastrophic events in human history. Barthes, in turn, wrote and convened his lectures, *Comment vivre ensemble* and *Le Neutre*, in post-1968 Paris, experimenting, like the Truffaut of *Baisers volés*, with new forms of individuality and sociability in the aftermath of the student revolution. The hypothesis I wish to discuss in this essay is that in their works all three authors—the differences in historical and intellectual context notwithstanding—react to a shared sense of crisis when responding to the following question: what distance must I maintain between myself and others if we are to construct a community without collision, a sociability without alienation, based on a form of individual freedom that may imply solitude but not isolation? Running against the intellectual and political currents of their times, the answers Plessner, Adorno, and Barthes provide are decidedly anti-communal. Prioritizing the individual over the collective, all three writers champion an ethic of indirectness. Within this context, tact, understood as an ongoing negotiation between the demands of convention and the claims of the individual, turns into a figure of distance and of difference. This interpretation of tact allows Adorno and Barthes in particular to think of tact as the aesthetic side of the ethical. Based on the principle of the 'as if', tact subsumes social behaviour and the theory and practice of intellectual and creative production. As such, tact, defined as a form of individual digression, can also serve as a figure of critical enquiry.

toriously absent in Adorno's writing. Adorno's derogatory comment on Max Scheler as one of the founding fathers of Philosophical Anthropology is, in turn, well known (see *Minima Moralia*, p. 218; p. 191).

¹⁷ Note that, as Joachim Fischer points out, an early working title of Plessner's essay was *Grenzen der Gemeinschaft: Eine Kritik des kommunistischen Ethos* (see Fischer, 'Nachwort', in Plessner, *Grenzen der Gemeinschaft: Eine Kritik des sozialen Radikalismus* (1924) (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2002), pp. 135–42 (p. 136)).

Adorno and the 'historical hour of tact'

The *Oxford English Dictionary* credits Voltaire (1769) as the first to describe tact as a practice of sociability. Tact, we read, is a

ready and delicate sense of what is fitting and proper in dealing with others, so as to avoid giving offence or win good will; skill or judgement in dealing with men or negotiating difficult or delicate situations; the faculty of saying or doing the right thing at the right time.

This definition illustrates the shift in meaning from tact primarily understood as a sense of feeling or touching to tact as an individual art of handling. Borrowed from the French, the word was quickly adapted in English to denote, as Dugald Stewart wrote in 1793, 'that delicate sense of propriety which enables a man to feel his way' in society.¹⁸ Stewart explained the need for tact in the context of the French Revolution, where disorientation was the order of the day and new forms of recognition had to be developed that could no longer rely on general codification but were based on individual forms of subjective perception.¹⁹ In German, too, the word 'Takt' gained in prominence around 1800. The *Deutsches Wörterbuch* by the Brothers Grimm lists Friedrich von Matthisson, Johann Gottfried Seume, and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe as the first to use tact in the sense of a delicate feeling for what is right and proper. The entry also refers to Immanuel Kant, who associated tact with 'taste' and applied the term in 1789 in the sense of an ethical and aesthetic judgement that, operating a priori without scientific principles, was based on the 'im Dunkeln des Gemüts liegenden Bestimmungsgründe des Urteils' ('grounds of judgement that lie in the dark regions of the mind').²⁰ It is at this historical moment, marked by the demise of absolutism and the rise of the bourgeoisie, that Adorno locates what he identifies as the high point of tact.

Unlike Norbert Elias, who focuses on the phenomenon of politeness when thinking about the transformation of courtliness ('Höfischkeit') into courtesy ('Höflichkeit') between the Middle Ages and the early modern period,²¹ and in contradistinction to Michel Foucault, who associates modern forms of tact

¹⁸ *Outlines of Moral Philosophy: For the Use of Students in the University of Edinburgh* (Edinburgh: printed for William Creech; London: T. Cadell, 1793), I. 6. I take the quotation from the *OED*.

¹⁹ For a discussion of the rise of tact in nineteenth-century Britain see David Russell, *Tact: Aesthetic Liberalism and the Essay Form in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018). I became aware of David Russell's work only once I had finished drafting this essay. I thank him, however, for letting me read the proofs.

²⁰ Kant calls this process 'logischer Takt': *Anthropologie in pragmatischer Hinsicht*, in *Werkausgabe*, ed. by Wilhelm Weischedel, 12 vols (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1977), XII, 424, trans. by Mary J. Gregor as *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1974), p. 20.

²¹ *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation*, 2 vols (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1976); see specifically II, 312.

and discretion with control over enunciation and a policing of statements,²² Adorno links the importance of tact in the Enlightenment to the birth of the modern, autonomous subject. The ‘historical hour of tact’, Adorno contends in *Minima Moralia*,

ist die, in welcher das bürgerliche Individuum des absolutistischen Zwangs ledig ward. Frei und einsam steht es für sich selber ein, während die vom Absolutismus entwickelten Formen hierarchischer Achtung und Rücksicht, ihres ökonomischen Grundes und ihrer bedrohlichen Gewalt entäußert, gerade noch gegenwärtig genug sind, um das Zusammenleben innerhalb bevorzugter Gruppen erträglich zu machen. (p. 39)

was the hour when the bourgeois individual rid himself of absolutist compulsion. Free and solitary he answers for himself, while the forms of hierarchical respect and consideration developed by Absolutism, divested of their economic basis and their menacing power, are still just sufficiently present to make living together within privileged groups bearable. (p. 36)

Like Roland Barthes, who, as we shall see, develops his theory of tact on the basis of ‘novelistic simulations’ of human interaction, Adorno, too, establishes his theory of tact by drawing on literary works. The section from *Minima Moralia* dedicated to the ‘Dialectic of Tact’ opens with a contemplation of *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre* (1807–29), the third and last volume of Goethe’s genre-defining Bildungsroman cycle. For Adorno, this text thematizes the effects of unprecedented urbanization, industrialization, and population growth on human relations. It reveals how tact becomes important in times of rapid change, when established social hierarchies collapse and norms and conventions crumble. Within this context tact serves as a means to buffer the effects of the increasing alienation between individuals. It results from what Adorno calls a renunciation of original contact, of passion, and ‘ungebrochenes Glück’ (‘unalloyed happiness’) (*Minima Moralia*, p. 38; pp. 35–36).

Adorno’s argument is based on the assumption of a polar tension between so-called immediate human existence on the one hand and alienation and objectification on the other. At first glance, this tension seems to indicate a Rousseauist line of reasoning. But Adorno’s apparent nod at Rousseau’s concept of the ‘original state of nature’ is deceptive. A brief look at Rousseau’s and Adorno’s different uses of the concept of ‘humanity’ within this context not only serves to highlight the differences between Adorno and Rousseau at this point, but also helps to clarify Adorno’s mode of argumentation. According to Rousseau, ‘humanité’ results from compassion, which, understood as a figure of identification between self and other, characterizes the original state of nature.²³ In Adorno’s reading of Goethe, by contrast, ‘Humanität’ is linked not to compassion as a figure of identification but to tact as a figure of

²² *The History of Sexuality*, 2 vols, trans. by Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon, 1978), I, 17–18.

²³ *Discours sur l’origine et fondement de l’inégalité*, in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Bernard Gagnebin and others, 5 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1995), III, 155–57.

separation (*Minima Moralia*, p. 39; p. 36). Indeed, according to Adorno the humane dimension of tact consists in the idea of self-restriction. This self-restriction does not resist but embraces the ineluctable course of history and the inhumanity of progress that go hand in hand with what Adorno calls the ‘withering of the subject’ (‘Verkümmerung des Subjekts’) (*Minima Moralia*, p. 38; p. 36). In contradistinction to Rousseau, for Adorno salvation cannot be achieved through the attempt to restore an original immediacy of human relations. Such an attempt can only ever result in simulation. The key to the problem is to be found not in the restoration of intimacy and identification but in the cultivation of distance and dissociation. ‘Nur Fremdheit’, writes Adorno, ‘ist das Gegengift gegen Entfremdung’ (‘retention of strangeness is the only antidote to estrangement’) (*Minima Moralia*, p. 105; p. 94). This seemingly paradoxical idea is further unpacked in a section on Henrik Ibsen’s drama *Hedda Gabler* (1891) in which Adorno discusses the relation between two prominent bourgeois virtues: ‘das Gute’ (‘good’) and ‘die Güte’ (‘kindness, benevolence’). Kindness, or benevolence, Adorno argues, is a deformation of good inasmuch as it separates the moral principle from the social principle and displaces it into the realm of private conscience. Kindness, he states, aims at the alleviation of social injustice but not at its overcoming. This is its limitation. Kindness simulates the possibility of direct relations between individuals. Its ‘guilt’, Adorno writes, is intimacy, and indeed touch. For ‘Güte’, he explains,

überspringt die Distanz, in der allein der Einzelne vor dem Angetastetwerden durchs Allgemeine sich zu schützen vermag. Gerade im engsten Kontakt erfährt er die unaufgehobene Differenz am schmerzlichsten. (*Minima Moralia*, p. 105)

[kindness] overrides the distance that is the individual’s only protection against the infringements by the universal. It is precisely in the closest contact that he feels the unabridged difference most painfully. (p. 94)

Accordingly, for Adorno, one of the key problems of modern human existence is not the extension of distance between individuals but the elimination thereof, not the loss of intimacy, but the expansion of intimacy in its perverted form. Adorno’s argument hinges on the idea of ‘touchability’ here, and its potentially negative repercussions. In his formulation, tact is being removed from its semantic connection with ‘touch’ and ‘contact’ (*antasten*: ‘to touch on’, but also ‘to infringe’, ‘to violate’, as in: ‘Die Würde des Menschen ist unantastbar’ (‘Human dignity is inviolable’)). Tact appears as the reverse of touch. Or better, in a variation of Derrida’s formulation, tact becomes contact without touch.

For Adorno, tact does not simply mean ‘the subordination to ceremonial convention’. In contrast to politeness, tact is ‘eine Differenzbestimmung’ (‘a determination of differences’) based on ‘wissende Abweichungen’ (‘conscious

deviations') (*Minima Moralia*, p. 40; p. 37). This definition enables Adorno to discuss tact as a category to be employed both in ethical and in aesthetic terms. The works of Goethe, Beethoven, and Kant appear to Adorno as eminently 'tactful' inasmuch as they perform what he describes as the simultaneity of social convention and individual variation (*Minima Moralia*, p. 39; p. 36). Tact, Adorno later explains in his 'Kleine Proust-Kommentare', arises from the difference from 'Konfektion des Gedankens, das vorgegebene und etablierte Cliché' ('ready-made thought, the pre-given and established cliché'). Tact is a reaction against that which everybody says.²⁴

Adorno's association of human sociability with intellectual and artistic innovation follows a logic reminiscent of Kant's paradox of 'ungesellige Geselligkeit' ('unsociable sociability').²⁵ At the heart of human development, Kant explains, lies the individual's desire to integrate with society combined with a constant thirst for isolation. This antagonistic dynamic is one of the key drivers that spur human social and cultural development. Kant uses the term 'Widerstand' ('resistance') here to qualify this human tendency towards disintegration. It emerges from the paradoxical struggle of wanting to participate in collective culture while at the same time seeking to renounce it. Adorno makes a similar point when arguing that intellectual productivity presupposes the individual's involvement in collective culture precisely because it is this involvement that provides him with the strength to dismiss it (*Minima Moralia*, pp. 30–31; p. 29). And yet, there is a crucial difference. While the Kantian paradox follows an eschatological trajectory marked by belief in the human capacity for perfection,²⁶ Adorno's antagonism takes a negative turn. In fact, Adorno describes the reconciliation between the demands of convention and the unruly claims of the individual, which the exercise of tact demands, as 'actually impossible' ('eigentlich unmöglich[]') (*Minima Moralia*, p. 39; p. 36).

Adorno is pessimistic when it comes to answering the question of how tact can become normative without undermining its own subjectivity. At first the decay of ceremonial convention in modernity appears to benefit tact because it opens up greater space for autonomous action. However, if tact, as individual difference, emancipates itself from social convention to confront the individual as an absolute, without anything universal from which it can be distinguished, tact, in Adorno's view, turns into what it originally sought to

²⁴ 'Kleine Proust-Kommentare', in *Schriften*, II, 203–15 (p. 205), trans. by Shierry Weber Nicholsen as 'Short Commentaries on Proust', in *Notes to Literature*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann, 2 vols (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), I, 174–84 (pp. 175–76).

²⁵ See Kant, 'Idee zu einer allgemeinen Geschichte in weltbürgerlicher Absicht', in *Werkausgabe*, XI, 31–50 (pp. 37–39), trans. by H. B. Nisbet as 'Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose', in *Political Writings*, ed. by Hans Reiss, 2nd, enlarged edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 41–53 (pp. 44–45). I thank Ben Hutchinson for alerting me to Kant in this context.

²⁶ Kant, 'Idee', pp. 38, 40; pp. 44, 45.

subvert. The renunciation of convention as an outdated ornament leads to a life of direct domination. What remains is the triumph of intimacy over distance, and of directness over digression. Any form of intellectual activity, essentially understood as a form of resistance, becomes impossible. The modern individual, once enlightened and free, is crushed in what Adorno calls, in allusion to Nazi Germany, a caricature of tact that manifests itself in a potentially murderous culture of ‘Kameraderie der Anrempelei’ (‘rib-digging camaraderie’) (*Minima Moralia*, p. 40; p. 37).

Plessner’s ‘Culture of Impersonality’

Helmuth Plessner’s *Grenzen der Gemeinschaft* is, like Adorno’s *Minima Moralia*, a textual hybrid that oscillates between general philosophical enquiry, socio-political analysis, and literary-essayistic polemic. Like Adorno, who seeks to revitalize what he describes as the long-lost tradition of philosophical thought dedicated to the ‘Lehre vom richtigen Leben’ (‘teaching of the good life’) (*Minima Moralia*, p. 13; p. 15), Plessner, too, conceptualizes his argument ‘vom Leben her’ (‘from life’).²⁷ Like his younger colleague, Plessner addresses an audience that ideally combines an academic with a more general readership. However, while *Minima Moralia* sold more than 12,000 copies and was swiftly dubbed ‘das letzte deutsche Volksbuch der Philosophie’ (‘the last German chapbook of philosophy’),²⁸ the immediate impact of Plessner’s book was limited. Despite receiving a number of high-profile reviews, the work went out of print.²⁹ Its wider reception was only triggered by its being reprinted in honour of the author’s eightieth birthday, in 1972. But the so-called Plessner renaissance that followed went largely unnoticed in Anglo-American scholarship, and few of Plessner’s works have been translated into English.³⁰

In *Grenzen der Gemeinschaft* Plessner developed a line of argument that,

²⁷ Plessner, *Grenzen*, p. 11, trans. by Andrew Wallace as *The Limits of Community: A Critique of Social Radicalism* (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 1999), p. 41, subsequently cited in the text as ‘*Grenzen*’. All quotations from Plessner’s writings will be referenced to the German original and to the—occasionally modified—English translation whenever available.

²⁸ Ulrich Raulff, ‘Nachwort’, in *Minima Moralia’ neu gelesen*, ed. by Raulff and Andreas Bernard (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2003), pp. 123–31 (pp. 123–24, my translation).

²⁹ Reviewers included Siegfried Kracauer and Ferdinand Tönnies, the doyen of German sociology at the time and one of the prime targets of Plessner’s critique. Both Tönnies’s and Kracauer’s reviews can be found in *Plessners ‘Grenzen der Gemeinschaft’: Eine Debatte*, ed. by Wolfgang Eßbach and others (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2002), pp. 353–56, 357–62. Plessner himself described Tönnies’s review as a ‘liebenswürdig anerkennende Rezension’ (‘graciously appreciative review’), ‘Nachwort zu Ferdinand Tönnies’ (‘Postscript to Ferdinand Tönnies’), in Plessner, *Übergänge: Politik, Anthropologie, Philosophie*, ed. by Salvatore Giammusso and Hans-Ulrich Lessing (Munich: Fink, 2001), p. 178 (my translation).

³⁰ For an overview of the German debate see *Plessners ‘Grenzen der Gemeinschaft’*. For a first documentation of the debate in English, mostly written by continental European scholars, see

with variations, he maintained throughout his academic career. With this essay, Plessner intervened in a debate that defined ‘society’ (‘Gesellschaft’) and ‘community’ (‘Gemeinschaft’) as dichotomous sociological terms, and critiqued the preference for the term ‘community’ over ‘society’ that prevailed in German academic and public discourse at the time. This does not mean that *Grenzen der Gemeinschaft* is directed against all forms of community. Instead, the essay sets out to limit widespread expectations that, based on belief in the possibility of direct relations between individuals, promote idealized ideological conceptions of ‘community’ as a space within which alienation would dissolve.³¹ Indeed, in his essay Plessner attacks the ‘bald international, bald völkisch getönte Verklärung der Schrankenlosigkeit im Miteinander’ (‘idealization of seamless togetherness, tainted by both, internationalist and ethnic-nationalist [völkisch] colours’)³² that he sees as dominant in intellectual and public debate at the time. Written in the year of the communist uprising in Hamburg and the failed Nazi putsch in Munich, Plessner’s text anticipates Adorno’s concerns about a community marked by ‘rib-digging *camaraderie*’ and defends the idea of ‘society’ as a space in which distance affords man his own dignity.³³

Anticipating Adorno, in *Grenzen der Gemeinschaft* Plessner raises a concern about the decay of ceremonial convention since the Enlightenment. At the same time, however, he assesses the emancipation of the individual that coincides with it in less positive terms than Adorno. Plessner’s model for orientation is the salon culture of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The code of conduct he recommends combines aspects of the Nietzschean ‘Pathos der Distanz’ (‘pathos of distance’) with the moralist ideal of the ‘honnête homme’, portrayed by François de La Rochefoucauld among others as a master of communication who derives his talents from character traits that combine fortitude and courage with judgement, taste, and tact.³⁴ More rigorously than Adorno, Plessner emphasizes the ongoing need for a code of conduct. The liberation of the individual from social and cultural constraints, Plessner argues, creates a need to establish new means of protection, to shelter the intimate self, the ‘soul’, from public exposure, and to maintain its ‘hygiene’ by

Plessner’s Philosophical Anthropology: Perspectives and Prospects, ed. by Jos de Mul (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2014).

³¹ In his ‘Selbstdarstellung’, published in 1975, Plessner still criticizes the ‘Glauben an die Möglichkeit unvermittelter Beziehungen von Mensch zu Mensch’ (‘belief in the possibility of immediate relations between humans’), in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by Günter Dux and others, 10 vols (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2003), x, 203–341 (p. 323) (my translation).

³² Plessner, ‘Nachwort zu Ferdinand Tönnies’, p. 177 (my translation).

³³ Fischer, ‘Nachwort’, p. 137.

³⁴ See La Rochefoucauld, *Maximes*, ed. by Jacques Truchet (Paris: Gallimard, 1967), e.g. pp. 99, 128. For a discussion of Plessner’s relation to French moralism see Dorothee Kimmich, ‘Moralistik und Neue Sachlichkeit: Ein Kommentar zu Plessner’s *Grenzen der Gemeinschaft*’, in *Plessners ‘Grenzen der Gemeinschaft’*, pp. 160–82.

protecting it from violation and humiliation (*Grenzen*, p. 87; p. 138). This variation in judgement is linked to a fundamental difference between Plessner's and Adorno's general theoretical orientations. Adorno's dialectical theory of tact—as his reading of Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister* illustrates—retains the theoretical possibility of a 'Wahrheit übers unmittelbare Leben' ('truth about life in its immediacy') when scrutinizing everyday lived experience in its alienated form (*Minima Moralia*, p. 15; p. 13). Adorno's text is composed from the—at least hypothetical—standpoint of redemption ('Erlösung') (*Minima Moralia*, p. 283; p. 247). For Plessner, by contrast, this hypothetical standpoint does not exist. According to him, the very concept of an 'immediate form of human existence' is inconceivable in the first place. Against all negative theories of alienation that start with Rousseau and take much of their inspiration from a potentially reductive Hegelian–Marxist dialectic, Plessner argues that alienation is not a temporary state of human existence that could potentially be overcome. For him, the idealist axiom according to which 'der Mensch mit sich identisch werden müsse, weil er es einmal gewesen sei' ('man needs to become identical to his original self, because that is what he once was'), is wrong.³⁵ Alienation is an inherent part of human existence. Based on the assumption that the human position is marked by a constitutive 'mediacy' ('Vermitteltheit'), Plessner develops his two fundamental concepts of 'natural artificiality' ('natürliche Künstlichkeit') and 'eccentric positionality' ('exzentrische Positionalität'). Eccentric positionality manifests itself in the ontological gap between 'being a body' ('Leibsein') and 'having a body' ('Körperhaben'). 'Natural artificiality' helps us to compensate for this fundamental dissociation. Humans are essentially 'Doppelgänger' inasmuch as they are split into an outer personality, the public or 'unrealized' self, and an inner personality, the 'real' or private self. Any forms of direct, immediate, organic relationship with others, and with ourselves, are potentially destructive. It is only through performing a social role, wearing a mask, that we can create and protect our private existence.

For Adorno, the social role we play in society is the result of objectification and alienation. To him, in modern consumer society the idea of the 'an sich seiende[] und unabhängige[] Persönlichkeit' ('personality as existing independently and in itself') becomes an illusion. 'Ohnmächtig in der überwältigenden Sozietät, erfährt der Einzelne sich selber nur noch als gesellschaftlich vermittelt' ('powerless within an overpowering society, the individual can only experience himself as socially mediated') (*Minima Moralia*, p. 288).³⁶ For Plessner, there is no conflict between authentic existence and alienation.

³⁵ See Plessner, 'Das Problem der Öffentlichkeit und die Idee der Entfremdung' (1960), in *Schriften*, x, 212–26 (p. 220) (my translation).

³⁶ My translation—this section from the 'Anhang' (Appendix) is not included in Jephcott's translation.

According to him, our social persona does not abolish our private self. On the contrary, it is the social role that allows us to have a private existence in the first place. This is why, according to Plessner, alienation is the condition of identification. It is in the realm of social coercion that we can find liberation, as it is only through being other that we can be ourselves.³⁷ This is the context in which Plessner's theory of tact as a way to permeate the boundaries between interior and exterior, private and public, self and other, can evolve.

In *Grenzen der Gemeinschaft* Plessner defines 'tact' in distinction to 'Höflichkeit' ('politeness') and 'Diplomatie' ('diplomacy'). Politeness follows a code. Tact negotiates between this code and individual expectation. Politeness is associated with a norm, with 'what everybody does'. It faces the past. Tact, in turn, is an individual variation of that norm. It is linked to the spontaneity of the individual. Tact is a situational form of handling that occurs in the 'here and now' of the present moment. The idea is to strike an equilibrium between individuals. This equilibrium is fragile inasmuch as it is located beyond the rules of convention. Diplomatic behaviour is target-oriented. Its strategic goal is to reach an agreement. Tact, by contrast, is distinct from 'tactics'. It is essentially 'without reason' ('grundlos') (*Grenzen*, p. 111; p. 168), cautious in its expression ('Gedämpftheit') (*Grenzen*, p. 110; p. 167), nuanced, and, most importantly, indirect. This indirectness appears as a means to achieve the highest possible degree of reciprocal protection (*Grenzen*, p. 107; p. 163).

Plessner's verdict against any direct, immediate forms of human expression fuels his radical critique of contemporary aesthetics. For Plessner, art, design, and literature should refrain from any claims to 'honesty' and 'authenticity' that would threaten to expose the intimate self of the subject. Instead, they should help prevent any direct forms of representation and promote an aesthetic that subscribes to the creation of distance and dissimulation. Seen from this angle, Expressionism appears as the aesthetic of tactlessness while the clean-cut surfaces of New Objectivity ('Neue Sachlichkeit') look like manifestations of a morality that is marked by what Plessner calls a reckless honesty combined with a principled practice of hurting oneself and others (*Grenzen*, p. 110; p. 167).

Tact and diplomacy are separate in theory yet intertwined in practice (*Grenzen*, p. 112; p. 169). Together, they offer the individual a strategy to safeguard himself against any forms of authenticity and fusion. Tactful behaviour serves as a provision against rational and emotional overflow. It helps to reconstruct boundaries where unrestricted and immediate forms of communication with others, as well as with oneself, may currently exist. As a well-tempered compromise between hot and cold, tact regulates the distance between self and

³⁷ Plessner, *Grenzen*, p. 94, and 'Soziale Rolle und menschliche Natur' (1960), in *Schriften*, x, 227-40 (p. 235).

other. Tact, writes Plessner in a key passage, evoking the imagery of play and dance, is marked by the

virtuose Handhabung der Spielformen, mit denen sich die Menschen nahe kommen, ohne sich zu treffen, mit denen sie sich voneinander entfernen, ohne sich durch Gleichgültigkeit zu verletzen. (*Grenzen*, p. 80)

virtuous mastery of forms of play where persons come close to each other without meeting and where they establish distance without damaging each other through indifference. (p. 131)

This does not mean that Plessner's anthropology entails a code of cool conduct, as Helmuth Lethen argues.³⁸ Nor does it necessarily categorize Plessner, in the words of Roberto Esposito, as a 'theoretician of the preventive immunisation of all social forms'.³⁹ Plessner's dialectical definition of the human 'soul' as 'eine[] ewig nach Berührung verlangende[] und diese Berührung doch fliehende[], nach Antastung strebende[] Unantastbarkeit' ('an inviolability striving for violation, an inviolability constantly demanding and, yet, fleeing contact') (*Grenzen*, p. 84; p. 136), and his introduction of the term 'Zartheit' ('delicacy') as a key symptom of tact, indicate otherwise. Reaching back to the eighteenth century, 'Zartheit' carries connotations of delicacy, tenderness ('Zärtlichkeit'), harmony, weakness, and tearableness ('Zerreißbarkeit'). Associated with affect and with the idea of care and protection, 'Zartheit' is also linked with femininity, forming a counter-principle to 'Roheit' ('crudeness'/'rudeness'), and to masculine strength.⁴⁰ Within the context of Plessner's argument, 'Zartheit' is related to grace, warm-heartedness, and cure (*Grenzen*, p. 108; pp. 164–65). As a light and elusive form of contact, not a grip, 'Zartheit' appears as the only means to render social intercourse possible and agreeable (*Grenzen*, p. 107; p. 163).

Plessner's theory of tact bears traces of the traumatic repercussions of the First World War and the fundamental social and cultural crisis that followed. The individual Plessner describes in *Grenzen der Gemeinschaft* struggles to find a balance between the '[m]aßlose Erkaltung der menschlichen Beziehungen durch maschinelle, geschäftliche, politische Abstraktionen' ('immeasurable chilling of human relationships by mechanical, commercial, and political abstractions') and the equally 'maßlose Gegenentwurf im Ideal einer glühenden, in all ihren Trägern überquellenden Gemeinschaft' ('immeasurable

³⁸ Helmuth Lethen makes this point when characterizing Plessner's individual as a 'Duellsubjekt' and an expert in division: see, in particular, Lethen, *Verhaltenslehren der Kälte: Lebensversuche zwischen den Kriegen* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1994), pp. 75–95. For a detailed critique of Lethen's position see Fischer's and Eßbach's contributions in *Plessners 'Grenzen der Gemeinschaft'*, pp. 63–79, 80–103.

³⁹ This is Esposito's interpretation in *Immunitas: The Protection and Negation of Life*, trans. by Zakiya Hanafi (Cambridge: Polity, 2011), p. 99.

⁴⁰ 'Zartheit', in *Deutsches Wörterbuch von Jacob und Wilhelm Grimm* <<http://woerterbuchnetz.de/DWB/?lemma=Zartheit>> [accessed 11 May 2017].

reaction in the ideal of a shimmering community overflowing through all of its supporters') it provokes (*Grenzen*, p. 28; p. 65). The utopian 'Kultur der Unpersönlichkeit' ('culture of impersonality') which Plessner advocates grows out of the spirit of tact as a configuration of distance (*Grenzen*, p. 133; p. 194). This does not mean that the inhabitants of this culture are isolated or indifferent. Instead, they form part of a complex and delicate network of multiple social and emotional associations that exist to guarantee their reciprocal protection, both with and against each other.

Barthes and the 'Right to Digress'

In comparison with Plessner's and Adorno's work, Roland Barthes's writing is surprisingly devoid of allusions to the experience of fascism and war.⁴¹ Barthes was thirty when the Second World War ended, and had lost his father in the First World War. His suffering from pulmonary tuberculosis meant that he spent much of the 1940s in the secluded communities of various different sanatoriums, a life-forming experience that gave inspiration to some of the leitmotifs of *Comment vivre ensemble*. The lectures Barthes delivered between 1976 and 1978 were composed at a time that was still marked by belief, as Plessner observed in 1975, in the possibility of immediate relations between human beings, and that saw a renewed appeal of communal forms of existence as ways to retreat from society. Plessner went on to specify his point by constructing a link between the intellectual climate of the 1920s and that of the 1970s when he concluded: 'Der leitende Gedanke war und ist die Befreiung des Menschen aus seiner Entfremdung, an welcher je nach Bedarf und Lage der Kapitalismus, bald der Kommunismus schuld sind' ('The overarching idea was, and remains, the liberation of man from estrangement, caused, depending on requirement and situation, by capitalism or communism').⁴² In his lectures Barthes, too, toyed with escapist fantasies. We shall see, however, that the variation he proposed differs quite distinctly from the anti-societal ideologies that were the object of Plessner's ongoing critique.

Barthes's lectures are less openly political than Plessner's essay. Like Adorno, who was under severe attack in 1968–69 for refusing to engage directly with the political challenges of the time, Barthes abstains from direct political discourse. This does not mean, however, that his lectures do not have political implications. Barthes concurs with Plessner and Adorno in thinking that aesthetics are an essential component in the consideration of social

⁴¹ Exceptions may be found, for example, in the letters Barthes wrote while at the sanatorium St-Hilaire-du-Touvet in the 1940s, reprinted in *Roland Barthes Album: inédits, correspondances et varia* (Paris: Seuil, 2015).

⁴² Plessner, 'Selbstdarstellung', p. 323 (my translation).

conditions.⁴³ Like Adorno, who seeks to revitalize a tradition of philosophical thought as a teaching of the good life, and like Plessner, who writes his essay from the perspective of lived experience, Barthes, too, aims for ‘une introduction au vivre, un guide de vie’.⁴⁴ In the ‘projet éthique’ that emerges, Barthes, like Adorno, draws on literature as a tool to investigate problems of communality, searching, like his predecessor, for a utopian balance between community and autonomy, social integration and intellectual independence. In the process all three scholars choose to occupy an off-centre position. In his introduction to *Minima Moralia* Adorno, although avowedly schooled by Hegel, criticizes the prioritization of the universal over the individual that he sees as dominating post-Hegelian thought (*Minima Moralia*, pp. 14–15; pp. 16–17). Plessner, with his fervent critique of the limits of community, consciously writes on the margins of the intellectual spectrum of the Weimar Republic. And by referring, as does Adorno, to Hegel, Barthes knows that to valorize the individual at the expense of the communal deviates significantly from the collective undercurrent of post-1968 French intellectual debate.⁴⁵ It is in this context that Barthes gradually defines tact, a word ‘quelque peu provocant dans le monde actuel’,⁴⁶ as one of the key concepts of his lectures. Or, as he prefers to call it—in a move that resembles Plessner’s use of the term ‘Zartheit’—‘délicatesse’.

Barthes offers a first detailed discussion of ‘délicatesse’ in *Fragments d’un discours amoureux*, the best-selling book he published in 1977 while writing his lectures for *Comment vivre ensemble*. In the section with the symptomatic title ‘J’ai mal à l’autre’, Barthes defines ‘délicatesse’ as a particular form of compassion.⁴⁷ Barthes’s starting point is not, as his earlier lecture version of the same chapter suggests, Rousseau’s definition of compassion, but Arthur Schopenhauer’s more recent theory of ‘Mitleid’ (‘suffering with’), a concept that Schopenhauer defines as the self’s complete and utter identification with

⁴³ For a more detailed discussion of Barthes and Adorno in this context see O’Meara, ‘“Not a Question but a Wound”’, pp. 185–89.

⁴⁴ *Le Neutre: cours au Collège de France (1977–78)*, ed. by Thomas Clerc (Paris: Seuil/IMEC 2002), p. 37, subsequently cited in the text as ‘Neutre’.

⁴⁵ As Barthes observes in an interview: ‘Toute philosophie qui essaye de se soustraire à ces impératifs de collectivité est extrêmement singulière, et, je dirais, a une mauvaise image de marque’ (‘Propos sur la violence’ (1978), in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Éric Marty, 5 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 2002), v, 549–53 (p. 553)). See also the following statement: ‘Il faut partir de ce vieux cheval de bataille: l’individualisme discrédité (cf. critique sartrienne de la démocratie bourgeoise: les individus comme des petits pois dans une boîte+critique marxiste+critique gauchiste: vraie conjuration contre l’individualisme!)’ (Barthes, *La Préparation du Roman I et II: notes de cours et des séminaires au Collège de France 1978–79 et 1979–80*, ed. by Natalie Léger (Paris: Seuil/IMEC, 2003), p. 77).

⁴⁶ *Comment vivre ensemble: simulations romanesques de quelques espaces quotidiens. Notes de cours et de séminaires au Collège de France (1976–77)*, ed. by Claude Coste (Paris: Seuil/IMEC, 2002), p. 179, subsequently cited in the text as ‘Vivre’.

⁴⁷ *Fragments d’un discours amoureux*, in *Œuvres complètes*, v, 27–283 (pp. 87–88).

the other's distress.⁴⁸ Following Nietzsche's polemical rejection of Schopenhauer's concept as 'Ein-leid' or 'Einleidigkeit' ('suffering-into', or 'suffering one and the same feeling'), Barthes argues in the book section that Schopenhauer's understanding of the term is misleading. While Schopenhauer's 'Mitleid' has to do with the affective and corporeal fusion of self and other, Barthes's transformation of compassion into 'délicatesse' is motivated by a desire for separation. Schopenhauer's 'Mitleid' is altruistic; Barthes's tact is egocentric. Tact enables the self to protect itself from empathetic identification and hence from being harmed, 'angetastet', by the misery of the other. While Schopenhauer celebrates the breakdown of the boundary between the 'you' and the 'I' in the act of compassionate identification, Barthes aims to resurrect it.⁴⁹ As such, tact helps to reinstate the difference between self and other. For Barthes, as for Plessner and Adorno before him, this differentiation between the individuals involved is associated with protection. And like Plessner's 'Takt', Barthes's 'délicatesse' is linked to the control of emotions, to 'artificiality', and to 'health'.⁵⁰

While in *Fragments d'un discours amoureux* the figure of tact triggers a relapse into a non-dialectical, self-centred construction of thought, in the lecture series that followed, *Comment vivre ensemble* and *Le Neutre*, tact is transformed from a figure that helps confirm the boundary between the 'I' and the 'you' into a concept that assists in erecting this boundary in order to overcome it. In his lectures, Barthes is no longer thinking about a dual model (the couple), nor is he simply replacing that dual model with a plural or collective model (the family, the crowd). Instead, he explores what we might call a very personal fantasy of a lifestyle: 'Quelque chose comme une solitude interrompue d'une façon réglée: le paradoxe, la contradiction, l'aporie d'une mise en commun des distances — l'utopie d'un socialisme des distances' (*Vivre*, p. 37). The motif that set this fantasy to work is the small group of coenobitic monasteries on Mount Athos in Greece: monks both isolated from and in contact with one another, within a particular type of structure based on 'agglomérats idiorrhythmiques' (*Vivre*, p. 37). In his lecture series, Barthes's interest thus shifts from an individual ethic that focuses on the idiosyncrasies of the 'I' to a social ethic that actively takes into consideration the space of the other.

The deliberately associative ideas of tact subsequently explored by Barthes bear a number of resemblances to those we have encountered in the texts

⁴⁸ For the lecture version on 'Compassion' of 11 March 1976 see Barthes, *Le Discours amoureux: séminaire à l'École pratique des hautes études 1974-76*, ed. by Claude Coste (Paris: Seuil, 2007), pp. 520-23. I offer a more detailed analysis of this passage in conjunction with the book section in Katja Hausteин, "'J'ai mal à l'autre": Barthes on Pity', *L'Esprit créateur*, 55.4 (Winter 2015), 131-47 (pp. 134-37).

⁴⁹ Arthur Schopenhauer, 'Zur Ethik', in *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. by Wolfgang Freiherr von Löhneysen, 5 vols (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1994), v: *Parerga und Paralipomena II*, p. 242 (§ 110).

⁵⁰ Barthes, *Fragments*, p. 88.

by Plessner and Adorno. Barthes, like his predecessors, defines tact in distinction to politeness. Politeness is ‘une gangue conformiste d’habitudes’ (*Neutre*, p. 62). Tact is a deviation of this habit and with it a digression from social norms and consent. Tact parries generality by inventive, non-paradigmatizable behaviour. Tact is aimless, useless, futile, and effeminate. It is marginal to mass culture, and socially ‘obscène’ (*Neutre*, p. 64). In a rare reference to Walter Benjamin, who is hesitating, under the influence of hashish, over what to eat—‘non par goinfrerie’, as Benjamin explains, ‘mais par expresse politesse à l’égard des plats, de peur de les froisser en les refusant’—Barthes portrays tact as a kind of exaltation of politeness, and hence, rather counter-intuitively, as a form of excess (*Neutre*, p. 62).⁵¹ At the same time, however, tact also appears as a buffer against the potential onslaught of emotions. Neither hot nor cold, tact is described as a well-tempered compromise between proximity and distance, passion and reason (*Neutre*, p. 179). Essentially implicit, tact helps to circumvent any direct connection between individuals. Opposed to frankness and to blackmailing (*Neutre*, p. 53), tact does not crush the other ‘sous une demande poisseuse’ (*Neutre*, p. 42). Defined as natural as well as cultured and artful, tact is gradually developed as a value linked to emotional balance. Significantly, Barthes concludes the last lecture of *Le Neutre* with an evocation of the simultaneously sympathetic and erratic figure of the smile.⁵²

Both Plessner’s and Adorno’s theories of tact rely on what Barthes in his lectures addresses as ‘le mythe public/privé’ or, more specifically, ‘le mythe (historique) des deux hommes dans un même sujet’ (*Neutre*, p. 183). We saw that Adorno interprets the social persona in terms of alienation and objectification, while for Plessner it is this very state of alienation that carries the potential for individual freedom. Within the context of Plessner’s theory, tactful behaviour negotiates between norm and individual variation, social self and private self, mask and face. The idea is not to hide the face, the soul, behind a shield, but to facilitate its truthful expression under protected conditions. The goal is to uphold the mask in order to keep face. Plessner resolves this apparent paradox by introducing the term ‘Nimbus’, Latin for ‘luminous

⁵¹ The original passage reads as follows: ‘Das war aber nicht nur Verfressenheit sondern eine ganz ausgesprochene Höflichkeit gegen die Speisen, die ich nicht durch eine Ablehnung beleidigen wollte’ (Benjamin, ‘Protokolle zu Drogenversuchen’, in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann and Gerhard Schweppenhäuser, 7 vols (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1974), IV, 558–617 (p. 583)).

⁵² Incidentally, Plessner devotes an entire essay to the same topic. The smile, Plessner argues, is closely associated with distance. It summarizes, as such, the human position: ‘Im Lächeln [. . .] bewahrt er [der Mensch] seine Distanz zu sich und zur Welt [. . .]. Lachend und weinend ist der Mensch das Opfer seines Geistes, lächelnd gibt er ihm Ausdruck’ (‘Man retains his distance from himself and from the world by smiling. [. . .] In laughing and weeping man is the victim of his spirit, in smiling he gives expression to it’) (‘Das Lächeln’ (1950), in *Schriften*, VII, 419–34 (p. 432) (my translation)).

vapour', '(dark) cloud', 'storm', or 'halo'. Used to signify a person's 'good reputation' or social 'prestige', for Plessner it is the nimbus of the individual that may offer him distance in proximity, mask *and* face: 'Der künstliche Zauber des unzerstörbaren Nimbus bringt den Widerspruch zur Lösung. Er schafft seinem Träger zugleich Raum und Anziehungskraft, Maske und Gesicht' ('The artificial magic of the indestructible nimbus solves this contradiction. It simultaneously produces for its bearer space and the force of attraction, mask and face') (*Grenzen*, p. 85; p. 136). In *Minima Moralia* Adorno introduces the related concept of 'Aura'. Latin/Greek for 'breeze' or 'air', 'aura' is semantically linked to 'nimbus'. And, like Plessner's 'nimbus', Adorno's 'aura' is based on a dialectical tension between nearness and distance. While Plessner's 'nimbus' abolishes the conflict between mask and face, however, within the context of Adorno's theory of tact aura is solely associated with the intimate self. Aura appears as the medium of the individual's uniqueness and difference. As such, and in consistency with Benjamin's earlier understanding of the term as 'einmalige Erscheinung einer Ferne, so nah sie sein mag' (the 'unique apparition of a distance, however near it may be'),⁵³ aura corresponds to what Adorno calls 'das Menschliche' ('the humanity') in the subject (*Minima Moralia*, p. 207; p. 182). Threatened by social immediacy and public incorporation, aura determines the condition of the subject as individual. The utopian lifestyle Barthes envisages in his lecture series follows a logic that complies with Adorno's point. 'Le principe' of tact, Barthes notes in *Comment vivre ensemble*, would be

ne pas manier l'autre, les autres, ne pas manipuler, renoncer activement aux images (des uns, des autres), éviter tout ce qui peut alimenter l'imaginaire de la relation.= Utopie proprement dite, car du Souverain Bien. (*Vivre*, pp. 179–80)

Inflected by a Lacanian vocabulary, Barthes's use of the 'image' in this passage is marked by a negative understanding of alienation that shares many of its traits with Adorno's understanding of the concept. For Barthes, just as for Adorno, tact, essentially motivated by a respect for the private sphere of the other, appears as a form of defence against the individual's potential commodification. In contradistinction to Plessner, for Barthes liberation is not to be found in the social sphere that facilitates alienation, but in the individual's solitary retreat from the public. As he explains in *Le Neutre*:

le mythe public/privé; on a dit: idéologiquement capitaliste: mais c'est l'utilisation du 'public' qui est aliénée dans un marché (photos, interviews, racontars, etc.): le 'privé' est une défense naturelle contre la transformation du public en marchan-

⁵³ 'Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit', *Gesammelte Schriften*, I.2, 471–508 (p. 479), translated as 'The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility', in *Selected Writings*, trans. by Edmund Jephcott and others, ed. by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, 4 vols (Cambridge MA: Belknap, 2003), VI, 251–83 (p. 272).

dise → identification logique du clandestin (ou de l'anonyme) et du libre. (*Neutre*, p. 183)

More explicitly than Adorno, Barthes reflects in his lectures on his own position as an intellectual in society. Seeking to reconcile the paradox 'de vouloir vivre seul et de vouloir vivre ensemble' (*Vivre*, p. 35), Barthes explores, in loose adaptation of the above-mentioned Kantian antagonism, the connection between human sociability and intellectual productivity in view of its hermeneutic potential. Tact, within this context, offers a way to disestablish the intellectual self as a public figure and to deconstruct habitual forms of critical enquiry (*Neutre*, p. 140). In this way, Barthes succeeds in translating the idea of ethical tact into a form of hermeneutical tact that resides at the heart of an alternative practice of critical enquiry. Recalling Nietzsche's opposition between method and *paideia* ('culture'), or, in Barthes's words, 'non-method', Barthes's general idea is not to pursue a clearly marked path but to let the mind roam, and to present one's findings as one goes along.⁵⁴ For Barthes, as for Adorno, the practice of culture is defined by an engendering of forces essentially understood as an 'écoute des différences'⁵⁵. Intellectual practice means to 'ne pas parler la langue de "tout le monde"' (*Vivre*, p. 50). Defined, with Adorno, as a form of resistance that diverts from the 'vertraute[] Strom der Rede' ('familiar flow of speech'), intellectual enquiry must not obey any sense of belonging and contact (*Minima Moralia*, p. 114; p. 100). Instead, for Barthes as for Adorno, it is marked by an intimate sensitivity to the particular and a non-dogmatism that avoids establishing the shortest connection between two points. It is a form of critical engagement that resists the pressure of nearness inasmuch as it approaches the object of one's desire in a plurality of digressions (*Minima Moralia*, p. 45; p. 41). As Barthes notes in *Le Neutre*, tact is

une jouissance d'analyse, une opération verbale qui déjoue ce qui est attendu [. . .] une perversion qui joue du détail inutile [. . .] c'est ce découpage et ce détournement qui est jouissif → on pourrait dire: jouissance du 'futile' [. . .] En somme, délicatesse: l'analyse [. . .] qui ne sert à rien. (*Neutre*, p. 58–59)

Conclusion

The social practice of tact can be linked to the ability to empathize with another person. In order to be tactful, it helps to be able to imagine how the other feels so as to alleviate her—and possibly our own—state of distress. But while empathy is an important pathway to tact, it may not always be neces-

⁵⁴ On Barthes's preference for 'paideia' as digression over "méthode" come art du marcher droit' see also Claude Coste, *Barthes ou l'art du détour* (Paris: Hermann, 2016), p. 30.

⁵⁵ Barthes adds this orally (*Vivre*, p. 34, n. 6).

sary. A second look at Truffaut's story about the gentleman caller and the lady in the bath reveals as much. To handle the situation creatively, in slight but essential deviation from the general code of politeness, the gentleman does not necessarily have to be able to feel how the lady feels at the very moment he opens the door. Although it may help if he does, it suffices for him to know that it is generally deemed an embarrassment for a lady to be caught naked in the bath by a (not yet quite known) representative of the other sex. Tact, like empathy, is based on a certain form of mutual understanding. But while empathy implies the idea of entering someone else's mind inasmuch as it is linked to the presumption that 'I know how you feel', tact exists to create a form of bonding between individuals that is not based on the idea of intrusion but, conversely, on the respect for existing boundaries, and on a willingness not always to assume that one knows. While empathy requires resonance and proximity, tact is there to restore distance, and to accept the difference between the individuals involved in order to protect and preserve their dignity. Tact is based on an attention towards otherness. It functions as a way to negotiate the space between different horizons of experience in the same way as it facilitates a rapprochement between the horizons of readers and texts. Tact, understood with Barthes and Adorno as an ethical sensitivity to form, is based on an individual digression from the norm that may, at least in the case of Barthes and Truffaut, arouse pleasure (of interpretation).

In visiting the three theories of tact advanced by Plessner, Adorno, and Barthes, we have seen that the figure of crisis gives rise to the notion of tact. Tact flourishes at times when established codes and conventions disintegrate but have not yet disappeared. The challenge is, then, to develop new forms of communication that enable individuals to approach each other without colliding, and to depart from each other without ending in isolation. While Plessner's, Adorno's, and Barthes's theories of tact were produced at different turning points in the history of the twentieth century and are, at least in the case of Plessner and Adorno, characterized by conflicting methodological assumptions, they share a suspicion towards certain forms of intimacy, and a preference for individual difference over communal identification. The three variations of an ethic of indirectness that result are based on forms of communication that defy authenticity (Plessner), frankness (Barthes), and touch (Adorno). As such, they seek to resist any possible strategies of incorporation. The outcome consists in a form of non-violent contemplation that is, in the words of Adorno, the source 'of all the joy of truth'. It presupposes 'daß der Betrachtende nicht das Objekt sich einverleibt: Nähe an Distanz' (that he who contemplates does not absorb the object into himself: a distanced nearness) (*Minima Moralia*, p. 100; p. 90).