At a time when critical theory’s future is very much at issue, this book presents a number of arguments about what critical theory should be if it is to have a future worthy of its past. The arguments presented here call for another way to inherit critical theory in light of renewed reflection on the nature of its undertaking, on its relation to time and to its own traditions, and, crucially, on the sources of normativity upon which it should draw. The book is composed of two interanimating and intersecting parts: (1) an elaborate critique of the limitations of Jürgen Habermas’s reformulation of critical theory, and the proceduralist interpretation of reason upon which it is based; and (2) an alternative rendering of critical theory, at the center of which is a normatively reformulated interpretation of Martin Heidegger’s idea of “disclosure” or “world disclosure.” Contrasted are two “visions” of critical theory’s role and purpose in the world. On the one side is a vision of critical theory that, in recognition of the value pluralism and social complexity of modernity, restricts itself to the normative clarification of the procedures by which moral and political questions should be settled; on the other, a vision of critical theory that, in recognition of the various ways in which conditions of modernity obscure or foreclose our possibilities, conceives itself as a possibility-disclosing practice. The proposed alternative represents neither a “Heideggerian” critical theory nor a total break with the Frankfurt School tradition of critical theory. Its guiding intention is to return critical theory to itself. To “return to itself,” critical theory needs to reclaim the conceptual and normative resources of its own tradition from which it has been cut off and alienated, and to re-attune itself to those sources of normativity in communication with which it receives its calling and undertakes its distinctive philosophical and critical tasks.

The audience for whom this book was written obviously includes Habermasians and Heideggerians, and all those generally interested in the
question of how to inherit the German philosophical tradition; however, the circle of intended addressees is much wider and more diverse. I hope that it will have something meaningful to say to social and political theorists, literary and cultural theorists, and feminist and postcolonial theorists wishing to rethink the meaning of reason, the possibilities of human agency, the conditions of modernity, and the practice of critique; in particular, to those who see the need to reformulate our received conceptions of reason, agency, and critique by incorporating (rather than neglecting) the activities through which human beings reflectively and innovatively transform the social practices, cultural traditions, and political institutions that they inherit and pass on.

The form of the book is somewhat unusual in that its arguments are not developed in straightforwardly linear and discrete fashion. Instead, they unfold in a “theme and variation” form. The principal themes of the book—the problem of beginning anew, the normative implications of modernity’s relation to time, the cultural role of philosophy and the nature of critical theory’s “calling,” the meaning and scope of reason, the question of how to inherit and pass on our forms of life, the place of receptivity and self-decentering in our conceptions of reason and agency, and the normative and critical significance of Heidegger’s notion of disclosure—are introduced in part I and reappear in subsequent parts of the book, taking on new implications at different points in the argument and in the changing contexts of the argument. As with rondo form in music, the final part, part VI, returns to and “concludes” part I, suggesting answers to the questions first posed there.

Even a superficial reading of this book will reveal its obvious flaws. Despite these flaws it is my hope that the book succeeds in showing the normative and critical potential of a way of thinking and philosophizing that has been greatly misunderstood and sometimes maligned, even though it has been central to the critical practice of Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, Emerson, Dewey, Mead, Heidegger, Arendt, Gadamer, Adorno, Foucault, Taylor, and Cavell. If the book does succeed in this, then I will have partly discharged my many debts to these thinkers.

Close readers of Habermas will notice that a few elements of the alternative conception of critical theory proposed here can be found in the more “marginal” of Habermas’s writings. Thinkers of Habermas’s stature leave behind more good undeveloped ideas than less extraordinary thinkers develop in a lifetime. My own intellectual development would have been very different, and I would not have been nearly as clear about my own intellectual agenda, had I not been able to learn a very great deal
from Habermas’s undeveloped as well as from his fully developed ideas. I am very grateful to Habermas for inviting me to participate in his research colloquium at the University of Frankfurt, where, thanks to a postdoctoral fellowship from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, I was able to spend three formative years in the company of a very stimulating group of philosophers and social theorists.

I want also to express my gratitude to Peter Dews for an invitation to contribute a paper on Habermas and Heidegger for his collection, Habermas: A Critical Reader. The invitation to write that paper gave me the opportunity to articulate in relatively intelligible and cogent form the issues that are at the heart of this book. And because the first draft of that paper was more than 30,000 words long, it became clear that those issues required book-length treatment. What I had in mind back then was a nice short book. It didn’t turn out that way, but for the fact that it turned out as a book at all, I am indebted to David Levin for his timely encouragement and support. I am especially grateful to James Bohman for fifteen years of thought-provoking discussion about the topic of disclosure, its critical and normative potential, and its possible role in a renewed critical theory. And I’m also indebted to a great number of other friends and colleagues whose intellectual companionship has been an invaluable source of stimulation and support. I wish, in particular, to thank Martin Bresnick, Mikael Carleheden, Carolin Emcke, Josef Früchtl, Bonnie Honig, Axel Honneth, Jennifer Nedelsky, Claude Piché, and, especially, Jay Bernstein, Joseph Carens, Richard Eldridge, and James Tully. On various occasions and in various ways, whether you realized it or not, you kept my spirits up, and kept me from doubting myself too much, during some very difficult times.

I want also to thank my MIT Press editor, John Covell, for all his help in bringing this book into the marketplace of ideas, and for his choice of three excellent anonymous reviewers. Their valuable criticisms and suggestions helped me improve the book’s overall structure and organization, and I wish to thank them as well for their close and attentive reading of the manuscript. And I also want to thank Dana Andrus at The MIT Press for her meticulous editing and valuable suggestions.

I dedicate this long-promised book to Allison Weir for the benefit of her patience and impatience with its progress; for the great good fortune that daily exposes my life to large and restorative doses of her grace, generosity, humor, and beauty; and for reminding me, time and again, that intimacy and criticism are not just compatible with but absolutely essential to the success of any life shared together.