A Reader on Adorno for Hegel 13/13

Prepared by Billie Alexopoulos
Department of Philosophy,
Columbia University

Introduction and Selections
by Billie Alexopoulos

Hegel 13/13 Seminar
Professor Bernard E. Harcourt

Adorno and Hegel's Dialectical Method: What He Appropriates and What He Refuses

Hegel is a crucial reference point for Adorno's philosophy, a fact that becomes immediately clear in the opening pages of the introduction to *Negative Dialectics*. Adorno turns to Hegel's dialectical method as one of philosophy's most integral modes of thinking, praising its capacity to attend to contradiction and movement within thought. Yet he also subjects Hegel's system to criticism. Understanding what Adorno adopts from Hegel, and what he ultimately rejects, is therefore essential for grasping the character of Adorno's own philosophical project. Adorno's engagement with Hegel centers on the nature and limits of conceptual knowledge. Dialectics, for Adorno, is not simply a method of logical development but a way of thinking about the relationship between concepts and the objects they seek to grasp. What we attempt to know when we conceptualize objects—and the limits of such attempts—determine what dialectical thinking can and should do. Adorno approaches Hegel's dialectic with a double aim: to preserve its critical power while resisting what he sees as the *systematic impulse* toward reconciliation that he believes characterizes Hegel's philosophy.

The following discussion pursues two interrelated goals. First, it clarifies how Adorno interprets Hegel's dialectical method—what he appropriates from it and what he finds philosophically problematic. Second, it sheds light on Adorno's own epistemology, which emerges through his critical engagement with both Hegel and Kant. Examining this relationship helps illuminate the distinctive form of dialectics that Adorno develops in *Negative Dialectics.*

The Limits of Our Knowledge: Adorno's Epistemology Between Kant and Hegel

Adorno develops a distinctive account of our conceptual apparatus—that is, of what we are capable of knowing. In order to understand what dialectics is for Adorno and how it strays from Hegel's and what it is meant to accomplish, we must first look toward the structure and limits of our cognition: what happens when we attempt to conceptualize the world around us, and what remains beyond our grasp. Adorno's position can be understood as situated between two philosophical poles, the epistemological theories of Kant and Hegel. Examining his thought in relation to these two figures clarifies both the limitations Adorno identifies in Hegel's dialectical method and the elements of it that he seeks to preserve.

Kant's Epistemological Limit

Adorno agrees with the fundamental claim of Kant that our cognitive apparatus is limited in its attempt to grasp the thing in itself, or the objects in nature before conceptual categorization. For Kant, the study of our thought, or the investigations into the necessary conditions for the possibility of our thought, allows us to say something about structures of this thought, but nothing of the being out there—so his theory sets a radical limit to what we can know. This is what Adorno calls Kant's block of knowing the absolute. He disagrees however with Kant, in terms of the degree to which we can know the object. Adorno rejects the claim that the objects out there (things in themselves) are unknowable to cognition. We may attain glimpses of the thing through our conceptual acts to grasp the objects, but not the object's entirety or completeness. Adorno rejects the Kantian separation between the noumena and phenomena—the substantial eternal things out there and the insubstantial mere appearances.

The principle of identity, in the conceptual act, appropriates the object (the thing in itself) and molds it under its own logical system or categorization. The qualities or elements that do not fit under the concept that is applied to the object, is left out or discarded by the cognitive mechanism. With every conceptual act toward the intention to know the object, there is always a 'remainder': something of the object that resists this act, or the concept's attempt to grasp it. This is what Adorno calls *non-identity*. In this sense, we can attempt to know about objects in the world, regardless of their scale—whether it be a political phenomenon of a certain historical period for instance or a mere piece of furniture in front of us—but with every attempt to know it, something about this object will necessarily be left out, and thus its full essence will always be violated or distorted: "No object is wholly known…" (Adorno, 14). For Adorno, Kant is true in "…destroying the illusion of an immediate knowledge of the Absolute…" (Ibid, 140)

These remnants of 'non-identity' that resist conceptualization always appear to the systematic theories of thought as contradiction. In its attempt to totalize, the pieces of reality that truly exist, but did not fit the systematic theory will appear as theoretical blocks, that hinder thought's speculative drive for complete harmony.

Hegel's Dialectical Thinking

It is this attention to contradiction where Adorno meets Hegel. Dialectical thinking is this very *attention to contradiction*—investigating it to reveal a deeper truth of a previous superficial knowledge of something. Exemplified in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel believed throughout history, knowledge is on a path to its full realization or actualization. In its attempt and intent to know the world (and for Hegel this also means itself), with each form of consciousness or phases, knowledge finds contradictions internal to its own logic. With each phase of consciousness, these contradictions eventually reveal themselves to be moments of a greater or more complex concept or phase of consciousness, where the contradictions are reconciled and thus dissolved, only with the consciousness and movement to this greater concept. Although Adorno honors Hegel's dialectical thinking, its specific form as an idealistic dialectic, or a 'closed' dialectic, where Adorno disagrees with Hegel. It is Hegel's idealistic attempt to reconcile the contradictions of knowledge—by making it a mere 'moment' in the concept, where Adorno claims Hegel falls into a trap of what he calls identity-thinking. Contradiction is not a mere side of a concept that can be reconciled and thus absolved, contradiction is the mark of what is left out of the object in the conceptual act:

> The name of dialectics says no more, to begin with, than that objects do not go into their concepts without a remainder, that they come to contradict the traditional norm of adequacy. Contradiction is not what Hegel's absolute idealism was bound to transfigure it into: it is not of the essence in a Heraclitean sense. It indicates the untruth of identity, the fact that the concept does not exhaust the thing conceived" (Ibid, 5)

Whereas Kant claimed that we could not immediately know things in themselves, Hegel was on the other side of the epistemological spectrum. Adorno believes that as a repulsion to this limit of knowledge Kant had set, an idealistic will to grasp the whole arose, and it was Hegel's philosophy that was the manifestation of this impulse. This was "…the will to grasp the whole without any limits being placed on cognition" (Ibid, 62). Hegel attempted through his constructivist philosophy to salvage true knowledge of the absolute of which Kant had taken away the possibility. When reason constructs and thus is the external world, there is no longer

the epistemological gap introduced by Kant. But this attempt for totalization and harmony of world (or objectivity) and reason is not successful if the appearance of contradictions in our rational system are seen for what they really are: objects external to our rational system that do not fit into it. Perhaps this idealistic impulse and obeyance of identity thinking was what caused Hegel to stray away from the authentic dialectical mode of thought: the thought that knows what these contradictions really are, and thus refuses to absolve them for the sake of the impulse of totalization or control. Adorno saves the speculative moment from Hegel that works through contradictions, but refutes the moment when they are reconciled (Ibid, 15).

One could place Adorno's epistemology between these two theoretical poles. Adorno agreed with Kant due to the limits of our cognitive structure as identity-thinking we were not capable of knowing things in themselves completely, and thus was deeply skeptical of the Hegelian idea that the reason and the world can be completely reconciled. He agreed with Hegel that close attention to contradictions reveal to us something deeper about the truth of objects out there, but these are not mere moments of a concept that can be dissolved, but markers that show us what our identity thinking as conceptualization had missed. In this sense, it is these unreconcilable contradictions as *non-identity* that are the indicators of our epistemic limits. Adorno would say Kant is too doubtful of our cognitive capability toward knowing objects, but Hegel was too optimistic about complete and total harmony with reason and those objects. Adorno takes Kant's limits and Hegel's dialectic, and leaves behind the former's rigid boundaries and the latter's constructivist idealism. Theoretical primacy is reoriented from the subject to the object.

Reader

If there is an interest to explore more deeply Adorno's engagement with Hegel and dialectics, the following passages from *Negative Dialectics* offer a point of entry. Given the fragmentary and non-linear structure of the text, Adorno's references to Hegel are dispersed throughout; nevertheless, going over these passages may provide insight into his critical relation to Hegelian thought.

Key themes:

- **Movement from idealist to non-idealist dialectic**
- **Movement from primacy of the subject to the primacy of the object**
- **Contradiction as non-identity**
- **Dialectics: the consistent sense of non-identity (what is not captured in conceptualization or 'identity thinking'), the ontology of the wrong state of things**

Passages from Introduction of *Negative Dialectics*

- Speculative for Hegel: Reason's ability to overcome contradictions by sublating them to higher unity: idealistic closure
- Speculative for Adorno: the speculative moment is the drive of thought to push beyond the surface, to penetrate into what resists conceptual capture-the postulate of depth-the negative-that which resists
- It is the element of philosophy that does not settle for mere facts or immediate appearance: seeks to unfold contradictions of reality
- This moment is essential for depth in thought: prevents philosophy from collapsing into empiricism or positivism
- Speculative need not end up in Hegelian identity-thinking (where contradictions are resolved in totality or unity)
- Freeing 'the postulate of depth from ideology'

6. ***'Twofold Character of the System'*** …….24-26
    - Critique of Hegel: attempts to adjust tension of still concept (being in itself) and dynamic concept (pure becoming) by construing unitarian principle: Spirit

7. ***'The Antinomical Character of Systems'*** ……...……26-28
    - Hegelian system was not true becoming: each definition within it already preconceived: these safeguards 'condemned it to untruth'
    - Thought must 'yield to the object'
    - 'Freedom to the object' is what philosophy lost under the spell of the concept of 'freedom'
    - A philosophy in fragment form

8. ***'Dialectics and Solidity'*** …….…….37-40
    - Critique of Hegel: primacy of the subject over the object
    - 'Hegel left the subject's primacy over the object unchallenged: its guise is the semi-theological word spirit'
    - With this process resulted the 'elimination of the definite being that might have legitimized its rudiment'

Selections from Chapter 'Meditations on Metaphysics' of *Negative Dialectics*

9. ***Section 1: 'After Auschwitz'*** ……...……361-365

10. ***Section 12: 'Self-Reflection of Dialectics'*** …….....…….…….405-408

The will to this understanding bespeaks a power claim denied by that which is to be understood.

The most patent expression of philosophy's historical fate is the way the special sciences compelled it to turn back into a special science. If Kant had, as he put it, "freed himself from the school concept of philosophy for its world concept,"[1] it has now, perforce, regressed to its school concept. Whenever philosophers mistake that for the world concept, their pretensions grow ridiculous. Hegel, despite his doctrine of the absolute spirit in which he included philosophy, knew philosophy as a mere element of reality, an activity in the division of labor, and thus restricted it. This has since led to the narrowness of philosophy, to a disproportionateness to reality that became the more marked the more thoroughly philosophers forgot about the restriction—the more they disdained, as alien, any thought of their position in a whole which they monopolized as their object, instead of recognizing how much they depended on it all the way to the internal composition of their philosophy, to its immanent truth.

To be worth another thought, philosophy must rid itself of such naïveté. But its critical self-reflection must not halt before the highest peaks of its history. Its task would be to inquire whether and how there can still be a philosophy at all, now that Hegel's has fallen, just as Kant inquired into the possibility of metaphysics after the critique of rationalism. If Hegel's dialectics constituted the unsuccessful attempt to use philosophical concepts for coping with all that is heterogeneous to those concepts, the relationship to dialectics is due for an accounting insofar as his attempt failed.

DIALECTICS NOT A STANDPOINT

No theory today escapes the marketplace. Each one is offered as a possibility among competing opinions; all are put up for choice; all are swallowed. There are no blinders for thought to don against this, and the self-righteous conviction that my own theory is spared that fate will surely deteriorate into self-advertising. But neither need dialectics be muted by such rebuke, or by the concomitant charge of its superfluity, of being a method slapped on outwardly,

at random. The name of dialectics says no more, to begin with, than that objects do not go into their concepts without leaving a remainder, that they come to contradict the traditional norm of adequacy. Contradiction is not what Hegel's absolute idealism was bound to transfigure it into: it is not of the essence in a Heraclitean sense. It indicates the untruth of identity, the fact that the concept does not exhaust the thing conceived.

Yet the appearance of identity is inherent in thought itself, in its pure form. To think is to identify. Conceptual order is content to screen what thinking seeks to comprehend. The semblance and the truth of thought entwine. The semblance cannot be decreed away, as by avowal of a being-in-itself outside the totality of cogitative definitions. It is a thesis secretly implied by Kant—and mobilized against him by Hegel—that the transconceptual "in itself" is void, being wholly indefinite. Aware that the conceptual totality is mere appearance, I have no way but to break immanently, in its own measure, through the appearance of total identity. Since that totality is structured to accord with logic, however, whose core is the principle of the excluded middle, whatever will not fit this principle, whatever differs in quality, comes to be designated as a contradiction. Contradiction is nonidentity under the aspect of identity; the dialectical primary of the principle of contradiction makes the thought of unity the measure of heterogeneity. As the heterogeneous collides with its limit it exceeds itself.

Dialectics is the consistent sense of nonidentity. It does not begin by taking a standpoint. My thought is driven to it by its own inevitable insufficiency, by my guilt of what I am thinking. We are blaming the method for the fault of the matter when we object to dialectics on the ground (repeated from Hegel's Aristotelian critics on[2]) that whatever happens to come into the dialectical mill will be reduced to the merely logical form of contradiction, and that (an argument still advanced by Croce[3]) the full diversity of the noncontradictory, of that which is simply differentiated, will be ignored. What we differentiate will appear divergent, dissonant, negative for just as long as the structure of our consciousness obliges it to strive for unity: as long as its demand for totality will be its measure for whatever is not identical with it. This is what

dialectics holds up to our consciousness as a contradiction. Because of the immanent nature of consciousness, contradictoriness itself has an inescapably and fatefully legal character. Identity and contradiction of thought are welded together. Total contradiction is nothing but the manifested untruth of total identification. Contradiction is nonidentity under the rule of a law that affects the nonidentical as well.

REALITY AND DIALECTICS

This law is not a cogitative law, however. It is real. Unquestionably, one who submits to the dialectical discipline has to pay dearly in the qualitative variety of experience. Still, in the administered world the impoverishment of experience by dialectics, which outrages healthy opinion, proves appropriate to the abstract monotony of that world. Its agony is the world's agony raised to a concept. Cognition must bow to it, unless concretion is once more to be debased into the ideology it starts becoming in fact.

Another version of dialectics contented itself with a debilitated renascence: with its intellectual-historical derivation from Kant's *aporias* and from that which the systems of his successors projected but failed to achieve. It can be achieved only negatively. Dialectics unfolds the difference between the particular and the universal, dictated by the universal. As the subject-object dichotomy is brought to mind it becomes inescapable for the subject, furrowing whatever the subject thinks, even objectively—but it would come to an end in reconcilement. Reconcilement would release the nonidentical, would rid it of coercion, including spiritualized coercion; it would open the road to the multiplicity of different things and strip dialectics of its power over them. Reconcilement would be the thought of the many as no longer inimical, a thought that is anathema to subjective reason.

Dialectics serves the end of reconcilement. It dismantles the coercive logical character of its own course; that is why it is denounced as "panlogism." As idealistic dialectics, it was bracketed with the absolute subject's predominance as the negative impulse of each single move of the concept and of its course as a whole.

Historically, such primacy of the subject has been condemned even in the Hegelian conception that eclipsed the individual human consciousness as well as the transcendental one of Kant and Fichte. Subjective primacy was not only supplanted by the impotence of the weakening thought, which the world's overpowering course deters from construing it; but none of the reconcilements claimed by absolute idealism—and no other kind remained consistent—has stood up, whether in logic or in politics and history. The inability of consistent idealism to constitute itself as anything but the epitome of contradiction is as much the logical consequence of its truth as it is the punishment incurred by its logicity *qua* logicity; it is appearance as much as necessity.

Yet reopening the case of dialectics, whose non-idealistic form has since degenerated into a dogma as its idealistic one did into a cultural asset, will not decide solely about the actuality of a traditional mode of philosophizing, nor about the actuality of the philosophical structure of cognitive objects. Through Hegel, philosophy had regained the right and the capacity to think substantively instead of being put off with the analysis of cognitive forms that were empty and, in an emphatic sense, null and void. Where present philosophy deals with anything substantive at all, it lapses either into the randomness of a weltanschauung or into that formalism, that "matter of indifference," against which Hegel had risen. There is historical evidence of this in the evolution of phenomenology, which once was animated by the need for contents and became an invocation of being, a repudiation of any content as unclean.

The fundament and result of Hegel's substantive philosophizing was the primacy of the subject, or—in the famous phrase from the Introduction to his *Logic*—the "identity of identity and nonidentity."[4] He held the definite particular to be definable by the mind because its immanent definition was to be nothing but the mind. Without this supposition, according to Hegel, philosophy would be incapable of knowing anything substantive or essential. Unless the idealistically acquired concept of dialectics harbors experiences contrary to the Hegelian emphasis, experiences independent of the idealistic machinery, philosophy must inevitably

do without substantive insight, confine itself to the methodology of science, call that philosophy, and virtually cross itself out.

THE CONCERN OF PHILOSOPHY

The matters of true philosophical interest at this point in history are those in which Hegel, agreeing with tradition, expressed his disinterest. They are nonconceptuality, individuality, and particularity—things which ever since Plato used to be dismissed as transitory and insignificant, and which Hegel labeled "lazy Existenz." Philosophy's theme would consist of the qualities it downgrades as contingent, as a *quantité négligeable*. A matter of urgency to the concept would be what it fails to cover, what its abstractionist mechanism eliminates, what is not already a case of the concept.

Bergson and Husserl, carriers of philosophical modernism, both have innervated this idea but withdrawn from it to traditional metaphysics. Bergson, in a tour de force, created another type of cognition for nonconceptuality's sake. The dialectical salt was washed away in an undifferentiated tide of life; solidified reality was disposed of as subaltern, not comprehended along with its subalternity. The hater of the rigid general concept established a cult of irrational immediacy, of sovereign freedom in the midst of unfreedom. He drafted his two cognitive modes in as dualistic an opposition as that of the Cartesian and Kantian doctrines he fought had ever been; the causal-mechanical mode, as pragmatistic knowledge, was no more affected by the intuitive one than the bourgeois establishment was by the relaxed unself-consciousness of those who owe their privileges to that establishment.

The celebrated intuitions themselves seem rather abstract in Bergson's philosophy; they scarcely go beyond the phenomenal time consciousness which even Kant had underlying chronological-physical time—spatial time, according to Bergson's insight. Although it takes an effort to develop, the intuitive mode of mental conduct does continue to exist in fact as an archaic rudiment of mimetic reactions. What preceded its past holds a promise beyond the ossified present. Intuitions succeed only desultorily, however.

disparage, and discard. The cognitive utopia would be to use concepts to unseal the nonconceptual with concepts, without making it their equal.

THE ANTAGONISTIC ENTIRETY

Such a concept of dialectics makes us doubt its possibility. However varied, the anticipation of moving in contradictions throughout seems to teach a mental totality—the very identity thesis we have just rendered inoperative. The mind which ceaselessly reflects on contradiction in the thing itself, we hear, must be the thing itself if it is to be organized in the form of contradiction; the truth which in idealistic dialectics drives beyond every particular, as onesided and wrong, is the truth of the whole, and if that were not preconceived, the dialectical steps would lack motivation and direction. We have to answer that the object of a mental experience is an antagonistic system in itself—antagonistic in reality, not just in its conveyance to the knowing subject that rediscovers itself therein. The coercive state of reality, which idealism had projected into the region of the subject and the mind, must be retranslated from that region. What remains of idealism is that society, the objective determinant of the mind, is as much an epitome of subjects as it is their negation. In society the subjects are unknowable and incapacitated; hence its desperate objectivity and conceptuality, which idealism mistakes for something positive.

The system is not one of the absolute spirit; it is one of the most conditioned spirit of those who have it and cannot even know how much it is their own. The subjective preconception of the material production process in society—basically different from its theoretical constitution—is the unresolved part, the part unreconciled with the subjects. Their own reason, unconscious like the transcendental subject and establishing identity by barter, remains incommensurable with the subjects it reduces to the same denominator: the subject as the subject's foe. The preceding generality is both true and untrue: true, because it forms that "ether" which Hegel calls spirit; untrue, because its reason is no reason yet, because its universality is the product of particular

interests. This is why a philosophical critique of identity transcends philosophy. But the ineffable part of the utopia is that what defies subsumption under identity—the "use value," in Marxist terminology—is necessary anyway if life is to go on at all, even under the prevailing circumstances of production. The utopia extends to the sworn enemies of its realization. Regarding the concrete utopian possibility, dialectics is the ontology of the wrong state of things. The right state of things would be free of it: neither a system nor a contradiction.

DISENCHANTMENT OF THE CONCEPT

Philosophy, Hegel's included, invites the general objection that by inevitably having concepts for its material it anticipates an idealistic decision. In fact no philosophy, not even extreme empiricism, can drag in the *facta bruta* and present them like cases in anatomy or experiments in physics; no philosophy can paste the particulars into the text, as seductive paintings would hoodwink it into believing. But the argument in its formality and generality takes as fetishistic a view of the concept as the concept does in interpreting itself naïvely in its own domain: in either case it is regarded as a self-sufficient totality over which philosophical thought has no power. In truth, all concepts, even the philosophical ones, refer to nonconceptualities, because concepts on their part are moments of the reality that requires their formation, primarily for the control of nature. What conceptualization appears to be from within, to one engaged in it—the predominance of its sphere, without which nothing is known—must not be mistaken for what it is in itself. Such a semblance of being-in-itself is conferred upon it by the motion that exempts it from reality, to which it is harnessed in turn.

Necessity compels philosophy to operate with concepts, but this necessity must not be turned into the virtue of their priority—no more than, conversely, criticism of that virtue can be turned into a summary verdict against philosophy. On the other hand, the insight that philosophy's conceptual knowledge is not the absolute of philosophy—this insight, for all its inescapability, is

again due to the nature of the concept. It is not a dogmatic thesis, much less a naïvely realistic one. Initially, such concepts as that of "being" at the start of Hegel's *Logic* emphatically mean nonconceptualities; as Lask put it, they "mean beyond themselves." Dissatisfaction with their own conceptuality is part of their meaning, although the inclusion of nonconceptuality in their meaning makes it tendentially their equal and thus keeps them trapped within themselves. The substance of concepts is to them both immanent, as far as the mind is concerned, and transcendent as far as being is concerned. To be aware of this is to be able to get rid of concept fetishism. Philosophical reflection makes sure of the nonconceptual in the concept. It would be empty otherwise, according to Kant's dictum; in the end, having ceased to be a concept of anything at all, it would be nothing.

A philosophy that lets us know this, that extinguishes the autarky of the concept, strips the blindfold from our eyes. That the concept is a concept even when dealing with things in being does not change the fact that on its part it is entwined with a nonconceptual whole. Its only insulation from that whole is its reification—that which establishes it as a concept. The concept is an element in dialectical logic, like any other. What survives in it is the fact that nonconceptuality has conveyed it by way of its meaning, which in turn establishes its conceptuality. To refer to nonconceptualities—as ultimately, according to traditional epistemology, every definition of concepts requires nonconceptual, deictic elements—is characteristic of the concept, and so is the contrary: that as the abstract unit of the noumena subsumed thereunder it will depart from the noumenal. To change this direction of conceptuality, to give it a turn toward nonidentity, is the hinge of negative dialectics. Insight into the constitutive character of the nonconceptual in the concept would end the compulsive identification which the concept brings unless halted by such reflection. Reflection upon its own meaning is the way out of the concept's seeming being-in-itself as a unit of meaning.

The esthetic moment is thus not accidental to philosophy, though on grounds quite different from Schelling's; but it is no less incumbent upon philosophy to void its estheticism, to sublimate the esthetic into the real, by cogent insights. Cogency and play are the two poles of philosophy. Its affinity to art does not entitle it to borrow from art, least of all by virtue of the intuitions which barbarians take for the prerogatives of art. Intuitions hardly ever strike in isolation, as lightning from above; they do not strike the artist's work like that either. They hang together with the formal law of the work; if one tried to extract and preserve them, they would dissolve. Finally, thought is no protector of springs whose freshness might deliver us from thinking. We have no type of cognition at our disposal that differs absolutely from the disposing type, the type which intuitionism flees in panic and in vain.

A philosophy that tried to imitate art, that would turn itself into a work of art, would be expunging itself. It would be postulating the demand for identity, claiming to exhaust its object by endowing its procedure with a supremacy to which the heterogeneous bows a priori, as material—whereas to genuine philosophy its relation to the heterogeneous is virtually thematic. Common to art and philosophy is not the form, not the forming process, but a mode of conduct that forbids pseudomorphosis. Both keep faith with their own substance through their opposites: art by making itself resistant to its meanings; philosophy, by refusing to clutch at any immediate thing. What the philosophical concept will not abandon is the yearning that animates the nonconceptual side of art, and whose fulfillment shuns the immediate side of art as mere appearance. The concept—the organon of thinking, and yet the wall between thinking and the thought—negates that yearning. Philosophy can neither circumvent such negation nor submit to it. It must strive, by way of the concept, to transcend the concept.

THE SPECULATIVE MOMENT

Even after breaking with idealism, philosophy cannot do without speculation, which was exalted by idealism and tabooed with it—meaning speculation, of course, in a sense broader than the overly

positive Hegelian one.* For positivists it is not difficult to attribute speculation to Marxian materialism, which starts out from laws of objective being, by no means from immediate data or protocol statements. To cleanse himself of the suspicion of ideology, it is now safer for a man to call Marx a metaphysician than to call him a class enemy.

But the safe ground is a phantasm where the claims of truth demand that one rise above it. Philosophy is not to be put off with theorems that would talk it out of its essential concern instead of satisfying that concern, albeit with a No. In the countermovements to Kant, from the nineteenth century on, this was sensed but always compromised again by obscurantism. The resistance of philosophy needs to unfold, however. Even in music—as in all art, presumably—the impulse animating the first bar will not be fulfilled at once, but only in further articulation. To this extent, however much it may be phenomenal as a totality, music is a critique of phenomenality, of the appearance that the substance is present here and now. Such a mediate role befits philosophy no less. When it presumes to say things forthwith it invites Hegel's verdict on empty profundity. Mouthing profundities will no more make a man profound than narrating the metaphysical views of its characters will make a novel metaphysical.

To ask philosophy to deal with the question of being, or with other cardinal themes of Western metaphysics, shows a primitive

* "Moreover, if skepticism even nowadays is frequently considered an irresistible enemy of all positive knowledge, and thus of philosophy insofar as it is a matter of positive cognition, we have to counter by saying that it is indeed only finite, abstractly intellectual thought that need fear skepticism and cannot withstand it, while philosophy contains the skeptical as one of its own elements, namely, as dialectics. But then philosophy will not halt at the merely negative result of dialectics, as is the case in skepticism. Skepticism misconceives its result, holding on to pure (i.e., abstract) negation. As dialectics has the negative for its result, this negative, being a result, is simultaneously positive, since it contains sublimated within itself that from which it results and without which it is not. This is the basic definition of the third form of logic, namely, of speculation or positive reason." (Hegel, Works 8, p. 194ff.)

topical faith. The objective worth of those themes is indeed inescapable in philosophy, but neither can we rely on our ability to cope with the great topics. We must be so wary of the beaten tracks of philosophical reflection that our emphatic interest will seek refuge in ephemeral objects not yet overdetermined by intentions. Though chained to the questions of traditional philosophical problematics, we certainly must negate that problematics. A world that is objectively set for totality will not release the human consciousness, will ceaselessly fasten it to points it wants to get away from; but a thinking that blithely begins afresh, heedless of the historic form of its problems, will so much more be their prey.

That philosophy shares in the idea of depth is due to its cogitative breath alone. A prime example from the modern age is the Kantian deduction of pure intellectual concepts, which the author, with abysmally apologetic irony, called "somewhat profoundly arranged."[7] Profundity, as Hegel did not fail to note, is another element of dialectics, not an isolated trait. A dreadful German tradition equates profound thoughts with thoughts ready to swear by the theodicy of death and evil. A theological *terminus ad quem* is tacitly passed over and passed under, as if the worth of a thought were decided by its result, the confirmation of transcendence, or by its immersion in inwardness, its sheer being-for-itself; as if withdrawal from the world were flatly tantamount to consciousness of the world ground. As for the phantasms of profundity—which in the history of the human spirit have always been well-disposed toward an existing state of affairs they find insipid—resistance would be their true measure.

The power of the status quo puts up the façades into which our consciousness crashes. It must seek to crash through them. This alone would free the postulate of depth from ideology. Surviving in such resistance is the speculative moment: what will not have its law prescribed for it by given facts transcends them even in the closest contact with the objects, and in repudiating a sacrosanct transcendence. Where the thought transcends the bonds it tied in resistance—there is its freedom. Freedom follows the subject's urge to express itself. The need to lend a voice to suffering is a condition of all truth. For suffering is objectivity that weighs

upon the subject; its most subjective experience, its expression, is objectively conveyed.

PRESENTATION

This may help to explain why the presentation of philosophy is not an external matter of indifference to it but immanent to its idea. Its integral, nonconceptually mimetic moment of expression is objectified only by presentation in language. The freedom of philosophy is nothing but the capacity to lend a voice to its unfreedom. If more is claimed for the expressive moment, it will degenerate into a weltanschauung; where the expressive moment and the duty of presentation are given up, philosophy comes to resemble science.

To philosophy, expression and stringency are not two dichotomous possibilities. They need each other; neither one can be without the other. Expression is relieved of its accidental character by thought, on which it toils as thought toils on expression. Only an expressed thought is succinct, rendered succinct by its presentation in language; what is vaguely put is poorly thought. Expression compels stringency in what it expresses. It is not an end in itself at the latter's expense; rather, expression removes the expressed from the materialized mischief which in its turn is an object of philosophical criticism. Speculative philosophy without an idealistic substructure requires observance of stringency to break the authoritarian power claim of stringency. Benjamin, whose original draft of his passage theory combined incomparable speculative skill with micrological proximity to factual contents, later remarked in a correspondence about the first properly metaphysical stratum of this work that it could be accomplished only as an "impermissible 'poetic' one,"[8] This admission of surrender denotes as much the difficulty of a philosophy loath to decline as the point at which its concept can be carried further. It was probably due to Benjamin's acceptance of dialectical materialism as a weltanschauung, so to speak, with closed eyes. But the fact that he could not bring himself to put the definitive version of the passage theory in writing reminds us that philosophy

pressure of particular rationality: there is disintegration by way of integration. If society could be seen through as a closed system, a system accordingly unreconciled to the subjects, it would become too embarrassing for the subjects as long as they remain subjects in any sense.

Angst, that supposed "existential," is the claustrophobia of a systematized society. Its system character, yesterday still a shibboleth of academic philosophy, is strenuously denied by initiates of that philosophy; they may, with impunity, pose as spokesmen for free, for original, indeed, for unacademic thinking. Criticism of the systems is not vitiated by such abuse. A proposition common to all emphatic philosophy—as opposed to the skeptical one, which refrained from emphasis—was that only as a system could philosophy be pursued; this proposition has done hardly less to cripple philosophy than have the empiricisms. The things philosophy has yet to judge are postulated before it begins. The system, the form of presenting a totality to which nothing remains extraneous, absolutizes the thought against each of its contents and evaporates the content in thoughts. It proceeds idealistically before advancing any arguments for idealism.

THE TWOFOLD CHARACTER OF THE SYSTEM

In criticism we do not simply liquidate systems, however. At the peak of the Enlightenment, d'Alembert rightly distinguished between *l'esprit de système* and *l'esprit systématique,* and the method of the Encyclopédie took account of the distinction. Speaking for the *esprit systématique* is not only the trivial motive of a cohesion that will tend to crystallize in the incoherent anyway; it does not only satisfy the bureaucrats' desire to stuff all things into their categories. The form of the system is adequate to the world, whose substance eludes the hegemony of the human thought; but unity and unanimity are at the same time an oblique projection of pacified, no longer antagonistic conditions upon the coordinates of supremacist, oppressive thinking. The double meaning of philosophical systematics leaves no choice but to

transpose the power of thought, once delivered from the systems, into the open realm of definition by individual moments.

To Hegelian logic this procedure was not altogether alien. The microanalysis of individual categories, which simultaneously appears as their objective self-reflection, was to let each concept pass into its otherness without regard to an overlay from above; to Hegel, the totality of this movement meant the system. There is contradiction as well as kinship between this concept of the system—a concept that concludes, and thus brings to a standstill—and the concept of dynamism, of pure, autarkic, subjective generation, which constitutes all philosophical systematics. Hegel could adjust the tension between statics and dynamics only by construing his unitarian principle, the spirit, as a simultaneous being-in-itself and pure becoming, a resumption of the Aristotelian-scholastic *actus purus;* and that the implausibility of this construction—in which subjective generation and ontology, nominalism and realism, are syncopated at the Archimedean point—will prevent the resolution of that tension is also immanent in the system.

And yet, such a concept of the philosophical system towers above a merely scientific systematics that call for orderly organization and presentation of thoughts, for a consistent structure of topical disciplines, without insisting strictly, from the object's point of view, upon the inner unity of its aspects. The postulate of this unity is bound up with the presupposition that all things in being are identical with the cognitive principle; but on the other hand, once burdened as it is in idealistic speculation, that postulate legitimately recalls the affinity which objects have for each other, and which is tabooed by the scientific need for order and obliged to yield to the surrogate of its schemata. What the objects communicate in—instead of each being the atom it becomes in the logic of classification—is the trace of the objects' definition in themselves, which Kant denied and Hegel, against Kant, sought to restore through the subject.

To comprehend a thing itself, not just to fit and register it in its system of reference, is nothing but to perceive the individual moment in its immanent connection with others. Such anti-subjectivism lies under the crackling shell of absolute idealism; it

stirs in the tendency to unseal current issues by resorting to the way they came to be. What the conception of the system recalls, in reverse, is the coherence of the nonidentical, the very thing infringed by deductive systematics. Criticism of systems and asystematic thought are superficial as long as they cannot release the cohesive force which the idealistic systems had signed over to the transcendental subject.

THE ANTINOMICAL CHARACTER OF SYSTEMS

The ego principle that founds the system, the pure method before any content, has always been the *ratio*. It is not confined by anything outside it, not even by a so-called mental order. Idealism, attesting the positive infinity of its principle at every one of its stages, turns the character of thought, the historic evolution of its independence, into metaphysics. It eliminates all heterogeneous being. This defines the system as pure becoming, a pure process, and eventually as that absolute engendering which Fichte—in this respect the authentic systematizer of philosophy—declared thinking to be. Kant had already held that the emancipated *ratio,* the *progressus ad infinitum,* is halted solely by recognizing nonidentities in form, at least. The antinomy of totality and infinity—for the restless *ad infinitum* explodes the self-contained system, for all its being owed to infinity alone—is of the essence of idealism.

It imitates a central antinomy of bourgeois society. To preserve itself, to remain the same, to "be," that society too must constantly expand, progress, advance its frontiers, not respect any limit, not remain the same.[9] It has been demonstrated to bourgeois society that it would no sooner reach a ceiling, would no sooner cease to have noncapitalist areas available outside itself, than its own concept would force its self-liquidation. This makes clear why, Aristotle notwithstanding, the modern concept of dynamics was inappropriate to Antiquity, as was the concept of the system. To Plato, who chose the aporetical form for so many of his dialogues, both concepts could be imputed only in retrospect. The reprimand which Kant gave the old man for that reason is not, as he put it, a

matter of plain logic; it is historical, modern through and through. On the other hand, systematics is so deeply ingrained in the modern consciousness that even Husserl's anti-systematic efforts—which began under the name of ontology, and from which "fundamental ontology" branched off later—reverted irresistibly to a system, at the price of formalization.

Thus intertwined, the system's static and dynamic characters keep clashing. No matter how dynamically a system may be conceived, if it is in fact to be a closed system, to tolerate nothing outside its domain, it will become a positive infinity—in other words, finite and static. The fact that it sustains itself in this manner, for which Hegel praised his own system, brings it to a standstill. Bluntly put, closed systems are bound to be finished. Eccentricities like the one constantly held up to Hegel—of world history being perfected in the Prussian state—are not mere aberrations for ideological purposes, nor are they irrelevant vis-à-vis the whole. Their necessary absurdity shatters the asserted unity of system and dynamics. By negating the concept of the limit and theoretically assuring itself that there always remains something outside, dynamics also tends to disavow its own product, the system.

An aspect under which it might well be fruitful to treat the history of modern philosophy is how it managed to cope with the antagonism of statics and dynamics in its systems. The Hegelian system in itself was not a true becoming; implicitly, each single definition in it was already preconceived. Such safeguards condemn it to untruth. Unconsciously, so to speak, consciousness would have to immerse itself in the phenomena on which it takes a stand. This would, of course, effect a qualitative change in dialectics. Systematic unanimity would crumble. The phenomenon would not remain a case of its concept, as it does to Hegel, despite all pronouncements to the contrary. The thought would be burdened with more toil and trouble than Hegel defines as such, because the thought he discusses always extracts from its objects only that which is a thought already. Despite the program of self-yielding, the Hegelian thought finds satisfaction in itself; it goes rolling along, however often it may urge the contrary. If the thought really yielded to the object, if its attention were on the

object, not on its category, the very objects would start talking under the lingering eye.

Hegel had argued against epistemology that one becomes a smith only by smithing, by the actual cognition of things that resist cognition—of things which are, so to speak, atheoretical. There we have to take him at his word; nothing else would return to philosophy what Hegel calls the "freedom to the object"—what philosophy had lost under the spell of the concept "freedom," of the subject's sense-determining autonomy. But the speculative power to break down the gates of the insoluble is the power of negation. The systematic trend lives on in negation alone. The categories of a critique of systems are at the same time the categories in which the particular is understood. What has once legitimately transcended particularity in the system has its place outside the system. The interpretive eye which sees more in a phenomenon than it is—and solely because of what it is—secularizes metaphysics. Only a philosophy in fragment form would give their proper place to the monads, those illusory idealistic drafts. They would be conceptions, in the particular, of the totality that is inconceivable as such.

ARGUMENT AND EXPERIENCE

The thought, to which a positive hypostasis of anything outside actual dialectics is forbidden, overshoots the object with which it no longer simulates being as one. It grows more independent than in the conception of its absoluteness, in which sovereignty and complaisance mingle, each inwardly depending on the other. This may have been the end to which Kant exempted the intelligible sphere from all immanence. An aspect of immersion in particularity, that extreme enhancement of dialectical immanence, must also be the freedom to step out of the object, a freedom which the identity claim cuts short. Hegel would have censured that freedom; he relied upon complete mediation by the objects. In cognitive practice, when we resolve the insoluble, a moment of such cogitative transcendence comes to light in the fact that for our micrological activity we have exclusively macrological means.

from the different perspectives of the strata of a "freely suspended" intelligence, the factors are reversed: the conditioning becomes the conditioned.

In fact, the law that governs the divergent perspectives is the structure of the social process as a preordained whole. Knowledge of the whole makes the perspectives binding. An entrepreneur who wants to stay competitive must calculate so that the uncompensated portion of the yield of other people's labor will go to him as profit, and he must believe that what he is doing is a fair exchange of labor against the cost of its reproduction. It can be just as stringently shown, however, why this objectively necessary belief is an objective falsehood. The dialectical relation voids its particular elements in itself. The alleged social relativity of views obeys the objective law of social production under private ownership of the means of production. Bourgeois skepticism, of which relativism is the doctrinal embodiment, is obtuse.

But the perennial anti-intellectualism is more than an anthropological trait of bourgeois subjectivity. It is due to the fact that under the existing conditions of production the concept of reason, once emancipated, must fear that its consistent pursuit will explode those conditions. This is why reason limits itself; throughout the bourgeois era, the spirit's accompanying reaction to the idea of its autonomy has been to despise itself. The spirit cannot forgive itself for being barred, by the constitution of the existence it guides, from unfolding the freedom inherent in its concept. The philosophical term for this prohibition is relativism. No dogmatic absolutism need be summoned against it; it is crushed by being proved narrow. Relativism, no matter how progressive its bearing, has at all times been linked with moments of reaction, beginning with the sophists' availability to the more powerful interests. To intervene by criticizing relativism is the paradigm of definite negation.

DIALECTICS AND SOLIDITY

Unleashed dialectics is not without anything solid, no more than is Hegel. But it no longer confers primacy on it. Hegel did not

overstress the solid features in the origin of his metaphysics: they were to emerge from it at the end, as a translucent entirety. This lends a peculiar duplicity to his logical categories. They are structures that have originated, structures that void themselves, and at the same time they are a priori, invariant structures. With dynamism they are made to accord by the doctrine of an immediacy newly restored in each dialectical stage. The theory of second nature, to which Hegel already gave a critical tinge, is not lost to a negative dialectics. It assumes, *tel quel,* the abrupt immediacy, the formations which society and its evolution present to our thought; and it does this so that analysis may bare its mediations to the extent of the immanent difference between phenomena and that which they claim to be in themselves.

The self-preserving solidity, the young Hegel's "positive," is to such analysis, as it was to him. the negative. In the Preface to *Phenomenology* he still characterized thought, the arch-enemy of that positivity, as the negative principle.* The road to this is the simplest of reflections: what does not think, what surrenders to visibility, is inclined toward the badly positive by that passive nature which in the critique of reason marks the sensory source of the rights of knowledge. To receive something as it is offered at a time, dispensing with reflection, is potentially always tantamount to recognizing it the way it is; virtually all thoughts, on the other hand, cause a negative motion.

Of course, all his statements to the contrary notwithstanding, Hegel left the subject's primacy over the object unchallenged. It is disguised merely by the semi-theological word "spirit" with its indelible memories of individual subjectivity. The bill for this is presented in the excessive formality of Hegel's logic. According

* "The activity of distinguishing is the force and the work of the intellect, the most marvelous and greatest or, rather, the absolute power. The closed circle, which rests in itself and substantially contains its elements, is the immediate and therefore not marvelous relation. But that accidental things as such, apart from their extent, dependent things which are real only in connection with others—that these obtain an existence of their own and a separate freedom is the enormous power of the negative; it is the energy of thought, of the pure I." (Hegel, Works 2, p. 33f.)

to its own concept it would have to be substantial, but the endeavor to make it all things at once, metaphysics as well as a doctrine of categories, resulted in the elimination of the definite being that might have legitimized its rudiment. In this respect Hegel is not so far removed from Kant and Fichte, whom he never tires of denouncing as spokesmen for abstract subjectivity. For its part, the science of logic is abstract in the simplest sense of the word: the reduction to general concepts is an advance elimination of the counter-agent to those concepts, of that concrete element which idealistic dialectics boasts of harboring and unfolding.

The spirit wins its fight against a nonexistent foe. Hegel's derogatory remark about contingent existence—the Krugianism which philosophy may, and must, scorn to deduce from itself—is a cry of "Stop thief!" Having always dealt with the medium of the concept, and reflecting only generally on the relation between the concept and its conceptual content, Hegelian logic has advance assurance of what it offers to prove: that the concept is absolute. The more critically we see through the autonomy of subjectivity, however, and the clearer our awareness of its own mediated nature, the more incumbent is it upon our thinking to take on what lends it the solidity it does not have in itself. Otherwise we would not even have the dynamics with which dialectics moves its solid burden.

Not every experience that appears as primary can be denied point-blank. If conscious experience were utterly lacking in what Kierkegaard defended as naïveté, thought would be unsure of itself, would do what the establishment expects of it, and would become still more naïve. Even terms such as "original experience," terms compromised by phenomenology and neo-ontology, denote a truth while pompously doing it harm. Unless resistance to the façade stirs spontaneously, heedless of its own dependencies, thought and activity are dull copies. Whichever part of the object exceeds the definitions imposed on it by thinking will face the subject, first of all, as immediacy; and again, where the subject feels altogether sure of itself—in primary experience—it will be least subjective. The most subjective, the immediate datum, eludes the subject's intervention. Yet such immediate consciousness is neither continuously maintainable nor downright positive; for

consciousness is at the same time the universal medium and cannot jump across its shadow even in its own *données immédiates*. They are not the truth.

The confidence that from immediacy, from the solid and downright primary, an unbroken entirety will spring—this confidence is an idealistic chimera. To dialectics, immediacy does not maintain its immediate pose. Instead of becoming the ground, it becomes a moment. At the opposite pole, the same thing happens to the invariants of pure thought. Nothing but a childish relativism would deny the validity of formal logic and mathematics and treat them as ephemeral because they have come to be. Yet the invariants, whose own invariance has been produced, cannot be peeled out of the variables as if all truth were at hand, then. Truth has coalesced with substance, which will change; immutability of truth is the delusion of *prima philosophia*. The invariants are not identically resolved in the dynamics of history and of consciousness, but they are moments in that dynamics; stabilized as transcendence, they become ideology. By no means will ideology always resemble the explicit idealistic philosophy. Ideology lies in the substruction of something primary, the content of which hardly matters; it lies in the implicit identity of concept and thing, an identity justified by the world even when a doctrine summarily teaches that consciousness depends on being.

THE PRIVILEGE OF EXPERIENCE

In sharp contrast to the usual ideal of science, the objectivity of dialectical cognition needs not less subjectivity, but more. Philosophical experience withers otherwise. But our positivistic *zeitgeist* is allergic to this need. It holds that not all men are capable of such experience; that it is the prerogative of individuals destined for it by their disposition and life story; that calling for it as a premise of cognition is elitist and undemocratic.

Granted, philosophical experiences are indeed not equally accessible to everyone, not the way all men of comparable I.Q.

THREE

MEDITATIONS ON METAPHYSICS

1

AFTER AUSCHWITZ

We cannot say any more that the immutable is truth, and that the mobile, transitory is appearance. The mutual indifference of temporality and eternal ideas is no longer tenable even with the bold Hegelian explanation that temporal existence, by virtue of the destruction inherent in its concept, serves the eternal represented by the eternity of destruction. One of the mystical impulses secularized in dialectics was the doctrine that the intramundane and historic is relevant to what traditional metaphysics distinguished as transcendence—or at least, less gnostically and radically put, that it is relevant to the position taken by human consciousness on the questions which the canon of philosophy assigned to metaphysics. After Auschwitz, our feelings resist any claim of the positivity of existence as sanctimonious, as wronging the victims; they balk at squeezing any kind of sense, however bleached, out of the victims' fate. And these feelings do have an objective side after events that make a mockery of the construction of immanence as endowed with a meaning radiated by an affirmatively posited transcendence.

Such a construction would affirm absolute negativity and would assist its ideological survival—as in reality that negativity survives anyway, in the principle of society as it exists until its self-destruction. The earthquake of Lisbon sufficed to cure Voltaire of the theodicy of Leibniz, and the visible disaster of the first nature was insignificant in comparison with the second, social one, which defies human imagination as it distills a real hell from human evil.

Our metaphysical faculty is paralyzed because actual events have shattered the basis on which speculative metaphysical thought could be reconciled with experience. Once again, the dialectical motif of quantity recoiling into quality scores an unspeakable triumph. The administrative murder of millions made of death a thing one had never yet to fear in just this fashion. There is no chance any more for death to come into the individuals' empirical life as somehow conformable with the course of that life. The last. the poorest possession left to the individual is expropriated. That in the concentration camps it was no longer an individual who died, but a specimen—this is a fact bound to affect the dying of those who escaped the administrative measure.

Genocide is the absolute integration. It is on its way wherever men are leveled off—"polished off," as the German military called it—until one exterminates them literally, as deviations from the concept of their total nullity. Auschwitz confirmed the philosopheme of pure identity as death. The most far out dictum from Beckett's *End Game,* that there really is not so much to be feared any more, reacts to a practice whose first sample was given in the concentration camps, and in whose concept—venerable once upon a time—the destruction of nonidentity is ideologically lurking. Absolute negativity is in plain sight and has ceased to surprise anyone. Fear used to be tied to the *principium individuationis* of self-preservation, and that principle, by its own consistency, abolishes itself. What the sadists in the camps foretold their victims, "Tomorrow you'll be wiggling skyward as smoke from this chimney," bespeaks the indifference of each individual life that is the direction of history. Even in his formal freedom, the individual is as fungible and replaceable as he will be under the liquidators' boots.

But since, in a world whose law is universal individual profit, the individual has nothing but this self that has become indifferent, the performance of the old, familiar tendency is at the same time the most dreadful of things. There is no getting out of this, no more than out of the electrified barbed wire around the camps. Perennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream; hence it may have been wrong to say that after Auschwitz you could no longer write poems. But it is not

wrong to raise the less cultural question whether after Auschwitz you can go on living—especially whether one who escaped by accident, one who by rights should have been killed, may go on living. His mere survival calls for the coldness, the basic principle of bourgeois subjectivity, without which there could have been no Auschwitz; this is the drastic guilt of him who was spared. By way of atonement he will be plagued by dreams such as that he is no longer living at all, that he was sent to the ovens in 1944 and his whole existence since has been imaginary, an emanation of the insane wish of a man killed twenty years earlier.

Thinking men and artists have not infrequently described a sense of being not quite there, of not playing along, a feeling as if they were not themselves at all, but a kind of spectator. Others often find this repulsive; it was the basis of Kierkegaard's polemic against what he called the esthetic sphere. A critique of philosophical personalism indicates, however, that this attitude toward immediacy, this disavowal of every existential posture, has a moment of objective truth that goes beyond the appearance of the self-preserving motive. "What does it really matter?" is a line we like to associate with bourgeois callousness, but it is the line most likely to make the individual aware, without dread, of the insignificance of his existence. The inhuman part of it, the ability to keep one's distance as a spectator and to rise above things, is in the final analysis the human part, the very part resisted by its ideologists.

It is not altogether implausible that the immortal part is the one that acts in this fashion. The scene of Shaw on his way to the theater, showing a beggar his identification with the hurried remark, "Press," hides a sense of that beneath the cynicism. It would help to explain the fact that startled Schopenhauer: that affections in the face of death, not only other people's but our own, are frequently so feeble. People, of course, are spellbound without exception, and none of them are capable of love, which is why everyone feels loved too little. But the spectator's posture simultaneously expresses doubt that this could be all—when the individual, so relevant to himself in his delusion, still has nothing but that poor and emotionally animal-like ephemerality.

Spellbound, the living have a choice between involuntary ataraxy—an esthetic life due to weakness—and the bestiality of the involved. Both are wrong ways of living. But some of both would be required for the right *désinvolture* and sympathy. Once overcome, the culpable self-preservation urge has been confirmed, confirmed precisely, perhaps, by the threat that has come to be ceaselessly present. The only trouble with self-preservation is that we cannot help suspecting the life to which it attaches us of turning into something that makes us shudder: into a specter, a piece of the world of ghosts, which our waking consciousness perceives to be nonexistent. The guilt of a life which purely as a fact will strangle other life, according to statistics that eke out an overwhelming number of killed with a minimal number of rescued, as if this were provided in the theory of probabilities—this guilt is irreconcilable with living. And the guilt does not cease to reproduce itself, because not for an instant can it be made fully, presently conscious.

This, nothing else, is what compels us to philosophize. And in philosophy we experience a shock: the deeper, the more vigorous its penetration, the greater our suspicion that philosophy removes us from things as they are—that an unveiling of the essence might enable the most superficial and trivial views to prevail over the views that aim at the essence. This throws a glaring light on truth itself. In speculation we feel a certain duty to grant the position of a corrective to common sense, the opponent of speculation. Life feeds the horror of a premonition: what must come to be known may resemble the down-to-earth more than it resembles the sublime; it might be that this premonition will be confirmed even beyond the pedestrian realm, although the happiness of thought, the promise of its truth, lies in sublimity alone.

If the pedestrian had the last word, if it were the truth, truth would be degraded. The trivial consciousness, as it is theoretically expressed in positivism and unreflected nominalism, may be closer than the sublime consciousness to an *adaequatio rei atque cogitationis;* its sneering mockery of truth may be truer than a superior consciousness, unless the formation of a truth concept other than that of *adaequatio* should succeed. The innervation that metaphysics might win only by discarding itself applies to

such other truth, and it is not the last among the motivations for the passage to materialism. We can trace the leaning to it from the Hegelian Marx to Benjamin's rescue of induction; Kafka's work may be the apotheosis of the trend. If negative dialectics calls for the self-reflection of thinking, the tangible implication is that if thinking is to be true—if it is to be true today, in any case—it must also be a thinking against itself. If thought is not measured by the extremity that eludes the concept, it is from the outset in the nature of the musical accompaniment with which the SS liked to drown out the screams of its victims.

2

METAPHYSICS AND CULTURE

A new categorical imperative has been imposed by Hitler upon unfree mankind: to arrange their thoughts and actions so that Auschwitz will not repeat itself, so that nothing similar will happen. When we want to find reasons for it, this imperative is as refractory as the given one of Kant was once upon a time. Dealing discursively with it would be an outrage, for the new imperative gives us a bodily sensation of the moral addendum—bodily, because it is now the practical abhorrence of the unbearable physical agony to which individuals are exposed even with individuality about to vanish as a form of mental reflection. It is in the unvarnished materialistic motive only that morality survives.

The course of history forces materialism upon metaphysics, traditionally the direct antithesis of materialism. What the mind once boasted of defining or construing as its like moves in the direction of what is unlike the mind, in the direction of that which eludes the rule of the mind and yet manifests that rule as absolute evil. The somatic, unmeaningful stratum of life is the stage of suffering, of the suffering which in the camps, without any consolation, burned every soothing feature out of the mind, and out of culture, the mind's objectification. The point of no return has been reached in the process which irresistibly forced metaphysics to join what it was once conceived against. Not since the youthful

the resistance to the fungible world of barter is the resistance of the eye that does not want the colors of the world to fade. Semblance is a promise of nonsemblance.

12

SELF-REFLECTION OF DIALECTICS

The question is whether metaphysics as a knowledge of the absolute is at all possible without the construction of an absolute knowledge—without that idealism which supplied the title for the last chapter of Hegel's *Phenomenology.* Is a man who deals with the absolute not necessarily claiming to be the thinking organ with the capacity to do so, and thus the absolute himself? And on the other hand, if dialectics turned into a metaphysics that is not simply like dialectics, would it not violate its own strict concept of negativity?

Dialectics, the epitome of negative knowledge, will have nothing beside it; even a negative dialectics drags along the commandment of exclusiveness from the positive one, from the system. Such reasoning would require a nondialectical consciousness to be negated as finite and fallible. In all its historical forms, dialectics prohibited stepping out of it. Willy-nilly, it played the part of a conceptual mediator between the unconditional spirit and the finite one; this is what intermittently kept making theology its enemy. Although dialectics allows us to think the absolute, the absolute as transmitted by dialectics remains in bondage to conditioned thinking. If Hegel's absolute was a secularization of the deity, it was still the deity's secularization; even as the totality of mind and spirit, that absolute remained chained to its finite human model.

But if our thought, fully aware of what it is doing, gropes beyond itself—if in otherness it recognizes something which is downright incommensurable with it, but which it thinks anyway—then the only shelter it will find lies in the dogmatic tradition. In such thoughts our thinking is estranged from its content, unreconciled, and newly condemned to two kinds of truth, and that in turn would be

incompatible with the idea of truth. Metaphysics depends upon whether we can get out of this aporia otherwise than by stealth. To this end, dialectics is obliged to make a final move: being at once the impression and the critique of the universal delusive context, it must now turn even against itself. The critique of every self-absolutizing particular is a critique of the shadow which absoluteness casts upon the critique; it is a critique of the fact that critique itself, contrary to its own tendency, must remain within the medium of the concept. It destroys the claim of identity by testing and honoring it; therefore, it can reach no farther than that claim. The claim is a magic circle that stamps critique with the appearance of absolute knowledge. It is up to the self-reflection of critique to extinguish that claim, to extinguish it in the very negation of negation that will not become a positing.

Dialectics is the self-consciousness of the objective context of delusion; it does not mean to have escaped from that context. Its objective goal is to break out of the context from within. The strength required from the break grows in dialectics from the context of immanence; what would apply to it once more is Hegel's dictum that in dialectics an opponent's strength is absorbed and turned against him, not just in the dialectical particular, but eventually in the whole. By means of logic, dialectics grasps the coercive character of logic, hoping that it may yield—for that coercion itself is the mythical delusion, the compulsory identity. But the absolute, as it hovers before metaphysics, would be the nonidentical that refuses to emerge until the compulsion of identity has dissolved. Without a thesis of identity, dialectics is not the whole; but neither will it be a cardinal sin to depart from it in a dialectical step.

It lies in the definition of negative dialectics that it will not come to rest in itself, as if it were total. This is its form of hope. Kant registered some of this in his doctrine of the transcendent thing-in-itself, beyond the mechanisms of identification. His successors, however stringently they criticized the doctrine, were reinforcing the spell, regressing like the post-revolutionary bourgeoisie as a whole: they hypostatized coercion itself as the absolute. Kant on his part, in defining the thing-in-itself as the intelligible being, had indeed conceived transcendence as

nonidentical, but in equating it with the absolute subject he had bowed to the identity principle after all. The cognitive process that is supposed to bring us asymptotically close to the transcendent thing is pushing that thing ahead of it, so to speak, and removing it from our consciousness.

The identifications of the absolute transpose it upon man, the source of the identity principle. As they will admit now and then, and as enlightenment can strikingly point out to them every time, they are anthropomorphisms. This is why, at the approach of the mind, the absolute flees from the mind: its approach is a mirage. Probably, however, the successful elimination of any anthropomorphism, the elimination with which the delusive content seems removed, coincides in the end with that context, with absolute identity. Denying the mystery by identification, by ripping more and more scraps put of it, does not resolve it. Rather, as though in play, the mystery belies our control of nature by reminding us of the impotence of our power.

Enlightenment leaves practically nothing of the metaphysical content of truth—*presque rien,* to use a modern musical term. That which recedes keeps getting smaller and smaller, as Goethe describes it in the parable of New Melusine's box, designating an extremity. It grows more and more insignificant; this is why, in the critique of cognition as well as in the philosophy of history, metaphysics immigrates into micrology. Micrology is the place where metaphysics finds a haven from totality. No absolute can be expressed otherwise than in topics and categories of immanence, although neither in its conditionality nor as its totality is immanence to be deified.

According to its own concept, metaphysics cannot be a deductive context of judgments about things in being, and neither can it be conceived after the model of an absolute otherness terribly defying thought. It would be possible only as a legible constellation of things in being. From those it would get the material without which it would not be; it would not transfigure the existence of its elements, however, but would bring them into a configuration in which the elements unite to form a script. To that end, metaphysics must know how to wish. That the wish is a poor father to the thought has been one of the general theses of European

enlightenment ever since Xenophanes, and the thesis applies undiminished to the attempts to restore ontology. But thinking, itself a mode of conduct, contains the need—the vital need, at the outset—in itself. The need is what we think from, even where we disdain wishful thinking. The motor of the need is the effort that involves thought as action. The object of critique is not the need in thinking, but the relationship between the two.

Yet the need in thinking is what makes us think. It asks to be negated by thinking; it must disappear in thought if it is to be really satisfied; and in this negation it survives. Represented in the inmost cell of thought is that which is unlike thought. The smallest intramundane traits would be of relevance to the absolute, for the micrological view cracks the shells of what, measured by the subsuming cover concept, is helplessly isolated and explodes its identity, the delusion that it is but a specimen. There is solidarity between such thinking and metaphysics at the time of its fall.