CONTRADICTION, CRITIQUE, AND DIALECTIC IN ADORNO

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Abstract

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This dissertation aims to explain how negative dialectics can be understood as a form of dialectics. One of the defining features of dialectical reflection is that it is not reducible to a list of propositions, but rather progresses from one position of thought to another, and it is the movement through the various positions that defines reflection. This movement is achieved by developing “contradictions” within every position under consideration, where the “contradiction” always gives rise to the following position. However, for this movement to be possible, the “contradiction” must be determinate: it must have a logical form and content that gives rise to a new position of thought, which in turn does not merely deny the initial position but rather encompasses it and corrects its insufficiencies. If the contradiction is not determinate but merely “abstract,” then it cannot give rise to dialectical motion. The question guiding this dissertation is how the “contradictions” in negative dialectics can be understood as determinate.

Insofar as Adorno discusses the determinacy of his account of contradiction, he claims to take over the Hegelian conception of determinate negation. However, the Hegelian account cannot be the same account at work in negative dialectics because
Hegel’s account presupposes the complete Hegelian system, whereas Adorno rejects the closure of the system. An account of how “contradiction” is *determinate* in negative dialectics must thus go beyond Hegel. On the basis of Adorno’s statement that there are two forms of contradiction in negative dialectics (the “contradiction in the object,” and the “contradiction in the concept”), this dissertation proceeds by a detailed investigation of the two forms of contradiction and the relation between them. The upshot is that, while both forms of contradiction involve Hegelian insights, their overall structure is intelligible only in terms of Adorno’s appropriation of the Freudian notion of ‘paranoid projection.’ This dissertation argues that it is ultimately the logic of paranoid projection that makes contradiction *determinate* in negative dialectics, and that makes dialectical development possible. The conclusion reflects on the extent to which Freudian theory is presupposed by the structure and integrity of negative dialectics as a whole.
For my parents, Luz Marina and John.
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CHAPTER 1:
THE PROBLEM OF DETERMINATE NEGATION IN NEGATIVE DIALECTICS

This chapter is the beginning of a philosophical study of Adorno’s negative dialectics. The aim of the study is to clarify the logical structure of this form of dialectical reflection.

Adorno emphasizes the centrality of negative dialectics to critical theory, going so far as to claim that critical theory just is negative dialectics. For Adorno, negative dialectics is not one methodology among others at the social critic’s disposal but rather the very foundation of the critical power of thought. The importance that Adorno accords to negative dialectics makes careful philosophical investigation of this concept crucial for two reasons. The first is the philosophical question of how it is that a social theory can be critical. In contrast with the views of the Frankfurt School up to the 1930’s, which located the distinctively critical potential of social theory on the theoretician’s allegiance to the oppressed social class, Adorno takes critical philosophy to be distinctive not because it coincides with the standpoint of the proletariat (although it may) but rather because, through its relentless negation of existing conditions, it is able to disclose falsities and distortions deeply entrenched in ordinary consciousness and social experience. According to Adorno, this task can only be accomplished via negative

1 See Adorno, Vorlesung über Negative Dialektik, in Nachgelassene Schriften, Vol. 16 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2003), 37-38.
dialectics. The importance of the question of what makes social theory distinctively critical makes careful investigation of the viability of Adorno’s answer an important endeavor. Whether negative dialectics ultimately withstands rigorous philosophical scrutiny or not, understanding its successes and failures cannot fail to be illuminating for our own ongoing questioning of the grounds of possibility for critique.

Second, although understanding negative dialectics is a necessary condition on understanding Adorno’s thought, in-depth philosophical study of the logical-ontological structure of negative dialectics has yet to be pursued in the Anglo-American literature on Adorno. The reception of Adorno’s philosophy in the United States and England was initially dominated by Jürgen Habermas’s critique, reiterated by Seyla Benhabib in her influential *Critique, Norm, and Utopia* (1986). This critique quickly dismissed the project of negative dialectics as inherently aporetic under a self-referential paradox: Habermas and Benhabib argue that Adorno and Horkheimer’s critique of enlightenment in *Dialektik der Aufklärung* extends ideology critique to cover the very activity of critique, and in so doing brings under suspicion the critical capacity of thought *in toto*—that is, reason and all its tools. Since they interpret Adorno’s critique of rationality as ‘totalizing,’ and thus applying equally to any and all forms of rationality, they argue that the critique must also apply to negative dialectics, and thus deny the validity of this form of thinking. However, neither Habermas nor Benhabib engage in the project of studying the logical-ontological underpinnings of negative dialectics, which is what I attempt to do

in the present study, and which I think shows that the critique of enlightenment rationality does not equally apply to all forms of thinking. Negative dialectics for Adorno takes the logical-ontological form that it takes precisely in view of the crisis of reason diagnosed in *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, and in its relentless negativity it avoids inflicting the kind of ‘violence’ on its object of reflection that Adorno takes other forms of thought to inflict.

The philosophical study of Adorno’s negative dialectics has recently begun to gain some independence from the early aporetic readings defended by Habermas and Benhabib. But the logical study of negative dialectics as a form of philosophical reflection on its own right remains a lacuna in the literature. Susan Buck-Morss’ *The Origin of Negative Dialectics* (1977) gives an excellent overview of the origin of negative dialectics in Adorno’s intellectual exchanges with Benjamin and examines some of the key ideas involved in Adorno’s philosophy, but it remains an introduction rather than an in-depth philosophical study of the structure of negative dialectics. Jay Bernstein’s *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics* (2001) is an excellent and broad study of Adorno’s philosophy, yet its focus consists in the development of a modernist account of ethics on the basis of Adorno’s thought, and, though it develops an account of Adorno’s theory of concepts in order to explain the epistemology and ontological

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grounding of this form of ethics, it does not focus on the structure of negative dialectics itself.\textsuperscript{5}

Two more works should be mentioned, which focus more on the epistemological and logical underpinnings of Adorno’s thought. Yvonne Sherratt’s \textit{Adorno’s Positive Dialectic} (2002)\textsuperscript{6} develops a detailed account of Adorno’s theory of concepts and argues that negative dialectics should be understood as developing the tension or contradiction between two forms of identification: the aesthetic and the instrumental. However, though Sherratt gives detailed accounts of what she means by these two forms of identification, she does not examine and analyze how they give rise to dialectical motion in reflection, i.e., how the transitions between them are connected in a determinate way that impels dialectical reflection forward in virtue of the determinations of the object of thought. As a result, Sherratt’s study does not answer the question of how negative dialectics can be understood as a dialectical form of thought.

Finally, I want to mention another recent and so far very influential book, namely Brian O’Connor’s \textit{Adorno’s Negative Dialectic} (2004),\textsuperscript{7} which argues that Adorno is best understood as a transcendental philosopher. According to O’Connor, Adorno’s philosophical strategy consists in arguing that the very possibility of experience requires subject-object mediation, so that any philosophical account that can be shown to presuppose a subject-object relation that is incompatible with the structure of mediation is

\textsuperscript{5} This is not meant as a criticism of Bernstein, since a work of philosophy has to choose a particular focus. The point is just that his focus is different from the one I am pursuing, which I think is essential for understanding Adorno’s thought and has not been sufficiently addressed by commentators.

\textsuperscript{6} Sherratt, Yvonne, \textit{Adorno’s Positive Dialectic} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

\textsuperscript{7} O’Connor, Brian, \textit{Adorno’s Negative Dialectic} (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 2004).
inadequate. In my view, O’Connor’s account of Adorno’s argumentative strategy is problematic above all because it presupposes that we have access to a positive specification of the structure of non-reified experience (i.e., the structure of subject-object mediation), and it therefore minimizes what I take to be one of Adorno’s main worries: namely, that the non-mediated structure of reified experience does in fact constitute a correct description of nearly all of our experiences in a reified world and soon perhaps of all of them. The problem with un-mediated accounts of the subject-object relation is not that they necessarily get the structure of experience ‘wrong,’ but rather that the structure of experience, which they may actually correctly describe, is ontologically wrong: We live in a ‘wrong’ or damaged world in which our experience is also ‘wrong’ or distorted; this is why the role of negative critique is to bring us to awareness of the irrationality or falsity of social reality rather than to provide a positive account of what non-reified experience might be in a reconciled world. But the point I really want to stress about O’Connor’s account of negative dialectics is that it explains Adorno’s philosophical strategy as transcendental and thus does not explain its dialectical structure. Again, this is precisely the lacuna that the present study aims to fill.

The topic of this dissertation, then, is the structure of negative dialectics. The main question I want to address is how the logical-ontological structure of negative dialectics can be understood as a form of dialectical reflection. As is well known, one of the defining features of dialectical reflection in general is that it is a “movement” of thought: it is not reducible to a static list of propositions or results, but is rather such that it progresses from one position of thought to another, which then gives way to another, and it is the movement itself that defines reflection and that constitutes the content of
reflection. As is also well known, dialectical thinking moves from one position to another by developing tensions or “contradictions” within the first position, which contradictions then gives rise to the next position, the latter is then developed to the point of contradiction, and so on. However, for this movement to be possible, the “contradiction” developed at any given point must be *determinate*, which means that it must have a logical form and content that enable it to be resolved into a new position of thought that is not a mere denial of the initial position but rather encompasses it and corrects its insufficiencies. If the contradiction is not *determinate* in this way, but rather merely “abstract” or skeptical—that is, if the contradiction is a mere logical contradiction—then it cannot give way to a new position of thought, and we achieve no dialectical motion. Thus, in order for negative dialectics to be in fact a form of *dialectical* reflection, the contradictions that it develops must be *determinate* rather than abstract. The central question I will be addressing in the present study is whether the contradictions at the heart of negative dialectics can be understood as *determinate* rather than abstract, and, if so, on what grounds.

This first chapter explains why it is essential that contradictions (or ‘negations’) in negative dialectics be determinate rather than abstract, and why it is initially difficult to see how this might be the case. Adorno himself emphasizes the centrality of determinate negation to his account of negative dialectics, and, insofar as he discusses the *determinacy* of his account of contradiction, he claims to be taking over the Hegelian conception of determinate negation. I will argue, however, that the Hegelian account cannot be the same account at work in negative dialectics. The problem is that the Hegelian notion of determinate negation presupposes the complete Hegelian teleological
system, and Adorno rejects both the closure of the system and the teleological account of
reason that undergirds it as one-sided. Adorno’s simultaneous appropriation of the
Hegelian notion and rejection of the Hegelian teleological system seems therefore
inconsistent. And this inconsistency is not just a minor problem because determinate
negation constitutes the very mechanism by which dialectical reflection develops. Thus,
negative dialectics requires an account of the determinacy of negation or contradiction
that is different from the Hegelian account. My goal in this chapter is just to show the
necessity for such an account, and the rest of the present study will concern itself with re-
constructing the account.

In order to clarify the notion of determinate negation and its essential role in
dialectical reflection, I first turn to Hegel. Section 1 explains the role of determinate
negation in Hegel’s conception of dialectics, and it argues that the Hegelian conception of
determinate negation presupposes the completion and ‘absoluteness’\(^8\) of the Hegelian
teleological system. In section 2, I turn to a discussion of Adorno’s critique of Hegel,
where my main aim is to show that Adorno rejects Hegel’s account of the system, as well
as the teleological account of reason that it presupposes.\(^9\) This means, however, that
Adorno must also reject the Hegelian conception of determinate negation. But, in section
3, I show that Adorno takes himself to be taking over just this conception of determinate

\(^8\) By the ‘absoluteness’ of the system I mean its qualities of being self-grounding and such that
nothing remains external to it; that everything thinkable or cognitively significant in any way is ultimately
internal to the system.

\(^9\) Adorno’s rejection of the Hegelian system, as I explain in detail in section 2, is not a simple or
mere negation but rather a dialectical development of the system. It however does constitute a rejection of
Hegel’s own conception of the system, since it shows the system not to be closed upon itself but rather
mediated by its proper dialectical opposite, which for Adorno is non-conceptual nature.
negation. I conclude by analyzing the problem and laying out the framework under which I will address it in the chapters that follow.

1.1 The Hegelian dialectic and determinate negation

In Hegel, dialectical reflection begins by considering the viewpoint of a particular philosophical position, assuming nothing that is not presupposed by that position, and then showing that the position is internally contradictory—that it contains knowledge claims and standards for validity or truth that can be driven into contradiction with each other. Hegel claims that it is possible to develop contradictions internal to all philosophical positions other than his own. By thus showing that these positions fail by their own lights, Hegel aims to prove the superiority of his own philosophy to all alternative philosophical positions.10

Moreover, Hegel seeks not only to convince alternative positions that make positive claims to knowledge, but also the skeptic who would deny any first principle merely posited as such. Hegel holds that, in order to meet the skeptic’s challenge, philosophical thought cannot begin with an absolute principle, for such a principle would be open to equipollence: it would be open to the skeptic’s assertion of the contradictory principle on grounds of equal legitimacy (in this case, on grounds that are equally dogmatic). The skeptical challenge is met by carefully avoiding making any assumptions

and instead examining only the assumptions made by alternative positions—forms of consciousness in the *Phenomenology* and basic categories, forms of judgment, and forms of the syllogism in the *Logic*—finally to show that these positions alone lead to the dialectical movement whose completed form just is Hegel’s system. The final system is thereby shown to be presupposition-less. If Hegel successfully shows that he has considered *all* alternative positions, that each of them falls into contradiction, that all the contradictions are connected in a complete system of thought, and that the final system does not involve any presuppositions of its own, then he establishes the truth of his philosophy against skeptical challenge.

Importantly, the Hegelian system does not aim to be a mere refutation of other positions, but is rather constituted by the rational movement that dialectically negates these positions and connects them in a complete system of thought. The complete system itself thus makes a positive claim to knowledge, but one that allegedly cannot be challenged because all challenges would be propounded from *within* the system. Any position internal to the system is such that, taken by itself, it is partly true in that it is a stage in the development of the complete system, but also partly false in that it mistakenly takes itself alone, in isolation from the dynamic system of which it is a moment, to offer an adequate and complete account of reality. The completed system preserves the kernel of truth in each position because it comprehends how the position is driven to contradiction and, through this contradiction, gives rise to a “higher” position. So, the dialectical method does not merely reject any one position that it encounters in its journey, but instead goes beyond the position by exposing the position’s shortcomings.
and, in so doing, reaching a standpoint from which the truth content of the sublated \textit{aufgehoben} position is more adequately articulated. Thus, Hegel says,

\[E\]s \textit{ist} in der Tat bloß das endliche, abstrakt verständige Denken..., welches den Skeptizismus zu fürchten hat und demselben nicht zu widerstehen vermag, wohingegen die Philosophie das Skeptische als ein Moment in sich enthält, nämlich als das Dialektische. Die Philosophie bleibt dann aber bei dem bloß negativen Resultat der Dialektik nicht stehen, wie dies mit dem Skeptizismus der Fall ist. Dieser verkennt sein Resultat, indem er dasselbe als bloße, d. h. als abstrakte Negation festhält. Indem die Dialektik zu ihrem Resultat das Negative hat, so ist dieses, eben als Resultat, zugleich das Positive, denn es enthält dasjenige, woraus es resultiert, als aufgehoben in sich und ist nicht ohne dasselbe.\textsuperscript{11}

Negation for Hegel thus always involves a positive moment: The negation of any one-sided position or theory constitutes a new position “higher” than the one negated because it resolves the contradiction contained in the position “below” it, in a way \textit{uniquely determined} by the contradiction itself. The dialectical movement of thought just is the movement by which contradictions are produced from within specific positions or theories, and are in turn immediately surpassed into more rational positions or theories. It is this idea that the contradiction or negation of one position determines its own transition into a unique new position that is captured by Hegel’s motto that negation is \textit{determinate} and not merely abstract.


[I]t is only the finite and abstract thinking of the understanding that has anything to fear from skepticism, and that cannot resist it; philosophy, on the other hand, contains the skeptical as a moment within itself—specifically as the dialectical moment. But then philosophy does not stop at the merely negative result of the dialectic, as is the case with skepticism. The latter mistakes its result, insofar as it holds fast to it as mere, i.e., abstract, negation. When the dialectic has the negative as its result, then precisely as a result, this negative is at the same time the positive, for it contains what it resulted from sublated \textit{aufgehoben} within itself, and it cannot be without it.
In Hegel, there are three stages in the progression of thought from the naïve standpoint of the ordinary consciousness to that of philosophical Wissenschaft.\(^\text{12}\) The first is the stage of the “understanding” (Verstand), which is the standpoint of ordinary consciousness. It is basically the standpoint from which any non-dialectical philosophical position is propounded. The second stage consists in the discovery that any position advanced by the understanding—any one-sided or finite form of understanding reality—can be pushed into contradiction. This stage makes use of the sceptical method; its concern is to reveal and articulate the shortcomings and inadequacies of any finite form of consciousness, and “Er [dieser Weg] kann deswegen als der Weg des Zweifels angesehen werden order eigentlicher als der Weg der Verzweiflung....”\(^\text{13}\)

But, as I have already said, the dialectical journey is not an aimless movement advancing haphazardly through positions that are merely refuted (or “abstractly negated,” in Hegel’s terminology).

Der Skeptizismus, der mit der Abstraktion des Nichts oder der Leerheit endigt, kann von dieser nicht weiter fortgehen, sondern muß es erwarten, ob und was ihm etwa Neues sich darbietet, um es in denselben leeren Abgrund zu werfen. Indem dagegen das Resultat, wie es in Wahrheit ist, aufgefaßt wird, als bestimmte Negation, so ist damit unmittelbar eine neue Form entsprungen und in der

\(^{12}\) The idea that Hegel’s account of dialectical movement involves three stages, as I discuss it here, is not the naïve view common in popular renditions of Hegel as moving always from “thesis” to “antithesis” and then to “synthesis.” Instead of a tripartite structure of micro-argumentation in Hegel, the structure I discuss connects the stages of philosophical Bildung (formation or education) that ordinary consciousness must follow in order to understand the content, and see the truth, of Hegel’s system. I am basing the division of this educational experience of consciousness into three stages on Robert Stern’s discussion in his Hegel and The Phenomenology of Spirit (New York: Routledge, 2002), esp. pp. 12-18.

\(^{13}\) Hegel, G.W.F., Phänomenologie des Geistes, in Werke, Vol. 3 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970), 72. English translation by A.V. Miller in Hegel, Phenomenology of Spirit (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), ¶78, p.49: “The road can therefore be regarded as the pathway of doubt, or more precisely as the way of despair.”
Negation der Übergang gemacht, wodurch sich der Fortgang durch die vollständige Reihe der Gestalten von selbst ergibt.\textsuperscript{14}

Each contradiction \textit{immediately} results in a new position of the understanding, which is then submitted to the same treatment: a contradiction is derived within it, and a higher position is thereby attained. Hegel insists that the movement from each position to the next is propelled by strict “necessity,”\textsuperscript{15} so that there are no gaps between the derivation of a contradiction within a given position and the constitution of the next position, for the latter’s content is fully (necessarily) determined by the content and structure of the contradiction from which it arises.

When all finite positions have been submitted to dialectical treatment, we reach the third and final stage of philosophy, speculative reason, from which we recognize the unity of all finite determinations in their opposition. At this stage, philosophical truth is revealed to be what Hegel calls “der spekulative Satz” [the speculative proposition]—a proposition that cannot be captured in the logical form of the propositions of the understanding, which are necessarily fixed and non-dynamic, but rather requires the higher standpoint of speculative reason (\textit{Vernunft}) because it encompasses the entirety of


The skepticism that ends up with the bare abstraction of nothingness or emptiness cannot get any further from there, but must wait to see whether something new comes along and what it is, in order to throw it too into the same empty abyss. But when, on the other hand, the result is conceived as it is in truth, namely, as a \textit{determinate} negation, a \textit{new} \textit{form} has thereby \textit{immediately} arisen, and in the negation the transition is made through which the progress through the complete series of forms comes about of itself. (underline mine)

\textsuperscript{15} Hegel, G.W.F., \textit{Phänomenologie des Geistes}, in \textit{Werke}, Vol. 3 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970), 79-80. English translation in Hegel, \textit{Phenomenology of Spirit} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), ¶87, p. 56. The specific nature of the necessity involved in the connection of different forms of consciousness or basic items of thought will be a topic of discussion later in this section.
dialectical movement in act. Philosophical truth is nothing more (and nothing less) than dialectical movement comprehended in its necessary directionality and inherent rationality.

I said at the beginning of this section that the Hegelian system proves its legitimacy by proceeding free of presuppositions and thus establishing its invulnerability to skeptical challenge. We are now in a better position to see how the task of meeting the skeptical challenge is achieved. Hegel aims to show that all alternative philosophical positions are driven to contradiction. To show this point, he must establish that the negation of all alternative viewpoints is exhaustive, and, in order to prove exhaustiveness, he aims to show that all basic items negated constitute a complete and tightly connected system. The proof of completeness hinges on the idea that the system of all alternative positions is ultimately circular. On the other hand, the proof of systematic connectedness depends on the notion of determinate negation—the idea that there are no logical gaps between the contradiction that is derived within one position and the constitution of the position that follows. Finally, the proof against the skeptic finds its coup de grâce in the idea that the movement of thought by which all contradictions arise and are subsequently sublated [aufgehoben] is such that it itself cannot be negated (i.e., the system as a whole cannot be subjected to the kind of dialectical development to which Hegel subjects other

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16 See Hegel, G.W.F., Phänomenologie des Geistes, in Werke, Vol. 3 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970), 60-61: “Der [spekulative] Satz soll ausdrücken, was das Wahre ist, aber wesentlich ist es Subjekt; als dieses ist es nur die dialektische Bewegung, dieser sich selbst erzeugende, fortleitende und in sich zurückgehende Gang.” English translation in Hegel, Phenomenology of Spirit (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), ¶65, p. 40: “The [speculative] proposition should express what the True is; but essentially the True is Subject. As such it is merely the dialectical movement, this course that generates itself, going forth from, and returning to, itself.”

17 Michael Forster has an excellent discussion of the necessity of proving completeness and systematic connectedness for responding to the skeptic’s challenge in Forster, Michael, Hegel and Skepticism (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1989), esp. 127-147.
philosophical positions) because it encompasses all possible standpoints from which an attempt to negate it could be articulated, and it does not contain any presuppositions of its own that could be countered with equipollence considerations. This imperviousness to skeptical challenge is what makes the dialectically derived system “absolute”: it encompasses all standpoints and all theoretical and practical forms of consciousness, and it is not itself a one-sided position or standpoint. The result is the final and complete articulation of philosophical rationality.

There are two main points I want to stress regarding the Hegelian conception of dialectical reflection: First, that dialectical movement presupposes determinate negation, and, second, that determinate negation in turn presupposes the ‘absoluteness’ of the Hegelian system. (By ‘absoluteness’ I mean specifically the idea that the system encompasses all philosophical positions and is not itself susceptible of ‘negation’ or dialectical development.)

1.1.1 Dialectical movement presupposes determinate negation.

Immanent critique works because contradiction, when philosophically understood, produces a positive result. If the result of driving a position of thought into contradiction with itself were the mere refutation of that position, and refutations of different positions were just unrelated proofs of the failure of those positions, then there would be no positive content to Hegel’s philosophy; it would instead constitute a form of skepticism. However, according to Hegel, the contradiction internal to one position of thought compels reflection to adopt a unique new position, which can be submitted to the same treatment as the one before it. It is because the different positions are tightly connected and give rise to one another in this way that they produce dialectical motion.
According to Hegel, the philosopher who analyzes the various positions is driven to dialectics by the objects of thought themselves—by the positions under scrutiny, which give rise to each other through determinate negation—and not by any imposition of logical form on them. This is why dialectics is not a formal logic but rather an ontological one: The logical movement of dialectics is guided by the object of consciousness; the object allegedly gives rise, of its own, to the contradiction that immediately catapults it into the next object for philosophical consideration.

This explains why, whereas the principles of formal logic can be understood by grasping a list of rules, dialectical logic cannot be reduced to a set of prescriptions. The only way to understand dialectical logic is by directly applying it to a particular object of reflection and having the geistige experience of following the dialectical movement of the object. The unfolding of dialectical thinking requires a receptive stance on the part of the subject, an openness to be led along a movement of consciousness whose direction is given by the determinations of the object. The subject is called to hold herself to what

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18 Hegel describes the subject’s passive attitude with regard to the object in Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften, Vol. I, in Werke, Vol. 8 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp taschenbuch, 1986), saying, “Indem ich denke, gebe ich meine subjektive Besonderheit auf, vertiefe ich mich in die Sache, lasse das Denken für sich gewähren, und ich denke schlecht, indem ich von dem Meinigen etwas hinzutue” (§24, Zusatz 2, p. 84). English translation by T.F. Geraets, W.A. Suchting, and H.S. Harris in The Encyclopaedia Logic (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett, 1991), p. 58: “When I think, I give up my subjective particularity, sink myself in the matter, let thought follow its own course; and I think badly whenever I add something of my own.” It should be noted that Adorno agrees with Hegel that dialectics must be object-directed in just this way, and it is in fact only by being object-directed that a form of thought can avoid instrumental, identity-thinking. Adorno, of course, thinks that if Hegel had rigorously stuck by his own injunction to object-directedness, he would have found thought driven to non-identity rather than to the completed Hegelian system. See Adorno, Negative Dialektik, in Gesammelte Schriften, Vol. 6 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1970), 38: “Bewußtlos gleichsam müßte Bewußtein sich versenken in die Phänomene, zu denen es Stellung bezieht. Damit freilich veränderte Dialektik sich qualitativ. Systematische Einstimmigkeit zersie.,” [Consciousness would have to immerse itself in the phenomena on which it takes a stand unconsciously, as it were. With this, admittedly, the dialectic would undergo a qualitative change. Systematic unanimity would disintegrate (My translation)]. See also Adorno, Vorlesung über Negative Dialektik, in Nachgelassene Schriften, Vol. 16 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2003), 122:
is necessitated by the object of reflection without imposing anything external on it. The progression from one stage of the dialectic to the next cannot be fully comprehended through mere description of the path followed, for the subject cannot know on the basis of such a description alone that the path described is necessitated by the object; a dialectical path known only through description could be arbitrarily imposed on, or only accidentally related to, the object. Only through direct acquaintance with the object and with the demand that it places on thought to be understood along a specific dialectical progression can consciousness be assured that its movement is directed and necessitated by the object and is therefore genuinely ontologically grounded. Dialectical logic, because of its ontological nature, requires that the subject have direct experience of the object and of the ways in which the object directs consciousness along a specific path of dialectical connections. It is therefore essential that the object of thought fully determine the movement by which dialectics is driven forward.

The transition from one position or item under consideration to the next must be rigorously imposed by the position or item itself, and this is what Hegel means when he says that each position gives rise to the next with strict necessity—in other words, that the

Philosophie hätte also demzufolge ihren Gehalt in der ungeschmälerten Mannigfaltigkeit ihrer Gegenstände aufzusuchen. Sie hätte sich ihnen im Ernst zu überliefern, ohne dabei immer schon rückversichert zu sein durchs Koordinatensystem oder durch ihre sogenannte Position. Sie darf ihre Gegenstände nicht als die Spiegel benutzen, aus denen sie immer wieder sich selbst herausliest, und sie darf nicht ihr eigenes Abbild verwechseln mit dem, worauf Erkenntnis eigenlicht geht.

English translation by Rodney Livingstone in Adorno’s Lectures on Negative Dialectics (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008), 81-82:

[Philosophy should seek its contents in the unlimited diversity of its objects. It should become fully receptive to them without looking to any system of coordinates or its so-called postulates for backing. It must not use its objects as the mirrors from which it constantly reads its own image and it must not confuse its own reflection with the true object of cognition.]
dialectic is driven forward from one position to the next through a form of negation that is determinate, a form of negation that gives rise to each new position without any logical gaps. The dialectical movement of thought is driven forward by strictly following the exigencies of the object, and the logical operation by which such exigencies are articulated in consciousness is determinate negation. So, the dialectical movement of thought is possible only because negation is determinate rather than merely abstract or skeptical.

1.1.2 Determine negation presupposes the Hegelian ‘absolute’ system.

I have said that dialectical reflection is moved forward by a demand from the object to be thought in a certain way: in this sense, the different positions considered are connected by ontological-logical (rather than merely formal-logical) necessity. But how is this form of necessity revealed to consciousness? In order to answer this question, I will first consider how the necessity connecting different forms of consciousness is made available to consciousness in the Phenomenology. Then I will discuss the structure of necessity in the connection of the basic items of thought Hegel considers in the Logic.

I begin with the Phenomenology. The first thing to note is that the intelligibility of the dialectical progression in the Phenomenology requires engagement between an observing consciousness, the reader of the Phenomenology, and the object of reflection, the successive forms of ordinary consciousness described in the text. The observing consciousness follows the movement of the ordinary consciousness as the latter goes through various theoretical ways of understanding reality in order for the former (1) to comprehend the necessary connections between successive stages in the forms of consciousness, (2) to have evidence of the ontological necessity connecting these stages,
and (3) to be transformed by this experience in such a way that it achieves the standpoint of Absolute Knowledge, from which alone it can understand philosophical Wissenschaft. All three of these achievements require that the reader follow the progression of the ordinary consciousness; the observing consciousness “muß auch dem Inhalte nach die Bildungsstufen des allgemeinen Geistes durchlaufen….”

Importantly, the contradiction reached at any given stage in the dialectic is understood differently from the standpoint of the ordinary consciousness and from the standpoint of the phenomenological observer (except, of course, at the end of the dialectical journey, at which point the two standpoints coincide). The contradiction derived within one position is for the ordinary consciousness a mere refutation of its view of the world. The ordinary consciousness conceives of the form of consciousness that follows as an achievement underdetermined by, and therefore to some degree independent from, the failure that preceded it. The ordinary consciousness therefore is not aware of the ontological necessity that drives it to adopt a specific new form of understanding the world.

The observing consciousness, on the other hand, understands that the new form of consciousness is uniquely determined by the contradiction, so that the connections between forms of consciousness is necessary. But how is it that the observing consciousness is able to see the connections between different forms of ordinary consciousness as necessary? The key point in Hegel’s answer to this question is that the

19 Hegel, G.W.F., Phänomenologie des Geistes, in Werke, Vol. 3 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970), 32: English translation in Hegel, Phenomenology of Spirit (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), ¶ 28, p. 16: “The individual must also pass through the formative stages of universal Spirit so far as their content is concerned….“
observing consciousness has already implicitly reached the end of the dialectical progression through all forms of ordinary consciousness. By following the dialectic, the phenomenological observer does not acquire new knowledge but rather raises her implicit understanding of speculative rationality to the level of explicit knowledge. Hegel says of the necessity connecting one form of consciousness to the next that

Nur diese Notwendigkeit selbst..., der dem Bewußtsein, ohne zu wissen, wie ihm geschieht, sich darbietet, ist es, was für uns gleichsam hinter seinem Rücken vorgeht. ... [F]ür es ist dies Entstandene nur als Gegenstand, für uns zugleich als Bewegung und Werden. Durch diese Notwendigkeit ist dieser Weg zur Wissenschaft selbst schon Wissenschaft und nach ihrem Inhalte hiermit Wissenschaft der Erfahrung des Bewußtseins.  

The phenomenological observer does not follow a journey of development alien to her, but rather observes fully and explicitly for the first time the journey that she has herself already un-self-consciously undergone, and she is able for the first time to see that the journey was a necessary progression. The development through which the ordinary consciousness reaches the standpoint of speculative reason has already been accomplished, even though only implicitly. The Phenomenology raises this implicit achievement to the level of explicit knowledge. The reader of the Phenomenology beholds the development of the natural consciousness and, through this experience, what

[Hegel, G.W.F., Phänomenologie des Geistes, in Werke, Vol. 3 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970), 80. English translation in Hegel, Phenomenology of Spirit (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), ¶87-88, p.56:

[I]t is just this necessity itself...that presents itself to [the ordinary] consciousness without its understanding how this happens, which proceeds for us, as it were, behind the back of consciousness. ... For it, what has thus arisen exists only as an object; for us, it appears at the same time as movement and a process of becoming. Because of this necessity, the way to Science is itself already Science, and hence, in virtue of its content, is the Science of the experience of consciousness.
was already familiar to her but implicit becomes comprehended. As Michael Rosen notes,

We have to have already implicitly acquired the Scientific consciousness which the Phenomenology is out to deduce. But we are not yet fully aware that we have acquired it. It is not a matter of comprehension [Begreifen] or Thought [Denken]; we merely have a figurative representation [Vorstellung] of it. The task of the Phenomenology is to bring this unconscious knowledge to full knowledge, to raise consciousness to the level of the activity of the “universal self”, to enable us to move from Science in the form of Vorstellung to Science proper, Absolute Knowledge or (simply) Thought. But it is itself Science in the form of Vorstellung. What allows it to presuppose this is a fact of history, namely, that the formative process of Spirit is completed.  

Geist has already completed its development. But this cannot be demonstrated to the skeptic before she follows the journey through the various forms of consciousness that make up the history of Geist. It can only be shown through the experience of going through the journey, since only if we do have the knowledge already implicitly will we be able practically to follow the path of the Phenomenology, and, specifically, to move from one form of consciousness to the next through determinate negation with a clear understanding that the movement is dictated by the form of consciousness itself and therefore ontologically necessitated by it. “Rather than giving a rational, discursive demonstration in which we try to establish in advance that such reasoning patterns are plausible, for the benefit of skeptics, the intelligibility of the Phenomenology will give their justification, as it were, in use.” The intelligibility of the ontological necessity connecting different forms of consciousness and the ability of the observing

21 Rosen, Michael, Hegel’s Dialectic and its Criticism (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 44.

22 Ibid., 44.
consciousness to perform the operation of determinate negation therefore presuppose that consciousness has already gone through the sequence of transitions that develops to absolute reason. Retrospectively, from the standpoint of the completed journey, consciousness is able to understand that there was ontological necessity pushing the dialectical progression forward all along. This necessity is an autotelic property of the system.

Moreover, it is not only the subjective progression of consciousness in the direction of ever more explicit rationality that is presupposed by the operation of determinate negation. On the object’s side, the ontological necessity that pushes each form of consciousness forward, and which is not intelligible to the forms of consciousness prior to the end-point of the dialectical journey, is in the end revealed to have a definite structure: the structure of speculative reason. The entire structure that becomes pellucid only after philosophical scrutiny of the dialectical journey was from the start embedded in each form of consciousness and was the motor of the form of consciousness’s inherent drive to develop into a specific new form of consciousness. It is therefore because teleological, speculative reason is the inner structure of reality, pushing toward ever fuller and more self-conscious actualization of itself, that the transitions between forms of consciousness at the micro-level are necessary. The autotelic property of the Hegelian system operates thus both at the macro-level (enabling the observing consciousness to understand the journey of the ordinary consciousnesses in the text as necessary) and at the micro-level (impeling the objects considered in the text, the forms of ordinary consciousness themselves, to develop contradictions). The necessity connecting forms of consciousness at each stage of the dialectical progression, which
makes possible the observing consciousness’s application of determinate negation, presupposes the teleological conception of rationality that constitutes the completed Hegelian system.

Moreover, if the system is not complete and embedded from the start in the object (i.e., in each form of ordinary consciousness described in the Phenomenology), then the observing consciousness’s reconstruction of the path followed by Geist is (1) not ontologically necessitated by the object, which means further that (2) the object is not the ontological-logical ground of the operation of determinate negation, and this in turn entails (3) that the observing consciousness’s view that it is able to reconstruct the journey of Geist by successive applications of determinate negation is a mere illusion. At this point, the observing consciousness would become debased to the status of yet another ordinary consciousness in a progression of forms of consciousness that has not been shown not to be contingent and perhaps even haphazard. In other words, if the division between ordinary and observing consciousness holds—a division which, as we have seen, is required for the very possibility of reconstructing the stages of Geist as necessarily giving rise to each other, and thus also for the very possibility of the operation of determinate negation—then the connection of all forms of consciousness into a unified and complete system must be presupposed as already implicitly contained in each object under consideration, and the implicit unfolding of the system must be presupposed as already accomplished. Similarly, were the system susceptible of external negation, then the observing consciousness would once again be debased to the status of another ordinary form of consciousness, and the reconstruction of Geist’s journey given in the Phenomenology would lose the ‘ontological necessity’ that allegedly moves it forward
and makes possible the successive applications of determinate negation that result in “the system.” The possibility of determinate negation in the *Phenomenology* thus presupposes the absoluteness of the Hegelian system (that is, the system’s completeness and invulnerability to external negation).

The same teleological and systematic conception of reason is presupposed by the connections between different basic items of thought in the *Logic*. The latter no longer has the structure of a dual standpoint of ordinary and observing consciousness, because the reader of the *Logic* is expected to have first worked her way through the *Phenomenology*, so that the necessity connecting the basic units of thought considered in the *Logic* is already explicit and its validity already established.

In the *Logic*, Hegel begins by considering the most general category of thought (“Being”) and, from it, “derives” dialectically every category that follows, until all of the different categories, forms of judgment, and forms of the syllogism are derived. The question of how more complex and determinate forms of thought can be derived from more general ones vexed commentators from the earliest reception of Hegel’s philosophy. Clearly, the “derivation” in question cannot be a merely formal-logical derivation, for it is impossible to acquire new content and additional logical complexity from an initial premise with nothing but the application of formal-logical rules. Hegel’s “deduction” of new categories and basic items of thought in the *Logic* is moved forward by the exigencies of the item under consideration, which is shown to be inadequate on its

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23 Criticism of the attempt to derive more determinate content from an initial, general first principle was widespread among critics of various philosophical projects that started as appropriations and critiques of Kant and culminated in the variegated philosophical movement of “German Idealism.” See, for example, Schulze’s critique of Reinhold in “Aenesidemus,” reprinted in DiGiovanni, George and Harris, H. S., ed. *Between Kant and Hegel: Texts in the Development of Post-Kantian Idealism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985).
own to account for the ontological-logical structure of reality as a whole, and, on the basis of the inadequacies revealed, gives rise to a new, logically more complex and determinate, item of thought. Again, the transition from the derived inadequacies or “contradictions” to the new item of thought is ontologically necessitated by the form and content of the contradiction. The “deductions” that make dialectical movement from one basic item of thought to the next are possible because they are instances of determinate negation. And the possibility of advancing through determinate negation toward a completed system of all basic forms of thought is guaranteed by the idea that the completed system is already implicitly contained in every form of thought from the start, and that in the end nothing remains external to the system itself. In other words, the dialectical movement of the Logic presupposes the absoluteness of the Hegelian system.

This is why the transitions in Hegel’s system are not only transcendental arguments moving from a specific conception $x$ to the necessary conditions for $x$ but are rather supplemented by an argument that $x$, in order to be fully actualized in the world, or in order for it to work as an all-encompassing account of reality, must be supplemented by $y$. But this is a teleological strategy, and the teleology is grounded in the idea that the whole system is implicitly present in each form of thought under consideration from the start. The goal of the Logic as a whole is in fact to argue that, in order to think anything at all, the whole system of pure concepts presented in the text must be presupposed, and the dialectical movement developed in the Logic ultimately

24 See Frederick’s Neuhouser short discussion of the methodology involved in Hegel’s transitions in Foundations of Hegel’s Social Theory (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2000), fn. 27, p. 29. Neuhouser argues that Hegel’s arguments make use of both transcendental and teleological arguments, and, if the latter are ignored, key points of Hegel’s dialectical “derivations” are lost.
corresponds to the self-determining movement of “the Concept,” which actualizes itself in philosophical thought as the self-determining teleological movement of Reason. The operation of determinate negation, which “necessarily” develops each individual concept into the one that follows, is possible only because the complete system of concepts is already internal to any concept that is applicable to reality, and because there is no thinkable content that stands outside “the Concept.”

So, both in the Phenomenology and in the Logic, the operation of determinate negation that makes dialectical movement possible presupposes that the Hegelian system is complete (that it encompasses all positions of consciousness or of pure thought) and that it is not itself open to external negation. In other words, determinate negation presupposes the absoluteness of the Hegelian system. The system’s absolute status makes possible the teleological order that pushes determinate negation forward in a unique direction to develop every finite element that is made an object of reflection into a new element, whether it be a form of consciousness (in the Phenomenology), a basic item of thought (in the Logic), a finite element of the Concept’s externalization in nature (in the Philosophy of Nature) or a finite moment in the development of spirit (in the Philosophy of Spirit).

The main points to take from this discussion of Hegel’s philosophy are the following: Dialectical movement presupposes determinate negation, and determinate negation presupposes the completed Hegelian system, specifically the idea that all

25 Here, as in the rest of the chapter, I use the standard capitalization of “the Concept” to refer to the totality of thought-determinations in the Logic, which for Hegel is connected into a complete dialectical system that is in turn internal to any finite concept at all because it is only by virtue of the system of thought-determinations that any concept has determinate content and is thus applicable to the object-world.
processes of thought and being are impelled forward by speculative rationality, where the latter is the teleological motor of the dialectic. In Hegel’s philosophy, then, dialectical movement in general presupposes “the absolute system.”

1.2 Adorno’s critique of Hegel

With these points in mind, I turn to a discussion of Adorno’s appropriation of the Hegelian notion of determinate negation. Adorno argues that, even while we must reject the completed Hegelian system—that is, the closure of the dialectic into a finally reconciled total system to which nothing is external, which just means the ‘absoluteness’ of the system—we can, and indeed must, hold on to the Hegelian idea that philosophical reflection proceeds dialectically through successive applications of determinate negation.26 Adorno endorses, at least in words, the specifically Hegelian doctrine of determinate negation, disparaging only the moment of positivity that, he claims, follows upon the steps of determinate negation in Hegel. Adorno thus has the following view of Hegel: We keep determinate negation; we deny the absolute status of Hegel’s system.

26 See, for example, Adorno and Horkheimer, Dialektik der Aufklärung, in Max Horkheimer: Gesammelte Schriften, Vol. 5 (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1997), 46, where Adorno assimilates Hegel’s call for determinate negation to philosophical respect for Bilderverbot—a respect we ought to follow and foster—but claims that, in his final complete system of identity, Hegel violates the Bilderverbot and thus also his own call for determinate negation. (English reference in trans. Jephcott, Edmund, Dialectic of Enlightenment (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 18.) See also Adorno, Vorlesung über Negative Dialektik (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2003), 44-45, where Adorno claims of his own concept of negativity, “daß darin die Anweisung steckt zu dem, was bei Hegel bestimmte Negation heißt” [that it contains a pointer to what Hegel calls determinate negation]. In this text, Adorno emphasizes that his concept of negativity is not just abstract negation, and that the latter would transform itself into a “schlechte Positivität” [bad positivity], and he adds: “Aber trotzdem soll man bei dieser Haltung [der abstrakten Negativität] nicht stehenbleiben. Eben das liegt in der Forderung der bestimmten Negation.” Cf. Livingstone’s translation in Adorno, Lectures on Negative Dialectics (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008), 26: “[W]e cannot allow this [merely abstract negativity] to be the end of the story, and this is what is implied in the call for determinate negation.”
And yet, as I hope to have shown in section 1, determinate negation in Hegel presupposes the complete “absolute” system.

This would seem to imply that Adorno’s position is incoherent. But let us not be quick and look at the grounds on which Adorno rejects Hegel’s conception of the completed teleological system in order to be in a position to evaluate what consequences this rejection has for the kind of ‘negation’ at work in negative dialectics.

The key to understanding Adorno’s critique of Hegel is that it does not constitute a wholesale rejection of Hegel’s system. In good dialectical fashion, what Adorno proposes is that Hegel’s complete position, contained in the total conception of the system, is not final but rather is itself susceptible of dialectical development (although such development does not lead to a “higher,” more comprehensive position of thought, but rather to the demonstration that the Hegelian system is as a whole dialectically mediated by something external to it). For Adorno, then, the problem with Hegel is that he fell short of the dialectical rigor he pledged and provided a final account that was one-sided and thus ultimately un-dialectical. This is because, according to Adorno, the completed Hegelian system is not the end of dialectical progression, for it is dialectically opposed to (i.e., mediated by and meditative of) non-conceptual nature.

27 Another way to put this point is to say that Adorno rejects Hegel’s claim that the system is, as a whole, beyond dialectical contradiction. Rather, as he puts it in Negative Dialektik, “Auch insofern ist der Welgeist, anders als Hegel es wollte, sein eigener Widerspruch. Das Vertierte selbsterhaltender Vernunft treibt den Geist der Gattung aus, die ihn anbetet. Darum ist bereits die Hegelsche Geistmetaphysik auf all ihren Stufen so nah an der Geistfeindschaft” (Negative Dialektik, in Gesammelte Schriften, Vol. 6 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1970), 341). [In this sense too the world Spirit (Geist) contains its own contradiction, against what Hegel wanted. The bestiality of self-preserving reason drives out Spirit (Geist) from the species that worships it. Because of this the Hegelian metaphysic is already in all its steps so close to hostility against Spirit (Geist). (Translation mine.)]
The presentation of Adorno’s critique of Hegel—i.e., his dialectical development of the Hegelian system beyond Hegel’s closure of it—can be pursued with respect to any of the elements in Hegel’s system: in terms of the philosophy of consciousness, Adorno’s critique can be reconstructed as arguing that the opposition of subject and object with which the *Phenomenology* begins is never fully overcome because the journey described in that book is as a whole dialectically mediated by a ‘natural’ substratum that consciousness never acknowledges or overcomes. In terms of the *Logic*, Adorno’s critique can be reconstructed as showing that the full self-movement of “the Concept” remains until the end unable fully to capture the object because the non-conceptual element in the object eludes the discursive logic of concepts. In terms of the philosophy of nature, Adorno’s critique can be reconstructed as showing that the essential moments of nature are not fully accounted for in terms of the Concept’s self-externalization because this externalization itself is mediated by nature; and, in terms of the philosophy of spirit, Adorno’s critique can be reconstructed as arguing that consciousness is never able fully to retrieve its natural origins because its development remains until the end ‘blindly’ determined by a non-rational natural substratum.

Adorno’s full critique of Hegel is, in my view, contained and thus expressible in terms of *any* of the more specific critiques of the Hegelian system described above—whether it is a critique of the system’s completeness in the sphere of pure concepts, or in the sphere of the science of consciousness, or the philosophy of nature, or even the more specific Hegelian accounts of the system’s “externalization” in social reality and world history. The reason why Adorno’s general critique is contained in any of the more specific critiques is that any of these more specific critiques illustrates Adorno’s key
claim; namely, that the Hegelian system is *incomplete* (thus, not absolute) because it can as a whole be set in dialectical opposition with an element that actively mediates it and yet eludes it from within: namely, the element of ‘nature’ or the ‘non-conceptual.’ In this section, I will discuss Adorno’s critique of Hegel with respect to two elements of the Hegelian system only: first, with respect to the Hegelian philosophy of history (section 1.2.1), and then with respect to Hegel’s view of the relation between concept and object (section 1.2.2.). Then I will return to the more general point that Adorno deploys against Hegel, and I will analyze what consequences Adorno’s critique of Hegel has for Adorno’s own notion of determination negation.

1.2.1 Critique of the Hegelian philosophy of history

The first and perhaps most famous of Adorno’s arguments against Hegel’s self-contained, teleological system is his critique of Hegel’s conception of *Geist’s* externalization in world history. It is well known that Adorno takes the Hegelian philosophy of history to be untenable after the experiences of the Shoah. The idea is that any of a variety of terrible and irrational experiences from that historical period is sufficient to refute Hegel’s idea that world history is in essence rational. But ‘refute’ in

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28 Later chapters of the present study elucidate other ways in which Adorno’s critique of Hegel can be formulated. Chapter 3 frames Adorno’s critique of Hegel’s social philosophy in terms both of an internal critique of Hegel’s position and the claim that Hegel’s conception of the social order as a whole has to be seen as mediated by nature. Chapter 4 in turn shows how Adorno’s conception of the social order makes the sublation of the concepts of ‘essence’ under “the Concept” impossible because the sphere of essence is mediated by a natural element that resists sublation under concepts and requires a different form of interpretation. Chapters 5-6, which concentrate on Adorno’s view of how non-rational nature mediates individual and social consciousness, can be read as an elucidation of Adorno’s critique of Hegel’s philosophy of consciousness, as well as a critique of his conception of history.

29 Recall Hegel’s (in)famous statement that “Alles was vernünftig ist, ist wirklich, und alles was wirklich ist, ist vernünftig” [the rational is actual, and the actual is rational].
what sense? Adorno’s position is often represented as grounded in an ethical assessment that the belief that history is rational and meaningful constitutes an unacceptable apology for the terrible events of the Shoah, so that it is in order to avoid the morally deplorable position of the apologist that one ought to reject the Hegelian philosophy of history. I believe this kind of argument does capture a strand in Adorno’s thought, but it presents only the polemical and by no means philosophically deepest layer of his argument against the Hegelian philosophy of history. Adorno’s main theoretical point against Hegel’s philosophy of history is that the latter is theoretically one-sided and undialectical.

Reflection on Auschwitz is important because it presents this one-sidedness in the experience of thinking. In this sub-section, I aim to reconstruct Adorno’s argument against the Hegelian philosophy of history as a charge of dialectical one-sidedness due to

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30 See Adorno’s Vorlesung über Negative Dialektik, in Nachgelassene Schriften, Vol. 16 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2003), 35:

Aber daß man nach Auschwitz nicht im Ernst mehr davon reden kann, daß eine Welt, in der das möglich gewesen ist und in der es jeden Tag aufs neue in anderer Gestalt droht und in ähnlicher Gestalt, ich erinnere an Vietnam, wahrscheinlich in dieser Sekunde geschieht, —daß man von einer solchen Gesamtverfassung der Realität soll behaupten können, daß sie sinnvoll sei, das scheint mir ein Zynismus und eine Frivolität, die einfach im Sinne, ja, lassen Sie mich sagen: der vorphilosophischen Erfahrung nicht zu vertreten ist. Und eine Philosophie, die dem gegenüber sich blind machte und mit der törichten Arroganz des Geistes, der die Realität nicht in sich aufgenommen hat, behaupten würde: trotz allem, dennoch ist ein Sinn, —das scheint mir wirklich einem Menschen, der noch nicht vollkommen durch Philosophie verdummt ist (denn Philosophie kann unter vielen anderen Funktionen auch die der Verdummung ohne alle Frage mit Erfolg ausüben), nicht zumutbar zu sein.

English translation by Rodney Livingstone in Lectures on Negative Dialectics (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008), 19:

[The idea that we can say of the world as a whole in all seriousnessness that it has a meaning now that we have experienced Auschwitz, and witnessed a world in which that was possible and that threatens to repeat itself in another guise or a similar one—I remind you of Vietnam—to assert such an idea would seem to me to be a piece of cynical frivolity that is simply indefensible to what we might call the pre-philosophical mind. A philosophy that blinds itself to this fact and that in its overweening arrogance fails to absorb this reality and continues to insist that there is a meaning despite everything—this seems to me more than we can reasonably expect anyone who has not been made stupid by philosophy to tolerate (since as a matter of fact, alongside its other functions, philosophy is capable of making people stupid).
the system’s inability to express a key element in history: namely, the element of ‘nature,’ from the standpoint of which history emerges in a light that opposes the Hegelian narrative.

One of Adorno’s main complaints against the Hegelian philosophy of history is that the latter upholds a hypostatized conception of reason that in the end becomes divorced from the concrete experiences of individuals and as a result loses concrete meaning. For Hegel, the philosophical assessment of history requires that the experiences of individuals be subsumed under a rational reconstruction that explains their overarching meaning, and this meaning actualizes itself “behind the back” of individuals’ consciousnesses. Hegel’s account requires his idea that there are two different standpoints for consciousness, which standpoints diverge until the individual reaches absolute knowledge: on the one hand, there is the standpoint of the concrete, empirical individual, and, on the other, the standpoint of self-conscious Geist. A certain historical event may be rife with individual suffering and seem wholly irrational to the individuals undergoing it, and yet, according to Hegel, the same event can be understood as a step toward the ever-greater actualization of reason from the standpoint of absolute knowledge.

Hegel says of individuals that “sie sind in einem geringen Verhältnis zu der Masse des Menschengeschlechts” [they are of slight importance in comparison to the mass of the human race], and, in a famous passage, he says,

Aber auch indem wir die Geschichte als diese Schlachtbank betrachten, auf welcher das Glück der Völker, die Weisheit der Staaten und die Tugend der Individuen zum Opfer gebracht worden, so entsteht dem Gedanken notwendig auch die Frage, wem, welchem Endzwecke diese ungeheuersten Opfer gebracht worden sind. Von hier aus geht gewöhnlich die Frage nach dem, was wir zum allgemeinen Anfange unserer Betrachtung gemacht; von demselben aus haben wir die Begebenheiten, die uns jenes Gemälde für die trübe Empfindung und für die darüber sinnende Reflexion darbieten, sogleich als das Feld bestimmt, in welchem wir nur die Mittel sehen wollen für das, was wir behaupten, daß es die substantielle Bestimmung, der absolute Endzweck oder, was dasselbe ist, daß es das wahrhafte Resultat der Weltgeschichte sei.32

For Hegel, human history has indeed involved a great deal of suffering and sacrifice, much of it the result of contingency and irrational local events or accidents; and yet, from the standpoint of absolute knowledge, we come to see that reason was always actualizing itself in history, despite or even through local irrationalities and contingent happenings. From the standpoint of absolute knowledge we can see “daß die Vernunft die Welt regiert und so auch die Weltgeschichte regiert hat. Gegen dieses an und für sich Allgemeine und Substantielle ist alles andere untergeordnet, ihm dienend und Mittel für dasselbe. Aber ferner ist diese Vernunft immanent in dem geschichtlichen Dasein und vollbringt sich in demselben und durch dasselbe.”33


But even as we look upon history as this slaughterhouse in which the happiness of peoples, the wisdom of states, and the virtues of individuals are sacrificed, our thoughts are necessarily impelled to ask: to whom, to what final purpose, have these monstrous sacrifices been made? From here the question customarily turns to those general considerations from which we have begun our inquiry. From this beginning we identified those same events that offer this spectacle for gloomy feelings and brooding reflection to be the field in which we wish to see only the means to what we have claimed to be the substantial destiny, the absolute final end, or (what is the same thing) the true result of world history.

Hegel’s idea that history is in essence rational means that we can reconstruct the main or essential moments of world history in an intelligible narrative which, despite local irrationalities and contingencies, actualizes a movement toward ever-increasing rationality and freedom. But I want to emphasize that this reconstructive narrative is open only to the philosophical or speculative standpoint, which means that Hegel’s view of history hinges on the distinction between different standpoints from which history can be assessed, and on his view that the adequate standpoint for philosophical assessment is that of absolute knowledge and not that of the empirical individual who has not yet reached a self-conscious understanding of philosophical Wissenschaft. Hegel is well-aware that historical events may seem irrational and terrible from the standpoint of the individual, living consciousness that is trapped within historical development before the completion of Geist’s journey toward self-knowledge, just as the ordinary consciousness described in the Phenomenology does not itself understand the movement from one shape of consciousness to another as necessary and driven in a journey toward absolute knowledge. But the important point for Hegel is that from the speculative standpoint of absolute knowledge we can reconstruct world history as an essential movement toward the ever-more complete actualization of rationality and freedom in objective existence, and thus to see even the ‘irrational’ moments of seemingly pointless suffering in history as means by which Reason actualizes itself in the world.

However, for Adorno, the speculative standpoint is ultimately only a dialectical moment that can be shown to be inadequate. Whereas for Hegel the ordinary

94: “[R]eason rules the world and thus also has ruled and continues to rule world history. Everything else is subordinate to this universal substance in and for itself, and serves as a means for it. In addition, however, reason is immanent in historical existence, bringing itself to completion in and through it.”
consciousness is ultimately able to supersede its opposition to the object and thus to raise itself to absolute knowledge, for Adorno the subject is never fully able to supersede this opposition. Specifically, the individual is not able to reconcile itself with the world, because the concrete, living individual contains a non-conceptual natural component that exists in ineluctable opposition to the world, and whose suffering relation to the world enters into conscious reflection and denies the rational reconstruction that would see the world, and world history, as reconciled with the subject.

Adorno’s point is not just that there is a natural component of the self that is not fully conceptual or conceptualizable; after all, Hegel accepts this, for he holds that nature, both inner and outer, always externalizes the Concept only to a limited extent and is never fully rid of contingency. But for Hegel the human spirit (i.e., consciousness or mind) is the first full actualization of the Concept, even if it is always embodied and thus contains a natural moment that is finite. Hegel holds that human consciousness is unique in the animal realm in that it is able fully to actualize and even to comprehend the full rational structure of reality as the self-actualization of the Concept, of Reason; and since spirit itself is a self-conscious externalization of the Concept, it can understand reality as expressive of its own self, and so as fully reconciled to it.

For Adorno, on the other hand, the inner nature of the human being exists in irreconcilable opposition with the human spirit or mind, which means that the mind can never retrieve its natural element to see it as essentially determined by the categories of reason. In chapter 5, I explain the opposition at issue in detail, showing that Adorno holds it to be specifically defined by a relation of repression. For now, however, it is sufficient to note that Adorno holds this opposition to be such that the human being is
irremediably caught in a situation where its inner nature defies full rationalization, specifically the kind of rationalization that would present it as reconciled with, and ultimately defined by rationality. This means that a demonstration that the world and its history can be reconstructed rationally, even if possible, would not yet show that they are reconciled with the subject.

But this does not yet amount to the claim that the world is unreconciled or in an antagonistic relation to the subject—the claim that would alone represent a denial of Hegel. Adorno, however, makes this claim. As we have seen, Adorno holds the individual to be internally composed by both a geistig and a non-conceptual natural moment. If the non-conceptual natural element were such that it could not enter into consciousness, and in so entering oppose geist’s self-understanding, then there would be no compelling reason to deny the veracity of Hegel’s conception of world history. Adorno however holds that the natural element in the self does enter into the experience of conscious reflection, and that it does so in a manner that is cognitively meaningful and that specifically denies the mind’s claim to determine the essential structure of reality and history through its rational categories. Let us then first look at how the ‘natural’ moment of the self enters reflection, and then how it allegedly opposes the mind’s claim to define reality as essentially rational.

The first point to see is that, for Adorno, inner nature in the modern world is paradigmatically expressed at the level of affect as suffering and guilt. In Adorno’s view, no matter how much we think that the world is reconciled with human consciousness, we cannot write out the experience of suffering as definitive of our relation to the world. And this experience, importantly, is not just an unreflective passive emotion but is rather
the defining quality of *geistige Erfahrung*—that is, of the experience of thinking.

Moreover, *geistige Erfahrung* is not just a ‘general feeling’ that the thinker has; it is not the *same quality of affect* in the experience of any object whatever. Rather, the quality of suffering or guilt that accompanies the thought of a particular object is ineluctably attached to *that specific object* and reveals something about that unique object. And, finally, what the quality of *geistige Erfahrung* reveals about the object is not fully elusive to interpretation. It is elusive to full conceptualization—i.e., to a conceptual analysis that would pretend fully to render what the experience expresses about the object. The interpretation has to ‘say’ what is only allegorically ‘sayable’ with concepts, as, for instance, the psychoanalytic interpretation of the “Oedipus complex” expresses something about unconscious development that is only approachable with language and that cannot be fully conceptually unpacked ‘as it is in itself.’ But the allegory based on the Greek myth does tell us something. Similarly, the natural element in the self can be given meaningful expression in language; and the interpretation that aims to animate this expression can be cognitively significant even if not *reducible* to conceptual analysis.34

So, the standpoint of nature can enter conscious reflection in a manner that is cognitively meaningful. But, in terms of the specific topic that concerns us—that is, world history—what does the interpretation of nature ‘say’?

According to Adorno, the interpretation of world history *from the standpoint of inner nature* gives voice to a narrative of infinite suffering. From this standpoint, for instance, Auschwitz cannot be explained as an unfortunate stage in a world history

34 See chapter 5 for a detailed reconstruction of the interpretation of world history *from the standpoint of nature* that Adorno and Horkheimer offer in *Dialektik der Aufklärung*. Chapter 6 analyzes the philosophical conception of history presupposed by this form of interpretation.
defined in its essence by rationality and freedom, nor can history in general be
understood in terms of a teleological progression toward rationality and reconciliation.
Rather, the progression of history appears as a series of catastrophes. To the Hegelian
picture of history as a uni-directional progression towards ever-greater rationality and
freedom, we can juxtapose the picture of Walter Benjamin’s *Angelus Novus*:

Seine Augen sind aufgerissen, sein Mund steht offen und seine Flügel sind
ausgespannt. Der Engel der Geschichte muß so aussehen. Er hat das Antlitz der
Vergangenheit zugewendet. Wo eine Kette von Begebenheiten vor uns erscheint,
da sieht er eine einzige Katastrophe, die unablängig Trümmer häuft und sie ihm
vor die Füße schleudert. Er möchte wohl verweilen, die Toten wecken und das
Zerschlagene zusammenfügen. Aber ein Sturm weht vom Paradiese her, der sich
in seinen Flügeln verfangen hat und so stark ist, daß der Engel sie nicht mehr
schließen kann. Dieser Sturm treibt ihn unaufhaltsam in die Zukunft, der er den
Rücken kehrt, während der Trümmerhaufen vor ihm zum Himmel wächst. Das,
was wir den Fortschritt nennen, ist dieser Sturm.35

What is essential about the juxtaposition of this view of history, told from the standpoint
of the ‘natural’ suffering moment in the self, with the Hegelian standpoint, is *not* that the
natural standpoint is the final truth and the Hegelian narrative is simply false, but rather
that the two narratives are contradictory and one-sided, and they cannot be subsumed
under a third and final narrative that accommodates them and reduces them to inadequate
moments of the truth.

(Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1974), 699. English translation by Harry Zohn in “Theses on the
Philosophy of History,” *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 257:

His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of
history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one
single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet.
The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a
storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel
can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is
turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.
Adorno argues that the same historical developments that a Hegelian would interpret as a progression in rationality, self-consciousness, and freedom can also be reconstructed as a history of infinite suffering, irrationality, and unfreedom. In some places, Adorno goes so far as to say that the only way in which we can say today that reality is meaningful is in the sense that it can be explained by a narrative of ever greater domination and violence: the story of progressive mastery over nature.\textsuperscript{36} We can hold human history to be a history of progress only to the extent that we assimilate progress to the development of an ever more powerful instrumental rationality, which rationality grows ever more efficient at enabling the domination of nature and human beings. In Adorno’s words, we can speak of progress only when we speak of the progress “von der Steinschleuder zur Megabombe” [from the slingshot to the megaton bomb].\textsuperscript{37} But this view of progress is progress only as the growth of instrumental rationality, and it has required increasing antagonism, domination, and suffering. The process can thus also be understood as regression rather than progress.


Adorno does not deny that there is an interpretation of history to be told in terms of progress; he argues only that this progress is one-sided because history can also be construed as a narrative of regression, and any interpretation that does not one-sidedly emphasize the geistig moment in the individual, but that rather also looks at the natural moment, has to deal with the narrative of regression. Moreover, the two ways of looking at historical development—progress in instrumental rationality and regression in the increase of domination and suffering—are not independent but rather mediate each other. The very development of instrumental rationality, we are told in Dialektik der


Universal history must be construed and denied. After the catastrophes that have happened, and in view of the catastrophes to come, it would be cynical to say that a plan for a better world is manifested in history and unites it. Not to be denied for that reason, however, is the unity that cements the discontinuous, chaotically splintered moments and phases of history—the unity of the control of nature, progressing to rule over men, and finally to that over men’s inner nature. No universal history leads from savagery to humanitarianism, but there is one leading from the slingshot to the megaton bomb. It ends in the total menace which organized mankind poses to organized men, in the epitome of discontinuity. It is the horror that verifies Hegel and stands him on his head. If he transfigured the totality of historic suffering into the positivity of the self-realizing absolute, the One and All that keeps rolling on to this day—with occasional breathing spells—would teleologically be the absolute of suffering. … The world spirit, a worthy object of definition, would have to be defined as permanent catastrophe. Under the all-subjugating identity principle, whatever does not enter into identity, whatever eludes rational planning in the realm of means, turns into frightening retribution for the calamity which identity brought on the nonidentical. There is hardly another way to interpret history philosophically without enchanting it into an idea.
Aufklärung, is measured in terms of control over fearful nature, and this control necessitates violence and a dominating relation both toward the subject’s inner nature—instincts that must be repressed in order to meet the requirements of social life—and of outer nature. As instrumental rationality increases, so do repression and domination of nature, so that the historical processes of “progress” and “regression” are dialectically intertwined. Because Hegel develops only one side of this dialectic, his view is ultimately one-sided. His philosophy ultimately bottoms out in a dogmatic elevation of Geist over nature and individual subjects, and in this sense is not properly dialectical.  

39 Hegel’s development of only one side of the dialectic allows him to subsume the individual standpoint on reflection under a speculative standpoint that sees history as fully reconciled with the subject. Adorno, on the other hand, maintains that the Hegelian narrative is one side of a dialectical opposition between geist and nature, but this opposition cannot be overcome by thought. This is why, for Adorno, the experience of thinking is epitomized by the unglückliche Bewußtsein [the unhappy consciousness]. This form of consciousness is described by Hegel as one stage within Geist’s journey to absolute knowledge. The unhappy consciousness is the first form of consciousness in the Phenomenology that explicitly recognizes itself as contradictory. It generates standards to which it cannot live up and, as a result, it lives in painful recognition of its own insufficiency; the ideal it seeks has constantly to be relegated to a ‘beyond’ in comparison to which the unhappy consciousness experiences itself and its world as a failure. The unhappy consciousness sets out to eliminate contingency and changeability, which it sees as insubstantial, so as to become one with its ideal, an infinite realm of universal reason. But it cannot accomplish this task because it knows itself to be contingent and changeable, and thus inessential according to its own standards. We can interpret Adorno as holding that the Hegelian absolute consciousness is contained in the moment in which the unhappy consciousness seeks to eliminate its own ‘inessential’ moment and to be one with universal reason, where the moment that is ‘inessential’ corresponds to the natural element in the self, but the attempt to eliminate this natural moment fails again and again. Adorno holds that the unhappy consciousness captures the experience of the philosophical consciousness in today’s world. See Adorno, Negative Dialektik, in Gesammelte Schriften, Vol. 6 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1970, 55. So, whereas for Hegel the unhappy consciousness is just one stage in the journey of the ordinary consciousness—a stage that the observing consciousness comprehends as belonging to a path that leads to understanding the world as fully rational—for Adorno Hegel’s observing or speculative consciousness is ultimately just a moment of the unhappy consciousness, and it is rather the inner dynamic of the unhappy consciousness that defines the intellectual experience of philosophical thought. The pain and frustration of the unhappy consciousness is the definitive affect of our experience of thinking—it is the affective expression of non-conceptual nature.

[U]nglückliches Bewußtsein ist keine verblendete Eitelkeit des Geistes sondern ihm inherent, die einzige authentische Würde, die er in der Trennung vom Leib empfing. Sie erinnert ihn, negativ, an seinen leibhaften Aspekt; allein daß er dessen fähig ist, verleiht irgend ihm Hoffnung. Die kleinste Spur sinnlosen Leidens in der erfahrenen Welt straft die gesamte Identitätsphilosophie Lügen, die es der Erfahrung ausreden möchte: »Solange es noch einen Bettler gibt, solange gibt es noch Mythos; darum ist die Identitätsphilosophie Mythologie als Gedanke. Das leibhafte Moment meldet der Erkenntnis an, daß Leiden nicht sein, daß es anders werden solle. »Weh
1.2.2 Hegelian dialectics as a form of instrumental thought

Various other formulations of Adorno’s critique of Hegel make the same point, but with different emphases. Here I want to discuss one other such formulation, so that the general point that unifies both critiques comes to the fore. My focus in this second sub-section is Adorno’s critique of the Hegelian conception of the relation between concept and object.

For Hegel, the structure of (thinkable) reality is ultimately captured by the structure of conceptual relations traced by the dialectical movement in the *Logic*, by the self-determination of the Concept. Even though finite concepts always fail adequately to capture their objects, the logic of conceptual relations—dialectical logic—defines the *essence* of objects fully. By understanding dialectical movement as the self-actualization of the Concept’s thought-determinations, we understand the most fundamental conceptual relations that make the world *a world* and that define not only the movement of thought but also the logic by which reality unfolds historically and concretely. Nothing that can


English translation (mine):

The unhappy consciousness is not a deluded vanity of the mind but something inherent in the mind, the one authentic virtue it has received in its separation from the body. It reminds the mind, negatively, of its physical aspect; its capacity to recall that aspect is the only source of whatever hope the mind can have. The smallest trace of senseless suffering in the experienceable world belies all the identitarian philosophy that would talk us out of that this experience: ‘So long as there is a beggar, there is a myth;’ this is why the philosophy of identity is mythology as thought. The physical moment tells knowledge that suffering ought not to be, that things should be different. ‘Woe speaks: ‘Go.’

For Adorno, suffering is an essential component of dialectical thinking, and it denies the claims of the mind to determine reality fully with its rational categories. Suffering and negativity are the “Motor des dialektischen Gedankens” [motor of dialectical thinking] (*Negative Dialektik*, 202). The standpoint of the concrete, suffering individual is the final standpoint and cannot itself be subsumed under the speculative standpoint; rather, the speculative standpoint is in the end just a moment of the unhappy consciousness.
be meaningful or thought at all escapes the dialectic; the concrete processes that constitute any particular object as an object are fully intelligible only as moments in the unfolding of the Concept. For Hegel, the object is therefore in the end conceptual all the way down in the sense that its essence is captured without loss by the totality of conceptual relations that define the object as a possible object at all.

So, for Hegel, the object is neither a bundle of qualities nor a bare substratum with properties that attach to it, but rather the concrete, historical process by which its properties arise and are negated: a process that is in turn, is contained in the movement of the Concept. The Concept is therefore adequate to the object, even though—or rather because—both concept and object contain negativity; they are both processes of determinate negation.

For Adorno, by way of contrast, the object is not just a historical process by which qualities arise and are determinately negated in concepts. The object also contains a non-conceptual element or ‘nature,’ where the latter is not a bare substratum but rather a non-conceptual component that is nonetheless meaningful and contains imprints of the object’s historical development.40 The non-conceptual element in the object contains a history that has congealed in the object,41 not as a latent conceptual component of

40 See Adorno, “Zur Theorie der geistigen Erfahrung,” Vorlesung über Negative Dialektik, in Nachgelassene Schriften, Vol. 16 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2003), 256-257: “Denn die Vermittlung im Nichtbegrifflichen ist nichts, was, nach Subtraktion, als Rest erübrigte und auf eine schlechte Unendlichkeit von dergleichen Prozeduren verwiese. Vielmehr ist die Vermittlung der ὑλή (sic) deren implizite Geschichte.” See English translation by Rodney Livingstone’s translation in “Toward a Theory of Intellectual Experience” in Lectures on Negative Dialectics (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008), 206: “For mediation in the non-conceptual is not the remainder left over after the process of subtraction, nor something pointing to a bad infinity of such procedures. On the contrary, the mediation of ὑλή (sic), matter, is its implicit history.”

41 See Adorno, Vorlesung über Negative Dialektik, in Nachgelassene Schriften, Vol. 16 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2003), 216.
objectivity, but rather as an emphatically non-conceptual trace of the object’s emergence and development in a non-conceptual but meaningful substratum of objective social experience. The idea here is best understood by analogy with the unconscious in the subject. Just as instincts and urges contain traces of the repressive development they had to undergo in order for the ego to develop—traces that are not conceptually articulated, not even implicitly—the object contains an analogous non-conceptual but meaningful repository of its historical origin and development. The concept of ‘nature’ or the ‘non-conceptual’ in Adorno is a remarkably difficult one to pin down, and unpacking this idea will be a major focus in the chapters that follow.\(^\text{42}\) For now, it is sufficient to say that the non-conceptual is a meaningful, and therefore cognitively significant, but not conceptually determined ontological constituent of the object.

Unlike Hegel, who takes the non-conceptual to be analyzable in terms of a latent conceptual element (at least insofar as the non-conceptual is cognitively meaningful at all), Adorno believes that the non-conceptual is necessarily resistant to full conceptual unpacking. But, importantly, the non-conceptual is an element in reflection; we can interpret the object and the object’s history in a manner expressive of its non-conceptual natural element.\(^\text{43}\) So, the non-conceptual is not cut off from cognitive contact with the subject; it is not a brute substratum, an unknowable beyond, or a thing in itself divorced from the experience of thinking. The non-conceptual is accessible experientially and meaningfully, but not through subsumption into conceptual categories. There can be no concept, set of concepts, or complete conceptual process that captures the content of the

\(^{42}\) See especially chapters 7-8.

\(^{43}\) Chapters 7 and 8 below discuss in detail how the interpretation of the non-conceptual element in the object proceeds according to Adorno.
object discursively. Rather, the philosophical interpretation of the object that takes the standpoint of its non-conceptual component has the effect of showing determinate insufficiencies in the form of analysis that focuses only in the conceptual determination of the object. And, importantly, neither form of interpretation is able to express the object fully in a way that subsumes the other interpretation as an inadequate moment of itself, nor is a synthesis of the interpretations possible. Rather, the object itself is defined only in terms of the tension between the two interpretations: the object itself is internally dirempted in the same way that the interpretations are at odds with each other. 44

Because Hegel in the end conceives of the complete system of dialectical progression as able to capture the object fully, he fails to give due weight to the non-conceptual element in the object. Adorno argues that in the end, for Hegel, the object is fully subsumed under conceptual, and therefore subjective, categories, but the recalcitrant objectivity of the object, its radical “otherness” to the categories of the mind, remains external to the Hegelian Concept. Yet Hegel defines the object ultimately in terms of the Concept; “Das bestimmte Einzelne war ihm [Hegel] von Geist bestimmbar, weil seine immanente Bestimmung nichts anderes als Geist sein sollte.” 45 In absolute knowledge, Geist finds its other, i.e. the non-conceptual, as a moment of itself. This means that, in the end, for Adorno at least, Hegelian dialectics reveals itself to be a form of instrumental thinking. A form of thought that is closed, that pretends to contain within it all of reality

44 For a specific example of this kind of philosophical interpretation of the object, see my exposition of Adorno’s interpretation of Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason in chapter 7.

45 Adorno, Negative Dialektik, in Gesammelte Schriften, Vol. 6 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1970), 19: “The determinate particular was for Hegel definable by Spirit [mind] because its immanent determination was to be nothing but Spirit [mind].” (My translation)
as thought, is a form of thought that aims to gobble up the object’s radical objectivity rather than understand it as a meaningful otherness.

But, Adorno argues, this view flounders by the measure of its own standards, because, if knowledge turns out to be ultimately determined by the categories of *Geist* only, it misses its target, which is precisely what is not-*Geist*, what is radically objective in the object and thus not ultimately capturable without remainder by the mind, i.e., the object’s non-conceptual natural element. Unless dialectical experience contains within it a moment that is not reducible to mind (i.e., not fully capturable by the categories of *Geist*), it cannot lead to the kind of knowledge at which it, like all philosophical thinking, aims (whether or not philosophy is self-conscious of this aim): namely, at knowledge of the object in its radical objectivity, of the object’s non-conceptual nature.

Birgt der idealistisch gewonnene Begriff der Dialektik nicht Erfahrungen, die, entgegen der Hegelschen Emphase, unabhängig sind von der idealistischen Apparatur, so bleibt der Philosophie eine Entsagung unausweichlich, die inhaltliche Einsicht sich verwehrt, sich auf die Methodik der Wissenschaften einschränkt, diese für Philosophie erklärt und sich virtuell durchstreicht. 46

Adorno’s critique is an immanent critique of Hegel. The argument can be summarized as follows: The aim of Hegel’s philosophy—like the aim of philosophy in general—is to experience the object fully in thinking. 47 But the object contains a conceptual and a non-


If the idealistically acquired concept of dialectics does not involve experiences that, contrary to the Hegelian emphasis, are independent from the idealist machine, then philosophy remains an inevitable renunciation that does without substantive insight, confines itself to the methodology of the sciences, explains this as philosophy and virtually crosses itself out. (My translation)

47 The standard for philosophical thought is the seemingly paradoxical task to use concepts in order to approach the non-conceptual while holding firm to the otherness of the non-conceptual that defines the philosophical desire of the mind in the first place. Unless we have confidence that the concept can be
conceptual element. In order to experience the object in thought, both elements must be interpreted because both elements are constitutive of the object. In fact, philosophy’s desire to know the object as an object of thought (thus as not defined only by the subject) requires an interpretation of the non-conceptual element in the object that does not reduce it to the mind.\textsuperscript{48} The Hegelian view of the object, however, ultimately reduces it to its “turned against itself” in order to reach the non-conceptual without denying it as non-conceptual, we rule out the very possibility of philosophy. See Adorno, Vorlesung über Negative Dialektik, in Nachgelassene Schriften, Vol. 16 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2003), 111-112:

\begin{quote}
Aber wenn man nicht das Vertrauen darauf hat, daß dieser Ausbruch aus der Sphäre des gemachten Begriffs in das diesem Begriff wesentlich zugehörige Nichtbegriffliche eben doch möglich sei, dann kann man wirklich überhaupt nicht philosophieren. Sie können sagen: warum muß philosophiert werden, —und darauf kann ich Ihnen eine Antwort nicht geben. Aber immerhin: wenn man eine solche Nötigung überhaupt verspürt, dann ist sie ohne ein Moment das Vertrauens auf die Möglichkeit des Ausbruchs nicht zu vollziehen. ... Sondern die Philosophie besteht gerade in der Anstrengung, das zu sagen, was nicht sich sagen läßt: nämlich was nicht unmittelbar, was nicht in einem einzelnen Satz oder in einzelnen Sätzen, sondern nur in einem Zusammenhang sich sagen läßt. ... Es wäre die Utopie der Erkenntnis... das Begriffslose nun nicht etwa durch irgendwelche begriffslosen, angeblich höheren Methoden zu ergreifen, sondern das Begriffslose vermittels des Begriffs und vermittels der Selbstkritik der Begriffe aufzuschließen, —ohne daß dabei das Begriffslose, das Begriffene seinerseits gewalttätig von außen her den Begriffen gleichgemacht werden dürfte.
\end{quote}

English translation by Rodney Livingstone in Adorno, Lectures on Negative Dialectics (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008), 74:

But if we have no confidence in the feasibility of such a breakout from the sphere of the manufactured concept into the non-conceptual realm essentially belonging to that concept, this would rule out philosophizing of any kind. You may well reply: then why philosophize at all—and I can give you no answer to that. Nevertheless, if you feel such a need, it cannot be satisfied without an element of confidence in the possibility of a breakout. ... We should insist instead that philosophy consists in the effort to say what cannot be said, in particular whatever cannot be said directly, in a single sentence or a few sentences, but only in a context. ... It would be the utopia of cognition...if it might prove possible to grasp the non-conceptual not by means of some allegedly superior non-conceptual methods, but by unlocking the non-conceptual by means of the concept, and the self-criticism of concepts—without reducing what has been comprehended, the non-conceptual, to concepts by main force.

\textsuperscript{48} See Adorno, Vorlesung über Negative Dialektik, in Nachgelassene Schriften, Vol. 16 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2003), 85: “Denn diese ist die oberste Gestalt der Philosophie, als der Versuch, das nicht Begriffliche, der Philosophie] Heterogene in diese hineinzunehmen, also Phil[osophie] aufs Wesentliche auszudehnen, das sie in ihrer traditionellen, affirmativen Gestalt unterschlägt.” Cf. Livingstone’s translation in Adorno, Lectures on Negative Dialectics (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008), 55: “For this is the highest form of philosophy; it is the attempt to incorporate the non-conceptual into itself, that which is heterogeneous to philosophy, in short, to extend phil[osophy] to the essential, the very thing it suppresses in its traditional, affirmative form.”
conceptual element. It is thus ultimately one-sided and undialectical. To really attain a full experience of the object, the Hegelian account would need to be supplemented by a different account of the object, where the non-conceptual is an active participant in cognition without being subsumed fully under concepts.

Like the argument against Hegel’s philosophy of history, this argument constitutes an internal critique of Hegel: a demonstration that Hegel ultimately fails by his own standards of dialectical rigor because his view of reality as a whole constitutes only one moment of a further dialectical opposition. According to Adorno, the Hegelian system is not self-grounding or “absolute” but rather mediated by nature. In both of the arguments that we have seen here—against the Hegelian philosophy of history and against his conception of the relation between concept and object—Adorno criticizes Hegel for ultimately forgetting the non-conceptual natural element that is in its own right an ontological and meaningful constituent of reality.

1.3 Determinate negation in negative dialectics

The question I wish to consider now is how Adorno’s critique and dialectical development of Hegel affects how we should understand the notion of negation in negative dialectics. Adorno claims to endorse a Hegelian notion of determinate negation. He claims of his own concept of negativity, “daß darin die Anweisung steckt

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49 See, for example, Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, in *Max Horkheimer: Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. 5 (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1997), 46, where Adorno assimilates Hegel’s call for determinate negation to philosophical respect for Bilderverbot—a respect we ought to follow and foster—but claims that, in his final complete system of identity, Hegel violates the Bilderverbot and thus also his own call for determinate negation. (English reference in trans. Jephcott, Edmund, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 18.)
zu dem, was bei Hegel *bestimmte* Negation heißt” [that it contains a pointer to what Hegel calls determinate negation]. 50 He emphasizes that his concept of negativity is not just abstract negation, and that the latter would transform itself into a “schlechte Positivität” [bad positivity]. 51 “Aber trotzdem soll man bei dieser Haltung [der abstrakten Negativität] nicht stehenbleiben. Eben das liegt in der Forderung der bestimmten Negation.” 52 Clearly, Adorno takes himself to be working with a notion of determinate negation like Hegel’s. But I argued in section 1 that the Hegelian notion of determinate negation presupposes Hegel’s “absolute” system, and we have now seen that the Hegelian system is for Adorno not absolute but rather one-sided and un-dialectical in its claim to ‘absoluteness.’ This means that Adorno rejects the conditions that make negation determinate in Hegel’s account.

At this point one might think that there are two possibilities for Adorno’s own account of the determinacy of negation in negative dialectics: Either (1) we must reject the notion as it stands in Hegel and develop a new account, or (2) we can preserve the Hegelian conception of determinate negation as an appropriate conception of negation for one strand of the dialectic, i.e. for the internal logic of “the system,” but we must also develop an account of the logic of negation appropriate to the dialectical other of the system—namely to nature and its development.


51 Ibid.

It is clear, however, that (2) is not an option. Once it is seen through that the Hegelian conception of the Concept and the teleological account of Reason to which it gives rise is only one side of a further dialectic with nature, the Hegelian view of the Concept and Reason itself is transformed, for, though the Concept does not incorporate nature, its relation to nature is internally constitutive insofar as it mediates the Concept, rather than merely external. We cannot simply take the Hegelian system and its logic of determinate negation, on the one hand, and the relation of non-conceptual nature to concepts and rationality with some independent account of its internal logic, on the other, and then juxtapose the two or relate them in some *ex post facto* manner. Adorno’s critique of Hegel is in fact built on the idea that the Hegelian system contains its contradiction with non-conceptual nature *internally* and thus can be dialectically developed as one side of a further dialectical opposition. Once the totality of the Hegelian system has been submitted to dialectical analysis, it is destabilized and internally transformed. As a result, we cannot take any of its one-sided categories unchanged. In other words, we must follow (1) above. The Hegelian account of determinate negation cannot give us a way to understand how dialectical movement proceeds and is made possible in negative dialectics.

We are, then, left with the following quandary: Either negative dialectics proceeds through some alternative conception of determinate negation, or else Adorno illegitimately imported the Hegelian conception into his own philosophy, without realizing that his critique of the Hegelian system made such importation problematic. The second view is defended by Michael Rosen in the last chapter of his *Hegel’s Dialectic and its Criticism* (1982). My goal is to explore the viability of the first position,
and to that end it will be necessary to explore the possibility that Adorno offers a different and plausible conception of determinate negation, of what makes it possible, and, ultimately, of dialectical thought.

I agree with Michael Rosen that Adorno’s belief to be operating with a conception of determinate negation that he owes largely to Hegel is based on Adorno’s misreading of Hegel. Rosen argues that Adorno mistakenly interprets Hegel’s dialectic as moving from one form of consciousness to another in two steps: The first is the critical negation of the first form of consciousness, and the second is a “negation of the negation” by which a new form of consciousness is constituted. Rosen sees Adorno as wanting to retain the first, “critical negation,” and calling it alone “determinate negation,” while rejecting the second. Rosen is right to point out that this view misinterprets Hegel’s philosophy, in which the first and second negative moments above are one and the same. Ultimately, for Rosen, this misreading leads to grave consequences for Adorno, for his rejection of the affirmative moment in negation entails the wholesale rejection of determinate negation (in Hegel’s sense) and leaves in place only skeptical or abstract negation. But abstract negation cannot generate dialectical movement. In Rosen’s view, Adorno is


54 Rosen considers a way out of this dilemma by articulating Adorno’s notions of mediation and reflection. ‘Mediation’ is the relationship that meaning processes bear to their material substrata, and it explains how meaning derives from material processes and becomes inscribed in material reality. ‘Reflection’ explains how the analysis of mediation makes possible negative dialectical reflection. “But what entitles Adorno to make use of these two concepts? Evidently they are supposed to constitute the common strand connecting his conception of philosophical experience with Hegel’s…..” The problem, however, is that Adorno’s attempt to use these concepts in isolation from the context of the Hegelian system “removes it from the context in which the experience of Thought might give its only rigorous justification” (Rosen, Michael, *Hegel’s Dialectic and its Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 176). In the end, then, Rosen thinks that Adorno’s misreading of Hegel deals a heavy blow to his philosophical views. Adorno tries to avoid falling into a mere skeptical position (operating with negation that is abstract only) by assuming a view of the activity of thought as ‘reflection,’ which is capable
ultimately blind to this problem. He attempts to retain a notion of dialectical progression without realizing that, in rejecting the Hegelian ‘absolute’ system, he has removed the justificatory ground for dialectical movement and can legitimately assume the validity of negation only as abstract, skeptical negation.

This criticism of Adorno constitutes a fatal blow only on the assumption that abstract negation and the Hegelian conception of determinate negation exhaust the conceptions of negation available to Adorno’s philosophy. Let us review the philosophical commitments that have created difficulties for Adorno. In the first place, he rejects the completeness of the Hegelian system as an absolute account of reason, which means that he rejects Hegel’s view that an already-developed rationality (i.e., the self-determining movement of the Concept) is what alone pushes the dialectic forward in the activity of thought. This entails a rejection of the conditions that make Hegel’s account of determinate negation possible, and it also entails that the Hegelian conception of determinate negation is limited and one-sided. And yet Adorno’s negative dialectics, like any form of Entwicklungs dialektik, requires that negation be determinate and not merely skeptical. The most charitable way to interpret the situation is to think that the form of negation at work in negative dialectics is a conception of negation different from (though perhaps closely related to) the Hegelian one, but also different from abstract negation.

of interpreting contradictions in such a way that they move the dialectic forward. Yet such an answer would work only on the assumption that thought has an imminent rational standard moving it forward to higher self-understanding—that is, on the assumption that thought develops through (Hegelian) determinate negation impeled forward by reason. On this view, negative dialectics requires a view of the activity of thought that finds philosophical justification on the very Hegelian grounds that Adorno rejects.
In order to locate an account of determinate negation in Adorno, we need to explore his views on “negation” or “contradiction.” The key point will be to understand on what presuppositions Adorno holds that the contradictions that thought discovers within a particular position of thought give rise to a distinct new position of thought rather than leading to a mere formal contradiction incapable of driving dialectical reflection forward. Unless the contradiction that is generated uniquely determines a specific interpretation or range of interpretations of its significance—an interpretation that gives rise to the a new position and in so doing moves the dialectic forward—negative dialectics would turn out to be a merely skeptical philosophy, and the contradictions that it discloses in the positions that it targets would constitute a merely abstract negation of those positions.

There are some readings of negative dialectics that take it to be a method for driving any theoretical position whatever into merely abstract contradiction with itself, and that take the philosophical payoff of this methodology to be the realization that conceptual thought in general is contradictory and necessarily a failure. This is not Adorno’s intention. Negative dialectics is not just a repudiation of rationality or conceptual thought generally. In fact, for Adorno, such a repudiation would be a mere inversion of the error contained in instrumental identity thinking, which elevates conceptuality over all else. The concept is neither to be made into an absolute nor to be debased by simple, abstract negation.

55 The contradiction is not just an arbitrary, merely negative rebuttal of views. See Adorno, Negative Dialektik, in Gesammelte Schriften, Vol. 6 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1970), 17: “Das Differenzierte erscheint so lange divergent, dissonant, negativ, wie das Bewuβtsein der eigenen Formation nach auf Einheit drängen muβ: solange es, was nicht mit ihm identisch ist, an seinem Totalitätsanspruch mißt. Das hält Dialektik dem Bewuβtsein als Widerspruch vor.” English translation (mine): “The
Aber Denken darf auch nicht bei deren abstrakter Negation verharren. Die Illusion, des Vielen unmittelbar habhaft zu werden, schlüge ebenso in Mythologie, ins Grauen des Diffusen zurück, wie am Gegenpol das Einheitsdenken Nachahmung blinder Natur durch deren Unterdrückung, mythische Herrschaft wäre.56

Adorno’s view presupposes a concept of negation (contradiction) that stands somewhere between abstract negation (simple negativity) and Hegel’s notion of determinate negation (where the negation immediately acquires positive content and the complete series of dialectical negations gives rise to the system, which itself cannot be negated). Our first task in looking for an account of what makes negation determinate in negative dialectics is therefore to articulate Adorno’s views on contradiction.

One of Adorno’s most lucid discussions of contradiction occurs in the first of his Vorlesung über Negative Dialektik. He says,

Trotzdem hat das, was Ihnen als negative Dialektik soll vergeführt werden, mit dem Begriff der Dialektik etwas Entscheidendes zu tun, —und das ist doch nun auch vorweg einmal zu sagen. Nämlich: der Begriff des Widerspruchs, und zwar des Widerspruchs im Begriff, nicht des Widerspruchs zwischen Begriffen, wird in dem, was wir besprechen, eine zentrale Rolle spielen. Dabei hat—und Sie werden nicht verkennen, daß das in einem gewissen Sinn eine Transposition oder eine Fortbildung eines Hegelschen Motivs ist—der Begriff des Widerspruchs selbst einen doppelten Sinn. Auf der einen Seite wird nämlich, ich deutete das schon an, gehandelt werden von dem

56 Adorno, Vorlesung über Negative Dialektik, in Nachgelassene Schriften, Vol. 16 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2003), 200. Cf. Linvingstone’s translation in Adorno, Lectures on Negative Dialectics (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008), 158-160: “But thinking must not confine itself to abstract negation. The illusion that it is possible to take possible to take hold of the many directly would regress to mythology, to the horrors of the diffuse, just as much as, at the opposite pole, unity thinking would mean the imitation of blind nature by suppressing it, mythical domination.” Cf. Adorno, Negative Dialektik, in Gesammelte Schriften, Vol. 6 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1970), 161-162.
widerspruchsvollen Charakter des Begriffs. Damit ist gemeint, daß der Begriff selbst in Widerspruch zu der mit ihm gemeinten Sache träte.  

The second meaning of contradiction is explained in the following page:

Das ist nun aber—und gerade in dieser Doppelseitigkeit werden die Kenner unter ihnen weitergetriebene und sehr veränderte Hegelsche Motive unschwer erkennen—, das ist nur die eine, wenn Sie wollen: die subjektive Seite des Problems der Dialektik, und nicht die Seite, die am Ende sogar die entscheidende ist. Wenn ich also sage, daß zu dialektischem Denken in dem Sinn, daß die Kategorie des Widerspruchs in sein Zentrum tritt, die Struktur des Begriffs und das Verhältnis des Begriffs zu seiner Sache selbst nötige, dann nötigt umgekehrt dazu auch die objektive Realität, die Sphäre des Objekts,—wenn Sie einmal einen Augenblick lang sich ganz einfach so etwas wie eine Sphäre der Objektivität, wie es der naïve Realismus tut, als unabhängig von dem Denken vorstellen. Das Modell dafür ist, daß wir in einer antagonistischen Gesellschaft leben.


Nevertheless, what I intend to present to you as negative dialectics possesses something quite crucially related to the concept of dialectics in general—and this is something I wish to clarify at the outset. It is that the concept of contradiction will play a central role here, more particularly, the contradiction in things themselves, contradiction in the concept, not contradiction between concepts. At the same time—and I am sure that you will not fail to see that this is in a certain sense the transposition or development of a Hegelian motif—the concept of contradiction has a twofold meaning. On the one hand, as I have already intimated, we shall be concerned with the contradictory nature of the concept. What this means is that the concept enters into contradiction with the thing to which it refers.


However, that is only one side of the matter—and the fact that the question has two sides will enable the connoisseurs among you to identify without much difficulty a number of Hegelian motifs that have been extended and altered. And this side is the subjective aspect of dialectics, the aspect that is not the decisive one in the final analysis. Thus for dialectical thought in the sense in which the category of contradiction is central, what is needed is the structure of the concept and the relation of the concept to the thing it stands for. But to say this is also to imply the converse, namely objective reality, the sphere of the object—if, like the naïve realists, you can for a moment entertain the notion of a sphere of objectivity that is independent of thought. The model for this is the fact that we live in an antagonistic society.
The first contradiction is internal to the concept and is developed by comparing it to its intentional object. The second is a contradiction in the object, and it expresses the contradiction inherent in social reality.

The overarching goal of the present study is to develop an account of what makes negation or contradiction determinate in Adorno’s negative dialectics, and to answer this question I will proceed by developing an account of (1) the contradiction as a “contradiction in the concept” (between the concept and the thing to which it refers) and the theory of concepts that this contradiction presupposes, (2) the contradiction as a “contradiction in the object,” in the sense of the inherently antagonistic nature of society, and its consequences for a theory of concepts, and, finally, (3) the relation between these two kinds of contradiction.
CHAPTER 2:
SUBJECT AND OBJECT

We have seen that, according to Adorno, the contradictions that impel negative dialectics forward run along two dimensions. There is, on the one hand, the “contradiction in the concept,” which constitutes “the subjective side of contradiction,” and, on the other hand, the “contradiction in the object,” which constitutes “the objective side of contradiction.” Both sides of the contradiction arise from what Adorno takes to be a relation of opposition or antagonism between subject and object. In order to lay the groundwork for investigating Adorno’s notion of contradiction, this chapter begins to explore the relation between subject and object that allegedly undergirds the contradiction.

The “contradiction in the object” allegedly arises from an “objective contradiction”: a fundamental, unresolved antagonism lodged at the heart of social reality that is, according to Adorno, replicated in a critical reflection that takes the social world as its object. So, in order to understand the nature of the contradiction in the object, we need to understand, first, the sense in which social reality is allegedly antagonistic or contradictory and, second, how this contradiction is connected to thought such that it becomes replicated in subjective reflection. In other words, we need to understand the nature of the object of reflection, which here means specifically the social
world, and the nature of the subject-object relation, how the contradictions in the object are connected to subjective reflection.

The second kind of contradiction in negative dialectics, the “contradiction in the concept,” arises from Adorno’s view of “the concept”—by which he means, not an isolated concept, but rather a conceptual framework that defines a specific theoretical position on the world\textsuperscript{59}—and of the relation of concepts to the objects they subsume. Adorno takes concepts to arise from the confrontation between subject and “object”—which here means not the social world but rather non-conceptual nature—in which confrontation the subject attempts to order nature through imposition of its own categories. But the object is never fully captured by the subject’s categories and remains at once “more” and “less” than the categories.\textsuperscript{60} This “contradictory” relation between concept and object is the ground for the “contradiction in the concept.” In order to understand this kind of contradiction, we need to explore Adorno’s theory of concepts and their relation to the objects they determine. And this relation, again, is grounded in Adorno’s conception of the subject-object relation—where the object here refers not to the social world but rather to nature or the non-conceptual referent of concepts.

\textsuperscript{59} In this sense, Adorno’s use of the term ‘concept’ is akin to Hegel’s use of the ‘Concept’ (usually translated with a capital ‘C’), which denotes the totality of dialectically connected conceptual determinations that are deployed in order to determine any object at all, and which are “deduced” in the Science of Logic. See Adorno, Vorlesung über Negative Dialektik, in Nachgelassene Schriften, Vol. 16 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2003), 18: “Es ist nämlich nicht der übliche Begriff, sondern der Begriff, der eigentlich bereits Theorie ist.” English translation in Adorno, Lectures on Negative Dialectics (Cambridge: Polity, 2008), 7: “The fact is that I am not talking about ‘concept’ in the ordinary sense, but about concept that is already theory.”

The above characterization of Adorno’s view of contradiction makes it evident that both the “contradiction in the object” and the “contradiction in the concept” are grounded in Adorno’s conception of the subject-object relation. Admittedly, the meaning of ‘object’ changes as we move from discussion of the subject-object relation that grounds the contradiction in the object—which relation refers primarily to the subject’s relation to the social world—to discussion of the subject-object relation that grounds the contradiction in the concept—which relation refers to the subject’s relation to non-conceptual nature. Moreover, the meaning of ‘subject’ changes and develops as well: it refers at different points to the social subject (society as a whole) and to the empirical, embodied subject (the individual). Yet the reason for these shifts in meaning is not lack of conceptual clarity or a case of logical sloppiness on Adorno’s part, but rather his idea that every concept requires appeal to other, dialectically related concepts, in order for its meaning to be articulated in a rigorous, semantically determinate, and concrete way. The dialectical transformation of meaning that concepts undergo is internal to the meaning of the concepts themselves. Thus, in order to understand the dialectical conception of the subject-object relation that undergirds Adorno’s view of contradiction, we need to bring under scrutiny the transformations in meaning that characterize the relation.

This chapter begins to look at these transformations and thus to clarify the relation between subject and object that grounds Adorno’s view of contradiction. I focus in particular on the relation between subject and object understood as the relation between the individual and the social world, leaving the discussion of how the dialectic is altered by the incorporation of ‘nature’ for later (chapters 5-6). This chapter is divided into two sections. Section 1 discusses two methodological difficulties that arise with the
undertaking of giving an account of the subject-object relation in Adorno and explains how I will address them. Section 2 then begins to articulate Adorno’s dialectical conception of the subject-object relation, with a special focus on the subject’s relation to the social world.

2.1 Method

Before we begin the task of explaining Adorno’s conception of the subject-object relation, we need to discuss two methodological difficulties confronting this task.

2.1.1 First methodological difficulty

According to Adorno, the subject-object relation cannot be articulated outside the dialectic. He takes it that reality reveals itself and its antagonisms precisely in the course of negative dialectical reflection, for this type of reflection is uniquely suited to its object of reflection—reality—and in fact arises as necessitated by the object. According to Adorno, it is the object of reflection that determines the form that reflection must follow, for only the appropriate form of reflection discloses reality in its essentially antagonistic quality. Adorno explicitly denies that negative dialectics is a universally valid mode of reflection appropriate for all times and all historical stages—in fact, there is for him no single, universal mode of philosophical reflection appropriate for all times and all social formations. But negative dialectics, he holds, is the mode of thinking uniquely
appropriate to the specific social, historical, and intellectual reality of the world in which we live.\footnote{The ideas that thought is necessarily situated, historically and socially, and can only rise above blind determination by its situatedness through self-awareness of how it arises from, and intervenes into, the present reality was a central tenet of the early Frankfurt School. Max Horkheimer stresses the dependence of critical theory on its specific social and historical context in his influential inaugural address as director of the \textit{Institut für Sozialforschung}, entitled “Traditionelle und kritische Theorie.” As Horkheimer notes, critical theory is always time-indexed because it concerns itself with the concrete social and historical context from which it arises. Yet critical theory as a whole retains a degree of stability because its substance will not change until we see a historical transformation of society and its basic principle of commodity exchange. Within this relative stability, micro-historical changes cause a shift in degrees of relative importance within elements of the theory (i.e. more concretization, new results based on advances in the sciences, etc), but the principle driving the social totality remains unchanged. Moreover, critical theory maintains stability and theoretical integrity through its evolution because this evolution is itself an object of study for the theory. See Horkheimer, Max, “Traditionelle und kritische Theorie,” in \textit{Traditionelle und kritische Theorie: Fünf Aufsätze} (Frankfurt am Main: Fisher, 1992), 255:}

It is the object of reflection, reality itself, that requires reflection to take the specific form it takes. This view is in agreement with Hegel’s conception of dialectics as an \textit{ontological} form of thought, a form of thought prompted and guided by the object of

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\textit{What has been said is intended to show that the continuous change of social relationships, due immediately to economic developments and fining its most direct expression in the formation of the ruling class, does not affect only some areas of the culture. It also affects the way in which the culture depends on the economy and, thus, the key ideas in the whole conception. \textit{This influence of social development on the structure of the theory is part of the theory’s doctrinal content.} Thus new contents are not just mechanically added to already existent parts. Since the theory is a unified whole which has its proper meaning only in relation to the contemporary situation, \textit{the theory as a whole is caught up in an evolution}. The evolution does not change the theory’s foundations, of course, any more than recent changes essentially alter the object which the theory reflects, namely contemporary society. Yet even the apparently more remote concepts of the theory are drawn into the evolution. (emphasis mine)}
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reflection. The idea is that, instead of imposing a pre-determined set of logical principles on the matter of thought, consciousness should take a receptive attitude in the face of the object and follow the specific path of reflection determined by the object.

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62 Hegel describes the subject’s passive attitude with regard to the object in *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften*, Vol. I, in *Werke*, Vol. 8 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp taschenbuch, 1986), saying, “Indem ich denke, gebe ich meine subjektive Besonderheit auf, vertiefe ich mich in die Sache, lasse das Denken für sich gewähren, und ich denke schlecht, indem ich von dem Meinigen etwas hinzutue” (§24, Zusatz 2, p. 84). English translation by T.F. Geraets, W.A. Suchting, and H.S. Harris in *The Encyclopaedia Logic* (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett, 1991), p. 58: “When I think, I give up my subjective particularity, sink myself in the matter, let thought follow its own course; and I think badly whenever I add something of my own” (p 58, §24 Add. 2). Adorno agrees with Hegel that dialectics must be object-directed in just this way, and it is in fact only by being object-directed that a form of thought can avoid instrumental, identity-thinking. Adorno, of course, thinks that if Hegel had rigorously stuck by his own injunction to object-directedness, he would have found thought driven to non-identity rather than to the completed Hegelian system. See Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*, in *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. 6 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1970), 38: “Bewußtlos gleichsam müßte Bewußtsein sich versenken in die Phänomene, zu denen es Stellung bezieht. Damit freilich veränderte Dialektik sich qualitativ. Systematische Einstimmigkeit zerfiele.” “Consciousness would have to immerse itself in the phenomena on which it takes a stand unconsciously, as it were. With this, admittedly, the dialectic would undergo a qualitative change. Systematic unanimity would disintegrate” (My translation). See also Adorno, *Vorlesung über Negative Dialektik*, in *Nachgelassene Schriften*, Vol. 16 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2003), 122:

Philosophie hätte also demzufolge ihren Gehalt in der ungeschmälerten Mannigfaltigkeit ihrer Gegenstände aufzusuchen. Sie hätte sich ihnen im Ernst zu überliefern, ohne dabei immer schon rückversichert zu sein durchs Koordinatensystem oder durch ihre sogenannte Position. Sie darf ihre Gegenstände nicht als die Spiegel benutzen, aus denen sie immer wieder sich selbst herausliest, und sie darf nicht ihr eigenes Abbild verwechseln mit dem, worauf Erkenntnis eigenliegt.

Cf. Livingstone’s translation in *Lectures on Negative Dialectics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008), 81-82:

[P]hilosophy should seek its contents in the unlimited diversity of its objects. It should become fully receptive to them without looking to any system of coordinates or its so-called postulates for backing. It must not use its objects as the mirrors from which it constantly reads its own image and it must not confuse its own reflection with the true object of cognition.

63 See Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*, in *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. 6 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1966), 142:

In gewissem Betracht ist die dialektische Logik positivistischer als der Positivismus, der sie ächtet: sie respektiert, als Denken, das zu Denkende, den Gegenstand auch dort, wo r den Denkregeln nicht willfahrt. Seine Analyse tangiert die Denkregeln. Denken braucht nicht an seiner eigenen Gesetzlichkeit sich genug sein zu lassen; es vermag gegen sich selbst zu denken, ohne sich preiszugeben; wäre eine Definition von Dialektik möglich, so wäre das al seine solche vorzuschlagen.

See English translation by E.B. Ashton in Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (New York and London: Continuum, 2005), 141:
For Adorno, the experience of philosophical reflection [*geistige Erfahrung*] consists precisely in this openness to follow the object as it unfolds in accordance with its own inner constitution, free of imposition by external principles. Only by so following the exigencies that the object places on thought can we be sure that our thought is actually *of the object* and not a mere projection of subjective categories and logical functions on what might in itself not conform to those functions. The dialectical connections that drive thought forward are *necessary* in the specific sense that reflection is compelled to conceive of the object along a reflective path dictated by the actual constitution of the object. That which determines the direction of thought is therefore, in principle at least, the ontological constitution of the object of reflection—which in the case that interests us here is the actual mode of the being of subject and object, in its irreducibly historical and social dimension.

Now, since it is the mode of being of subject and object, and their actual relation, that in the first place motivate and necessitate reflection to be negative and dialectical, understanding Adorno’s conception of the subject-object relation is tantamount to understanding what he takes to be the ontological underpinnings of negative dialectics. And such underpinnings are at once the conditions for the possibility of negative dialectics and that which allegedly confers legitimacy on negative dialectics as the most adequate form of philosophical reflection for us today. But the very thing that constitutes the ontological conditions for the possibility and necessity of negative dialectics, the state

In a sense, dialectical logic is more positivistic than the positivism that outlaws it. As thinking, dialectical logic respects that which is to be taught—the object—even where the object does not heed the rules of thinking. The analysis of the object is tangential to the rules of thinking. Thought need not be content with its own legality; without abandoning it, we can think against our thought, and if it were possible to define dialectics, this would be a definition worth suggesting.
of subject and object characterizing the reality on which dialectics reflects, is intelligible

only as discovered through the dialectic. This is why it is the matter of thought itself that
drives reflection to dialectics. We cannot avoid the circle.

Consider also that dialectical reflection is dynamic. It cannot be summarized
through a list of propositions. Such a list would capture only finite results articulated in
the course of the dialectic, and yet the dialectic itself is composed not only by these
results, but also by the transitions from one result to the other, and by the retrospective
alteration that new results project onto the meaning of previous results.64 This means
that, in order to explore Adorno’s conception of the object, and of the subject-object
relation, we cannot employ the usual philosophical method of expounding the basic
theses he advances, but must rather critically follow Adorno’s own dialectical reflections.
Therefore, we will not be able to conduct an “external” study that surveys and evaluates
isolated elements of Adorno’s views (like the studies that the “analytic Marxists” conduct

64 Adorno agrees with Hegel that philosophical knowledge cannot be conveyed as a finished
product by way of a list of conclusions or a description of the thought process involved in dialectical
analysis. See Adorno, Negative Dialektik, in Gesammelte Schriften, Vol. 6 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1966),
41: “Das Wesen wird durchs Resume des Wesentlichen verfälscht. Philosophie, die zu dem sich
herabließe, worüber schon Hegel spottete; geneigten Lesern sich anbequemte in Erklärungen darüber, was
man nun be idem Gedanken sich zu denken habe, gliederte der vordringenden Regression sich ein, ohne
doch mit ihr Schritt zu halten.” Philosophy, for Adorno, requires a dialectical experience for which no
description can substitute. “[W]as in ihr [in der Philosophie] sich zuträgt, entscheidet, nicht These oder
Position; das Gewebe, nicht der deductive oder inductive, eingleisige Gedankengang. Daher ist
Philosophie wesentlich nicht referierbar. Sonst wäre sie überflüssig; daß sie meist sich referieren läßt,
spricht gegen sie” (Ibid., 42). See English translation by E.B. Ashton in Adorno, Negative Dialectics (New
York and London: Continuum, 2005), 32-33: “The essence is falsified by a resume of essentials. If
philosophy were to stoop to a practice which Hegel already mocked, if it were to accommodate its kind
reader by explaining what the thought should make him think, it would be joining the march of regression
without being able to keep up the pace.” Ashton renders the second passage above as follows: “The crux
is what happens in it [in the geistige experience of philosophical reflection], not a thesis or a position—the
texture, not the deductive or inductive course of one-track minds. Essentially, therefore, philosophy is not
expoundable. If it were, it would be superfluous; the fact that most of it can be expounded speaks against
it.”
on the basis of a Marxian thought cleansed of dialectics\(^{65}\), but will rather have to choose a suitable point at which to enter Adorno’s thought “from the inside” and conduct an interpretive study that combines an insider’s perspective with a critical standpoint. This is why I am choosing to begin the present study by first embedding ourselves into Adorno’s dialectic of subject and object, and building from there. The way forward,

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\(^{65}\) G.A. Cohen has expressed the analytic Marxist’s project and rejection of the “insider’s standpoint” required by dialectics with considerable clarity in his introduction to the 2001 expanded edition of his classic work *Karl Marx’s Theory of History: a Defense* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001). He says, for instance,

I said…that analytical Marxists do not think that Marxism possesses a distinctive and valuable *method*. Others believe that it has such a method, which they call ‘dialectical.’ But we [analytic Marxists] believe that, although the word ‘dialectical’ has not always been used without clear meaning, it has never been used with clear meaning to denote a method rival to the analytical one: there is no such thing as a dialectical form of reasoning that can challenge analytical reasoning. Belief in dialectic as a *rival* to analysis thrives only in an atmosphere of unclear thought. (p. xxiii).

Later he adds:

We believe that it is irrational obscurantism to resist analytical reasoning, to resist analysis in the narrow sense in the name of anti-individualist holism. It is not, of course, irrational obscurantism to reject particular conclusions that are presented as results of analytical reasoning, for ordinary error and extraordinary ideological distortion commonly disfigure such (supposed) results. But to argue that there is something hopelessly undialectical or individualist about analytical techniques themselves represents, we believe, an unwillingness to accept the rule of reason (p. xxiv).

And, perhaps more poignantly, Cohen claims,

In fact, there exists Marxism which is neither analytical nor bullshit, but, once such (as we may designate it) pre-analytical Marxism encounters analytical Marxism, then it must either become analytical or become bullshit. You could be a respectable ‘holistic’ (as it were) chemist before chemistry began to expose the structure of the elements, but, once such an advance has been made, to insist on the holistic approach is obscurantist. (xxvi).

While I agree with Cohen’s statement that analytic and dialectical thought are not *necessarily* opposed or incompatible modes of thinking, it seems clear to me that they represent different ways of conceiving of philosophical reflection at its best or most rational. For a dialectician like Adorno and Hegel, for instance, it is essential that philosophical thought *follow the lead of its object* in the development of dialectical (synthetic) connections, and insists on the idea that the unity of the reflection/object-of-reflection complex is presupposed at every step of thought. Analytic philosophical methods would tend to reject these ways of conceiving philosophical thought. In this work, I want to employ analytical methods of analysis *without* thereby imposing an external form on the text that would likely distort our interpretation. This is why, as I argue in this section, it is essential to proceed first and foremost through a careful exegetical reconstruction of Adorno’s dialectical moves from an insider’s point of view, before attempting to launch an external assessment.
then, will be to take a suitable example of negative dialectical reflection, to explicate the way in which it unfolds, and then to exit the insider’s perspective at various points in order to examine what has been discussed.\footnote{It should be noted, however, that even while we adopt the “insider’s” perspective, the exercise of following and clarifying the dialectical movements through which Adorno takes the reader is not uncritical, for dialectical thought has the property of being inherently self-reflexive. That is, since the object of reflection (reality) is at the same time the ground of the possibility of such reflection, and the cause of the necessity of reflection to take the shape that it takes, negative dialectics is inherently reflection on the conditions of its own possibility and on its legitimacy as a form of critical thought. This is, of course, in keeping with what Horkheimer singles out as one of the distinguishing features of critical theory in his early essay “Traditionelle und Kritische Theorie,” when he says that critical theory is characterized by the self-consciousness that, even as it attempts to articulate its object, it is itself determined by the object.} In what follows, I will clearly flag the points at which we will be conducting an “insider’s” survey of Adorno’s dialectics, and the points at which we will temporarily exit the insider’s viewpoint in order to get a critical bearing on the material.

We could achieve the goal of investigating the conception of subject and object presupposed by and revealed in the course of negative dialectics by focusing on any one or more of Adorno’s dialectical studies. Regardless of what the direct and explicit object of reflection is, negative dialectics is always at the same time, with different degrees of explicitness, reflection on how the object of reflection makes this particular form of reflection possible and allegedly even requires it. But there is a specific essay, “Zu Subjekt und Objekt,” in which Adorno takes up as its explicit and direct topic the relation of subject and object. The essay is thus simultaneously an investigation of the constitution of subject and object and an explicit investigation of the conditions of possibility of negative dialectical reflection generally. The essay is therefore particularly well suited to the present study and will be the focus of my textual analyses in this chapter.
2.1.2 Second methodological difficulty

The second methodological difficulty is that Adorno’s conception of the dialectic of subject and object does not culminate with a final, total view of the subject-object relation. Whereas in Hegel the different positions examined throughout the dialectic ultimately come together into a closed conceptual circle, so that at the end of dialectical reflection we can attain a complete view of subject and object (a view that makes explicit what was implicitly presupposed from the beginning), in Adorno what we have is rather a helix-shaped mode of reflection that never reaches a point of completion or rest, but that must rather simply be discontinued at some point—presumably when something like “sufficient” insight into the matter at hand has been achieved (sufficient with respect to specific practical or theoretical goals). Dialectical reflection is, according to Adorno, ineluctably incomplete, fallible, and provisional. So a final point of completion is never achieved, from which we could conceive of the movement that preceded and culminated

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67 For Adorno, philosophical thinking must of necessity be fallible and revisable. See, for instance, Adorno, Vorlesung über Negative Dialektik, in Nachgelassene Schriften, Vol. 16 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2003), 127:

Philosopfie hat nämlich keinen Gegenstand absolut garantiert; philosophisch wird eigentlich überhaupt nur dort gedacht, wo der Gedanke fehlgehen kann, wo er fehlbar ist. … Und, wenn ich mir das gestatten darf, ich würde sagen, daß der Punkt, an dem heute die Philosophie…ihre wahre Aktualität, wenn anders sie eine hat, zeigt, darin besteht, daß sie dem herrschenden Sekuritätsbedürfnis, nach dem auch alle Modi der Erkenntnis mehr oder minder zurechtgeschustert sind, widersteht; und daß sie einsieht, daß—mit Nietzsche zu reden—eine Erkenntnis, die nicht gefährlich ist, nicht wert ist, gedacht zu werden.

Cf. Livingstone's translation in Adorno’s Lectures on Negative Dialectics (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008), 85:

The fact is that philosophy does not have any particular guaranteed object of study; it is possible to think philosophically only where thinking can go awry, where it is falling. … [T]he point at which philosophy…is able to demonstrate its true actuality, if indeed it has one, consists in the resistance it offers to the prevailing need for security, in contrast to all current modes of knowledge which have more or less adjusted their sights so as to conform to that need. It is the point at which it realizes that—as Nietzsche would have put it—knowledge that is not dangerous does not deserve to be thought.
in it as providing a stable view of the structure of subject and object and their mutual constitution that was presupposed by dialectical reflection all along but only rendered fully explicit at the end of the reflective process. In contrast to the Hegelian view of the dialectic, what we have in Adorno is a view in which (1) a stable conception of subject and object is never attained; (2) the ontological insights into subject and object that are revealed in the course of the analysis are time-indexed (true only at a particular time) and revisable; and (3) all of these insights are by themselves incomplete or inadequate, for they are flawed conceptions of the object, and it is precisely their inadequacy that pushes thought forward in unending unrest.

Is it then possible to discover something like a conception of subject and object, or a series of conceptions related to each other in a specifiable way, at work in negative dialectics? I think the answer is ‘yes’—albeit a qualified ‘yes.’ We can only become clear about the various stages of reflection at which a conception of subject and object is proposed and then shown to be inadequate, but, importantly, each conception put forward and then rejected is found to be inadequate in a determinate way. The reflective process in the end leaves us with an aggregate of failed theoretical views on the concepts that interest us. Together, these views form what Adorno calls a “constellation” and, arranged in this way, they provide a moment of insight whose content is not a stable and final view of reality but rather a determinate and meaningful understanding of the essential contradiction that precisely impedes any such final view.\(^{68}\)

\(^{68}\) I investigate in detail Adorno’s conception of the “constellation” in chapter 8. The conclusion to this study then explains the overall structure of dialectics as a series of failures in thought’s attempts fully to determine its object, but the failures are determinate (have a specific meaning) that gives insight into the causes for unavoidable failure. I give a final account of what this meaning is in the concluding chapter.
So, as we follow the turns of Adorno’s dialectical view of subject and object, it will be essential to keep in mind that the views we consider and discuss at any particular moment are provisional, and that their meaning will undergo alterations until the whole dialectic comes together into an arrangement of views (the constellation) that orders them into a self-reflexive analysis of the total phenomenon and that illuminates the determinate failures of each partial analysis, as well as the whole. Since, moreover, the present chapter focuses exclusively on the subject’s relation to the object *conceived as the social world*, and leaves for later a discussion of how nature mediates and alters this relation, it is all the more essential to keep in mind that the views we will be reconstructing here are provisional and not a final account of the subject-object relation underlying negative dialectics.

We are now ready to turn to Adorno’s text. As I already announced above, I will proceed by focusing on his essay “Zu Subjekt und Objekt.” In particular, I will focus on one section, namely section 3 of the essay, which deals specifically with the subject’s relation to social reality. By exploring the dialectical moves contained in this section, the remainder of this chapter will construct an initial account of the relation of subject and object, on which other chapters will build, as well as an initial account of the negative dialectical method, which will be also refined in the course of further investigation.

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2.2 The subject’s mediation of and by the social world

This section gives an exegesis and commentary of Adorno’s dialectical reflections on the subject’s mediation of the object in sections 1-3 of “Zu Subjekt und Objekt.” The passage begins with a statement of the inherently ambiguous point of departure faced by any investigation of subjectivity. “Mit Erwägungen über Subjekt und Objekt einzusetzen, bereitet die Schwierigkeit anzugeben, worüber eigentlich geredet werden soll. Offenkundig sind die Termini äquivok. So kann »Subjekt« sich auf das einzelne Individuum ebenso wie auf allgemeine Bestimmungen, nach der Sprache der Kantischen Prolegomena von »Bewußtsein überhaupt« beziehen.” The ambiguity here is one between reference to concrete and embodied individual selves, on the one hand, and to the universal structures of consciousness that order individual experience—something like Kant’s transcendental unity of apperception or Husserl’s transcendental ego—on the other. Because of the sedimented meanings contained in the concept of the ‘subject,’


71 The idea that concepts contain meanings sedimented in them is one that will be explained in detail in chapters 7-8. In terms of the present discussion, the point is just that the concepts we use owe their content to a historical process that has imbued them with various meanings, which in their turn have arisen from specific socio-historical contexts. Every concept has a content that is historically inherited and that therefore is not “pure,” not free of presuppositions and one-sidedness derived from the historical development. In terms of the philosophical tradition specifically, the concept of a supra-individual subjectivity (whether merely logical or ontologically substantive) was at the center of philosophical discourse since at least Kant, and it took several different shades of meaning: Kant’s idea of the transcendental unity of self-consciousness, Fichte’s I as self-positing self-consciousness, Hegel’s notion of the “I that is a we, and a we that is an I” (Geist), etc. When thinking about the subject in the face of such a variegated tradition, the very meaning of what is meant by ‘subject’ is an issue. All of the senses of ‘subject’ I just mentioned above, though different, stand in contradistinction to a concept of the subject as an individual, empirical self. It is this fundamental difference that marks the point of departure in Adorno’s thinking here.
the project philosophically to investigate the subject is from the beginning caught in a
dichotomy between two conceptions of the object under consideration. The concept of
‘subject’ is not pure and self-contained, but rather evokes ways of conceiving subjectivity
that have historically shaped how we think about it.

One easy way to deal with this ambiguity would be simply to dispel it by fiat. One
could limit the object under study to one of the two senses prevalent in philosophical
discourse (at least in the tradition to which Adorno belongs and at the time at which he
writes): that is, one could simply point out the ambiguity inherent in the term ‘subject’
and then tell the reader which of the two senses one wishes to investigate. But this is not
a move that Adorno is prepared to make. The very fact that a discussion of subjectivity is
from the beginning drawn along lines that distinguish between two specific ways of
thinking about the subject (one referring to living, concrete individuals, and the other to
the general features of consciousness that structure the experience of individuals) is an
indication of various philosophical prejudices built into the very language we must use to
reflect on the subject and subjectivity. The distinction between the two specific senses of
‘subject’ at issue here is not a natural or unavoidable distinction. It would not have
occurred to Aristotle to think that the subject must in the first instance be thought about
as either the concrete self or the universal structure of consciousness. (In fact, Aristotle
had no concept ‘subject’ at all!) This dichotomous way of thinking about subjectivity has
a history and involves specific modes of conceptualizing the subject that a philosophy
whose chief aspiration is to be thoroughly critical cannot accept as unquestioned starting
points.
It might be thought, then, that the solution should be to steer clear of the terms according to which reflection on the subject has been pursued in the philosophical tradition. The idea that such a course of action is best is of course not alien to us: It is an idea often conceived as that which ushered us into the modern philosophical era, since it is characteristically identified with Descartes’ attempt to start from a pure beginning, to set aside the way philosophical issues had been reflected upon before him, and thereby clear the ground for unprejudiced new foundations. But according to Adorno and the Frankfurt School generally, the idea that philosophy can occur in a historical vacuum is an illusion, a lack of self-consciousness. Reflection is irremediably influenced and to some extent determined by the historical moment in which it finds itself. This means that our attempts to think through a philosophical issue are ineluctably tied to the philosophical tradition in which we find ourselves and whose vocabulary we have inherited. For critical theorists, to pretend to steer clear of historical influences can only result in lack of awareness of those influences. In any case, the idea that one can never begin from unquestioned, unprejudiced foundations is a keystone of Adorno’s thought.

We can only think by means of concepts, and concepts are not pure, a-historical, and

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72 Adorno accordingly emphasizes that even negative dialectic, whose chief aim is to oppose “identitarian thought,” nonetheless must always begin with the concepts available to us, which are all identitarian. See Adorno, Negative Dialektik (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1970), 150: “Der Totalität ist zu opponieren, indem sie der Nichtidentität mit sich selbst überführt wird, die sie dem eigenen Begriff nach verleugnet. Dadurch ist die negative Dialektik, als an ihrem Ausgang, gebunden an die obersten Kategorien von Identitätsphilosophie. … Berichtigen muß sie sich in ihrem kritischen Fortgang, der jene Begriffe affiziert, die sie der Form nach behandelt, als wären es auch für sie noch die ersten.” See English translation by E.B. Ashton in Adorno, Negative Dialectics (New York and London: Continuum, 2005): “Totality is to be opposed by convicting it of nonidentity with itself—of the nonidentity it denies, according to its own concept. Negative dialectics is thus tied to the supreme categories of identitarian philosophy as its point of departure. … It must correct itself in its critical course—a course affecting concepts which in negative dialectics are formally treated as if they came ‘first’ for it, too.”
unprejudiced unities, but are rather the result of historical modes of thinking and the concrete, material realities that surrounded those modes of thinking.

The only way to proceed, then—and this is something Adorno takes to be true of all philosophical reflection—is to begin with the concepts and structures of discourse that we have inherited, but with the self-conscious understanding that they involve prejudices that have to be examined at every turn. We must begin with the concepts at hand and submit them to relentless reflexive and historical scrutiny—in Adorno’s terminology, we must bring concepts to think against themselves.73 As any other piece of negative dialectics, the analysis of the subject cannot begin “at the beginning”—it can neither begin by positing a stable starting point for analysis, such as a principle of subjectivity that we could take for granted—but must rather begin in medias res. “Deshalb empfiehlt es sich, die Worte Subjekt und Objekt zunächst so zu übernehmen, wie sie die eingeschliffene philosophische Sprache als Sediment von Geschichte an die Hand gibt; nur freilich nicht bei solchem Konventionalismus zu verharren, sondern kritisch weiter zu analysieren.”74

With respect to the specific topic of subjectivity, Adorno thinks that the starting place for reflection has to be the historically delimited field of tension between opposing views of

73 See, for example, Adorno, Negative Dialektik, in Gesammelte Schriften, Vol. 6 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1970), 358: “Erheischt negative Dialektik die Selbstreflexion des Denkens, so impliziert das handgreiflich, Denken müsse, um wahr zu sein, heute jedenfalls, auch gegen sich selbst denken.” Cf. E. B. Ashton’s translation in Adorno, Negative Dialectics (New York and London: Continuum, 2005), 365: “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.”

74 Adorno, “Zu Subjekt und Objekt,” in Stichworte: Kritische Modelle, Vol. 2 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1969), 152. Cf. Pickford’s translation in Adorno, “On Subject and Object,” Critical Models (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 246: “Therefore it is advisable to start by taking up the words ‘subject’ and ‘object’ such as they are handed down by the well-honed philosophical language, as a historical sediment; not, of course, sticking to such conventionalism but continuing further with a critical analysis.”
the subject as, on the one hand, an empirical subject, and, on the other, a transcendental or universal subject (the subject as universal structure of consciousness).

The dialectic of the subject in “Zu Subjekt und Objekt” begins by examining the view of the subject that takes the necessary and universal structures of consciousness to have priority over the subject considered as the empirical, concrete, embodied individual. Adorno calls the view “Idealism,” and identifies it with conceptions of the subject such as Kant’s transcendental unity of apperception, Fichte’s self-positing I, or even the late Husserl’s transcendental ego. The common thread running through these positions is the view that the structure of consciousness is the logical ground for the constitution of objects and of the empirical subject as well.

But, Adorno objects, the transcendental subject, said to be primary, is in fact derivative and secondary because it is an abstraction from actual living, empirical individuals. So, claims Adorno, “Idealism” leads to the “*unübersehbaren Schwierigkeiten des Zirkels*” [the unsurveyable difficulties of the circle/ circularity]. The transcendental conception of the subject presupposes the very empirical subjectivity that it posits as secondary. “*Bedingtes soll als unbedingt, Abgeleitetes als primär gerechtfertigt werden.*” Thinking through the theory of transcendental subjectivity should lead us into the opposite pole of the dichotomy with which we began, namely, to

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75 Adorno, “Zu Subjekt und Objekt,” 151. The standard English translation by Henry Pickford in *Critical Models* renders the phrase as an “unavoidable problem of circularity,” but the German *unübersehbaren* is better translated as “unsurveyable” or “extending too far to be kept under optical control.”


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reflection on empirical subjectivity, from which transcendental subjectivity is a mere abstraction.

Adorno claims that most defenders of “Idealism” were well aware of this paradox, and in order to address it they were led to posit a strong and unmediated distinction between ontological and logical priority. On the one hand, the empirical subject is alleged to have ontological priority (priority in the order of being) over the transcendental subject, for it is the empirical subject that we actually encounter experientially and from which the structures that constitute the transcendental subject are abstracted and derived. The empirical subject is prior as the ratio essendi of the transcendental subject. On the other hand, the transcendental subject is supposed to have logical priority over the empirical subject, since the transcendental subject is supposed to be a necessary condition for the possibility of experience, and so for the possibility of any empirical subjects of experience. “Evident ist, daß der abstrakte Begriff des transzendentalen Subjekts, die Formen von Denken, deren Einheit und die ursprüngliche Produktivität von Bewußtsein, voraussetzt, was er zu stiften verspricht: tatsächliche, lebendige Einzelwesen.”77 That is, even if the theories at issue claim that the transcendental subject is the ground of validity for objectivity, and thus for the empirical subject’s experience and knowledge of objects, they cannot claim that it is equally the genetic ground of either concrete, real subjects or objects. The empirical subject is clearly prior in being. We encounter empirical experience and abstract from it the forms

of consciousness that are then said to be prior in some “deeper” sense as necessary conditions for the possibility of consciousness. The picture that “Idealism” proposes, according to Adorno, is one in which we have on the one hand a view of the subject as transcendental and prior in terms of logical validity and the constitution of experience, while on the other we have a disconnected view of the subject as the empirical individual. The second is said to depend on the first in a logical sense, but the direction of dependence is the opposite in terms of existence.

The distinction between logical validity and genesis necessitated by this bifurcated view of the subject is untenable for Adorno. He claims that it is based on a prejudice that runs through the whole of Western philosophy. “Wiederholt wird ein Topos der gesamten abendländischen Überlieferung, demzufolge allein das Erste oder, wie Nietzsche kritisch es formulierte, nur das nicht Gewordene wahr sein könne.” The prejudice that underpins “Idealism” is the idea that something that has a history—something that changes and evolves—cannot be without firm ground on some unchanging and necessary structure, nor can it be its own ground or, worse still, be ungrounded. Behind the messiness of the empirical individual and empirical experience, there must be some ground that is eternal and unchanging: a universal transcendental subject of some kind. But this view requires that genesis and validity be kept distinct and unmediated, and such a distinction is a doctrine against which Adorno argues again and again.

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78 Adorno is, of course, not the first philosopher to criticize the unmediated distinction between validity and genesis that the theory of transcendental subjectivity requires. This idea has been the target of criticism since the earliest receptions of Kant’s writings by philosophers like Herder, Fichte, and Hegel.

79 Adorno, “Zu Subjekt und Objekt,” 154. Cf. Pickford’s translation in Adorno, “On Subject and Object,” Critical Models (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 248: “Here a topos of the entire Western tradition is repeated, which holds that only the First or, as Nietzsche critically formulated it, only something that has not evolved, can be true.”
again: validity and genesis cannot, in his view, be legitimately separated without mediation.

Adorno thus argues that the conception of the subject as transcendental is too abstract. To give content to a notion of subjectivity, we need recourse to the empirical, concrete self from whom the notion of subjectivity is abstracted in the first place. It is useful to complement this critique of the notion of transcendental subjectivity with a critique that Adorno launches against the same doctrine in his lectures on Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*. There he argues that the attempt to establish a strong distinction between the transcendental subject and the empirical subject—a distinction based on the dichotomy between validity and genesis—necessarily ends in failure, and he explains the reasons for this failure as follows:

Sie können sich dieses Ich denke, dieses also in letzter Instanz bei Kant konstituierende Problem, ohne ein wie auch immer geartetes Ich, das da denken soll, gar nicht vorstellen. Im Augenblick, in dem Sie aber von einem solchen Ich reden, das da denkt, können Sie zwar dieses Ich sich vorstellen al eines, das noch nicht in einem vollen Sinn ein raum-zeitliches, körperliches Ich ist,—aber immerhin: Sie müssen, damit Sie ein solches Ich denke überhaupt fassen können, dabei immer auch das mitfassen, was dabei gedacht wird: *ohne ein solches verliert es überhaupt seinen Sinn*. Das heißt: es ist auf Faktität verwiesen; das Ontologische bedarf des Ontischen genauso, wie umgekehrt—in Sinn der Argumentation von Kant und im Sinn der Argumentation des gesamten Idealismus—auch das Ontische seinerseits nun wiederum des Ontologischen bedarf. Wenn Sie dieses Ich denke, also das eigentlich transzendentale reine Subjekt, von dem Ich qua Tatsache ganz und gar ablösen, so verliert nicht nur die Rede von »Ich überhaupt« ihren Sinn, sonder Sie können sich dann das überhaupt nicht vorstellen, was bei Kant Bewußtseinszusammenhang heißt, was Synthesis heißt, was Erinnerung heißt, was Reproduktion; alle diese Kategorien, die bei Kant vorkommen, die verlieren dann eigentlich ihren ganzen Sinn.\(^{80}\)

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Note the radical nature of Adorno’s critique: He claims that the concept of the transcendental subject cannot make sense to us, cannot be substantive (one cannot “obtain any grasp of it at all”) without relation to the empirical subject (“ohne ein solches körperliches ich verliert es [Kants ‘ich denke’] überhaupt seinem Sinn”). In order to give content to the concept of the transcendental subject, we are necessarily led to think about its dialectical opposite: the concept of the empirical subject. The dialectic shows that the first concept semantically presupposes and in this sense requires the second, and what needs to take place after this first swing of the dialectical pendulum is reflection on the other pole of the ambiguity noted at the beginning, namely on the empirical, living, and embodied subject.

But, before moving to a consideration of this other conception of the subject, one needs to ask: if the view that grounds the conception of subjectivity as transcendental—that is, the view that genesis and validity are strongly to be distinguished—is an untenable philosophical prejudice, whence this prejudice? The answer, according to Adorno, is that the view that severs genesis and validity in order to depict the subject as originally and primarily a transcendental subject that grounds the logical structure of the


You will find it impossible to imagine this ‘I think’, this ultimately constitutive problem in Kant, without some sort of ‘I’, however constituted. But the moment you start to talk of an ‘I’ that ‘thinks’ you may indeed imagine it as something that is not fully corporeal or existing in time and space. Nevertheless, in order to obtain any grasp of it at all you have to include something of what comes to mind when you think it; without that it would make no sense at all. That is to say: it depends on factual existence; the ontological stands in need of the ontic just as much as, conversely—if we go along with the arguments of Kant and indeed of idealism in generally—the ontic stands in need of the ontological. If you completely detach this ‘I think’, that is, the pure transcendental subject, from the ‘I’ as actual fact, then not only does all talk of an ‘I’ lose all its meaning but it also becomes impossible to imagine what Kant means by ‘context of consciousness’ or ‘synthesis’ or ‘memory’ or ‘reproduction.’ (My emphasis)
world is a view that arises historically in order to satisfy the “wishful thinking” of individuals in the process of becoming ever more unfree socially, politically, and concretely. The radical freedom of a subject that constitutes the ground of validity for the world is an ideological correlate of the lack of freedom of real, embodied subjects in the “administered” society of today’s capitalist world.81 “Die ideologische Funktion der These ist nicht zu verkennen. Je mehr die einzelnen Menschen real zu Funktionen der gesellschaftlichen Totalität durch deren Verknüpfung zum System herabgesetzt werden, desto mehr wird der Mensch schlechthin, als Prinzip, mit dem Attribut des Schöpferischen, dem absoluter Herrschaft, vom Geist tröstlich erhöht.”82

The idea that the subject is best understood in terms of transcendental subjectivity, which is the ground of empirical subjects and objects (of the empirical world and experience generally), is, according to Adorno, fully intelligible only if we take into account the social-psychological effect of the doctrine. The latter fulfills the two main

81 Adorno’s point here is similar to Feuerbach’s theory of projection in Das Wesen des Christentums (1841), namely, the idea that at the root of the Christian belief in a personal, immortal God, lies the attempt to satisfy a psychological need to negate the individual’s limitations and nullity through projection of opposite attributes (unlimitedness and absolute being) into an imaginary being. Feuerbach extended this critique to a critique of Hegel’s thesis of the identity of thought and being in the 1943 edition of Das Wesen des Christentums, arguing that it too is based on a projection of characteristics into an empty substratum, and on the basis of psychological desiderata. Adorno’s point at this stage of the dialectic is similar to Feuerbach, although, like Marx, Adorno thinks that the problem with the projections that lead to a view of the subject as a supra-individual legislator of objectivity in the world (as transcendental consciousness) is not just a problem of false beliefs based on psychological need, but moreover arises from the material, economic order, so that the solution to it cannot be simply to correct our false beliefs but rather requires concrete changes in the socio-economic order. For an excellent discussion of Feuerbach’s ideas and their influence on Marx see Breckman, Warren, Marx, the Young Hegelians, and the Origins of Radical Social Theory (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

82 Adorno, “Zu Subjekt und Objekt,” in Stichworte: Kritische Modelle, Vol. 2 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1969), 154. Cf. Pickford’s translation in Adorno, “On Subject and Object,” Critical Models (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 248: “The ideological function of the thesis cannot be overlooked. The more individuals are in effect degraded into functions within the societal totality as they are connected up to the system, the more the person pure and simple, as a principle, is consoled and exalted with the attributes of creative power, absolute rule, and spirit.”
tasks of ideology: first, to mask the true nature of social experience, and, second, to justify the *status quo*. The doctrine of the primacy of transcendental subjectivity conceals the unfreedom of actual, concrete subjects, by offering them a way to think of themselves as radically free and, in fact, as the ultimate creators of the world; and, second, it provides a justification for the existing social order by characterizing it as the free creation of the subject writ large. Under this view, individual feelings of unfreedom or coercion can be dismissed as due to an erroneous standpoint of reflection under the idea that one needs only to assume the viewpoint of the transcendental subject to see one’s own freedom in the world.

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This ideological function of the doctrine of the transcendental subject is the same one that Marx detected in Hegel’s treatment of alienation. In the 1944 *Ökonomisch-philosophische Manuskripte*, Marx argues that Hegel treats alienation as if it were a matter for thought alone. To overcome alienation, all we need to do is to understand reality better. Once we understand things truly, we will realize that our feelings of alienation were grounded in erroneous conceptions about the nature of reality and our place in it. But for Marx alienation is real, and comprehending it only accentuates it. Marx, Karl, *Ökonomisch-philosophische Manuskripte*, in Karl Marx-Griedrich Engels Gesamtausgabe, Vol. 2 (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1982), 403:

When he [Hegel] e.g. wealth, state-power, etc. are understood by Hegel as entities estranged from the human being, this only happens in their form as thoughts. ... They are thought-entities, and therefore merely an estrangement of pure, i.e., abstract, philosophical thinking. The whole process therefore ends with Absolute Knowledge. It is precisely abstract thought from which these objects are estranged and which they confront with their arrogation of reality. The *Philosoph* sets up himself (that is, one who is himself an abstract form of estranged man) as the measuring-rod of the estranged world. The whole *Entäußerungsgeschichte* and the whole process of the retraction of the alienation is therefore nothing but the *Productiongeschichte* of abstract (i.e., absolute) thought—of logical, speculative thought (emphasis in the original).

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English translation by Martin Milligan in Marx, *Economic and Philosopher Manuscripts of 1844* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1988), 147:

When, for instance, wealth, state-power, etc. are understood by Hegel as entities estranged from the *human* being, this only happens in their form as thoughts. ... They are thought-entities, and therefore merely an estrangement of *pure*, i.e., abstract, philosophical thinking. The whole process therefore ends with Absolute Knowledge. It is precisely abstract thought from which these objects are estranged and which they confront with their arrogation of reality. The *philosopher* sets up himself (that is, one who is himself an abstract form of estranged man) as the *measuring-rod* of the estranged world. The whole *history of the alienation-process* and the whole process of the retraction of the alienation is therefore nothing but the *history of the production of abstract* (i.e., absolute) thought—of logical, speculative thought (emphasis in the original).
At this point I want to pause for a moment before continuing with the movement of this dialectic and reflect on the structure of the analysis so far. We started with a statement of the ambiguity of the concept of ‘subject’ with which we must begin reflection on the subject, specifically an ambiguity between two conceptions of the subject. We then turned to one of those conceptions: the subject as transcendental ground of consciousness. The view was then argued to be insufficient because it requires the other pole of the distinction in order to be substantive, in order to have content. The first conception is thus shown to be inadequate on its own—it alone cannot account for a contentful conception of subjectivity—and it is shown to be inadequate on theoretical grounds. But the analysis does not proceed simply by showing theoretical insufficiencies in the position that is considered first. That is, the analysis does not just tell us that the theories which give primacy to transcendental subjectivity are wrong and so we must move on to look at empirical subjectivity: the theories negated in the course of the dialectic are not just abstractly negated. Rather, reflection on these theories also provides an account of the ideological motivations that in the first place give rise to the view that transcendental subjectivity is primary. The idea that the subject should be conceived primarily as a transcendental ground of experience is not a historical accident to be examined merely in terms of its logical consistency, but it is rather the product of a historical and social situation, and we can understand it critically and adequately only by placing it in that historical and social context. This is, as it were, a Lukácsian moment characteristic of all of Adorno’s dialectical studies: The contradictions that arise at the level of theory are made intelligible by articulating their origin in concrete tensions lodged in social reality. This kind of explanation is not only intended to render the theory
more intelligible but also to lead to illuminating self-reflection—and, ideally, to a translation of this reflection into praxis. What I want to stress here is that the failure of the initial theoretical position is not a mere denial of the view, but also offers a specific interpretation of how the view arises and of the meaning it conceals, a meaning to be fleshed out in terms of the role that the view at issue plays in the social world in which it arises, and which is based on the material, economic conditions that determine that world.\(^\text{84}\)

If, as Adorno thinks, a theoretical view is always the product of its historical moment and of the political, social, and human needs that it satisfies (or purports to satisfy) at that moment, then it makes sense that we could come to understand those political, social, and human needs better by analyzing the theory in terms of the ideological role it plays. The theory therefore, even if insufficient or “false” in its own terms, can lead us to discover “truths” about our history and ourselves. So even at the level at which the position is argued to be “false” or insufficient in its own terms, there is a sense in which it is also “true”: it is not a view to be discarded in the epistemological rubbish heap of all false theories and forgotten, but rather a view to be analyzed in such a way that it might lead to a better understanding of the social reality that we confront in the present. Adorno writes in \textit{Negative Dialektik} that “In gesellschaftliche Kategorien ist philosophisch überzugehen allein durch Dechiffrierung des Wahrheitsgehalts der philosophischen,”\(^\text{85}\) and the truth content at issue [\textit{der Wahrheitsgehalt der}

\(^{84}\) Note that the analysis, as described so far, corresponds to the method of analysis that Marx deploys and his view that the ideal dimension of culture plays a specific function based on the material substratum of life.

\(^{85}\) Adorno, \textit{Negative Dialektik}, in \textit{Gesammelte Schriften}, Vol. 6 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1966), 198. See English translation by E.B. Ashton in Adorno, \textit{Negative Dialectics} (New York and
philosophischen] is found by looking at the ideological function that the philosophical theory plays in its concrete socio-historical context, conducting this investigation from the standpoint of our own social, political, and theoretical situation and concerns. In sum, the structure of this first stage in the dialectic is as follows:

1. A theoretical concept is considered. It is found to be insufficient; its claim to be adequate for understanding the matter at hand (subjectivity in this case) is shown to be false. In order to correct the insufficiencies of the concept, we need to appeal to the object’s “dialectical opposite.”

2. But the concept is also interpreted in the context of the objective historical and social totality to which it belongs, which gives rise to it, and the needs for justification of which it satisfies.

The dialectic thus moves from the realm of our theoretical self-conception to the derivation of a “contradiction” (or insufficiency, or shortcoming) internal to that self-conception, and finally to the “objective” realm of the social and historical world, in terms of which the contradiction gains a concrete interpretation and is thus made determinate.

Let us enter Adorno’s dialectic of subject and object once again at the point at which we left it. The conception of the subject as a transcendental subject led to what was initially the “opposite” conception of the subject: namely, that of the subject as

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London: Continuum, 2005, 198: “The only way to pass philosophically into social categories is to decipher the truth content of philosophical categories.”

86 This is one of the many senses in which philosophical reflection for Adorno should always proceed from the standpoint of the present rather than as reflection on eternal and unchanging truths: We interrogate or mortify theories (in Benjamin’s sense) with a view to inducing them to speak to our present situation.
empirical subject. The transcendental subject was found to be an abstraction from the empirical subject, and so to be empty by itself; it requires the empirical subject in order to have substance as a conception of the subject. But, Adorno claims, when we consider the empirical, living subject, we find that its content is threateningly almost as formal and abstract as the content of the transcendental subject.

When we consider the concrete individual's experience, claims Adorno, we find that it is overwhelmingly determined by the formal laws of exchange and consumption of the economic system. According to Adorno, all major social institutions have been rationalized for the sake of capital reproduction, so that ethical life is no longer possible in the public sphere. Initially, and in response to this domination of the economic order over public life, the possibility of a more immediate and self-determined form of individual experience retreated to the private sphere. But, as a refuge, the private sphere became indirectly deformed by that from which it constituted an escape.\(^{87}\)

\(^{87}\) The retreat of “life” into the private realm, in contradistinction to the “public sphere” of consumption, and the subsequent colonization of the private world by that same consumption are the main topics of Adorno’s *Minima Moralia*, in *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. 4 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2003). Once the private realm becomes the life of consumption, it becomes a mere addendum to the process of production. All of life becomes thus determined by the economic capitalist order. These ideas are announced in Adorno’s dedication of *Minima Moralia* to Max Horkheimer, from which I quote at length (Ibid., 13):

Die traurige Wissenschaft, aus de rich meinem Freunde einiges darbiete, bezieht sich auf einen Bereich, der für undenkliche Zeiten als der eigentliche der Philosophie galt, seit deren Verwandlung in Methode aber der intellektuellen Nichtachtung, der sententiösen Willkür und am Ende der Vergessenheit verfiel: die Lehre vom richtigen Leben. Was einmal den Philosophen Leben hieß, ist zur Sphäre des Privaten und dann bloß noch des Konsums geworden, die als Anhang des materiellen Produktionsprozesses, ohne Autonomie und ohne eigene Substanz, mitgeschleift wird. Wer die Wahrheit übers unmittelbare Leen erfahren will, muß dessen entfremdeter Gestalt nachforschen, den objektiven Mächtten, die die individuelle Existenz bis ins Verborgenste bestimmen. Redet man unmittelbar vom Unmittelbaren, so verhält man kaum sich anders als jene Romanschreiber, die ihre Marionetten wie mit billigem Schmuck mit den Imitationen der Leidenschaft von ehedem behängen, und Personen, die nichts mehr sind als Bestandstücke der Maschinerie, handeln lassen, als ob sie überhaupt noch als Subjekte handeln könnten, und als ob von ihrem Handeln etwas abhänge. Der Blick aufs Leben ist übergegangen in die Ideologie, die darüber betrügt, daß es keines mehr gibt.
Following Benjamin’s theory of the change of Erfahrung into Erlebnis, Adorno thinks that there is in modern life a “loss of experience [Erfahrung]” characterized by the fact that the structures that determine individual experience are far removed from the concrete individual; they are rather dictated by the rhythm and emptiness of the unskilled worker’s tasks in the assembly line. As Marx had already noted, in the factory the working conditions and the worker’s experience of work are dictated by the rhythm of the machine, so that the worker becomes an appendage to the machine rather than vice versa. Not only is the temporality of the worker’s experience directed by the tempo of the machine, but the content of that experience too is determined externally, for it consists in a mindless succession of repeated, identical tasks that do not reach fulfillment or completion by building on the worker’s preceding tasks. Rather, the worker’s activity is just a fragment in the process of production, which is mindlessly repeated again and again. The experience (Erlebnis) of ceaseless and unsubstantial repetition dictated by


The melancholy science from which I make this offering to my friend relates to a region that from time immemorial was regarded as the true field of philosophy, but which, since the latter’s conversion into method, has lapsed into intellectual neglect, sententious whimsy and finally oblivion: the teaching of the good life. What the philosophers once knew as life has become the sphere of private existence and now of mere consumption, dragged along as an appendage of the process of material production, without autonomy or substance of its own. He who wishes to know the truth about life in its immediacy must scrutinize its estranged form, the objective powers that determine individual existence even in its most hidden recesses. To speak immediately of the immediate is to behave much as those novelists who drape their marionettes in imitated bygone passions like cheap jewellery, and make people who are no more than component parts of machinery act as if they still had the capacity to act as subjects, and as if something depended on their actions. Our perspective of life has passed into an ideology which conceals the fact that there is life no longer.


This ceaselessly renewed repetition of the same tasks thus falls outside the temporality of “eternity” [Ewigkeit] or heaven, which completes or fulfills, but rather corresponds to that of “time in hell” [höllische Zeit], “in der sich die Existenz derer abspielt, die nichts, was sie in Angriff genommen haben,
something external to the individual is the experience of “a series of shocks” (*Erlebnis*)
rather than a full and substantial experience that builds on the past and aims at fulfillment
in the future (*Erfahrung*). Under these conditions, the experience of modern individuals
is one of constant conscious alert against shock experiences. Driving in a big city
requires constant alertness and responsiveness to the rhythm dictated by traffic. Going to
work by public transport requires being at the bus or train stop just in time; the individual
must follow the machine; the organization of public transportation determines the rhythm
of life. The same is true for the work-day, with its rigid schedule for work and breaks, or
the school schedule and its drills. The individual must be constantly alert in order to
respond to an organization of conscious experience imposed externally on her.  

According to this view of modern experience, daily life is today structured in such a way
that the individual is an appendage to a fixed structure that she confronts as imposed
externally on her, to whose dictates the psyche must adjust.

And, for Adorno, this experience is not limited to what we might call “public”
activities. Realms of life that were supposed to be protected as private are ever more
contaminated by the same rigidity and external determination. Individuals' experiences
of romantic relationships, for instance, are ever more determined by ideals of love
prescribed by Hollywood romantic comedies and sit-coms. In order to be connected to
another person through romantic love, the individual experiences a social compulsion to

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wollenden dürfen”[in which the existence of those who are not allowed to complete what they have started
plays itself out] (Ibid., 635).

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90 Changes in technology are relevant to this discussion. We may consider, for instance, changes
in experience that have come about through the development of the mobile phone and the internet.
Whereas just twenty-five years ago a phone call was easily missed and then returned at one’s leisure, or a
message received by mail awaited response for a few days, we are now constantly reachable, “on call,” and
are expected to respond quickly and efficiently to all communications.
adapt her experience to what is prescribed as the model for that experience. Even marriage, supposed to be one of the last refuges for non-instrumental relations, has largely become a contract of self-interested parties, where a deep truth of the arrangement emerges at the time of divorce with bitter disputes over the distribution of property.\textsuperscript{91}

The model of exchange relations is ever more deeply ingrained in every aspect of individual experience. The principle of exchange determines social life in its totality: the concrete, empirical individual thus seems to be not a self-determining ground of subjectivity at all, but rather the product of a supra-individual social and economic structure.

\textsuperscript{91} See Adorno’s comments on marriage and divorce in \textit{Minima Moralia}, in \textit{Gesammelte Schriften}, Vol. 4 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2003), §10-11, pp. 33-34 Consider the following discussion of how divorce retrospectively reveals society’s determination of the “private realm” of marriage (§11, pp. 33-34):


See E.F.N. Jephcott’s translation in Adorno, \textit{Minima Moralia} (London and New York: Verso, 2005), §11, pp. 31-32:

If marriage offers one of the last possibilities of forming human cells within universal inhumanity, the universal takes revenge in the breakdown of marriage, laying hands on what had seemed excepted from the rule, subjugating it to the alienated orders of right and property and deriding those who had lived in delusive security. Just what was most protected is cruelly requisitioned and exposed. The more ‘generous’ the couple had originally been, the less they thought of possessions and obligations, the more abominable becomes their humiliation. For it is precisely in the realm of the legally undefined that strife, defamation, and endless conflict of interests flourish. … Those who once experienced the good universal in restrictively belonging to each other, are now forced by society to consider themselves scoundrels, no different from the universal order of unrestricted meanness outside. The universal is revealed in divorce as the particular’s mark of shame, because the particular, marriage, is in this society unable to realize the true universal.
Even the individual who explicitly attempts to be “different” and escape external determination by the social totality is given a myriad possibilities to fulfill this ideal through ready-made subcultures, attached to specific kinds of attires, specific discourses, and pre-determined behaviors. If one wants to engage in political dissent, one can always find the right articles for the self-expression of such dissent in a certain kind of shop: key chains with the face of Che Guevara have become staples for the self-expression of political discontent with capitalism; handbags with anti-establishment messages can be found for an affordable price by all those seeking to express a radical identity. Or, if one wants to counter the alienation from nature characteristic of modern life, one can purchase over-priced “natural” products and foodstuffs that provide entry into some kind of “alternative” identity for which the market has already created a comfortable and non-threatening niche. The most “original” behaviors\(^\text{92}\) available today are on sale in a vast market of personal identities, and there are a myriad companies always on the look-out for new forms of behavior, new loci of “self-expression,” new “original identities” to exploit in order to reach a new consumer pool through novel marketing strategies.\(^\text{93}\) Thus even “anti-capitalist” protest has been almost fully absorbed by the capitalist market.\(^\text{94}\)

\(^{92}\) See Adorno’s comments on the mendacity of today’s social imperative to be “different,” “original,” “genuine” in *Minima Moralia*, in *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. 4 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2003), §99, pp. 173-177, where he argues that the imperative is in fact a result of the decline of individuality and a ruse of the market.

\(^{93}\) In this regard, the phenomenon of social networking sites offers an interesting illustration, as they usually gather personal information that is used to choose and order the ads that appear on the user’s internet homepage or “profile.”

\(^{94}\) This is just the point Adorno makes in §132 of *Minima Moralia*, where he describes the paradigm of the “disconformist” intellectual:

\[\text{Während sie gegen den offiziellen Kitsch eifern, ist ihre Gesinnung wie ein folgsames Kind auf vorweg ausgesuchte Nahrung verwiesen, auf Clichés der Clichéfeindschaft. Die Wohnung solcher jungen Bohémiens gleicht ihrem geistigen Haushalt. An der Wand die täuschend originalgetreue} \]
Today, the individual’s attempt to find an experience that is not directly determined by external and ultimately economic forces is immediately (or at least very, very quickly) absorbed into the market and made into a universal identity that anyone can acquire for a certain price, provided only that they have the purchasing power required. The formal structure of the economy enters into all, or nearly all, realms of private life and leaves nothing, or very little, untouched. Thus the concrete individual's life, her relations to


English translation in Adorno, Minima Moralia (London and New York: Verso, 2005), §132, pp. 206-7;

While they inveigh against official kitsch, their views, like dutiful children, are allowed to partake only of pre-selected nutrition, clichés against clichés. The habitations of such young bohemians resemble their intellectual household. On the walls the deceptively faithful colour reproductions of famous Van Goghs like the ‘Sunflowers’ or the ‘Café at Arles’, on the bookshelf the boiled-down socialism and psycho-analysis and a little sexology for libertines with inhibitions. Added to this the Random House edition of Proust. … Even Kafka is becoming a fixture in their sub-let studio. … The subjective precondition of opposition, unco-ordinated judgment, is dying out, while its gesticulations continue to e performed as a group ritual. Stalin only needs to clear his throat and they throw Kafka and Van Gogh on the rubbish-heap.

95 See Adorno, Minima Moralia, in Gesammelte Schriften, Vol. 4 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1969),§99,, p. 175:


What presents itself as an original entity, a monad, is only the result of a social division of the social process. Precisely as an absolute, the individual is a mere reflection of property relations. In him the fictitious claim is made that what is biologically one must logically precede the social whole, from which it is only isolated by force, and its contingency is held up as a standard of truth. Not only is the self entwined in society; it owes society its existence in the most literal sense. All its content comes from society, or at any rate from its relation to the object.
others, and even her own self-understanding become more and more deeply determined by the structure of the social and economic totality. She seems indeed to be given form and content by a supra-individual subject of which she is not aware and over which she has no control. This supra-individual subject is similar to the transcendental subject in its role as the structural ground of conscious experience—only, instead of being characterized by abstract rules of rationality, it is rather characterized by the rules of the market, specifically by the principle of exchange. The overarching structures that organize individual experience and that make such experience intelligible are removed from the immediate experience of individuals and can in fact be understood only reflectively and theoretically. Where we thought we might find the immediacy of individual life—i.e., in the concrete empirical individual—what we find in fact is an almost total mediation by the social and economic order.\footnote{Compare this point with Adorno’s discussion of the consequences of the loss of the concrete subject for art:}

\begin{quote}
\end{quote}

English translation by Robert Hullot-Kentor in \textit{Aesthetic Theory} (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 31-32):

Art carries out the eclipse of concretion, an eclipse to which expression is refused by a reality in which the concrete continues to exist only as a mask of the abstract and the determinate particular is nothing more than an exemplar of the universal that serves as its camouflage and is fundamentally identical with the ubiquity of monopoly. … The tangents of the empirical world
Adorno sees the modern individual as a formal and thin self whose psychological contents and the meaning of whose world are almost fully determined by something beyond herself, something that is beyond her cognitive grasp and her practical control, which is derived from the economic structure of society, and which gives rise to a totality of social norms and modes of thinking that the individual encounters as ready-made, rigid, and seemingly natural. In today's social reality, the relations of production and the imperatives of consumption (as well as the associated modes of self-understanding, rational calculation, and models for social relations) confront individuals as if they were necessary and eternal structures, structures that constitute the experience and contents of the empirical subject.

With this point, we get the theoretical contradiction of the conception of subjectivity that attempts to conceive the subject in terms of the individual, concrete and living self. The problem with this conception is that, when we look at the individual and try to understanding it in terms of itself alone, we find nothing but a decimated and indeterminate I. The form and content of this I is in fact intelligible only by appealing to the supra-individual structure of the socio-economic order. The concept of the empirical, individual subject is thus insufficient for understanding the modern subject; it

need only be slightly extended to see that they converge in the insight that the concrete serves for nothing better than that something, by being in some way distinct, can be identified, possessed, and sold. The marrow of experience has been sucked out; there is none, not even that apparently set at a remove from commerce, that has not been gnawed away. At the heart of the economy is a process of concentration and centralization that has the power to absorb what is scattered. It leaves traces of independent existences only for professional statistics and permeates the most subtle spiritual innervations often without its being possible to perceive the mediations. The mendacious personalization of politics and the blather about ‘man in the age of inhumanity’ are appropriate to the objective pseudoindividualization; but this becomes an unbearable burden for art because there is no art without individuation.
is “contradictory” and “false” because it cannot fulfill its claim adequately to capture its object.

Yet, as we should expect, there is a sense in which the concept of the empirical subject is also “true.” As I have said before, the truth of a theoretical position subject to negative dialectics arises through an investigation of the position’s ideological function. And ideology in general fulfills two functions: the first is to mask the true nature of social reality, and the second to provide a justification for the status quo. How does the conception of the subject as merely the empirical, concrete subject fulfill an ideological function? Adorno does not elaborate this point in the section of “Zu Subjekt und Objekt” that we have been looking at, but he does in other places. In the first place, the idea that we can understand ourselves primarily or fully as individuals plays the ideological function of giving the appearance that the self of modern capitalism is substantial in itself, that it is free and that it has content that is its own—content that expresses the individuality (uniqueness) of that self. In fact, as we have seen, Adorno thinks that the modern self is given all (or almost all) of its content and the form of its ordinary experience by structures that are beyond individual control. In social and political discourse, the idea that the subject is to be conceived fully in terms of the individual gives rise to the ideology of atomistic individualism: an ideology that conceals the lack of self-determination and independence—in effect, the lack of individual self-hood—of modern individuals.

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97 See Minima Moralia, in Gesammelte Schriften, Vol. 4 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1969), §97. Consider also, for example, Adorno’s critique of Hegel’s conception of the individual—which, Adorno thinks, both reduces the individual to a mere appendage of the whole and retains a liberal view of individuality that ideologically fulfills the individual’s delusion of self-determination for the sake of preserving the status quo—in the dedication of Minima Moralia, 16-17.
The ideology of individualism also facilitates the preservation of the *status quo*. If individuals realized the profound lack of self-determination from which even the dearest enclaves of their “private” life suffer, they would likely desire radical change. However, so long as they are blinded to their own unfreedom, they are unlikely to challenge the way things are. An example from our earlier discussion will help make this point clearer. In modern capitalist society, individuals undertake to express their radical “originality,” their individual ethical choices and tastes, by adopting a specific identity, for or against the mainstream identity. But even the most “radical” identities are given a niche in the market of commodities. The pre-packaged “unique” and “original” identity that can be purchased in the market makes the individual believe that she is in fact singular and self-determining. In fact, virtually every identity sold in the culture industry is sold as a profound expression of individual uniqueness. Yet the vacuity of this sense of uniqueness and individuality is obvious, for the identities that can be purchased and adopted are not self-determined creations of the singular subject but rather general categories developed by marketing agencies. Still, the appearance of individual self-determination that such identities give fulfills the task of keeping people satisfied (even if only in a superficial way) and channeling individual discontent away from the real causes of unhappiness and toward increased hunger for more things that could once and for all show the self’s originality. “If only I could buy those clothes/ go to those protests/ get the right articles/ go to the right places/ move in the right circles to express myself, I could really show how unique and original an individual I am.” The hyperbolic stress on individuality characteristic of (Western) social discourse is the ideological correlate of the profound lack of individual self-determination of the modern subject.
Moreover, even modern critiques of this phenomenon, when coupled with the ideology of atomistic individualism, serve only to obscure the issue because they attribute the decline of individuality to individual responsibility, not recognizing the social causes of the phenomenon. Adorno makes this point as follows:

Die reaktionäre erreicht oft genug die Einsicht in den Verfall der Individualität und die Krise der Gesellschaft, aber bürdet die ontologische Verantwortung dafür dem Individuum an sich, als einem losgelösten und inwendigen, auf: daher ist der Einwand der Flachheit, Glaubenslosigkeit, Substanzlosigkeit das letzte Wort, das sie zu sagen hat, und Umkehr ihr Trost. Individualisten wie Huxley und Jaspers verdammten das Individuum um seiner mechanischen Leere und neurotischen Schwäche willen, aber es ist der Sinn ihres Verdammungsurteils, lieber noch es selber zu opfern als Kritik am gesellschaftlichen principium individuationis zu üben. Ihre Polemik ist als halbe Wahrheit schon die ganze Unwahrheit. Die Gesellschaft wird dabei als das unmittelbare Zusammenleben von Menschen angesprochen, aus deren Haltung gleichsam das Ganze folgt, anstatt als ein System, das sie nicht bloß umklammert und deformiert, sondern noch in jene Humanität hinabreicht, die sie einmal als Individuen bestimmte. Durch die allmenschliche Interpretation des Zustands, wie er ist, wird noch in der Aklage die krude materielle Realität hingenommen, die das Menschsein an die Unmenschlichkeit bindet.98

This analysis completes a second step in the dialectic of subject and object that we have been considering here. It has the same structure we discovered in the first part: It

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Reactionary criticism often enough attains insight into the decay of individuality and the crisis of society, but places the ontological responsibility for this on the individual as such, as something discrete and internal: for this reason the accusation of shallowness, lack of faith and substance, is the last word it has to say, and return to the past its solace. Individualists like Huxley and Jaspers damn the individual for his mechanical emptiness and neurotic weakness, but the trend of their condemnation is rather to sacrifice the individual himself than to criticize the social principium individuationis. As half-truths their polemics are already the whole untruth. Society is seen by them as an unmediated community of men, from whose attitudes the whole follows, instead of a system not only encompassing and deforming them, but even reaching down into that humanity which once conditioned them as individuals. By this exclusively human interpretation of the situation as it is, the crude material reality that binds human beings to inhumanity is accepted even while being accused.
begins with a specific concept—here the concept of the subject as the concrete, empirical subject—and then derives a theoretical contradiction within this concept, in the sense that it shows the concept to be insufficient for adequately characterizing its object. The concept is thus shown to be “contradictory” or “false.” The analysis then continues by seeking an account of the concept’s ideological function within the socio-historical context to which it belongs. The ideological analysis locates the concept within its concrete context and thus yields a specific insight into that context: in this case, the insight consist in the understanding of concrete individuality as thin or even empty, and leads to a critical assessment of the ways in which the ideological discourse of atomistic individuality so widespread in advanced capitalist societies is a mask for a deep lack of individuality and for the lack of self-determination prevalent over the constitution and development of modern selfhood.

At this point in the dialectic, we are led to go beyond the view of the subject as the empirical subject and to a new concept that, surprisingly perhaps, brings us back to our initial concept: that of the transcendental subject. The reason is that the empirical subject’s constitution by the socio-economic totality follows a very similar pattern to its constitution by the transcendental subject according to “Idealism.” Just as the transcendental subject was supposed to determine the structure of the empirical subject and the objects that it encounters in ordinary experience, the social totality structures the empirical subject and its experience of the world. Thus, Adorno concludes,

_In gewissem Sinn ist, was freilich der Idealismus am letzten zugestünde, das transzendentale Subjekt wirklicher, nämlich für das reale Verhalten der Menschen und die Gesellschaft, die daraus sich bildete, bestimmender als jene psychologischen Individuen, von denen das transzendentale abstrahiert ward und die in der Welt wenig zu sagen haben; die ihrerseits zu Anhängseln der sozialen Maschinerie, am Ende zur Ideologie geworden sind. Der lebendige_
Einzelmensch, so wie er zu agieren gezwungen ist und wozu er auch in sich geprägt wurde, ist als verkörperter homo oeconomicus eher das transzendentale Subjekt denn der leendige Einzelne, für den er sich doch unmittelbar halten muß. Insofern war die idealistische Theorie realistisch und brauchte sich vor Gegnern, welche ihr Idealismus vorwarfen, nicht zu genieren. In der Lehre vom transzendentalen Subjekt erscheint getreu die Vergänglichkeit der von den einzelnen Menschen und ihrem Verhältnis abgelösten, abstract rationalen Beziehungen, die am Tausch ihr Modell haben. Ist die maßgebende Struktur der Gesellschaft die Tauschform, so konstituiert deren Rationalität die Menschen; was sie für sich sind, was sie sich dünken, ist sekundär. Von dem philosophisch als transzendental verklärten Mechanismus sind sie vorweg deformiert. Das vorgeblich Evidente, das empirische Subjekt, müßte eigentlich als ein noch gar nicht Existentes betrachtet werden; unter diesem Aspekt ist das transzendentale Subjekt »konstitutiv«.99

On the ground of the subject as an individual, concrete being, we find ourselves having to consider the content and conscious structure of that individual in terms of an over-arching social subject that dictates the norms and behaviors of people. This overarching subject is, moreover, conceptually very close to the initial concept of the subject that we first rejected in favor of the empirical subject: namely, the concept of the transcendental subject. Society as a whole dictates the structure and order of the world


In a certain sense, although idealism would be the last to admit it, the transcendental subject is more real, that is, it far more determines the real conduct of people and society than do those psychological individuals from whom the transcendental subject was abstracted and who have little to say in the world. … The living individual person, such as he is constrained to act and for which he was even internally molded, is a homo oeconomicus incarnate closer to the transcendental subject than the living individual he must immediately take himself to be. To this extent idealist theory was realistic and need not feel embarrassed when reproached for idealism by its opponents. The doctrine of the transcendental subject faithfully discloses the precedence of the abstract, rational relations that are abstracted from individuals and their conditions and for which exchange is the model. If the standard structure of society is the exchange form, its rationality constitutes people: what they are for themselves, what they think they are, is secondary. They are deformed at the outset by the mechanism that was then philosophically transfigured into the transcendental. What is supposedly most obvious, the empirical subject, would actually have to be considered as something not yet existing: from this aspect the transcendental subject is ‘constitutive.’
that the empirical individual experiences as well as the individual’s psychological constitution.

The dialectical pendulum has swung back: We find ourselves anew dealing with the position of transcendental subjectivity. The first part of the dialectic showed that the view of the subject as transcendental is insufficient: it requires the subject as empirical subject. Now we see that reflection on the concrete condition of the empirical subject, on its experience in the concrete social world in which it finds itself, takes us back to reflection on something like the transcendental subject. The first part shows the untruth of transcendental subjectivity, while the second shows its truth. But it is essential to note that, after this dialectical turn, we do not simply move back to the same concept of the transcendental subject with which we started. Thinking about the empirical individual brings us to a version of the transcendental subject, but not a pure version, as Kant or Fichte would have it. It is rather a version couched in terms of social reality: the transcendental subject is now revealed to be the social totality.\footnote{In terms of this result, Adorno’s view is not far from Marx’s “demystification” of Hegel’s Geist as a cipher for society and, ultimately, for the economic structure that determines society.}

The theoretical position that gave primacy to the transcendental subject over the living, empirical subject is now revealed to have been a distorted image of a deep social truth; a transfiguration or sublimation of social reality. The position of transcendental subjectivity as primary is not a thought-production without any basis in experience and concrete, material reality, but is rather a rationalization (and a defence mechanism) of the experience of the individual as part of a social totality that determines the way the subject views the world, itself, and others, and which it confronts as an inflexible reality of independent provenance. Adorno
says that the “fixity and invariance” of the transcendental subject [seine Festigkeit und Invarianz],

Welche der Transzendentalphilosophie zufolge die Objekte erzeugt, wenigstens ihnen die Regel vorschreibt, ist die Reflexionsform der internal gesellschaftlichen Verhältnis objektiv vollzogenen Verdinglichung der Menschen. Der Fetischcharakter, gesellschaftlich notwendiger Schein, ist geschichtlich zum Prius dessen geworden, wovon er seinem Begriff nach das Posterius ware. Das philosophische Konstitutionsproblem hat sich spiegelbildlich verkehrt; in seiner Verkehrung jedoch drückt es die Wahrheit über den erreichten geschichtlichen Stand aus…”

The dialectic of the subject, as we have considered it so far, seems to find a point of culmination in the doctrine of the transcendental subject as the social totality. The analysis, in fact, seems to have reached a full circle: We began with the “idealistic” conception of the transcendental subject and saw that it was inadequate and required the concept of the empirical subject. But, then, when we turned to this latter concept, we found that it led us back to a revised and more adequate conception of the transcendental subject—a social and no longer “idealistic” conception. It is interesting to note that if this point were the end of the dialectic, then it would be difficult to see how the reflective journey we have been following would be different from a Marxian-Hegelian type of analysis. The last conception of transcendental subjectivity, it would seem, is the


Its [the transcendental subject’s] solidity and invariance, which according to transcendental philosophy engenders objects or at least prescribes their regularity, is the reflective form of the reification of human beings that has objectively occurred in the conditions of society. The fetish character, societally necessary semblance, historically has become the prius of what according to its concept would have to be the posterius. The philosophical problem of constitution has been inverted into its mirror image; yet in its inversion it expresses the truth about the historic stage that has been attained… (underline mine)
adequate conception, operative all along but previously obscured by one-sided concepts which, when approached dialectically, lead of their own to the final and definitive conception of the subject.

But Adorno concludes the section with a remark that suggests this dialectic is incomplete and partial. He says that the conception of the transcendental subject that has arisen—the transcendental subject as society—is a hypostasis. It has not (and perhaps cannot) determine all of human experience seamlessly and without friction. He says that, while the transcendental subject, conceived as the social totality, does indeed determine the empirical individual, it is nonetheless a hypostasis because it is “only one side” of a relation, and is “incomprehensible” outside of this relation. As we will see later, this is because the social subject itself is inwardly fragmented and not total, due to its mediation by nature. Adorno concludes the dialectic we have examined with the following cryptic line: “Das Gegebene aber, das Skandalon des Idealismus, das er doch nicht wegzuräumen vermag, demonstriert stets wieder Mißlingen jener Hypostase.” 102 This closing remark of the last section in “Zu Subjekt und Objekt” that we have been examining suggests that the apparent conceptual circle (from the idealistic to the social conceptions of the constitutive subject) we have reached is not in fact a full circle; it is not a completed dialectic, because it itself is as a whole susceptible to the derivation of a new contradiction. This further contradiction arises by considering the role of ‘nature’ in

the subject-object relation. I consider this mediation in detail in chapters 5-6, and its consequences for the dialectic in chapters 7-8.

2.3 Conclusion

In closing this chapter, I want to recap the two most important results that we have attained from our close study of the dialectic of subject and object in section 3 of “Zu Subjekt und Objekt.” The first has to do with the general structure of negative dialectics. From our analysis of the dialectic, we were able to extrapolate what seems to be a coherent structure of analysis. We saw that each step of the dialectic—the first consisting in a consideration of the subject as transcendental subject and the second of the subject as the empirical individual—followed a clear pattern: They each began by deducing a theoretical contradiction in the conceptual position under consideration, which contradiction revealed the “falsity” of the position in question; and they then proceeded to an investigation of the ideological function of the position, which function revealed the “truth” of the position. At this point we cannot generalize this structure to the point of claiming that it yields a general account of the structure of negative dialectics. Still, the discovery of this analytical structure in the dialectic is important and we can take it as an initial account of the structure of negative dialectics, an account that will be both confirmed and refined in chapters to come.

The second important result that we have gained from the investigations in this chapter is an initial set of dialectically related views of the subject, culminating—for the time being—in the idea that an adequate concept of the subject has to take into account the concept of society as a totality that constitutes the transcendental structure of
subjectivity. As I mentioned at the end of our discussion, Adorno no sooner reaches this concept of subjectivity than he suggests that it too will turn out to be a failed and incomplete view of the subject. Yet, as always, this concept will not be simply discarded, but will be an important, though partial, way of understanding the subject philosophically. Moreover, it is a more refined view of the subject than the two views previously considered (the view of the idealistic transcendental subject and the view of the empirical individual). The position of the transcendental subject as society seems clearly to be an *Aufhebung* of the initial two positions. Neither position is discarded as a result of its derived insufficiencies; rather, the contradictions reached at every point serve to push reflection forward toward a refinement of its concept of subjectivity, culminating in a re-working of the concept with which we began (transcendental subjectivity). This concept preserves insights gained along the reflective path and provides a re-interpretation of the transcendental subject that claims to retain what was true in the previously considered conceptions.

It is important, however, to keep in mind that, even if the concept of the transcendental subject as the social totality is a refinement of the first two views considered, the concept of the subject as the living, embodied individual is not rejected wholesale in favor of the transcendental social subject even at this stage of the dialectic. The empirical individual is, on the one hand, the real, concrete locus of self-hood and experience. But, on the other hand, its selfhood and the content of its experience has in the modern world become almost entirely colonized by a totalizing social structure that administers and organizes it in accordance with its own structure and requirements—a structure ultimately dictated by the market. While experience cannot be abstracted from
the concrete living individual, experience today is ever more beyond her control and
cognitive reach. More and more aspects of our ordinary lives are determined by social
and economic macro-structures that the individual does not understand and therefore
obviously cannot self-consciously choose. The subject cannot be understood correctly if
it is reduced either to society or to the idea of a truly individual locus of self-
determination. Rather, the subject must be understood as the field of tension between the
two extremes.

The field of tension that characterizes subjectivity, with fully unmediated
individuality in one extreme, and total social determination on the other, is according to
Adorno a field of antagonism. And this antagonism is the ontological root of the
“contradiction in the object.” We are now ready to turn to a detailed investigation of the
“antagonism” at issue. This investigation is the topic of chapter 3.
The previous chapter explored the relation that obtains, according to Adorno, between the individual and the social subject in modern society. This relation is a field of tension with fully unmediated individuality in one extreme and total social determination on the other. Of course, to describe the relation as a “field of tension” remains very imprecise, so in this chapter I seek to clarify the quality of this relation. Adorno characterizes it as a relation of *antagonism*. My goal in this chapter is to clarify the meaning of this antagonism.

Let me quickly explain how this discussion fits into the overall objective of this study. Ultimately, our goal is to clarify Adorno’s two-fold notion of contradiction. I argued in chapter 2 that in order to clarify this notion, we need first to explore the conception of the subject-object relation that it presupposes. The main elements that constitute this relation, for Adorno, are the individual, society, and nature. The previous chapter has begun to investigate Adorno’s view of the individual’s mediation of and by the social world. This chapter completes that investigation and explains in detail why Adorno takes the individual’s relation to the social order to be specifically ‘antagonistic.’ The discussion I pursue here will also begin to clarify how the third key element, i.e. nature, enters into and alters the subject-object relation.
Clarifying Adorno’s notion of antagonism is made difficult by the fact that Adorno nowhere offers an explicit analysis of what he means by ‘antagonism.’ Yet, as anyone familiar with Hegel and with Adorno’s recurrent allusions to the Hegelian philosophy would not fail to notice, Adorno’s claim that society is structured in accordance with an essential “antagonism” is advanced as a direct counter-claim to Hegel’s view that the social order is essentially “reconciled.” On the basis of this observation, the method I employ to clarify what Adorno means by “antagonism” is to reconstruct in detail his disagreement with Hegel’s view of the modern social order.

Section 1 briefly explains the key elements of Hegel’s social theory that are relevant to this discussion. Then section 2 offers a systematic reconstruction of Adorno’s disagreement with Hegel. On the basis of this reconstruction, I conclude with a concise statement of Adorno’s conception of “antagonism” as the basic category around which the modern social order is structured.

### 3.1 Hegel

One of Hegel’s principal claims in the *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts*[^103] is that the structure of modern society is the most rational social structure. The statement is meant both in a prescriptive and a descriptive sense. One the one hand, Hegel argues that the structure of modern society is in itself the most rational form of social organization because it is differentiated into three distinct

[^103]: Hegel, G.W.F., *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts*, in *Werke*, Vol. 7 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1986). I will henceforward refer to this work simply as *The Philosophy of Right* or *Die Philosophie des Rechts*, as is standard practice.
institutional spheres (the family, civil society, and the state), and because the spheres relate to each other in accordance with the structure of rationality such that they come together into a unified organic whole. The underlying rational structure of society makes possible and maximizes the actualization of freedom: the freedom of individuals as individuals, their freedom as constituting a community, and the freedom of the community as a self-standing and self-determining social organism in its own right. The

104 By ‘civil society’ Hegel means the specifically modern form of economic organization, in which individuals meet each other as abstract selves for the purposes of economic exchange on the basis of personal self-interest. For an illuminating discussion of the significance of Hegel’s distinction between the political sphere (the state) and civil society as an independent sphere of economic activity and private interest, see Peleczynski’s introduction to The State and Civil Society: Studies in Hegel’s Political Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

105 The relation at issue here is, in Hegel’s words, characterized by the logical structure of “the Concept.” The general point is that the social order is structured according to the structure of self-conscious rationality—the structure that characterizes every object as essentially intelligible to reason, and that also characterizes rationality itself. According to Hegel, the modern state actualizes the structure of rationality by freely uniting the individual and the universal into a harmonious unity. See Hegel, G.W.F., Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts, in Werke, Vol. 7 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1986), §258, p. 399:


English translation in by H.B. Nisbet in Elements of the Philosophy of Right (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), §258, p. 276:

Since the state is objective spirit, it is only through being a member of the state that the individual [Individuum] himself has objectivity, truth, and ethical life. Union as such is itself the true content and end, and the destiny [Bestimmung] of individuals [Individuen] is to lead a universal life; their further particular satisfaction, activity, and mode of conduct have this substantial and universally valid basis as their point of departure and result. – Considered in the abstract, rationality consists in general in the unity and interpenetration of universality and individuality [Einzelheit]. Here, in a concrete sense and in terms of its content, it consists in the unity of objective freedom (i.e. of the universal substantial will) and subjective freedom (as the freedom of individual [individuellen] knowledge and of the will in its pursuit of particular ends). And in terms of its form, it therefore consists in self-determining action in accordance with laws and principles based on thought and hence universal.
structure of modern society maximizes freedom because it is in itself rational, and it is rational because it maximizes freedom. The claim that this structure is the most rational form of social organization is the prescriptive dimension of Hegel’s claim.

Additionally, Hegel argues that modern Western society (or at least the European social order of his time) instantiates this most rational structure and thus embodies the most rational social order. This is the descriptive dimension of Hegel’s claim.

Hegel’s claim, in both of its senses (prescriptive and descriptive), ties the alleged rationality of the modern social order to this order’s actualization of freedom. But what does Hegel mean by ‘freedom,’ and how does he take it to be actualized in the social world? In the first two sections of the Philosophy of Right, Hegel discusses two types of freedom specific to the realm of private life: personal freedom and moral freedom. Personal freedom is the negative freedom that protects individuals from being imposed upon by an external will. This is the kind of freedom usually prominent in discussions of

106 We thus have the bi-conditional (maximization of freedom ↔ maximization of rationality), which is grounded in Hegel’s doctrine that the structure of rationality—i.e. the structure of “the Concept”—just is the structure of freedom as self-determination.

107 Hegel’s claims are based on his analysis of the European social order of the 19th century. The claims are however not meant to be restricted to that specific historical moment, but rather to apply to any social order built around the institutions of the family, civil society, and the state, where these institutions are related to each other in accordance with the structure of “the Concept.” What Hegel takes to be important about the European social order of the 19th century is that it has the structure of the most rational social order for human beings. Michael Hardimon makes this point in his Hegel’s Social Philosophy: The Project of Reconciliation (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 131-3, and uses it to defend Hegel against charges of Eurocentrism, explaining that Hegel does not defend the European social order just because it is European, but rather because it instantiatea a number of principles that can be independently shown to be the most rational principles for any social order. In my view, the fact that Hegel takes the European order of his time to be necessarily the best and most rational for human beings, ignoring the plights of colonization and poverty (which he in fact takes to be a necessary, if regrettable, consequence of the modern social order) is strong, though admittedly not decisive, evidence for Eurocentrism, and a legitimate cause of suspicion toward Hegel’s project. In any case, the important thing to note is that the social order that Hegel describes in Die Philosophie des Rechts is meant both to characterize the European society of his time and to describe the most rational order for any social arrangement after that time. Whether or not Hegel would take contemporary European or American society to embody the same, and allegedly most rational, social order is debatable.
liberal political theory: the freedom of the individual to have a sovereign domain of action unencumbered by external coercion. The second kind of private freedom that Hegel discusses is what he calls ‘moral freedom’: the freedom individuals have to determine their will in accordance with their own vision of the Good. Moral freedom is akin to Kantian autonomy, for it is the freedom by which the individual legislates to herself the dictates of morality. Finally, in the third section of the Philosophy of Right, Hegel discusses a final form of freedom, which he calls “objective freedom,” and which is no longer a characteristic of the isolated individual but rather requires the individual’s participation in the social whole, in an organically unified community of ethical life (Sittlichkeit). I will follow Frederick Neuhouser in calling this third form of freedom ‘social freedom.’

There is controversy among commentators about whether social freedom is (1) an attribute of the social order alone, and so not predicable of individuals, (2) an attribute of individuals, predicable of the social whole only in virtue of the social whole’s being structured such that it secures the conditions necessary for personal and moral freedom, or (3) a combination of (1) and (2). Despite interpretive disputes, I take


\[^{109}\text{Charles Taylor adopts this position insofar as he thinks that individuals in the rational state are free simply because they participate in a social order that fully expresses the nature of }\textit{Geist}, \text{ which is also the deepest nature of individuals, whether they subjectively understand it as such or not. See Taylor, Charles, }\textit{Hegel} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975). Karl-Heinz Ilting also defends this interpretation on the basis of Hegel’s 1920 }\textit{Philosophy of Right}, \text{ although he argues that the view is presented in this way only because Hegel was attempting to abide by restoration politics and avoid censorship. See “Hegel’s Concept of the State and Marx’s Early Critique” in }\textit{The State and Civil Society: Studies in Hegel’s Political Philosophy}, \text{ ed. Z.A. Pelczynski (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 93-113.}\]

\[^{110}\text{This is for instance the position advocated by Michael Hardimon in }\textit{Hegel’s Social Philosophy: The Project of Reconciliation} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994). See esp. pp 146-153.\]
the following points to be relatively uncontroversial and to constitute the grounds on which Hegel takes the modern social order to be necessary for, and a maximizer of, freedom, and thus to be most rational:

1. Insofar as social freedom is dialectically “higher” and derived from personal and moral freedom, social freedom is required for, and preserves, the two “lower” forms of individual freedom. Call this condition the preservation of private freedom.

2. Hegel characterizes the social order as a whole as ‘free’ in a way that goes beyond the freedom of individuals. This is because he takes it that the social order as a whole instantiates the quality of self-determination. This quality allegedly characterizes the internal dynamics of each of the three main institutional spheres of modern society and the relations between the spheres. Insofar as the spheres are each characterized by self-determination, they can be said to be autonomous. Specifically, this means that their inner logic is immanently developed rather than imposed from without, and is oriented toward an end, or telos, internal to the sphere. Call this condition internal autonomy.

3. Moreover, the autonomous logical structures of the separate institutional spheres immanently coalesce into a harmoniously functioning unity that actualizes the structure of “the Concept”112 and is determined autonomously in accordance with

111 This last position is defended by Frederick Neuhouser in Foundations of Hegel’s Social Theory: Actualizing Freedom (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2000).

112 See Hegel, G.W.F., Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts, in Werke, Vol. 7 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1986), §272, p. 432:

Die Verfassung ist vernünftig, insofern der Staat seine Wirksamkeit nach der Natur des Begriffs in sich unterscheidet und bestimmt, und zwar so, daß jene dieser Gewalten selbst in sich die Totalität
its own telos: the actualization of Geist’s essence in the world. Call this condition the autonomy of the whole.

For Hegel, it is the fulfillment of these three conditions that makes the modern social order rational, free, and reconciled to human needs and aspirations.

3.2 Adorno’s critique of Hegel

My goal now is to reconstruct Adorno’s arguments against each of the three conditions identified above. This section is divided into four sub-sections. The first three deal with Adorno’s arguments against each of the three conditions above in their descriptive dimension. Thus, the first three sections give an overall view of Adorno’s disagreement with Hegel’s theory as a descriptive theory of the modern social order. The last sub-section shows that the critique reconstructed in the first three sub-sections (2.1-2.3) targets also the prescriptive dimension of Hegel’s social theory.

3.2.1 Hegel’s condition of internal autonomy

As we have seen, Hegel describes modern society as differentiated into three central institutions—the family, civil society, and the state—each of which operates in

dadurch ist, daß sie die anderen Momente in sich wirksam hat und enthält und daß sie, weil sie den Unterschied des Begriffs ausdrücken, schlechthin in seiner Idealität bleiben und nur ein individuelles Ganzes ausmachen.

English translation in by H.B. Nisbet in Elements of the Philosophy of Right (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) §272, p. 305:

The constitution is rational in so far as the state differentiates and determines its activity within itself in accordance with the nature of the concept. It does so in such a way that each of the powers in question is in itself the totality, since each contains the other moments and has them active within it, and since all of them, as expressions of the differentiation [Unterschied] of the concept, remain wholly within its ideality and constitute nothing but a single individual whole.
accordance with its own autonomous logic and is teleologically oriented toward the achievement of specific goods appropriate to it. Together, the claims that each sphere (1) operates in accordance with a principle internal to the sphere, and (2) in so doing promotes the achievement of goods appropriate to the sphere, constitute the internal autonomy of the sphere.

Adorno’s critique of the internal autonomy of the central spheres of modern social life can be reconstructed as the negation of (1) and (2). Adorno argues that the different spheres of modern society have all become subservient to a single principle—not, however, a principle of rationality and freedom, but rather the principle of exchange. Against (1) above, Adorno holds that the principle of exchange is external to each of the particular spheres whose internal dynamics it determines. Against (2), he argues that the principle of exchange undermines the achievement of goods internal to every one of the spheres, and in fact threatens the very survival of the spheres as distinct fields of social activity at all. As a result, the submission of each institutional sphere to the principle of exchange furthers goals that are neither internal to, nor autonomously defined by, the institutional sphere, and the appearance of the spheres’ autonomy is in the end just a deceptive cover for the advantage of the market.

To begin unwrapping this two-pronged critique of Hegel’s condition of internal autonomy, I will reconstruct Adorno’s arguments against the autonomy of each of the central institutions of modern life. For each institution, I will show that Adorno holds

that the institution’s essential dynamics follow the principle of exchange, which is external to the institution, and that, under the direction of this principle, the institution no longer promotes the achievement of goods internal to the institution but rather unwittingly operates in a way that undermines its own integrity. This in turn means that the institution is not autonomous. I begin with the institution of the family.

The Family

First, we need to recall Hegel’s view of the role of the family in social life. Hegel argues that the family promotes the development of freedom at each level: personal, moral, and social. The family promotes the freedom of personhood by encouraging children to become independent adults and create their own families. Additionally, it promotes the freedom of moral subjectivity, or autonomy, by inculcating discipline. Finally, it promotes the freedom of citizenship by cultivating the child’s capacity for trust and her appreciation of a shared final end that trumps individual interest. According to Hegel, by promoting these three levels of freedom, the family simultaneously fosters the development of an independent self, the stability and unity of the family as a group, and the formation of good citizens. It thus cultivates goods internal to the family that at the same time contribute to the good functioning of the social order as a whole.

Like Hegel, Adorno takes the disciplinary formation given by the family to be central to the development of a strong individual capable of criticism, resistance, and autonomy. But Adorno’s reasons for endorsing this view are Freudian. In accord with

orthodox Freudianism, Adorno takes this disciplinary formation to require a strong father figure. The Freudian idea is that a strong ego capable of autonomy is developed through a successful resolution of the Oedipus complex, which resolution is achieved by the child’s internalization of the authority figure that initially dominates over her. Through internalization, the relation of subjugated object to dominating subject is taken “inside” the child’s ego, which is then split into ego and super-ego, with the super-ego representing the internalized authority. The commands of the super-ego are thereafter experienced as autonomous directives coming from within rather than imposed from without. According to this model, although internalization is achieved through submission to authority, it is nonetheless a necessary condition for the development of an ego capable of becoming its own authority by exercising self-control against its irrational drives (the *id*) and mediating between social coercion and its effects on the unconscious.\(^{115}\)

However, according to Adorno, the contemporary family-structure no longer has the strong father figure that represented the authority to be internalized by the child in the

\(^{115}\) Adorno’s reliance on the orthodox Freudian account of ego development is problematic, as the latter makes a number of unacceptable assumptions that disregard the differences between male and female ego development and that involve patriarchal prejudices. Moreover, the view leads to a paradox of domination and resistance that has been aptly analyzed by Jessica Benjamin. As she puts it, the problem is that in Adorno’s view, “[t]hose aspects of consciousness where this resistance [resistance to domination] might be located—critical reason, individuation, integrity and ultimately resistance itself—are tied to the process of internalizing authority. As a result, the rejection of authority can only take place through its prior acceptance. Even though the subjective dimension of domination is found to be in the way authority is internalized, the only possible resistance to authority is located in the same process of internalization” (Benjamin, Jessica, “The End of Internalization: Adorno’s Social Psychology,” *Telos*, No. 32 (1977): 42). My goal here, however, is not to evaluate Adorno’s allegiance to orthodox Freudian views but rather only to explain the bases of his arguments against the idea that the modern family promotes the development of an autonomous self. The extent to which Adorno’s overall view depends on the Freudian model is in any case debatable. With respect to his analysis of the family, what is essential for Adorno is the idea that the contemporary family-structure produces and reproduces a character structure incapable of defending the self from direct manipulation by the social apparatus.
traditional bourgeois family structure.\textsuperscript{116} In the absence of this authority figure, he argues, internalization has become all but impossible. The result is the development of a weak ego, incapable of mediating between external coercion and the unconscious, and so incapable of protecting the *id* from direct manipulation by social pressures.

Without internalization, society reaches the *id* directly and without conflict. Instead of fostering the development of an individual capable of self-determination and independent judgment, the contemporary family structure thus fosters the development of a weak ego that has lost all critical ability and all potential to resist social domination. In *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, Horkheimer and Adorno describe the current situation thus:

Gewissen wird gegenstandslos, denn anstelle der Verantwortung des Individuums für sich und die Seinen tritt, wenn auch unter dem alten moralischen Titel, schlechthin seine Leistung für den Apparat. Es kommt nicht mehr zum Austrag des eigenen Triebkonflikts, in welchem die Gewissensinstanz sich ausbildet. Stattdessen der Verinnerlichung des gesellschaftlichen Gebots, die es nicht nur verbindlicher und zugleich geöffneter macht, sondern auch von der Gesellschaft emanzipiert, ja gegen diese wendet, erfolgt prompte, unmittelbare Identifikation mit den stereotypen Wertskalen.\textsuperscript{117}

\textsuperscript{116} The idea that the traditional authority structure of the family had collapsed in late capitalism, producing personality-types that are highly susceptible to authoritarian manipulation, was the result of various studies conducted by the *Institut für Sozialforschung* in the 1930’s. See Horkheimer, ed., *Studien über Autorität und Familie* (Hannover: zu Klampen Verlag, 1947).

\textsuperscript{117} Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, in Max Horkheimer: *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. 5 (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1997), 228-9. English translation (All translations of Adorno are my own, unless otherwise noted):

Conscience is deprived of objects, since individuals’ responsibility for themselves and their own [their family] is replaced—even if still under the old moral title—by their mere performance for the apparatus. It no longer comes down to a working-through of the conflict of drives, in which the agency of conscience is formed. Instead of the internalization of the social command—which internalization not only makes the command more binding and open, but also emancipates it from, and even turns it against, society—what promptly succeeds is the [individual’s] unmediated identification with the stereotyped scales of values.
In this situation, autonomous ego-control becomes impossible. Mass culture takes over the roles of ego and super-ego and makes the instincts of the id more compliant than the internalized authority ever could, for the internalized authority at least remained in unresolved tension with the unconscious. Without the conflict of drives that results from internalization, the social apparatus reaches the individual’s unconscious directly, through mechanisms such as popular entertainment, the mass media, and advertisement. The result is the reduction of the individual to a mere consumer. The

118 See Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, in Max Horkheimer: *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. 5 (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1997), 234:


English translation (mine):

> The individual no longer needs to wrest a decision of what he or she should do from an initial painful inner dialectic between conscience, self-preservation, and drives. For the human being as wage earner, the decision is made by a hierarchy extending from trade unions to the national administration; in the private sphere it is made by the schema of mass culture, which monopolizes even the innermost stirrings of its coerced consumers. The committees and stars function as ego and super-ego, and the masses, divested of even the appearance of personality, are molded more smoothly [frictionlessly] by the slogans and models than the instincts ever were by the internal censor.

119 Although Adorno’s psychoanalytic model is problematic, his point that modern social pressures affect the unconscious directly and bypass mediation by the conscious ego is worth attention. The contemporary American is, according to various sources, exposed to an average of 3,000 advertisement images per day. (The most conservative estimates place the number between 500 and 1,000, but they usually count only advertisement images to which the consumer does or could pay conscious attention.) Clearly, the sheer number of images makes it impossible consciously to decide how they affect the consumer’s thoughts and behavior. In fact, the multi-million marketing industry openly invests in psychological research aimed at developing strategies that target individuals below the level of active conscious scrutiny, for instance by fostering the association of a specific emotional reaction with a specific product through contiguous presentation of images that evoke the reaction and the name brand for the product, or even, more insidiously, through the use of subliminal stimuli.
individual is thereby constituted as incapable of autonomy, and empty of particular content beyond universal adaptability to the impositions of the market.

Adorno thus reverses Hegel’s view that the nuclear family constitutes the individual in such a way as to cultivate her ability for personal freedom (independence from external coercion) and moral freedom (autonomy, self-determination). But what about Hegel’s idea that the family promotes social freedom? If we conceive of the latter as the simple alignment of the individual’s particular will and the demands of society, then we could say that Adorno agrees that such integration of the individual into the whole is facilitated by the contemporary structure of the family. However, this integration is hardly a form of freedom because it unfolds through direct manipulation of the individuals’ unconscious, and it is moreover aimed at turning individuals into compliant consumers and not at turning them into responsible and reflective citizens. Thus, on the bases of his analysis of the contemporary family structure and his orthodox Freudian assumptions about ego development, Adorno takes the institution of the family to facilitate the direct social manipulation of the individual rather than the individual’s freedom. The institution of the family thus functions in a way that is not guided by ends internal to the family, which Hegel had identified as the promotion of an independent, autonomous individual, who can put the shared ends of family life above self-interested advantage, and who is thus also formed as a good citizen. Rather, the contemporary family in Adorno’s view furthers only the goals of the market by facilitating the constitution of a consumer army.

\[1^{120}\text{ Adorno’s critique of the family however does not stand or fall with the Freudian model, but it does require the claim that the contemporary family structure promotes the development of a self incapable of protecting itself from direct manipulation by social pressures.}\]
Civil Society

Let us now turn to an analysis of the second institutional sphere of the modern social order: civil society. First we need briefly to review Hegel’s conception of civil society and its role in the social order. For Hegel, the sphere of civil society provides individuals with an institutional space in which they meet each other as abstract equals or universal “persons”\textsuperscript{121} with egoistic private interests that they pursue as sellers or buyers, and with legitimate claims to protection from the interference of others in their own private sphere.\textsuperscript{122} There are two important points to note about Hegel’s conception of civil society: First, the sphere as a whole is characterized by relations of exchange among agents in the “free market,” in which relations individuals meet each other as equals. Second, in encountering each other as “abstract” and “equal” persons, individuals develop a sense of universal equality and entitlements to negative “rights” that must be protected by the state. Thus the primary social good that comes from the sphere of civil society is that, on its basis, the ideas of equality and universal rights are developed.

Adorno’s criticism of civil society can be formulated in the claim that, because civil society is subservient to the principle of exchange, it actually undermines both the ideal of equality and the ideal of dignity that undergirds the concept of human rights. Adorno’s analysis thus results in a negation of the two points above. Against the first point, Adorno accepts Marx’s demonstration of the lack of equality characteristic of

\textsuperscript{121} For Hegel, the term “person” denotes the universality of the self as an abstract bearer of negative rights. This is basically the liberal conception of the person.

\textsuperscript{122} The private sphere over which the individual is sovereign involves her “property” (Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts, §44-46), which in turn includes her body (§47), her individual life (§48), and her material possessions (§49).
market relations and argues that civil society’s submission to the principle of exchange is therefore grounded in a basic inequality among individuals of different classes. Against the second point, Adorno argues that the abstract ideal of equality ideologically developed in modern capitalist society on the basis of exchange relations actually turns into a “principle of equivalence” according to which individuals become expendable. This result undermines the ideal of individual dignity that would need to buttress any substantial notion of human rights. Let me briefly elaborate on these two points.

The first point is familiar from Marx’s analysis of capitalist relations. The sphere of civil society, as Hegel described it, is a sphere of exchange relations. But, Marx argues, exchange is predicated on production, and the apparent equality of individuals in their exchange relations is exposed as a sham when the relations of production are taken into account. Marx argues that there is a basic inequality between the worker and the capitalist, namely that, whereas the former owns only her labor power, the latter owns the means of production. This basic fact is not a surface difference but rather points to a deep and basic inequality, for the worker needs to be able to sell her labor power for wages to the capitalist in order to survive, whereas the capitalist needs to employ the worker’s labor power, not in order to survive, but only in order to create surplus value. An asymmetrical dependence is thus created between worker and capitalist. As Marx puts it,

Aber der Arbeiter, dessen einzige Erwerbsquelle der Verkauf der Arbeitskraft ist, kann nicht die ganze Klasse der Käufer, d.h. die Kapitalistenklasse verlassen, ohne auf seine Existenz zu verzichten. Er gehört nicht diesem oder jenem Kapitalisten, aber der Kapitalistenklasse; und es ist dabei seine Sache, sich an
den Mann zu bringen, das heißt in dieser Kapitalistenklasse einen Käufer zu finden.\textsuperscript{123}

While it is true that the capitalist and working classes each requires the other to exist \textit{as a class}, the individual capitalist does not depend on the working class for his existence \textit{as an individual}, whereas the worker depends on the capitalist class for his survival.

And, according to the Marxian analysis, there is a further source of inequality, which is the unfairness of the transaction that occurs between worker and capitalist. In this transaction, the labor power of the worker is exchanged for wages given by the capitalist. The labor power that the capitalist purchases from the worker is such that, through its deployment, it produces additional value, a value that exceeds the pre-existing value contained in raw materials and means of production. The capitalist keeps most of the newly-created value, except for a small portion that he gives to the worker as wages, and which is equivalent to the amount necessary for the continued survival of the worker,\textsuperscript{124} so that she may go on selling her value-creating labor power. So, in the exchange of labor power for wages, what the worker receives in wages is just the necessary means to get back to her starting point, still owning nothing but her labor.

\textsuperscript{123} This quote and a few to follow are from Marx’s first analysis of capital-labor relations in the short text entitled “Lohnarbeit und Kapital” [Wage Labour and Capital]. Though it dates back to 1847, this text already contains the fundamentals of Marx’s argument in \textit{das Kapital}. See Marx, “Lohnarbeit und Kapital,” in \textit{Karl Marx und Friedrich Engels: Werke}, Vol. 3 (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1969), 401 (emphasis in the original). English translation (mine):

\begin{quote}
But the worker, whose only means of livelihood is the sale of his labor power, cannot leave the whole class of buyers, that is, the capitalist class, without relinquishing his existence. \textit{He belongs not to this or that capitalist, but to the capitalist class}, and it is up to him to dispose of himself, that is, to find a buyer [for his labor power] in the capitalist class.
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{124} We could add to this analysis that the worker receives not only the means for bare survival but also the means to consume and thus keep the economic system functioning and the capitalist’s profit growing. This addition, however, does not change the essence of the analysis.
power, which she needs to sell again in the market in order to survive. On the other hand, what the capitalist receives is labor power that through its deployment produces new value (i.e., surplus value), most of which the capitalist keeps. The capitalist thus gains more than the worker, and the transaction is therefore unequal—that is, unfair.

We thus have two ways to understand the inequality that characterizes transactions between worker and capitalist. On the one hand, there is from the beginning a differential of power due to the worker’s dependence on employment for her very subsistence, which among other things means that the worker must more readily accept conditions set by the capitalist than vice versa, so that the two parties do not meet at the negotiating table of the market with equal leverage. Second, the exchange of labor power for wages is an unequal transaction: The capitalist gains something new with each transaction and her capital increases in value, whereas the worker gains only her ability to continue to live and continue to sell her labour power. The inequality of this transaction, moreover, grows with each new transaction: “Die Arbeitskraft des Lohnarbeiters kann sich nur gegen Kapital austauschen, indem sie das Kapital vermehrt, indem sie die Macht verstärkt, deren Sklavin sie ist.” Thus, according to Marx, the logic of capitalist

\[125\] Ibid., 409: “Der Arbeiter erhält im Austausch gegen seine Arbeitskraft Lebensmittel, aber der Kapitalist erhält im Austausch gegen seine Lebensmittel Arbeit, die produktive Tätigkeit des Arbeiters, die schöpferische Kraft, wodurch der Arbeiter nicht nur ersetzt, was er verzehrt, sondern der aufgehäuften Arbeit einen größern Wert gibt, als sie vorher besaß” (emphasis in the original). [English translation (mine): “The worker receives the means of subsistence in exchange for his/her labor power, but the capitalist receives in exchange for these means of subsistence labor, the productive activity of the worker, the creative power, through which the worker not only replaces what he/she uses up but moreover adds more value to the accumulated labor than it previously possessed.”]

\[126\] Ibid., 410. English translation (mine): “The labor power of the wage worker can only be exchanged against capital, by which process capital is increased, and its power—whose slave the wage worker is—is strengthened.”
relations of production inherently leads to ever-greater inequality and antagonism between the oppressed class of workers and the oppressing class of capitalists.\(^{127}\)

According to this Marxian analysis, which Adorno endorses, the apparently equal relations that characterize the sphere of exchange are in fact predicated in un-equal, inherently unfair and antagonistic relations of production. The sphere of market relations is on this view not an autonomous sphere guided by an immanent principle of equality among “persons,” as Hegel would have it, but is rather subservient to the principles of capitalist production, which are in turn predicated on inequality and class struggle.

Let us now look at the second part of Adorno’s critique of Hegel’s conception of civil society, namely that civil society’s subservience to the principle of exchange has the result that civil society, rather than promoting the idea of equal dignity for all persons at the heart of the notion of human rights, in fact diminishes the worth of individuals to the point that they become dispensable. Adorno’s argument again originates in Marx—this time in Marx’s analysis of the commodity form.

The commodity, Marx argues, is a form of wealth specific to the capitalist system.\(^{128}\) Its distinguishing characteristic is the replacement of the qualitative features that make an object have \textit{use value} by the quantitative features that make it a bearer of \textit{exchange value}. The commodity is an object produced not for the sake of its qualities, but rather for the sake of exchange. The exchange value of commodities makes them all measurable by the same quantitative standard regardless of the objects’ peculiar

\(^{127}\) See Ibid., 411-416 for Marx’s analysis of the relation between capital and wages. Marx argues that, as capital increases, wages decrease overall: capital and wages stand in inverse proportion.

\(^{128}\) For Marx’s analysis of the commodity form, see Chapter I of \textit{Das Kapital}, Vol. 1 (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1953), 39-89.
properties: for any commodity \( x \), if \( x \) has a specific value \( v \), it can be replaced by any other commodity of value \( v \) without regard for the particularity of the objects.

Importantly, commodity production leads to a distinction between concrete and abstract labor that mirrors the distinction between use value and exchange value. Concrete labor refers to the specific skills required to produce an object of a certain kind—skills that are irreducibly qualitatively distinct depending on what the product is—whereas abstract labor refers to a general expenditure of labor power that is measurable equally for all types of labor. Abstract labor, like exchange value, is measured along a merely quantitative scale bereft of qualitative distinctions. With the transformation from concrete to abstract labor characteristic of capitalism, labor power itself becomes a commodity. It comes to be measured in terms of segments of labor time, each of which is allocated a specific exchange value. The result is that finite segments of human life become commodities in the market.

Based on this analysis, Adorno claims that the idea that individuals encounter each other in the market as equals, though false in terms of the transaction that takes place between worker and capitalist, nonetheless has a dimension of “truth”—namely, in the fact that individuals’ lives are broken down into segments that are accorded equal exchange value measured in terms of the purely quantitative, commodified category of abstract labor power. The value of the individual becomes abstractly measurable as the value of an object in the commodity market. But then every individual is replaceable by any other individual with similar qualifications or similar skills, which in the capitalist division of labor tend to be reduced to the lowest common denominator. The very content of individual identity becomes socially understood as an abstract content.
according to which any one individual is just as good as any other so long as they can expend an equal amount of labor power, which means that any one individual can be replaced by any other without regard for individual particularities. The alleged equality of individuals thus has an aspect of truth, only not in a qualitatively equal dignity of personhood, but rather in a purely quantitative exchangeability of one individual’s worth for another’s, and in an equal emptiness of substantial (qualitative) content.

Adorno calls this phenomenon the rule of “equivalence.”¹²⁹ The phenomenon is not only restricted to the way individuals are socially valued and how they view one another but also how they view themselves. Adorno claims that in this process the individual eventually comes to measure her own worth in terms of the abstract market value of her skills. She thus becomes self-alienated. And, moreover, by accepting the measure given by the market for her own self-worth, the individual begins to mold her whole identity in order to adapt to the economic apparatus, thus succumbing to total control by the external forces of the market. “Je weiter aber der Prozeß der Selbstverwirklichung durch bürgerliche Arbeitsteilung geleistet wird, um so mehr erzeugt er die Selbstentäußerung der Individuen, die sich an Leib und Seele nach der technischen Apparatur zu formen haben.”¹³⁰

Thus, for Adorno, although the social realm of exchange does indeed have an aspect by which it equalizes all individuals, it is not in a way that promotes the constitution of a substantial individuality, as it is for Hegel, but rather in a way that strips

¹²⁹ See Adorno and Horkheimer, Dialektik der Aufklärung, in Max Horkheimer: Gesammelte Schriften, Vol. 5 (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1997), 30.

¹³⁰ Adorno and Horkheimer, Dialektik der Aufklärung, in Max Horkheimer: Gesammelte Schriften, Vol. 5 (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1997), 52. “[T]he more the process of self-preservation is promoted by the bourgeois division of labor, the more it enforces the self-alienation of individuals, who must shape themselves body and soul in accordance with the apparatus.”
individuals of all particularity, reduces them to commodities, alienates them from themselves, and makes them easy targets of control by the external market forces to which they must adapt themselves in order to survive and by the measure of which they come to measure their own self-worth. As Julian Roberts notes, “The subordination of individuality to market-defined function does not merely facilitate economic organization—it also destroys the identity and happiness of the human beings involved. It is not possible to alienate segments of one’s life without also alienating oneself from the means of self-determination. The humanity that remains after the labor market has exacted its toll is no more than an empty husk.”

The sphere of civil society is thus, according to Adorno, radically heteronomous. First, Adorno claims that the internal dynamics of civil society are determined not by a principle internal to civil society but rather by the principle of exchange. Second, he claims that as a result civil society does not in fact further the ends that Hegel assigned to it. Instead of promoting equality in market relations, it consists of unequal and unfair economic exchange between capitalists and workers; and, instead of promoting a substantial notion of equal rights—one based on the equal qualitative dignity of every individual—it bottoms out in the abstract equality of individuals as abstract laborers, who are equal only in the emptiness of qualitative content according to which they are measured, and according to which they in turn come to measure themselves.

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Finally, we need to consider the last major social institution, which Hegel identifies as the highest of all three: the state. For Hegel, the state is the sphere of substantial ethical life (*Sittlichkeit*), in which the particular ends of all individuals come together into a unified general end, the highest good of society as a whole. The state promotes the highest good by ensuring the harmonious functioning of all other spheres of social life and by providing a sphere in which individuals acquire and enact their identity as *citizens*, i.e., as members of a political community united by its striving toward the highest good of all.

We need not concern ourselves here with the many controversies that surround Hegel’s view of the state—ranging from the idea that the Hegelian state completely subsumes the interests of individuals and is thus inherently totalitarian to the idea that it serves only the interests of individuals by ensuring that the necessary conditions for the actualization of their private freedoms obtain—for, although Adorno often criticizes the Hegelian view of the state as authoritarian, this is not the key point of his critique. I propose once again that Adorno’s key point is the charge of heteronomy. He argues that the state is not autonomous because, like the other central institutions of modern society, it is subservient to the laws of the market, and these laws do not promote the interests of the political nation-state but rather undermine them to the point of rendering the very idea of state sovereignty obsolete.

To understand Adorno’s critique of the state, we need to look once again at Adorno’s relation to Marx, although this time not at Adorno’s many points of agreement with Marx, but rather at the crux of their disagreement. Although Adorno accepts many
Marxian theses—in particular, Marx’s analysis of the relations of production—he importantly rejects two central Marxian ideas. The first is that (1) when the relations of production of a given society become obsolete because they limit rather than foster the productive and technological capacities of society, a tension arises that necessarily becomes untenable for the social order. The second is that (2) this tension necessarily results in a revolutionary change of the existing relations of production, which change leads to the establishment of new relations that better accommodate the development of productive forces. Instead, Adorno argues that the conflict that arises when society’s productive capacities are restricted or irrationally utilized by the prevailing productive relations, can be and in fact has been allayed through mechanisms that perpetuate these relations by forcefully bringing the masses and the political arm of the state into compliance, thus diffusing the tension that could have otherwise provoked revolutionary change. Thus, Adorno writes:

Allzu optimistisch war die Erwartung von Marx, geschichtlich sei ein Primat der Produktivkräfte gewiß, der notwendig die Produktionsverhältnisse spreng. . . . Die Produktionsverhältnisse haben um ihrer schieren Selbsterhaltung willen durch Flickwerk und partikulare Maßnahmen die losgelassenen Produktivkräfte weiterhin sich unterworf. Signatur des Zeitalters ist die Präponderanz der Produktionsverhältnisse über die Produktivkräfte, welche doch längst der Verhältnisse spotten.\textsuperscript{132}


Marx’s expectation that historically the primacy of the forces of production was assured, which forces would necessarily burst open the relations of production, proved all too optimistic. … The sheer instinct for survival enabled the relations of production to keep the liberated forces of production under submission through a series of ad hoc devices and particular stratagems. The signature of the age is the predominance of the relations of production over the forces of production, even though in the eyes of the latter the relations of production have long been a laughingstock.
The forces of production have indeed increased to a degree unimaginable just a century ago: today technological advances already make possible the elimination of hunger, rural poverty, and life-threatening scarcity. Yet this situation, which in Marx’s view should necessarily lead to the overthrow of capitalist productive relations and to the establishment of social relations that would allow for society’s productive capacity to be rationally administered so as to meet all human needs, has not in fact led to such a change. In Adorno’s grim view, the relations of production and the profit motive have managed not only to survive but also to squash the possibility of revolutionary change. The question of how this is possible, how this could happen, is in fact for Adorno the central question for critical theory today.

Adorno discusses at least three ways in which revolutionary change aimed at a more “rational” structure of productive relations (i.e., a structure whose primary concern

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133 See, for instance, Jeffrey Sachs’s expert study on how poverty and extreme hunger could be eliminated with the use of economic and technological resources we already have in The End of Poverty: Economic Possibilities for Our Time (New York: the Penguin Press, 2005).


Mehr als je sind die Produktivkräfte durch die Produktionsverhältnisse vermittelt; so vollständig vielleicht, daß diese eben darum als das Wesen erscheinen; sie sind vollends zur zweiten Natur geworden. Sie sind dafür verantwortlich, daß in irrem Widerspruch zum Möglichen die Menschen in großen Teilen der Erde darben müssen. Selbst wo Fülle an Gütern herrscht, ist diese wie unter einem Fluch.

English translation:

The forces of production are mediated more than ever by the relations of production, so completely, perhaps, that the latter appear to be the essence; they have fully become second nature. They are responsible for the fact that, in mad contradiction with what is possible, human beings in large parts of the Earth must live in poverty. Even where goods are aplenty, they are as if under a curse.

would be to meet human needs) has been forestalled. First, he claims that the capacity of individuals to oppose the social order has been almost completely destroyed, with the result that the principle of the market has been able to establish complete control over the masses and has successfully brought them into complicity with the *status quo*. Second, Adorno argues that economic relations have also brought the political arm of the state into complicity. Finally, the economic relations have found a way to satisfy the logic of productive forces by giving them an outlet for technological development through the establishment of a massive war industry which, while satisfying the requirements of increasing productive capacity, simultaneously entrenches existing productive relations and their domination over political life. Let us briefly look at these three explanations for the primacy of the relations of production.

The first dimension has already been discussed at some length. As we have seen, Adorno claims that there is a widespread phenomenon of ego-weakness in contemporary society, and that this phenomenon makes it possible for the social mechanism to control the unconscious of individuals directly and to bring them into total conformity with the *status quo*, even if the latter opposes their true interests.

Der Satz von Marx, daß auch die Theorie zur realen Gewalt wird, sobald sie die Massen ergreift, wurde eklatant vom Weltlauf auf den Kopf gestellt. Verhindert die Einrichtung der Gesellschaft, automatisch oder planvoll, durch Kultur- und Bewußtseinsindustrie und durch Meinungsmonopole, die einfachste Kenntnis und Erfahrung der bedrohlichsten Vorgänge und der wesentlichen kritischen Ideen und Theoreme; läßt sie, weit darüber hinaus, die bloße Fähigkeit, die Welt konkret anders sich vorzustellen, als sie überwältigend denen erscheint, aus denen sie besteht, so wird der fixierte und manipulierte Geisteszustand ebenso zur realen
Gewalt, der von Repression, wie einmal deren Gegenteil, der freie Geist, diese beseitigen wollte.\textsuperscript{136}

This process of direct control over individuals is made possible by the mass media and the culture industry, which directly feed individuals with the desires, aspirations, and thought contents that make them good consumers, pliable workers, and virtually thoughtless objects of exchange. The ideological manipulation of consciousness is in Adorno’s view so advanced today that the individual’s capacity for even understanding her own predicament and the dynamics of her social world—let alone her capacity practically and creatively to oppose that world—has been neutralized.

The second element that according to Adorno has made possible the submission of society’s productive capacities to the preservation of capitalist productive relations is the submission of the political state to the requirements of capitalist relations of production. This is more relevant to our discussion because it directly contradicts Hegel’s vision of the state as the guarantor of the rationality of society, charged with ensuring that market relations are harmonious with, and specifically aimed at, the good of the whole. Adorno claims that the logic of the market dominates the logic of politics in the modern state, not vice versa, for the market enlists the aid of the state in order to


Marx’s dictum that theory becomes a real force when it grips the masses was flagrantly stood on its head by the course of events. If the organization of society, whether automatically or according to methodical plan, prevents the most basic knowledge and experience of the most threatening processes and of the most essential critical ideas through use of the culture industry, the consciousness industry, and the monopolistic control of opinion, and if, far beyond that, it also handicaps people’s mere ability to imagine the world in concrete terms as being anything other than what it overwhelmingly appears to be to them, of whom it is comprised, then the fixed and manipulated state of mind \textit{Geistezustand} becomes a real force, the force of repression, powerful as its opposite force was once upon a time, namely the free spirit \textit{der freie Geist}, which wished to abolish repression.
further its dominance over the social order. In Adorno’s view, Hegel was right in thinking that the state is the major player that facilitates the actualization of the intrinsic logic of the social whole, but this intrinsic logic is not a logic of freedom and rationality, but rather the logic of exchange relations, obsolete because of its inability to organize the social order in a manner that meets human needs, but nonetheless triumphantly dominant over the social order.\(^\text{137}\) For Adorno, the idea of a “free market” that functions under the invisible hand of immutable economic laws has shown itself to be mere illusion as the modern political state directly and without qualms has used and continues to use its

\(^{137}\) See Adorno, “Spätkapitalismus oder Industriegesellschaft?” in Gesammelte Schriften, 8. Band: Soziologische Schriften (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1969), 367:


English translation:

The power of the relations of production, which were not revolutionized, is greater than ever; however at the same time they are disintegrated [literally full of holes], since they are objectively anachronistic, everywhere diseased, damaged. They no longer function independently. Economic interventionism is not, as the older liberal school reckoned, an alien element graft on from outside, but rather immanent to the system, the epitome of self-defense. Nothing could better illustrate the concept of dialectic. There is an analog in the call Hegel once made to the state to aid in the immanent dialectic of society with the help of the police—without which aid, according to him, society would disintegrate—even though according to his Philosophy of Right bourgeois ideology and dialectics are so deeply intertwined in bourgeois society that the state is supposed to stand beyond intervention in the dynamics of society.
political and even its military power to ensure the continuance of “objectively irrational” market relations and their extension all over the globe.\textsuperscript{138}

It is worth noting that this part of Adorno’s analysis gains credibility from recent developments. Consider for instance the causes for the 2008 economic crisis, which were incubated in the financial sphere, and which nonetheless brought various governments to use their political leverage and tax-payer resources to bail the banks. Another case in point is the current debt crises of certain European economies, where some governments have yielded to the demands of non-political economic entities such as the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund even in matters of internal political governance in order to salvage existing economic arrangements. The cases of Greece, Portugal, Ireland, and now Spain are exemplary. Of course, this primacy of economic interests over the political state is old news to many poor states around the globe, but has only recently begun to affect even the most developed countries. Also of interest are the political maneuvers that some states have been forced to deploy to avoid being penalized with a downgrade of their credit status by privately owned and operated financial rating agencies. The austerity measures imposed by Italy and Spain are cases in point. What is interesting about these cases is that they give some evidence for the idea that the economy determines at least some extremely important decisions of internal governance, even when these decisions are actively opposed by a majority of the people, and this in turn brings into question the political sovereignty of the nation-state vis-à-vis the

\textsuperscript{138} An example here would be the use of economic coercion and even outright military force in order to bring down a foreign government that opposes the economic interests of a particular society. Consider, for instance Noam Chomsky’s analysis of US military intervention on Latin America in \textit{Profit Over People: Neo-liberalism and Global Order} (New York: Seven Stories Press, 1999).
demands of non-democratically elected economic bodies. But this is not the place to go into detail on these recent developments, or to attempt an analysis that shows it to be a symptom of the subservience of the political state to the market. The key point is to understand Adorno’s point: that the political state, far from being an autonomous social sphere, is in fact an arm, perhaps the strongest arm, used by economic relations of exchange to maintain their homogeneity over the global order.

A third important element in Adorno’s explanation for the prominence of the relations of production over the forces of production is his idea that through the development of an enormous war industry, capitalist society has found a way to satisfy the logic of the productive forces without sacrificing the existing relations of production. The war industry satisfies the logic of the productive forces by providing a way for them to be exploited for the development of new technologies, if only for the production of war and destruction. And it satisfies the logic of the relations of production in three ways: First, it offers a solution for the problem of over-production by providing a constant market for military products. Second, it provides an extremely lucrative sphere of

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139 Some Marxian economists have recently argued that the very notion of a sovereign nation-state is virtually anachronistic, as the power of financial capital over politics has expanded enormously all over the globe. See for example Prem Shankar Jha analysis in The Twilight of the Nation State: Globalisation, Chaos and War (Ann Arbor and London: Pluto Press, 2006).

140 Adorno, “Spätkapitalismus oder Industriegesellschaft?” in Gesammelte Schriften, 8. Band: Soziologische Schriften (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1969), 366:

Die internationalen Antagonismen aber, die zum jetzt erst wahrhaft totalen Krieg hin sich steigern, stehen in flagrantem Zusammenhang mit den Produktionsverhältnissen im wörtlichsten Verstande. Die Drohung der einen Katastrophe wird durch die der anderen hinausgeschoben. Die Produktionsverhältnisse könnten schwerlich ohne die apokalyptische Erschütterung erneuter Wirtschaftskrisen so hartnäckig sich behaupten, würde nicht ein unmäßig großer Teil des Sozialprodukts, der sonst keinen Markt mehr fände, für die Herstellung von Zerstörungsmitteln abgezweigt.

English translation:
economic activity for global capital. And third, by bringing economic interests, the political state, and military power together, it enables powerful countries to enforce the global hegemony of the capitalist order through military intervention. The U.S. military-industrial complex and its enormous power in geo-politics is an apt illustration of this point.

We are now ready to wrap up Adorno’s overall critique of the Hegelian view of the state. Adorno argues that the state is not autonomous, as Hegel believes, because its internal dynamics are determined not by a principle internal to the state but rather by the principle of exchange, and because, as a result of this external determination, the state acts in a way that does not foster its own political internal ends. Whereas, according to Hegel, the state fosters the development of a social order that ensures that the interests of individuals and the interests of the state are harmonious, Adorno argues that the modern state, because of its subservience to the preservation of capitalist relations of production, in fact works to maintain a social order in which human needs are not met despite the existence of the technological capacity to meet them. The state therefore works against the interests of (most) individuals. Moreover, the state actually acts against its own interests of survival, for, as the power of capital becomes ever greater and comes to exceed national borders through processes of economic globalization, the power that the economic sector exerts over matters of political governance not only becomes greater and greater but moreover is no longer tied to political borders. Global finance, for instance, is

But the international conflicts that are being escalated to the point of a truly total war stand in flagrant connection with the relations of production in the most literal sense. The threat of one catastrophe is staved off by that of others. The relations of production would find it hard to maintain their position so persistently without the apocalyptic cataclysms of renewed economic crises, if a disproportionate part of the social product were not diverted to the production of weapons of destruction, which would otherwise not find a market.
not only ever more powerful but also represents interests that do not map into the particular interests of the states over which it exerts power. The result is that the political sphere becomes a mere cover for the real locus of political power, which shifts more and more decidedly to the hands of global economic bodies. This means that the state’s subservience to the principle of exchange actually brings the state ever closer to its own disintegration as a center of political power. So, subservience to the principle of exchange does not further the internal ends of the nation-state but rather threatens the latter with disintegration.

In the end, this is the point to take home about Adorno’s critique of Hegel’s condition of internal autonomy, as I have reconstructed it here: Whereas Hegel takes it that the central institutions of modern society are autonomous because their internal dynamics follow principles of development internal to them and because, by following these principles, each institution promotes the achievement of social goods internal to it, Adorno argues that each of the institutions is actually heteronomous because it follows an external principle—the principle of exchange—and in so doing does not further goods internal to the institution but rather only the goals of the market, which actually undermine the prolonged existence of the institution as an independent locus of social activity: According to Adorno the family is in decline; civil society (as Hegel envisaged it) is an ideological illusion; and the political nation-state’s sovereignty is already an anachronism.

3.2.2 Hegel’s condition of the preservation of freedom

Although I did not indicate it explicitly, we have already discussed Adorno’s reasons for rejecting the Hegelian condition of the preservation of freedom, which claims
that social freedom, or the freedom that individuals achieve as citizens of the state, both makes possible and preserves personal and moral freedom.

With regard to personal freedom—the individual’s negative freedom from external coercion as a universal, abstract member of civil society—we saw in Adorno’s critique of Hegel’s conception of civil society that he takes this institutional sphere to emaciate individuality from qualitative content and to reduce individuals to mere consumers, equal only in their lack of substantial identity and in their total susceptibility to determination by the market. This utter vulnerability to determination by the principle of exchange is anything but a form of freedom.

Further, with respect to moral freedom—the individual’s self-determination in accordance with her own vision of the Good—we have seen that such self-determination is in Adorno’s view actually made impossible by the preponderance of the principle of exchange. Adorno’s idea that the phenomenon of ego-weakness has become widespread, with the result that individuals are directly molded by the principle of exchange, results in the virtual impossibility of individual autonomy. The psychological conflict between a strong super-ego and the id, which he takes to be a necessary condition for the development of the capacity for autonomy, has been virtually eliminated by the impossibility of the internalization of familial authority. Hegel’s idea that the modern social order is structured in a manner that preserves and promotes personal and moral freedom is thus false on Adorno’s view.

3.2.3 Hegel’s condition of the autonomy of the whole

I have reconstructed in detail Adorno’s arguments against the Hegelian idea that the central institutions of modern society are autonomous. However, it could still be the
case that the principle that governs the inner dynamics of the institutional spheres, though not autonomously determined by the spheres themselves, nonetheless expresses the rationality of the social order as a whole. The principle of exchange could for instance be conceived after the model of the “invisible hand,” as a self-regulating principle that society imposes on each of the institutional spheres so that the sum of their activities serves the rational interest of the social order as a whole, even if this rational interest requires the undermining of private freedom and of particular institutions. In this model, the principle of exchange could still be the rationally self-determined principle of society, for the model would at least satisfy Hegel’s condition of the autonomy of the whole, which requires that the separate institutions of the modern social order coalesce into a harmoniously functioning unity that actualizes the structure of rationality. The key question is whether the principle of exchange can be conceived as standing in accordance with rationality and as imposed by the social order on all its constitutive elements (so, in a sense, self-imposed or autonomous) for the sake of an overall social good.

As is to be expected, Adorno argues that the principle of exchange is not rationally self-imposed by the modern social order. Instead, he takes it to be the result of a pathological and un-self-conscious relation between modernity and nature, especially the “internal nature” of the subject. Adorno’s argument for this point can be reconstructed in two steps. The first is his claim that the development of rationality and civilization in general requires an antagonistic relation to nature for the purpose of the self-preservation of the species. The second step is his argument that, in modernity, this relation continues to become ever more antagonistic even though in doing so it no longer promotes survival. In becoming more antagonistic, the relation between human beings
and nature has actually become a threat to humanity’s continued survival, and socially prevalent forms of rationality have become irrational. The modern social order’s submission to the principle of exchange is symptomatic of this irrationality, and it moreover preserves and increases the prevalent irrationality. Let us look at the steps of this argument in more detail.

In *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, Adorno and Horkheimer locate the ontogenetic and phylogenetic genesis of rationality in humanity’s instinctual drive for self-preservation.\(^{141}\) The idea is that, both in the historical development of the species and in the development of the individual, rationality first appears as a tool for negotiating practical actions with the external world in a way that ensures survival. This negotiation in turn requires the repression of instincts for immediate gratification.\(^{142}\) In the phylogenetic case, the development of rationality requires the ever stronger repression of instinctual desires for the sake of organized social labor to ensure survival in the face of natural dangers and scarcity. The gratification of the pleasure instincts of the *id* has to be constantly delayed and repressed in order to make possible the cooperative practical activity necessary to build human civilization, which furthers self-preservation by offering protection from external nature and from unbridled aggression among human beings. In the ontogenetic

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\(^{142}\) This model is of course based on Freud’s view that the activities of the ego are ruled by the reality principle, whose highest aim is the preservation of the individual through the repression of instincts that would challenge this aim if left unbridled—in particular, through the repression of the id’s unruly demand for gratification of its pleasure principle. Adorno and Horkheimer agree with Freud’s suggestion that, just like the strong repression of instincts in individual development leads to neurosis, civilization as a whole has come to exhibit what might be called social neurosis. See Freud, *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur*, in *Gesammelte Werke*, Vol. 14 (Frankfurt am Main: Fisher taschenbuch verlag, 1999).
case, the development of rational abilities requires the repression of instincts driven by
the pleasure principle so that the ego’s activities of reality-testing can direct practical
activity in a way that ensures the survival of the self. So, the development of rationality
and civilization necessitated a concomitant increase in the repression of instinctual drives.
Rationality and civilization thus developed in an *antagonistic* relation of domination
against the instincts, which constitute the “internal nature” of the self.

The problem according to Horkheimer and Adorno is that the mechanisms of
repression have gone far beyond their necessity to ensure survival and, as they grow ever
more demanding of self-renunciation in the modern capitalist order, they are actually
turning against the goal for which they developed. In Adorno and Horkheimer’s view,
the degree of repression enforced in modernity is no longer necessary for the sake of
survival, but repression nonetheless continues to grow, seemingly for its own sake.¹⁴³
Specifically, the repression demanded of individuals in advanced capitalist societies is
neither necessary for survival nor conducive to happiness but rather seems aimed at the
reproduction of the capitalist structure for its sake alone. Thus, the very process that
initially led to the development of rationality and aided humanity’s survival now enforces

¹⁴³ Horkheimer explains the point most clearly in *Eclipse of Reason*—a book that he wrote around
the same time as he co-authored *Dialektik der Aufklärung* with Adorno, and which was strongly influenced
by ideas that they shared. See *Eclipse of Reason* (New York and London: Continuum, 1974), 64:

Domination of nature involves domination of man. Each subject not only has to take part in the
subjugation of external nature, human and nonhuman, but in order to do so must subjugate nature in
himself. Domination becomes ‘internalized’ for domination’s sake. What is usually indicated as a
goal—the happiness of the individual, health, and wealth—gains its significance exclusively from
its functional potentiality. These terms designate favorable conditions for intellectual and material
production. Therefore self-renunciation of the individual in industrialist society has no goal
transcending industrialist society. Such abnegation brings about rationality with reference to means
and irrationality with reference to human existence. Society and its institutions, no less than the
individual himself, bear the mark of this discrepancy. Since the subjugation of nature, in and
outside of man, goes on without a meaningful motive, nature is not really transcended or reconciled
but merely repressed.
repression and domination for their own sake without thereby promoting survival. Under these circumstances, the process of repression and domination has become irrational.\footnote{144}

Moreover, on the basis of psychoanalytic theory, Horkheimer and Adorno take it that instinctual drives are not weakened by extreme repression but are rather strengthened and rendered pathological. As repression and self-renunciation become stronger, the demands for gratification of the instincts also become stronger. But social praxis in modern capitalist society fails to offer any outlet for the satisfaction of pleasure instincts. This state of affairs leads to an ever-growing unconscious resentment against civilization and institutionalized rational structures that enforce repression. The modern individual thus has a great reservoir of pent-up repression and latent aggression ready to explode at any opportunity. This instinctual reservoir finds outlets in the modern world in movements based on ideologies of nationalism, ethnic prejudice, fascism, and war. Repressed nature thus “returns” in outbursts of destruction of human beings, of the natural world, and ultimately of civilization itself. Thus, for Adorno, the excesses of violence and even the ecological crises of the modern world are not accidental to modernity but are rather based on the very psycho-dynamics on which the modern order is built.\footnote{145}

\footnote{144} This does not mean that human civilization was reconciled to human needs and rationality was not problematic before levels of repression exceeded what is necessary for survival. Civilization and rationality were from the beginning based on psycho-dynamics that demanded renunciation from the individual, and that made possible the increase in repression that has characterized the development of Western civilization. The problem of extreme repression in modern civilization has its seeds in the very dynamics by which civilization developed. However, the current state of repression is not a necessary development from those dynamics. I give a detailed interpretation of the pathological levels of repression in modern society and the relation between this outcome and the necessary dynamics of civilization in general in chapters 5-6.

\footnote{145} Adorno and other members of the early Institut für Sozialforschung carried a number of studies on what they took to be the authoritarian irrationalism of modern society to support their claim that the dynamics of the modern social order are essentially fascist, and to argue that the recurrent outburst of
Adorno thus takes it that the underlying “logic” of modern society, i.e. the principle of exchange, does not express the self-determination of the social organism but rather its determination by “repressed nature,” which determination undermines the continued survival of human beings and therefore also the survival of society. So, the modern social order’s determination by the principle of exchange is neither rationally self-imposed nor conducive to achieving the interests of society. It is neither autonomous nor reconciled to the needs and desires of individuals and society, as Hegel claimed.

3.2.4 Adorno’s overall argument against Hegel: the prescriptive dimension

We have now seen the details of Adorno’s arguments against the three key Hegelian conditions identified in section 1. Against Hegel, Adorno claims that the modern social order is not autonomous or rational, but rather heteronomous and driven by irrational and pathological dynamics. The question I want to address in this final part of section 2 is whether Adorno’s arguments apply only to the descriptive dimension of Hegel’s social theory, or whether they rather apply also to the theory as a normative standard. For, a defender of Hegel might claim that the arguments, assuming that they are successful, show only that the modern social order is in fact heteronomous and irrational, whereas it ought to be as Hegel described it: autonomous and rational. In this irrational destruction that have characterized recent history are not aberrations but rather extreme expressions of fascist tendencies latent in everyday social life. Perhaps the most famous of these studies is The Authoritarian Personality (New York: Harper, 1950), which claimed that the characterological bases of fascism (the authoritarian personality structure) are widely distributed and encouraged by the structure of advanced capitalist society. They moreover argued that the culture industry and the mass media produce and reproduce this authoritarian character type, so that there is a continuity between the culture industry and the extreme expressions of aggression that characterize ethnic prejudice, fascism and war. See for example Adorno’s studies of astrology and fascist propaganda in The Stars Down to Earth (London and New York: Taylor and Francis, 2002).
case, Hegel’s model would remain valid as a normative model for the kind of social order we should strive to establish.

In what follows I offer two arguments in opposition to this defense of Hegel against Adorno. The first shows that, if Adorno’s arguments are successful, they refute not only Hegel’s idea that his model describes the modern social order but also his argumentative strategy for the claim that the model establishes a normative standard for social organization in general. The second argument I propose shows moreover that, if Adorno’s arguments are successful, then any model that prescribes rational autonomy as the standard for social organization is misguided. Accepting Adorno’s critique of Hegel’s social theory challenges the social theorist to think of a new socio-political ideal in terms other than radical autonomy.

To see why Adorno’s arguments take aim not only at Hegel’s theory as a descriptive model but also at Hegel’s arguments for the prescriptive legitimacy of the model, we need to look at how the prescriptive dimension is justified in the Hegelian philosophy. The structure of Hegel’s argumentation (not only in his social theory but in his system as a whole) is such that it moves from an identification of the immanent logic of reality to the normative claim that this immanent logic just is the logic of the rational; it just is the standard of the rational. This does not mean that every detail of what happens to be the case is rational; but it does mean that what exists can always be understood as following, even if only implicitly and imperfectly, from a principle of rationality; even if the real does not fully actualize that principle in every respect, it is
determined in its essence by it.\textsuperscript{146} So, for instance, even if the modern social order does not in every detail follow the laws of rationality, any case of irrational deviation (1) is intelligible only against the immanent rationality of the background, and therefore (2) understanding it as irrational entails understanding what needs to be corrected in order to bring the local irrational element in conformity with the rational whole. Hegel takes it that understanding a local irrational occurrence within the social order brings to the fore a local element that has not yet fully actualized its rational potential, and the realization of this unfulfilled potential at once constitutes both a determinate ground for understanding

\textsuperscript{146} Consider, for instance, Hegel’s remarks about the state when he affirms that even a deficient actualization of the state is nonetheless, in its essence, determined by the rational ‘Idea’ of the state. See Hegel, G.W.F., \textit{Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts}, in \textit{Werke}, Vol. 7 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1986), §258, p. 403-4:

\begin{quote}
\end{quote}

English translation by H.B. Nisbet in \textit{Elements of the Philosophy of Right} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) §258, p. 279:

The state consists in the march of God in the world, and its basis is the power of reason actualizing itself as will. In considering the Idea of the state, we must not have any particular states or particular institutions in mind; instead, we should consider the Idea, this actual God, in its own right [\textit{für sich}]. Any state, even if we pronounce it bad in the light of our own principles, and even if we discover this or that defect in it, invariably has the essential moments of its existence [\textit{Existenz}] within itself (provided it is one of the more advanced states of our time). But since it is easier to discover deficiencies than to comprehend the affirmative, one may easily fall into the mistake of overlooking the inner organism of the state in favour of individual [\textit{einzeln}] aspects. The state is not a work of art; it exists in the world, and hence in the sphere of arbitrariness, contingency, and error, and bad behaviour may disfigure it in many respects. But the ugliest man, the criminal, the invalid, or the cripple is still a living human being; the affirmative aspect—life—survives [\textit{besteht}] in spite of such deficiencies, and it is with this affirmative aspect that we are here concerned.
how the potential can be fulfilled and an effective motivational force for practical intervention to render the world ever more expressive of its rational essence—the type of intervention Hegel sees as the motor of history.

Adorno, on the other hand, maintains that the immanent logic of the social order is itself irrational. Against (1) above, Adorno holds (1’) that local elements of irrationality in the modern social order are understood correctly when seen as local expressions of the global irrationality of the order as a whole, an irrationality that can be diagnosed as resulting from the pathological psycho-dynamics that accompanied the rise of modernity, and that continue to become ever more pathological with modern capitalism’s unbridled expansion. Understanding the irrationality of a local occurrence thus requires an understanding of the global *irrationality* (rather than rationality) of the total social context in which it occurs. But, if the context of intelligibility for a local irrationality is not itself rational but rather mired in irrationality, then it follows that (2’) the act of placing the local irrational occurrence in relation to its background does not indicate how the local irrationality could be locally “fixed” in order to render it rational. In fact, the kind of practical intervention that would transform the social world into a *rational* world would of necessity for Adorno have to aim at a *global* change of the entire underlying structure of society, for it is the overall irrationality of the whole order that causes localized instances of irrationality to erupt.

This means that understanding the immanent logic of any element of the social order leads only to an understanding of the irrationality of the social order as a whole (specifically determined in terms of the social order’s relation to non-rational nature). But, then, it is impossible to move from an identification of the essential principle that
guides social development to the construction on its basis of a normative model of what a rational order should be. In other words, Adorno’s rejection of the Hegelian doctrine that the real is in its essence rational blocks the elevation of a descriptive model into a prescriptive model. No longer backed by this key Hegelian doctrine, the move becomes an instance of the naturalistic fallacy. As a result, if Adorno’s arguments for the actual irrationality of the modern social order hold, then they constitute a refutation not only of Hegel’s social theory in its descriptive dimension but also a of Hegel’s grounds for claiming that the theory has a prescriptive dimension as well.\footnote{This critique of the prescriptive claim can also be formulated in terms of Adorno’s critique of the Hegelian philosophy of history, which is based on Adorno’s rejection of Hegel’s idea that world history is a narrative of the ever increasing actualization of reason. The Philosophy of Right does not conclude with Hegel’s arguments for the rationality of the social order. Instead, Hegel follows these arguments by locating his description of the modern social order into a larger narrative of the rational development of \textit{Spirit} in world history. The reason this move is necessary is because only within the larger framework can the full rationality of the modern social order be ascertained. Only within a larger framework that shows all of human history, and all of reality, to be essentially rational, can the discovery of the immanent logic of the real—here, of the social order—be argued to be \textit{ipso facto} expressive of rationality. If we reject the idea that world history can be reconstructed along a narrative of ever increasing rationality (as Adorno does), then the idea that the modern social order represents the most rational order loses its ground.}

Moreover, if Adorno is right in saying that the irrationality predominant in modernity is due to its specifically \textit{antagonistic} relation to the instincts, then the primary question to address in seeking to understand what a better social order would be is what a better relation to the instincts would be—a relation that would allow for the healthy expression of pleasure instincts and thus for human happiness, and that would not result in the magnification of destructive instincts and desires. This way of posing the question would have to take at its point of the departure the ideas that (i) the primary goal for social organization must be defined in terms of a \textit{value} (for instance peace or happiness) rather than in terms of rationality, for, moreover, (ii) the \textit{definition} of rationality is itself a problem, since the development of rationality is at least initially mired in the very
antagonistic relation to internal nature (to the instincts) that became dissociated from a human purpose in modernity and continued to grow for its own sake alone, and which stands at the basis of the modern order’s pathology. But, if the development of rationality itself is conceived as problematic when it becomes divorced from a telos defined in terms of value, then rationality alone cannot be the standard by which a new social ideal is proposed—that is, unless rationality itself is understood in a new way that incorporates a different relation to the instincts. And a relation that would circumvent descent into repression and irrationality would have to give up the goal of a radical autonomy of reason because it would have to acknowledge the inevitable intertwinenent of socio-historical development with non-rational, psycho-dynamic ‘natural’ elements.

3.3 Conclusion: Adorno’s conception of antagonism

In concluding, I want to return to the concept that this discussion was first intended to elucidate: that is, Adorno’s conception of antagonism. The opening question for our discussion was the meaning of Adorno’s claim that modern social reality is inherently antagonistic. The above reconstruction of Adorno’s position in terms of his critique of Hegel’s social theory of ‘reconciliation’ now places us in a position to answer the question. I have reconstructed this critique as a denial of three Hegelian claims: (1) the internal autonomy of the central institutions of modernity, (2) the preservation of private freedom, and (3) the autonomy of the social order as a whole. The denial of (2), as I showed, is already entailed by the denial of (1). So, we can characterize Adorno’s position as the denial of (1) internal and (2) global autonomy.
More specifically, Adorno’s claim that the modern social order is structured by antagonism can be broken down into the following claims:

(1) The dynamics of the modern social world are both locally (in terms of its constitutive institutions) and globally determined by the principle of exchange, which does not further human goals of happiness and freedom but rather systematically opposes them (sections 3.2.1 and 3.2.2).

(2) The dominant role that the principle of exchange plays in the social order is built on the basis of antagonism against instinctual demands for satisfaction of the pleasure principle of the id. This antagonism results in an increase in unconscious resentment toward civilization and pent-up aggression, which in turn threatens to destroy society through periodic outbursts of violence and destruction (section 3.2.3).

The first thesis claims that every finite element of social life (and therefore also social life as a whole) is ultimately regulated by the principle of exchange. This thesis points to the internal heteronomy of social elements due to the primacy of economic relations. The second thesis claims that the primacy of the economy as a whole is heteronomously determined in accordance with unconscious and pathological dynamics. This thesis points to a global heteronomy of the social order due to the primacy of “repressed nature” over social dynamics. Adorno’s further claim that the modern social order is essentially antagonistic corresponds to the idea that the phenomena of internal heteronomy and global heteronomy described above are not accidental features of modern society but rather constitute the fundamental character of the modern social order.
Adorno’s conception of the antagonistic subject-object relation that characterizes modern society is drawn along the axes of internal and global heteronomy. The first axis, i.e. internal heteronomy, has to do mostly with the relation between the subject and the social world. The second axis, i.e. global heteronomy, is grounded in the way that nature mediates the subject’s relation to social reality. The two-fold structure of internal and global heteronomy thus constitutes a general framework for Adorno’s conception of the subject-object relation: though it does not provide us with a final view of the relation, since only an exposition of specific mediations between these two levels of heteronomy would flesh out the relation, it does provide us with an exhaustive framework of the logical-ontological axes along which the subject, the social order, and nature mediate each other according to Adorno.

The next step we need to take is to investigate how this account of the subject-object relation buttresses Adorno’s conception of dialectical contradiction. In the remainder of this study, I will employ the distinction between internal and global heteronomy as a systematic framework for investigating how the subject-object ontology of antagonism clarified in this chapter allegedly gives rise to the two forms of contradiction that impel negative dialectics forward.
CHAPTER 4:
THE CONTRADICTION IN THE OBJECT

The previous chapter concluded with a clarification of Adorno’s social ontology of antagonism. I reconstructed Adorno’s notion of antagonism along two axes. The first is a denial of what I have called the *internal autonomy* of finite elements of the modern social order—in particular, of the internal autonomy of the central social institutions of modernity. The institutions are heteronomous because their development is determined by the principle of exchange, which is neither internally defined in terms of the institution’s social role nor conducive to ends that constitute internal goods for the institution. The second is a denial of the *global autonomy* of the modern social order as a whole. The ground for this denial is Adorno’s idea that the social order’s determination by the logic of exchange is heteronomously imposed on it because it is built on the basis of an unconscious determination of society by non-rational nature, and, instead of furthering the good of society as a whole, determination by the logic of exchange leads to an increase in unconscious resentment toward civilization and pent-up aggression, which in turn threatens to destroy society through periodic outbursts of violence and destruction. The two forms of heteronomy are connected in that, for Adorno, the principle of exchange’s determinative role in the social order (internal heteronomy) is the result of the fundamental antagonism that characterizes the relation between the modern social order and humanity’s instinctual desires (global heteronomy).
The question I pursue in this and the following chapter is how Adorno’s notion of antagonism, understood as the above twofold heteronomy, constitutes the ontological ground for dialectical contradiction in subjective reflection. In this chapter, I focus on the first of the two forms of heteronomy involved in Adorno’s notion of antagonism: that is, *internal heteronomy*. I show that this first form of heteronomy is the ontological ground for the “contradiction in the object.” Later, chapters 5 and 6 will give an account of the second form of heteronomy, and chapter 7 will show that it stands at the basis of the “contradiction in the concept.”

As I have said, this chapter focuses on the first element of Adorno’s ontology of antagonism: *internal heteronomy*, or the determination of every finite realm of social life by the principle of exchange. In section 1, I submit this element of Adorno’s social ontology to close examination, and I explore its consequences for the structure of thought in general. In section 2, I show that Adorno’s view of internal heteronomy corresponds to a conception of both the concrete structure of social reality, and the conceptual structure of thought, as defined by irreconcilable tension between a sphere of ‘essence’ and a sphere of ‘appearance.’ This tension just is the “contradiction in the object.” Section 3 fleshes out my analysis of Adorno’s conception of the relation between appearance and essence that defines the “contradiction in the object” by considering Kantian and Hegelian objections to it.

My main concern in sections 1-3 is thus to clarify the structure of the “contradiction in the object,” which defines both social reality and the form of dialectical reflection uniquely suited to reproducing the complex structure of that reality without
falling into ideological illusion. Sections 4-5 in turn concentrate on clarifying the structure of this form of reflection.

In section 4, I show that the model of dialectical reflection that can be developed on the basis of the “contradiction in the object” corresponds to the structure of negative dialectical reflection that was discovered already in chapter 2, and I employ the discussion in this chapter to refine that initial account. In section 5, I argue that this form of reflection is structurally homologous to a Hegelian-Marxian model of dialectics. This model is specifically suited to the object of critical reflection, i.e., the structure of social reality derived from the first element of antagonism: internal heteronomy. The model, however, proves to be incomplete when we bring the second element in Adorno’s social ontology of antagonism to bear: the element of global heteronomy due to the determination of the social order by nature. I explain how the first element corresponds in reflection to the Hegelian-Marxian model, and how the model breaks down, or is at best incomplete, when we take into account the global heteronomy of ‘antagonistic’ society. The element of global heteronomy demands a different analysis of social reality and, in particular, of its relation to nature. (This account will be the topic of chapters 5-6, and will undergird another dimension of Adorno’s conception of contradiction, namely that of the “contradiction in the concept,” which I develop in chapters 7-8).

4.1 Society’s determination by exchange and its epistemological consequences

I begin by analyzing Adorno’s conception of social reality, and the place that reflection has within that conception of reality, concentrating for the moment on the view of social reality that follows specifically from the first element of social antagonism:
local heteronomy, or total determination by exchange. My focus in this section is to explore the relation between social reality and reflection, and in particular the capacity of thought to re-create the structure of reality in reflection.

More specifically, in this section I show that Adorno’s conception of local heteronomy implies the following two theses: (1) Every element of social reality is determined by the principle of exchange, and (2) conceptuality as a whole is determined by the same principle. Together, (1) and (2) entail that conceptual thought is in principle capable of tracking reality, for thought and reality are structured in accordance with the same principle. However, the principle of exchange is deceptive: it gives rise to an ‘appearance’ that in fact opposes and conceals the ‘essence’ of social reality. I close this section with a discussion of the epistemological problems that the deceptive nature of the principle of exchange raises; Adorno’s answer to these problems will then be the topic of section 2.

As we saw in chapter 3, Adorno holds that the central institutions of modern society are all determined by the principle of exchange. The claim can be generalized to include social reality as a whole, down to its most minute elements.\footnote{See my discussion in chapter 2 regarding Adorno’s claim that the principle of exchange has come to govern even the most precious spaces of private life. As I discuss in that chapter, Adorno supports this idea with several analyses of private life in \textit{Minima Moralia}.}

But how much of reality is encompassed by ‘social reality’? Importantly, ‘social reality’ for Adorno is not an abstract construct supervenient on psychological states, or some other version of a construct supervenient on a more basic, non-social substratum. For Adorno, all of experienceable reality is pervaded by social elements.\footnote{This is why Adorno argues, against many sociologists of his (and our) time, that the concept of ‘society’ needs to be maintained in sociology. Understanding the significance of even the smallest}
landscape is encountered by consciousness in a way pervaded by social categories. And these categories are *objective elements* of the landscape; they are not subjective additions that can be subtracted.

Adorno of course does not hold that reality is ideal, that it only exists insofar as it is, or can be, experienced. However, he does hold that when we speak of reality in isolation from the elements that make it experienceable—elements that are always already social in nature—we are able to speak in this manner only after a process of *abstraction*. The idea of a substratum free of subjective (and thus also social) categories is derivative and constructed on the basis of an original concept of reality that is always already mediated by social understanding. Social conceptual categories constitute “nicht sowohl die konstitutive Begrifflichkeit des erkennenden Subjekts al seine in der Sache


Confronted with this claim, the skeptic may argue that scientific or mathematical structures are constitutive of reality and yet free of social categories and therefore seem to offer a counter-example to Adorno’s claim. However, there is no reason why Adorno would need to deny that scientific and mathematical knowledge gives us insight into objective elements of reality. His point is only that we arrive at knowledge of these objective elements via processes of rational abstraction that are secondary to the more basic encounter in experience with a reality that is never exhausted by such elements, and that is pervaded by social understandings. We for instance never encounter numbers or mathematical structures in experience, but rather find numbers and structures through a subsequent *analysis* of experience. This does not deny the *validity* of mathematical and scientific forms of knowledge, only their *primacy*. To make the view clearer, consider Plato’s theory of knowledge in the *Republic*. Experience is never directly of intelligible objects, be it mathematical objects or the pure Forms. Rather, experience provides a basis on which, through processes of intellectual abstraction, we can arrive at intelligible objects. However, whereas for Plato these objects reveal what is truly real and only distorted in the appearances of the experienceable realm, for Adorno neither experience nor intelligible structures are more or less real. Both are objective elements of reality, and Adorno is not interested in making any ontological claims about more or less fundamental structures of *being* (he thinks the whole idea of such an ontological project is flawed). But he does hold that the fullness of experience is primary insofar as it is what we actually encounter in our transactions with the world, and the intelligible structures are derivative attempts to make certain isolated elements more precise in a secondary step of reflection.
selbst waltende” [not merely the constitutive conceptuality of the knowing subject but also a conceptuality which holds sway in reality (Sache) itself].\textsuperscript{151}

Adorno thus opposes the idea that reality should \textit{as a whole} be identified with a non-social substratum that then gives rise to supervenient social elements. The point is not that certain isolated, non-socially defined elements cannot be identified; clearly finite non-social components of reality, like numbers or atoms, \textit{can} be identified. The point, rather, is that reality \textit{as a whole} is irreducibly social—it cannot be \textit{reduced} to a non-social substratum, and even isolated elements that are separated through analysis from social elements are initially given as mediated by society.

We can reconstruct an argument for this view on Adorno’s behalf as follows. Reducing reality to a non-social substratum would require the following two steps:

1. identifying and separating social from non-social elements in reality, and
2. showing that the non-social elements are basic or foundational, while the social elements are supervenient or derivative.

For Adorno, (1) is impossible, and (2) is based on an ideologically motivated assumption.

The first step (separating social and non-social elements) requires a standard free of social prejudice in accordance with which the elements can be separated, and Adorno holds that we cannot achieve a standpoint free of social bias in order to establish what such a standard would be. Whereas certain non-social elements of reality can be identified, there are elements in which social and non-social aspects cannot be disentangled: for instance, the objects of analysis of social theory or historical

reconstructions of the past. Because the very description of these objects involves the values and social prejudices of the interpreter, the objects cannot be cleanly broken down into non-social facts, on the one hand, and socially determined interpretations, on the other. A complete separation of social and non-social elements that would then allow for the reduction of the first to the second is impossible.

Additionally, Adorno argues that the very motivation for attempting such a reduction is ideologically tainted. The attempt is based on the assumption that what is truly real must be void of subjectivity. But this assumption is ideologically motivated, for its role is to support and misrepresent the status quo. First, by representing what is “truly real” as free of social and historical elements, the assumption leads to a view of reality as ultimately static and unchangeable, and this assumed immutability of the real has the effect of limiting the scope of critique and forestalling attempts at radical change, for it does not make sense to try to change what is in essence immutable. Thus the assumption that what is truly real is free of subjective elements has the effect of supporting the status quo. Second, because the assumption conceals the mediation of reality by society, it conceals in particular the fact that every realm of life is determined according to the logic of exchange. According to Adorno, this concealment is necessary for maintaining the very supremacy of the market that is concealed in the first place, for a self-conscious understanding of the market’s dominance would instigate the desire for revolutionary change. The positivist assumption is thus itself caused by society, more specifically by the social forces that strive to maintain their primacy over the social order: the very forces that the positivistic assumption purges from its view of the real. In its
refusal to acknowledge social factors as elements of the real, the positivist assumption is itself determined by society—more specifically, by ideology.\footnote{See Adorno, “Soziologie und empirische Forschung” in Gesammelte Schriften, Vol. 8 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1969), 205, where he says that}

Thus the project of reducing social reality to a secondary construct on the basis of a primary, non-social substratum, is according to Adorno both impossible (because it is impossible to separate \textit{all} social from non-social elements of reality in the first place) and wrong-headed (because it is motivated by ideology).

It is not my goal here to evaluate Adorno’s view that reality is always already social. What is important is to understand the view, from which it follows that all of reality in its full and primary sense is co-extensive with ‘social reality.’\footnote{The two terms have the same extension but differ in intension. This is important because ‘reality’ \textit{tout court} contains in its meaning not only the determination of all finite phenomena by society but also the element of “nature” that itself determines society.} And, since social reality is determined by the principle of exchange, it follows that any element of reality that we isolate as the object of thought is determined by the logic of exchange.

\footnote{See also Adorno, “Zu Subjekt und Objekt,” Gesammelte Schriften, Vol. 8 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1969), 753-4, where Adorno explains that the very idea of a more fundamental reality purged of subjective elements is itself the result of a form of thinking based on exchange—that is, a form of thinking determined by social (subjective) elements. English translation in Critical Models (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 253.}
The logic of exchange thus determines reality in general. Rationality and conceptual thinking, however, are themselves part of that reality. For Adorno and the critical theorists in general, thought is first and foremost a form of social praxis, and as such it is determined by the same principle that determines social life as a whole: the principle of exchange. As Horkheimer emphasized in his influential inaugural lecture on the meaning of critical theory, the latter holds that even the most theoretical and abstract exercises of thought—those of the scientist and the scholar—constitute “Besonderungen der Art und Weise, wie sich die Gesellschaft mit der Natur auseinandersetzt und in ihrer gegebenen Form erhält” [particular ways in which society comes to grips with nature and preserves its received (given) form]. “Sie [die Wirtschaftsubjekte in der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft] glauben, nach individuellen Entschlüssen zu handeln, während sie noch in ihren kompliziertesten Kalkulationen Exponenten des unübersichtlichen gesellschaftlichen Mechanismus.” [The economic subjects of bourgeois society believe that they behave in accordance with individual determinations, while in fact even in their most complicated calculations they are exponents of the un-surveyable social mechanism.]\(^{154}\) Not only is the object of knowledge—reality, or finite elements thereof—socially pre-formed, but also our epistemic apparatus—thought in general—is formed in the same way. Both are determined by the essence of the social totality, which in advanced capitalism corresponds specifically to the principle of exchange.

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\(^{154}\) Horkheimer, Max, “Traditionelle und kritische Theorie,” in Traditionelle und kritische Theorie: Fünf Aufsätze (Frankfurt am Main: Fisher, 1992), 214. See also Ibid., 213: “Der Gelehrte und seine Wissenschaft sind in den gesellschaftlichen Apparat eingespannt, ihre Leistung ist ein Moment der Selbsterhaltung, der fortwährenden Reproduktion des Bestehenden, gleichviel, was sie sich selbst für einen Reim darauf machen” [The scholar and his science are inserted into the social apparatus; his accomplishments are a moment of the self-preservation and the continuous reproduction of the established state of things, regardless of what he makes of them].
There is therefore a sort of socially pre-determined harmony between the objects of knowledge and thought. The old philosophical problem of a split between object and thought is inoperative from the start. Thought and its objects are bridged through their common determination by the social totality to which they belong: in particular, by the principle of exchange. This connection between thought and object guarantees the possibility of success in subjective reflection, where ‘success’ refers to a relation of correspondence between reflection and the object world. In fact, this connection explains why Adorno insists that an appropriate form of reflection that succeeds in reproducing the structure of the object-world in thought is an “ontological logic”: thought is able to follow the determinations of its object because it is from the start connected to its object by virtue of its own internal dynamics. The idea that thought can follow the matter of thought instead of just imposing an external logical structure on this matter makes sense only if thought and object are connected from the start, and they are so connected according to Adorno because they share a common essence in the principle of exchange.155

However, this connection between subject and object does not entail that every mode of thinking correctly describes reality. Rather, an accurate description of the object-world requires that reflection be deployed in a very specific, dialectical way, which is necessary for overcoming a basic obstacle imposed by the nature of the principle that unites subject and object: the principle of exchange.

155 I have already discussed Adorno’s idea, following Hegel’s, that philosophical thought is ontological because it is receptive to the determinations of the object and follows them without imposing external categories on the matter of reflection. See chapter 1, section 1.1, and chapter 2, section 2.1.
The principle of exchange is such that its determining power necessarily takes place “behind the back of consciousness.” Though the principle of exchange is operative in individual acts of social and historical significance, it is ordinarily not self-consciously apprehended as so operative by individuals. In fact, it is part of the essence of the principle that it operates only un-self-consciously, for, as will become clear below, its success depends in part on its remaining behind the veil of self-conscious understanding.

Rule by the principle of exchange operates specifically through ideological distortion. And ideological distortion exploits what we might call a logic of opposites. Individuals further the aims of the principle of exchange through the illusion that they are furthering ends that are in fact opposite to the brute ends of the market. Individuals would generally cite as the motivations for their actions things like the desire for happiness or freedom, or their devotion to love and family. Yet, if Adorno is right, the deep logic of their actions is almost always intelligible as determined by the logic of exchange. The same holds for the actions of states. The latter may cite humanitarian reasons, or the goal to democratize the world and to expand human rights and freedom as reasons for military intervention, yet these actions are not fully understandable without an analysis that discloses them as determined by the logic of exchange.

The point can also be seen in terms of the role of key concepts in social life. For Adorno, the concepts central to modern society’s self-understanding are usually concepts that conceal the true nature of the social order and play an ideological role in the maintenance of that order. Take, for instance, the concept of individual freedom, which plays a pivotal role in the self-understanding of modern Western societies. This concept functions in self-consciousness by cultivating the belief that modern individuals follow
their own autonomously defined ends and are self-determining islands unto themselves. According to Adorno, this belief is not only false but moreover functions ideologically by making individuals unable to see the ways in which their actions are determined by the heteronomous logic of the market. It thus creates a social illusion *necessary* for the maintenance of the market’s supremacy over the individual, for, Adorno intimates, self-conscious recognition of such supremacy would lead individuals to oppose the determinations of their actions by the capitalist relations of production—or, at least, would cause a crisis of consciousness and of Western culture’s understanding of itself.

The logic of exchange is thus, according to Adorno, self-concealing; and it is necessarily so, for its very survival as the determining force behind social reality depends in part on its concealment from self-consciousness. The principle of exchange produces ideological illusion as a way to hide its rule over social reality from self-consciousness, in order to preserve itself.\(^{156}\) Ideological illusion is “notwendig, weil der Gegenstand, die Gesellschaft, nichts so sehr fürchtet, wie beim Namen gerufen zu werden, und darum unwillkürlich nur solche Erkenntnisse ihrer selbst fördert und duldet, die von ihr ableiten.”\(^{157}\)

\(^{156}\) Note that we do not yet have an explanation for the self-concealing nature of the principle of exchange. This explanation hinges on the principle’s mediation by nature and will be explained explicitly in chapter 6. For now, the key point is to understand that Adorno takes the essence of social reality—that is, the principle of exchange—to be by its very nature self-concealing, and thus necessarily to give rise to ideological illusion in ordinary consciousness.

\(^{157}\) Adorno, “Soziologie und empirische Forschung” in *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. 8 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1969), 205. English translation in by Glyn Adey and David Frisby Adorno, “Sociology and Empirical Research,” in *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology* (Brookfield, Hong Kong, Singapore, Sydney: Avebury, 1994), 76: Ideology is “necessary since the object, society, fears nothing more than to be called by name, and therefore it automatically encourages and tolerates only such knowledge of itself that slides off its back without any impact.”
So, on the one hand, we have the idea that reflection is inherently tied to its object because of their common determination by the principle of exchange and is therefore in principle able to grasp the object-world accurately. But it cannot do so by simply following the surface appearance of reality, the way in which the social world presents itself in ordinary consciousness, because this appearance is ideologically produced 

*precisely in order to conceal the essence of reality*—to conceive reality’s determination by exchange. In order to penetrate the surface appearance of things and get to the deep logic of its object, thought needs to overcome the cunning of the principle of exchange.

### 4.2 The dialectic of essence and appearance and the “contradiction in the object”

In this section, I wish further to explain what seems to be the biggest obstacle to epistemic success in the analysis of society—namely, that the principle of exchange is inherently deceitful—and to reconstruct Adorno’s account of how this obstacle is surpassed by critical reflection. I begin by explaining the deceitful nature of exchange as a sundering of reality into a sphere of essence, on the one hand, and a sphere of appearance, on the other, where the two spheres are incompatible with each other. If the relation between the two spheres is seen as one of causation or uni-directional determination—where essence gives rise to appearance and simultaneously hides itself from appearance—then critical thought seems to be unavoidably trapped in “false appearance.” However, the model of uni-directional causation or determination applies only to a reified conception of social reality. The spheres of essence and appearance are not actually separate and related causally, but are rather *mediated*. Their mediation is in fact constitutive of reality as a whole (and thought in particular), and is therefore
available to thought. By bringing the relation of mediation to the surface, critical thought
is not only able to gain insight into essence, and into the relation between appearance and
essence, but moreover transforms this relation into a new understanding of the object
(that is, of social reality as a whole). This new understanding corresponds to the
conception of reality as the “contradiction in the object.” This section explains in detail
the relation of mediation between appearance and essence, the role that critical thought
plays in this relation, and the structure of reality that arises through critical analysis: the
“contradiction in the object.”

As I have said before, the principle of exchange has as one of its main functional
characteristics that it conceals its determining role. This concealment has the result of
bifurcating reality into a realm of appearance, which readily gives itself to ordinary
consciousness and represents reality in a distorted manner, and the deep structure or
essence of social reality, which is ruled by the principle of exchange. The two
dimensions of reality become sundered because they are in fact contradictory. But in
what sense are appearance and essence ‘contradictory’? Wouldn’t their being
contradictory entail that they cannot both simultaneously exist?

Consider an example of the contradiction at issue: whereas the surface appearance
of reality represents a realm with self-determined human beings who meet each other as
free individuals, the deep structure of the same reality reveals that it is an un-free order
where individuals who are utterly conditioned by the laws of the market meet each other
and interact in ways already pre-structured, again, by the market. The beliefs that
ordinary consciousness holds, and the formation of which the social order promotes, are
contradictory with the way things really are—that is, the semantic contents of appearance
(the propositions to which ordinary individuals give or tend to give assent) are contradictory, in a logical and straightforward sense, with the propositions that correctly describe the essence of (social) reality. This is the sense in which Adorno holds that the structure of social reality is a structure of contradiction between appearance and essence, and this contradictory structure captures part of what he means by the “contradiction in the object.”

But we must be careful in talking about the phenomenon by which reality is bifurcated into ‘appearance’ and ‘essence’ as a split into two realms, for it is essential to keep in mind that this is not an ontological separation into two different realms of being. (If it were an ontological bifurcation, then the two realms, being contradictory, could not co-exist.) The distinction between essence and appearance is not a distinction in the order of being but rather a distinction in the order of intelligibility: a distinction between the surface grammar of reality—i.e., appearance—and its deep logical structure—i.e., essence. The distinction between appearance and essence in Adorno is to be understood along Hegelian lines: Essence is not disconnected from appearance but is rather the ground of intelligibility for appearance and, as thus, is immanent in appearance. The appearance of reality is the appearance of essence; it results from the dynamics of essence (i.e., of the total determination of social reality by exchange). And the essence is essence only through its effects: through the appearance to which it gives rise. Thus, Adorno says, “Die gesellschaftliche Totalität führt kein Eigenleben oberhalb des von ihr Zusammengefaßten, aus dem sie selbst besteht. Sie produziert und reproduziert sich
durch ihre einzelnen Momente hindurch.” Following Hegel, Adorno calls this relation of inter-dependence between essence and appearance a relation of ‘mediation’ [Vermittlung].

Viewed as mediated, the relation between appearance and essence must be construed as constitutive not of two separate realms causally or representationally connected, but rather as the poles of intelligibility of a single realm: (social) reality. Appearance and essence, and their relation, are constitutive of object and subject: In objectivity, appearance corresponds to the realm of finite facts and essence to the overall constitution of finite facts by the social totality. In subjectivity, appearance corresponds to ordinary consciousness and essence to the theoretical grasp of the concept of “the whole” or “the social totality” as fully determined by exchange, and as the ground of intelligibility for the claims of ordinary consciousness.

Further, we have seen that Adorno holds the relation between appearance and essence to be one of ‘contradiction.’ The reason for this is that the analysis of finite facts and isolated elements of social life as independent from the social totality gives rise to an interpretation that is logically incompatible (thus ‘contradictory’) with the interpretation that arises from conceptualizing them as mediated by the social totality and, in particular, by the totality’s determination by the principle of exchange. In objectivity, appearance and essence constitute the inconsistent interplay between the logic of finite facts and their overall determination by society, in particular, by the principle of exchange. In

subjectivity, appearance and essence constitute the logical contradiction that arises
between the ordinary or positivist consciousness’s analysis of isolated elements, and the
theoretical consciousness’s analysis of all finite elements in terms of the social totality
that grounds their deep structure of intelligibility. The inconsistency that pervades both
objectivity and subjectivity just is Adorno’s “contradiction in the object.”

Figure 4.1: Inner contradictory structure of social reality: Adorno’s “contradiction in the object”.

The structure of the “contradiction in the object” arises because the sphere of
essence is essentially distortion-producing: the essence of social reality is only essence
by giving rise to a *distorted* appearance that in turn maintains the essence in place *as
essence*. And, in order for essence to maintain itself as essence, its distinction from
appearance must hold so that essence remains hidden behind appearance, so that it
remains protected from itself becoming appearance. In other words, the determination of
reality by the principle of exchange requires that this very determination remain hidden from apprehension in self-consciousness. For it is part of the nature of the principle of exchange that it remains the essence of social reality only insofar as it operates unconsciously, only insofar as it gives rise to an illusion (appearance) that is taken to be all there is to reality by ordinary consciousness. If, however, the principle of exchange is exposed as the operative principle behind a delusory appearance, it ceases to be essence and itself becomes appearance.¹⁵⁹

The one-sided dynamics between essence and appearance on which we have been focusing so far in the structure of the “contradiction in the object”—that is, the dynamics according to which the essence of reality is its determination by the principle of exchange, and this determination gives rise to a distorted appearance that specifically contradicts the essence—are dynamics characteristic of reified reality.¹⁶⁰ They

¹⁵⁹ This does not mean that the principle of exchange thereby ceases to determine social reality, but just that this very determination enters the realm of appearance and is no longer the hidden essence of reality.

¹⁶⁰ The notion of reification refers back to Georg Lukács’s idea that, under capitalism, social relations, which are in fact subjectively (socially) established and therefore susceptible of transformation, necessarily take on the mystified appearance of being relations among things; that is, relations that follow unchangeable and necessary laws grounded in the object and that are therefore unassailable to the subject. Lukács says of the commodity structure, which he takes to be the pivotal conceptual category in capitalist societies, that “[i]ts basis is that a relation between people takes on the character of a thing and thus acquires a ‘phantom objectivity’, an autonomy that seems so strictly rational and all-embracing as to conceal every trace of its fundamental nature: the relation between people” (Lukács, Georg, “Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat,” in History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971), 83). One example of how the phenomenon of reification appears in experience is the commodification of labor-power: The worker’s activity appears to her as an alien thing. Moreover, the world of commodities and their movement in the market appears as an order governed by objective laws to which the subject relates only by trying to discover them or to better articulate them, but not in such a way that she can actually alter them. The laws appear as something that individuals can come to understand and use to their advantage, but not as something dependent on their activity. In general, the phenomenon of reification is for Lukács a process whereby the qualities of the commodity, which are ossifications of social relations, are no longer seen as having a social, and therefore subjective, origin. The reified mind takes the commodity in its immediacy and the social relations revealed therein as objective, given, and unchangeable. The result of reification is that we come to view social relations of production that are specific to capitalism as if they were independent of capitalism and based on a time-less model of human relations governed by necessary, quasi-natural laws. Every aspect of life
appropriately depict our social reality because, according to Adorno, our social reality is
reified. But the phenomenon of reification is neither metaphysically necessary nor
unchangeable.

Reality remains reified only so long as consciousness remains trapped in social
delusion. The condition of reification is one in which, even though human beings create
social reality, they are not aware of their agency in this creation. Instead, they see the
social world as if its qualities were natural, given, and unchangeable. As a result, the
way in which human beings produce social reality is hidden from them; the creation
operates un-self-consciously, and only under the spell of this lack of self-consciousness is
the creation of social reality (and so social reality itself) blindly ruled by the principle of
exchange. This is the meaning of Adorno’s remark that “Die Autonomie der
Sozialprozesse ist selber kein An sich, sondern gründet in Verdinglichung; auch die den
Menschen entfremdeten Prozesse bleiben menschlich.”\textsuperscript{161} The priority of society over
individuals is not an immutable ontological principle but rather a fait social that has
become the governing principle of social reality only through a historical and contingent
development, and which, in order to remain true, makes itself true by maintaining itself
hidden from the self-consciousness of individuals.

\textsuperscript{161} Adorno, “Zur Logik der Sozialwissenschaften” in Gesammelte Schriften, Vol. 8 (Frankfurt am
the Logic of the Social Sciences,” in The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology (Brookfield, Hong Kong,
Singapore, Sydney: Avebury, 1994), 119: “The autonomy of social processes is itself not an ‘in itself’ but
rather it is grounded in reification; even the processes estranged from human beings remain human.”
If a critical form of thought exposes the appearance of social reality as the result of an ideological illusion caused by the principle of exchange, the whole phenomenon that becomes recognized—the very rule by the principle of exchange—itself becomes exposed as a sham, as a “spell” [Bann] on thought. Self-conscious recognition that social reality has been produced through blind submission to the principle of exchange makes this submission no longer blind. But the blindness of submission was constitutive of the one-sided structure of essence and appearance characteristic of reified reality. With the blindness abolished, the structure itself unravels.\(^{162}\)

The fact of determination by the principle of exchange becomes itself part of the material of appearance, and changes the very appearance of that appearance. In other words, when determination by the principle of exchange becomes self-consciously apprehended, the social world as a whole appears differently; its whole structure must now accommodate the insight that it itself is nothing but ideological appearance. The entire structure of the “contradiction in the object” becomes internal to appearance. Note that this does not mean that the initial ideological determination of appearance becomes

\(^{162}\) The goal of critical theory is to make submission to the principle of exchange no longer blind, and thus to demythologize the “spell” that governs reality. This is why Adorno is in fact a strong defender of the project of enlightenment. He conceives of this project as a project of “demythologization,” of liberating human beings from blind determination. The cause of his protests against the historical Enlightenment is that he takes the latter not to have gone far enough. By getting caught blindly in the spell created by social reality’s determination by the principle of exchange, the historical Enlightenment became entangled in a new mythology. In order to go beyond this atrophied state, enlightenment must break the latest spell. In Adorno’s words, “Was immer Aufklärung an Entzauberung vollbringt, will dem eigenen Sinn nach die Menschen vom Bann befreien; von dem der Dämonen einst, heute von dem, welchen die menschlichen Verhältnisse über sie ausüben. Aufklärung, die das vergisst, desinteressiert es beim Bann belässt und sich in der Herstellung brauchbarer begrifflicher Apparaturen erschöpft, sabotiert sich selbst...“ ("Zur Logik der Sozialwissenschaften," 565). (English translation by Glyn Adey and David Frisby in “On the Logic of the Social Sciences,” in The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology, 121-122: “Whatever enlightenment achieves in the form of disenchantment it must necessarily desire to liberate human beings from such spells—formerly from that of the demons, nowadays from the spell which human relations exert over them. An enlightenment which forgets this, which disinterestedly takes the spell as given and exhausts itself in the production of utilizable conceptual apparatuses sabotages itself...”)
suddenly transformed into something else; rather, appearance continues to appear as before, but it is now apprehended as wearing its own ideological nature (its own “falsity”) on its sleeves. Appearance now has as part of its content the reflection that exposes it as resulting from a deceitful determining principle: that is, the principle of exchange. But now there is no longer a bifurcation into appearance and essence, for appearance now comes to include the insight that it is “negative,” that it is a distorted image.

Note that what is gained here is not insight into a deeper, “true” composition of reality that stands as ground for the distorted appearance. Rather, what is gained is insight into the ordinary appearance of reality as distorted—as the result of a social “spell”—and distorted specifically through the logic of exchange relations and their rule over the totality of social life. So, the insight gained in critical thought does not result in the production of new finite content (new facts) added to the network of our knowledge of society, but rather on a new interpretation of the same old facts, where, however, the new interpretation reveals them as intelligible only as determined by the totality of society and its determination by exchange. This, of course, does result in new knowledge, specifically, knowledge of the structure of society as a totality, a closed system determined by exchange, where any finite elements are intelligible only in relation to the system as a whole. Also note that this change in our knowledge of society neither liberates social reality nor thought from determination by society, by the principle of exchange. It results only in thought’s self-awareness of its own determination by the principle of exchange.
The following diagram illustrates the dynamic between essence and appearance that has been described thus far:

![Diagram](image_url)

**Figure 4.2: Intervention on the dynamics of essence and appearance through critical thought**

Let us sum up what we have seen so far of Adorno’s conception of the dialectic between essence and appearance. We began with a view that conceptualized the relation between appearance and essence as one of uni-directional determination, whereby ‘essence’ is the hidden ‘truth’ of reality—that is, determination by exchange is the hidden truth of the social order—and it ‘causes’ or ‘determines’ a deceptive appearance that maintains the essence hidden from view. However, we found that this simple structure corresponds to a reified view of reality. The relation between appearance and essence is not one of causation or uni-directional determination of appearance by essence, but rather one of *mediation*. Viewed as mediated, the relation between appearance and essence must be construed as constitutive not of two separate realms causally or
representationally connected, but rather as the poles of intelligibility of a single realm: (social) reality. Appearance and essence, and their relation, are constitutive of object and subject in accordance with the “contradiction in the object.” The “contradiction” here is rooted in the fact that the logic of appearance is incompatible with the logic of essence when the two are considered in isolation: the analysis of appearance alone (the analysis of finite facts and isolated elements of social life in independence from the social totality) yields conclusions that are logically contradictory with the results that follow from analyzing appearance as determined by essence (that is, by analyzing finite facts and elements as intelligible only in relation to the social totality and, in particular, the principle of exchange). This “contradiction” between the logic of appearance and essence is according to Adorno grounded in the way concrete reality is structured as a result of its determination by exchange: hence the reason to call the contradiction a “contradiction in the object.”

Finally, we have seen that the “contradiction in the object” is shown by critical thought to be not an abstract contradiction but rather to be the internal structure of reified reality: hence to be internal to a more developed conception of appearance. In the section that follows, I explain and flesh out the idea that the dialectic between the reified notions of appearance and essence is sublated [aufgehoben] in a higher notion of appearance rather than a higher notion of essence.

4.3 Adorno’s resolution of the dialectic of appearance and essence

One of the more salient peculiarities of this view is what I have reconstructed as the idea that the intervention of critical thought into the one-sided dynamics between
appearance and essence characteristic of reified reality results in the transformation of the ‘contradiction’ into an opposition internal to appearance, where the structure of social reality is as a whole sublated into an ‘appearance’ that has no opposing or underlying ‘essence.’ There are at least two reasons why this view should initially seem strange: one is Kantian in spirit, and the other is an objection I would expect from a Hegelian point of view.

(1) **Kantian objection:** The concept of appearance analytically entails the concept of some underlying thing that *appears.*\(^{163}\) The view I have attributed to Adorno, according to which the dialectic of essence and appearance culminates with a dialectically higher conception of appearance without an underlying essence, is therefore incoherent. Even worse, the final notion of appearance is, I have claimed, ultimately understood as a whole as a “sham” or “delusion.” But the concepts of “sham” and “delusion” seem to imply an underlying *truth* that they deceptively present. Once again, it seems necessary to postulate a further ‘essence’ behind the final conception of appearance.

(2) **Hegelian objection:** In the *Science of Logic,* Hegel has already dealt with the dialectic between essence and appearance. Like Adorno, and against Kant, Hegel argues that essence and appearance are essentially mediated: Essence exists only through the appearances by which it progressively actualizes itself, and appearance is the actualization of essence.\(^{164}\) But this mediation is possible only

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because essence and appearance are revealed to be one-sided determinations of a third concept—‘ground’—which in turn is, like the initial determinations, merely a moment in the self-determined movement of pure thought (i.e., of “the Concept”). In my reconstruction of Adorno’s conception of the dialectic between appearance and essence, however, I have argued that the initial determinations are subsumed under appearance. In terms of Hegel’s view of the dialectic, this reconstruction seems to constitute a regression to one of the simple, one-sided determinations, rather than a dialectical progression to a more developed concept that subsumes the initial determinations under a third concept.

In this section, I take up these objections and explain Adorno’s position in response to them. This discussion culminates with an explanation of the reason and philosophical significance of my reconstruction of Adorno’s conception of the dialectic between appearance and essence as culminating with a more developed concept of appearance, independent of any underlying concept of essence.

I begin with (1) the Kantian objection. The charge here is that the subsumption of the one-sided conceptions of appearance and essence characteristic of reified reality into a more developed conception of appearance is incoherent because at the end of the process we are left with an appearance that has no essence underlying it. The assumption buttressing this objection is that the concept of appearance requires a further concept of essence, of which appearance is mere appearance, to be coherent at all. And, second, the more developed concept of appearance at the end of the dialectic is according to my reconstruction apprehended as delusory: a “sham” or a “spell” (this is the point of
Adorno’s famous statement that “[d]as Ganze ist das Unwahre”\textsuperscript{165} [the whole is the false]); and yet the concept of falsity seems to imply a conception of the ‘true’ or ‘essential’ of which the ‘false appearance’ is a distortion.

Let me consider first the idea that the final conception of appearance is ‘mere appearance’ and then the idea that it is “a spell” or a “delusion,” for the two sets of concepts involve different problems.

The legitimate basis for the above objection regarding the dialectically developed conception appearance as ‘mere appearance’ is that this label is necessarily relative: it entails that its referent is not self-grounded, not permanent and not unconditioned. But it does not need to involve the notion that there is something self-grounded, permanent, and unconditioned—something ‘essential’ in the strong sense of the term—underlying or causing the appearance. The totality of social reality is ‘mere appearance’ at the end of the dialectic between appearance and essence because its determining ground is the principle of exchange, which is itself mediated, or determined by, nature, and therefore is not self-grounded.\textsuperscript{166} Nature is however not something more essential or immutable giving rise to the appearance. Rather, adopting the standpoint of ‘nature’ as mediating social reality (that is, as mediating the totality that is itself mere appearance) allows only for the interpretation of the totality as contingent and delusory in a determinate way. Elucidation of this form of interpretation and its determinate character will have to wait until chapters 5-6; for now, it is important just to keep in mind that the status of the


\textsuperscript{166} Chapter 3 discussed briefly Adorno’s idea that the modern social order has developed thorough a process determined by unconscious psycho-dynamics predicated on an antagonistic relation between society and nature. This idea will be explained and developed in detail in chapters 5-6.
totality as ‘mere appearance’ identifies it as not having its ground in itself, and at the same time as nonetheless not pointing to a “truer,” foundational or immutable ground for appearance.

The second set of concepts, which identify the dialectically developed concept of the totality as a ‘sham’ or as ‘delusion’ is more problematic because the idea of delusion seems to entail the concept of a non-delusory state that the delusion represents in a distorted manner. But Adorno denies that there is a truer or a non-reified dimension of reality that is misrepresented by the final structure of appearance, the structure of reified society as the “contradiction in the object.” The concept of ‘delusion’ is here deployed in reference to the possibility of a non-reified reality, which itself is in fact involved in the apprehension of reality as thoroughly reified.

The insight that social reality is the product of ideological distortion grounded in reification involves the idea that social reality could be different. Recall that reification is only possible because human beings, who are the producers of social reality, are not aware of their productive agency, so that the latter takes place behind their conscious understanding and according to the principle of exchange. In becoming self-conscious of the determinative role that the principle of exchange plays, thought escapes the very condition of blindness that makes the status quo, determined as it is by exchange, appear necessary. But then the reality woven in accordance with the principle of exchange is seen to be contingent. And this contingency means precisely that some other reality, functioning in accordance with a principle different, could be realized. Whereas reified reality presents itself as necessary, critical thought’s apprehension of reality as reified already contains the understanding that the reified social order’s claim to necessity is
false or delusory. So, the idea that the final structure is appearance, in the sense that it is a ‘sham’ or ‘delusion,’ does not entail that there exists another dimension of reality that appearance misrepresents, but rather just the understanding that reified social reality is a historical, changeable *contingency*, that its claim to be necessary is a sham.

One last point that needs to be made about the delusory character of reified reality is that critical thought understands it not merely in terms of an abstract possibility that another social order could exist, but rather in contrast to a determinate negation of reified reality.

Die Gesellschaft, auf deren Erkenntnis Soziologie schließlich abzielt, wenn sie mehr sein will als eine bloße Technik, kristallisiert sich überhaupt nur um eine Konzeption von richtiger Gesellschaft. Diese ist aber nicht der bestehenden abstrakt, eben als vorgeblicher Wert, zu kontrastieren, sondern entspringt aus der Kritik, also dem Bewußtsein der Gesellschaft von ihren Widersprüchen und ihrer Notwendigkeit.\(^{167}\)

The concept of a possible order that would be radically different from the existing order is not a fully undetermined concept, but is rather a concept built step by step through determinate negation of the conditions that determine our current social order. Each of these steps constitutes a determinate, concrete negation of specific conditions in reified reality (e.g., a negation of alienated conditions of labor grounded in the possibility of different conditions, a negation of the primacy of financial capital’s interests over the


Society, the knowledge of which is ultimately the aim of sociology, if it is to be more than a mere technique, can only crystallize at all around a conception of the just society. The latter, however, is not to be contrasted with existing society in an abstract manner, simply as an ostensible value, but rather it arises from criticism, that is, from society’s awareness of its contradictions and its necessity.
social interests of individuals grounded in the possibility of putting the later set of interests first, a negation of widespread hunger in poor countries grounded in the fact that the means to produce enough food to feed the human population already exist, etc), so that each step reveals not merely a ‘logical’ possibility for things to be different but rather a real, concrete possibility.

The concept of a different social order as a whole is a task—a task constituted by step-wise determinate negations of elements in the existing order. This task, however, is never completed and fully given, and this is why the concept of a different, non-reified social order is as a whole never apprehensible in the fullness of its constitutive conceptual marks, but rather operates as a regulative principle on critical thought. Yet, even if never given in fullness, the concept of another order of things is not merely abstract, for it is not the mere logical possibility of a different social reality, but is rather given as a task made of specific concrete negations of the existing order.

Following Kant’s distinction between merely ‘logical’ and ‘real’ possibility, we could say that each of the steps involved in the construction of the concept of another order constitutes a ‘real’ possibility. Yet the complete concept of another order is a concept the construction of which is never completed, so that all marks in the concept cannot be displayed in toto before our eyes. And this means that the concept as a whole is not in itself fully possible in the sense of ‘real’ possibility, but more indeterminate. But

\[\text{168 See Kant, Immanuel, Kritik der reinen Vernunft, in Gesammelte Schriften, Vol. 4, ed. Prussian Academy of the Sciences (Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1973), A220-1/B268. For Kant, logical possibility requires only that concepts be non-contradictory, whereas ‘real possibility’ requires further that concepts agree with the formal conditions of experience in general (the conditions of the understanding and intuition). For example, that a figure can be enclosed by two straight lines is logically possible (there is no contradiction b/n the concepts of straight line and two) but it is not really possible because the conditions of space and its determinations, which contain the a priori form of experience in general, render the proposition impossible.}\]
it is also not merely ‘logically’ possible because each step in its construction is ‘really’
possible. The concept of a non-reified order of things is rather, according to Adorno,
modally located somewhere between abstract (logical) possibility and real possibility, in
a modal category that Adorno calls the category of “das Intelligible” [the intelligible].

What is important to us is that the capacity of the concept of a non-reified order to ground
the necessary friction for us to see the existing social order as illusory is guaranteed by
the modal status of this concept. The simple fact that another order, which would
constitute the total determinate negation of the existing order, is understood to be
possible—not just logically but as a sum of concrete determinate negations of the existing
order—is enough to cast existing social reality as a contingent possibility among others,
and this modal relativization of the status quo is already sufficient to show that the claim
reified reality makes to be necessary is illusory.

Now I turn to the “Hegelian objection” that I described at the beginning of this
section. As I have already noted, Hegel in the *Science of Logic* had already argued that
appearance and essence are not two separate realms of being. Rather, like Adorno after

169 See Adorno, *Negative Dialektik* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1970), 384-386. See English
Jay Bernstein has an excellent discussion of Adorno’s concept of the intelligible in *Adorno:
Disenchantment and Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), chapter 9. Adorno says,
“Der Begriff des Intelligiblen ist weder einer von Realem noch einer von Imaginärem” [The concept of the
intelligible is neither a concept of something real nor of something [merely] imaginary] (Adorno, *Negative
Dialektik* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1970), 384). It is not real because it is not contained in actual
social reality. However, it is not merely logically possible because its modality is not simply given by its
freedom from contradiction. Rather, the world of actuality contains specific possibilities which are not
actualized, but which are nonetheless ontologically constituent of reality, in a sense similar to the Hegelian
view of possibilities that are real existing tendencies whose fulfillment is objectively and concretely
possible but nonetheless may or may not become actualized. The space of the intelligible opens up the only
space of transcendence that thought can occupy in order to escape the context of immanence. It is from the
standpoint of this modality, of the space of the intelligible, that thought is able to surpass the context of
immanence, if only to look back at reality in denunciation. For Adorno, it is from this standpoint alone that
critical thought is possible. Note that Adorno denies that criticism takes place from a context of full
transcendence.
him, Hegel explained the relation between essence and appearance as a relation of mediation—a relation whereby essence is understood as the ground of intelligibility of appearances, and as existing only in and through the appearances. Essence is thus not a realm distinct from appearance, but rather the ground on which appearances are constituted. Up to this point, Adorno’s account of the relation between appearance and essence is the same as Hegel’s. However, Hegel develops the dialectic between essence and appearance by sublating [aufheben] both determinations under a more encompassing determination (specifically, under the concept of ‘ground’) and finally understanding the transition, like all other transitions in the Logic, as the self-determining movement of “the Concept.” My reconstruction of Adorno’s view as subsuming the initial determinations of appearance and essence under a higher notion of appearance may seem, by contrast to Hegel, to revert to one of the initial determinations and therefore to constitute no dialectical advance at all.

However, I will argue here that the way in which Hegel’s and Adorno’s views on the dialectic of appearance and essence should be compared is not in terms of the latter’s reversion to one of the initial determinations as opposed to the former’s advance toward a new concept altogether, but rather in terms of Hegel’s sublation of appearance and essence under a more developed conception of essence as opposed to Adorno’s sublation of appearance and essence under a more developed conception of appearance. In terms of this opposition between Hegel and Adorno, the reason and philosophical significance of my reconstruction of Adorno’s conception of the dialectic of appearance and essence under a more developed concept of appearance, rather than essence, will become clear.
Hegel’s *Science of Logic* begins with the “Doctrine of Being,” followed by the “Doctrine of Essence,” finally reaching an ‘absolute’ resolution of all conceptual oppositions in the “Doctrine of the Concept.” The “Doctrine of Being” deals with pure concepts that apply specifically to the world of existing things: the pure concepts that are presupposed by any mode of empirical knowledge, and that enable thought to determine objects with regard to quantity, quality, and measure (the unity of quantity and quality). But none of these concepts can determine reality as a whole. The reconstruction of pure concepts in these sphere concludes with the notion of a substratum indifferent to its determinations.\(^{170}\) The relation between this indifferent substratum and its qualities or determinations is then considered in the Doctrine of Essence.

The concepts that Hegel considers in the Doctrine of Essence determine objects in terms of the *opposition* between essence and appearance, where the sphere of ‘being’ is understood as corresponding to ‘appearance,’ and the sphere of ‘essence’ is understood as the relation between concepts that constitutes the appearance as appearance. The object is understood in terms of relations such as cause and effect, identity and difference, whole and parts, etc, all of which are concrete determinations of the relation between essence and appearance. The significance of the transition from ‘being’ to ‘essence’ is that things, or appearances, are understood as constituted in reflection—not, however, in a reflection that projects distinctions into a separate and indefinite substratum of being, but rather in a movement of reflection internal to being itself, which reflection actualizes itself precisely in the appearances to which it gives rise. As Béatrice Longuenesse puts it,\(^{170}\)

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[T]he transition from ‘Being’ to ‘Essence’ is the transition from determinations which seem to exist by themselves and to be immediately presented in ‘things,’ to the revelation that the apparently most ‘immediate’ determinations are always constituted and organized in the context of a unified process of thinking. … The whole Doctrine of Essence is the step-by-step exposition of things and their relations, of what appears as given and what is explicitly constructed by thought (the ‘essence’ of things). But this exposition also reveals that if it is possible to think an essence for the appearance, to unify things by way of their relations, it is because the same unity of thought that determines relations and laws, namely essence, was already at work in the very presentation of the appearance. One and the same unity of thought organizes the immediate presentation of things and the understanding of their relations: both being and essence are products of the concept.\footnote{171}{Longuenesse, Béatrice, *Hegel’s Critique of Metaphysics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 6-7.}

This last sentence already expresses the point of Hegel’s transition from the Doctrine of Essence to the Doctrine of the Concept, which finally unifies the Doctrine of Being and the Doctrine of Essence. The Doctrine of the Concept is the dialectical resolution of appearance and essence in the macro-structure of the Logic. In the Hegelian system, the Doctrine of the Concept shows that being (appearance) and essence are both products of the movement by which “the Concept” determines itself.\footnote{172}{This reconstruction of the relation between the spheres of being, essence, and the concept in the *Logic* is highly indebted to Karin de Boer’s interpretation in her *On Hegel: The Sway of the Negative* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), where she argues that the first two spheres (being and essence) are opened up in the act by which the Concept divides itself into one-sided determinations that are finally unified in the Doctrine of the Concept. This interpretation is particularly helpful for understanding Hegel’s idea that the movement of concepts presented in the *Logic* constitutes “a circle,” since the end of the *Logic* makes the unity of being and essence intelligible, and it is this very unity that precedes the Concept’s self-division into being and essence, presupposed by the beginning of the *Logic*. The fact that the *Logic* begins with being rather than essence is further intelligible by the fact that being deals with the concepts that first enable thought to reach knowledge of anything at all, whereas the relational concepts in the Doctrine of Essence are already located strictly within the sphere of thought-determinations. See especially chapter 4 of de Boer’s insightful study.} The standpoint of “the Concept” represents, for Hegel, the highest speculative standpoint of philosophical thought.
In my view, the sublation [\textit{Aufhebung}] of the standpoints of appearance and essence (i.e., of the concepts that Hegel considers in the Doctrine of Being and the Doctrine of Essence) under the self-determination of “the Concept” should be understood as a final subsumption of the initial determinations of appearance and essence under a more developed conception of essence. The reason is that the traditional characteristics associated with ‘esse[nce]’ (e.g., autonomy or self-groundedness, permanence, having a foundational epistemological role for the understanding of ‘the truth’) are ultimately ascribed to the movement by which “the Concept” separates itself into one-sided determinations and in turn supersedes these determinations to re-establish its unity. The traditional marks of the concept of essence are thus maintained as characteristics of the totality of the structure that is internally dirempted into the one-sided determinations of appearance and essence in the movement of the \textit{Logic}, but whose essential unity is re-established by the end of the \textit{Logic}.

Understood in this way, Hegel’s final concept of essence—as “the Concept’s” self-movement and actualization, which is the logical structure of Reason’s actualization not only in the realm of pure thought but also in nature, socio-historical development, culture, and religion—is inherently positive, where what I mean by calling it ‘positive’ is that it constitutes the final ground of intelligibility for all elements of reality and stands in no further need of analysis or interpretation. It is, in other words, the final self-justifying ground for the intelligibility of the real. In pure philosophical reflection—that is, in the \textit{Logic}—we allegedly come to understand that the most developed speculative conception of essence just is the self-grounding structure of the real, and it stands in no need for further justification. In fact, since nothing external to the Concept remains at the end of
the *Logic*—i.e., since there is nothing external to the Concept that can be thought in any way at all—the question of “justifying” the Concept by anything that is not already contained within it cannot even be rationally formulated. The self-movement of the Concept as a whole is the Concept’s self-justification; it expresses the logical structure of everything that can be thought and experienced at all.

I have reconstructed Adorno’s view of the dialectic between appearance and essence as resulting in the sublation of both initial determinations, embedded in the logical structure of reified social reality, into a more developed conception of *appearance*. The force of putting things in this way is to deny Hegel’s transition from the sphere of essence to the sphere of the Concept; that is, to deny his leaving behind the realm of thought characterized by conceptual oppositions to enter the realm of thought in which all oppositions are superseded in the ultimate essence of reality: the self-movement of the Concept.

The reason for this divergence from the Hegelian view is two-fold: First, the final mediated structure that critical thought reveals to exist between appearance and essence is internally structured in terms of ineluctable oppositions (in terms of the “contradiction in the object”). These oppositions, however, cannot according to Adorno be sublated in pure thought. The final structure of social reality thus does not have any of the qualities traditionally associated with the concept of essence. For Adorno, the sphere of essence refers to the absolute rule of the logic of exchange relations over the totality of social life, and over any and every finite element of social life. But the fact that social life is structured as a ‘totality,’ and the fact that this totality follows an ‘essential logic’ determined by exchange, are only true because reality has become reified, which is a
contingent historical development, and not because of natural necessity. The structure of reified reality as a whole is internally defined by contradiction; it is not self-grounded, not necessary but rather contingent, and not the foundation of truth but rather the ground of ideological illusion.

Second, and as a result of this first point, Adorno’s conception of the total structure of the relation between appearance and essence—that is, the structure of the “contradiction in the object”—is not positive in the sense that I have described Hegel’s conception of essence as positive (i.e., self-justifying), but rather stands in need of further interpretation. Even though the structure as a whole is an accurate description of the structure of social reality as a totality, it is still insufficient for understanding the meaning of this reality. Whereas, for Hegel, a final understanding of the logical structure of the real is the final realization of philosophy and the apex of knowledge, where philosophical thought is finally at rest and at home with itself, for Adorno, understanding the structure of the real only opens up more questions, particularly regarding the meaning of the real, and it leaves thought more restless than ever. In order to understand the ‘meaning’ of the total structure of reality, further interpretation is required, specifically interpretation of the mediation of the social order by nature.

This way of specifying the difference between Adorno and Hegel—in terms of Hegel’s conception of essence as positive in the sense of being self-grounded and self-justifying, as opposed to Adorno’s conception as negative because it is not self-grounded but rather demands further interpretation—is helpful for understanding a crucial difference between Adorno and Marx, which I wish briefly to consider. Though different from Hegel’s conception of essence, Marx’s conception of essence remains positive. For
Marx, the sphere of essence (the base, i.e., production) is expressed in appearance (the superstructure) only in a distorted form so long as the relations of production limit the full realization of the productive forces. Essence actualizes itself by way of the revolutionary transformation of productive relations in favor of new relations that better promote the full realization of productive forces. Historical development can thus be understood as pushed forward by the ever-greater actualization of essence. In the Marxian picture, the sphere of essence, interpreted as the ever-growing capacity of human beings to produce and reproduce their material reality in line with their needs, just is the final explanation for the nature of socio-historical change, and it expresses the nature of the human being and of societies: namely, the ever-advancing actualization of productive power over nature. Therefore, in Marx as well as in Hegel, the opposition between appearance and essence gives way (even if only in the future revolutionary change of society) to a greater realization of essence.

So, whereas Marx’s conception of essence corresponds to the ultimate nature of human beings and their social forms of organization, and thus needs no further justification; and whereas Hegel’s conception of essence corresponds ultimately to the self-movement of the Concept, which determines everything that can be thought or experienced and thus needs no further justification, Adorno’s conception of essence is contingent, not self-justifying, and stand in need of further explanation. For Adorno, essence is always a negative notion. Even though essence (that is, exchange) does structure the totality of (social) reality, it is neither self-grounded, nor grounded on some deeper determination of essence, and this is why it becomes *appearance* and calls for
further interpretation. This need for further interpretation, to say it one last time, is the need for understanding the whole of (social) reality as mediated by nature.

It is impossible to discuss Adorno’s conception of the dialectic between appearance and essence without discussing Herbert Marcuse’s 1936 essay on this topic, so I will conclude this section by comparing Adorno’s and Marcuse’s conceptions of this dialectic. I will argue that Marcuse’s conception in this early essay is basically a Marxian conception, and thus differs from Adorno’s conception in just the way I have explained with relation to Marx: Marcuse’s view of the dialectic ultimately subsumes the initial determinations of essence and appearance under a more developed conception of essence, because it operates with a positive (self-grounding and ultimate) conception of essence, whereas Adorno has only a negative conception of essence.

In “Zum Begriff des Wesens” [“The Concept of Essence”], Marcuse initially defines essence and appearance, and their relation in advanced capitalist society, in the same way as Adorno: He defines essence as “die Totalität des gesellschaftlichen Prozesses, wie er in einer bestimmten historischen Epoche organisiert ist. In Relation zu ihm ist jedes einzelne Moment, als isoliertes Einzelnes genommen, insofern ’unwesentlich’, als erst seine Beziehung zum Ganzen des Prozesses sein ‚Wesen’ einsehen läßt, d.h. den Begriff des wirklichen Inhalts einer Erscheinung gibt.”

He further claims that the internal structure of the totality is governed by the economy, so

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that all other levels of social life are manifestations [Erscheinungsformen] of economic relations,\(^{174}\) and argues that, as a result of the primacy of capitalist exchange relations over the social totality, the central phenomena of our society appear in masked, distorted form [in einer 'verkehrten' Form].\(^{175}\) Throughout these definitions, it would seem that Marcuse and Adorno define the relation between appearance and essence in reified society in the same way.

But Marcuse and Adorno have very different views about the way this dialectic is developed through the intervention by critical thought.

Marcuse argues that critical theory develops the tension between essence and appearance by re-orienting these concepts in relation to a positive conception of the essence of the human being. This step is essential for Marcuse’s rendition of critical theory, because, in his view, it is only in relation to the positive concept of the “human essence” that the tension between appearance and essence is interpreted as entailing that the current ‘essence’ of society (advanced capitalism) needs to be transformed so that it can express the ‘essence’ of the human being (freedom). Marcuse’s concept of the human essence provides a normative ground of the form of critical theory that he defends in “Zum Begriff des Wesens.”\(^{176}\)

\(^{174}\) “In der gegenwärtigen Epoche der Menschheit ist die Ökonomie als die fundierende Schicht derart zum ,Wesentlichen’ geworden, daß alle anderen Schichten zu ihrer /Erscheinungsform’ geworden sind” (Marcuse, Herbert, “Zum Begriff des Wesens,” Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung, Vol. V (1936): 24). English translation (mine): “In the present epoch of humanity, the economy is the foundational layer, which has become the essence, in such a way that all other layers (of society) can be seen as manifestations (appearances) of this essence.”

\(^{175}\) Ibid.

\(^{176}\) The concern for the human being “governs” [führen] the theory and, through it, the critical motif of the theory gains “eine bisher unbekannte Schärfe” [a sharpness previously unknown] (Ibid., 23). For Marcuse, the concept of the essence of the human being orients and re-structures the concept of essence and its relation to other concepts. “Mit der grundsätzlichen Beziehung des Wesensproblems auf die
Marcuse’s builds his conception of the ‘human essence’ in terms of both the past—preceding conceptions of ‘essence’ in philosophical thought, which, he argues, always contained a striving toward freedom—and in terms of the future: he looks at “concrete possibilities” for the establishment of a different social order in which every human being would have all of her material needs met, in which alienated labor would be abolished, and in which cultural values would be incorporated in everyday life rather than confined to ‘leisure.’ He argues that the idea of such a future society is not just an imaginary utopian thought experiment, since we actually have the concrete means to make it a reality, means primarily determined in terms of the current level of control over the forces of nature and of production that Western society enjoys. So, Marcuse asserts, the concept of the human essence must incorporate the potentialities for a future social order where social activity is aimed at freedom from need and the actualization of human potentialities.

Developed in this way, the concept of the human essence stands in opposition to what human beings actually are like in current society. Marcuse develops the opposition into a dialectical contradiction: the ‘essence’ of the human being is inadequately expressed in its current historical ‘appearance’—the existing social order—and that appearance ought to be transformed in order to express the ‘essence’ better: capitalism

gesellschaftliche Praxis erfolgt eine Umstrukturierung des Wesensbegriffs selbst in seiner Beziehung zu allen anderen Begriffen: eine Umstrukturierung auf das Wesen des Menschen hin. Die Sorge um den Menschen tritt in das Zentrum der Theorie; er soll aus der wirklichen Not und dem wirklichen Elend zu sich selbst befreit werden” (Ibid, 25). [Connecting at its roots the problem of essence to social practice restructures the concept of essence in its relation to all other concepts by orienting it toward the essence of the human being. Concern with the human being moves to the center of theory; the human being must be freed from real need and real misery to the realization of him/herself.” (translation modified)]. Marcuse argues that this concern with the essence of the human being and the realization this essence gives a concrete meaning to the tension between essence and appearance (a meaning not present in Hegel, see Ibid., 23-25).
has to give way to a different social order because it ought to express the essence of humanity better. So, the current social order, initially defined as ‘essence,’ is transformed into ‘appearance’ through its dialectical opposition with the essence of the human being. Note that Marcuse’s call for the transformation of society is grounded in a specific, positive conception of essence (the human essence), and a call for it to be better realized. This means that the higher dialectical concept here is essence, not appearance, and the realization of a different social order in which the ‘essence’ of the human being is finally actualized would just be the concrete sublation \([\text{Aufhebung}]\) of the one-sided determinations of appearance and essence in reified society under a higher conception of essence.

Even though Marcuse’s formulation of the initial determinations of essence and appearance in reified society corresponds to Adorno’s (where essence refers to exchange relations as fully determining the social totality and appearance to the ideological and distorted contents of ordinary consciousness), Marcuse’s deployment of a positive concept of the human essence changes the structure of the dialectic of essence and appearance. For Marcuse, the ‘higher’ dialectical concept is the concept of essence, the human essence, and it is on the ground of this positive conception of essence that he decries the existing social order.\(^{177}\) Whereas for Adorno the dialectic of appearance and

\(^{177}\) Marcuse says that the positive concept of the essence of the human being “als Leitidee und Vorbild hinter allen kritisch-polemischen Unterscheidungen von Wesen und Erscheinung steht. Von ihm aus werden alle Kategorien, welche die gegebene Gestalt des Daseins als eine historisch vergängliche beschreiben, zu „ironischen” Begriffen, die ihre eigene Aufhebung enthalten” [The positive concept of essence sustains all critical and polemical distinctions between essence and appearance as their guiding principle and model. All categories that describe the given form of existence as historically transient become ‘ironic’ concepts that contain their own negation (translation modified)] (Ibid., 37). By placing other dialectical pairs in relation to the positive concept of essence, existing conditions are shown to be ‘bad’ but also to contain the possibilities and tendencies toward a transformation into a free society. Marcuse claims that “[d]ie materialistischen Begriffe enthalten alle eine Anklage und eine Forderung” [the
essence gives way to a more developed notion of appearance, where there is no ‘higher’ notion of essence left, for Marcuse, the reified conceptions of appearance and essence collapse into appearance, but only relative to the higher concept of the human essence.

Marcuse’s conception of the dialectic of appearance and essence is in the end more akin to Marx’s conception than to Adorno’s. In fact, Marcuse’s view is basically the view Marx expressed in the 1944 Manuscripts: Marcuse’s construction of the concept of the human essence is reminiscent of Marx’s conception of ‘species being.’ Consider, moreover, that Marcuse argues that his construction of the positive conception of the human essence, including as it does the way human beings could be in a future rationally planned society, is justified by two things: universality and objectivity. First, he claims that the concept is universal in the sense that it incorporates the interests of all human beings, whether they would admit to it or not, since its content expresses the nature of the human being. And, second, he claims that it is objective because it is based on real possibilities (tendencies that demonstrably exist already in the present), selected in accordance with the ‘universal interest’ of freedom – although Marcuse grants that objectivity will not be confirmed until society is actually transformed into the ‘rationally planned’ order that he advocates.


178 Marcuse says that the goal of critical theory is a rationally planned society that fulfills human potentialities. Such a society would integrate particular interests into a concrete universality because they would fulfill the “essence of the individual” [Wesen des Individuums] (“Zum Begriff des Wesens,” Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung, Vol. V (1936): 30). “Am Ende des Weges, wenn die bisherigen gesellschaftlichen Gegensätze in einer solchen Allgemeinheit überwunden sind, schlägt die ‘Subjektivität’ der Theorie in die Objektivität um: in der Gestalt eines Daseins, wo die Interessen der Einzelnen wahrhaft bei der Gesamtheit aufgehoben sind” (Ibid., 30). English translation in in Negations: Essays in Critical Theory (London: MayFlyBooks, 2009), 57: “At the end of the process, when former social antagonisms have been overcome in such a community, the ‘subjectivity’ of materialist theory becomes objectivity – in the form of an existence where the interests of individuals are truly preserved in the community.” The
Marcuse’s view is thus justified by the idea that he can construct a positive conception of the human essence that is positive in the sense I identified Hegel’s and Marx’s conceptions as positive: namely, it stands in no need of further justification because it expresses the “universal” interests of humanity. Moreover, he claims that the opposition between appearance and essence that characterizes reified reality is ultimately superseded by the actualization of this positive conception of essence in a new society that enables human beings to realize their full potential, and he argues that this actualization is foreshadowed by revolutionary tendencies already under way.

Marcuse’s conception of critical theory (at least in this early essay of 1936) thus presupposes (1) that theory has a guiding interest, not ‘justifiable’ contemplatively, but rather chosen in accordance with the universal, essential interest of freedom, which Marcuse seems to identify with the interests of an existing revolutionary subject, \(^{179}\) and theory is guided by a universal interest because it is derived from the “essence” of the human being, and its objectivity is confirmed by the success of the revolutionary practice to which it contributes. The dialectical distinctions within the materialist theory “begreifen die gesellschaftliche Totalität von einer Zielsetzung aus, welche die besonderen Ziele der Individuen in der wirklichen Allgemeinheit aufheben will” [they grasp the social totality from the standpoint of an goal that sublates [aufheben] the true universality of the community] (“Zum Begriff des Wesens,” Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung, Vol. V (1936): 35, translation modified)


English translation (modified):

The consciousness to which this universality is attached is no longer the abstract individual of idealist philosophy: it stands no longer at the beginning of thought as the fundamentum inconcussum of truth, nor at the end of thought as the bearer of the freedom of the pure will and of pure knowledge. The theory has moved to another subject: the vehicle of its concepts is the consciousness of specific groups and individuals who are fighting for a more rational organization of society.
(2) that there are tendencies already at work in the social order toward the destruction of capitalism and the institution of a rationally planned society. These assumptions express a much closer affinity with Marxism than Adorno has. Adorno disagrees with both assumptions: He is much less sanguine about the tendencies at work in society at his time, and he does not even believe in the existence of a coherent ‘revolutionary subject,’ and much less with the idea that human beings are ‘essentially’ defined by the striving for freedom, since Adorno worries quite a lot about the deformation of individuals under conditions of reification, and is not at all certain that the capacity for freedom will survive much longer under these conditions.

With regard to the main topic of this chapter, the relation between Adorno’s and Marcuse’s conception of the dialectic of essence and appearance can be summarized as follows: Initially, there is a similarity between Adorno’s and Marcuse’s views in that they both argue that there is a tension between appearance and essence in advanced capitalist society, and that this tension is developed theoretically though a dialectical Lebensphilosophie, existentialism, even phenomenology tried to go beyond the epistemological subject to something concrete. But, Marcuse argues, they failed because they did not attack the specific unfreedom of the individual in the actual production process. He says:


Consequently, the place of abstract reason was taken by an equally abstract ‘historicity’, which amounted at best to a relativism addressed indifferently to all social groups and structures. Materialist theory moves beyond historical relativism in linking itself with those social forces which the historical situation reveals to be progressive and truly ‘universal.’
mode of reflection that confronts the ‘appearance’ with objective social conditions. How this confrontation is then interpreted, however, is different. For Marcuse, the confrontation is interpreted as sublating the initial distinction between appearance and essence into appearance because there is a positive conception of the ‘human essence’ that has not yet been actualized. In the end, then, Marcuse (like Marx and Hegel) sublates the initial determinations of essence and appearance into a higher conception of essence. This sublation is made possible by the fact that Marcuse operates with a positive conception of essence that is self-justifying because it allegedly represents the “universal” interest of humanity. For Adorno, on the other hand, the confrontation between essence and appearance results in the sublation of both initial determinations into appearance, where this overarching appearance has no further essence against which it is defined as appearance. The appearance here is just appearance because it is not self-justifying but rather requires further interpretation in terms of its mediation by nature.

My main goal in this section has been to explain the significance of my reconstruction of Adorno’s view of the dialectic of appearance and essence as culminating in the sublation of the two initial determinations into a more highly developed conception of appearance rather than essence. I have argued that the decision to view the final dialectical step in this way is due to the negativity of Adorno’s conception of the structure of the social totality under which the initial determinations are subsumed. This negativity means that the structure of reality as a whole, i.e. the structure of the “contradiction in the object,” ought to be understood critically as contingent, not self-grounded or autonomous, and, rather than self-justifying, as standing in need of further interpretation. This means that critical theory’s insight into the structure of social
reality as a whole does not result in a final *explanation* of this reality, but rather conceives of the structure of the totality as new material for interpretation. The interpretation that remains to be carried out is specifically an interpretation of the mediation of the entire social order by nature.

### 4.4 Positivist v. critical thought

In this section, I employ the account I have developed of the “contradiction in the object” and the dialectical mode of reflection to which it gives rise in order to get a more detailed account of negative dialectics. First, I explain the distinction that Adorno takes there to hold between a positivist, ideological form of thought and critical thought. Then I build an account of the logical structure of negative dialectics based on the idea that its object of analysis—that is, social reality as a whole—is structured in terms of the dialectic of essence and appearance that characterizes the “contradiction in the object.”

What Adorno calls “positivism” is characterized by a form of thinking that concerns itself with the study of isolated facts but does not analyze them in their relation to the whole, to the social totality. In other words, positivism gathers information about the appearance of social reality as it is taken up in ordinary consciousness but does not inquire into the mechanisms by which such consciousness is pre-formed. Critical thought, on the other hand, accomplishes three further things: first, it analyzes finite facts in terms of their mediation by the social totality and its determining principle of exchange (which means that it interprets the sphere of appearance in relation to essence); second, it shows that the relation between the logic of finite facts and the logic of their mediation by the social totality is contradictory (which means that it develops a dialectical
contradiction between appearance and essence); and, finally, it shows that this relation of contradiction is not ultimate or necessary but rather the result of contingent conditions of reification (which means that it subsumes the contradiction under a more developed conception of appearance).

The realms of appearance and essence are both available to thought because they are constitutive of reality and thought. The study of phenomena belonging to ‘appearance’ is available for instance, through the study of individuals’ avowed understanding of social reality through questionnaires, interviews, and statistical analysis. These opinions are mere appearance because they are socially pre-formed and distorted. How can such distortion be ascertained? Adorno’s answer is straightforward: through the study of objective social facts, which are also available to thought in reality, the apprehension of which requires only a form of theoretical attentiveness. These objective facts are “[der] Zwang zumal der ökonomischen Objektivität” [the constraints of economic objectivity].”\(^\text{180}\) The determining feature of positivistic thought is that it stops short at the description of facts, without inquiring into the conditions of their formation, whereas critical thought sets the appearance of facts in opposition with the conditions of their social formation, and exposes the opposition as constitutive of reified social reality.

Consider here Adorno’s own example regarding sociological analysis on the topic of musical taste.\(^\text{181}\) Such a study can begin by inquiring into people’s musical tastes,

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\(^{181}\) Adorno, “Soziologie und empirische Forschung” in *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. 8 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1969), 199-201. English translation by Glyn Adey and David Frisby in...
asking them to choose their preference between the categories of “classical” and “popular” music, for instance. The division between these two categories, however, itself needs to be studied objectively. A study of this division would show it to be the contingent result of economic forces that promote and entrench the division rather than a natural or objectively necessary division, and it would moreover show that the division itself predisposes individuals to listen to music in a certain manner and to have specific, socially determined preferences, defined ultimately by the market. The study of these social forces is the objective part of the study, the part that refers finite elements and social facts—in this case people’s opinions and tastes on music—back to their ground of intelligibility in the social totality and its determining principle of exchange.

But a critical analysis does not stop with showing the opposition between people’s opinions and tastes, on the one hand, and their pre-formation by exchange. Rather, Adorno argues that the tension between the two poles (between the quantificational analysis of people’s opinions and the qualitative analysis of the social foundations for these opinions) is the fertile ground of social theorizing. The tension or opposition is itself the proper object of social theory according to Adorno: “Die dabei hervortretenden Differenzen von sozialer Objektivität und dem wie immer auch allgemein verbreiteten Bewußtsein von jener Objektivität markieren eine Einbruchstelle der empirischen Sozialforschung in die Erkenntnis der Gesellschaft: in die der Ideologien, ihrer Genese und ihrer Funktion.”

Critical thought exposes the opposition between social...
objectivity (essence) and ordinary consciousness (appearance), and shows it to be
grounded in the objective structure of reified social reality. Finally, the fact that the
analysis bottoms out in the interpretation of society’s structure as inherently reified and
so contradictory brings the tension between appearance and essence back to the status of
appearance.

By contrast, the positivistic mode of analysis stops short at the description of
ordinary consciousness. In the example above, the first step in the investigation of
people’s musical tastes, which consists in gathering information about people’s musical
tastes in accordance with existing categories, but which looks neither at the social pre-
formation of taste nor at the social determination of the choices given in the
questionnaire, illustrates the kind of inquiry favored by positivism. According to
Adorno, positivism studies finite social facts and quantitatively analyzes them, but it ends
with this kind of analysis. The results are usually “correct” in the sense that they
correspond to the way that facts appear. Yet the problem is that the “facts” are, as we
have seen, constitutive of a distorted appearance. Facts are facta; they are made, and
understanding them theoretically requires understanding the social, objective conditions
of their formation. The mere study of facts, because it does not look at the ideological
determination of those facts, fails to understand that the results of its analyses are only
adequate as a depiction of reified reality. Positivism takes the facts to depict all of
reality, and seeks to use the facts it encounters in order to arrive at the laws that order

Kong, Singapore, Sydney: Avebury, 1994), 83: “The difference which thereby emerges between social
objectivity and the consciousness of the subjectivity, no matter in what form this consciousness may be
generally distributed, marks a place at which empirical social research reaches knowledge of society—the
knowledge of ideologies, of their genesis and of their function.”
reality “in itself,” or essentially. These laws are then taken to constitute the necessary structure of an unchanging social order. But this way of viewing things obscures not only the determining ground of the facts in the economy but also the possibility that such determination, and so the facts themselves, could be otherwise.

Positivist thought thus results in a duplication or mere reproduction of reified reality without awareness of the reified nature of this reality: Adorno says that positivistic sociology engages in a “wissenschaftliche Spiegelung” [scientific mirroring] that remains “in der Tat bloße Verdoppelung, verdinglichte Apperzeption des Dinghaften, und entstellt das Objekt gerade durch die Verdoppelung, verzaubert das Vermittelte in ein Unmittelbares” [mere duplication, the reified apperception of the hypostatized, thereby distorting the object through duplication of itself. It enchants that which is mediated into something immediate.] The positivist approach to society thus

wird Ideologie im strengen Sinn, notwendiger Schein. Schein, weil die Vielfalt der Methoden an die Einheit des Gegenstandes nicht heranreicht und sie hinter sogenannten Faktoren versteckt, in die sie ihn der Handlichkeit wegen zerlegt; notwendig, weil der Gegenstand, die Gesellschaft, nichts so sehr fürchtet, wie beim Namen gerufen zu werden, und darum unwillkürlich nur solche Erkenntnisse ihrer selbst fördert und duldet, die von ihr abgleiten. 

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183 Adorno, “Soziologie und empirische Forschung” in Gesammelte Schriften, Vol. 8 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1969), 204. English translation by Glyn Adey and David Frisby in Adorno, “Sociology and Empirical Research,” in The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology (Brookfield, Hong Kong, Singapore, Sydney: Avebury, 1994), 75-6. See also “Soziologie und empirische Forschung,” 198: “Die Einzelfeststellung, durch die sie ‘positivistische Theorie’ verifiziert wird, gehört selbst schon wieder dem Verblendungszusammenhang an, den sie durchschlagen möchte. Für die gewonnene Konkretpisierung und Verbindlichkeit hat sie mit Verlust an eindringender Kraft zu zahlen...” Translation in “Sociology and Empirical Research,” 69. Adorno says that even though positivist thought is able to describe current surface facts and even accurately to predict further facts, “[t]he isolated observation through which it is verified belongs, in turn, to the context of delusion which it desires to penetrate. The concretization and certainty gained must be paid for with a loss in penetrating force...”

184 Adorno, “Soziologie und empirische Forschung” in Gesammelte Schriften, Vol. 8 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1969), 205. English translation by Glyn Adey and David Frisby in Adorno,
The positivist method of studying social facts in isolation from their determination by the whole social structure is clearly inadequate if we accept Adorno’s ontological picture of social reality as a structure of irrevocable tension between essence and appearance—that is, as having the structure of “the contradiction in the object.”

The latter structure can only be adequately analyzed by a form of thought that does not stop with the study of appearance but that rather locates itself in the tension between appearance and essence and shows this tension to be the expression of reified social reality (i.e., an appearance) rather than a result of natural necessity. This form of thinking still requires the sort of empirical studies with which positivist thought is concerned, but it ought further to place the findings of such studies in confrontation with a theoretical analysis of society as a totality and to interpret the opposition that results as a symptom of reification. This confrontation sheds light on the contradictory structure of social reality, for

Empirie und Theorielassen sich nicht in ein Kontinuum eintragen. Gegenüber dem Postulat der Einsicht ins Wesen der modernen Gesellschaft gleichen die empirischen Beiträge Tropfen auf den heißen Stein; empirische Beweise aber für zentrale Strukturgesetze bleiben, nach empirischen Spielregeln, allemal anfechtbar. Nicht darauf kommt es an, derlei Divergenzen zu glätten und zu harmonisieren: dazu läßt bloß eine harmonistische Ansicht von der Gesellschaft sich verleiten. Sondern die Spannungen sind fruchtbar auszutragen.\(^\text{185}\)

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“Sociology and Empirical Research,” in *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology* (Brookfield, Hong Kong, Singapore, Sydney: Avebury, 1994), 76:

Such sociology becomes ideology in the strict sense—a necessary illusion. It is illusion since the diversity of methods does not encompass the unity of the object and conceals it behind so-called factors into which the object is broken up for the sake of convenience; it is necessary since the object, society, fears nothing more than to be called by name, and therefore it automatically encourages and tolerates only such knowledge of itself that slides off its back without any impact.

\(^\text{185}\) Adorno, “Soziologie und empirische Forschung” in *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. 8 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1969), 198. English translation by Glyn Adey and David Frisby in Adorno,
Since the contradiction between appearance and essence (or between limited empirical studies of social facts and the theoretical concept of the social totality as the determining ground for those facts) is irrevocable, for it is the constitutive ground of social reality, the contradiction cannot be conjured away but must rather be understood. And the kind of understanding that it calls for is insight into its structure as ideological illusion that originates in reification—that is, the form of understanding that not only exposes the contradictory relation between essence and appearance, but moreover sublates [aufhebt] it into a tension internal to a more refined conception of appearance. The method of critical reflection thus consists, first, in confronting the surface facts of society with the theoretical conditions of their existence and intelligibility (that is, with the category of society as a tightly structured totality present in all limited elements of social life), then showing the discrepancy between the surface facts and the overarching theoretical structure, and finally analyzing the discrepancy in terms of ideological illusion grounded in reification.

We have thus found the theoretical ground for the structure of negative dialectics as it was discovered and described in chapter 2. There I argued that negative dialectical analyses have a two-step structure:

“Sociology and Empirical Research,” in The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology (Brookfield, Hong Kong, Singapore, Sydney: Avebury, 1994), 70:

The empirical and the theoretical cannot be registered on a continuum. Compared with the presumption of insight into the essence of modern society, empirical contributions are like drops in the ocean. But according to the empirical rules of the game, empirical proofs for the central structural laws remain, in any case, contestable. It is not a matter of smoothing out such divergences and harmonizing them. Only a harmonistic view of society could induce one to such an attempt. Instead, the tensions must be brought to a head in a fruitful manner.
1. A theoretical concept is considered. It is found to be insufficient; its claim to be adequate for understanding the matter at hand is shown to be false. In order to correct the insufficiencies of the concept, appeal to the object’s “dialectical opposite” is needed.

2. But the concept is also interpreted in the context of the objective historical and social totality to which it belongs, and which gives rise to it in the first place. The first part of the dialectic moves from the realm of our theoretical self-conception in ordinary consciousness to the derivation of a “contradiction” (or insufficiency, or shortcoming) internal to that self-conception, and the second step moves to the “objective” realm of the social and historical world, in terms of which the contradiction gains a concrete interpretation and is thus made determinate—it is made objective.

Adorno’s view that social reality has the structure of the “contradiction in the object” is the ground for this two-step structure of dialectical reflection, and we can now flesh out the two-step structure above by relating it to the contradiction between appearance and essence that Adorno takes to be constitutive of social reality. We get the following refined structure:

1. The analysis begins by considering an isolated “fact,” in its empirical surface determination, in accordance with the way it is conceived in ordinary consciousness (that is, appearance). But under this way of conceiving the fact, thought is unable to go beyond description to a deep theoretical understanding. The next step leaves the prohibition on going beyond the mere fact (that is, the positivist prohibition on speculation) and tries to understand the fact theoretically on the basis of its determining ground in the social totality. We move from
appearance to essence. But the empirical specification of the facts as they appear in ordinary consciousness is incompatible with their theoretical analysis as determined by the whole, and, specifically, determined by the principle of exchange. In other words, the analysis finds that appearance and essence are contradictory—what ordinary consciousness takes social reality to be contradicts what that reality objectively turns out to be when studied through the lens of the totality. This is the “theoretical contradiction” derived in the first step of a negative dialectical analysis.

2. The second part of the dialectical analysis consists in understanding the “contradiction” found in the first step as originating in ideology. The failure of the initial surface category to render the object intelligible is made comprehensible in terms of the category’s embeddedness and role in the social totality to which it belongs. This second part of the analysis gives a new significance to the contradiction derived in the first step, for the latter ceases to be a contradiction between essence and appearance and comes instead to be understood as a contradiction inherent in appearance. This is the step at which the relation between appearance and essence in the first step (the “theoretical contradiction” above) becomes a contradiction immanent in appearance. It is understood as a ‘spell’ on thought brought about by reification. The whole structure of reality is then seen as an appearance rife with contradiction, and as the contingent result of reification. The “contradiction in the object” is thus elucidated.
Let us illustrate the application of this structure by considering how it corresponds to a concrete example of negative dialectics. In chapter 2, we followed a portion of Adorno’s analysis of the concept of the subject in “Zu Subjekt und Objekt.” We began with the concept of pure transcendental subjectivity, and saw that it led to theoretical contradiction and was ideologically motivated to obscure the objective conditions of life of empirical subjects. The contradiction between the concept of the transcendental subject and the objective conditions of empirical subjects was then brought to the status of a contradiction in appearance, itself in need of dialectical analysis. The analysis then moved to a study of the empirical subject and the way the concept of empirical subjectivity appears in ordinary consciousness. This concept was then found to be contradictory and to require for its intelligibility the concept of the social totality. We also saw that the concept of the empirical subject is ideologically grounded in the social totality’s self-concealing activity, in its inherently distorting nature. The contradiction between the empirical subject and its determining ground in the social totality was thus once again brought to the status of appearance, due to reification, and itself in need of further interpretation. The example of the dialectic of the subject examined in chapter 2 thus follows exactly the structure we should expect on the basis of Adorno’s conception of the “contradiction in the object.”

4.5 Adorno’s negative dialectic in relation to Marx and Hegel

So far we have seen that Adorno’s conception of social reality as structured in accordance with the “contradiction in the object” explains both the conditions for the possibility of negative dialectical analysis and the appropriateness of this form of
reflection to the study of social reality. In this final section, I further clarify negative dialectics by looking at its relation to Hegelian and Marxian dialectics. I argue, first, that the picture of negative dialectics we have thus far, and in particular of the conditions for its possibility and success, are structurally analogous to the accounts of dialectics that we find in Hegel and Marx, notwithstanding the differences I discussed in section 4.3 above. The “contradiction in the object” gives rise to a form of reflection that is Hegelian-Marxian in nature. However, there is an important difference between Adorno’s conception of dialectics, on the one hand, and Marx’s and Hegel’s, on the other, and it has to do specifically with the second component of the ontology of “antagonism,” which we have not yet taken into account, namely the role of nature in relation to the structure of reality that the dialectic uncovers. It is with respect to this difference, which remains external to the structure of negative dialectics that has been analyzed thus far, that the divergences explored in section 3 become relevant. To understand more about this key difference, we will need to investigate Adorno’s view of the mediation of social reality by nature, which is the topic of the next chapter.

First I want to stress the similarities between the account of negative dialectics developed thus far and its Hegelian and Marxian predecessors.

The first point to see is that in all three accounts (Hegel’s, Marx’s, and Adorno’s), dialectical thought is *ontological* in the sense that it follows the structure of its object, and, second, it is able to do so because the structure of thought just is the structure of the world, and every element in the world is fully intelligible only in view of the whole structure of connections in which it is embedded. This is why the derivation of “contradictions” or insufficiencies in a particular way of understanding the object does
not culminate in simple failure, or abstract negation, but is rather pulled forward to a new and deeper understanding of the object.

So, there are two conditions that hold for Hegel, Marx, and Adorno, and that account for the possibility of dialectics: First, the structure of the world as a whole just is the structure of thought’s inner dynamics, so that there is no unbridgeable gap between subject and object. Second, just as any individual concept is intelligible fully only in terms of its connections to all other concepts in the structure of thought and its inner dynamics, every finite element of reality is intelligible fully only in terms of its structural connection to the whole of which it is part.

These conditions together make possible the overall structure of dialectics, which proceeds by first looking at a finite element in the object world and attempting to characterize it fully with a finite set of conceptual resources. But the attempt fails because the object’s full intelligibility requires understanding the object in terms of the structure of the whole object-world and its inherent logic, and this requirement is replicated in the fact that any finite set of conceptual resources must be understood in its interrelation to the whole of conceptuality. The determination of any determinate object or finite set of conceptual relations (or theory) thus inherently requires mediation by the whole (the totality), which in every case has a definite structure: in Hegel, the ultimate structure of intelligibility is the structure of the “Concept,” which determines both thought and being; in Marx, the ultimate structure of intelligibility is historical materialism, which explains both the socio-historical material structure of the world and of thought; and, in Adorno—at least in the account we have considered thus far—the ultimate structure of intelligibility is the principle of exchange and its self-concealing
nature, which constitutes social reality and discursivity. It is moreover as a result of this
double determination of thought (conceptual structure as a whole) and being (the
structure of the object world) by a single underlying principle that dialectics takes the
dynamic form that it takes in Hegel, Marx and Adorno, in all of which the analysis
proceeds by the progressive determination of the object of critique, beginning with more
general (abstract) categories and moving dialectically from these categories to more
determinate, concrete ones, with the goal of reproducing concrete reality in thought.

We can thus outline the following conditions for dialectics, which hold in the
accounts given by Hegel and Marx and, apparently, by Adorno as well:

a. Homology between conceptual structure and the structure of the world.

b. Holistic structure of concepts (which replicates the holistic intelligible ground of
   the world).

c. Reproduction of concrete reality in thought through the progressive determination
   of the object of critique, beginning with more general (abstract) categories and
   moving dialectically from these categories to more determinate, concrete ones.

Conditions (a) and (b) account for the idea that dialectical logic is an *ontological*, rather
than a merely formal, logic. And (a) and (b) make possible a form of dialectical
reflection whose aim is expressed by (c).

The whole account developed thus far explains the ontological grounds that make
dialectical reflection possible, and the structure of such reflection, on the grounds of an
ontological monism of thought and being and of the inner structure that characterizes the
intelligibility of both. In terms of Adorno’s philosophy, this monism was developed from
the first component of his ontology of antagonism—that is, the element of internal
heteronomy that claims that every finite element of social reality is determined by the principle of exchange. It remains for us to see what happens when we take into account the second element of Adorno’s social ontology of antagonism, namely the element of global heteronomy that takes the principle of exchange to be determined by an element that is not fully immanent in social reality, namely non-rational nature.

The issue we have to take into account now is that, for Adorno, social reality is not autonomous. Even though reality is always already social, the category of the social is not self-determining, but is rather such that its inner logic arises from confrontation with nature, and nature exists beyond the reach of the Concept, or beyond the reach of conceptuality as a whole. Thus Adorno stands against Hegel, and with Marx, in thinking that nature exists beyond the reach of the Concept.

But Marx takes nature to be a sort of Ding an sich, such that it is external to, or unmediated with, the structure of the object world, on the one hand, and the structure of thought, on the other. In other words, for Marx, there are no such things as natural

\[\text{\textsuperscript{186}}\text{I use ‘Concept’ (with capital ‘C’) to refer to the Hegelian conception of the Concept as the totality of conceptual determinations connected into a dialectically structured whole.}\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{187}}\text{For Marx, the relation between human beings and nature is always mediated by labor. Through social labor, nature becomes objective nature. See Marx, \textit{Das Kapital}, Vol. 1 (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1953), 185:}\]


objects, for the constitution of objects is due to historical praxis and the conceptual order to which this practice gives rise. Thus nature in itself is ultimately irrelevant to critique in Marxian analysis.

For Adorno, however, nature is not merely passive, because it actively mediates the structure of conceptuality and of the object world as a whole, since it is dialectically related to the principle of exchange that governs (social) reality. The deeper dialectic

Labour is, in the first place, a process in which both man and Nature participate, and in which man of his own accord starts, regulates, and controls the material re-actions between himself and Nature. He opposes himself to Nature as one of her own forces, setting in motion arms and legs, head and hands, the natural forces of his body, in order to appropriate Nature’s productions in a form adapted to his own wants. By thus acting on the external world and changing it, he at the same time changes his own nature. He develops his slumbering powers and compels them to act in obedience to his sway.

Labor regulates the material exchange between humans and nature. The specific social form that labor takes gives rise to a specific objectification of nature. So the objective nature that confronts human beings is determined by their social material activity. In *Die deutsche Ideologie*, Marx says:


English translation:

The human being does not see how his/her surrounding sensuous world is not an unmediated given from all eternity, remaining always the same, but rather the product of industry and of the state of society, indeed in the sense that it is a historical product, the result of the activity of a number of generations, each of which stands on the shoulders of the preceding one, developing the industry and its intercourse, and modifying its social order in response to changing needs. Even the objects of the simplest ‘sense certainty’ are given to the human being only through social development, industry and commercial exchange/intercourse.

This does not mean that for Marx nature is eliminated. Rather, as Habermas rightly argues in *Knowledge and Human Interest* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), esp. pp. 29-40), Marx adheres to the idea of something like a “nature in itself,” whose existence must be presupposed for epistemological reasons, but which is disclosed only within the historically determined dimension of social labor. Habermas argues, correctly in my opinion, that Marx preserves a distinction between form and matter, where the matter is an unknown and indeterminate natural substratum that acquires form through subjective activity, so that the world that we know is known only as formed through subjective labor.
between the principle of exchange (the logic of the social) and nature in Adorno does not challenge the ontological monism that unites subject and object in the way I have developed it here, but it means that our philosophical understanding of both subject and object remains superficial if it ends with the realization that subject and object are constituted by the principle of exchange in accordance with the model of reification. In order to go deeper, analysis needs to see the principle of exchange as itself determined in relation to nature. In fact, Adorno holds that we understand the subject, and the nature of concepts, only if we understand them as dialectically related, and mediated by, nature.

The account that we have thus far of the relation between thought and being, of how this relation makes dialectics possible, and of the dialectical structure that follows, is therefore incomplete. It contains a blind spot, which is the determination of the whole structure in relation to non-rational nature.

The difference that I am highlighting here between Adorno, on the one hand, and Hegel and Marx, on the other, was already presaged by the way in which their views of the dialectic of essence and appearance diverge: specifically by the fact that both Hegel and Marx ultimately subsume ‘appearance’ under a dialectically developed concept of ‘essence,’ whereas I have reconstructed Adorno’s view of the dialectic as culminating in the incorporation of the initial concepts of appearance and essence, and the tension between them, under appearance. I have already argued that the point of saying that the more highly developed dialectical concept is appearance and not essence is to characterize the social order as a whole as contingent and neither grounded in some external absolute foundation, nor self-grounding, but rather in need of further interpretation through another mediation: the mediation by nature.
However, we do not yet know how the interpretation proceeds. But it is clear that it cannot proceed via the dialectical structure developed in this chapter. Non-rational nature is by definition not conceptual, and, since it is the alleged determining ground of conceptuality, but is itself non-conceptual, it cannot be captured by the logic of concepts. The mediation of society and of conceptuality by non-rational nature is itself neither a constituent of the object-world nor a constituent of conceptuality, but is rather the pre-conceptual ground on which both objectivity and conceptuality take shape. Because it is not a positive constituent of the structures of thought and being, determination by nature stands outside the conditions that I outlined above as conditions that make dialectics possible and that can become visible through (appear in) dialectical exposition. This means that the structure of dialectics outlined in this chapter is in principle incapable of capturing the mediation of social reality by nature. And this further means that this kind of dialectical analysis remains always incomplete. Grasping the mediation by nature in philosophical reflection will require a form of interpretive analysis different from the dialectical structure that we have discussed here, which, though uniquely able to unearth the structure of reified society (i.e. “the contradiction in the object”), cannot interpret the meaning of social reality as a whole.

There are several questions that arise at this juncture. First, on what epistemological grounds does Adorno claim that there is such a “deeper” dialectical mediation of both social reality and conceptuality by non-rational nature? Given that the kind of dialectical strategy that we have seen him using so far is in principle unable to uncover the determination of the object world and of conceptual structure by nature, the thesis that such determination obtains is either a dogmatic assertion, or is uncovered
through a different form of analysis, which form of analysis needs to be both explicated and substantiated. Second, assuming that there is another element to philosophical analysis, capable of disclosing the mediation of social reality and conceptuality by nature, what consequences does this form of philosophical analysis have for the dialectical structure that has been developed in this chapter? Is the further form of philosophical analysis compatible with the account developed here, such that it can be taken up as an addition to this account, or does it result in a negation or alteration of this account?

In order to address these questions, which orient the rest of this study, we need to develop a more detailed understanding of the mediation by nature that Adorno takes to determine the inner logic of both social reality and conceptual dynamics. I now turn to an investigation of this mediation.
CHAPTER 5:

A FREUDIAN INTERPRETATION OF DIALEKTIK DER AUFKLÄRUNG

Now we need to take into account the second component of Adorno’s ontology of antagonism: that is, the global heteronomy of the social order due to society’s mediation by nature. This chapter, and the one that follows, are mainly concerned with explaining the meaning of this mediation. Since the mediation of society by nature is the main topic of Adorno and Horkheimer’s Dialektik der Aufklärung, I proceed by first offering an interpretation of this text.

In this work, Horkheimer and Adorno diagnose the modern social order, and the form of rationality prevalent in it, as pathological—and not just in any sense but rather specifically in terms of a “return of nature,” or, as Horkheimer calls it in his Eclipse of Reason, a “revenge of nature.” This phenomenon corresponds to Freud’s category of the “return of the repressed.” In order to understand Horkheimer and Adorno’s diagnosis of the pathologies of the modern world, it is essential to understand Freud’s notion of the return of the repressed as well as how the notion might be applicable to society and civilization as a whole.

In psychoanalytic theory, the return of the repressed corresponds to the creation of symptoms in psychological illness, be it in neurosis or psychosis. My central interpretive claim is that Adorno and Horkheimer’s diagnosis of the enlightenment’s pathology corresponds in detail to the Freudian conception of the paranoid form of psychosis. If I
am right, then it will be essential to understand the logic of paranoid psychosis in order to clarify Adorno and Horkheimer’s conception of the relation between thought, the social order, and nature. My main goals in this chapter are to explain the ‘logical structure’ of paranoid psychosis, and to argue that the diagnosis of the enlightenment’s pathology given in *Dialektik der Aufklärung* corresponds to it. To accomplish these tasks, I divide my discussion into sections dealing with key elements of Adorno and Horkheimer’s interpretation, and I show in each case how they are embedded within the logical structure of Freud’s model of paranoia.

The following four sections discuss: (1) Adorno and Horkheimer’s diagnosis of a crisis of knowledge as a paranoid “loss of the external world,” (2) the mechanism of paranoid projection as the proximate cause of this crisis, (3) the structure of enlightenment rationality as a paranoid system of delusions, and (4) the development of pathology in enlightenment rationality as structurally analogous to the development of paranoia in an individual.

### 5.1 Crisis of knowledge

The first element is Adorno and Horkheimer’s idea that there is a crisis of knowledge in enlightenment rationality. One of the main criticisms of enlightenment knowledge voiced by Adorno and Horkheimer is that this knowledge has become self-defeating. While it aims to know *external objects*, it in fact achieves knowledge only of subjective categories, and is ever more estranged from anything truly external.

In *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, this point is made on the basis of Adorno and Horkheimer’s claim that enlightenment rationality is instrumental, so that it knows
objects only to the extent that the objects can be manipulated for the sake of achieving subjective goals\textsuperscript{188}—ultimately, for the sake of self-preservation. Under this condition, Adorno and Horkheimer argue, the “essence” of the object becomes simply its being an indeterminate substrate for the projection of subjective categories that are themselves defined for the sake of manipulation, for domination:

Die Menschen bezahlen die Vermehrung ihrer Macht mit der Entfremdung von dem, worüber sie die Macht ausüben. Die Aufklärung verhält sich zu den Dingen wie der Diktator zu den Menschen. Er kennt sie, insofern er sie manipulieren kann. Der Mann der Wissenschaft kennt die Dinge, insofern er sie machen kann.\textsuperscript{189}

As a result of the instrumentality of knowledge, “[d]ie disqualifizierte Natur wird zum chaotischen Stoff bloßer Einteilung und das allgewaltige Selbst zum bloßen Haben,

\textsuperscript{188} In \textit{Eclipse of Reason}, Horkheimer provides vivid examples of how even the \textit{perception} of external reality has become instrumental: a landscape appears as a possible space for an advertising billboard; the moon is perceived as an advertisement for something or as an object to be exploited for profit. In these cases, external nature is perceived in terms of its utility for advancing and securing the individual’s well-being in market society and, in this sense, for the sake of self-preservation. See \textit{Eclipse of Reason} (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), 69:

The story of the boy who looked up at the sky and asked, ‘Daddy, what is the moon supposed to advertise?’ is an allegory of what has happened to the relation between man and nature in the era of formalized reason. On the one hand, nature has been stripped of all intrinsic value or meaning. On the other, man has been stripped of all aims except self-preservation. He tries to transform everything within reach into a means to that end. Every word or sentence that hints of relations other than pragmatic is suspect. … Though people may not ask what the moon is supposed to advertise, they tend to think of it in terms of ballistics of aerial mileage.


Human beings purchase the increase in their power with estrangement from that over which it is exerted. Enlightenment stands in the same relationship to things as the dictator to human beings. He knows them to the extent that he can manipulate them. The man of science knows things to the extent that he can make them. Their ‘in itself’ becomes ‘for him.’ In their transformation the essence of things is revealed as always the same, a substrate of domination.
The relation of knowledge has thus become, in Adorno and Horkheimer’s view, a relation between an abstract subject that endows things with meaning and an indeterminate object that has no meaning in itself other than its being the matter that is conceptually ordered by subjective categories. “Die mannigfaltigen Affinitäten zwischen Seiendem werden von der einen Beziehung zwischen sinngebendem Subjekt und sinnlosem Gegenstand, zwischen rationaler Bedeutung und zufälligem Bedeutungsträger verdrängt.”

One consequence of the instrumentalization of knowledge is thus that the external world, as an independent bearer of meaning, and thus an active participant in the process of knowledge, is lost, in the sense that it becomes reduced to an indeterminate substratum upon which subjective categories are projected that parcel out reality in a way that is profitable or advantageous for human endeavors. Adorno and Horkheimer detect this ‘loss of external reality’ in the primacy that logical rules and formulae have over an attempt to respect [respektieren] “das zu Denkende, den Gegenstand auch dort, wo er den Denkregeln nicht willfährt [to respect that which is to be thought, the object, even where

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it does not follow the rules of thinking]” (as Adorno puts the point in Negative Dialektik).192

In psychoanalytic terms, this estrangement from external reality corresponds to the mechanism at work in the narcissistic neuroses, and paranoia in particular, in which libido is withdrawn from the external world and redirected toward the ego. Adorno himself puts the point in libidinal terms, suggesting that real knowledge requires the “Sehnsucht” [longing] of the concept for “die Sache” [the thing]193 and that the “Errettung” der Dinge [the rescue of the thing] “meint die Liebe zu den Dingen” [means the love of things].194 Knowledge of what is truly external, truly other and a bearer of its meaning (rather than an indeterminate substratum for the projection of meaning), requires a relation of desire and love for what is other, a relation lacking in the dominating form of relating to what is external that Adorno and Horkheimer see in enlightenment rationality. The idea that enlightenment rationality is deficient in part because it is not libidinally related to the external world but rather only to the self (to the mind, rationality itself) corresponds in psychoanalytic terms to a form of narcissistic neurosis. Other elements in the analysis, which I discuss below, show that the narcissistic neurosis at issue is specifically paranoia.

192 Adorno, Negative Dialektik, in Gesammelte Schriften, Vol. 6 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1970), 144.

193 Ibid., 152.

194 Ibid., 191: “Die Dinge verhärten sich als Bruchstücke dessen, was unterjocht ward; seine Errettung meint die Liebe zu den Dingen.” On the importance of love in Adorno’s conception of philosophical thinking (and knowledge), see Haynes, Patrice, “‘To rescue means to love things’: Adorno and the re-enchantment of bodies,” in Critical Quarterly, vol. 47, no. 3, pp. 64-77.
5.2 The mechanism of projection

The mechanism that Adorno and Horkheimer describe as bringing about the loss of external reality discussed above is “paranoid projection”—the mechanism at work in the formation of paranoia, one of the narcissistic neuroses.\textsuperscript{195}

Adorno and Horkheimer’s discussion of paranoid projection follows two lines of thought. The first identifies projection with a mechanism by which the subject imputes the formal structure of its own mind to reality as a whole, so that external reality appears as a mirror image of the subject. This is the mechanism that creates the epistemic estrangement from external reality discussed above. The second train of thought identifies paranoid projection with the mechanism at work in fascist violence\textsuperscript{196} against the Jews, homosexuals, Roma, women, and other persecuted groups.\textsuperscript{197} On the basis of Adorno and Horkheimer’s text alone, and without recourse to Freud’s analysis of projection, it is not immediately evident how these two phenomena result from a single

\textsuperscript{195} Nosographically, the illnesses that Freud called “narcissistic neuroses” in earlier writings correspond to the functional psychoses (i.e. those not caused by somatic lesions, see Laplanche and Pontalis, \textit{The Language of Psychoanalysis} (London: The Hogarth Press, 1973), 258). These include paranoia, schizophrenia, and delusions of jealousy. Later (“Neurose und Psychose” 1924 [1923]), Freud reserves the label ‘narcissistic neurosis’ for melancholia, as opposed to the psychoses. However, the earlier nomenclature fits Adorno and Horkheimer’s diagnosis better, so I will stick with it.

\textsuperscript{196} Importantly, Adorno and Horkheimer do not limit the phenomenon of fascism to the historical political systems that are usually called ‘fascist,’ typically Hitler’s Third Reich, Mussolini’s rule in Italy and Franco’s rule in Spain. Rather, Adorno and Horkheimer see these systems as specific and poignant eruptions of political and cultural currents latent in advanced capitalist society, therefore in the Western world as a whole.

\textsuperscript{197} The mechanism of paranoid projection is discussed in detail in what is perhaps the most important of the theses on anti-semitism—thesis VI—in \textit{Dialektik der Aufklärung}. See Adorno and Horkheimer, \textit{Dialektik der Aufklärung}, in \textit{Max Horkheimer: Gesammelte Schriften}, Vol. 5 (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1997), 217-230; English translation by Edmund Jephcott in \textit{Dialectic of Enlightenment} (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 154-165. Both strands identified here are intermingled in the discussion and brought together under the umbrella of “paranoid” or “false” projection, which itself is said to be the deep cause of the enlightenment’s pathology. In fact, the ideal of emancipation and “healthy” reflection is identified with “die Gegenbewegung zur falschen Projektion” [the countermovement to false projection] in the last sentence of the section (\textit{Dialektik der Aufklärung}, 230/\textit{Dialectic of Enlightenment}, 165).
mechanism, namely paranoid projection. However, by looking at Freud’s explanation of the mechanism of projection in paranoia, the connection between the two trains of thought becomes clear, and much about the diagnosis of Dialektik der Aufklärung is made pellucid.

According to Freud, the mechanism of projection is a means for the repression of an infantile wish \(^{198}\) through a two-step process: the first step negates the wish, and the second projects the negated wish outward. The result of this outward projection is that what has been repressed internally is thereupon experienced as externally encroaching on the subject.

In his most detailed analysis of paranoia, the analysis of Dr. Schreber’s written memoir, Freud discusses four ways in which a wish may be negated in paranoia, two of which involve projection. \(^{199}\) The wish, which for Freud is always a homosexual wish in the case leading to paranoia, \(^{200}\) may be expressed as ‘I (a woman) love her (a woman).’ \(^{201}\) The first way to deny this wish is

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\(^{200}\) Horkheimer and Adorno also identify the infantile wish at issue in the pathology of enlightenment rationality with a homosexual repression (Dialektik der Aufklärung, 223/ Dialectic of Enlightenment, 159), but I will not linger on this aspect of the diagnosis here, as it is of little interest and leads to no significant new discoveries or deeper understanding of the pathology of reason.

\(^{201}\) Freud of course discusses the wish in male terms only (‘I [a man] love him [a man]’). I will use the female case in my discussion, but, of course, the theoretical point remains the same.
(1) to deny the verb, so that the wish becomes ‘I do not love her; I hate her.’ The wish is then transformed by projection into ‘She hates (persecutes) me, which justifies me in hating her.’ The unconscious feelings now appear as if they were the consequence of an external perception: ‘I do not love her; I hate her, because she persecutes me.’ This mechanism to deny the wish is the one at work in delusions of persecution.

The second way to deny the wish is

(2) to deny the object, so that it becomes ‘I do not love her; I love him (someone else, this time of the opposite sex, so that it is an acceptable object of love to the super-ego). This denial of the wish is projected outward as ‘I observe that he (the more “acceptable” object put in place of the original object) loves me.’ The repressed wish is thus displaced to another object and encountered as an outward perception: ‘I do not love her—I love him, because he loves me.” This way to deny the unconscious wish is characteristic of erotomania.

The third way to deny the wish is

(3) to deny the subject: ‘It is not I who loves the woman—he (someone else) loves her.’ This is the mechanism at work in delusions of jealousy.

Finally, the fourth way to deny the wish is simply to negate the whole sentence:

(4) ‘I do not love at all—I do not love anyone.’ This negation of the wish is then transformed into ‘I love only myself,’ and is at the base of the megalomania that, according to Freud, always accompanies paranoia.

How does this account of the repression of infantile wishes in paranoia apply to the dialectic of enlightenment? Adorno and Horkheimer hold that the progress of
civilization and enlightenment has demanded the repression of ‘inner nature’—that is, of the basic, unconscious impulses of human beings for pleasure and happiness. In order for thought to institute itself and grow in power, it had to establish a distance from nature, and also multiple mechanisms to prevent itself from returning to a state of communion with—or, better, abandonment to—nature. On the one hand, this separation from nature first afforded the human animal distance from the fearfulness of nature—from the dangers and cruelty of mere natural existence—and set in motion the development of the individual and of civilization. On the other hand, Adorno and Horkheimer argue, this ever more strict distancing from nature also enforced estrangement from a promise of happiness and non-domination inherent in unity with nature. This promise of happiness exerts a strong attraction on the human being, who has always been tempted to return to nature (to abandon herself to instinctual desires and to escape the bonds of civilized society). The infantile wish that must be repressed with the advance of civilization is thus the wish to be lost in nature, to be one with nature.

We could express the wish as ‘I wish to lose myself in nature.’ Now, if we apply the mechanisms of negation discussed by Freud to this wish, we get the following results:

202 This is precisely the wish that is expressed by the singing of the sirens in Adorno and Horkheimer’s interpretation of the Odyssean myth. “Ihre [die Sirene] Lockung ist die des sich Verlierens im Vergangenen” (Dialektik der Aufklärung, 55). English translation: “Their [the sirens’] allurement is that of losing oneself in the past” (Dialectic of Enlightenment, 25). Their song holds the promise of pleasure in oneness with nature. But to succumb to this ultimate pleasure—to lose oneself in nature once again—would be the end of civilization and of the hard labor by which humanity has forged the ego. Horkheimer and Adorno say:

Furchtbares hat die Menschheit sich antun müssen, bis das Selbst, der identische, zweckgerichtete, männliche Charakter des Menschen geschaffen war, und etwas davon wird noch in jeder Kindheit wiederholt. Die Anstrengung, das Ich zusammenszuhalten, haftet dem Ich auf allen Stufen an, und stets war die Lockung, es zu verlieren, mit der blinden Entschlossenheit zu seiner Erhaltung gepaart. … Die Angst, das Selbst zu verlieren und miet dem Selbst die Grenze zwischen sich und
(1*) Negation of the verb: ‘I do not wish to be one with nature; I hate nature.’

The negated wish then undergoes projection and gives way to: ‘I do not wish to be one with nature; I hate nature because it [or its representatives] persecute me.’

Now, ‘nature’ and its primacy over behavior is visible in groups that retain traces of nature; that is, groups that recall ‘nature’ because they are not smoothly and completely assimilated into mainstream society and its male, nationalist, and racial normative self-understanding, like the Jews, the unassimilated immigrant, and women. The delusion of persecution explained in (1*) gives way to delusions of evil deeds on the part of these groups. This is how the mechanism of projection paves the way for fascist organized violence, and it is why Adorno and Horkheimer claim that any group who represents untamed nature can become the victim of fascist aggression.  

It is in this manner that...
Adorno and Horkheimer see the Shoah as stemming from the repression of nature. This first application of projection thus explains their idea that projection is a central mechanism at work in fascist excesses of violence and persecution against the Jews and other minorities that are similar in that their alleged incomplete assimilation to civilization elicits the remembrance of nature.\footnote{204}

(2*) Negation of the object: ‘I do not wish to be one with nature; I wish to be one with its opposite, which in this case is mind.’ The negated wish expunges inner nature from the subject; it says ‘I am only mind.’ By application of projection, this negation of the wish becomes ‘All reality is mind.’

This second example of projection corresponds to the problem of knowledge that I discussed above as the loss of external reality. In order not to lose itself in nature, the subject replaces all of reality with its opposite: with mind, i.e., with subjective categories of reason.

(3*) Negation of the subject: ‘I do not wish to lose myself in nature; he/she [some other person or group] wishes to lose him/herself in nature.’

This negation of the wish is at work in (fascist) society’s constant need and search for a group to which longing for nature and scorn for the achievements of civilization against nature can be ascribed. Though this mode of negating the repressed wish does not make symbolic reminders of nature without. I will say more about the details of Adorno and Horkheimer’s conception of the psycho-dynamics of fascism in the course of this chapter.

\footnote{204} I will discuss this mechanism in more detail when I discuss the parallels between the development of enlightened rationality according to \textit{DA} and the development of paranoia according to Freud’s theory. For a discussion of Adorno and Horkheimer’s attribution of fascist violence to the victim’s representation of insufficiently tamed nature, see Theses II-VII of the “Elemente des Antisemitismus,” in \textit{Dialektik der Aufklärung}, in \textit{Max Horkheimer: Gesammelte Schriften}, Vol. 5 (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Verlag, 2000), 199-230.
use of projection, it paves the way for projection by choosing the victim to whom representation of nature will be ascribed.

(4*) Negation of the whole sentence; ‘I do not wish to lose myself in anything; I am purely-self identical with myself and wish to love only myself.’

This negation of the wish corresponds to megalomania, a pathological element that Adorno and Horkheimer find again and again in their analysis of modern philosophy, especially of Kant and German Idealism, where they see the Subject as glorified into an absolute admitting of no external other. They also see megalomania at work in fascism: The individual identifies with the fascist leader and with the collective because the leader’s display of absurd, almost super-natural strength satisfies the individuals megalomaniac delusions of grandeur.  

The four mechanisms of negation described above are at work in Adorno and Horkheimer’s conception of what has become of enlightenment civilization, but the first two are the most important. They exemplify the process of paranoid projection. The first mechanism leads to delusions of persecution from representatives of untamed nature, who become eventually the victims of fascist violence, while the second leads to the delusion that reality is constituted fully by the mind—that is, the delusion at the root of the enlightenment’s loss of the external world. This explains why for Adorno and Horkheimer the crisis of knowledge in enlightened reason—the fact that enlightened

205 Adorno and Horkheimer’s analysis of the lure of the fascist leader is of course more complex. The leader combines characteristics of the “everyday, ordinary person” at the same time as he exhibits super-natural strength: he is, in Adorno’s words, “a composite of King-Kong and the suburban barber” (“Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda,” in Gesammelte Schriften, Vol. 8 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1969), 420). The leader’s ordinary and even absurd characteristics allow the ego to transfer to him the cathexes that remained attached to the individual, while the leader’s display of supernatural strength attracts the attachment of the self to its megalomaniac ego-ideal.
thought has experienced a loss of external reality—and the catastrophic violence unleashed by fascist movements, are results of one and the same phenomenon: the repression of an unconscious longing for nature through the process of paranoid projection, which process has the result that the nature repressed in the subject is experienced with hatred and resentment as returning from the outside, and as needing to be once and for all expunged from reality. This phenomenon corresponds to what Horkheimer and Adorno call the “return” of damaged nature, and what Horkheimer calls “the revenge of nature” in *Eclipse of Reason*. It is ultimately in this process that they claim the process of enlightenment is destroying itself.

5.3 The paranoid symptom: system and resistance to rational challenge

A third important way in which Adorno and Horkheimer’s diagnosis of the enlightenment’s pathology corresponds to Freud’s notion of paranoia is in the systematic form that projective delusions take, and in their strong resistance—in fact, virtual impermeability—to rational challenge.

Freud’s analysis of paranoia locates the beginning of illness proper in the loss of the world that the patient experiences through the withdrawal of cathexes from external objects and their redirection toward the ego. But this state is not sustainable for long. Eventually the paranoid patient attempts to recover her relation to objects and people in the world—a process that corresponds to the formation of symptoms. In this process, the patient uses the mechanism of projection discussed above to rebuild the world. The

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delusional formations obtained through projection are incorporated into a well-ordered system. The system offers the patient a new framework on the basis of which her libido can be re-invested in the world, and relations to objects can be established anew. Some of these relations incorporate remnants from the patient’s normal (healthy) stage, but relations to key objects taken to represent or be implicated with what was abolished internally are specifically hostile. This of course follows from the fact that the framework is built in such a way that what was abolished internally returns as a hostile presence from without. The system as a whole is fixed and all-encompassing, and its role is both to enable the patient to recreate a world, and to fashion that world as a whole in accordance with the patient’s delusions. Even where remnants of a normal state remain, the libidinal investment of the patient in the world is as a whole driven by projection.

The system itself is symptomatic of the illness; through its framework, delusions are rationalized through secondary revision and ordered in a fixed way along with the rest of the patient’s “reality.” In his analysis of Schreber, Freud quotes from a report written by the patient’s last doctor, stating that the patient’s pathological ideas ultimately “sich zu einem vollständigen System geschlossen haben, mehr oder weniger fixiert sind und einer Korrektur durch objektive Auffassung und Beurteilung der tatsächlichen Verhältnisse nicht zugänglich erscheinen” [these ideas formed themselves into a closed system; they are more or less fixed, and seem to be inaccessible to correction by means of


any objective appreciation and judgment of the actual facts]. As we learn from Schreber’s own report of his ideas, the pathological delusions were built into an intricate theologico-philosophical system, so that the framework of delusion whose goal is to repress the unacceptable wish becomes the determining principle of how reality as a whole appears to the paranoid patient in its most fundamental aspects.

It is in part because the repressive framework of delusion becomes the determining, highest principle ordering reality that an important characteristic of the system arises: namely, to be impenetrable by rational argument. The system is in fact created in such a way as to have built-in explanations for, and responses to, contradictions brought from without, so that the latter are explained always in terms of the system itself, and the final court of appeal is the determining principle of the system: its functional role in repressing the unacceptable wish.

Both the systematic character of paranoid delusions and their impenetrability to contradiction correspond to characteristics that Adorno and Horkheimer ascribe to the systematic, reified view of reality woven by enlightened rationality: “das diabolisches System” [the diabolic system]. This system, they say, is characterized by being “totalitarian,” in the sense that it does not permit contradiction through rational argument, for, according to enlightenment thought, rationality itself is defined by systematicity and

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210 Adorno and Horkheimer, Dialektik der Aufklärung, in Max Horkheimer: Gesammelte Schriften, Vol. 5 (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1997), 217.
rigor in accordance with fixed laws that exclude anything that does not already fit the laws. Any argument that would be deemed “rational” and thus taken into account would already have to conform to the paranoid form of enlightened reason itself; otherwise, the argument does not even qualify as a legitimate argument at all.211 “Auf welche Mythen der Widerstand sich immer berufen mag, schon dadurch, daß sie in solchem Gegensatz zu Argumenten werden, bekennen sie sich zum Prinzip der zersetzenden Rationalität, das sie der Aufklärung vorwerfen. Aufklärung ist totalitär.”212 “Die bündig rationalen, ökonomenischen und politischen Erklärungen und Gegenargumente—so Richtiges sie immer bezeichnen—vermögen es [das Leiden der Zivilisation] nicht, denn die mit Herrschaft verknüpfte Rationalität liegt selbst auf dem Grunde des Leidens.”213

Emphasizing the parallel between the paranoid system and the functional structure of enlightenment rationality, Adorno and Horkheimer say “Sein [der Paranoikers] Scharfsinn verzehrt sich in dem von der fixen Idee gezogenen Kreis, wie das Ingenium

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211 This does not mean that there is no form of thinking and of expression that contradicts the claims of the system, but only that, since the system and its fixed structure have a monopoly over what counts as rational argumentation, all real challenges to the system are automatically denied recognition as rational.

212 Ibid., 28. English translation by Edmund Jephcott in Dialectic of Enlightenment (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 4: “No matter which myths are invoked against it [enlightenment], by being used as arguments they are made to acknowledge the very principle of corrosive rationality of which enlightenment stands accused. Enlightenment is totalitarian.”

213 Dialektik der Aufklärung, in Max Horkheimer: Gesammelte Schriften, Vol. 5 (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1997), 200. English translation by Edmund Jephcott in Dialectic of Enlightenment (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 139.: “The plausibly rational, economic, and political explanations and counterarguments—however correct their individual observations—cannot appease it (the malady or pathology of civilization), since rationality itself, through its link to power, is submerged in the same malady.”
der Menschheit im Bann der technischen Zivilisation sich selbst liquidiert. Die Paranoia ist der Schatten der Erkenntnis.”²¹⁴

Understanding the pathology of enlightened reason as structurally analogous to paranoia, whose main symptom is the creation of a fixed system of delusions that orders reality and does not allow room for anything that does not fit with the system, allows us to understand one of the main problems Adorno and Horkheimer identify with modern rationality, namely its inability to incorporate insights about, or even to experience, anything that is radically different, anything new—in brief, anything that does not fit the order imposed by the pre-determined system. This is why Adorno and Horkheimer claim that, for enlightenment thought, nothing can be in principle unpredictable: if not the material content of experience, at least the (delusional) form of experience and of all possible thoughts about reality becomes predictable to the extent that the “logical” rules and possible semantic combinations into which anything deemed meaningful must fit are given in advanced by the system. The result is that any thought or experience that actually contradicts the principle of delusions according to which the system is ordered is ruled out from the start and appears as irrational or senseless; “[d]er Schein hat sich so konzentriert, daß ihn zu durchschauen objektiv den Charakter der Halluzination gewinnt.”²¹⁵

²¹⁴ Adorno and Horkheimer, Dialektik der Aufklärung, in Max Horkheimer: Gesammelte Schriften, Vol. 5 (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1997), 225. English translation by Edmund Jephcott in Dialectic of Enlightenment (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 161: “Their [paranoids’] mental acuteness consumes itself within the circle drawn by their fixed idea, as human ingenuity is liquidating itself under the spell of technical civilization. Paranoia is the shadow of cognition.”

²¹⁵ Adorno and Horkheimer, Dialektik der Aufklärung, in Max Horkheimer: Gesammelte Schriften, Vol. 5 (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1997), 235-6. English translation by Edmund Jephcott in Dialectic of Enlightenment (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 170: “Illusion has become so concentrated that to see through it objectively assumes the character of hallucination.”
However, in the paranoid patient, the symptom of constructing a system of delusion that orders the world befalls only the individual and is the product of individual phantasy\textsuperscript{216}—the delusions order the world of the individual paranoid only, and they stand in opposition to the appearance that the world has for “normal” or “healthy” people, thus standing out as deviant and ultimately false. If the model of paranoia is appropriate to understanding the pathology of enlightened civilization, then what/who corresponds to the patient’s psyche that suffers from delusion, and in opposition to what standard of normality is it possible to apprehend the pathology as deviant?

In order to answer the first question, it is helpful to invoke Cornelius Castoriadis’s conception of how the radical social imaginary gives rise to society and the social world.\textsuperscript{217} For Castoriadis, the ‘imaginary’ corresponds to the domain of the ‘radical imagination’—a faculty that orders the appearance that the world takes (under historical and natural constraints of course) and thus gives shape to—that is, it forms—reality for us, both at the social and at the individual level. “[T]his imagination is before the distinction between ‘real’ and ‘fictitious’. To put it bluntly: it is because radical

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\textsuperscript{216} Psychoanalysts use ‘ph’ in ‘phantasy’ to distinguish its strict psychoanalytic meaning from the broader everyday meaning of ‘fantasy.’ Phantasy is an unconscious activity in which meanings are enacted or shown in a manner relatively independent from rationality. For an excellent study of phantasy see Lear, Jonathan, “Restlessness, Phantasy, and the Concept of Mind” in Open Minded: Working Out the Logic of the Soul (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1998), pp. 80-123.

\textsuperscript{217} Of course, Horkheimer and Adorno could not have had Castoriadis’s account of the radical self-creation of the social in mind, since their work in Dialektik der Aufklärung preceded the formulation of Castoriadis’s ideas on this matter, ideas that were first published in 1974 in The Imaginary Institution of Society, already after Adorno’s death. Still, my goal in this study of Adorno and Horkheimer’s thought is not to pretend that my interpretation is true to what they had in mind exactly, but rather to reconstruct their train of thought in the manner that seems most philosophically interesting and fruitful, true to their text, but also taking resources from ideas that have been formulated after the publication of Dialektik der Aufklärung.
imagination exists that ‘reality’ exists for us—exists tout court—and exists as it exists.”218 The radical imagination gives rise to a society and its various domains of meaning in a manner analogous to how the individual’s unconscious phantasy gives rise to the symbolic structures of consciousness. There are, according to Castoriadis, two seats of the radical imagination: the psyche of the singular individual whose radical imaginary creates the outer and inner experiential field of the individual, on the one hand, and the anonymous collective whose imaginary institutes the social-historical field. Using this distinction, we could say that, while the imaginary of an individual suffering from paranoia creates a subjective system of projections that comes to structure her singular world in a way internally and externally incompatible with the public world shared with others, the society suffering from paranoia is the result of the anonymous collective’s creation of a paranoid system that symbolically structures society in accordance with its pathological social imaginary, a social repository of (pathological) systems of meanings.

Note that this does not require that individuals suffer from clinical cases of paranoia. As participants in a paranoid radical social imaginary, all individuals would tend to acquire corresponding pathologies, but they would not necessarily all exhibit pathology, and those who would exhibit pathology would not necessarily suffer from the same pathology or exhibit it to the same degree, for the individual’s creation of an inner and outer world is conditioned by, but goes beyond, adaptation to the social world. This does not change the case, however, that the society itself, though concretely real and

objectively determining the form of the world, would have the form or logos of a paranoid delusional system—a system of symbolic understandings that orders social experience in a manner structurally analogous to what we find in individuals who suffer from the clinical pathology of paranoia.

Admittedly, my appeal to Castoriadis’s notion of the radical social imaginary does not resolve the question of how individual and social agency are connected—a question that Adorno and Horkheimer do not theorize sufficiently, and which in any case falls beyond the purview of this chapter. However, I think the appeal to Castoriadis is helpful because it allows us to understand how it can be meaningful to talk of a specific psychoanalytic pathology of the social order rather than of an individual, without invoking some idea of a supra-individual, unified social subject. The social imaginary is a unified repository of the meanings that unify a society; its order of significance gives rise to the ontological form or eidos of the social. Moreover, the social imaginary corresponds to the symbolic, rather than logical order that structures reality; its specific content in a given socio-historical period arises contingently in relation to natural and historical conditions but without being determined fully by these conditions, and this content is not necessarily structured in a ‘rational’ or consistent manner. As a result, the way in which the social imaginary gives rise to social meanings is different from the way in which the Kantian transcendental subject or the Hegelian Geist produces social reality. Rather, the radical social imaginary structures the world in much the manner in which the individual’s unconscious structures the individual’s inner and outer world, and it intersects the individual’s unconscious at the point at which the individual encounters and constitutes herself in relation to the outer world. The activity of the social imaginary
results in the radical creation of social rather than individual reality, but it stills influences (thought it does not exhaust) the individual’s reality because the individual’s outer world is formed in relation to the public, social world. All of these descriptions of Castoriadis’s notion of the radical social imaginary correspond well to the layer of reality to which Adorno and Horkheimer assign the pathology of paranoia, the layer of a ‘subterranean,’ ‘natural’ element in the constitution and historical development of civilization. I thus want to borrow the notion of the ‘social imaginary’ from Castoriadis in order to talk about Adorno and Horkheimer’s diagnosis of the modern social order as pathological without presupposing a supra-individual or transcendental subject but rather only a contingently constituted repository of symbolic meanings that orders social reality and thereby influences individuals’ reality as well, without fully determining it.

With respect to modern society, Castoriadis claims, like Adorno and Horkheimer, that the defining characteristic of the modern social imaginary is an instrumental relation of domination toward nature. Adorno and Horkheimer would agree, but would moreover add that the social imaginary’s antagonism with nature has reached the stage of regression, repression proper, and disease, and has as a result of pathology spawn a delusional eidos or form as the ontological principle that structures our society and all aspects of culture, as well as the prevalent and socially sanctioned forms of thought. The structure of the closed and totalitarian system thus corresponds not only to the abstract structure of socially prevalent and sanctioned modes of rationality but also to the ontological structure of social reality and all institutional spheres of society in general, as they all emerge from the same pathological social imaginary. Modern society is the pathological symptom of civilized, enlightened, paranoid humanity.
So, we have at least partly answered the first question I posed above, namely, to what entity or function in civilization we could ascribe the creation of a paranoid system: namely, to the paranoid social imaginary of the modern anonymous collective. Now I want to return to the second question I posed: in opposition to what standard of normality do we apprehend enlightened society as pathological?

If the paranoid system just is the form of our world and our reality, as I have argued, and since we cannot step outside of our social imaginary to consider others, it follows that we have access to no non-pathological order of reality in opposition to which our own would stand out as deviant. Even more, it follows that we cannot even think non-pathologically; we cannot be spared from a paranoid world. But—and this is the point on which the strength and Adorno and Horkheimer’s conception of the dialectic of enlightenment hinges—we are able through the right form of thinking to become aware of the pathological nature of the world that we cannot escape, but which, perhaps one day, we could come to change on the basis of a new imaginary.

The question of how exactly we are able to gain this knowledge that the world is pathological without access to a standpoint transcending the world is one that I address in detail in chapters 6-8, where I discuss the method of ‘natural-historical’ interpretation, so I will not speak at length about it here. To anticipate, I will only point out that Adorno’s answer has to do with calling for a form of thought that does not merely reproduce the form (system) of reality, but that moreover expresses the affective (non-conceptual and non-logocentric) content in which damaged, projected nature expresses itself. It is impossible to deduce the pathological character of reality with the formal—that is, conceptual—structure of reality alone, but it is possible to feel the pathology, and the goal
of Adorno’s negative dialectics is to incorporate the affective content of experience into thinking, for only in this way can a conceptual form of discourse express content beyond the confines of its formal constraints and disclose the pathological character of the world.

5.4 Development of illness

The fourth and final way in which Adorno and Horkheimer’s diagnosis of the enlightenment’s pathology corresponds closely to Freud’s discussion of paranoia is in their description of the stages of development that result in illness. Let us first look at the Freudian schema for these stages, and then turn to how it corresponds to Adorno and Horkheimer’s conception of the development of enlightened civilization’s pathology.

According to Freud, the development of illness (in both neurosis and psychosis) requires the conjunction of a number of conditions that are individually necessary but only jointly sufficient for illness. To begin with, the development of the individual from infancy to maturity might suffer one or more “fixations” at specific stages of the process. A fixation, for Freud, is a passive process in which one instinct or instinctual component is inhibited: its development stops at an infantile stage. “Die betreffende libidinöse Strömung verhält sich zu den späteren psychischen Bildungen wie eine dem System des Unbewußten angehörige, wie eine verdrängte” [the libidinal current at issue behaves in relation to the later psychological structures like one that belongs to the

219 That is, from primary narcissism to a genital organization of the libido.
system of the unconscious, like one that is repressed].”220 Fixation alone, however, does not result in illness; it only sets the stage for the possibility of illness.

A second condition that must take place in order for illness to occur is that an intolerable frustration be met with in the life of the individual. That is, a situation must occur in which the satisfaction of pleasure (or, what is the same: the satisfaction of the infantile wish for pleasure) is frustrated, to the extent that the individual is unable to find any fulfillment in external reality. Frustration arises because external reality makes the satisfaction of a childhood wish impossible, or because the super-ego, as the representative of the demands of external reality (social and parental pressures), does so.221 The frustration constitutes a psychic conflict to which the organism needs to react. There are various ways in which the psyche can compensate without the person becoming ill, for instance by replacing the object desired by one more easily attainable, by replacing the component instinct that cannot obtain satisfaction by one that can, by a process of sublimation, etc. But “Das Maß von unbefriedigter Libido, das die Menschen im Durchschnitt auf sich nehmen können, ist begrenzt” [the amount of unsatisfied libido

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that human beings on the average can put up with is limited[.]

If frustration becomes intolerable for the individual, illness almost certainly ensues."

The onset of illness comes with the stage of repression or regression, which is a direct response to the intolerable frustration met with in external reality. Unable to find fulfillment in the external world, the individual turns inward for satisfaction. She looks for an internal source of gratification to replace the external one. In this internal search for satisfaction, the libido usually *regresses* to the stage of fixation. In the transference neuroses, the individual chooses an internal object to satisfy her wish in place of the external object (a process called ‘introversion’), and the libido regresses to an earlier stage of development, usually oral (resulting in hysteria) or anal (resulting in obsessive neurosis). However, in the narcissistic neuroses, to which paranoia belongs, regression does not lead to introversion because the point of fixation to which the libido regresses pre-dates object choice; it is the narcissistic stage. The result of regression is the withdrawal of libido from external objects and its re-investment in the ego; that is, secondary narcissism.

The regression of the libido leads to the last and final stage of illness, the “return of the repressed.” This is the stage of symptom formation. The symptom offers relief for the desires of the id—a kind of satisfaction—but in a way distorted so as to supersede

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223 But not necessarily. For example, a return to the perversions, if tolerated by the super-ego, allows the individual to find other forms of satisfaction without regression, and so without becoming ill.

the conflict that prevented satisfaction in the first place. In paranoia, in particular, the conflict that takes place is between the ego and the external world, partly in its representation by the super-ego. The ego feels pressure from the demands of the id, but they are irreconcilable with external reality and with demands imposed by the super-ego. The psyche responds to the conflict with the ego’s turning away from reality and subsequently reconstructing a new framework for external reality in accordance with a system of delusions. This system allows the ego to re-attach itself to external reality, in a way that is acceptable to the super-ego (since, as we have seen, the delusions constitute negations of the repressed wish that the super-ego could not withstand), and in a way that gives outward expression to what was repressed, the infantile wish of the id (since that which was repressed constantly returns from without, so that it finds expression within reality without the individual’s feeling responsible for it).

I propose that we can interpret the main ideas of the *Dialektik der Aufklärung* as a reconstruction of the process of illness along the lines I have laid out above. To see this, I will reconstruct Adorno and Horkheimer’s view of the pathological development of enlightened reason through the stages of (i) an account of the development of civilization and enlightenment, (ii) an element of fixation that occurs in this development, (iii) a conflict that is brought to intolerable dimensions, (iv) regression, and finally (v) the return of the repressed in the formation of symptoms.

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225 The mechanism by which this system is established and its relation to the content of repression has already been discussed above in the section on projection.
5.4.1 Development of civilization

Adorno and Horkheimer trace the development of civilization along distinct, successive stages. I will reconstruct this development beginning with a stage that they do not explicitly talk about, but that is implied, at least as a theoretical construct rather than an actual historical fact, by their theory. We can call this initial stage ‘primary mimesis’—a stage analogous to primary narcissism in that human beings and nature are undifferentiated (mind is fully nature, and behavior is fully naturally directed)—proceeding with a gradual differentiation of thought or mind from nature, and culminating with the drastic separation of the two characteristic of modernity.

The initial stage, what I am calling ‘primary mimesis, can be conceived as a stage in which human beings were fully one with their inner nature and their external natural surroundings. There was no gap between impulse and action, no gap between the surrounding world and the ‘self;’ there was strictly speaking no ‘self’. Under these conditions, the organism was infinitely vulnerable to the vicissitudes of desire and inner urges in general, as well as to the dangers of external nature. Despite the dangers, however, primary mimesis also offered experiences of immediate pleasure, since the

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Precisely because there can be no distinct self at this stage, the stage is a theoretical construct rather than a ‘fact’ of history. However, as I explain later, Adorno and Horkheimer view the development of civilization as always threatened by human beings’ longing to ‘return’ to full unity with nature. This longing could also be interpreted in terms of Freud’s notion of the death drive, which can be seen as the consequence of fully satisfying the drives, since pleasure is for Freud defined as the cessation of stimulus, and the total cessation of stimulus results in an abandonment of the self to nature that the psyche can only see as death. However, the death drive is not repressed but rather defused, by the sensori-motor apparatus in the individual, and by technology in civilization, in order to sublimate wants which would otherwise destroy the organism. Since Adorno and Horkheimer claim that humanity’s primordial wish for unity with, or abandonment to, nature is actually repressed in modern civilization, a translation of what I am calling ‘primary mimesis’ into the language of the death drive is not helpful for understanding Dialektik der Aufklärung. It seems to me that the notion of primary mimesis as a developmental stage analogous to primary narcissism is inescapable in order to reconstruct the ideas of Dialektik der Aufklärung.
activity of delaying gratification for the sake of work was not even possible at this stage. Fear and pleasure were unmediated and overwhelming.

The process of separation from nature was in the first place an act against the fearfulness of nature, an attempt to control and subdue both inner nature, which directed all animal behavior without mediation and with a view to pleasure without concern for self-preservation, and outer nature, which threatened survival. The development of thought required the establishment of distance from immediate natural circumstances, both within the psyche and in relation to outer nature, in order to calculate action, to weigh consequences, and to determine one’s behavior in advance with a view to the course likely to achieve the desired effects in the external world.

The initial distancing from nature was driven by self-preservation—or, rather, it was the institution of self-preservation as the driving principle of the organism’s activity; greater distance from nature afforded ways to use nature for the sake of the organism’s survival. This distancing was moreover a necessary condition for the development of the self—the ego—as well as for the development of socially coordinated action, a precondition for the establishment of civilization. These two achievements—the creation of the subject and the creation of civilization—brought with them tremendous advantages, chief among them increased survival and power. Yet at the same time it was a costly process, for distance from nature entailed not only appeasing the terrors of nature, but also forsaking the uninhibited pleasure that unity with nature afforded. Establishing distance from this wish was done only under the promise that renunciation would one day be compensated through the achievement of happiness in and through social life.
The first stage of distance that Adorno and Horkheimer discuss is the stage of animism. During this stage, human beings tried to control and appease nature through the magic ritual: “Der Zauberer macht sich Dämonen ähnlich; um sie zu erschrecken oder zu besänftigen, gebärdet er sich schreckhaft oder sanft.” Sacrifice was an additional method of control, used to persuade gods, demons, or natural spirits in order cunningly to get them to act as one wished and to steer nature in the direction one desired. There was already in this stage a certain distance between subject and object—a distance not present in primary mimesis—for the magic ritual worked through representation. Something done to a symbol was expected to cause the action to befall the object or person symbolized: for instance, using the hairs of a person and doing something to them would signify what one wanted to happen to the person herself. Sacrifice worked through symbolic representation also, as the thing sacrificed constituted a symbol for something else that the god or spirit coveted.

Symbolic representation, because it involves a differentiation between the symbol and the symbolized, already establishes some distance between subject and object. But the distance is bridged by the fact that the symbol necessarily refers to a particular object, and this attachment to the object is not arbitrary but rather guaranteed by the specific qualities of the symbol, on the one hand, and the symbolized, on the other. The symbol is conceived as attached to a particular meaning or sense by virtue of its concrete qualities, thus necessarily and not accidentally or arbitrarily. In turn, the thing

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symbolized (the concrete ‘reference’ of the symbol) is also conceived as necessarily attached to the same meaning or sense. To use the language of structuralism, we could say that the signifier (the sensory symbol) is necessarily attached to the signified (the signification or meaning), and the signified is in turn necessarily attached to the thing designated. For example, the ‘hairs’ of the person involved in a magical ritual symbolize the particular person to whom they once belonged, and are thus necessarily attached to a particular sense or signified, while this sense in turn corresponds to the particular thing designated: the actual, living person. In sacrifice, similarly, the thing coveted by the god or spirit is conceived as necessarily attached to a particular sense or signified (for example, the first-born as the head representative of common identity in the family or tribe) that is in turn also necessarily attached symbolically to the thing sacrificed (e.g. the first-cast animal as the best representative of its pack, and thus as a suitable stand-in for the first-born), and in each specific sacrificial ritual the concrete object chosen for sacrifice depends on the specific thing or person it is supposed to symbolize. Thus in symbolic representation, while the symbol and the thing designated are differentiated, they are connected in that the symbol is necessarily tied to a specific sense or signified, which in turn is also necessarily tied to the thing designated.

The differentiation between symbol and symbolized, however, entails the establishment of some separation between the subject and nature, for the symbolic representation’s role in magical rituals is motivated by the wish to control nature—to

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228 What I mean by calling the tie between symbol and signified ‘necessary’ is that it is conceived as grounded in the concrete qualities embodied by the sensory symbol, on the one hand, and the thing designated, on the other, so that the symbol necessarily and non-arbitrarily signifies the signified. Similarly, what I mean by calling the tie between the symbolized thing and the signified ‘necessary’ is that it is conceived as following directly from the concrete qualities embodied by the thing, so that the thing is necessarily and non-arbitrarily designated by the signified.
persuade it or “convince” it to develop in a certain direction—for the sake of human purposes. The method of “control” in such rituals is mimesis—a process in which, though subject and object are not undifferentiated (as in what I called above primary mimesis), they are nonetheless still very “close,” for the subject tries to control the object by becoming like the object: thus the requirement that the symbol be non-arbitrarily attached to a specific signification that is in turn also non-arbitrarily attached to the particular object symbolized. The symbol and the symbolized are united by an affinity in meaning; the symbol is not an arbitrary sign.

The first excursus in the *Dialektik der Aufklärung* traces the next stage of development, in which animism begins to lag behind: the stage of mythology. Sacrifice, which was already “eine Veranstaltung der Menschen, die Götter zu beherrschen [a human contrivance intended to control the gods],” is gradually replaced by rational cunning. This transition is developed in *Dialektik der Aufklärung* through a re-interpretation of the *Odyssey*, which reads Odysseus’s story in terms of the gradual replacement of sacrifice and magical ritual by rational calculation and rationalized

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229 Against Freud’s idea that there is an “omnipotence of thought” in animism, Horkheimer and Adorno view animism as involving differentiation between subject and object, but within a relation of proximity where the mind tries to become like nature. They argue that “Sie [die Zauberei] gründet keineswegs in der »Allmacht der Gedanken«, die der Primitive sich zuschreiben soll wie der Neurotiker; eine »Überschätzung der seelischen Vorgänge gegen die Realität« kann es dort nicht geben, wo Gedanken und Realität nicht radikal geschieden sind” ([Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, in Max Horkheimer: Gesammelte Schriften, Vol. 5 (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1997), 33]). English translation by Edmund Jephcott in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 7: “It [magic] certainly is not founded on the ‘omnipotence of thought, which the primitive is supposed to impute to himself like the neurotic; there can be no ‘over-valuation of psychical acts’ in relation to reality where thought and reality are not radically distinguished.” According to Horkheimer and Adorno, the very idea that there is an autonomy of thought in controlling the world actually applies to industrial society rather than to animism.

The story of Odysseus is cast as a struggle of the early self to be free from the vicissitudes of fate and nature (external nature) and from the temptation of instinctual drives (internal nature) in order to “get its way”: to retain its unity as a self, to preserve itself, and ultimately to achieve the promise of a return to happiness, a return ‘home.’ Through the various stages of his journey home, Odysseus is constantly trying to establish the unity of the subject, of the ego, against the diversity that threatens it from without and from within. To ensure his self-preservation and maintain his ego together, he uses what can already be seen as instrumental reason: he often resorts to cunning, following the letter of the law but cheating the other to get his way, denying his own identity in order to achieve his goal of survival (for instance in the encounter with the Cyclops), denying his instinctual desires to preserve himself (for instance when he is tied to a mast of the ship in order both to hear the song of the sirens and not to succumb to it), and gaining mastery over nature by refusing to submit to it (in the myth of Circe).

For Horkheimer and Adorno, the development of distance from nature through the domination of inner and outer nature continued until the rational cunning already shown in the Odyssey became the fully instrumentalized system of rationality characteristic of modernity. In this latest stage, rational calculation becomes total, or nearly so. Instead of approaching the object by trying to become like it, as in mimesis, thought approaches the object by subsuming it under ever more general concepts and laws. This method affords

\[231\] Cunning is the sublation of sacrifice. “Die List ist nichts anderes als die subjektive Entfaltung solcher objektiven Unwahrheit des Opfers, das sie ablöst” (Dialektik der Aufklärung, in Max Horkheimer: Gesammelte Schriften, Vol. 5 (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1997), 75). English translation by Edmund Jephcott in Dialectic of Enlightenment (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 41: “Cunning is nothing other than the subjective continuation of the objective untruth of sacrifice, which it supersedes.”
much greater control over nature, but at the cost of greater distance and estrangement from it.

In conceptual representation, the term that expresses the concept in language, and its reference (the thing designated), are not tied to each other by their necessary attachment to a common sense or signified, as was the case in symbolism. On the one hand, the term is a more or less arbitrary sign for the sense (i.e., the signifier is arbitrarily assigned to the signified), and so it is only contingently and arbitrary related to the reference (the thing designated). On the other hand, the relation between the sense or signified, and the reference or thing signified, also becomes more or less arbitrary, for the thing becomes conceived as a mere exemplar of the sense that it exhibits, rather than as uniquely tied through its particularity to this sense, as was the case in mimesis. The transformation from animism and its characteristic symbolic representation to enlightenment thought and its deployment of generalized, conceptual representation is captured in this passage:

Materie zertrümmert, und das Kaninchen geht nicht in Stellvertretung sondern verkannt als bloßes Exemplar durch die Passion des Laboratoriums.\textsuperscript{232}

In enlightened thought, the particularity of the object is no longer essential; what matters is only that it exemplify a general concept. Thus the signification and the thing signified (sense and reference) come apart. Similarly, the relation between the signifier and the signified (between the term and its sense, the concept), becomes seen as arbitrary; the signifier is no longer a symbol but rather a mere sign. The process of establishing ever greater distance from nature thus corresponds to the growth of distance between thought and object.

For Horkheimer and Adorno, the model that conceives of thought as classification into general categories has become the dominating model because it is the most efficient for the sake of controlling nature. The principle driving the progress of rationality, from its beginnings in mimesis to its enlightened stage, is the idea that grasping everything conceptually will put an end to humanity’s fears. Eventually, nothing is allowed to escape; everything comes to be seen as in-principle knowable and controllable, and thus devoid of that mysterious quality that once made the world unpredictable and threatening.


Magic requires specific representation. What is done to the spear, the hair, the name of the enemy, is also to befall his person; the sacrificial animal is slain in place of the god. The substitution which takes place in sacrifice marks a step toward discursive logic. Even though the hind which was offered up for the daughter, the lamb for the firstborn, necessarily still had qualities of its own, it already represented the genus. It manifested the arbitrariness of the specimen. But the sanctity of the \textit{hic et nunc}, the uniqueness of the chosen victim which coincides with its representative status, distinguishes it radically, makes it non-exchangeable even in the exchange. Science puts an end to this. In it there is no specific representation: something which is a sacrificial animal cannot be a god. Representation gives way to universal fungibility. An atom is smashed not as a representative but as a specimen of matter, and the rabbit suffering the torment of the laboratory is seen not as a representative but, mistakenly, as a mere exemplar.
Threatening, wild nature is pushed ‘outside’ until, in the final stage, it is basically
annulled through the powers of reason (at least insofar as reason’s self-understanding is
cared for).  

Der Furcht wähnt er ledig zu sein, wenn es nichts Unbekanntes mehr gibt. Das
bestimmt die Bahn der Entmythologisierung, der Aufklärung, die das Lebendige
mit dem Unlebendigen ineinssetzt wie der Mythos das Unlebendige mit dem
Lebendigen. Aufklärung ist die radikal gewordene, mythische Angst. Die reine
Immanenz des Positivismus, ihr letztes Produkt, ist nichts anderes als ein
gleichsam universales Tabu. Es darf überhaupt nichts mehr draußen sein, weil die
bloße Vorstellung des Draußen die eigentliche Quelle der Angst ist.  

The development of enlightenment civilization and enlightenment thought thus
follows definite stages, beginning with primary mimesis, then going through animism,
mythology, and finally resulting in the full-fledged subject-object relation of distance and
manipulation that characterizes the apex of enlightenment.

5.4.2 Fixation

It seems clear from the account in Dialektik der Aufklärung that the promise of
infinite pleasure that was only possible through loss of the self in nature (that is, in
primary mimesis) constitutes a desire that human beings never completely superseded, an
infantile wish whose pull on the self—a pull for disintegration into nature—was never

233 Adorno and Horkheimer, Dialektik der Aufklärung, in Max Horkheimer: Gesammelte
Schriften, Vol. 5 (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1997), 38. English translation by
Edmund Jephcott in Dialectic of Enlightenment (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 11:

Humans believe themselves free of fear when there is no longer anything unknown. This has
determined the path of demythologization, of enlightenment, which equates the living with the
nonliving as myth had equated the nonliving with the living. Enlightenment is mythical fear
radicalized. The pure immanence of positivism, its ultimate product, is nothing other than a form
of universal taboo. Nothing is allowed to remain outside, since the mere idea of the ‘outside’ is
the real source of fear.
overcome and in fact became stronger and stronger as civilization called for ever greater sacrifice of instinctual desires.

Rein natürliche Existenz, animalische und vegetative, bildete der Zivilisation die absolute Gefahr. Mimetische, mythische, metaphysische Verhaltensweisen galten nacheinander als überwundene Weltalter, auf die hinabsinken mit dem Schrecken behaftet war, daß das Selbst in jene bloße Natur zurückverwandelt werde, der es sich mit unsäglicher Anstrengung entfremdet hatte, und die ihm eben darum unsägliches Grauen einflößte. Die lebendige Erinnerung an die Vorzeit, schon an die nomadischen, um wie viel mehr an die eigentliche präpatriarchalischen Stufen, war mit den furchtbarsten Strafen in allen Jahrtausenden aus dem Bewußtsein der Menschen ausgebrannt worden. Der aufgeklärte Geist ersetzte Feuer und Rad durch das Stigma, das er aller Irrationalität aufprägte, da sie ins Verderben führt.

The creation of the self and of civilization is presented in *Dialektik der Aufklärung* as a painful process that required extreme sacrifice and exertion. All this exertion was for the sake of survival and a future promise of re-gaining pleasure, of acquiring a sort of compensation for the sacrifices required by finding an Odyssean “return home”—a return to nature that is not unmediated, and so does not entail the destruction of civilization, but that offers a mediated satisfaction of the wish for happiness. As this compensation became ever more remote and unattainable, the pull of unsatisfied instinctual desires clamoring for the satisfaction of pleasure became ever

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For civilization, purely natural existence, both animal and vegetative, was the absolute danger. Mimetic, mythical, and metaphysical forms of behavior were successively regarded as stages of world history which had been left behind, and the idea of reverting to them held the terror that the self would be changed back into the mere nature from which it had extricated itself with unspeakable exertions and which for that reason filled it with unspeakable dread. Over the millennia the living memory of prehistory, of its nomadic period and even more of the truly prepatriarchal stages, has been expunged from human consciousness with the most terrible punishments. The enlightened spirit replaced fire and the wheel by the stigma it attached to all irrationality, which led to perdition.
stronger, and so became the exertions necessary to extirpate the memory of lost happiness.

5.4.3 Intolerable frustration

I propose that the moment of intolerable frustration in the history of enlightenment came about at the point where the development of civilization, through the development of its technical powers over the forces of nature, was finally able to cease demanding the increased repression of instincts, and it became possible to order society in a way that affords human beings some more satisfaction in the external world—for instance, through the reduction of alienated labor and the facilitation of individual self-actualization, through collective work for the betterment of human conditions rather than for the creation of profit at the expense of human potentialities, or through the establishment of a new relation with inner nature’s desire for happiness as well as with external nature, etc. But civilization failed to deliver.

A glimpse of this idea is already present in the discussion of the myth of the sirens in *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, where Adorno and Horkheimer interpret Odysseus’ escape from the lure of the sirens’ song by listening to the call of pleasure without being able to submit to it, and the rowers’ stoppage of their senses in order not to even hear the call of pleasure, as a dialectic of compulsion that plays itself over and over in civilization:

Der Knecht bleibt an Leib und Seele, der Herr regrediert. Keine Herrschaft noch hat es vermocht, diesen Preis abzudingen, und die Kreisähnlichkeit der Geschichte in ihrem Fortschritt wird miterklärt von solcher Schwächung, dem Äquivalent der Macht. Die Menschheit, deren Geschicklichkeit und Kenntnis mit der Arbeitsteilung sich differenziert, wird zugleich auf anthropologisch primitivere Stufen zurückgezwungen, *denn die Dauer der Herrschaft bedingt bei*
Frustration becomes intolerable—and thus leads to regression—when the technical capabilities of humanity concretely open possibilities for the reduction or partial lifting of repression, but these possibilities are forsaken.

The idea that this moment marks a change in the history of civilization is made more explicit in Horkheimer’s *Eclipse of Reason*, where he argues that the degree of repression enforced under modern technological conditions has become irrational because it has become divorced from the promise of happiness and so also from its initial raison d’être—enhanced survival of the species—but rather continues seemingly only for its own sake. Thus, Horkheimer suggests, the repression demanded of individuals in...
advanced capitalist societies is neither necessary for survival nor conducive to happiness but rather seems aimed at the reproduction of the capitalist structure for its sake alone, and it is this turn of affairs that renders repression irrational and unbearable. It no longer upholds the promise of a future compensation, for the concrete potentialities to begin bringing about that compensation have already been actualized, and yet the idea of consciously ordering society for the sake of this compensation—for the sake of happiness and liberation from unnecessary repression—has not been pursued.

In his *Vorlesung über Negative Dialektik*, Adorno traces the pathology of the creation of reality as a rigid and ‘totalitarian’ system to the failure of the promises of the bourgeois revolutions. It is difficult to place the moment at which frustration became intolerable precisely, but it is clear that Adorno takes it to be tied to the unrealized possibilities for liberation from coercive work that the scientific revolution afforded, and the forsaken promises contained in the bourgeois liberal ideas of the seventeenth century: promises of emancipation and new possibilities for happiness that were never fulfilled. Instead, the social conditions of life continued to require ever greater renunciation from the masses and, even for those in power, the small capitalist class that did not have to pay through sacrificial labor and the inhibition of pleasure, their privileged position bore the cost of maintaining and increasing humanity’s distance from nature. At this point, the repression of nature not only became intolerable in that it made satisfaction of instinctual desires impossible, but moreover it became independent of its initial *raison d’etre* as a sacrifice to be compensated in a future that would manage to recover the lost promise of

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happiness from the stage of primary mimesis. “Ihr Weg [der Weg der Zivilisation] war der von Gehorsam und Arbeit, über dem Erfüllung immerwährend bloß als Schein, als entmachtete Schönheit leuchtet.”

5.4.4 Regression/ Repression proper

In psychoanalytic theory, when frustration reaches intolerable dimensions, the psyche first tries to change the external world in order to solve the conflict, but, if this proves impossible, a number of reactions can take place—for instance, a re-organization of leading component instincts, or sublimation, or perversion, or regression, etc. In paranoia, the attempt to change the external world fails, and the organism withdraws its libidinal cathexes from external reality and attaches them to the ego.

The process of pathology in the history of the enlightenment follows a structurally analogous pattern. The first significant thing that happened when humanity was faced with intolerable frustration in the realm of social reality, according to Horkheimer and Adorno, was that the attempt actually to change the social order so that it may afford some satisfaction to human beings—a satisfaction of the old wishes for happiness and freedom—failed, and we can correlate this failure specifically with the failure of a truly Marxist revolution to occur and take hold. Since the external world whose structure had become a cause of intolerable frustration was not changed, cathexes were removed from external reality and attached to the ego, producing megalomania.

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In his *Vorlesung über Negative Dialektik*, Adorno claims that the philosophical systems of the late eighteenth and nineteenth century express the megalomania resulting from regression, since they represent the ego—that is, the transcendental or constitutive rational subject in Kant and German Idealism—as all-powerful and the external world as defined by the categories imprinted on the world by the subject. But this philosophical notion emerged according to Adorno as a response to real socio-historical conditions.

From its inception, the bourgeois mind sought emancipation, but it continually renounced real liberation and instead affirmed the existing order. To compensate for its shortcomings in changing the real conditions of life, bourgeois thought undertook to construct an intellectual order free of all the contradictions, inconsistencies, and deficiencies of concrete social conditions. Adorno suggests that bourgeois thought exaggerated its autonomy at the level of its own theoretical self-understanding in order to compensate for the unfreedom of the individual in practical life. Ideology at the beginning of bourgeois society required that reality be taken to be permeated by the freedom that was being in fact denied. Humanity’s yearning for emancipation from social and economic oppression, its longing for satisfying the promise of happiness of the past, was appeased with a thought-construction rather than with real change in the conditions of objective life. In other words, the satisfaction that was sought-for in

239 See Adorno, *Vorlesung über Negative Dialektik*, in *Nachgelassene Schriften*, Vol. 16 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2003), 170: “Im Schatten der Unvollständigkeit seiner Emanzipation muß das bürgerliche Bewußtsein fürchten, von einem fortgeschrittenen kassiert zu werden; es ahnt, daß es, weil es nicht die ganze Freiheit ist, nur deren Zerrbild hervorbringt; darum muß es seine Autonomie theoretisch zum System überhöhen, das zugleich seinen Zwangsmechanismen ähnelt.” English translation in *Lectures on Negative Dialectics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008), 124: “It [the bourgeois mind] sensed that it had achieved not freedom in its entirety but only a caricature. Because of that it was forced to exaggerate its own autonomy at the level of theory, expanding it into a system that resembled its own coercive mechanisms.”
external reality was instead satisfied with thought’s creation of its own substitute reality, in which its absolute freedom reigns supreme. In this process, thought moved away from the real conditions of reality and cathected instead the subject, transfigured into a transcendental and constitutive self whose form institutes a free and logical world.

I am proposing to understand this phenomenon, in which philosophical reflection comes to represent thought as all powerful and as the creator of what counts as meaningful objectivity, and in which the external world is reduced to an indeterminate beyond, as the process of withdrawing cathexes from an external reality that offers no satisfaction and re-directing them to the subject, the ego—in this case, the transcendental ego. Just as, in paranoia, the psyche attempts to compensate for the satisfaction that it seeks but cannot find in external reality by regressing to the stage of primary narcissism and instituting a secondary narcissism, I interpret Adorno’s idea of how the transcendental ego comes about as a process in which humanity’s self-understanding (captured in philosophical thought) regresses to the stage of primary mimesis and cathexes the ego. Satisfaction is now sought not in something external but rather in the creations of the mind alone.

It is moreover at this stage that the pathological process of drastic separation from the object—from nature—sets in. The whole world appears as a creation of thought—it becomes meaningful and accessible only by being subsumed under the classifying categories of the mind. The object loses significance and the mind, now suffering from a sort of megalomania (as is characteristic in paranoia) stands supreme as the legislator of what counts, meaningfully, as real. “Das Selbst, das die Ordnung und Unterordnung an der Unterwerfung der Welt lernte, hat bald Wahrheit überhaupt mit dem disponierenden
Denken ineinsgesetzt, ohne dessen feste Unterscheidungen sie nicht bestehen kann. Es hat mit dem mimetischen Zauber die Erkenntnis tabuiert, die den Gegenstand wirklich trifft.

The movements in philosophy that defend the notion of a transcendental or constitutive self (Kant, German Idealism, even Husserl) show the onset of regression at the level of humanity’s theoretical self-understanding.

We are now at the stage of the formation of symptoms. As I discussed above, in paranoia symptoms are formed in an effort to rebuild the world, to re-establish rapport with objects and things. But the mechanism by which the world is rebuilt is projection, and it leads to the re-construction of the world along a framework in which paranoid delusions hold “the world” together in a rigid system that admits of no contradiction from without. In the onset of paranoia in enlightened reason, nature had to be repressed and the promise of happiness from the stage of primary mimesis was finally frustrated so greatly that thought turned to itself alone in order to gain satisfaction. But the world then needs to be rebuilt through projection. The system of projected delusions (as is the role of all paranoid systems of delusions) directly contradicts the repressed wish, and so directly contradicts the wish to reunite with nature and even the existence of nature as something that goes beyond the system, that is meaningful in its own right, and that is not merely the passive “stuff” of classifying thought, but rather itself an active agency in human life and human reality. The world in which we, as enlightened “thinkers” and minds live, is a closed system that encompasses and organizes reality in accordance with

\footnote{Adorno and Horkheimer, Dialektik der Aufklärung, in Max Horkheimer: Gesammelte Schriften, Vol. 5 (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1997), 36. English translation by Edmund Jephcott in Dialectic of Enlightenment (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 10: “The self which learned about order and subordination through the subjugation of the world soon equated truth in genera with classifying thought, without whose fixed distinctions it cannot exist. Along with mimetic magic it tabooed the knowledge which really apprehends the object.”}
a rigid framework imposed by thought alone, in its pathological effort to repress the unfulfilled wish for happiness promised by nature.\footnote{241}{Of course, this does not mean that every single, finite element of our world is pathological and delusory. Many of the results of modern science are probably true and, in themselves, not delusional. The point is rather that the structure of the world as a whole is delusional. This structure orders all elements of our world in terms of a total structure (system) of relations that is itself delusional, and that rules out from our conception of meaningful or ‘rational’ reality anything that would challenge the structure’s organizing principle, namely the repression of nature through projection. See my discussion above of the delusional system characteristic of paranoia.}

The goal of the system of delusions, namely to repress and “expunge” nature from the real, is enforced by the unforgiving exclusion of anything that does not fit the systematic structure. Adorno puts the point thus,

\begin{quote}

In this extirpation of the other, of nature as a \textit{meaningful} existent, from reality, thought regresses to the stage of fixation, but in reverse form: whereas the first stages of detachment from primary mimesis sought to know nature by becoming like the object, enlightenment knowledge seeks to reduce the meaningful content of all of nature to its own conceptual framework, to the formal structure of the transcendental ego, of

\begin{quote}
Whenever things that are to be comprehended resist identity with the concept, the latter are forced into grotesque exaggeration to prevent doubts arising about the coherence and rigour of the intellectual product. Great philosophy was taken possession of by the paranoid zeal that forbids the wicked queen in Snow White to tolerate anyone more beautiful than she—another person, in short—even at the uttermost ends of her realm, and that drives her to pursue that Other with all the wiles of reason, while the Other constantly retreats in the face of that pursuit.
\end{quote}
instrumental reason. Stepping outside the system is the greatest taboo of enlightened reason:

Die Entfernung des Denkens von dem Geschäft, das Tatsächliche zuzurichten, das Heraustreten aus dem Bannkreis des Daseins, gilt der scientifischen Gesinnung ebenso als Wahnsinn und Selbstvernichtung, wie dem primitiven Zauberer das Heraustreten aus dem magischen Kreis, den er für die Beschworung gezogen hat, und beidemale ist dafür gesorgt, daß die Tabuverletzung dem Frevler auch wirklich zum Unheil ausschlägt. Naturbeherrschung zieht den Kreis, in den Kritik der reinen Vernunft das Denken bannte. Kant hat die Lehre von dessen rastlos mühseligem Fortschritt ins Unendliche mit dem Beharren auf seiner Unzulänglichkeit und ewigen Begrenztheit vereint. Der Bescheid, den er erteilte, ist ein Orakelspruch. Kein Sein ist in der Welt, das Wissenschaft nicht durchdringen könnte, aber was von Wissenschaft durchdrungen werden kann, ist nicht das Sein.\textsuperscript{243}

This is why the system is “totalitarian.”\textsuperscript{244} Only what the system manages to incorporate into its rigid structure is allowed the dignity of being real, of being meaningful.\textsuperscript{245}

\begin{flushright}

For the scientific temper, any deviation of thought from the business of manipulating the actual, any stepping outside the jurisdiction of existence, is no less senseless and self-destuctive than it would be for the magician to step outside the magic circle drawn for his incantation; and in both cases violation of the taboo carries a heavy price for the offender. The mastery of nature draws the circle in which the critique of pure reason holds thought spellbound. Kant combined the doctrine of thought’s restlessly toilsome progress toward infinity with insistence on its insufficiency and eternal limitation. The wisdom he imparted is oracular: There is no being in the world that knowledge cannot penetrate, but what can be penetrated by knowledge is not being.


\textsuperscript{245} Adorno and Horkheimer, Dialektik der Aufklärung, in Max Horkheimer: Gesammelte Schriften, Vol. 5 (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1997), 220:

Indem der Paranoiker die Außenwelt nur perzipiert, wie es seinen blinden Zwecken entspricht, vermag er immer nur sein zur abstrakten Sucht entäußertes Selbst zu wiederholen. Das nackte Schema der Macht als solcher, gleich überwältigend gegen andere wie gegen das eigene mit sich zerfallene Ich, ergreift, was sich ihm bietet, und fügt es, ganz gleichgültig gegen seine Eigenart, in

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5.4.5 Return of the repressed

The system of delusions, built through paranoid projection, re-creates the world in such a way that what has been repressed, the extirpation of which is the system’s single aim—i.e. nature—constantly returns from without.

The return of repressed inner nature is the final cause that Adorno and Horkheimer ascribe to fascist and proto-fascist movements as well as other expressions of racism, xenophobia, and intolerance. The more nature is repressed in the self through the method of projection, the more the menace of nature is re-encountered from without, in the system of projective delusions that orders the world in which we live. Since the desire for happiness in nature has been repressed and transformed into the invective to destroy all threatening nature, which is seen as persecuting civilization from the outside, the unconscious affective forces of modernity are constantly galvanized in the service of movements whose goal is to destroy any remnants of the natural, of that which has not

246 Here I concentrate on the ‘return’ of inner nature, which is after all the most important element in Horkheimer and Adorno’s conception of ‘nature.’ However, it is interesting to see that a certain notion of the ‘return of nature’ can be seen even with respect to outer nature. No matter how much modern society seeks to keep wild and uncontrollable nature outside—by filling all spaces with human habitats, by keeping “wild spaces” controlled, by leaving no corner of the earth unexplored, etc—nature’s power is ultimately uncontrollable, and this point is more visible than ever in the ecological crisis now under way, in which our civilization’s ways are dangerously close to bringing about ecological catastrophe. The fury with which we attempt to dominate nature returns with fury that threatens to destroy us.
been totally “civilized,” of all that is perceived as a trace of untamed nature. These traces of not-fully tamed nature are particularly noticeable in groups that stand in a relationship of some distance with totally-ordered civilization. In their analysis of the horrors of the Third Reich, Adorno and Horkheimer ascribe the organized persecution of Jews, homosexuals, Roma, and other groups²⁴⁷ to the fact that these minorities exhibited characteristics of an incompletely or insufficiently “civilized” nature, thus reminding the “civilized” individual of the primitive world, its fearfulness, and also its happiness. Gestures, religious beliefs, and modes of behavior that are not completely in line with the totalized system are reminiscent of that which stands “outside” the system (of the fact that there is an outside at all); they are traces of the nature that has been so painfully expunged from reality in the process of civilization and through the paranoid projection from which reified reality itself emanates. Even the subjugation and oppression of women is assigned to the same drive to eliminate the remembrance of untamed nature:

Die Frau aber ist durch Schwäche gebrandmarkt, auf Grund der Schwäche ist sie in der Minorität, auch wo sie an Zahl dem Mann überlegen ist. Wie bei den unterjochten Ureinwohnern in den frühen Staatswesen, wie bei den Eingeborenen der Kolonien, die an Organisation und Waffen hinter den Eroberern zurückstehen, wie bei den Juden unter den Ariern, bildet ihre Wehrlosigkeit den Rechtstitel ihrer Unterdrückung. ... Der Mann als Herrscher versagt der Frau die Ehre, sie zu individuieren. Die Einzelne ist gesellschaftlich Beispiel derGattung, Vertreterin ihres Geschlechts und darum, als von der männlichen Logik ganz Erfaßte, steht sie für Natur, das Substratum nie endender Subsumtion in der Idee, nie endender Unterwerfung in der Wirklichkeit. Das Weib als vorgebliches Naturwesen ist Produkt der Geschichte, die es denaturiert. ... Die verhaßte übermächtige Lockung, in die Natur zurückzufallen, ganz ausrotten, das ist die Grausamkeit, die der mißlungenen Zivilisation entspringt, Barbarei, die andere Seite der Kultur. ... Die Zeichen der Ohnmacht, die hastigen unkoordinierten Bewegungen, Angst der

²⁴⁷ See Dialektik der Aufklärung, in Max Horkheimer: Gesammelte Schriften, Vol. 5 (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1997), 200, where Adorno says that for fascism and the anti-Semitic spirit, “die Opfer untereinander auswechselbar sind... Vagabunden, Juden, Protestanten, Katholiken... [the victims are interchangeable... vagrants, Jews, Protestants, Catholics...].”

The success of fascist society—which, it is worth noting again, for Adorno and Horkheimer does not designate only the explosion of Nazism in the Third Reich but the latent character of advanced capitalist Western society in general—is due to the fact that it creates, through its pathological system of delusions, an external projection of the nature that is repressed within, and in this externalization of nature, individuals in the sick society achieve a double satisfaction. First, they enact again and again their expunging of

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But woman bears the stigma of weakness; her weakness places her in a minority even when she is numerically superior to men. As with the subjugated original inhabitants in early forms of state, the indigenous population of colonies, who lack the organization and weapons of their conquerors, as with the Jews among Aryans, her defenselessness legitimizes her oppression. … Man as ruler refuses to do woman the honor of individualizing her. Socially, the individual woman is an example of the species, a representative of her sex, and thus, wholly encompassed by male logic, she stands for nature, the substrate of never-ending subjection on that reality. Woman as an allegedly natural being is a product of history, which denatures her. … To eradicate utterly the hated but overwhelming temptation to lapse back into nature—that is the cruelty which stems from failed civilization; it is barbarism, the other side of culture. … The signs of powerlessness, hasty uncoordinated movements, animal fear, swarming masses, provoke the lust for murder. The explanation for the hatred of woman as the weaker in mental and physical power, who bears the mark of domination on her brow, is the same as for the hatred of the Jews. Women and Jews show visible evidence of not having ruled for thousands of years. They live, although they could be eliminated, and their fear and weakness, the greater affinity to nature produced in them by perennial oppression, is the element in which they live. In the strong, who pay for their strength with their strained remoteness from nature and must forever forbid themselves fear, this incites blind fury. They identify with nature by calling forth from their victims, multiplied by a thousandfold, the cry they may not utter themselves.
nature from the world; they repeat the obsessive-compulsive ritual in which they act as defenders of civilization in the ritual killing of nature. Although the process fails in finally eliminating nature (which cannot be eliminated because the very system of delusions created to eliminate it replicates it as an external presence), it is repeated as a magical ritual.

Second, through the ritualistic venting of fascist destruction against what represents nature, the repressed wish to be one with nature achieves a distorted satisfaction: it achieves unity through destruction. The destruction of nature and its representatives is in fact driven by the (unconsciously negated) wish for nature and

249 Recall that in paranoia, delusional projections tend to be produced in the manner of obsessive-compulsion, at least according to Freud’s analysis. In paranoia, there are three main kinds of phenomena: residual phenomena representing what remains of a normal stage, phenomena representing detachment of the libido from objects (megalomania in this case), and phenomena representing the attempt at restoration, where the libido attempts to re-attach to objects but does so in the manner of obsessional neurosis (by contrast, in other forms of psychosis, the attachment is different, for instance in schizophrenia the attachment is done in the manner of hysteria). So, the symptoms exhibit for example the repetition of rituals that the individual follows often without knowing their reason (cause) or purpose. See Freud, “Zur Einführung des Narzißmus,” in Sigmund Freud: Gesammelte Werke, Vol. X (London: Imago Publishing Co., 1949), 153. English translation in “On Narcissism”, in The standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. 14 (London: Hogarth Press, 1974), 2941.

250 Adorno and Horkheimer, Dialektik der Aufklärung, in Max Horkheimer: Gesammelte Schriften, Vol. 5 (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1997), 229:


English translation by Edmund Jephcott in Dialectic of Enlightenment (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 164-5:

No matter what the makeup of the Jews may be in reality, their image, that of the defeated, has characteristics which must make totalitarian rule their mortal enemy: happiness without power, reward without work, a homeland without frontiers, religion without myth. These features are outlawed by the ruling powers because they are secretly coveted by the ruled. The former can survive only as long as the latter turn what they yearn for into an object of hate. They do so through pathic projection, since even hatred leads to union with the object—in destruction.
ultimately by the remnants of nature (its violence as well as its betrayed promise of happiness) in the self. Fascist violence against nature and its representatives is fueled by the strength and the violence of the repressed nature in the self, and this is why Adorno and Horkheimer understand fascism as a phenomenon that brings the forces of repressed nature into the service of the violent elimination of nature. Fascist violence is enacted in abandonment to the destructive irrational rage of repressed nature and in this way achieves a satisfaction of the repressed wish for unity with nature, albeit in a damaged way ultimately doomed to fail. Fascism (and demagogy) offers the unconscious reward of allowing people to carry on their fight against nature toward a nature outside instead of inside themselves. The superego, impotent in its own house, becomes the hangman in society. These individuals obtain the gratification of feeling themselves as champions of civilization simultaneously with letting loose their repressed desires. Since their fury does not overcome their inner conflict, and since there are always plenty of others on whom to practice, this routine of suppression is repeated over and over again. Thus it tends toward total destruction.²⁵¹

As Horkheimer puts it, fascism reveals “the fatal intimate connection between domination of nature and revolt of nature.”²⁵² By allowing an outlet for pent-up resentment and rage through violence, fascism garners the energy of repressed nature and directs it into actions that act to maintain and enforce the repression of nature. “Der Faschismus ist totalitär auch darin, daß er die Rebellion der unterdrückten Natur gegen die Herrschaft unmittelbar der Herrschaft nutzbar zu machen strebt.”²⁵³

²⁵¹ Horkheimer, Eclipse of Reason (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), 82.
²⁵² Ibid., 84.
²⁵³ Adorno and Horkheimer, Dialektik der Aufklärung, in Max Horkheimer: Gesammelte Schriften, Vol. 5 (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1997), 215. English translation by
5.5 Conclusion

This chapter has developed a detailed Freudian interpretation of Adorno and Horkheimer’s diagnosis of the enlightenment’s pathology in Dialektik der Aufklärung. I have argued that the theory presented in this text interprets modern, advanced capitalist Western civilization as suffering from paranoid delusion, and I have shown that Freud’s conception of paranoia constitutes a main structural element in the theory of Dialektik der Aufklärung.254

Edmund Jephcott in Dialectic of Enlightenment (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 152: “Fascism is also totalitarian in seeking to place oppressed nature’s rebellion against domination directly in the service of domination.”

254 Horkheimer and Adorno’s discussion in Dialektik der Aufklärung is fragmentary and does not explicitly draw parallels between all structural details of Freud’s conception of paranoia, projection, and the functioning of the illness in general, on the one hand, and the details of the enlightenment’s pathology, on the other. Some readers familiar with the text may charge my interpretation of pushing the Freudian line too far. However, to these readers, I would like to stress two points. First, the fact that Dialektik der Aufklärung is bursting with Freudian references, and is in fact a Freudian interpretation (as the passages quoted throughout this chapter attest), should not be glossed over as peripheral to the account. Adorno and Horkheimer were of course very well versed on Freudian psychoanalysis—especially Adorno, who formulated the main psychoanalytic, speculative lines of research for the Institute’s Studies on Prejudice (the studies on the authoritarian personality), which lines of research were, fortunately for him, confirmed by the empirical studies of the Berkeley group. (For details of Adorno’s participation in the project, see Wiggershaus, Rolf. The Frankfurt School: Its History, Theories, and Political Significance (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1998), 408-430.) Adorno’s own publications on the psychoanalytic theory of fascism show a very careful understanding of Freudian psychoanalysis; someone so careful (even fastidious) as he was with his writing would not have deployed Freudian categories without first deciding that the details constituting the meaning of the category in psychoanalysis are appropriate for the context in which he was using the category. See “Anti-Semitism and Fascist Propaganda,” and “Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda” (both originally written in English) in in Gesammelte Schriften, Vol. 8 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1969). Also of interest is Adorno’s Freudian study of astrology columns in LA newspapers: see Adorno, The Stars Down to Earth (London and New York: Taylor and Francis, 2002)—also originally published in English.

Second, the details of the interpretation we have achieved are a salutary corrective to the vagueness with which Adorno and Horkheimer’s theory of the enlightenment’s pathology is usually met. The richness of detail that we have been able to gather from the detailed Freudian interpretation above will gives us fertile ground to work from as we bring the Dialektik der Aufklärung into relation with the conceptions of society and critical thought that have been developed so far. But the proof is in the pudding, and in the chapters that follow I will show that the interpretation I have defended here is key for understanding Adorno’s overall philosophy of history, his overall conception of society, and the logical structure of negative dialectics as a whole; and I will also show that this interpretation allows us to rule out widespread misunderstandings of Dialektik der Aufklärung that have unfortunately given rise to a relatively common view that the theory is ultimately incoherent.
However, I expect there to be reluctance to accept my idea that the main arguments in *Dialektik der Aufklärung* should be understood under strictly Freudian lines. The reason is that, by bringing Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s views so close to Freud, there arises a danger that their theory be taken to rise and fall with the social-scientific application of Freud’s theory. The issue is made worse by the fact that Freudian theory in general, and even more so applications of the theory to social science, have come under strong criticism since Freud’s death, and are widely disfavored today, in the Anglo-American academic world, at least.

However, the overwhelming evidence shows that, for better or worse, the Freudian conception of paranoia is a main structuring component of *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, and the theory presented in this text is not correctly understood without grasping the strong structural effect that Freud’s account of paranoia has on Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s conception of the enlightenment’s pathology and their analysis of fascism. In fact, the logic of paranoia and paranoid projection remains an essential component of Adorno’s general social theory throughout his later texts.

I will moreover argue in upcoming chapters that the logic of paranoia and paranoid projection in particular is key for understanding the logical structure of negative dialectics in general because it provides a framework for understanding how two seemingly incompatible elements of Adorno’s conception of dialectics come together. The first element is his genealogical conception of reason and social reality that interprets them to be the result of a contingent, non-teleological, and specifically pathological development in mediation with non-conceptual nature. (This is the element of *global heteronomy*.) The second element is a Hegelian conception of a holistic, systematic, and
teleologically ordered structure that governs both conceptual thinking and the social order under conditions of advanced capitalism. (This is the element derived from internal heteronomy.) The logical structure of paranoia and paranoid projection explains not only the genealogical account of modernity’s fall into pathology but also the rise of the system, and it accounts for Adorno’s evaluation of the system as both an accurate representation of existing reality and a system of delusion.

Of course, Freud himself does not consider the system of delusions that arises in paranoia as internally structured along Hegelian lines. The incorporation of Hegel into an account of the paranoid system in a social-theoretic framework belongs specifically to Adorno’s social theory. But this means that Adorno’s appropriation of Freud is not just Freudian; it is not reducible to Freud’s account of paranoia. Moreover, I will show in later chapters that Adorno not only incorporates a Hegelian component into the logic of paranoia and paranoid projection, but also a Benjaminian conception of language and its relation to nature. This means that the overall logical structure of paranoid projection in Adorno will not in the end be just the Freudian conception, but rather a sublation [Aufhebung] of Freud’s account of paranoia that incorporates a Hegelian and a Benjaminian moment, and that is itself altered as a result of this incorporation. (Similarly, as we saw in chapter 4, the Hegelian conception of dialectics is not exactly the same as Adorno’s but is rather an essential moment of it, and what we are investigating right now is precisely how the mediation by nature incorporates and at the same time alters the Hegelian model.)

The strictly Freudian interpretation that I have defended in this chapter therefore does not reduce Adorno and Horkheimer’s account in Dialektik der Aufklärung to Freud,
though I am claiming that the Freudian conception of paranoia is a central structuring component of *Dialektik der Aufklärung* and that the latter cannot be understood without a detailed understanding of the former. But since my claim is not a *reductive* one, it in no way entails that Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s theory necessarily rises and falls with the fate of Freud’s theory. Rather, we will need first to get the full picture of how the logical structure of negative dialectics incorporates Freud’s, Hegel’s, and Benjamin’s theories (without leaving any one of these three theories unchanged) before assessing (a) which elements of Freudian theory are essential for Adorno’s account, and which are not; (b) whether the essential elements can be defended on their own right, and, of course, (c) whether the resulting overall logical structure of Adorno’s dialectics can itself be defended on its own right.
CHAPTER 6:

THE DIALECTIC OF ENLIGHTENMENT AND ITS CONSEQUENCES FOR THE THEORY OF SOCIETY AND CRITICAL THOUGHT

Having explained and defended a strictly Freudian interpretation of the dialectic of enlightenment, I now want to use that interpretation in order to flesh out Adorno’s conception of society’s inner dynamics, and of critical thought, developed in chapter 4.

My primary aim is to explore how the mediation of the social order by nature comes together with the social analysis presented in chapters 2-4, which focused on the mediation of all domains of life by the social totality. I will present my interpretation of how these forms of mediation intersect by contrasting it with a common but erroneous reading of Adorno’s conception of how nature mediates the social order. This interpretation, versions of which can be found in Seyla Benhabib’s, Rolf Wiggerhaus’s, and Martin Jay’s readings of Adorno, takes the view that Adorno’s conception of how nature mediates the development of society entails that the process of enlightenment could not but lead to the descent of civilization into barbarism. This interpretation takes Adorno’s view of the relation between enlightenment and nature to entail that the pathologies of modernity are both historically inevitable and inescapable, for they arise from an element of domination that is a necessary component of the process of subjectivation and the formation of human societies in general. The idea of a non-
pathological, emancipated society is then a mere utopian fantasy that could never have been true, and the realization of which has no room in any possible future.

In section 1, I explain the details of this widespread interpretation of Adorno. Then, on the basis of the interpretation of the dialectic of enlightenment and nature that I developed in chapter 5, I show in the second section of this chapter that the interpretation explained in section 1 is erroneous. I argue instead that domination and pathology are not necessarily connected in Adorno’s thought. Domination, which does in Adorno’s view necessarily accompany the process of subjectivation and the formation of civilization, is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for the onset of enlightened civilization’s pathology of paranoia. The development of pathology requires, in addition, historically contingent developments that have led to the total domination of capitalist relations over the social order. Understanding how these contingent socio-economic developments came about, how they affected (in fact, how they mediated) the relation between society and nature, and how they led to the pathology of contemporary Western civilization is key for understanding Adorno’s philosophy.

After explaining the role of contingent socio-historical and economic developments in the dialectic of enlightenment and nature, and arguing that the resulting picture opposes common misinterpretations of Adorno’s philosophy, I turn in section 3 to constructing an overall interpretation of Adorno’s conception of contemporary society and critical thought, and I explain how this interpretation answers questions that were left open in the initial formulations of Adorno’s social theory that I advanced in chapter 4.
6.1 The dialectic of enlightenment and nature—a negative teleology?

There is no doubt that the main goal of *Dialektik der Aufklärung* is to find an explanation for the “neue Art von Barbarei” [the new form of barbarism] that characterized the historical events of the first half of the twentieth century and that arguably has characterized history since.²⁵⁵ It is also beyond question that, for Horkheimer and Adorno, an adequate explanation must not take this barbarism to be a mere accidental aberration, but must rather explain how elements *internal to* enlightenment developed to the current state of crisis. In this regard, Horkheimer and Adorno fully endorse Benjamin’s statement in the seventh of his “Theses on the Philosophy of History” that “Das Staunen darüber, daß die Dinge, die wir erleben, im zwanzigsten Jahrhundert ,noch’ möglich sind, ist *kein* philosophisches. Es steht nicht am Anfang einer Erkenntnis, es sei denn der, daß die Vorstellung von Geschichte, aus der es stammt, nicht zu halten ist.”²⁵⁶ The view that traces Western civilization’s development along a narrative of increasing progress and rationality is refuted by the violence, irrationality, and shear scale of destruction of the last century, and an explanation of the

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²⁵⁵ Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, in Max Horkheimer: *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. 5 (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1997), 16: “Was wir uns vorgesetzt hatten, war tatsächlich nicht weniger als die Erkenntnis, warum die Menschheit, anstatt in einen wahrhaft menschlichen Zustand einzutreten, in eine neue Art von Barbarei versinkt.” English translation by Edmund Jephcott in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), xiv: “What we had set out to do was nothing less than to explain why humanity, instead of entering a truly human state, is sinking into a new kind of barbarism.”

²⁵⁶ Benjamin, Walter, “Über den Begriff der Geschichte,” in *Gesammelte Werke II* (Frankfurt am Main: Zweitausendeins, 2011), 960. Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History, in *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), thesis VII, p. 257: “The current amazement that the things we are experiencing are ‘still’ possible in the twentieth century is *not* philosophical. This amazement is not the beginning of knowledge—unless it is the knowledge that the view of history which gives rise to it is untenable.”
current state of things demands a re-examination of the history of enlightenment
civilization.

As we have seen in chapter 5, Adorno and Horkheimer argue that enlightenment
always contained the possibility of, and tendencies toward, its own regression into
barbarism. These tendencies became more and more radicalized with the advancement of
enlightenment as an ever-growing domination of nature. Horkheimer and Adorno
interpret the advancement of enlightenment as a descent into pathology through various
stages beginning with the breakdown of primary mimesis in animism, proceeding through
a gradual distancing from nature in mythology, and culminating with the sharp paranoid
separation of mind from nature that in their view characterizes the present. The question
of how enlightenment descended into “the new barbarism” is thus answered by the
authors of Dialektik der Aufklärung through an interpretation of Western civilization in
terms of a pathological development culminating in paranoia.

Adorno and Horkheimer’s answer to the problem of why enlightenment failed and
became pathological has often and rightly been interpreted as marking a turn in the
tradition of critical theory from the view that the social ills of modern society are
grounded in the structure of capitalism alone to the view that the wider context of
society’s relation to nature must be taken into account too. However, this change has
often been misinterpreted as replacing the critique of capitalism with a one-sided account
of a single root-problem to be found in the dialectic of civilization and nature. Rolf
Wiggerhaus, for instance, says that the project of the dialectic of enlightenment assumed
that it was possible to show that the contemporary cultural crisis was a crisis of
the fundamental principle of all human culture up till then, and that this
fundamental principle was sovereignty over nature. The thesis lying behind this
was that the decisive event in the history of human culture was not the
development of the modern period and of capitalism, but rather humanity’s transition to domination over nature.\textsuperscript{257}

This reading of \textit{Dialektik der Aufklärung} locates the problem of modern Western civilization squarely in the very \textit{meaning} of civilization, which requires at least some degree of domination over inner and outer nature. The idea that the very concept of civilization—of the transition from natural life or primary mimesis to life in society—already contains tendencies and possibilities for the development of pathology is interpreted as the claim that the concept of civilization already (implicitly) contains the problem in full: By a sleight of hand, the idea that society requires domination of nature is turned into the idea that the development of society requires the growth of domination to \textit{pathological proportions}.

This way of reading the dialectic of enlightenment and culture is echoed in various prominent interpretations of the \textit{Dialektik der Aufklärung}. In his influential study of the early Frankfurt School, \textit{The Dialectical Imagination}, Martin Jay argues that \textit{Dialektik der Aufklärung} marked a radical change in the form of critical theory pursued by the \textit{Institut für Sozialforschung}, and he characterizes the change thus:

The clearest expression of this change was the Institute’s replacement of class conflict, that foundation stone of any truly Marxist theory, \textit{with a new motor of history}. The focus was now on the larger conflicts between man and nature both without and within, a conflict whose origins went back to before capitalism and whose continuation, indeed intensification, appeared likely after capitalism would end.\textsuperscript{258}


\textsuperscript{258} Jay, Martin, \textit{The Dialectical Imagination} (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1973), (emphasis mine)
Again, the theory of *Dialektik der Aufklärung* is interpreted as claiming to find the single, deepest principle of historical development in the relation of humanity to inner and outer nature, and locating *the* root of social pathology today in the development of this relation as one of ever-intensifying domination. But if the conflict with nature is the single and universal ultimate “motor of history,” then the development of civilization could not but be the development of domination, and, once again, the pathological state of advanced capitalist Western society is seen as a necessary consequence of history.

Seyla Benhabib, influenced by Habermas, follows the same line of interpretation. She claims that the *Dialektik der Aufklärung* signals a transition to a form of critique that becomes “totalizing” because it *reduces* all social labor—that is, the very building block of any society at all—to the domination of nature. In this reading, Adorno and Horkheimer’s conception of history is interpreted as a negative teleology: a steady, uninterrupted, and necessary progression toward the pathology and barbarism of the present. Adorno and Horkheimer’s critique of enlightenment, Benhabib says, entails that “it is exactly the continuum of history that critique must reject.”

The socio-historical realm is to be condemned in its essence. Benhabib’s view is that the account of *Dialektik der Aufklärung* entails that the devolution of human society to brute domination is


260 See ibid., 179, where Benhabib writes:

But if it is exactly the continuum of history that critique must reject, then the vision of the emancipated society which it articulates becomes a privileged mystery that cannot be related to the immanent self-understanding of needs and conflicts arising from within the continuum of the historical process. Critical theory must either revise the one-dimensionality thesis or it must question its own very possibility. This was recognized by Claus Offe in 1968: critical theory ‘must either limit the argument concerning all-encompassing manipulation and must admit the presence of structural leaks within the system of repressive rationality, or it must renounce the claim to be able to explain the conditions of its own possibility’.
necessitated by the very mechanism by which society is created, and, as she rightly notes, a view of this kind is so radical that it makes the very idea of critical social theory impossible, for it is the notion of anything social that already entails descent into pathology.

Additionally, Benhabib highlights a problem that follows from the application of this same form of interpretation to Horkheimer and Adorno’s conception of the development of the individual. Recall that Horkheimer and Adorno take the ontogenetic development of the individual to follow the same model as the phylogenetic development of civilization: it too requires domination, and it too has fallen prey to a pathological development. Just as the very notion of civilization already contains domination and the potential for pathology, the formation of the individual, since it requires self-renunciation and the domination of internal nature, also requires domination and contains the potential for illness.

On Benhabib’s reading, Adorno’s view of the individual entails the necessity of pathology. She takes him to fall into the position of denouncing the very idea of individuality as necessarily leading to the pathology of the individual, specifically the weak ego of modernity—a position that becomes paradoxical when one takes into account Adorno’s laments over the loss of individuality and his idea that freedom is only possible for the individual. But then the only possible locus of freedom—i.e., the individual—is destined to be a locus of domination and ultimately to lead to the pathology of the modern individual. In other words, freedom is forestalled precisely in the only place where it could be possible and by the very mechanism that could make it possible. Benhabib cites with approval Jessica Benjamin’s idea that Adorno’s critical
theory leads to a “paradox of autonomy”: freedom requires autonomy, which requires self-repression, but self-repression leads to a situation where the self regresses to nature and cannot be autonomous.\(^\text{261}\) The necessary conditions for the possibility of freedom (self-domination and renunciation) are also sufficient conditions for unfreedom.\(^\text{262}\)


\(^{262}\) Joel Whitebook’s study of psychoanalysis and critical theory, though sympathetic to Adorno’s incorporation of psychoanalysis into social-theoretic critique, also follows this line of interpretation. Whitebook interprets Adorno’s critique of the subject and the ego along Lacanian lines, thus implying that the process of subjectivation necessarily unfolds into the dialectic of enlightenment that leads to an empty subject incapable of autonomy.

But on Adorno and Horkheimer’s construction, as ‘everyone who practices renunciation gives away more of his life than is given back to him … and more than the life that he vindicates,’ nothing short of remaining in that original state [a state where the ego is not yet split but rather fully unified with nature, the narcissistic state] would appear to do: that is, nothing short of the unmediated preservation of inner nature, of ‘complete, universal, and undivided happiness’ can prevent the dialectic of enlightenment from unfolding. This is the unacknowledged hubristic-absolutist requirement that constitutes the psychoanalytically formulated bad utopianism on which the entire construction tacitly rests (Whitebook, Joel, *Perversion and Utopia* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 1995), 150-151).

Whitebook does emphasize an important difference between Adorno and Lacan, namely that Adorno does not want to abandon the standpoint of the subject, but rather to say that we stand in need of a different form of subjectivity, one capable of autonomy (p. 134). Yet, he claims this reveals a fundamental aporia in Adorno’s critical theory, the same aporia diagnosed by Jessica Benjamin and endorsed by Seyla Benhabib. Ultimately, Whitebook’s aim is to solve this aporia by developing a theory of sublimation that can be taken up by critical theory, and that can provide an account of how the subject may be capable of some freedom despite its genesis in the replacement of the pleasure principle by the reality principle (pp. 217-230). He argues, moreover, that Adorno’s theory has some hints in this direction, but that Adorno never developed a theory of sublimation because, first, he only saw aesthetic rationality as an alternative to identitarian thinking (p. 259), and, second, because he was too suspicious of sublimation as a tool for adaptation to the ‘bad society’ (pp. 260-262). In this chapter, my focus is to show that the theory of *Dialektik der Aufklärung* is not a ‘negative teleology’ in the sense of claiming that the very notion of civilization entails civilization’s descent into pathology and ‘barbarism.’ I will not, however, deal with the negative teleological reading in its application to the individual case in detail—that is, with the reading that sees Adorno’s conception of the individual as necessarily entailing the pathology of the modern individual (this is Jessica Benjamin’s and Whitebook’s reading). However, if I am right in arguing that the pathology of modernity is not fully determined by the genesis of civilization but rather also requires contingent events that accumulated to result in a qualitative turn toward pathology (see section 6.2), then the processes of subjectivation specific to pathological modernity should also be read as containing an element of contingency, and not as following necessarily from the dynamics that give rise to individuation in general. The search for a model of subjectivation that would not be pathological (like Whitebook’s proposal of reviving the notion of sublimation in critical theory) would then not need to be seen as a corrective of Adorno’s aporetic view of the individual, but rather as an attempt to address the very same problem Adorno is concerned with: namely the pathology of the *modern individual*, which is not the same as the pathology of individuality in general.
The interpretation of *Dialektik der Aufklärung* that views it as attributing the problems of enlightenment civilization to the very existence of civilization, and the problems of the modern individual to the very existence of individuals, is at least partly at fault for the common representation of Adorno as a quietist, politically inert philosopher. For, if the deep cause of the pathology of contemporary Western civilization is ultimately to be found in the necessary conditions for civilization, and if the pathology of the modern individual is ultimately due to the necessary conditions for the very existence of individuals, then there is no point in working for the transformation of society, either at a theoretical or at a practical level. Any efforts that fall short of destroying society and returning to nature—an impossible feat—will of necessity fail and only produce a new permutation of the same old barbarism. (Not to mention the fact that a return to nature would not move us a step closer toward freedom, since freedom requires individuality.) The idea of liberation is excluded from the realm of concrete social possibilities and relegated to the impotent thought-world of the theorist. It is ultimately this problem that stands behind the widespread criticism of Adorno as politically irrelevant. As Russel Berman notes, “Adorno is generally taken to stand for a quietism, fundamentally hostile to politics, and given to such an infinitely pessimistic account of capitalist development that no possible praxis, let alone a revolution, could turn humanity away from its sorry conclusion in a thoroughly administered society.”

Berman moreover traces this misrepresentation of Adorno’s work at the level of theory primarily to the “the negative teleology implicit in *Dialectic of Enlightenment,*” though also to Adorno’s aestheticist predilections and disputes with the student movement.

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In conclusion to this section, let us sum up the main features and consequences of the interpretation we have considered here. Call it the “negative teleological interpretation.” This interpretation takes *Dialektik der Aufklärung* to entail that the problems of contemporary, advanced capitalist Western society are nothing more than the actualization of what was already implicitly contained from the beginning in the nature of civilization—in the transition from mere natural existence to society. The transition necessarily required violence toward inner and outer nature, which violence became ever more entrenched and stronger with the development of human societies simply because violence against nature just is the essence of society, and it expands with the expansion of society. The formation of individuality is an element in this story: it developed through the domination of internal nature that was needed in order to establish the coordination of social labor necessary to build civilization. The individual itself is in essence domination turned inward, so that the pathologies of the modern individual—the suffering due to repression, which causes pent-up resentment and explosions of fascist violence and destruction—and the individual’s inability to be free—since the individual necessarily involves repression, that is, domination, which not only is already in opposition to freedom but moreover leads to a regression to nature and the development of a weak ego—are necessary developments of the internal dynamics of individuality itself.

The consequences of this interpretation, which have already been discussed above, are that critical theory loses any emancipatory potential, both theoretically and politically, and becomes a quietist indulgence of the theorist in lamentation over the nature of the social order. The realization of a better society is made impossible because the very nature of any society whatever is taken to be the root problem. But the idea of
doing without society provides no alternative, especially since Adorno has no romantic conception of nature but rather conceives of it as dangerous and violent. Critical thought becomes aporetic: Social reality is seen as utterly barbaric, but the possibility of anything better is emphatically denied.\footnote{The negative teleological interpretation is also present in Habermas’s appraisal of the *Dialektik der Aufklärung*. Habermas argues that Adorno and Horkheimer’s critique becomes totalizing because it entails that the development of Western modernity and rationality is all marred by domination and therefore irredeemable. This view, Habermas says, places Adorno and Horkheimer in an aporetic position: critical theory in general is made impossible with the abandonment of rational standards. See Habermas, Jürgen, “The Entwinement of Myth and Enlightenment: Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno,” in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1990), 106-130.}

### 6.2 Against the ‘negative teleological’ interpretation: a new formulation of Adorno’s philosophy of history

In this section, I use the Freudian interpretation of *Dialektik der Aufklärung* that was developed in chapter 5 in order to show that the negative teleological interpretation is mistaken.

Under the Freudian interpretation I have proposed, the devolution of enlightened civilization and enlightened reason into paranoia and “barbarism” is the result of the conjunction of a number of conditions. Even though civilization contained from its earliest beginnings the potential for regression—which is the point of Adorno and Horkheimer’s claim that the drive to control and dominate nature was already present in the mimetic methods of magical ritual and sacrifice—this potential did not have to result in regression and illness. In chapter 5, I proposed that there are at least five stages in the process of civilization’s pathology: primary mimesis, fixation, conflict leading to intolerable frustration, regression, and the return of repressed nature. In this section, I
want to focus on the last three stages, comprising the conflict leading to pathology and the onset of illness proper. I will show that these stages cannot be understood as part of a teleological narrative connecting them with the beginnings of civilization. There is an irreducible element of contingency in these stages, and the contingency is such that it constitutes a reversal, rather than a furthering, of the major tendencies present in the development of civilization prior to pathology.

This section is divided into three subsections. In section 2.1, I consider what it would mean to say that these events have occurred in accordance with a negative teleology driven by the ever-growing domination of nature, and I argue that the events in question simply cannot be understood in a way compatible with the teleology. The teleological reading of *Dialektik der Aufklärung* actually runs against the diagnosis of pathology. In section 2.2, I discuss the philosophy of history presupposed by *Dialektik der Aufklärung* and, finally, in section 2.3, I show that the structure of this philosophy of history stands at the crossroads between genealogy and teleology since its overarching structure is genealogical (*not* teleological, as the negative teleological interpretation maintains), but there is an element *internal* to the genealogy that is in fact teleological structured.

6.2.1 Against the negative teleological reading of *Dialektik der Aufklärung*

The negative teleological reading takes the period that brought on civilization’s regression into “barbarism” to be a necessary and inevitable consequence of the origins of civilization in animism and mythology. Of course, we must be careful in how we characterize the claim of necessity at issue here. It is not a claim of necessity in accordance with efficient causation, but rather in accordance with a teleological...
conception of historical development. So, the first thing we need to do is to clarify what kind of necessity is involved in teleological explanation.

There are two main forms of teleological explanation. We may call the first ‘broadly teleological,’ and the second ‘functional.’

1. Broadly teleological: There is a process (a pattern of change) that culminates in a certain state, where we explain the occurrence of the process and each of its stages in terms of the state in which the process culminates.

2. Functional explanation: Here we have an overarching system made up of parts, where the parts act together in a way that yields and maintains a single overarching functional economy. What we do here is to explain the behavior and the nature of the parts by reference to their role in the overarching functional economy.

Adorno’s explanation of the historical development of Western civilization, and its descent into paranoid pathology, is clearly not teleological in the first sense above, since the explanation of historical development is not ultimately given in terms of the present pathology. In fact, the goal of Dialektik der Aufklärung was to find an explanation for the ‘barbaric’ present state of things, which seemed to Adorno and Horkheimer to contradict the self-understanding of Western culture as enlightened. If the culminating point in the process is what stands in need of explanation, it cannot be the ground of explanation, which means that the account of Dialektik der Aufklärung does not follow the ‘broadly teleological’ form described above.

265 This distinction is drawn from Michael Loux’s lectures on the concept of teleology in Aristotle’s Physics, given at the University of Notre Dame in the Fall Semester 2007.
If the theory in *Dialektik der Aufklärung* is to be understood as a teleological theory at all, it must be in a functional sense. The idea is that we can look at Western civilization as a system, a unified whole, in which the parts (events, historical periods, the rise and demise of specific institutions, etc) ultimately work to achieve or maintain an overall functional economy. A functional explanation views the system as exhibiting a basic tendency to achieve or maintain a certain state—a tendency that is relatively resilient in the face of contingent developments within or outside the system. Defenders of the negative teleological reading of *Dialektik der Aufklärung* would identify the persistent tendency in the history of Western civilization as the growth of human domination over nature (inner and outer). So, the teleological reading maintains that, regardless of the level of contingency that individual elements in the history of civilization may exhibit, we can read off from them a basic movement of history in which the tendency toward the growth of domination over nature ultimately triumphs over other tendencies.

A teleological theory of history thus entails that major historical periods (their inner structure and main tendencies), and major historical changes, are intelligible as furthering some basic, persistent tendency—in the case of *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, the tendency toward the growth of human domination over nature. If we find that there are events, institutions, socio-historical developments, or other elements that work *against* the alleged basic, persistent tendency, this finding should be a cause for doubting the teleological account, although it could still be the case that the recalcitrant element only *seems* to oppose the basic tendency because we are considering it in isolation from the system as a whole, whereas, in systemic terms (taking into account other finite elements
of the system and perhaps also taking into account a broader historical period) the
element actually works in favor of furthering the basic tendency. However, if we find
that a significant historical epoch is explained and explainable only as undermining the
basic tendency, then the idea that the system as a whole exhibits a teleological structure is
refuted.\footnote{My analysis here is influenced by Allen Wood’s analysis of teleological explanation in Marx. In particular, Wood argues that the logic of teleological explanation is such that the \textit{explanandum} (which in the case of Marxist theory corresponds to elements in the superstructure, as well as the explanation of a society’s internal structure and its historical changes to adopt a different structure) is related to the \textit{explanans} (some basic, persistent tendency of the system) in such a way that the former causally brings about the latter. In terms of Marxian theory, this means that the elements in the superstructure causally further and reinforce the basic tendency toward the expansion of productive forces and the development of productive relations that are best suited to this expansion. As Wood points out, the only way in which this causal relation between superstructural elements and the economic ‘base’ is a threat to Marxian theory is if the former were found to exhibit tendencies that diverge, or work against, the alleged basic economic tendency of the system. See Wood, Allen, \textit{Karl Marx}, 2\textsuperscript{nd} ed. (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), 110-111:}

This, however, is exactly what happens with the account of civilization’s descent
into pathology in \textit{Dialektik der Aufklärung}. Consider how the stages of intolerable
frustration, regression, and the return of nature would fit into a negative teleological

\footnote{In general, when we explain something teleologically by showing how it manifests or contributes to the tendency of a system to achieve a certain result, this does not exclude (on the contrary, it positively implies) that the teleological \textit{explanandum} figures as a causal \textit{explanans} of the result. Thus when Marx (teleologically) explains social relations in terms of productive powers, or political and ideological phenomena in terms of economic structure of society or the class struggle, this does not exclude (on the contrary, it positively implies) that certain features of social relations figure in causal explanations of the state and development of productive powers, and that superstructural phenomena causally influence the economic basis of society. Marx’s theory is thus \textit{fundamentally} incompatible with any form of ‘economic determinism’ which holds that law, morality, politics or religion exercise no causal influence on material production or economic relations. In fact, it is precisely these influences which Marx’s theory tries to understand, to explain in terms of the economic tendencies they manifest. The causal influence of superstructural phenomena begins to threaten Marx’s theory only when these phenomena exhibit tendencies of their own which diverge from the ‘basic’ economic ones. Marx and Engels do not deny (indeed, they explicitly affirm) that these other tendencies exist, but they believe (for plausible if not decisive reasons we have already examined) that ‘in the last instance’ the economic ones must predominate over them.}

What I am saying here about Adorno’s analysis is that, if it is found that his explanation for the historical stages that bring about pathology is such that it is incompatible with the alleged basic tendency of civilization toward the expansion of domination over nature, then this explanation is not teleological.
The idea would be that these stages are intelligible as furthering Western civilization’s basic tendency toward the expansion and entrenchment of human domination over nature. But the stages of regression and everything that follows according to the pathological history of enlightenment civilization explained in chapter 5 cannot be understood in this way.

Consider again the main events in the pathological development of enlightenment starting from the moment of intolerable frustration, progressing through regression, projection, and the return of nature:

(1) Frustration: I have already argued in chapter 5 that the stage at which humanity was faced with “intolerable frustration” at the level of civilization’s instinctual ‘natural’ history corresponds to the moment at which the promises of emancipation and happiness contained in bourgeois ideals were left unfulfilled despite the concurrent development of technical capabilities that for the first time made it viable to bring about concrete social changes to actualize these promises. At this point the development of technological control over nature became independent of the promises of happiness and freedom with which it was previously intertwined.\(^{267}\) In concrete terms, this occurs with the entrenchment of capitalist relations as the determining principle of social organization. Since the advance and expansion of these relations was no longer aimed at the future realization of happiness, capitalist society’s ever-growing demands of repression and renunciation could no longer be justified by a future compensation in a happiness reconciled with nature, but rather only on the basis of capitalist expansion.

\(^{267}\) See chapter 5 for the textual evidence on which I have based this interpretation.
alone, seemingly for its own sake.\textsuperscript{268} The rise of intolerable conflict can thus be traced back to the point at which the principle of exchange’s role in determining social life became total\textsuperscript{269} and the further entrenchment of relations of exchange became its only justification.

(2) \textit{Regression}: In psychoanalytic theory, when frustration reaches intolerable dimensions, the psyche first tries to change the external world in order to solve the conflict, but, if this proves impossible, a number of reactions can take place—for instance, through a re-organization of leading component instincts, or sublimation, or perversion, or regression, etc. The first significant thing that happened when humanity was faced with intolerable frustration in the realm of social reality, according to Horkheimer and Adorno, was that the attempt actually to change the social order so that it may afford some satisfaction to human beings—a satisfaction of the old wishes for happiness and freedom—failed, and we can correlate this failure specifically with the failure of a truly Marxist revolution to occur and take hold. Since the external world whose structure had become a cause of intolerable frustration was not changed, cathexes were removed from external reality and attached to the ego, producing megalomania. As I have discussed already at length in chapter 5, Adorno claims that the philosophical systems of the late eighteenth and nineteenth century express the megalomania resulting

\footnote{268} According to Adorno, this is the point at which the domination of capitalist relations over the structure of social life becomes “objectively irrational.” See Adorno, \textit{Negative Dialektik}, in \textit{Gesammelte Schriften}, Vol. 6 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1970), 343. See English translation by E.B. Ashton in \textit{Negative Dialectics} (New York and London: Continuum, 2005), 349.

\footnote{269} Another way to put this would be to say that the moment of intolerable frustration coincides with the development that makes the commodity structure dominant over social life as a whole. See chapter 4 for a detailed analysis of the total determining role of the principle of exchange in advanced capitalist society.
from regression, since they represent the ego—that is, the transcendental or constitutive rational subject—as all-powerful and the external world as a mere substratum for the categories imprinted on the world by the subject.

(3) Projection and the Return of Nature: In paranoia, the process of regression is necessarily followed by a re-establishment of connection with the world through pathological projection. The social order becomes ordered by systematic relations whose leading and inviolable principle is to repress the unacceptable wish internally, the wish that could find no satisfaction externally, and to project it outward in a distorted fashion (see my detailed discussion of projection in chapter 5). In the delusional system, nature (and its representatives) are encountered as an external menace that must be destroyed, but the destruction is never successful because the system itself is created through the projection of repressed nature. The result is that violent outbursts against nature—made concrete paradigmatically in the Shoah—repeat themselves over and over again as instinctual energies are garnered to “expunge” the very nature that is made unexpungeable by the system that projects it outward.

In order to work, the negative teleological interpretation must understand the stages of intolerable conflict, regression, projection and the return of nature as causally contributing to the expansion and final achievement of domination over nature. However, to understand things in this way is precisely to miss the point that they are pathological delusions whose failure to destroy nature is recreated again and again in the deadly theater of modern social life. The megalomaniac delusional self-understanding of society as having finally triumphed over nature (the result of regression) is a mechanism of defense, not a real fait accompli. On the other hand, the projective system in
accordance with which social reality comes to be ordered does not actually manage to dominate nature; rather, it results in the recurrent and ever more threatening external “return” of repressed nature. Human civilization becomes trapped in self-defeating cycles of violent outbursts aimed at expunging nature and its representatives, in conditions where the destruction of nature is actually doomed to fail because the system—i.e., the social order structured as paranoid symptom—is formed precisely so that threatening nature returns “from without.” And, moreover, the whole social system is created as a projective denial of repressed nature; it is an inverse image, a negation, of the repressed wish for nature, and this means that, in fact, the logic by which the social system is ordered is in a sense determined by the very nature the destruction of which is the system’s raison d’être. Finally, the instinctual energy that motivates and drives the self-defeating irrational attempts to destroy nature itself originates in repressed nature. The “barbaric” social order of paranoid civilization does not actually succeed in dominating nature but is rather itself dominated by the nature it is obsessed to repress.

The historical events that Adorno and Horkheimer interpret as the conflict leading to pathology (the stage of intolerable frustration) and the onset of illness proper (regression and the return of nature) actually run against the actualization of humanity’s domination of nature. As efficient causes, they bring about the opposite effect: the blind and unconscious determination of the social order by nature through the pathological negation of nature in projection. This means that the historical periods that correspond to the onset and progression of pathology cannot be understood as teleological components of an overarching history of civilization whose basic tendency is the expansion and entrenchment of the domination of nature, and the fact that Adorno and Horkheimer find
the events intelligible in terms of an analysis of pathology entails that the analysis is not teleological.

The events can be explained only as a pathological distortion of the drive to dominate nature, a distortion that actually runs against the achievement of domination over nature. This seems to entail that the distortion itself cannot be explained in terms of the tendency toward the domination of nature, so that the latter cannot be the final (most basic) explanation of civilization’s descent into pathology. The pathological distortion of this drive seems to require some additional explanation: some other element, event, or tendency must also be involved in the descent into pathology, which, as I have argued, does not in fact further the human domination of nature but rather runs against it.

However, we might imagine the following counter-argument against this claim: Even granting that the descent into pathology constitutes a reversal of the movement toward ever greater domination of nature, this reversal is brought about by elements fully internal to the tendency toward the domination of nature, so that this tendency remains the basic and persistent tendency in terms of which the history of Western civilization is represented in Dialektik der Aufklärung. The argument would run as follows:

(1) Since the domination of nature is the basic tendency in early formations of society, the development and growth of human society necessarily follows a development of ever-greater domination over nature.

(2) At a certain point the quantitative increase in domination necessarily reached dimensions so great that the basic principle of domination over nature underwent a qualitative change, a change corresponding to pathological regression.
(3) Therefore, the result of regression—i.e., pathology—though no longer intelligible as a mechanism contributing to the domination of nature, necessarily follows from the earliest tendencies toward such domination.

Though the argument acknowledges a change in the basic tendency underlying the development of civilization, it supports the claim of necessity by attributing the change to a transformation *internally necessitated by the tendency itself*.

In other words, the argument posits an overarching continuity between the principle of domination and its pathological deformation through regression. This just means that a higher singular basic tendency (one that sublates *[aufhebt]* the principle of domination and its deformation) is posited, of which the domination of nature and its qualitative transformation after regression are mere phases or, in the terminology of German Idealism, ‘moments.’ There is still a basic principle posited as the motor of history—but the meaning of the principle is undefined and unknown, even unknowable: From a God’s eye point of view, the meaning of the principle would be intelligible, but from our point of view, caught as it is in the midst of history, all we can do is retrospectively ascertain its transformations thus far.

This view, however, is no longer teleological, since teleology is able to stabilize a view of history as an interconnected system only if the telos is known. The above proposal is rather a combination of theodicy and dialectic, more akin to Augustine’s conception of the agency of the mysterious and inscrutable ways of God in history than a Hegelian or Marxian teleological conception of history, since the latter proposals need to find the tendencies that strive for the realization of the telos *in history* and derive the teleology from the concrete historical elements that exhibit it. The above proposal, by
contrast, requires that the unity of a basic principle, whose existence and meaning is necessarily epistemologically beyond our grasp, be *posited* on dogmatic grounds. The view is Kantian in spirit insofar as it posits a unitary principle underlying the development of history as a regulative principle. Yet the idea of positing such a principle is inimical to Adorno’s entire philosophical position, and there seems to be no reason to adduce the positing of such a principle to the theory of *Dialektik der Aufklärung*. The theory interprets the development of enlightenment civilization as a development initially dominated by the tendency toward the domination of nature, and descending into pathology when this tendency and other factors coalesce in a way that brings about regression and paranoid delusion. But the theory never says that this whole movement of development and regression follows from one overarching single principle whose existence we must posit on dogmatic grounds and whose meaning is necessarily beyond our grasp. Nor do I see any reason why it would make sense for the theory to make a claim of this kind. It seems rather that, in order to maintain its commitments to immanent analysis and its explicit disavowals of historical inevitability, the theory of *Dialektik der Aufklärung* would oppose an unjustified and unjustifiable positing of universal systemic unity behind the historical development of enlightenment civilization.

The form of explanation for the historical development of Western civilization that we find in *Dialektik der Aufklärung* is not an inverse teleology and does not entail any form of teleological necessity driving forward the development of Western civilization from animism to advanced capitalism. The attempt to bring the historical-philosophical theory of *Dialektik der Aufklärung* into the form of a narrative that unfolds from a single principle fails. A theme unifying the historical development of civilization
from its beginnings in animism to high capitalist society is present, but this theme changes historically as it undergoes pathological development, and the change is not reducible to an overarching single principle or tendency contained from the beginning in the concept of civilization itself and achieving greater expression as civilization progresses. Rather, the moment at which the conflict leading to intolerable frustration arises, and civilization’s response to the conflict—i.e., regression—mark a change in the course of civilization, even a reversal, an event that of course is not disconnected from the existing historical and natural conditions and tendencies prior to the change, but which is nonetheless underdetermined by these conditions and not explainable in terms of those conditions and tendencies alone. Something new happens with the entrenchment of advanced capitalism and its final disavowal of happiness and liberation as directive principles of society, something that cannot be fully accounted for on the basis of civilization’s internal dynamics from its archaic beginnings.

6.2.2 The philosophy of history underlying Dialektik der Aufklärung

The reason why this change cannot be fully accounted for on the basis of the ‘natural history’ of civilization is not accidental; it rather exemplifies and corroborates Adorno’s general view of historical development. In our interpretation of the dialectic of civilization and culture, we have been oscillating between two levels of interpretation. The first, which we may call the level of nature, consists in the interpretation of the history of Western civilization in terms of an underlying pathological development in the unconscious libidinal life of civilization. This narrative is a history of nature in the sense that its object of study is the rise of the modern social order from the natural substratum of social life, as well as the rise of the individual from the natural substratum of the
unconscious. But the narrative in *Dialektik der Aufklärung* does not view this unconscious substratum of social and individual life as static, as an archaic unchanging “human” or “social” nature. Rather, the focus of *Dialektik der Aufklärung* is the history of this underlying nature.

Yet the historization of nature can only be understood *in relation to* what we think of as ‘history’ proper, which is the second level of narrative. This is the usual level in which historical analysis moves: the level at which we understand history as a development of contingent facts that *change* in ways that may be intelligible but are not just a series of permutations of ‘the same’ (which series would be nothing but an annihilation *of history*). It is at this second level of analysis that we seek for socio-historical events that correspond to the natural history of civilization. At this level, I have argued, the stage of intolerable conflict corresponds to a betrayal of bourgeois ideals through the rise of capitalist relations as the determining principle of society, independently of the goals of happiness and freedom, the stage of regression corresponds to the failure of Marxist revolution and the establishment of compensatory mechanisms at the level of philosophical thought, especially in German Idealism, and the return of the repressed corresponds to recurrent waves of ‘irrational,’” fascist violence that we have experienced since the twentieth century, paradigmatically with the World Wars and the Shoah.

It is essential to see that neither level of historical narrative is self-grounding; neither is intelligible without reference to the other. In Adorno’s philosophy of history, the intelligibility of history as an accumulation of contingent events requires the natural dimension, and the intelligibility of nature requires the historical dimension. In this
subsection (6.2.2), I briefly explain each side of this mutual dependence and the relation that holds them together. The view of history that will emerge from this explanation is clearly not teleological in its overarching structure and on its basis I will bring my polemic against the teleological reading of *Dialektik der Aufklärung* to a close in the final sub-section (6.2.3).

First, let us see how the historical dimension requires the natural dimension in Adorno’s philosophy of history. In general, the mere accumulation of contingent historical changes would be meaningless without an element of continuity. History, understood as the accumulation of transient events, does not persist in the present—unless one has an eternalist “block universe” theory of time or something of the sort. But Adorno is not in the business of metaphysical speculation of this kind. Yet he is also decidedly not a presentist, denying real existence to events of the past, for he holds that reality is irreducibly and objectively historical. How, then, does the past, and the historical dimension, exist in the present?

For Adorno, the historical dimension is ontologically constitutive of *natural things*; it constitutes the core of objectivity of things and subsists in the mode of being of nature. As we have seen, by ‘nature’ Adorno understands the ontological element of existents that is emphatically not ‘mental’—paradigmatically, the instincts [*Triebе*] of the self, but also the habits and desires of bodies, the history of feelings and their inscription in unreflective behavior, even the tacit taboos and norms that remain invisible to the individuals whose world is governed by them. History survives in the present in much the manner that history persists in the individual: in unconscious layers that correspond to the psychic development of the individual, in the unconscious and its implicit
remembrances. No matter what we may think of Freudian psychoanalytic theory, one thing that cannot be denied after the impact of Freud’s revolution on the theory of subjectivity is that the past is a constitutive element of the individual in the individual’s present existence, and that understanding the self requires understanding the imprints that the past has left in the self and the way in which these shape the subject in the present. Similarly, for Adorno, the past survives in a natural substratum defined by the unconscious psycho-dynamics of a socio-historical epoch. But, just as, according to psychoanalytic theory, the way in which the past affects the present is not reducible to some objective account of the events of the past, but rather requires a hermeneutic understanding of how the past subsists in the unconscious memory of the individual; similarly, at the level of social life, the past subsists not as a series of objective accounts of ‘what really happened,’ but rather as a natural element that requires interpretation of the unconscious life of civilization.

Nature is both the persistent substratum of history, and thoroughly imprinted by history. In the analysis of history’s inscriptions in nature, we find the element of the archaic, of the Ur-history of civilization, and, without it, it would be impossible to understand how for Adorno the present ontologically contains a historical dimension in itself.

On the other hand, I have said above that the natural element and the history that can be read off from it are not intelligible without reference to the other level: that of history proper as a succession of contingent happenings. Not all contingent happenings affect and change the natural substratum, but at crucial points there are accumulations of events, circumstances, even accidents, that coalesce with existing natural and prior
constraints to bring about the emergence of something new. The explanation of the new emergence cannot be reduced to tendencies and conditions that were already inscribed in nature because the new emergence arises from a critical mass of elements coming together, some of them accidental and external to pre-existing determinations. This is why history is not just a repetition of the archaic, but rather a changing narrative in which the archaic mingles with the new and changes its character as a result.

Consider the way in which the qualitatively new arises in the history of the individual according to psychoanalytic theory. One of the main features of Freudian theory is that it does not, cannot, and does not aim to answer the question of why a certain individual falls ill while another individual may not fall ill under the same conditions. The unconscious and its development, including possible fixations, constrains the individual’s potentialities for growth, but does not determine the individual’s development in full. External factors play an important role, as does the reaction of the individual’s psyche to specific challenges brought on by external reality. Recall for instance that an individual does not fall ill unless events occur that make it impossible for her to satisfy her unconscious wishes, fixated as they may be, through relations to external objects. (I have discussed this point in chapter 5.) External, accidental happenings come together and their impact on existing conditions and tendencies sometimes give rise to a new development—for instance, the onset of pathology. Similarly, the development of pathology in Western civilization is not fully determined as a metaphysical necessity from the origins of civilization in animism and mythology, though these origins certainly created a potential that became reinforced with the effect of contingent historical events. Understanding the moment at which Western civilization
met intolerable frustration in relation to the social order requires an examination of socio-historical developments that made satisfaction impossible in relation to external reality—developments that are contingent and irreducible to what existed before and what had already inscribed itself in the natural substratum of existents.

The fact that history reached a stage that created social conditions of intolerable frustration for the human psyche was not necessitated by the natural substratum of social life. Nor, finally, was there any necessity to the fact that, faced with intolerable frustration, humanity regressed to the stage of primary mimesis (in a distorted manner, of course) by withdrawing catexes from the external world and attaching them to the subject. At the level of the individual, Freud points out that the human organism is capable of a variety of responses in the face of intolerable frustration: for instance, the object desired may be substituted for one more easily attainable, the component desire whose satisfaction is frustrated may be substituted for another, sublimation may take place, or a return to perversion, or regression. Similarly, at the level of the history of Western civilization, the fact that humanity regressed in response to the frustration brought about by the failure of the bourgeois era to fulfill its promises of emancipation and happiness was not the only possible reaction of a humanity faced with intolerable conditions of existence—or, at least, it was not a reaction necessitated by the fact of frustration. Changing the conditions of existence through revolutionary activity would have been an alternative, for instance. But the conflict was lived in such a way that the social imaginary simply regressed to a hyper-cathexis of the transcendental ego, the mind, and through projection gave rise to a new world order characterized by paranoid delusion.
Just like the social-historical level is insufficient for understanding the development of civilization and how its present state contains a historical dimension at all, similarly the natural level is insufficient for understanding the present in its historical dimension.

Adorno in fact argues that all of history is constituted by mediation “zwischen dem mythisch-archaischen, natürlichen Stoff der Geschichte, des Gewesenen und dem, was dialektisch neu in ihr auftaucht, neu im prägnanten Sinn” [between the mythical archaic, natural material of history, of what has been, and that which surfaces as dialectically and emphatically new].270 In this mediation, history presents itself as something “durcaus Diskontinuierliches” [thoroughly discontinuous] that cannot be brought into a “Strukturganzheit” [structural whole]:271 instead of understanding history as a singular continuous narrative, Adorno proposes that the interpretation of history moves precisely in dialectical connections and ineliminable oppositions between nature (which returns to the archaic and unchanging, for instance the domination of nature) and history (where new and contingent elements emerge).


271 Ibid., emphasis in the original.
Zeichen für Geschichte und Geschichte, wo sie sich am geschichtlichsten gibt, als Zeichen für Natur.\textsuperscript{272}

A philosophy of history that ignores either of the two poles is for Adorno one-sided and fetishistic.

In the end, the search for a single narrative of history, either in terms of ‘nature,’ or as absolute contingency, renders history unintelligible. As I have already argued, the reduction to ‘nature’ simply eliminates the dimension of history; and the idea that there is only a contingent series of contingent events renders the possibility of the present’s containing a historical dimension impossible. Adorno instead takes history to be materialistically embedded in the present and even ontologically constitutive of nature. History is a proper dimension of material being, and it is retrieved in the form that Freudian screen memories or Proustian remembrances\textsuperscript{273} allow for retrieval: namely through interpretation. History exists in a mode of being analogous to the individual’s unconscious, and it mediates the present in similar fashion.\textsuperscript{274}


The basic quality of the transience of the earthly signifies nothing but just such a relationship between nature and history; all being or everything existing is to be grasped as the interweaving of historical and natural being. As transience all original-history is absolutely present. It is present in the form of ‘signification.’ ‘Signification’ means that the elements of nature and history are not fused with each other, rather they break apart and interweave at the same time in such a fashion that the natural appears as a sign for history and history, where it seems to be most historical, appears as a sign for nature.

\textsuperscript{273} The comparison between Adorno’s (and Benjamin’s) idea that history is constructed backward through the interpretation of unconscious memories, on the one hand, and Proustian remembrance or Freud’s screen memories, on the other, is made by Susan Buck-Morss in The Origin of Negative Dialectics (New York: The Free Press, 1977).

\textsuperscript{274} And just like the language in which the individual expresses her unconscious memories and brings their sense to consciousness in analysis does not capture these memories conceptually, but rather expresses them in an allegorical sense (consider the myth of Oedipus and its significance for psychoanalytic therapy, which cannot be expressed in fully conceptual terms without losing its richness, as
6.2.3 Adorno’s historical method: between genealogy and teleology

We now have a view of the overall structure of the historical narrative offered in *Dialektik der Aufklärung*: it is a mediation between ‘nature’ and ‘history.’ In the last part of this section I want to characterize this mediation more precisely, and to do so I will draw a detailed comparison between Adorno’s philosophical-historical method and the genealogical method. The comparison is illuminating because it shows the falsity of the negative teleological reading but also rescues what is true in the idea that there is a teleological *impulse* in Adorno’s method, which impulse is however constantly undermined in the final structure of the historical analysis.

The first point I want to emphasize is that the history of civilization’s development defended in *Dialektik der Aufklärung* has an *overall structure* that is not teleological (I have already given arguments for this thesis in section 2.1 above) but rather genealogical. I have said that the overall structure of historical-philosophical analysis in Adorno is a discontinuous interweaving of two layers of narrative: the level of a history of nature, which identifies the archaic elements and the way in which they continue to exist in the present, and the properly ‘historical’ level, where contingent events and conditions coalesce with pre-existing conditions and tendencies in the emergence of something new. These two elements correspond to the two elements that

Jonathan Lear argues in *Love and Its Place in Nature*, the same is true of how we become aware of the natural dimension of history. The conceptual articulation is neither capable of fully capturing the content nor to be measured by its correspondence to “the way things really were”—rather, language successfully articulates unconscious memories if it expresses them in a way that brings them experientially to their *meaningfulness in the present*, and it corresponds not to some hyposatized idea of how things objectively happened in the past (an impossible standard) but rather of how the past continues to exist as the natural underside of the present. I explore the consequences of Adorno’s theory of natural history for the interpretation of history in chapter 7.
Foucault identifies in “Nietzsche, la généalogie, l’histoire” as the two pivot points of genealogical analysis.

Foucault emphasizes that the genealogical method “s’oppose à la recherche de l’«origine»”275 in the sense of Ursprung—that is the search for a pure, stable, ultimate foundation of things or an ultimate meaning to the development of history. But Foucault argues that genealogy is concerned precisely with origins in two different senses of the term: in the sense of Herkunft and Entstehung. Herkunft refers to the provenance of something: its descent from a specific group, tradition, taboo, instinctual order, etc. Entstehung, on the other hand, refers to the emergence of something new through an accumulation of accidents, errors, and contingent events whose coming together with pre-existing conditions results in a qualitatively new element. These two elements, Herkunft and Entstehung, correspond to what I identified in Adorno as the element of the natural, on the one hand, and the properly ‘historical’ and contingent, on the other.

On the one hand, Herkunft, Foucault argues, results in a history that is inscribed in the body, the instincts, and the desires and inclinations of inner nature:

La provenance tient au corps. Elle s’inscrit dans le système nerveux, dans ‘humeur, dans l’appareil digestif. Mauvaise respiration, mauvaise alimentation, corps débile et affaissé de ceux dont les ancêtres ont commis des erreurs ; que les pères prennent les effets pour les causes, croient à la réalité de l’au-delà ou posent la valeur de l’éternel, et c’est le corps des enfants qui en pâtira. Lâcheté, hypocrisie - simples rejetons de l’erreur ; non pas au sens socratique, non parce qu’il faut se tromper pour être méchant, non point parce qu’on s’est détourné de l’originale vérité, mais parce que c’est le corps qui porte, dans sa vie et sa mort,

dans sa force et sa faiblesse, la sanction de toute vérité et de tout erreur, comme il en porte aussi, et inversement, l’origine - provenance.  

Here Foucault emphasizes the Nietzschean view that a myriad historical events, habits, and experiences of the past survive in the body—in its ailments, its strengths, its desires, and its instinctual drives.

Le corps – et tout ce qui tient au corps, l’alimentation, le climat, le son –, c’est le lieu de la Herkunft : sur le corps, on trouve le stigmate des événements passés, tout comme de lui naissent les désirs, les défaillances, et les erreurs ; en lui aussi ils se nouent et soudain s’expriment, mais en lui aussi ils se dénouent, entrent en lutte, s’effacent les uns les autres et poursuivent leur insurmontable conflit. … La généalogie, comme analyse de la provenance, est donc à l’articulation du corps et de l’histoire. Elle doit montrer le corps tout imprimé d’histoire, et l’histoire ruinant le corps.  

Finally, descent attaches itself to the body. It inscribes itself in the nervous system, in temperament, in the digestive apparatus; it appears in faulty respiration, in improper diets, in the debilitated and prostrate bodies of those whose ancestors committed errors. Fathers have only to mistake effects for causes, believe in the reality of an ‘afterlife,’ or maintain the value of eternal truths, and the bodies of their children will suffer. Cowardice and hypocrisy, for their part, are the simple offshoots of error: not in a Socratic sense, not that evil is the result of a mistake, not because of a turning away from an original truth, but because the body maintains, in life as in death, through its strength or weakness, the sanction of every truth and error, as it sustains, in an inverse manner, the origin—descent.

The body—and everything that touches it: diet, climate, and soil—is the domain of the Herkunft. The body manifests the stigmata of past experience and also gives rise to desires, failings, and errors. These elements may join in a body where they achieve a sudden expression, but as often, their encounter is an engagement in which they efface each other, where the body becomes the pretext of their insurmountable conflict. … Genealogy, as an analysis of descent, is thus situated within the articulation of the body and history. Its task is to expose a body totally imprinted by history and the process of history’s destruction of the body (emphasis mine).
The analysis of history in terms of an analysis of its particular inscription in the body—the feeling, instinctual, habitual body—is the very same form of analysis that Adorno seeks to uncover with the history of nature. And the aim of this history is to unearth the archaic in the present—which is the same as to say that it is to uncover the _Herkunft_ [provenance] of things—and to show that the ‘origin’ of things in this sense is not a noble, pure, and stable origin, but rather thoroughly permeated with non-rational elements and bodily, natural determinants.

The second goal of genealogy, as characterized by Foucault, is to show the origin of things in the sense of their _Entstehung_. _Entstehung_, he says, “désigne l’émergence, le point de surgissement” [designates emergence, the point of arising]. The analysis of _Entstehung_ looks to clarify a social institution or a concept, for instance, by looking at how it emerged from the coming together of various elements, some of them purely accidental, ignoble, and decidedly different from the origin and purpose that we ordinarily attribute to the object of analysis. A classic example is Nietzsche’s _Zur Genealogie der Moral_, where moral European values are traced back to a series of struggles for power, the ressentiment of the weak, the cunning of the “priestly cast,” etc.; or Foucault’s genealogy of the prison in _Surveiller et Punir_, where modern punishment is traced back to a variety of goals ranging from the demonstration of the sovereign’s power to the domination of the victim’s ‘soul’ and the normalization of behavior. Foucault argues that the _Entstehungen_ that genealogy seeks to uncover “ne sont pas les figures successives d’une même signification; ce sont autant d’effets de substitutions, de

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remplacements et de déplacements, de conquêtes déguisées, de retournements systématiques.” These emergences of the contingent, accidental, and new inscribe themselves on the level of history—on the body, feelings, habits, instincts of the human animal—but their explanation is not reducible to what was already a part of history, but rather requires appeal to accidents, errors, plays of power, the contingent victory of a certain interpretation over others, etc.

The parallels between Adorno’s historical method and the genealogical method are startling. Both proceed by looking at how the archaic (Herkunft) returns in history, and how the contingent gives rise to something new (Entstehung) and imprints itself in nature. Moreover, both look at the relations between the two layers of analysis (‘nature’ or Herkunft and the historically emergent or Entstehung) as characterized by mediation but also discontinuity.

There are other important similarities: In its retrieving of

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280 Ibid.

281 See Foucault, Michel, “Nietzsche, la généalogie, l’histoire,” in Dits et Ecrits, vol. II (Paris: Gallimard), 141:

La généalogie ne prétend pas remonter le temps pour rétablir une grande continuité par-delà la dispersion de l’oubli ; sa tâche n’est pas de montrer que le passé est encore là, bien vivant dans le présent, l’animant encore en secret, après avoir imposé à toutes les traverses du parcours une forme dessinée dès le départ Rien qui ressemblerait à l’évolution d’une espèce, au destin d’un peuple. Suivre la filière complexe de la provenance, c’est au contraire maintenir ce qui s’est passé dans la dispersion qui lui est propre : c’est repérer les accidents, les infimes déviations –ou au contraire les retournements complets –, les erreurs, les fautes d’appréciation, les mauvais calculs qui ont donné naissance à ce qui existe et vaut pour nous ; c’est découvrir qu’à la racine de ce que nous connaissons et de ce que nous sommes il n’y a point la vérité et l’être, mais l’extériorité de l’accident. C’est pourquoi sans doute toute origine de la morale, du moment qu’elle n’est pas vénérable –et la Herkunft ne l’est jamais –, vaut critique.

Herkunft and Entstehung, genealogy, like Adorno’s historical method, focuses on the particular without dissolving it into a continuity, and interprets it in terms of its effects on relationships of power, the instincts, and the aspirations and norms of society. Also like genealogy, Adorno’s methodology is reflexively and explicitly aware of its own historical situatedness and does not claim universal validity—it offers a history of the present.

Again, like genealogy, Adorno’s method is concerned with history as a physician is with the body. The regard [look] of the genealogist, Foucault claims, is semblable à celui du médecin qui plonge pour diagnostiquer et dire la différence. Le sens historique est beaucoup plus proche de la médecine que de la philosophie. … L’histoire a mieux à faire qu’à être la connaissance différentielle des énergies et des défaillances, des hauteurs et des effondrements, des poisons et des contrepoisons. Elle a à être la science des remèdes.282

This model of the philosopher of history as a physician should bring to mind Adorno’s approach to the history of civilization, his analysis of it as a descent into pathology, his analysis of advanced capitalist society as paranoid and the modern

Genealogy does not pretend to go back in time to restore an unbroken continuity that operates beyond the dispersion of forgotten things; its duty is not to demonstrate that the past actively exists in the present, that it continues secretly to animate the present, having imposed a predetermined form on all its vicissitudes. Genealogy does not resemble the evolution of a species and does not map the destiny of a people. On the contrary, to follow the complex course of descent is to maintain passing events in their proper dispersion; it is to identify the accidents, the minute deviations—or conversely, the complete reversals—the errors, the false appraisals, and the faulty calculations that gave birth to those things that continue to exist and have value for us; it is to discover that truth or being does not lie at the root of what we know and what we are, but the exteriority of accidents. This is undoubtedly why every origin of morality from the moment it stops being pious—and Herkunft can never be—has value as a critique.

282 Foucault, Michel, “Nietzsche, la généalogie, l'histoire,” in Dits et Ecrits, vol. II (Paris: Gallimard), 149. English translation in Foucault, Michel, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” in Rabinow, Paul, ed., The Foucault Reader (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 89-90: The approach of genealogy is similar to that of a doctor who looks closely, who plunges to make a diagnosis and to state its difference. Historical sense has more in common with medicine than philosophy…. History has a more important task than to be a handmaiden to philosophy, to recount the necessary birth of truth and values; it should become a differential knowledge of energies and failings, heights and degenerations, poisons and antidotes. Its task is to become a curative science.
individual as ailing from a weak ego, pent-up aggression, resentment, isolation and anxiety.

The two methods actually seem to be the same, and, in the overall structure of their critique of enlightenment civilization in *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, Adorno and Horkheimer deploy a genealogical method.

Yet there is a subtle but very important difference between Adorno’s method and the genealogical method, the understanding of which will give us a final view of the method of *Dialektik der Aufklärung*. Though the difference is in the first place at the level of the micro-, not macro-structure of analysis, it ultimately affects not just the content but also the form of analysis. But, to understand the difference, we need first to concentrate on the micro-level, and, in particular, on the content of the pathology with which Adorno and Horkheimer diagnose enlightenment civilization.

I have argued in chapter 5 that the pathology is exhibited concretely through the symptom of “the delusional system”: that is, the establishment of a delusional system of delusions which, though it is “false” insofar as it is delusional, is nonetheless very *real* insofar as it is the concrete form (*eidos*) of social reality and the organizing structure of concepts. Now, there are two main features I want to discuss about the system: First, that its emergence is a form of *Entstehung* and thus belongs as an element in the overall genealogical narrative of enlightenment civilization’s development. Second, that the system, though it is a moment in an overall structure that is genealogical (and decidedly *not* teleological, as I have already shown), nonetheless has an *internal* structure that is, in fact, teleological. In what follows, I discuss these two points in detail and employ them to flesh out the structure of Adorno’s historico-philosophical analysis, in comparison to a
simply genealogical or simply teleological method, and to bring into focus exactly how
the negative teleological interpretation is mistaken.

(1) The rise of capitalism as a form of Entstehung embedded in a genealogical
interpretation: The first point is that the emergence of the system is a form of
Entstehung. I have already argued that the onset of pathology in the development of
enlightenment civilization involved the coming together of elements that were contingent
and irreducible to the conditions and tendencies that existed before. The change that
brings the stage of pathology proper, which plays a central role in the interpretation of
advanced capitalist civilization as pathological, cannot be understood as ultimately
determined by natural elements and tendencies—for instance by the principle that the
very nature of civilization requires domination of nature, or that the very nature of the
human self requires self domination—but rather brings something new to bear, something
constrained but not fully determined by nature. This new element is a socio-historical
event, the rise of capitalism and its unfettered growth, and the failure of Marxist
revolution to change the external conditions of social existence, which failure led to the
search for satisfaction through regression and ultimately led to full-fledged megalomania
and paranoia.

Two important consequences follow from this reading of the rise of the system as
a form of Entstehung. First, the rise of capitalism and its principle of exchange as the
ultimate determining principle ordering the social order belongs in the theory of Dialektik
der Aufklärung to an overall genealogical narrative of Western civilization’s
development. Second, the rise of the system is irreducible to the tendencies that were
already present before—paradigmatically the drive toward the domination of nature. And
this point is worth emphasizing because it highlights the mistake that many critics of Adorno and Horkheimer make—usually the very same critics who defend the negative teleological reading (see section 1 above)—when they claim that in *Dialektik der Aufklärung* critical theory abandoned the critique of capitalism and reduced all social problems to the relation of domination between human beings and nature. It is precisely because they misunderstand the overall structure of *Dialektik der Aufklärung* as teleological that they think Adorno and Horkheimer carry out this reduction and leave aside the critique of capitalism. However, as I hope to have shown, the problem of enlightenment civilization’s pathology is irreducible to the domination of nature (even though the domination of nature plays a key role in understanding the pathology). The entrenchment of capitalist relations of exchange as the main determining principle of the social order, de-coupled from the aims of human happiness and freedom, is an element that marks the beginning of pathology but is not reducible to the problematic between civilization and nature. Since it is not so reducible, the study of how it came about, why the revolution failed, and in general the critique of capitalism remain in Adorno’s critical theory a necessary complement to the critique of the domination of nature.

(2) *The internal teleology of the system:* Internally, the system has a teleological structure. The system is well-integrated (hence it is a *system*) and its parts work in a way that maintains and furthers the functional economy of the whole. The functional economy of the whole just is the support and entrenchment of capitalist relations of production. I have already described the internal structure of the system as a well-
integrated whole, all of whose parts promote the furthering of capitalist relations, in chapters 3 and 4.\textsuperscript{284}

Moreover, as I showed in chapter 4, the systematic and functionalist structure of the system as the structure of the social order is replicated in the structure of concepts. What this means is that concepts are structured in a tight and complete system of relations whose overarching principle is the principle of exchange. This systematicity of the conceptual system was further explained in chapter 5, where I showed that, for Adorno and Horkheimer, the system is held together with the principle of exchange at its very center because this principle is the method by which the repression that gives rise to pathology is maintained and projected in the first place. As a consequence, the role of the principle of exchange in the conceptual order is not peripheral, and the conceptual system tends to support it when confronted with obstacles or contradictions. In other words, the principle of exchange is indubitable from within the system because it just is the structure of the system (which means that this specific system would crumble if the principle were rejected).

Adorno’s method of historico-philosophical analysis thus stands at the crossroads between teleology and genealogy. The macro-structure of the method is genealogical—and not teleological, as the negative teleological interpretation assumes—but, within the micro-structure, there is a teleological, systematic element. On the one hand, this

\textsuperscript{284} I also discussed in detail in these chapters how Adorno’s view of the capitalist system differs from Marx. Internally, the main difference is that, according to Adorno, the main overriding tendency at work in capitalism is not the development of the forces of production and the adjustment of productive relations to further the former, but rather the entrenchment of capitalist productive relations for their own sake. In other words, the main overriding tendency of the capitalist system is according to Adorno the maintenance of the principle of exchange as the single overriding tendency determining social life as a whole (see chapter 3).
element is a necessary component of the critical analysis of society because, according to Adorno, the actual structure of the social order in which we live as well as the structure of conceptual relations in our ordinary language are determined by a tightly woven system that works functionally to maintain the principle of exchange. Since the structure of this system is teleological, critical theory’s concrete analysis of society must also contain a teleological component (which component is evident in the dialectical structure that characterizes Adorno’s fragments internally). On the other hand, the teleological element is the result of pathological delusion. It is not self-standing, final, or absolute in any way. Adorno and Horkheimer show the delusional character of the system through genealogical interpretation. The teleology is an element within the genealogy, and understanding the meaning of the teleologically ordered system (that is, its delusional quality) requires genealogical analysis. This relation between genealogy and teleology is incidentally the reason behind the stylistic form of Adorno’s negative dialectics: The macro-structure is fragmentary (genealogical), whereas the internal structure of each fragment is tightly dialectical (based on a functional teleological view of society). I will say much more about this in the chapters to follow.

6.3 Implications for the theory of society and critical thought

My goal in this last section is to employ the interpretation of Dialektik der Aufklärung that has been developed in chapter 5, and sections 1-2 of this chapter, to flesh out Adorno’s conception of the modern social order and of critical theory. This section is divided into two subsections. The first (6.3.1) answers some questions that were left open in chapter 4: I explain first, why the principle of exchange is necessarily distortion-
producing, such that its dominance over the totality of social life necessarily gives rise to the “contradiction in the object,” and, second, why the mediation of the social order by nature, though it provides a determinate interpretation of the “contradiction in the object” that constitutes the internal structure of appearance, does not open up a deeper “essence” behind the appearance. This discussion fleshes out my final account of Adorno’s conception of the modern social order. Then, in section 6.3.2, I explain how Adorno’s conception of critical theory differs from other conceptions—specifically, Hegelian and Marxian conceptions of dialectical thought—on the basis of its ability not only to uncover the structure of the totality of the real, but also to interpret the meaning of this structure as fully negative.

6.3.1 The principle of exchange as mediated by nature

I have argued that the growth and entrenchment of capitalist relations without further justification for the advancement of human happiness and liberation—a phenomenon that coincides with the failure of Marxist revolution to take place, and which Adorno and Horkheimer identify as the betrayal of the bourgeois ideals of happiness and freedom—is, at the socio-historical level, the event corresponding to the onset of pathology at the level of natural history. Now I want to employ this insight in order to answer some questions that were left open in my account of Adorno’s conception of society in chapter 4.

In that chapter, I discussed Adorno’s view that social reality today has the structure of the “contradiction in the object,” a structure that consists in an opposition between appearance (the self-understanding of society at the level of ordinary consciousness) and essence (the determination of social life by the principle of
Moreover, I said that, for Adorno, this opposition or “contradiction” between appearance and essence necessarily follows from the inner dynamics of modern society, specifically from its determination by the principle of exchange. However, chapter 4 did not provide an explanation of why the principle of exchange is such that, in its determination of the social totality, it necessarily gives rise to an appearance that contradicts it and conceals it. In other words, chapter 4 left the issue of why the principle of exchange is necessarily distortion-producing as an open question, and I promised to address this question in a later chapter. Also in chapter 4, I said that the essence of social reality—the principle of exchange—is such that it must remain the unconscious determining ground of social reality in order to remain the essence of the social order at all. I did not however explain why the principle of exchange is such that it must remain unconscious in order to remain a determining ground of reality—that is, why it is that when human actors become conscious that the principle of exchange constitutes the essence of social reality, the principle ceases to be “essence” and instead becomes a component of the “appearance” of the social order. The interpretation that has been pursued in chapter 5 and in the first part of this chapter of the dialectic between nature and civilization now puts us in a position to answer these questions.

First, then, let us consider the initial question, namely: why does the principle of exchange necessarily give rise to the contradiction in the object? In order to answer this question, I want to appeal to the Freudian interpretation of Dialektik der Aufklärung that I proposed in chapter 5, and its clarification as a history uniting the narratives of natural history and socio-historical change developed in this chapter.
I have argued that the structure of the modern social order is at the level of natural history to be understood as a paranoid symptom—a symptom that arose in order to “resolve” (in a pathological way, of course) a conflict that became intolerable for humanity. On the one hand, the demands of society at a self-conscious level involved the realization of bourgeois ideals of happiness and freedom—ideals whose libidinal strength was in part rooted in the unconscious remembrance of happiness from primary mimesis. On the other hand, these demands, rooted as they were, libidinally, on the archaic wish for happiness in nature, represented a threat to civilization. The drive to avoid this threat in turn fueled the denial of humanity’s wishes for happiness and freedom, and regression occurred. The conflict was not resolved; rather, cathexes were removed from the external world and a substitute resolution was achieved through the twin elements of paranoia: megalomania, on the one hand, and the reconstruction of reality through projection, on the other.

It is important to understand just how megalomania and projection relate to each other in this case. As we have seen before, the megalomania that Adorno ascribes to enlightenment civilization consists in civilization’s self-understanding as having in fact achieved the satisfaction of bourgeois ideals—and in a magnified, irrational form. Recall that, for Adorno, the philosophical notion of the transcendental or constitutive subject—both in its Kantian and Hegelian versions, and even in its Husserlian and other “variants”—consists precisely in the inverse image of real unfreedom, an image that presents reality “at its core” as constituted by the “absolutely free” rational subject.

On the other hand, the system created through paranoid projection, which is in fact the real, concrete structure of pathological social reality, externalizes the repression
within, and constructs the world as objectively ever more rigid and unfree. The twofold symptom of paranoia—megalomania and projection—is created to satisfy two demands that are hardly compatible: (1) the idea that the betrayed bourgeois promises of happiness and freedom were in fact achieved because the world is structured in accordance with the fully free and rational transcendental structures of the mind, and (2) the ever-increasing repression of nature through a projection outward that results in its “external return,” allowing for inner nature (the repressed wishes of the id) to be vented against externally projected nature (thus giving a release valve to repression) under the compulsion to expunge dangerous nature.

The world organized in accordance with the rule of the exchange principle is built in a way that satisfies (1) and (2). The recurrence of organized fascist violence against any representatives of nature satisfies (2). On the other hand, the satisfaction of (1) requires that, regardless of the system’s objective structure, its self-understanding be in line with the betrayed bourgeois ideas of happiness and freedom. The system has to both increase the repression of nature (and so work against the possibilities of freedom and happiness), and present itself in an appearance that upholds precisely the values of freedom and happiness: Hence the contradiction between the essence and appearance of society, and hence the “contradiction in the object.”

This two-fold demand on the system that is symptomatic of enlightenment’s pathology has also the effect of emptying the ostensive ideals of society of meaning. Even as happiness and freedom are proclaimed as the goals of the social order, the possibility of fulfilling them in any concrete sense are ever more strongly negated. Humanity’s wish for happiness is based on an ideal of abandonment in nature and, even if
such abandonment, in unmediated form, would be impossible in civilization, fulfillment of the wish might be possible through the establishment of a mediated relationship with nature that allows for the wish’s satisfaction in social praxis. The repression of nature in the paranoid system hinders not only the realization of happiness, but also the realization of freedom, for the system imposes its delusional and repressive structure on the individual as a fixed and unchanging order—as a rigid paranoid system of delusion—that allows only peripheral elements, but not its organizing repressive principle, to be called into question. But, even as the concrete social order works against the realization of happiness and freedom, its very pathological structure, rooted as it is in the two-fold demands imposed by megalomania and projection, requires that the appearance of reality maintain the claim that our civilization is a bastion of freedom and that the conditions for happiness are already in place. This is why the domination of social reality by the paranoid system explains the contradiction between appearance and essence that characterizes advanced capitalist society, a contradiction between objective social conditions and the ostensive interpretation of those conditions in ordinary consciousness.

Now, let us turn to the second question that was left open in chapter 4, namely, the question of why it is that when the essence of social reality—i.e., its total determination by the exchange principle—becomes consciously apprehended, it becomes part of the appearance of reality and is no longer an underlying essence.

Consider, first, what it means to become conscious that the essence of the social totality is the principle of exchange: It is not the mere recognition that capitalist social relations dominate social life in its totality, but it moreover entails the recognition that this domination by exchange does not contain a higher telos that justifies it—such as
would be the case if exchange was a cipher for the advance of Geist or if it represented
humanity’s advance toward freedom through technological progress—but is rather a non-
self-justifying dead end. When social analysis reveals the contradiction between
appearance and essence, the contradiction in the object cannot be sublated [aufgehoben]
into a non-contradictory higher concept because the contradiction is itself the ultimate
meaning of the social totality as determined by exchange, and it has no deeper ground at
the level of social-historical analysis. It only has a “deeper ground” of intelligibility in its
relation to the level of ‘nature’—that is, in the meaning that can be ascribed to it through
the kind of ‘natural history’ that interprets it as symptomatic of paranoid pathology. But
this kind of ‘natural’ interpretation is an explanation, not a resolution, of the
contradiction. And this is exactly why the contradiction, when it becomes self-conscious
in social analysis, becomes a mere “appearance” without an underlying essence (see my
discussion in chapter 4). There is no ultimate ground behind the contradiction, nor can
the contradiction be taken to be a self-grounding ultimate essence because it is a cipher
for pathological delusion rather than a final, harmonious ontological structure of reality.
The contradiction in the object, as conceived by Adorno, cannot be resolved, and its
analysis does not give way to a “higher” understanding of an underlying essence, but
rather yields only the realization that the contradiction is both final, and a mere
appearance without further ground.

The idea that the contradiction is both the dead end of social analysis—the final
“result”—and that it is nonetheless a “mere appearance”—that is, neither grounded in an
underlying essence nor self-grounding—is difficult because there is a temptation to think
that the final result of analysis, especially if it claims to describe the structure of the
social order as a totality, must be the final ground of social reality. Why, then, should we reduce the dignity of this final ground by claiming that, though analysis cannot go beyond it, and though it accurately describes the structure of the real, it is not a ground or the essence of the real, but rather a ‘mere appearance’?

One reason to say that the real is a mere appearance without ground is to emphasize the point that reality is not definitive of truth. The idea of a final ground is traditionally understood—and it is initially hard to see how it could not be so understood—as a principle of “ontological truth.” That is, an account of how reality is structured is generally believed to be ipso facto an account of “the truth” about the real. And, yet, what if reality itself should be understood rather as a pathological symptom, a systematic structure of delusion? The mere description of reality’s structure and the notion of ontological truth then come apart. This is exactly what happens with Adorno’s theory, and it is why he claims that “[d]as Ganze ist das Unwahre”\(^{285}\) [the whole is the false], without an underlying existing “truth” of which “the whole” can be said to give a distorted (false) impression.

“Still,” one might imagine the critic responding, “the structure of reality is understood as delusional and thus false through the analysis of its relation to nature. Doesn’t this mean that nature, and the natural history that makes the pathological quality of the social intelligible, constitutes the underlying ground or essence of the false illusion? Isn’t paranoid pathology the essence, and the social order the appearance, of the real?”

But the relation of nature to society is not one of essence to appearance. In what follows, I briefly explore the relation between nature and society opened up by the philosophical interpretation of their mediated relation in order to show, first, (1) that neither society nor nature can be understood as having primacy over the other, either ontologically or epistemologically; and, second (2) that the interpretation of society from the standpoint of nature does not add any new elements to the domain of the theory, but rather only an interpretation of the meaning of the structure that was already discovered in the sort of Hegelian analysis explored in chapter 4, in terms of society’s determination by exchange, and not yet in terms of the mediation of society by nature. The interpretation of society’s mediation by nature therefore does not open up a more ‘fundamental’ ontological or epistemological ground for the structure of the social order, and hence does not relate to this order as essence to appearance.

The first point to see is that nature does not relate to society as essence to appearance in an ontological sense—that is, nature is not more primary or basic than society in the order of being; natural and social elements are intermingled in every existent. Recall that ‘nature’ is a component of existents, of the interior of material things and phenomena. It is the core of objectivity in the object, but it is related to subjectivity as the unconscious is related to the conscious mind. ‘Nature’ is the unconscious of things, and it exists in things. Its ‘history’ is told as an interpretation of how the social and historical realms have shaped and altered things. Natural history tells the narrative of human history’s imprint in the natural world, both inner and outer (by showing, for example, how a work of art is a reflection of damaged nature, or how various phenomena of everyday life conceal the pain and suffering of damaged life); and
of how nature has mediated the socio-historical dimension of the real (for instance by showing how the historical trajectory of civilization can be told in terms of the natural drives that have surreptitiously mediated it). Now, ontologically, the natural component of things and phenomena is no more real and no more basic than the social order that gives shape and conceptual order to the phenomena, and in relation to which their meaning is articulated. Nature is ontologically no more fundamental than the order of conceptual relations that orders the socio-historical realm; neither do or can exist in isolation.\(^{286}\)

Nor is there a relation of priority between ‘nature’ and ‘history’ in terms of intelligibility, as I have already argued in section 2.2. The concepts of ‘nature,’ ‘and ‘history’ are not definable in isolation from each other and do not refer to demarcated, independent, fully determinate elements of the real. They are conceptual marks separating aspects that do not in fact exist in separation from each other; the conceptual distinction is not meant to map a distinction in the order of being, but rather to identify two distinct layers of meaning and to indicate that, instead of coming together into a unified whole, these layers of meaning in fact come apart. If we reflect on this semantic relation between what I am calling the two “layers of meaning,” we can clearly see that

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\(^{286}\) It is obvious that the socio-historical realm cannot exist without nature; if nothing else because human beings could not exist without the natural element that constitutes them (the body, the unconscious drives, etc). The idea that the natural realm cannot exist without the socio-historical realm might seem less obvious, but it becomes clear when we think about the meaning of ‘nature’ in these discussions. ‘Nature’ is discovered and interpreted always through its relation to the history of the individual and the history of societies and civilizations. We lose our hold on the concept of nature completely if we try to isolate it from its opposition and mediations with the social-historical dimension. Whatever would exist in the future if human beings disappear (and the socio-historical dimension of reality with them) would not correspond to the concept of ‘nature’ that we deploy in these discussions.
neither can be understood as more fundamental than the other, or as the essence (the ground of intelligibility) of the other.

On the one hand, ‘nature’ refers to the non-conceptual core of objectivity of things, which is however not indeterminate and meaningless (as, for instance, brute matter), but is rather meaningful in a radically non-subjective way. To interpret history as a history of nature is to attempt to describe things and phenomena in a way that expresses their meaning and relation to social, human reality, from the standpoint of the most objective, non-subjective element in things and phenomena. This is why in various places Adorno identifies the utopia of philosophy with its lending a voice to nature, allowing language to be the self-expression of nature. It is also why he says

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287 Adorno has a detailed theory about how this is attempted, i.e., how the philosopher tries to recreate a phenomenon from the standpoint of nature. The method deployed (the study of which is the topic of the next chapter) is the method of constellations. This method was initially proposed by Walter Benjamin and, in Benjamin’s view, the successful constellation is actually able to express the phenomenon from the standpoint of nature in a dialectical image that illuminates its object in a flash. I discuss Benjamin and Adorno’s conceptions of the constellation in chapter 8.

288 Adorno in fact identifies the “telos” of philosophy (in the sense of its guiding goal and raison d’être) with the expression of non-conceptual nature. See Adorno, Negative Dialektik (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1970), 152.

Insgeheim ist Nichtidentität das Telos der Identifikation, das an ihr zu Rettende; der Fehler des traditionellen Denkens, daß es die Identität für sein Ziel hält. Die Kraft, die den Schein von Identität sprengt, ist die des Denkens selber: die Anwendung seines »Das ist« erschüttert seine gleichwohl unabdingbare Form. Dialektisch ist Erkenntnis des Nichtidentischen auch darin, daß gerade sie, mehr und anders als das Identitätsdenken, identifiziert. Sie will sagen, was etwas sei, während das Identitätsdenken sagt, worunter etwas fällt, wovon es Exemplar ist oder Repräsentant, was es also nicht selbst ist. Identitätsdenken entfernt sich von der Identität seines Gegenstandes um so weiter, je rücksichtsloser es ihm auf den Leib rückt. Durch ihre Kritik verschwindet Identität nicht; sie verändert sich qualitative. Elemente der Affinität des Gegenstandes zu seinem Gedanken leben in ihr.

English translation (mine):

Secretely, non-identity [the non-conceptual] is the telos of identification, that which should be saved; the mistake of traditional thinking is that it conceives of identity as its goal. The power that breaks through the appearance of identity is the power of thought itself: the use of “It is” is nonetheless its inalienable form. Knowledge of the non-identical is dialectical also in that it identifies more than, and in a manner different from that of, identity thinking. It seeks to say what
(following Walter Benjamin) that the “Aufgabe der Philosophie” [the role of philosophy] is nothing less than “die intentionslose Wirklichkeit zu deuten” [to interpret unintentional reality].

On the other hand, the standpoint of nature, this radically non-anthropocentric perspective on things, can nonetheless only be sought with subjective tools: concepts and theories that describe the social order and various historical elements in relation to which the phenomenon under interpretation has acquired its present meaning. The point of the analysis is to order the concepts and theories around the center of gravity of the phenomenon in such a way that the innermost core of the phenomenon, the meaning of its historical being, reaches expression in an interpretation. Adorno thus characterizes philosophy precisely as the attempt to go beyond concepts to non-conceptual nature, with nothing more than the force of the concept: “Und ich würde eine Definition riskieren wie etwa die, daß die Idee der Philosophie sei, über den Begriff mit dem Begriff hinauszugelangen“ [and I would risk as a definition that the idea of philosophy is to go beyond the concept with the concept].

something is, while identity thinking says what it falls under, what it is an exemplar or representative of, and not what it itself is. The more ruthlessly identity-thinking assails its object, the more it distances itself from identity with it. Through the critique of identity, identity does not vanish but rather undergoes a qualitative change. Elements of affinity between the object and the thinking of it live in identity.


290 Adorno, Vorlesung über Negative Dialektik (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2003), 141.
The ‘natural history’ of a phenomenon is thus achieved in an interpretation that is inseparable from socio-historical concepts and reflections. The interpretation is in fact composed of socio-historical reflections, connected to each other in specific, associative but non-arbitrary ways, with the goal of revealing the phenomenon’s meaningfulness from the most objective standpoint, the standpoint of nature. The successful interpretation is one able to order these reflections around the object of analysis in such a way that the objective content of the phenomenon is elucidated not in isolation from, but precisely in concrete mediations, oppositions, and determinate relations to, the various socio-historical foci of reflection. If successful, the arrangement of these foci of reflection around the phenomenon expresses something about the phenomenon that was not already present in the conceptual content of the individual foci of reflection; it is this content that gives concretion to the phenomenon as elucidated from the standpoint of nature. But the content does not refer to new insights regarding the structure of the social order and of the phenomenon’s place in that order—that is, the content does not add new structural elements to the theories and reflections that were arranged in a specific way in order to elucidate the phenomenon. Rather, the additional content adds a new interpretation of the meaning of the structure of the social, and the meaning of the particular phenomenon under interpretation as embedded in the social world.\footnote{In this sense, the overall interpretation is non-systematic, so long as one conceives of increased systematicity as involving an extensive increase in the domain of the theory.}

So, for example, the natural history of the development from animistic communities to advanced capitalist society that Adorno and Horkheimer offer in Dialektik der Aufklärung, and the particular interpretation I have offered of it in chapter

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\footnote{291 In this sense, the overall interpretation is non-systematic, so long as one conceives of increased systematicity as involving an extensive increase in the domain of the theory.}
do not add new elements to an understanding of the structure of the social order that was already achieved in chapter 4, on the basis of an examination of the objective social conditions and their relation to the image of society in ordinary consciousness. Rather, the concept of pathology and of historical development told from the standpoint of nature add a sense that there is something profoundly damaged about modern society, and that this damage cannot be truly understood merely in terms of structural contradictions but rather corresponds to the quality of social reality as a whole. The interpretation of enlightenment’s pathology does not give an account of the essential structure of the social order; it gives us an interpretation of the structure that was already derived from the social analysis: the structure of the contradiction in the object. The interpretation of the enlightenment’s pathology tells us that this contradiction is pathological, that it is caught in a vicious circle of damage against nature, that Western culture has failed and is rotting. But the interpretation neither (1) answers more fundamental questions than those addressed in the social analysis, such as questions about ultimate causes of the nature-culture relation, or the ultimate structure of reason, or anything that would reduce the social order to a fundamental “structure;” (2) nor does it constitute a final interpretation of the real. The interpretation grasps and attempts to express the way in which history exists in the present, as the objective core of phenomena, and it interprets these phenomena according to their meaning from (in terms of) and for (as an intervention into) the present.
Verschlingungen; darum sind ihr so wenig »Resultate« gegeben; darum muß sie stets von neuem anheben; darum kann sie doch des geringsten Fadens nicht entraten, den die Vorzeit gesponnen hat und der vielleicht gerade die Linieatur ergänzt, die die Chiffern in einen Textwandeln könnte.292

History is ontologically constitutive of things and phenomena in their present state—and thus in terms of how the historical dimension survives in them, rather than in terms of what the historical events ‘objectively were’ and how they idealistically affect the way we think about things and phenomena—and the natural history that opens up the phenomenon from the standpoint of nature is told as a fallible interpretation and an intervention in the conditions of the present, as an effort to demystify the state of things and to disclose the delusional quality that permeates our self-understanding.

Natural history is thus a history of and for the present; it claims neither universal validity nor accuracy in the sense of capturing a conceptual content that exists in the independent object.293 Since nature is radically non-conceptual, the success of interpretation cannot consist in translating “the perspective of nature” into a conceptual rendition that corresponds to it without loss. Instead, success consists in reconstructing the phenomenon from a different perspective, one in which society is the object and not the subject of the interpretation, one in which we are “looked at” by things, and things in


In this remains the great, perhaps the everlasting paradox: philosophy persistently and with the claim of truth, must proceed interpretively without ever possessing a sure key to interpretation; nothing more is given to it than fleeting, disappearing traces within the riddle figures of that which exists and their astonishing entwinings. The history of philosophy is nothing other than the history of such entwinings. Thus it reaches so few ‘results.’ It must always begin anew and therefore cannot do without the least thread which earlier times have spun, and through which the lineature is perhaps completed which could transform the ciphers into a text.

293 In this sense, again, natural history is much more like genealogy than teleology.
turn are able to express the phenomenon from the least ‘humanist’ perspective. If the interpretation truly expresses this perspective, if it allows the reader experientially to grasp and feel the phenomenon unlocked in its objective truth, then the world is disclosed in terms of a layer of meaning that opposes and shatters our usual self-understanding.

If the meaning of natural history is correctly understood, it becomes evident that it would be nonsensical to propose that in Adorno and Horkheimer’s theory the structure of pathology is the final ‘essence’ of the ‘false’ contemporary social order. As we have seen, the diagnosis of pathology does not add new knowledge—in the sense of new structural elements—to our understanding of the social order, as can be achieved without natural history from the analysis of the contradiction between objective conditions and the ideological appearance of society. As I have shown in chapter 4, this analysis yields the result that the social order has the structure of the contradiction in the object. Instead of providing new knowledge about the structure of social reality, the diagnosis of pathology adds a way to interpret the meaning of that structure, i.e. the meaning of the contradiction in the object. The ‘natural history’ of modern society (as advanced in *Dialektik der Aufklärung*) does not yield a new and fundamental ground for understanding the structure of social reality, and therefore does not constitute the essence of the social order. Rather, it provides us with a key to interpreting the meaning of the social order in toto, from a perspective that is at once as external to the social order as conceivable (since nature stands at the opposite pole of the social) and that bears the marks of the social world in the very core of its being (since nature just is history sedimented in the innermost core of things). In fact, the natural history of civilization provides us with a key for understanding the social imaginary from which significance is
given to the structural order of society—a significance that does not alter the structural order but simply allows us to understand its constitution in the radical social imagination. An analogy here would be finding a ‘clue’ to read and translate an ancient script, i.e., the syntactical ordering of signs that was otherwise undeciphered (e.g. the interpretation of the Rosetta Stone). The clue gives us the meaning, but it does not add something new to the script or the message encoded in the text. The translation key is essential for understanding the meaning of the text, but it would not make any sense to say that it is the essence of the text. Similarly, nature and the natural pathological perspective on the development of Western civilization is not the essence of our social reality. But we cannot understand the meaning of our social order without looking at it from the perspective of nature, and this is not because this perspective opens up a more fundamental realm of being or a more fundamental principle of intelligibility for the real, but because it destabilizes our usual perspective and estranges the social world in its totality. The method of natural history is the key for immanently breaking with the context of immanence, for approaching a new perspective that reveals in social reality as a whole a qualitative texture of delusion.

6.3.2 Beyond Hegel and Marx through the interpretation of society’s mediation by nature

Adorno’s view of the relation between nature and society, and of this relation’s bearing on the philosophical interpretation of the social world, is central to his conception of critical theory—of what it can achieve and how it ought to proceed—as well as for understanding the reason why he takes the Hegelian and Marxian forms of dialectics to be insufficiently critical and ultimately ideological. I want to bring this section to a close by noting the ways in which Adorno’s conception of society differs from Marx’s and
Hegel’s, and the consequences this difference has for their respective conceptions of dialectical thought.

For Hegel the essence of the real, the social order included, is Reason (*Geist*). This conception of the social order gives rise to a dialectic between appearance and essence in which all elements in the appearance—all phenomena: cultural, artistic, and philosophic creations, social institutions, historical events, etc.—can be ultimately explained functionally in terms of how they further the actualization of rationality and freedom. I have already discussed how the functional analysis works in Hegel’s social philosophy in chapter 3. Marx’s dialectical materialism also allows for an ultimately functional explanation of the dialectic between appearance and essence. For Marx, all appearances—all elements of the superstructure—are ultimately functionally intelligible in terms of the role their play with relation to the sphere of production and the unfettered expansion of technological control over nature.

For Adorno, however, a functionalist explanation is impossible. Adorno holds that the ‘essence’ of reified social reality is the principle of exchange (see chapter 4), which systematically orders all elements of social life. But, as we have seen, the determining role of the principle of exchange is instituted by a social imaginary that is specifically pathological, whose meaning is to be found in the complex mechanism by which nature is repressed and the “worldhood” of the world is reconstructed in accordance with paranoid projection. Under these circumstances, the principle of exchange cannot be understood as a final ground of intelligibility for social phenomena and institutions. Though it is possible to explain elements in social appearance in terms of exchange, the explanation achieved in this way is no *explanation* at all, for the
principle of exchange’s primacy over social reality is not self-justifying. The principle of exchange, rather than a final ground for intelligibility, is a cipher for the social imaginary of advanced capitalist society and the non-rational background that gives rise to it, which we have traced to the specific conditions of pathology of the modern social imaginary. A functionalist analysis of society structurally like a Hegelian or Marxian analysis necessarily falls short of discovering the sense, the meaning of social phenomena because it isolates the “essence” of society as the final ground of intelligibility, without instead understanding it as the contingent result of a pathological relation between society and nature.

Nor can the relation between society and nature be understood as the ground for a functional explanation of social reality. On the one hand, a functional explanation that would attempt to explain the social order in terms of the domination of nature fails because of reasons that I have already discussed in section 6.2 in my refutation of the negative teleological reading of Dialektik der Aufklärung; namely, because the social order is at the same time itself dominated by repressed nature. Nor is it finally possible to explain the various elements of social reality functionally in terms of the paranoid diagnosis of advanced capitalist civilization; i.e., in terms of these elements’ contribution to the pathology of modernity. The simple fact of saying that modern society is defined by pathology entails that something has gone awry, and the functionalist view cannot say anything about what is awry or how things have gone wrong. The explanation of what has gone wrong with Western society must for Adorno be interpretative and not functionalist. A functionalist form of explanation necessarily misses the pathological quality of the capitalist order and therefore falls into ‘ideology.’
With this in mind, we can now develop a final account of Adorno’s conception of critical thought and its relation to positivism as well as to the Hegelian/Marxian conception of dialectics. I propose to draw the crucial distinctions along the lines of thought’s penetration into the workings of reified society, whose structure contains three distinct layers: the layer of appearance, the layer of essence and its opposition to appearance; and, thirdly, the layer of interpretation that yields the pathological meaning of the structure of opposition between essence and appearance.

The first form of thought merely reproduces the layer of appearance. It looks at “the facts” and the ways in which finite elements and phenomena of the social system are structured in their ordinary appearance, but it does not seek to understand the meaning of its objects of study in terms of the systematic totality to which they belong. It therefore does not achieve an understanding of the relation between appearance and essence—the principle of exchange. This form of thought is what Adorno calls “positivism,” which he decries as ideological because it merely reproduces the most superficial layer of reified society.

The second form of thought goes one level deeper: it seeks to understand finite elements and phenomena of social life in terms of the “essence” of society—that is, in terms of the objective structure of the social system as a totality. This form of thinking proceeds dialectically: it shows that the finite element under study is not fully intelligible on its own, and that understanding it rather requires that its semantic connections with the totality of which it is part be elucidated. This form of thought is able not only to reproduce the surface level of society’s self-understanding, but moreover the relation that this surface level of appearance has to the structure of the social system as a whole. The
contradiction between appearance and essence is elucidated in the moment in which a finite element of appearance appears to be unintelligible in isolation from its relation to the whole system. For the second form of thought that I am considering, which stops at the level of the contradiction between appearance and essence, this contradiction is in the end explained in functionalist terms: the appearance has a “logic” of its own, which follows from and feeds back into the logic of the whole.

This second form of thought successfully reproduces concrete reality in thought, in the sense that it reproduces the system and its structure. But the meaning of the system remains hidden. The internal structure of the system is attributed to the self-sufficient totality, which in turn becomes identified with reason (whether as Geist or even as historical materialism). The system, which is (in the conception of the social order that we have developed here) in reality a system of delusions, a symbolic product of a pathological social imaginary, is transfigured into an autonomous totality whose structure is fully determined and determinable rather than partly non-rational and elusive from within the system. Marxian and Hegelian forms of dialectics exemplify this second form of thought.

Finally, there is a third form of thought that supersedes the second by first understanding the inner structure of the system (that is, of social reality as it concretely exists) and then further understanding this structure as delusion. This form of thought does not take the system to be the final structure of intelligibility for appearance, but rather understands the system itself as an extended symbol produced by a further, not fully rational source of significance: the social imaginary and its specifically pathological relation to nature. This approach does not take the dialectic between essence
and appearance to be a self-interpretive and self-grounded structure of reality, where the relation between appearance and essence is functional and its significance is ultimately given by the essence. Rather, as I said in chapter four, the dialectical relation between appearance and essence is understood as constitutive of a second appearance with no further underlying essence. This is just what it means to say that the structure of contradiction between essence and appearance that internally defines the social order and social reality as a whole (that is, the contradiction in the object) is symbolically a cipher for the pathological social imaginary. The whole social order is understood as appearance, specifically as delusion. But it is not delusion as opposed to a conceptually ordered reality that is covered up; rather, it is delusional because it originates in repression, regression, and the projective mechanism. There is no underlying reality of which the system is a distorted image. There is only a deeper non-conceptual ground of significance for the form that determines the conceptual relations of the system. Negative dialectics is, according to Adorno, the form of thought uniquely able to penetrate to the third and deepest level of interpretation in social analysis.

6.4 Conclusion

This chapter has built on my interpretation of *Dialektik der Aufklärung* in chapter 5 by exploring the philosophy of history that the latter presupposes, and, moreover, by explaining how Adorno and Horkheimer’s view of the relation between civilization and nature fits into their conception of society and the role of critique. We finally have before us a full view of the second element of the ontology of antagonism that was
introduced in chapter 3: the element of society’s global heteronomy due to its mediation by nature.

Now we must consider the following question: how is the mediation of the social order (i.e., of the system) by nature discovered and expressed in dialectical reflection? In other words, how is natural history possible? It cannot be achieved through an analysis that remains only *conceptual* because the system of concepts is based on the delusory framework of the system. The mediation of society by nature must be discovered in a way that illuminates the social order as a symbol originating in the social imaginary’s pathological relation to nature. But how can the relation between the social imaginary and nature, which underlines the *meaning* of the system—and which, as I have said, is the *symptom* of this relation—be made available to reflection, given that our reflective tools stand as determined *by the system*? This is the central question I address in the following chapter.
CHAPTER 7:
THE CONTRADICTION IN THE CONCEPT

In chapter 4, we saw how the mediation of every finite aspect of life by the social totality is available to dialectical reflection. I argued that Adorno holds that the structure of concepts replicates the structure of the socio-historical context in which the concepts originate, and this structural correspondence is a condition for the possibility of concepts’ ability to track social reality. More specifically, I showed in chapter 4 that Adorno’s conception of the relation between concepts and social reality satisfies two conditions that are each necessary and jointly sufficient to justify thought’s capacity to track and reproduce reality through a form of dialectical reflection conceived along Marxian/Hegelian lines. These conditions were: (1) that there be a homology between conceptual structure and the structure of the (social) world, and (2) that the structure of both concepts and world be holistic. These two conditions make possible (3) the reproduction of concrete (social) reality in thought thorough the progressive determination of the object of critique beginning with more general (abstract) categories and moving dialectically from these categories to more determinate, concrete ones. Conditions (1) and (2) account for the idea that dialectical logic is an ontological, rather than a merely formal, logic. And (1) and (2) make possible a form of dialectical reflection whose aim is expressed by (3).
When we consider the relation between concepts and the social world (the system), conditions (1) and (2) are satisfied: the structure of the social totality and the structure of concepts is the same, and both are ordered as a tight and fixed, teleologically ordered system. Therefore, the ability of concepts to track the structure of the social order follows unproblematically from the relation that Adorno holds there to be between the social totality and the structure of concepts, which relation makes possible a form of dialectics ((3) above) structurally like Hegel’s and Marx’s conception of dialectics.

However, this form of dialectical reflection falls short. At the end of the previous chapter (chapter 6) I showed that a form of thought that follows Hegelian/ Marxian lines is necessarily unable to interpret reality accurately because, although it can give a correct description of the structure of social reality (i.e., the structure of the “contradiction in the object”), it cannot go beyond description to give an accurate interpretation of what this “contradiction” means. As we have seen, understanding the meaning of the contradiction requires interpreting the relation between social reality and nature, and this relation forms an indispensable element in the significance of the whole. More specifically, it is necessary to understand the relation between nature and social reality in order to interpret the field of significance that characterizes the social imaginary, which in turn gives rise to the social order and its symbolic meanings.

But this form of interpretation, which corresponds to natural history and has the overall structure of genealogical interpretation (see chapter 6), is not available to the kind of thought that is structured solely along the lines of the Marxian/Hegelian version of dialectics. The form of analysis that corresponds to natural history shows that the systematic structure of concepts and of the social order is actually the consequence of a
pathological relation between the mind and nature. But this relation exceeds the limits of conceptuality; it can be neither discovered nor expressed through discursive-conceptual methods. The relation brings us back to the pre-conceptual level of (individual and social) experience, which constitutes the experiential ground of origin of conceptuality, but which is itself prior to, and necessarily ‘outside,’ the realm of the conceptual. The relation is precisely a relation between concepts and their pre- and non-conceptual ground, and to say this is already to imply that this relation cannot be captured with concepts since, if it could be so captured, it would *ipso facto* become internal to one of the termini that it is supposed to connect.

If the relation between the realm of concepts and the non-conceptual can be apprehended through critical thought—and, unless Adorno’s dialectic of enlightenment and nature is to be just a mystical or dogmatic account, there must be a way to build the interpretation from a standpoint that remains critical throughout—then it must be through a form of thinking that goes beyond Hegelian/Marxian dialectics. I have argued that this form of thought is in fact genealogical (chapter 6). But how can this genealogy be discovered, if our conceptual tools are all determined by the pathological system?

Adorno proposes an account of thought that can penetrate to the level of interpreting nature’s mediation of the social order while remaining negative and critical. This form of reflection is the construction of “constellations.” Through the construction of the constellation, thought is able to use the conceptual tools of the system in order to go beyond the system and discover the genealogical context of which the system is only the latest emergence (*Entstehung*).
The main goal of this chapter and the one to follow is to analyze the structure of constellations and to clarify the theory of concepts that underlies it. This structure, incidentally, corresponds to the “contradiction in the concept”: the second of the two forms of “contradiction” that I identified in chapter 1 as the key elements for understanding Adorno’s account of determinate negation and dialectics in general, and as the foci of this dissertation as a whole. Thus, another way to express the main topic of this chapter is to say that it offers a clarification and analysis of Adorno’s “contradiction in the concept.” In this chapter, I focus on clarifying Adorno’s “contradiction in the concept;” in chapter 8, I conclude the discussion by clarifying the philosophy of language that underlies this theory of concepts and the method of constellations. At the end of this account, we will have all the necessary pieces on the table to explore how the contradiction in the object and the contradiction in the concept yield a new version of determinate negation and dialectics in general.

This chapter is divided into two sections. Section 1 discusses the theoretical underpinnings of Adorno’s account of the method of natural history, through which the mediation of social reality by nature is interpreted in philosophical reflection. I focus on a specific example of this method, namely Adorno’s interpretation of Kant’s distinction between phenomena and noumena, in order to flesh out my account of the method. With this account in mind, section 2 then focuses on the theory of concepts that underlies it and concludes with an account of Adorno’s “contradiction in the concept.”
7.1 The method of natural history

The method of natural history is the method by which the role of ‘nature’ in mediating (social) reality is exhibited in philosophical reflection. The goal of this method is to “give a voice” to the natural element in the object of analysis. Our task is to examine what it means to “give a voice” to this element and the method by which Adorno holds this is achieved.

First, let us reflect on the ontological correlate of ‘nature’ in the object—that is, let us think about the form of being of the object whose availability to thought we want to examine. As I have already said before, Adorno conceives of objects in a radically materialist way. Even a Hegelian conception of the object is ultimately too “idealist” in his view, for the simple fact that Hegel considers objects to be essentially conceptual, at least in the sense that their essence is rational and can ultimately be fully accessible to thought as a dialectical movement of concepts that puts the object in the context of “the Concept’s” historically developed dialectical movement of self-determination. Adorno emphatically maintains that the object contains at its “innermost core” a non-conceptual nature whose intelligibility simply cannot be translated into conceptual form without loss (whether that form be propositional form, or the dialectical connection of many, even infinitely many, propositions).

Interestingly, Marx also criticized Hegel for being ultimately too idealist, and argued that Hegel did not give sufficient weight to the fact that nature exists beyond the

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294 I am using the term ‘core’ and not ‘essence’ here because, as I argued in chapter 6, the interpretation of the natural element in the object does not stand to a conceptual interpretation of the object as ‘essence’ does to ‘appearance.’ The non-conceptual core in the object is not the essence of the object, but it is the source of the radical objectivity of the object (what makes it not reducible to the subject).
reach of the Concept (beyond the reach of conceptuality in its complex self-determining structure taken as a whole). But Marx took nature to be a kind of *Ding an sich*—external to, and unmediated with, the structure of the world and the structure of thought. In the end, for Marx, social labor, which shapes reality and thought, imprints itself in a passive ‘nature’ that does not actively contribute to the creation of a world. Adorno disagrees.

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295 For Marx, the relation between human beings and nature is always mediated by labor. Through social labor, nature becomes objective nature. See Marx, *Das Kapital*, Vol. 1 (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1953), 185:


> Labour is, in the first place, a process in which both man and Nature participate, and in which man of his own accord starts, regulates, and controls the material re-actions between himself and Nature. He opposes himself to Nature as one of her own forces, setting in motion arms and legs, head and hands, the natural forces of his body, in order to appropriate Nature’s productions in a form adapted to his own wants. By thus acting on the external world and changing it, he at the same time changes his own nature. He develops his slumbering powers and compels them to act in obedience to his sway.

Labor regulates the material exchange between humans and nature. The specific social form that labor takes gives rise to a specific objectification of nature. So the objective nature that confronts human beings is determined by their social material activity. In *Die deutsche Ideologie*, Marx says:


English translation (mine):

> The human being does not see how his/her surrounding sensuous world is not an unmediated given from all eternity, remaining always the same, but rather the product of industry and of the
with this view too and, in fact, he finds it still too idealistic, because it attributes to the concept the structure of reality and downgrades nature to an indeterminate substratum that is in itself without cognitive significance, without meaning. It thus follows the model of an all-powerful subject (even if the subject is conceived as social praxis rather than pure mind) whose activity determines the structure of the world, on the one hand, and an indeterminate nature that serves solely as the substratum for classification, on the other.

A radical philosophical materialism, in Adorno’s view, is one that takes objects to be significant in their own right: one that first of all acknowledges a radically non-conceptual core of objectivity in the object, and that, second, takes it to be not inert but rather a center of meaning that actively contributes to cognition. The first requirement distinguishes Adorno’s materialism from any type of idealism, and the second sets it apart from any physicalism or mechanism. Adorno’s materialism is rather a form of naturalism, where nature is taken to be radically non-conceptual, meaningful in itself, and a necessary contributor to cognition. For Adorno, the view of the object that defines his materialism is the only one that places that element in the object which is the opposite of mind (i.e., its non-conceptual nature) at the center of cognition, and only this view of the state of society, indeed in the sense that it is a historical product, the result of the activity of a number of generations, each of which stands on the shoulders of the preceding one, developing the industry and its intercourse, and modifying its social order in response to changing needs. Even the objects of the simplest ‘sense certainty’ are given to the human being only through social development, industry and commercial exchange/intercourse.

This does not mean that for Marx nature is eliminated. Rather, as Habermas rightly argues in Knowledge and Human Interest (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), esp. pp. 29-40), Marx adheres to the idea of something like a “nature in itself,” whose existence must be presupposed for epistemological reason, but which is disclosed only within the historically determined dimension of social labor. Habermas argues, correctly in my opinion, that Marx preserves a distinction between form and matter where the matter is an unknown and indeterminate natural substratum that acquires form through subjective activity, so that the world that we know is known only as formed through subjective labor.
object leaves room for an idea of cognition as a cognition of the object in objectivity’s own terms, rather than as a subject-centered ideal. 296

This conception of the object entails that we cannot really understand the object without gaining some kind of insight into the non-conceptual core of objectivity that makes the object be what it is. (Unless we gain insight into this core of objectivity, our understanding may be correct, but it is adequate only to reified reality and is unable to interpret the meaning of the object. See chapter 6.) And, moreover, we cannot even understand our own social and intellectual experience without insight into the non-conceptual, since both the structure of the social order and the structure of our concepts are mediated by the origin of thought in non-conceptual nature. But how can we gain any form of insight into the non-conceptual?

296 This is why Adorno says that philosophy must proceed as the interpretation of “unintentional truth” in the object, and that this conception of philosophy is at the core of any authentic conception of materialism. See Adorno, “Die Aktualität der Philosophy,” Philosophische Frühschriften, Gesammelte Schriften, Band I (Frankfurt: Surkham Verlag, 2003), 336:

Man mag hier die scheinbar so erstaunliche und befremdende Affinität aufsuchen, die zwischen der deutenden Philosophie und jener Art von Denken besteht, die die Vorstellung des Intentionalen, des Bedeutenden von der Wirklichkeit am strengsten abwehrt: dem Materialismus. Deutung des Intentionslosen durch Zusammenstellung der analytisch isolierten Elemente und Erhellung des Wirklichen kraft solcher Deutung: das ist das Programm jeder echten materialistischen Erkenntnis....

See English translation by Benjamin Snow in Adorno, “The Actuality of Philosophy,” Telos, No. 31 (Spring 1977): 127:

Here one can discover what appears as such an astounding and strange affinity existing between interpretive philosophy and that type of thinking which most strongly rejects the concept of the intentional, the meaningful: the thinking of materialism. Interpretation of the unintentional through a juxtaposition of the analytically isolated elements and illumination of the real by the power of such interpretation is the program of every authentically materialist knowledge....

The first thing we need to understand in order to answer this question is what kind of being characterizes the non-conceptual and how it is related as origin to its object and to thought.

Adorno holds the initially puzzling view that the non-conceptual exists in the object as a “sedimented history” of the object, which history makes the object the particular object that it is. The “sedimented history” is in fact the unconscious trace of the object’s origin in a net of meaning and significance. This ‘origin’ is to be understood in the sense of Herkunft and Entstehung, and not in the sense of Ursprung (see chapter 6); it refers to an accumulation of the archaic and the new in a network of significance that makes the object be what it is. And, for Adorno, this network of significance is always irreducibly social: The object—any object at all—arises in a specific social life-world, in the context of which it has a particular significance. We can think here of Heidegger’s idea of the thing and its embeddedness in a specific network of significance and practices in which alone the object has the meaning that makes it the object it is. For Adorno, the network of significance is most importantly constituted by connections and associations of social meanings, available exclusively in the pre-conceptual experience of the social world in which they belong. The experiential social

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298 As I discuss later, the category of ‘origin’ here does not refer to an event in the past which gave emergence to the object. It rather refers to a context of significance that defined the object’s belonging to its world of emergence in the form that this context has taken in relation to both the object and the present social life-world.
context of the object’s origin is essential for understanding the object’s meaning and in fact constitutes the core of objectivity in the object.\(^{299}\)

The idea that the object’s core of objectivity is constituted by a “sedimented history” of the object’s relations and ties to its original social context may at first seem idealistic: the center of ‘objectivity’ seems to be reduced to a context of social experience, which seems necessarily to be an experience had by individuals (subjects), not material objects, so that objectivity seems to be reduced once again to the subject. But to understand Adorno’s point we need to think in a wholly different way: Social reality and its experiential, non-conceptual ground—just as much as its conceptual, reflexive moment—is not a subjective category but is rather the framework of objectivity in the world. While it is experienceable only by a subject of experience, it, as a pre-conceptual ground of experience, predates the distinction between subject and object; it is the non-conceptual context from which both emerge.

The non-conceptual is the ground of objectivity and permeates the object’s particular identity. An object is always an object in a world, and, as such, it acquires both conceptual elements that are subjectively projected onto the object, and a non-conceptual core that denotes the pre-conceptual relation of significance in which the object stands to its world. This relation of significance is multifarious and cannot be

\(^{299}\) Roger Foster’s excellent study of Adorno’s method of interpretation for ‘expressing’ the non-conceptual rightly emphasizes that the non-conceptual should be understood in terms of the social-historical experience sedimented in the object. See Foster, Roger, *Adorno: The Recovery of Experience* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), esp. pp. 1-30. Though I think Foster’s interpretation of Adorno’s method of natural-history is basically right on point, I disagree with the primacy that he gives to this form of interpretation in negative dialectics as a whole. After developing my own reading of the relation between the natural-historical interpretation of the non-conceptual and the dialectical-conceptual interpretation of the object, I discuss my agreements and disagreements with Foster at the end of this chapter in footnote 340.
captured fully in purely conceptual categories. It involves a constellation of meanings that belong in the object’s relation to its world.

The context of experiential relations that connected the object to its original life-world is of course not preserved, ‘as it was originally,’ in some mystical “part” of the object. The phrase ‘as it was originally’ does not make sense here, for the past is for Adorno preserved not as the memory of an abstract order of ‘objective’ events, but rather as a complex of meanings handed down to the present and received with a view to future possibilities that are themselves also outlined as constrained by the present and the past. This means, among other things, that there is no way that the past ‘really was’ that remains the same, but rather the past changes with the changing conditions of reception and interpretation that constrain the present. This is why the past is recovered through genealogical interpretation. But, of course, this also does not mean that the past can be interpreted in any way whatsoever. Rather, the past is handed down to us in the form of objects and traditions that originally belonged to another life-world, and that therefore, in order not to be hollowed out and empty for us, stand in need of interpretation. And this interpretation has to both attempt to tease the object into disclosing the life-world to which it belonged and to inhabit the tension between that life-world and the present from which we attempt to illuminate it.

It will be helpful to consider a concrete example. I will focus on Adorno’s interpretation of Kant’s philosophy in his lectures on *Kants »Kritik der reinen Vernunft«*.  

Adorno’s method to interpret Kant’s *Kritik* follows the same pattern for

each element of Kant’s theory on which he focuses: First, Adorno points out and
develops the conceptual tensions and contradictions in the text that characterize the
specific topic in which he is interested. Second, the theoretical dimension of these
contradictions is connected with the concrete social conditions that the contradictions
allegedly reflect. Third, the contradictions in the text are interpreted in terms of the
social experiences that they express; this step is achieved by repositioning Kant’s
philosophy in relation to the social experiences in which it first came to be. This step
corresponds to the task of bringing the “sedimented history” in Kant’s philosophy to
expression—that is, the task of providing a natural history of Kant’s thought. This last
step reconstructs the key experiences that constitute the pre-conceptual ground of the
conceptual aspects of the text, and the reconstruction proceeds by attempting to revive the
unconscious memories contained in the text, rather than the conscious intentions of the
author or the most consistent articulation of the (explicit or implicit) conceptual content
of the text. It is not, of course, that the latter do not matter, but a key presupposition in
Adorno’s mode of analysis is that, to really understand the object, we must penetrate to
the non-conceptual relation that it held with the social experiential context of its
Entstehung.

The re-connection of the text with its socio-historical experiential ground aims to
express the meaning of the contradictions that have been developed on the basis of the
text as well as on the basis of the social antagonism that the contradictions replicate. I
want to focus here on the interpretation of contradiction.\footnote{Adorno emphasizes the
important of contradictions for interpretation in his lectures on Kant’s Critique; see
Adorno, Kants »Kritik der reinen Vernunft«, in Nachgelassene Schriften, Abteilung IV:
Vorlesungen, Band 4 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1995), 127:}

\footnote{Adorno emphasizes the important of contradictions for interpretation in his lectures on Kant’s Critique; see Adorno, Kants »Kritik der reinen Vernunft«, in Nachgelassene Schriften, Abteilung IV: Vorlesungen, Band 4 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1995), 127:}
Aber immerhin: die Anstrengung der Philosophie gilt genau dem eigentlich, zu revidieren, was durch die begriffliche Aufbereitung, das durch die sogenannte widerspruchslose, glatte Darstellung irgendeiner Materie verlorengegangen ist. Und das scheint mir eigentlich der tiefste Grund dafür zu sein, die tiefste Rechtfertigung dafür zu sein, daß eine philosophische Interpretation eines Textes sich weniger auf dessen Widerspruchslosigkeit, also auf dessen systematische Konsistenz zu richten hat als, im Gegenteil, gerade auf die Widersprüche,—aber nicht, um an diesen Widersprüchen herumzunörgeln, sondern um in ihnen gleichsam die Schründe, die Spalte zu entdecken, die man—um ein Gleichnis aus der Hochtouristik zu gebrauchen—dazu benutzen kann, um sich darin festzumachen und auf die Weise zu dem zu kommen, was man nun in Gottes Namen mit dem Gipfel, also jedenfalls mit einer etwas freieren Aussicht über die wie immer auch problematische Landschaft dann vergleichen kann.

English translation by Rodney Livingstone in Adorno, Kant's Critique of Pure Reason (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 82:

Philosophy directs its efforts precisely towards the recuperation of what has been lost through this conceptual cleansing operation, this so-called contradiction-free, bland presentation of philosophical problems. This appears to me to provide the profoundest reason, the deepest justification of the claim that the philosophical interpretation of a text should focus less on the absence of contradictions, less on systematic consistency, than on its opposite, on the contradictions themselves. The aim should be not to nag away at these contradictions, but to discover the fissures, the chinks, that—if I may use an image from mountain-climbing—enable us to get a foothold and eventually to reach the peak from where we can obtain a freer view of whatever intellectual panorama we are examining.

Adorno also specifically points out that his interest in contradiction is specifically concerned with philosophical, theoretical, or other such productions: works that have a reflexive structure; that consist of a thinking about thinking, and that are therefore different from the objects of the natural sciences. The standard of non-contradiction in the natural sciences is of course essential but has nothing to do with the analysis of contradictions in texts and cultural productions, and of how these contradictions objectively express social conditions. See Ibid., 128:

Bitte, verstehen Sie das nicht falsch in dem Sinn, daß ich begriffliche Sauberkeit und Ordnung verachtete,—keineswegs! Es ist selbstverständlich, daß in den sogenannten positiven Wissenschaften ohne präzis gefaßte Begriffe und ohne die Logik der Widerspruchslosigkeit nicht auszukommen ist. Aber in der Philosophie, in der es sich ja nun wirklich um das »Denken des Denkens« handelt, wie Aristoteles es definiert hat,—in der also die Denkprozesse der Logik und der positiven Wissenschaft selber noch einmal kritisch nachzuvollziehen sind, da sollte man sich darauf nicht allzu fest verlassen. Ich möchte beinahe der Meinung Ausdruck verleihen, daß die Tiefe einer Philosophie—über deren Begriff ich Ihnen in einer der nächsten Stunden hoffe, etwas Grundsätzliches sagen zu können—, daß die Tiefe einer Philosophie nicht darin liegt, wie sehr diese Philosophie es vermag, die Widersprüche zu schlichten, sondern vielmehr darin, wie tief sie es vermag, Widersprüche, die in der Sache selbst liegen, erscheinen zu lassen; solche Widersprüche zum Bewußtsein zu erheben; und, indem sie sie zum Bewußtsein erhebt, zugleich sie in ihrer Notwendigkeit zu erkennen; das heißt: zu erkennen, was sie eigentlich bedeuten.

English translation in Kant's Critique of Pure Reason (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 82:

Please, do not misunderstand me here. It is not the case that I despise conceptual clarity and order—by no means! It goes without saying that the so-called positive sciences cannot survive without precisely defined concepts and a discourse free of contradiction. But philosophy is really a matter of ‘thinking on thinking’, as Aristotle defined it, and so the thought processes of logic and the positive sciences have to be subjected to a second critical scrutiny. This means that you cannot put too much reliance on a discourse free of contradictions. I should almost like to assert that the
precisely through the interpretation of the contradictions contained in the object of study—a text, theory, cultural product, etc—that the meaning of objective contradictions is made accessible, and the “objective content” of the object, rather than its author’s or producer’s intention, is released.

Das ist also eigentlich das, was ich mir hier vorgenommen habe,—nicht: Ihnen zu zeigen, was Philosophen bei ihrer Philosophie sich gedacht haben, und was wir ohnehin nicht rekonstruieren können; und ganz gewiß auch nicht die Trivialität: welche Stellung Kant in der Geschichte der Philosophie zwischen Leibniz und dem deutschen Idealismus einnimmt, und was Sie schlecht und recht in jedem Lehrbuch nachlesen können,—sondern das, was objektiv mit dieser Philosophie ausgedrückt ist, über ihre eigene Meinung hinaus: darauf kommt es an.302

In Adorno’s view, the text says more than what the author intentionally wanted to say, and the way to get at this “more” is by focusing on contradictions in the text and exploring how these contradictions are anchored in the text’s relation to the life-world in which it came to be.

The goal of interpretation is to tease out of the contradictions in the text the objective ground that gave rise to them. This does not constitute a conceptual resolution

proficiency of a philosophy—a concept I hope I shall be able to enlarge on in a more fundamental way in a later lecture—is not a matter of its capacity for resolving contradictions, but rather of its ability to bring to the surface contradictions that are deeply embedded in the subject under investigation, to raise such contradictions to the level of consciousness, and at the same time, to understand the necessity for them; that is, to understand their meaning.


This is what I have set out to do—and not to show you what philosophers had in mind when they wrote their philosophies, something we are not able to reconstruct anyway, and certainly not to indulge in such trivial activities as to discuss Kant’s place in the history of philosophy between Leibniz and the German idealists, something you can easily read up in any textbook. What I am concerned with is what a philosophy objectively expresses, over and above its own opinion: that is what is at stake. (emphasis mine)
to them, but rather a transformation of the theoretical problem into a depiction of the concrete and practical grounds of the problem, which in turn can be changed only through praxis. The “objective content” of the contradiction is thus not abstract and theoretical at all; it is rather part of social reality, and its interpretation links the original

303 In his 1931 inaugural lecture at Frankfurt University entitled “Die Aktualität der Philosophie,” Adorno outlined a philosophical program that he followed the rest of his life. The program already connected the elements of rigorous dialectical thinking and the construction of constellations to break the system from within. In his lecture, Adorno emphasizes that this program offers the only true ‘materialist’ philosophy, first, because it seeks to unlock the object’s meaning from the object’s standpoint (from the standpoint of the nature in the object, rather than the standpoint of the subject), and, second, because this form of interpretation transforms theoretical problems into problems of practice: this is the meaning of his repeated expression that philosophy seeks to dissolve the “riddles” [Rätsel] of philosophy by showing that they are rooted in the pathological state of the object, a demonstration that transforms the initial problem into one that calls not for theoretical solutions, but for political practice. See Adorno, “Die Aktualität der Philosophy,” *Philosophische Frühschriften, Gesammelte Schriften*, Band I (Frankfurt: Surkham Verlag, 2003), 338:

Dafür möchte ich einen zweiten wesentlichen Zusammenhang von deutender Philosophie und Materialismus bezeichnen. Ich sagte: die Rätselantwort sei nicht der »Sinn« des Rätsels in der Weise, daß beide zugleich bestehen könnten; daß die Antwort im Rätsel enthalten sei, daß das Rätsel lediglich seine Erscheinung bilde und als Intention die Antwort in sich beschließe. Vielmehr steht die Antwort in strenger Antithesis zum Rätsel; bedarf der Konstruktion aus den Rätsellelementen und zerstört das Rätsel, das nicht sinnvoll, sondern sinnlos ist, sobald die Antwort ihm schlagend erteilt ward. Die Bewegung, die hier im Spiel sich vollzieht, vollzieht der Materialismus im Ernst. Ernst heißt dort: daß der Bescheid nicht im geschlossenen Raum von Erkenntnis verbleibt, sondern daß ihn Praxis erteilt. Die Deutung der vorgefundenen Wirklichkeit und ihre Aufhebung sind auf einander bezogen. … In der Vernichtung der Frage bewährt sich erst die Echtheit philosophischer Deutung und reines Denken vermag sie von sich aus nicht zu vollziehen: darum zwingt sie die Praxis herbei.

English translation by Benjamin Snow in Adorno, “The Actuality of Philosophy,” *Telos*, No. 31 (Spring 1977): 129:

I would like to point out a second essential connection between interpretive philosophy and materialism. I said that the riddle’s answer was not the ‘meaning’ of the riddle in the sense that both could exist at the same time. The answer was contained within the riddle, and the riddle portrayed only its own appearance and contained the answer within itself as intention. Far more, the answer stands in strict antithesis to the riddle, needs to be constructed out of the riddle’s elements, and destroys the riddle, which is not meaningful, but meaningless, as soon as the answer is decisively given to it. The movement which occurs in this process is executed in earnestness by materialism. Earnestness means here that the answer does not remain mistakenly in the closed area of knowledge, but that praxis is granted to it. The interpretation of given reality and its abolition are connected to each other, not, of course, in the sense that reality is negated in the concept, but that out of the construction of a configuration of reality the demand for its [reality’s] real change always follows promptly. … Only in the annihilation of the question is the authenticity of philosophical interpretation first successfully proven, and mere thought by itself cannot accomplish this [authenticity]: therefore the annihilation of the question compels praxis.
problems of the text (or other object of interpretation) to a critique of social conditions. But, since the text does not explicitly link its theoretical shortcomings and contradictions to the concrete social life-world of its emergence, the latter must be teased out of the text through a form of interpretation that does more than look at the concepts explicitly and intentionally deployed in the text.

Consider as an illustration the way Adorno interprets Kant’s dualism between phenomena and noumena. Adorno first emphasizes and exacerbates the opposition between the two realms through a series of related dualisms: for instance between a realm of phenomena that can be fully known, with absolute certainty, and a realm of noumena that is most real but cannot be known at all; or between the empirical subject, who confronts a world determined by unchanging and necessary laws of nature beyond her control, and whose psychological contents are themselves determined by natural laws, on the one hand, and a transcendental subject whose cognitive structures determine the very structure of the world and who is absolutely free, on the other. I have already talked about Adorno’s analysis of the subjective part of this opposition in chapter 2, so I will briefly discuss here his analysis of the objective part, namely the opposition between phenomenal objects and their noumenal ground.

Adorno argues that Kant’s “duplication of the world” into phenomena and noumena is in the first place a reflection of the structure of the reified world: the structure of the social order as determined by exchange, by the commodity structure.$^{304}$

$^{304}$ Adorno argues that the division between a knowable realm of appearances and an unknowable realm of noumena reduces the things we can know to the subject: only those things that exhibit our cognitive structure are available to us, which means that nothing truly external enters knowledge anymore. In this situation, the subject can ultimately gain knowledge only of itself. What is truly external in the object recedes from view. Adorno refers to this process as a process of the “Subjektivierung”
But what is the meaning of this reified structure, as finds expression in Kant’s text?

Adorno ties the Kantian view of the world to the experience of a disenchanted world, free of uncanniness and of anything foreign.

Es steht also hinter der Verdopplung zunächst einmal das, daß unsere Welt, die Welt der Erfahrungen, nun tatsächlich zu einer uns vertrauten geworden ist; daß die Welt, in der wir als Erfahrende leben, nicht länger von Rätselhaftem, Unerklärtem durchherrscht ist, sondern daß wir sie eigentlich ganz und gar als unsere Welt in dem Sinn erfahren, daß uns in ihr nichts begegnet, was nicht eigentlich von vornherein unserer eigenen Rationalität angemessen wäre. Diese Erfahrung, daß man sozusagen mit beiden Beinen fest auf der Erde steht und sich in der eigenen Welt nun ohne Dämonenfurcht, ohne magische und mythische

[subjectivization] of knowledge. This process, however, is not just a theoretical aberration. It is produced by, and in turn produces and reproduces, the reified structure of society.

[D]ann glaube ich, daß man das in einem radikalen Sinn so interpretieren darf, daß nicht etwa bloß kein Gegensatz besteht zwischen Subjektivierung der Philosophie und Verdinglichung, sondern daß die Verdinglichung eine Funktion der Subjektivierung ist; daß es eigentlich um so mehr Verdinglichung gibt, wie es Subjektivierung in der Philosophie auch gibt. ... Darüber hinaus würde ich aber sagen: zunächst liegt einmal dadurch ein Anwachsen der Verdinglichung mit der anwachsenden Subjektivierung vor, daß durch diese Subjektivierung die Pole der Erkenntnis—das Ich und das Nicht-Ich—immer stärker auseinandergerissen werden. Also: je mehr in das Subjekt selber verlegt wird, je mehr das Subjekt eigentlich die Erkenntnis überhaupt erst konstituiert, um so mehr wird zugleich auch, wenn Sie so wollen, an Bestimmungen den Objekten entzogen und um so mehr klaffen dadurch eigentlich die beiden auseinander (Adorno, Kant’s »Kritik der reinen Vernunft«, in Nachgelassene Schriften, Abteilung IV: Vorlesungen, Band 4 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1995), 174-5).

Moreover, by reflecting the structure of reification, Kant’s theory of cognition expresses “die bürgerliche Antinomie, die Antinomie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft überhaupt” [the bourgeois antinomy, the antinomy of the bourgeois society in general] (Ibidl, 175). See English translation for the above quote by Rodney Livingston in Adorno, Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 114-5:

I would now claim that we can interpret this in a radical way as meaning not merely that there is no incompatibility between the subjectivization of philosophy and reification, but that reification is a function of subjectivization. In other words, the more subjectivization you have, the more reification there is. … But I would go further. With the growth of subjectivity there is a corresponding growth of reification because thanks to this process of subjectivization the poles of knowledge are drawn further and further apart. To put it another way, the more that is inserted into the subject, the more the subject comes to constitute knowledge as such, then the more that determining factors are withdrawn from the object, and the more the two realms diverge.
And yet this experience of the world is only a surface defense against a deep anxiety that the objective world is in fact more alienated from us than ever.

And it is the experience [der Erfahrung] of the world that the objective world is in fact more alienated from us than ever. And this is something Kant has known about, although it is expressed in his immanent concept of the thing.

Indem die erfahrene Welt, die Immanenz, das Diesda uns kommensurabel wird, indem sie unsere Welt gewissermaßen wird, wird dadurch gleichzeitig etwas wie radikale metaphysische Entfremdung bewirkt. ... Je mehr die Welt eines objektiven Sinnes entäußert wird und ganz und gar aufgeht in unseren Kategorien, also ganz und gar unsere Welt wird, um so mehr wird zugleich der Sinn überhaupt aus der Welt getilgt; um so mehr werden wir gewissermaßen—um es einmal modern auszudrücken: in etwas wie die kosmische Nacht eigentlich hineingehalten. Die Entmagisierung oder die Entzauberung der Welt, von der ich Ihnen mit dem Ausdruck Max Webers hier gesprochen habe, ist sozusagen eins mit dem Bewußtsein des Versperrtseins, des Dunkels, in dem wir uns überhaupt bewegen. Und wenn ich in einer der nächsten Stunden Ihnen eine Theorie des Kantischen »Blocks« [des Blocks der Erkenntnis von Noumena] geben werde, dann liegt im Grunde der Sinn dieses Blocks eben bereits darin, daß, je mehr die Welt, in der wir leben, die Welt der Erfahrung, kommensurabel wird, um so inkommensurabler, um so dunkler und um so drohender wird demgegenüber das Absolute, von dem wir wissen, daß es nur ein Ausschnitt ist.


[U]nderlying that duplication [the duplication of the world into phenomena and noumena] stands the idea that our world, the world of experience, really has become a world familiar to us; the world in which we live has ceased to be ruled by mysterious, unexplained powers. Instead, it is something we experience as our world in the sense that we encounter nothing that is incompatible with our own rationality. The experience that in this world we stand on our own two feet, and that we inhabit a known world without dreading the intervention of demons, without magical and mythical anxieties—all that is implicit in Kant’s immanent concept of the thing.


By making the experienced world, the immanent world, the world in its this-ness, commensurate with us, by turning it into our world, so to speak, something like a radical metaphysical alienation is achieved simultaneously. ... The more the world is stripped of an objective meaning and the more it becomes coextensive with our own categories and thereby becomes our world, then the more we find meaning eliminated from the world; and the more we find ourselves immersed in
But this means that the experience behind the division of reality into phenomena and noumena is in fact an experience of alienation, fear, of a sort of claustrophobia in a world of our making by virtue of which we feel cut off from anything external that is meaningful in itself, and not there just to be controlled by us and rendered amenable to our needs. The safety of knowing the world to be controllable and manipulable has as its correlate a radical alienation from what is truly “external,” and this external unknowable realm becomes even more mythological and “demonic” than the animistic world of primitive cultures. Adorno puts the point thus:

Und dieses Dunkel nun also, dieses Bewußtsein, daß, je sicherer wir uns in unserer Welt ergehen, je sicherer wir in unserer Welt uns eingerichtet haben, daß wir gleichzeitig um so ungewisser im Absoluten werden; daß gleichsam mit der Vertrautheit mit unserer Welt die metaphysische Verzweiflung zunimmt, - das ist eben ausgedrückt von Kant in jener Verdopplung der Welt; das heißt darin, daß eine ganz unbestimmte dunkle, wenn Sie wollen: dämonische Welt als Hinterwelt eben angenommen wird, bei der wir im Grunde nicht einmal etwas von ihrer Beziehung wissen zu der Welt, in der wir als Erfahrende leben.\textsuperscript{307}

\begin{quote}

something like a cosmic night—to express it in a modern way. The demystification or disenchantment of the world—to employ an expression taken from Max Weber—is identical with a consciousness of being locked out, of a darkness in which we are enclosed. … But I can say already that the meaning of this block [the epistemological block that separates us from the realm of phenomena] is that the more the world in which we live, the world of experience, is commensurate with us, the less commensurate, the more obscure and the more threatening the Absolute, of which we know that this world of experience is only a detail, becomes.


In other words, this darkness, that is, this consciousness, means that the more secure we are in our own world, the more securely we have organized our own lives, then the greater the uncertainty in which we find ourselves in our relations with the Absolute. The familiarity with our own world is purchased at the price of metaphysical despair. It is this paradox that is expressed in Kant’s duplication of the world. It means that we accept an entirely undefined, obscure and, if you like, demonic world as a world ‘behind’ our own world, even though we have no way of knowing how it relates to the world of experience that we inhabit.

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The world of empirical experience, which seemed safe, certain, and utterly free of superstition, is in fact a cover, put in place as a defensive reaction against the unknown outside—in other worlds, the Kantian realm of phenomena is established as a safe haven for a humanity that has become epistemically agoraphobic, so that the apparent safety that this realm provides is at the same time a defense against fear and anxiety from the real “outside.” The world of phenomena is not a home but rather just a cover for the anxiety that results from feeling estranged from the world, from feeling that the world is not a home at all. The world of phenomena now appears not safe and certain but rather as a world of illusion. “Die Welt wird dann tatsächlich zu einer Art von Verbergen eines Unbekannten, zu einer Art von bloßem Doppelgänger eben wirklich, zum Schein oder zum Gespenst.”

The division of reality into phenomena and noumena in Kant is thus interpreted first as a reflection of the structure of the reified world, an opposition that mirrors the contradiction in the object, and then this contradiction is interpreted as an expression and rationalization of the experience of metaphysical alienation and despair. The structure of Kant’s philosophy, revelatory as it is of the structure of social reality, is according to Adorno expressive of a specific form of suffering: the suffering of a humanity estranged from nature, attempting to feel secure by creating a “safe world” around it and never leaving it again, a world defined by scientific instrumentality and free of all superstition,

but ultimately losing any sense of meaning and feeling haunted by the real external world from which it has been exiled.

The contradictory structure of the reified society (the “contradiction in the object”) is thus interpreted as an order arising from and productive of alienation from the external world, an alienation whose expression at the level of affect is suffering, fear, anxiety, and “metaphysical despair” [metaphysische Verzweiflung]. These affects are moreover objective features corresponding to the reified social order—they are derived not from individual emotional experiences, but rather from the unconscious social-experiential “traces” left in Kant’s text. And the import of these affects for critical theory cannot be underestimated, for Adorno holds that the experience of suffering adds a quasi-normative dimension to the analysis: “Das leibhafte Moment meldet der Erkenntnis an, daß Leiden nicht sein, daß es anders werden solle. »Weh spricht: vergeh.« Darum konvergiert das spezifisch Materlialistische mit dem Kritischen, mit gesellschaftlich verändernder Praxis.”

It is the fact that the meaning of the social order is inseparable from the experience of suffering that calls for, and even demands, revolutionary change. This is an imperative whose meaning is revealed through the interpretation of the social world as originating in an experience of suffering and pain and not through mere conceptual analysis. Hence the necessity of natural history in addition to mere conceptual-dialectical analysis in the manner of Hegel or Marx.


310 Adorno, Negative Dialektik, in Gesammelte Schriften, Vol. 6 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1970), 203. English translation (modified): “The somatic moment tells our knowledge that suffering ought not to be, that things should be different. ‘Woe speaks: ‘Go away.’’ The specifically materialistic element thus converges with the critical, with praxis aimed at social change.”
Adorno interprets Kant’s division between the realm of phenomena and the realm of noumena along two axes: The first shows that there are deep conceptual tensions and contradictions in the text, and argues that they are actually produced by, and in turn reproduce, the structure of reified society—i.e., the structure of the contradiction in the object. The second axis interprets this contradiction to show that it is grounded in (it emerged from) the experience of alienation, suffering, and “metaphysical despair.” This element shows that the contradiction originates in the life-world of non-conceptual (or pre-conceptual) social experience; it shows that the theoretical contradictions in Kant’s philosophy do not stand in need of theoretical ironing-out but rather require practical intervention in the world of concrete social life; and, finally, it shows that there is a normative demand on us to carry out this practical intervention, because the objective experience of suffering reveals the wrongness of the social world without need of further arguments or conceptual mediation.  

Adorno in fact claims that we find a “new categorical imperative” in the experience of suffering, and the imperative to end suffering and to change the world that is built on the experience of suffering. The incredible extent that suffering has reached in recent times, and especially in the experience of the Shoah, makes the normative consequences of suffering more indubitable and immediate. Adorno puts the point thus in Negative Dialektik, in Gesammelte Schriften, Vol. 6 ((Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1970), 358):

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See English translation by E.B. Ashton in Negative Dialectics (New York and London: Continuum, 2005), 365:

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
Adorno’s critique of Kant is much more complex and brings to bear many more elements of social analysis than we can or need to consider here. What I want to achieve with this discussion of Adorno’s interpretation of the dualism between noumena and phenomena in Kant is to illustrate Adorno’s conception of the philosophical interpretation of the non-conceptual “core of objectivity in the object.” Adorno interprets Kant’s philosophy by drawing connections from the points in the philosophy that are most unsettled, “contradictory,” and not quite smooth, to the social experience that these elements express in their original life-world, as interpreted from the vantage point of the present. In other word, the interpretation moves from the tensions and contradictions in the text to the Entstehung of the object in a particular social experience. If it can recreate this experiential context, philosophical interpretation is able to release the non-conceptual ground of significance from which the object emerged, and which continues to live in the objective core of the object. The goal of this form of interpretation is to situate the object back into a context of relations and experiences that are both subjective and irreducibly social (thus the point of highest subjectivity converges with full objectivity), and, through the reconstruction of the context, to see how the initial conceptual puzzles presented by the object—the “contradictions” and “tensions”—do not stand in need of a resolution that answers to them in their own terms, but rather need to be interpreted as expressions of a fundamental, non-conceptual social experience that can only be changed through practical intervention. Adorno repeatedly characterizes the goal of philosophical

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.
interpretation as the dissipation of philosophy’s riddles [Rätsel]; by this he means that the conceptual problem in the text does not find an answer or conceptual solution but is rather “dissolved” by the interpretation that transforms it into a reflection of objective experiences in social life, experiences that do not need to be interpreted away, but rather to be changed through revolutionary praxis. (In this sense, Adorno’s philosophy remains true to Marx’s dictum that the point of philosophy ought to be to change the world and not just to interpret it, though Adorno’s version of this thesis might rather be rendered as the claim that philosophy ought to interpret the world, but only for the sake of changing it.)

This form of interpretation leads both to a higher understanding of the object and to a self-reflexive understanding of the present, since the present is always in part characterized by its reception of the past—a past that defines us as a “tradition,” a “culture,” a form of “civilization,” etc—and the past ordinarily appears to us as a frozen and life-less object whose contents and puzzles are self-standing, rather than, as it is in truth, a center of meaning that defines the object but is only intelligible in relation to the origin of the object in a different life-world. The interpretation of the non-conceptual

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312 See for example Adorno, “Die Aktualität der Philosophy,” Philosophische Frühschriften, Gesammelte Schriften, Band I (Frankfurt: Surkham Verlag, 2003), 342:

Wenn die Idee philosophischer Deutung zu Recht besteht, die ich Ihnen zu entwickeln unternahm, dann läßt sie sich aussprechen als Forderung, je und je den Fragen einer vorgefundenen Wirklichkeit Bescheid zu tun durch eine Phantasie, die die Elemente der Frage umgruppiert, ohne über den Umfang der Elemente hinauszugehen, und deren Exaktheit kontrollierbar wird am Verschwinden der Frage.

English translation by Benjamin Snow in Adorno, “The Actuality of Philosophy,” Telos, No. 31 (Spring 1977): 131:

If the idea of philosophic interpretation which I tried to develop for you is valid, then it can be expressed as the demand to answer the questions of a pre-given reality each time, through a fantasy which rearranges the elements of the question without going beyond the circumference of the elements, the exactitude of which has its control in the disappearance of the question.
element in the object is both a movement inward toward the thing’s core of objectivity, and a movement outward toward the things’ experiential context of meaningfulness, which is found in the recreation of the socio-historical conditions of significance of the object, in relation to the object’s origin and the way it is handed down to us in a way constrained by the conditions of the present.

In conclusion to this section, I want briefly to sum up the main points we have seen so far regarding the method of interpretation that uncovers the non-conceptual element in the object: the method of natural history. This interpretation constitutes the second axis of critical analysis.

(1) The first axis (chapter 4) reveals the contradiction in the object: It shows that the object contains oppositions and tensions (‘contradictions’) that replicate the structure of reified social reality (the commodity structure).

(2) The second axis, which has been our main concern here, aims to show that the contradictions in the object are not an abstract dead end but rather express important social-subjective experiences that connect the object to its legacy from the past (Herkunft) and its conditions of emergence (Entstehung)—that is, with the dimension of history “sedimented” in the object.

The first step proceeds dialectically and reveals the contradiction in the object. The second step proceeds through the construction of a constellation, in the manner we saw above in the example of Adorno’s interpretation of Kant.313

The first step remains at the level of concepts: It examines internal conceptual (dialectical) contradictions in what the object explicitly says about the world, and it

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313 I discuss the logical structure and philosophical significance of the “constellation” in chapter 8.
demonstrates that the contradictions have the structure that we studied in chapter 4 under the heading of the “contradiction in the object”: it is a contradiction between a deceptive “appearance” and an “essence” that corresponds to rule by the principle of exchange, in which contradiction the “appearance” serves to further and conceal the essence. The second step, however, goes beyond the level of concepts. It establishes associations of different kinds between elements of the object (the theory, the text, the work of art, etc) and the experiential elements that are posited as constituting the non-conceptual context of significance of the object.

The two steps of critical analysis have a different logical structure. The first, as we have seen before, is dialectical and its conditions of possibility are found in the internal teleological structure of the system. The second step, however, has a different structure. It positions the dialectical fragments of the system in relation to each other in a way that allows us to see how the experience of the system is itself contingently dependent on a moment of emergence, a genealogical Entstehung, that is a particular experience of suffering and alienation. Step (2) arranges various fragments whose internal logical structure is dialectical into an overall structure that Adorno calls the ‘constellation.’ The fragments are connected to each other not through discursive or dialectical connections, but rather through associations, and the accuracy of these associations is exhibited only when the whole constellation successfully recreates an experience that reveals to the reader the content of the object.

This raises a number of questions. How is thought able to re-construct the connections and associations that tie the object together to its non-conceptual, original context of significance? The answer is not arbitrary. Rather, the way in which the object
is reconnected to its context of significance must be rigorous and exact. But on the basis of what evidence can the task be done? How can thought reach the non-conceptual? A typical response to this answer would be intuition, but Adorno is highly critical of such an idea. He repeatedly emphasizes that thought moves in and only in the medium of concepts. So, if thought is to be able to reconstruct the non-conceptual dimension of the object, it must be able to reach the non-conceptual within the medium of concepts. And this is exactly what the constellation is supposed to do. The presupposition, of course, is that there is a trace of the non-conceptual in the concept, a trace that language can recover if deployed in a certain way.

Adorno in fact argues that what makes the “breakthrough” to the non-conceptual possible is the “contradiction in the concept,” and what this “contradiction” amounts to is a theory of how the non-conceptual is an internal constituent of conceptuality. What I want to do now is to give an overview of Adorno’s “contradiction in the concept” and to look into the way that it claims to find the non-conceptual within the structure of concepts.

7.2 The contradiction in the concept

In his Vorlesung über Negative Dialektik, Adorno explains the contradiction in the concept as follows:

Trotzdem hat das, was Ihnen als negative Dialektik soll verführt werden, mit dem Begriff der Dialektik etwas Entscheidendes zu tun, —und das ist doch nun auch vorweg einmal zu sagen. Nämlich: der Begriff des Widerspruchs, und zwar des Widerspruchs in den Sachen selbst, des Widerspruchs im Begriff, nicht des Widerspruchs zwischen Begriffen, wird in dem, was wir besprechen, eine zentrale Rolle spielen. Dabei hat—und Sie werden nicht verkennen, daß das in einem gewissen Sinn eine Transposition oder eine Fortbildung eines Hegelschen Motivs
The contradiction in the concept is internal to the structure of conceptuality—that is, to the Concept—and is developed by comparing it to its intentional object.

The “contradiction in the concept” refers to the relation that Adorno takes to hold between the concept (or between the structure of concepts) and the object. Let us for now set aside the question of just why Adorno calls this relation a ‘contradiction’ (we will come back to this point later), and just focus on the relation itself. First, let us clarify what the *termini* of this relation are.

1. The ‘concept’ refers to the system of concepts as a whole, as well as the tools it affords in (discursive) reflection. (Adorno, like Hegel, holds that any individual

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Nevertheless, what I intend to present to you as negative dialectics possesses something quite crucially related to the concept of dialectics in general—and this is something I wish to clarify at the outset. It is that the concept of contradiction will play a central role here, more particularly, the contradiction in things themselves, contradiction in the concept, not contradiction *between* concepts. At the same time—and I am sure that you will not fail to see that this is in a certain sense the transposition or development of a Hegelian motif—the concept of contradiction has a twofold meaning. On the one hand, as I have already intimated, we shall be concerned with the contradictory nature of the concept. What this means is that the concept enters into contradiction with the thing to which it refers.

315 Again, recall that when we talk about the ‘Concept’ (capital ‘C’) we are not talking about an individual concept but rather the whole of conceptual structure, which systematically connects concepts into a tightly interwoven whole, and in the context of which each individual concept gains a determinate meaning through its relations to all other concepts in the system and to the system itself as a whole.

316 Since Adorno (like Hegel) holds that each individual concept has *as its semantic content* the full conceptual framework of concepts to which it belongs, and the internal relations that define this framework, it would be the same to speak of the ‘contradiction in the concept’ and the ‘contradiction in the Concept.’
concepts or finite set of concepts already refers to all other concepts because its very content is determined by its relations to other concepts.)

2. The ‘object’ refers to the object of thought: a theory, work of art, philosophical position, or any other object in which society expresses its self-understanding. Recall that for Adorno, as for Hegel (and even Kant for that matter) the object always already contains a reflexive structure; it is always already permeated by concepts through and through. The ‘object’ for Adorno contains two components:
   a. First, it contains a conceptual element defined both by the concepts by which the object presents itself and the concepts by which the object has been historically understood and handed down to us today.
   b. Second, the object contains a non-conceptual ‘nature, namely the experiential Entstehung and Herkunft of the object, i.e., the particular experiential content of which the object is the expression.

It will be helpful here to consider an example. Think again of Adorno’s analysis of Kant’s dualism between phenomena and noumena. In this example, ‘concept’ and ‘object’ refer to the following:

1. The ‘concept’ refers to our discursive tools for interpreting and analyzing Kant’s theoretical philosophy, in particular the distinction between phenomena and noumena.

2. The ‘object’ here is Kant’s theoretical distinction between phenomena and noumena as expressed in the Kritik der reinen Vernunft. This object has two components:
a. The first component corresponds to the concepts deployed in the text and their discursive relations, as well as the interpretations of the *Kritik* that have been handed down to us by previous commentators.

b. The second component corresponds to the social-experiential content from which the distinction between phenomena and noumena arises, which content the distinction *expresses*.

With this clarification in mind, what we need to understand now is the relation Adorno takes there to hold between concept and object. (After we know what the relation is, we can inquire into why Adorno characterizes it as a relation of ‘contradiction.’)

Adorno characterizes the relation as encompassing two sides: the first is that the concept is “less” than the object, and the second is that the concept is “more” than the object. I now turn to looking at each side of this relation in detail.

7.2.1 The concept as “less than” the object

The concept (i.e., discursivity and its tools) can only go so far in its analysis of the object. The non-conceptual (material) content in the object necessarily eludes an analysis that proceeds exclusively with the tools of the concept.

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317 Clarifying what he means by the “contradiction in the concept,” Adorno says it refers to the fact that concepts are at once “more” and “less” than their objects. See Adorno, *Vorlesung über Negative Dialektik, in Nachgelassene Schriften*, Vol. 16 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2003), 18: “Der Begriff bleibt also insofern immer hinter dem, was er unter sich subsumiert, zurück. … Auf der anderen Seite aber ist in einem gewissen Sinn jeder Begriff auch mehr als das, was unter ihm befaßt wird.” English translation in Adorno, *Lectures on Negative Dialectics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008), 7: “The concept is always less than what is subsumed under it. … On the other hand, however, in a sense every concept is at the same time more than the characteristics that are subsumed under it.”
The discursive approach looks at what the object expresses and tries to clarify it, study it, and evaluate it by looking at the implications of the object’s conceptual content, confronting it with accepted theses about the world, exploring conceptual inconsistencies and trying to solve them, etc. The approach is dominated by conceptual analysis on the basis of relations of conceptual implication and exclusion. But the non-conceptual element, the social-experiential origin of the object, is nowhere to be found in the conceptual elements of the object (what the object explicitly ‘says’ of itself as well as the interpretations that have become part of the object historically), or what this conceptual layer in the object logically implies or excludes.

This has to do with the uniqueness of the object. The conceptual dimension can never identify the object in the uniqueness that characterizes it, and it does not even seek to do so. This uniqueness is rooted in the non-conceptual element in the object. Since the discursive approach does not even see that there is a non-conceptual element, it ignores the particularity of the object. We can think here of the example from Adorno’s interpretation of Kant. It is well known that the secondary literature on Kant’s philosophy is monumental, and most analyses are concerned with either showing a Kant free of contradiction (by building a consistent and complete system that allegedly represents more clearly than Kant did what his philosophy really wanted to say), or with taking some insight from Kant and incorporating it in some other conceptual theory of one’s own (e.g. Sellars, McDowell). Both approaches try to find something general and universal in Kant’s theory, something applicable beyond the theory as it stands, something independent of the specific words and stylistic tropes deployed in the actual text, and something that is only contingently tied to the historical Kant and his socio-
historical context. But this way of looking at the object, for Adorno, necessarily misses *the object* because it ignores that which makes the object the *particular* and unrepeatable object that it is: namely, the social-historical experience of its emergence, which is (according to Adorno) the non-conceptual objectivity that strives to find *expression* in the specificities of the text.

In fact, the non-conceptual experience that first motivates expression in concepts is according to Adorno constitutive of the meaning of the concept; in Kantian fashion, he claims that, divorced from this experience, concepts are *empty*: “Philosophische Reflexion versichert sich des Nichtbegrifflichen im Begriff. Sonst wäre dieser, nach Kants Diktum, leer, am Ende überhaupt nicht mehr der Begriff von etwas und damit nichtig.”

But, where Adorno’s account differs from Kant is in its claim that the concept (a theory, or the conceptual element in the object) must retain within it “traces” of the non-conceptual content that first gave rise to it, and which the concept sought to express.

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318 Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*, in *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. 6 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1970), 23. See English translation by E.B. Ashton in *Negative Dialectics* (New York and London: Continuum, 2005), 12: “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.” The idea that concepts first arise as an attempt to ‘say’ the non-conceptual, an attempt to find a concept that would fit the encounter with an irreducibly particular thing, is clearly reminiscent of Kant’s account of reflective judgment. Jay Bernstein has an excellent discussion of how Adorno’s theory of concepts can be seen as inspired by, and taking up, Kant’s notion of reflective judgment. See Bernstein, Jay, *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), esp. pp. 308-335. Bernstein interprets Adorno’s account of philosophical reflection as a “reasoning in transitions,” whose goal is constantly to recreate the experience of reflective judgment: the experience of encountering an object for which no concept is fully adequate, and of trying to find a new concept to express the object. While this is certainly an accurate account of Adorno’s idea of the experience of reflection, which in confronting an object experiences the inadequacy of its pre-existing concepts and struggles to express the non-conceptual in a new way, I think it is more accurate to see the method of constellations as a movement in the opposite direction from that of the reflective judgment: not trying to find new concepts for the experience of the object, but rather trying to break through the concepts in the object in order to exhibit the experience that first gave rise to those concepts.
The non-conceptual, experiential origin of concepts and theories not only first motivates the creation of the theory, but moreover survives in the theory. It survives in a manner inherently attached not just to the conceptual content (discursive content) put forward, but also, and most importantly, to the specifics of how the theory is articulated: its stylistic tropes, its idiosyncratic use of language, its chosen imagery, the emotional charge of its statements—in short, its rhetorical aspect. This is also why the retrieval of the non-conceptual core of a theory is rooted in the particularity of the object, in the specific way the object was first constructed; and this entails that a complete translation of the conceptual (discursive, logical) content of Kant’s distinction between phenomena and noumena, even if it where possible (which Adorno thinks, I believe, that it is not) would in any case not replace the Kritik der reinen Vernunft as it was written by Kant: an expression of the conceptual content deployed with different imagery and rhetorical content would no longer express the specific, and often unconscious experiential elements that first gave rise to the theory (though it would express elements of another experience).


What survives in it [in the concept] is the fact that nonconceptuality has conveyed it by way of its meaning, which in turn establishes its conceptuality. To refer to nonconceptualities...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.
The concern with retrieving the non-conceptual content of the text is thus the reason why negative dialectics is concerned with every object of analysis in its absolute particularity and rejects any attempts to translate the object into a universally communicable conceptual work divorced from the socio-historical life-world and the specific rhetorical elements (expressive of that life-world) particular to the object. But the retrieval of this non-conceptual, experiential content requires tools other than conceptual analysis: it requires interpretation. The goal of such interpretation can be qualified as the reverse of Kant’s reflective judgment: whereas the latter moves from a particular experience to its expression in concepts, the former moves from concepts, and specifically from their particular rhetorical relation in the object, to the experience that first gave rise to them, and (importantly) not an individual experience utterly subjective, but rather an experience that through the individuality of the author or producer gives voice to the objective conditions that animated her production.

This is why Adorno says that philosophy is inherently dependent on texts and the interpretation of texts. He says that the object of philosophical thought contains its non-conceptual core of objectivity as “tradition” [Tradition]—that is, as a temporal core that connects it to its socio-historical origins—and this “tradition” survives in the object “als unbewusste Erinnerung” [as unconscious remembrance]. Our mainstream approach to texts and theories as essential only in their conceptual (discursive) content divests itself [entäußert sich] of tradition but also preserves [aufbewahrt] and transforms [verwandelt]

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it through its rhetorical elements.\textsuperscript{321} “In der rhetorischen Qualität beseelt Kultur, die Gesellschaft, Tradition den Gedanken; das blank Antirhetorische ist verbündet mit der Barbarei, in welcher das bürgerliche Denken endet.”\textsuperscript{322} And it is through interpretation of the rhetorical elements of the text that its historical origin (in the genealogical senses of \textit{Herkunft} and \textit{Entstehung}, see chapter 6) is recovered. The point of philosophy is to recover the non-conceptual in the text, which just is its historical partaking in, and expression of, a particular historical experience.

The first side of the contradiction in the concept, in accordance with which the concept is “less than” the object, thus refers both to (i) the fact that concepts are unable through in their discursive deployment to bring into view the non-conceptual core of the text.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{321} Adorno, \textit{Negative Dialektik}, in Gesammelte Schriften, Vol. 6 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1970), 55.
\item \textsuperscript{322} Adorno, \textit{Negative Dialektik}, in Gesammelte Schriften, Vol. 6 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1970), 66. See English translation by E.B. Ashton in \textit{Negative Dialectics} (New York and London: Continuum, 2005), 56: “It is in the rhetorical quality that culture, society, and tradition animate the thought; a stern hostility to it is leagued with barbarism, in which bourgeois thinking ends.”
\item \textsuperscript{323} Adorno, \textit{Negative Dialektik}, in Gesammelte Schriften, Vol. 6 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1970), 64-5. English translation (modified):
\end{itemize}

Philosophy rests on the texts it criticizes. They are brought to it by the tradition they embody, and it is in dealing with them that the conduct of philosophy becomes commensurable with tradition. This justifies philosophy’s transition to interpretation, which exalts neither the interpreted nor the symbol into an absolute but seeks the truth where thinking secularizes the irretrievable archetype [\textit{Urbild}] of sacred texts. In its boundedness—patent or latent—on texts, philosophy avows for its linguistic nature, which the ideal of the method leads it to deny in vain.
object, which necessarily exceeds it, and (2) that the conceptual elements in the object are nonetheless inherently attached to the non-conceptual in the object through their particular rhetorical deployment in the text, and as such are a vehicle for the non-conceptual.

7.2.2 The concept as “more than” the object

Even though concepts are a vehicle for the non-conceptual, they also conceal the non-conceptual in the object.

The experiential content that first motivates (“animates”) the formation and use of specific concepts, and which the concepts then subsume under them, is inherently ambiguous (in today’s world it is even ‘contradictory,’ since experience in the pathological society is grounded in the contradiction in the object, the contradiction between appearance and essence in advanced capitalist social reality (see chapter 4)).

But, once this content is subsumed under concepts, it appears as though it were free of ambiguity. Concepts thus iron over tensions and ‘contradictions’ in experience and in so doing actually conceal the experiential content that motivated their formation in the first place. “Befriedigt schiebt begriffliche Ordnung sich vor das, was Denken begreifen will.”

Adorno offers as an example of the relation by which the concept is “more than” the object the concept of freedom:

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324 Adorno, Negative Dialektik, in Gesammelte Schriften, Vol. 6 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1970), 17. English translation (modified): Satisfied, the conceptual order pushes itself in front of [and thus conceals] that which thought wants to grasp/ comprehend.
Wenn ich etwa den Begriff der Freiheit denke und ausspreche, dann ist dieser Begriff der Freiheit nicht etwa nur die Merkmaleinheit all der Individuen, die auf Grund der formalen Freiheit etwa innerhalb einer gegebenen Verfassung als freie definiert werden, sondern in diesem Begriff »Die Freiheit« steckt etwas wie eine Anweisung auf etwas, was in einem solchen Zustand, wo den Menschen die Freiheit, sagen wir: der Berufsausübung, oder ihre Grundrechte oder alles das garantiert ist, wesentlich darüber hinausgeht, wesentlich darüber hinausschießt, ohne daß wir dieses Mehrs im Begriff uns immer bewußt wären.  

Here Adorno emphasizes that the concept of freedom is not just a generalization of a quality exhibited by various individual objects in experience: the ‘pure’ quality is never found as such in experience. There is something in the concept, an element of ‘purity’ of sense, lack of ambiguity, even a seeming eternality of meaning, that exceeds the quality of ‘freedom’ that we may find exemplified by any concrete existent. All concepts moreover, and not just the concept of freedom, exhibit this characteristic: because they are abstractions whose role is to captured a specific, self-identical ‘pure’ sense, they express qualities in a way that surpasses the way these qualities are to be found in actual existing things.

The key question, however, is how we should thematize this ‘excess’ in the concept. As I have explained it so far, the relation of ‘excess’ in the concept over its object seems to be just a necessary relation that all concepts would have to objects, simply by virtue of the fact that they are concepts. To put it in Adorno’s terminology,


If, for example, I think and speak of ‘freedom’, this concept is not simply the unity of the characteristics of all the individuals who can be defined as free on the basis of a formal freedom within a given constitution. Rather, in a situation in which people are guaranteed the freedom to exercise a profession or to enjoy their basic rights or whatever, the concept of freedom contains a pointer to something that goes well beyond those specific freedoms, without our necessarily realizing what this additional element amounts to.

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the problem seems to be inherent in the simple fact that concepts seek to ‘identify’ specific marks in the object. “Der Schein von Identität wohnt jedoch dem Denken selber seiner puren Form nach inne. Denken heißt identifizieren.”

However, if the point consists in nothing more than the idea that concepts, because of their abstract nature and their role in cognition, necessarily express a quality in ‘pure’ form, a form not actually exemplified anywhere in experience, then the issue seems to some extent trivial: in the first place, because it attends all concepts equally (a red flower is not ‘red’ itself, etc) and, in the second place, because it seems to be based in an abstract relation between concepts and things—that is, a relation that is exactly the same with respect to all concepts and their objects and thus is not tied to the particular object.

The general idea that concepts necessarily exceed the object as explained above is surely present in Adorno’s theory, but he also holds that there exists in every historical period a specific way in which the concepts exceed the object, and the specific relation at issue is determined by the socio-historical context and the particularity of the object within this context. The relation of thought to objects is irreducibly historically and socially situated, and the task of philosophy is precisely to articulate the specificity (i.e., the determinacy) of the relation, and this means not only how the concept expresses something that exceeds the existent, but also what the form of this excess conceals in the object.

There are for Adorno two main elements in the specific relation that concepts hold to their objects in the modern world that make the relation determinate, and they correspond to the two strands that define Adorno’s conception of the conceptual system: one the one hand, a Hegelian strand tied to systematicity and dialectics, and, on the other, a Freudian strand tied to genealogy and the notion of pathology.

Let us first consider the Hegelian strand. Adorno certainly holds, like Hegel, that the object, simply in virtue of its finitude, exhibits the conceptual elements that constitute it in a way that falls short of the content in the concepts. Recall that, for Hegel, any finite set of concepts that we could ascribe to any existent object necessarily falls short of expressing the object fully. It is only when these concepts are brought in relation to the totality of (dialectical and dynamic) relations in the system (that is, to “the Concept”) that they apply to the object adequately, and, at this point, the object is not just considered as a finite object but rather in its specific relations to the whole of thinkable reality.

Similarly, Adorno holds that the conceptual system as a whole (the “concept”) defines objects as they are structured in our social reality. This is a point I have already examined in chapter 4, so I will not elaborate too much on it here. The point is that objects as defined by our social order do in fact exhibit the structure of the system, which is, internally, a teleological structure (see chapter 6), and in terms of which each object is defined by its relation to other objects in the system and to the system as a whole—a system that is in turn determined by the principle of exchange. This is why the impulse of systematicity remains present in Adorno’s thought: the system is a necessary moment of critical philosophy because it corresponds to the structure of concepts and things in advanced capitalist society.
However, this society is pathological: “Sowie aber bleibt ihr [die Philosophie] am System zu achten, wie das ihr Heterogene als System ihr gegenübertritt. Darauf bewegt die verwaltete Welt sich hin. System ist die negative Objektivität...”[327] The system corresponds to the structure of social reality in the advanced capitalist world, and, since the structure of the system and its relation to objects in the social totality is replicated by dialectical reflection, this form of reflection captures one side of the relation between concept and object, but “Angesichts der konkreten Möglichkeit von Utopie ist Dialektik die Ontologie des falschen Zustandes. Von ihr wäre ein richtiger befreit, System so wenig wie Widerspruch.”[328] The fact that dialectics, and the relation between concept and object on which it is built, correspond to “the wrong state of things” points to a second strand in Adorno’s conception of the relation between concept and the object, for the qualitative judgment that the dialectical relation is pathological is part of the content of the relation.

This second strand in Adorno’s conception of the relation between concept and object is specifically Freudian; it corresponds to the interpretation of the “system” (the systematic structure of conceptuality as a whole, which also defines the eidos of social reality) as a symptom of paranoid projection. I have already argued that Adorno’s conception of the “system” is specifically bound to Freud’s analysis of paranoia (see

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[327] Adorno, Negative Dialektik, in Gesammelte Schriften, Vol. 6 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1970), 31, emphasis mine. See English translation by E.B. Ashton in Negative Dialectics (New York and London: Continuum, 2005), 20: “Philosophy retains respect for systems to the extent to which things heterogeneous to it face it in the form of a system. The administered world moves in this direction. It is the negative objectivity that is a system....”

[328] Adorno, Negative Dialektik, in Gesammelte Schriften, Vol. 6 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1970), 22, emphasis mine. See English translation by E.B. Ashton in Negative Dialectics (New York and London: Continuum, 2005), 11: “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.”
chapter 5) and, in particular, to the paranoid symptom corresponding to the creation, through the method of projection, of a system of delusions whose role and raison d’être is to repress nature and project it as dangerously returning from without. The delusions of the conceptual system have the specific role of repressing nature and projecting it outward, and the form of the system (its closed nature, its rigidity, its rule by a single determining principle) is designed specifically for the purpose of repression and projection. The nature repressed in the subject is thus by definition excised from the pathological system of concepts, except for the distorting representations through which it “returns” externally due to projection.

The pathological conceptual system orders the social world in accordance with systematic delusion, and presents itself as sovereign over that world: that is, the concept appears able accurately to represent the world, able to convey the content of the world without remainder, and therefore self-sufficient in the context of cognition and rationality. This appearance of independence from the non-conceptual and of self-sufficiency is, however, pathological; it corresponds to the megalomaniac delusions that always accompany paranoia (see chapter 5), which I have interpreted in detail as arising from a turn “inward” away from external reality due to the fact that social reality became intolerably repressive of humanity’s unconscious wish for happiness in nature.

The conceptual system’s pathological claim of independence and self-sufficiency, by which it presents the appearance that the non-conceptual does not even exist or matter for cognition and truth, constitutes the specific meaning in which the concept is “more than” the object. Adorno calls this misleading appearance of independence and self-
sufficiency the “Schein des Ansichseienden”\textsuperscript{329} [appearance of being-in-itself] of concepts and the conceptual system as a whole, and claims that to expose the spuriousness of this appearance is one of the main aims of philosophical reflection, for in it lies the possibility of salvaging philosophy from triviality: “Die Entzauberung des Begriffs ist das Gegengift der Philosophie”\textsuperscript{330} [the disenchantment of the concept is the antidote of philosophy].

7.2.3 The contradiction in the concept

As I said at the beginning of this section, the “contradiction in the concept” refers to the relation between the concept (understood as intrinsically related to the conceptual system as a whole) and the thing, and this relation in turn contains two sides: First, it refers to the concept’s being “less than” the object, and, second, to the concept’s being “more than” the object. I have discussed in detail the meaning of both sides of the relation between concept and object above. Now I will explore how they connect with each other. The result will be a statement of Adorno’s “contradiction in the concept,” which is the philosophical core of his theory of concepts.

Let us begin with the sense in which the concept is “more than” the object. I have explained this “excess” in the concept as the claims to (appearance of) independence and self-sufficiency of concepts—that is, the conceptual system’s appearance successfully to capture reality fully in dialectical reflection. As we have seen, this form of reflection

\textsuperscript{329} Adorno, Negative Dialektik, in Gesammelte Schriften, Vol. 6 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1970), 23.

\textsuperscript{330} Adorno, Negative Dialektik, in Gesammelte Schriften, Vol. 6 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1970), 24.
does indeed correspond to the existing social order, but what it excludes is the fact that
both it and the social order with which it coincides are the product of repression and
paranoid projection.

The very role and raison d’être of the system, whose structure is actualized both
by the conceptual structure contained in every individual concept (since the whole
conceptual system defines its elements) and by the existing social order, is to repress
nature and project a distorted image of it outward. But the system’s pretense to having
expunged nature is specious. Obviously, nature is not actually eliminated by the
repression of nature—an elimination that would be impossible but the accomplishment of
which is not even really a goal of the system, for repression actually requires the nature it
oppresses in order to maintain itself—but it survives in a way that is screened off by
concepts. Where, then, does nature survive? Where does it stir and make itself felt?

Recall that ‘inner nature’ is for Adorno that element in being that is radically not
conceptual or mental, but that is nonetheless not meaningless. It constitutes us in our
irreducible physicality, our animality, and through it we have a certain affinity with all
living things. The unconscious is a paradigmatic example of inner nature, although it is a
part of, and not co-extensive with, inner nature. In a situation of repression, and the
repression of nature in particular, the experience of one’s own nature—of one’s bodily
and emotional dimension—is obscured and already distorted as it appears in conscious
reflection and interpretation. But the experience is always there because we are always
irreducibly a part of nature: a body, understood not as a mechanical machine but a lived
and living body.
The category of ‘inner nature’ refers to the body as the place where self and other encounter each other, where subject and object “touch”—not in the literal sense (although perhaps also in this sense) but in the sense of communicating with each other. The body is a site in which the object is encountered in a way that is not yet part of conceptuality and thought, but which is a pre-conceptual ground of expressivity through language and thought: thus the body is both consciousness and physis but also not reducible to either.

Irreduzibel ist das somatische Moment als das nicht rein cognitive an der Erkenntnis. ... Daß die cognitiven Leistungen des Erkenntnissubjekts dem eigenen Sinn nach somatisch sind, affiziert nicht nur das Fundierungsverhältnis von Subjekt und Objekt sondern die Dignität des Körperlichen. Am ontischen Pol subjektiver Erkenntnis tritt es als deren Kern hervor. Das enthroniert die leitende Idee von Erkenntnistheorie, den Körper als Gesetz des Zusammenhangs von Empfindungen und Akten, geistig also, zu konstituieren; die Empfindungen sind bereits an sich, was die Systematik als ihre Formung durch Bewußtsein dartun möchte. ... Das erst erklärt vollends, warum der Antagonismus, den Philosophie in die Worte Subjekt und Objekt kleidete, nicht als Ursachverhalt zu deuten sei. Sonst würde der Geist zum schlechthin Anderen des Körpers gemacht, im Widerspruch zu seinem immanent Somatischen; durch Geist allein zu tilgen jedoch ist der Antagonismus nicht, weil das virtuell ihn wiederum vergeistigte. In ihm bekundet sich ebenso, was den Vorrang hätte vorm Subjekt und diesem sich entzieht, wie die Unversöhntheit des Weltalters mit dem Subjekt, gleichsam die verkehrte Gestalt des Vorrangs von Objektivität.331


The somatic moment as the not purely cognitive part of cognition is irreducible…. The fact that the subject’s cognitive achievements are somatic in accordance with their own meaning affects not only the basic relation of subject and object but the dignity of physicality. Physicality emerges at the ontical pole of subjective cognition, as the core of that cognition. This dethrones the guiding idea of epistemology: to constitute the body as the law governing the link between sensations and acts—in other words, to constitute it mentally. Sensations are already, in themselves, what the system would like to set forth as their formation by consciousness. This alone explains fully why the antagonism which philosophy clothed in the words ‘subject’ and ‘object’ cannot be interpreted as a primal state of facts. If it could be so interpreted, the mind would be turned into the body’s downright otherness, contradicting its immanent somatic side; but to have the mind alone void the antagonism is impossible, because that in turn would virtually spiritualize it. Showing equally in the antagonism are two things: that which seeks precedence over, and withdraws from, the subject
In somatic experience, the natural, non-conceptual element that eludes the
concept—“was den Vorrang hätte vorm Subjekt und diesem sich entzieht” [what has
precedence over but withdraws from the subject]}—exists side by side with the social,
conceptually structured element that represses inner nature—“die Unversöhntheit des
Weltalters mit dem Subjekt, gleichsam die verkehrte Gestalt des Vorrangs von
Objektivität” [the time-period/ age, unreconciled with the subject, the converse of the
precedence of objectivity in the sense of nature]). Both elements are present in the
encounter with the object—with any object at all—through somatic experience, which is
a condition for the possibility of any knowledge whatever. In somatic experience, the
concept’s being “more” and its being “less” than the object come together, which is just
to say that somatic experience contains within it the “contradiction in the concept.” The
somatic experience of the object is never free of this contradiction, which, according to
Adorno, is felt as suffering in the subject, but remains implicit unless given voice through
interpretation.

Thought, language, and the subject’s expression in general are attempts to bring
this experience into words. But since the experience is composed of such heterogeneous
elements (the “system” that is conceptual and represses nature, on the one hand, and the
experience of nature as suffering and repressed, on the other), its expression, where it is
possible, retains the heterogenous nature of that which is to be expressed. The systematic
element is expressed in internally tightly woven dialectical fragments, whereas the
‘natural,’ non-conceptual element is expressed in the macro-arrangement of the

and the fact that our time is unreconciled with the subject—the obverse form, as it were, of the
precedence of objectivity.
fragments and their rhetorical form of presentation in a constellation (we will return to the topic of the constellation in chapter 8). In the expression of somatic experience as an experience of reflection—in what Adorno calls a geistige Erfahrung (an “intellectual” experience)—the systematic relations among concepts, and their arrangement into fragmentary bits ordered in a manner that rhetorically expresses the non-conceptual, come together to express not the object in its fullness but the specific character of the non-identity between concept and object—that is, the specific way in which the relation of concept to object participates in the pathology of modernity.

We have now come full circle: From the idea that the concept is “more than” the object (because the concept distorts the object by appearing to eliminate its non-conceptual element), we have traced our way to the idea that the concept is “less than” the object (that it cannot reach the non-conceptual through its discursive tools but nonetheless remains bound to non-conceptuality through its rhetorical elements). The logical connection between the two ideas is the logic of repression and paranoid projection, and the concrete site where concept and object meet and their pathological relation to each other is “announced” is the somatic experience of the lived body.

In conclusion, let us sum up and briefly reflect on the meaning of the “contradiction in the concept.” This ‘contradiction’ refers to the relation between concept and object under conditions of repression and paranoid projection. In what sense is there a ‘contradiction’ at stake here? Adorno’s use of the term ‘contradiction’ is not gratuitous, and I want to propose that the “contradiction in the concept” refers to a whole family of contradictions between the concept and its discursive functions, on the one hand, and the rhetorical element in conceptual language, on the other. The following
table explains some of the ways in which both thought and object are differently conceived from the standpoint of the discursive function and the rhetorical function of the concept:
### TABLE 7.1

**DISCURSIVE-CONCEPTUAL V. RHETORICAL ELEMENTS IN LANGUAGE**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Form</th>
<th>Discursive-conceptual</th>
<th>Rhetoric/ Presentation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Logical structure</td>
<td>Systematic</td>
<td>Anti-systematic&lt;sup&gt;332&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teleology</td>
<td>Genealogy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kind of reflection</td>
<td>Dialectics</td>
<td>Constellations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Content</strong></td>
<td>Correspondence with the form and content of the social order.</td>
<td>Expression of repressed nature as suffering.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitude to the experiential origin of concepts/ of a conceptual theory</td>
<td>Claims fully to encompass the experiential origin of the object in its concepts, and therefore covers over this origin.</td>
<td>Recovers the origin (<em>Entstehung</em>) of the object in somatic experience.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conception of the object</td>
<td>Ultimately intelligible in full in relation to the system of dialectical relations.</td>
<td>Cannot be fully grasped conceptually but can be expressed in a <em>geistige Erfahrung</em>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ontological component expressed</td>
<td>Expresses the power of the Concept and its delusional pretensions of self-sufficiency and independence from non-conceptuality.</td>
<td>Expresses the non-conceptual at the heart of the object, and expresses it as repressed/ damaged: Expresses society’s self-understanding as pathological.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political role</td>
<td>Ideological replication of the system that characterizes the <em>status quo</em>.</td>
<td>Disintegration of the system through a recovery of the pathological experiences in which the system originates, which show the ‘wrongness’ of the system and call for revolutionary praxis.</td>
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The two strands are “contradictory” in the sense that, if one considers them in isolation from each other, their claims result in incompatible philosophical positions: incompatible views of the object, incompatible views of the concept and its capacity to express truth, incompatible views of the form that philosophical reflection ought to take, etc. Since the two strands give rise to incompatible—indeed, contradictory—philosophical standpoints, and yet they both constitute elements inherent in conceptuality (one in the discursive and the other in the rhetorical elements of concepts), Adorno calls their relation the “contradiction in the concept.”

Even if ‘contradictory’ in this sense, Adorno argues, the two strands are necessary in philosophical reflection. Without correction by the other, either one in isolation would remain bound to the system, to the pathological context of immanence. On the one hand, Adorno holds that a genealogy without the system, or more generally a philosophical critique of systems that does not incorporate the system within itself, becomes ideological. First, such an unmediated and one-sided denial of the system ultimately conceals the fact that the social order is in fact ordered as a system—“das diabolisches System [the diabolic system].”

Therefore, an unmediated critique of systems and a one-sidedly anti-systematic philosophy actually serves the ideological purpose of masking the structure of social reality and thus also its pathological nature. And,


334 See Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*, in *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. 6 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1970), 34:

Die bürgerliche ratio näherte als Tauschprinzip das, was sie sich kommensurabel machen, identifizieren wollte, mit wachsendem, wenngleich potentiell mörderischen Erfolg real den Systemen an, ließ immer weniger draußen. Was in der Theorie als eitel sich überführte, ward ironisch von der Praxis bestätigt. Daher ist die Rede von der Krisis des Systems als Ideologie beliebt geworden.... Die Realität soll nicht mehr konstruiert werden, weil sie allzu gründlich zu
moreover, a critique that simply ignores the system and the systematic impulse of thought remains critically impotent: “Kritik am System und asystematisches Denken sind so lange äußerlich, wie sie es nicht vermögen, die Kraft der Kohärenz zu entbinden, welche die idealistischen Systeme ans transzendentale Subjekt überschrieben.”

But, on the other hand, systematic thought that does not turn against the system also remains ideological, like Hegel’s system or even Marx’s dialectical materialism, because it can’t see that the system is a symptom of pathology. The argumentative form that remains immanent to the system—i.e., dialectics in the traditional Hegelian or Marxian sense—is legitimate and has critical power only when, by coming together with the fragmentary macro-structure of the constellation; it garners the power of the system in order to oppose the system. Without the rhetorical, fragmentary element of natural history displayed in the constellation, there would be no breaking out of the system, but

konstruieren wäre. Ihre Irrationalität, die unterm Druck partikularer Rationalität sich verstärkt: die Desintegration durch Integration, bietet dafür Vorwände. Wäre die Gesellschaft, als geschlossenes und darum den Subjekten unversöhntes System, durchschaut, so würde sie den Subjekten, so lange sie irgend noch welche sind, allzu peinlich.

Translation by E.B. Ashton in Negative Dialectics (New York and London: Continuum, 2005), 23-24:

In the form of the barter principle, the bourgeois ratio really approximated to the systems whatever it would make commensurable with itself, would identify with itself—and it did so with increasing, if potentially homicidal, success. Less and less was left outside. What proved idle in theory was ironically borne out in practice. Hence the ideological popularity of talk about a ‘crisis of the system’… Reality is no longer to be construed, because it would be all too thoroughly construable. Pretexts are furnished by its irrationality, intensifying under the 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.

335 Adorno, Negative Dialektik, in Gesammelte Schriften, Vol. 6 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1970), 36. English translation (modified): “Criticism of systems and asystematic thought are external/superficial as long as they are not able to release the power of coherence that the idealistic systems had signed over to the transcendental subject.”

336 See Adorno, Negative Dialektik, in Gesammelte Schriften, Vol. 6 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1970), 40.
“ohne Zueignung der Gewalt des Systems” [without appropriating the power/violence of
the system], Adorno says, the attempt to break out [Ausbruch] would fail. So, the two
strands, the two methods, even if ‘contradictory,’ require each other.

Theory and mental experience need to interact. Theory does not contain answers to everything;
rather, it reacts to the world, which is false to its inner core. What would be removed from
the spell of the world would not fall under the jurisdiction of theory. Flexibility is essential to
consciousness; it is not an accidental feature. It [flexibility] means a doubled mode of conduct:
an inner one, the immanent process, which is the properly dialectical one; and a free, unbound one,
like a stepping out of dialectics. Yet the two are not merely disparate. The unregimented thought
has an elective affinity to dialectics, which as criticism of the system recalls what would be
outside the system; and the force/power that the dialectical movement of knowledge releases is the
very same force that rebels against the system. *Beide Stellungen des Bewußtseins verbinden sich durch
Kritik eineinander, nicht durch Kompromiß.*

Note on the translation: The penultimate sentence is ambiguous. The original German says “die Kraft,
welche die dialektische Bewegung in der Erkenntnis entbindet, ist die, welche gegen das System
aufbegehrt.” The first occurrence of ‘welche’ could either be the direct object of the subordinate clause (in
which case the meaning would be that the dialectical movement of knowledge releases/liberates the power
of the system and turns it against the system) or the subject of the subordinate clause (in which case the
meaning would be that the power of the system releases/liberates the dialectical movement of knowledge).
The ambiguity concerns whether we should take the “power” or “force” (Kraft) to be that which releases
the dialectical movement of thought against the system, or to be that which the dialectical movement of
thought releases against the system. E.B. Ashton follows the first reading, making the “force” the subject
that releases dialectics against the system. See Negative Dialectics (New York and London: Continuum,
2005), 31. I, however, follow the second reading, since Adorno repeatedly talks of dialectics as a mode of
thinking whose critical potential lies precisely in its ability to garner the power/force of the system and turn
it against it (that is, against the system).
The two philosophical strands, or standpoints, must relate to each other but, still, they do not merge; they cannot be sublated \([aufgehoben]\) into a higher dialectical position. The very form of the constellation makes sublation impossible because it is fragmentary and moves in the rhetorical quality of language, not its conceptual/discursive connections, which is the proper realm of dialectics (at least as ‘dialectics’ is understood traditionally, with reference to Hegel and/or Marx). So, dialectical closure between the constellation and the systematic, dialectical impulse, is impossible. The two strands, the two tendencies and methods, remain in tension with each other, but nonetheless, according to Adorno, they must be deployed together because despite their incompatibility with each other they are held together by the state of the real, by the logic of pathology that connects (i) the system whose whole purpose is the attempt to repress and expunge nature from reality, and (ii) the inner nature that survives in the experience of damage/ suffering/ ‘wrongness’—a ‘feeling of illness.’ Logically, it is the logos of pathology, and specifically of repression and paranoid projection, that connects the two strands and keeps them in essential relation to each other.\(^{338}\) Ontologically, it is in unreduced somatic experience that the two strands are made available to the subject and, in the best of cases, to the thought that critically interprets that experiential content.

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\(^{338}\) This is why the specific logical structure of paranoid projection is important: it is the logos that brings together “the system” and the genealogy of pathology. This is also why the more detailed Freudian interpretation I pursued in chapter 5 is essential to understand Adorno correctly.
The two sides of the contradiction survive in experience and, because somatic experience is inherently connected to expression in language, they are connected in the concept.

The highest goal of philosophy, for Adorno, is the expression of both moments in language: the expression of the system, but only in such a way that the expression is internal to the logic of fragments. The macro-structure expresses the falseness of the system by mimicking in its form and presentation the disintegration of the system, but not in a haphazard or abstract form of disintegration; rather, the constellation expresses the non-conceptual in the object, which is the content that “gives the lie” to the system. A successful constellation expresses the irreducibly particular relation of pathology that holds between the object (as located within the system that orders both discursive thought and social reality), on the one hand, and its experiential, non-conceptual content from the standpoint of nature, which is in the modern pathological world always in some sense an

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The immanently argumentative element is legitimate where it receives the reality that has been integrated in a system in order to garner and deploy its [this reality’s] own strength. The free part of thought, on the other hand, represents the authority which already knows about the emphatic untruth of this context [i.e., the system]. Without this knowledge there would be no escape/outbreak; without appropriating the power/violence of the system, the outbreak would fail. That the two elements will not merge without a rift is due to the real power of the system, which integrates even what potentially excels/transcends it. The untruth of the immanent context itself, however, becomes accessible in the overwhelming experience that the world—though organized as systematically as if it were Hegel’s glorified realization of reason—at the same time, in its old unreason, perpetuates the impotence of the spirit that appears [as if it were] all powerful.
experience of suffering or damage, on the other. The expression of this relation is the expression of how specifically concept and object are incommensurable in the modern capitalist world; it is an explanation of the determinate non-identity between concept and object under conditions of pathology.  

340 Throughout this chapter (especially in section 7.1.1), my interpretation of the non-conceptual element of the object as essentially constituted by the social-historical experience of the object’s emergence and development was strongly influenced by Roger Foster’s excellent study of Adorno in Adorno: The Recovery of Experience (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007). This text gives a very illuminating overview of Adorno’s method of natural history as an attempt to express the social experiential content sedimented in the object. However, the shortcoming I see in Foster’s analysis is that, while it gives a perspicuous account of the natural-historical method and the method of constellation-construction, it elevates this element of Adorno’s negative dialectics above the Hegelian dialectical element which is, in my view, equally essential to Adorno. As I have been arguing, I instead take the tension between the two elements to be the ‘content’ that negative dialectics as a whole aims to disclose.

Foster argues that the natural-historical interpretation of the non-conceptual has the aims of bringing to self-consciousness philosophy’s dependence on historical experience (p. 16) and, by doing so, giving the reader an experience of the object as something we “want to express,” but which “cannot be said with our concepts,” so that we experience the limits of concepts “as limits” (p. 29). This interpretation suggests that negative dialectics simply reveals the distance between the concept and the object (specifically, between the concept and the non-conceptual in the object), showing that the concept is limited, that it is unable to express the object fully. Foster emphasizes that this is an experience of failure, but that the experience of this failure brings self-awareness of the social conditions that cause the failure by revealing the social context in which the object emerged (p. 39).

Though I think Foster’s position illuminates perspicuously the interpretive method by which the non-conceptual is illuminated, it is crucial to see that this method and its results constitute only one moment of negative dialectics, whereas Foster seems to consider it to describe negative dialectics completely. In the interpretation I have constructed here, the interpretation of the non-conceptual element in the object is still a one-sided account of the object. The discursive-conceptual analysis of the conceptual element in the object (which for Adorno is at its best a Hegelian analysis) is not subsumed under the non-conceptual interpretation, but is rather the other moment of negative dialectics, and what is key for Adorno is that these two ‘moments’ are contradictory. Negative dialectics ultimately aims to disclose the particular relation between the conceptual-discursive element in the object and the non-conceptual element that the natural-historical method illuminates: a relation whereby the view of the object we get from discursive-conceptual analysis contradicts the view of the object we get from the interpretation of the non-conceptual. Neither terminus of this relation is ultimately ‘higher’ than the other; rather, what is important is that, while they give incompatible interpretations of the object, they cannot be superseded into a higher standpoint from which they can be made consistent. Since I take the relation of contradiction here to be what is crucial for Adorno, I disagree with Foster’s interpretation that the non-conceptual simply goes ‘beyond’ the concept to show the concept’s limits.
7.3 Conclusion

This chapter has given an account of Adorno’s method of natural history, by which philosophical interpretation exhibits the mediation of social reality by nature. This mediation is available to philosophical reflection because concepts have the structure of the “contradiction in the concept.” According to this structure, concepts are not only confined to their discursive role, in accordance with which they repress and conceal the non-conceptual element in the object, but rather also have a rhetorical, expressive role, by which they can express ‘traces of the non-conceptual’ that survive in them. Concepts are able to, in a sense, transcend the confines of the delusional system by being deployed in a manner that uses their rhetorical, presentational aspects in order to reveal the particular non-identity that holds between concept and object.

In the next chapter, I will complete this account of how the mediation of social reality by nature enters into philosophical reflection by looking at the philosophy of language that underlies Adorno’s theory of concepts. Doing so will clarify the specific structure of the constellations that give voice to the relation of non-identity between concept and object, and which is the macro-structure of negative dialectics.
Chapter 7 explained Adorno’s method of ‘natural history,’ by which the object of study is interpreted from the standpoint of its non-conceptual nature—an idea I have explained as an interpretation that recovers the social-experiential original ground from which the object arose and which it expresses in its rhetorical aspects, stylistic tropes, and imagery. I have argued that, for Adorno, this mode of interpretation is possible because concepts have a double function: on the one hand, they have a discursive function that conceals the non-conceptual elements in the object, but, on the other hand, they also have an expressive function that serves as a vehicle for the expression of the non-conceptual. For Adorno, as we have seen before, the discursive function of concepts and the conceptual system as a whole should be understood along Hegelian lines, which is why a Hegelian notion of the dialectic remains in his view an essential constituent of philosophical reflection. However, the expressive function of concepts requires a conception of language that goes beyond the Hegelian framework. My goal in this chapter is to explain the philosophy of language presupposed by Adorno’s account of the expressive power of language: the aspect of language that allows traces of the non-conceptual origin and historical development of the object to survive in the conceptual element of the object (although they cannot be recovered through conceptual analysis but rather through interpretation of the particular rhetorical presentation of the concepts.
contained in the object), and the interpretive method by which these non-conceptual traces can be recovered in philosophical reflection.

Adorno’s view of language is strongly influenced by Walter Benjamin’s philosophy of language. In fact, Adorno’s conception of the expressive function of language, which enables it to give voice to the non-conceptual through the construction of constellations, just is Benjamin’s conception of this function. There are important differences between Adorno and Benjamin’s view of the constellation, but I will argue that they have to do with their divergent views regarding the discursive and systematic function of language and its place in the constellation, and not with their conception of the expressive function itself. Given the centrality of Benjamin’s philosophy of language for Adorno’s, I proceed in this chapter by first explaining Benjamin’s philosophy of language in detail (section 1) and then analyzing Adorno’s incorporation of it in his overall theory of negative dialectics (section 2).

8.1 Benjamin

In order to reconstruct Benjamin’s philosophy of language, I will look in chronological order at three key works on the subject: the early essay “Über Sprache Überhaupt und Über die Sprache des Menschen” [“On Language as Such and on the Language of Man] (1916), the “Erkenntnistheoretische Vorrede” [“Epistemic Prologue”] to Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiel [The Origin of German Tragic Drama] (1925), and finally the essay “Über das mimetische Vermögen” [“On the Mimetic Faculty”] (1932). In these works, I trace a transformation in Benjamin’s ideas, which I argue is a maturation rather than revision of key themes, in the direction of a
radicalization of the materialist strain in his interpretation of language. The unifying theme throughout my exegesis of Benjamin is an interpretation of his philosophical ideas on language’s ability and methodology to express the non-conceptual.

Benjamin begins the essay “Über Sprache Überhaupt und Über die Sprache des Menschen” by noting that the essence of all things is language.

The first thing to note about this claim is that Benjamin operates with a very wide understanding of ‘language’ not limited to conceptual language. ‘Language’ encompasses for him the larger category of ‘expression’ [Ausdruck]. And expression does not occur in the medium of concepts. Hence the view that all things, including inanimate ones, have linguistic being does not mean, as might at first appear, that all things have conceptual structure and discursive abilities.


There is no event or thing in either animate or inanimate nature that does not in some way partake of language, for it is in the nature of each one to communicate its mental contents. This use of the word ‘language’ is in no way metaphorical. For to think that we cannot imagine anything that does not communicate its mental nature in its expression is entirely meaningful; consciousness is apparently (or really) bound to such communication in varying degrees, but this cannot alter the fact that we cannot imagine a total absence of language in anything.
The view is simply that there is an immanent yearning in nature for self-expression. Nature is not just an aggregate of particles behaving in accordance with scientific laws; it is rather the element in being that is the opposite of, and yet the ground of, the mind, and the expression of which is the role of the mind. Recall that ‘nature’ for Benjamin, as for Adorno, is not the mechanical construction of the scientist but rather should be understood more along the lines of inner nature, paradigmatically as the ‘archaic mind’ discovered in psychoanalysis, the ‘mind’ that expresses itself just as much in a dream or a slip of the tongue as in a false pregnancy or a bout of vomiting, whose physical action has a logos that yearns for expression in language, in consciousness. In his book *Love and Its Place in Nature: a Philosophical Interpretation of Freudian Psychoanalysis* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998), Jonathan Lear has an excellent discussion of Freud’s discovery of the “archaic mind” as a longing for expression in nature, where ‘nature’ is irreducibly both physical and mental from the start. In the introduction, Lear highlights the discovery of nature as inherently seeking expression as one of Freud’s main achievements. He characterizes psychoanalytic interpretation as the attempt to bring to higher-level language an archaic form of mental functioning that is so radically different from conscious processes that it seems virtually unrecognizable as mind, and yet it is in a sense already mind.

The unconscious wish is expressed in dreams, in slips of the tongue, in symptomatic acts, in a paralyzed leg, a false pregnancy, an irritable bowel. How is the mind to recognize itself in, say, an act of vomiting? The real mystery is not ‘the mysterious leap from mind to body’: how something mental, an idea, can cause something physical, like vomiting, to occur. The real mystery is how it is possible for there to have been no leap. How could vomiting itself be ‘thinking’? How could we recognize the mental in something so physical? The answer lies in the fact that recognition tends to have a transformative effect. An interpretation attempts to elucidate the content of this archaic mental activity by expressing it in terms of the higher-level thinking with which we are familiar. But this interpretation not only explicates the primitive mental activity, it can transform it. It is as though the archaic ‘thinking’ is an early stage of a developmental process en route toward expression in terms of concepts and judgments. When the mind finally reaches an interpretation of its own activities, it can start to rework and even slough off these earlier formulations. It is the responsiveness of this archaic mental activity to the mind’s own attempt to understand it that lends credibility to the idea that what we have here is a form of mental functioning” (7).

Analytic interpretation is the expression of nature, and nature is ‘archaic mind’ both in that it has a logos or meaningfulness of its own, and in that it contains an inherent yearning for the expression of this logos in higher-level language. A successful analytic interpretation is according to Lear just such an expression in higher-level language of what nature or ‘archaic mind’ “has been trying to say all along, in more primitive ways” (8). Of course, Lear does not think that what we have is a one-to-one translation that leaves the content unchanged, but rather a transformation of the content that, when expressed in conceptual thought, and in conjunction with the experiential content in the archaic form of expression itself, constitutes an
Adorno’s words, nature is that which expresses itself in somatic experience. The responsiveness that nature, or the ‘archaic mind’ expressed in somatic experience, shows to a successful interpretation—which, for instance, may end the physical symptom—suggests that the experiential symptom was from the start characterized by a yearning for expression and, after all, expression in consciousness is precisely the goal of analysis: the “talking cure.”

Benjamin’s idea that the being of all things is expression should be understood as the two-fold claim that (i) inner nature inherently seeks expression in language and initiates a process whose successful completion is expression in interpretation, while (ii) language is, essentially, the attempt to express nature.

Benjamin articulates these two ideas through a new interpretation of the biblical narrative of creation. The interpretation offers an allegorical, genealogical account of language that proceeds in three stages. Let us briefly discuss these stages.

The first stage focuses on the creative nature of the divine word. In the story of Genesis, the world is created by the divine language; things come to be by being called into being by God. In Kantian terms, what Benjamin calls the “divine language” would

understanding of the phenomenon. The experiential material, he says, is the content of the interpretation, while its transformation by expression into concepts allows this content to enter consciousness. I want to propose that this conception of nature, which sees it as inherently seeking expression in language, and sees higher-level thinking as serving the purpose of the expression of nature corresponds to Benjamin’s and Adorno’s understanding of nature and its relation to language (Note: this does not mean that higher-level thinking serves no other purposes; it only means that the expression of nature is a, perhaps the, central purpose.)

343 In a sense, we could interpret the purpose of analysis according to Freud to be the expression of nature, of what had been repressed, in consciousness—though here we would have to understand by ‘expression’ not just a putting into words that could be achieved by the patient’s regurgitating words given to her by the analyst, but rather the patient’s own putting into words of content that she is able also experientially to make present to herself by reliving its emotional texture and thus making it present as the content of the words that finally express the experience adequately. For Freud’s discussion of the goal of analysis, the achievement of cure, and the necessity of an emotional re-living of the conflict that first led to illness and had been repressed (an emotional experience that requires the transference), see Freud, Vorlesungen zur Einführung in die Psychoanalyse, in Sigmund Freud: Gesammelte Werke, Vol. XI (London: Imago Publishing Co., 1969).
be the primordial act of an intuitive intellect in which the thing is produced by being conceived—in this case, by being *linguistically* conceived.\footnote{The Kantian view of a divine intellect is obviously different from Benjamin’s view of the divine language in at least two main ways: (1) For Kant, the notion of a divine intellect is a regulative principle, and (2) even as an idea, it is not linguistic.}

The second stage begins with this: “daß Gott dem Menschen den Odem einblies: das ist zugleich Leben und Geist und Sprache” [“that God breathes his breath into the human being: this is at once life and mind and language”].\footnote{Benjamin, Walter, “Über Sprache Überhaupt und Über die Sprache des Menschen,” in *Gesammelte Werke I* (Frankfurt am Main: Zweitausendeins, 2011), 212. English translation modified.} God gives life to the human being by bringing forth its peculiar kind of linguistic being.


In this allegory, the origin of human language is divine language, now deprived of its creative activity, but still capable of summoning things by their divinely ordained name, and thus of knowing them fully in their particularity. The divinely ordained proper name is the point of contact between the creative power of divine language and finite, human language.

God did not create man from the word, and he did not name him. He did not wish to subject him to language, but in man God set language, which had served *him* as medium of creation, free. God rested when he had left his creative power to itself in man. This creativity, relieved of its divine actuality, became knowledge. Man is the knower in the same language in which God is the creator.
One important point in Benjamin’s narrative of the origin of language is that the human being does not have a name. The point is crucial because it is connected to what Benjamin sees as the essence of the uncorrupted language of humanity, which is the ability to constitute a medium not for the expression of the subject, but rather for the expression of the object, of non-human things, of nature. It is the ontological nature of the human being to be a linguistic medium for the self-expression of nature. Language is therefore originally not a tool for communication but for the self-expression of non-human reality.

Durch das Wort ist der Mensch mit der Sprache der Dinge verbunden. Das menschliche Wort ist der Name der Dinge. … [E]s beruht der Name, den der Mensch der Sache gibt, darauf, wie sie ihm sich mitteilt. Im Namen ist das Wort Gottes nicht schaffend geblieben, es ist an einem Teil empfangend, wenn auch sprachempfangend, geworden. Auf die Sprache der Dinge selbst, aus denen wiederum lautlos und in der stummen Magie der Natur das Wort Gottes hervorstrahlt, ist diese Empfängnis gerichtet.347

The linguistic activity of human beings is—in its original, uncorrupted form—an activity of translating the language of things into sound, of lending its voice to nature so that it (nature) may express itself through this voice, and it is through this activity that human beings can achieve full knowledge of particulars. Nature is mute and nameless without the naming activity of human beings, and this activity is nothing more (and nothing less)


Through the word, man is bound to the language of things. The human word is the name of things. … [T]he name that man gives to language depends on how language is communicated to him. In name, the word of god has not remained creative; it has become in one part receptive, even if receptive to language. Thus fertilized, it aims to give birth to the language of things themselves, from which in turn, soundlessly, in the mute magic of nature, the word of God shines forth.
than expression of “die stumme namenlose Sprache der Dinge” [the unspoken nameless language of things]. The activity proper to the original language of humanity is ontologically placed somewhere between the act of the intuitive intellect and the act of conceptual, ordinary language. Even though the name inherited by the human being is not creative, as it would be for an intuitive intellect, it has access to the Ding an sich, which the concept can never reach.

The third stage of Benjamin’s narrative is the story of humanity’s fall from grace. Benjamin interprets it as the forgetfulness of the name, which comes about as the word is transformed into a sign arbitrarily attached to the object it designates and related to the latter only through the mediation of a general concept. The word now communicates the particular only partially and in terms of the generalities it shares with other things.

Das Wort soll etwas mitteilen (außer sich selbst). Das ist wirklich der Sünderfall des Sprachgeistes. Das Wort als äußerlich mitteilendes, gleichsam eine Parodie des ausdrücklich mittelbaren Wortes auf das ausdrücklich unmittelbare, das schaffende Gotteswort, und der Verfall des seligen Sprachgeistes, des adamitischen, der zwischen ihnen steht.\textsuperscript{349}


The word must communicate something (other than itself). In that fact lies the true Fall of the spirit of language. The word as something externally communicating, as it were a parody—by the expressly mediate word—of the expressly immediate, creative word of God, and the decay of the blissful Adamite spirit of language that stands between them.
After the fall, “the judging word” [das richtendes Wort] replaces the language of names. Language becomes discursive and no longer aims at expression but rather at communication. The word becomes a mere sign, related to the object through convention alone, and incapable of grasping the object in its own terms, from “within.” Knowledge of the particular is unattainable through this discursive language, for the particular is known only in its name, and discursivity is founded in the forgetfulness of the language of names. Unable to name its object, language becomes confused and falls into “prattle” [Geschwätz].

The fall of language entails not only a human loss of the ability to know particulars, but also a deep loss for the particulars themselves, whose expression was complete only in the human activity of naming. There is now a second muteness of nature, and it is due, in the first place, to the inability of human language to be a medium for the expression of things, but also to the violence that the human word inflicts on the thing. The concept gives value to the particular only in terms of the characteristics that it shares with other things and by which it may be instrumentally used for human purposes. The particular is in each case referred to by means of the concept that makes it useful for specific purposes in a specific situation. There are thus multiple words that can refer to a single particular—as many words as there might be human purposes and situations involving the particular—and the words are related to the particular not essentially but rather only in terms of the way in which the particular fits instrumental purposes.

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various concepts reflect human interests only and therefore do not express the intrinsic being of the thing. In Benjamin’s words, the particular is “overnamed,” and he describes this overnaming [Überbenennung] “als tiefster sprachlicher Grund aller Traurigkeit und (vom Ding aus betrachtet) allen Verstummens” [“as the deepest linguistic reason for all melancholy and (from the point of view of the thing) for all deliberate muteness”].


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After the Fall, however, when God’s word curses the ground, the appearance of nature is deeply changed. Now begins its other muteness, which is what we mean by the ‘deep sadness of nature.’ It is a metaphysical truth that all nature would begin to lament if it were endowed with language.... This proposition has a double meaning. It means, first, that she would lament language itself. Speechlessness: that is the great sorrow of nature (and for the sake of her redemption the life and language of man—not only, as is supposed, of the poet—are in nature). This proposition means, second, that she would lament. Lament, however is the most undifferentiated, impotent expression of language. It contains scarcely more than the sensuous breath; and even where there is only a rustling of plants, there is always a lament. Because she is mute, nature mourns. Yet the inversion of this proposition leads even further into the essence of nature; the sadness of nature makes her mute.
Importantly, however, language after the fall retains constitutive traces of its origin in the language of names. The original meaning that perfectly named the particular is not completely lost but rather becomes fragmented and dispersed among different concepts. As Fred Rush puts it, “[o]ur connection to this first state [original language] is not entirely sundered…. Both Benjamin and Hamann believe that profane language (as well as profane history) bears traces of ‘pure’ language prior to the Fall, dispersed throughout the several languages.”

The remnant of the original language of names is the symbolic (as opposed to the communicative) function of language. “Es ist nämlich Sprache in jedem Falle nicht allein Mitteilung des Mitteilbaren, sondern zugleich Symbol des Nicht-Mitteilbaren.” [For language is in every case not only communication of the communicable but also, at the same time, a symbol of the noncommunicable.] Whereas a sign is only arbitrarily linked to its object, in the symbol, the word is a constitutive component of a whole, of which the referent is another component. In the symbol, thing and word are tightly connected; each is ontologically complete and intelligible only in relation to its complement. Part of the being of the thing is its linguistic symbol, and part of the being of the symbol is the thing; the two are incomplete without the other. When language falls into the disarray of its merely communicative function, the reality of the thing is broken. Nature is incomplete without expression, and words are incomplete without an intrinsic

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connection to their object. Natural reality and human linguistic expression are in isolation from each other mere fragments, ruins of a primordial whole. Yet, understood as a ruin, the concept points to its other; its very constitution is that of a fragment in need of completion by other semantic fragments dispersed through discursivity and by a determinate object from which the name was severed.

Let us briefly sum up what we have seen so far: The theory of language that Benjamin presents in “On Language as Such and On the Language of Man” presents language as having deteriorated from a condition in which it (1) was able fully to express the particular (through the “naming” function) and (2) words were related in a necessary, non-contingent way to the things to which they referred. Benjamin thus thinks there is something like an original form of language (an original expressive experience that first constitutes language) that was able fully to express the object and that arose as intrinsically motivated by the object and its yearning for self-expression. But this language has suffered some kind of distortion, a distortion connected to its devolution from full expressivity to the manipulation of objects for human purposes and communication fully in terms of these purposes. Yet, we are told, language does not completely shed its expressive origins and still in some sense maintains its connection with things, so that through symbolic expression it may still be able to express the thing once again, to express it in its very distance from profane language, but doing so would require the bringing together of the multiple concepts containing “fragments” of the original language into a “symbol” that can once again give a voice to the thing.

It is important for our purposes to trace two developments in Benjamin’s account of how the symbolic role of language and thus its constitutive transcendence towards a
particular object is preserved in ordinary language and thus in conceptuality generally.

The first development is the theory of ideas presented in the introduction to Benjamin’s (unsuccessful) Habilitation dissertation, the *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiel* (written in 1925, about nine years after the essay on language), and the later materialistic interpretation of the naming power of language that undergirds Benjamin’s theory of mimesis, especially as it is explained in his 1932 essay “Über das mimetische Vermögen” [“On the Mimetic Faculty”].

In the *Trauerspiel*, Benjamin more fully develops an account of how the power to name is preserved in language (that is, the power to express the object in the object’s own terms and therefore to have a robust and not arbitrary relation to the object). Recall that the fall of language consists in that the original unity of the name becomes fractured into general concepts, and, with this, the content once indivisible in the name and having a one-to-one correspondence with the thing is broken. But, in its broken form, it remains in the word. The meaning in the name is not annihilated but rather fragmented. So, for example, with regard to the name $\aleph$ that expressed the object $a$, after the fall of language $\aleph$ has been broken but its semantic one-to-one attachment to $a$ survives in fragments scattered over a set of concepts $C$ that all in some way or other relate to $a$, though none of them fully corresponds to $a$, and even the set $C$ fails to corresponds because it expresses content that goes beyond $a$ (that does not apply to $a$).

Is it then possible for words, now corresponding to general concepts, to become once again united in the name? That is, would it be possible to reconstruct the name $\aleph$ by reuniting the fragments of it that are scattered over the set of concepts $C$, and attempting to reconnect them in just the right way, so that they jointly reconstitute the
meaning of \( a \), but without their additional meaning’s (the meaning that does not apply to \( a \)) impeding the meaning of \( a \) from coming to the fore? The task here is analogous to trying to put back together a myriad fragments that we know once constituted an object, but where the object is not a sum of the fragments (like a jigsaw puzzle), but rather each fragment contains a bit of information pertaining to the whole, and it is only when (or, if) the fragments are put together in just the right way that the bits of information combine to give an image of the object that emerges from the fragments but is not reducible to the aggregate of their arrangement.

The task of arranging concepts in such a way that they come together to give expression to the object whose traces they bare just is the task of building constellations. Importantly, however, the constellation does not give an image of the object as if the name were fully available once again, as if language had not been fragmented and separated from the object. Rather, the image that emerges in the constellation expresses the fragmentation that has arisen: it expresses the thing in its separation from language, and language in its fallen state.

Benjamin calls the content of the ‘image’ that arises in the constellation the “idea” [\textit{Idee}]. The idea is for Benjamin the symbol in which thing and concept come together. The idea is a unity in which the substantiality of language is recovered through a re-institution of the connection between word and thing. The distinction between the idea and the concept is in the first place a distinction between two different functions of language. The expressive function of words leads to the formation of ideas; whereas their communicative function moves in the medium of concepts. This functional distinction between the word as idea and the word as concept is implied in such claims as
that, “Was aber solche Namen als Begriffe nicht vermögen, leisten sie als Ideen, in denen nicht das Gleichartige zur Deckung, wohl aber das Extreme zur Synthese gelangt;” and

Worte sind, neben den Zeichen der Mathematik, das einzige Darstellungsmedium der Wissenschaft und sie selber sind keine Zeichen. Denn im Begriff, als welchem freilich das Zeichen entspräche, depotenziert sich eben dasselbe Wort, das als Idee sein Wesenhaftes besitzt.

The idea is the symbolic representation in language of the phenomena, where the strength of calling it “symbolic” is the implication that the representation is not separable from the phenomena (as it is in the relation between the sign and the phenomena) but rather the linguistic and ontological completion of the phenomena through expression of their being. This is why Benjamin says that ideas are not “contained” in the phenomena—as would, for instance, a trope—but are rather connected to the phenomena in the representation (read: symbol) of the phenomena. The idea just is the coming together of word and thing in the unity of the symbol. Hence the idea does not comprehend the thing as something falling under it but rather expresses (represents) the

355 Benjamin, Walter, Ursprung des Deutschen Trauerspiels, in Gesammelte Werke I (Frankfurt am Main: Zweitausendeins, 2011), 777. English translation by John Osborne in The Origin of German Tragic Drama (London and New York: Verso, 2003), 41: “As ideas, however, such names [terms, words] perform a service they are not able to perform as concepts: they do not make the similar identical, but they effect a synthesis between extremes.”

356 Benjamin, Walter, Ursprung des Deutschen Trauerspiels, in Gesammelte Werke I (Frankfurt am Main: Zweitausendeins, 2011), 778. English translation in The Origin of German Tragic Drama (London and New York: Verso, 2003), 42: “Words, along with mathematical signs, are the only means of expression available to science, and they are not signs. For in the concept, to which the sign would, of course, correspond, the very word which realizes its essence as idea, is depotentiated”.


358 And, in this view of the symbol we see clearly the influence of the George circle and in particular of Klages’ ideas in Benjamin’s thought.
thing in something like an event of (linguistic) disclosure. The idea therefore fulfills the role of the original name; it is not a recovery of the name, but it is a stand-in for the name insofar as it achieves a symbolic restoration of the original unity of thing and human linguistic expression.

Die Idee ist ein Sprachliches, und zwar im Wesen des Wortes jeweils dasjenige Moment, in welchem es Symbol ist. Im empirischen Vernehmen, in welchem die Worte sich zersetzt haben, eignet nun neben ihrer mehr oder weniger verborgenen symbolischen Seite ihnen eine offenkundige profane Bedeutung. Sache des Philosophen ist es, den symbolischen Charakter des Wortes, in welchem die Idee zur Selbstverständigung kommt, die das Gegenteil aller nach außen gerichteten Mitteilung ist, durch Darstellung in seinen Primat wieder einzusetzen.

This account of the word as idea immediately opens up the question of how profane language is reunited with the objects, what kind of procedure the philosopher follows in order to witness this re-unification in thought. This question is addressed by Benjamin’s theory of anamnesis and constellations.

In a receptive, contemplative stance, the philosopher recalls the original form of perception in which things were given fully from within:

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359 This way of putting things is of course very “Heideggerian.” In fact, Benjamin’s conception of truth is close to Heidegger’s, at least insofar as truth is not given in knowledge but rather in a moment, a flash, an originary “perception” of the being of the thing. See Benjamin’s discussion of truth in Benjamin, Walter, Ursprung des Deutschen Trauerspiels, in Gesammelte Werke I (Frankfurt am Main: Zweitausendeins, 2011), 766-8. English translation by John Osborne in The Origin of German Tragic Drama (London and New York: Verso, 2003), 29-31.


The idea is something linguistic, it is that element of the symbolic in the essence of any word. In empirical perception, in which words have become fragmented, they possess, in addition to their more or less hidden, symbolic aspect, an obvious, profane meaning. It is the task of the philosopher to restore, by representation, the primacy of the symbolic character of the word, in which the idea is given self-consciousness, and that is the opposite of all outwardly-directed communication.
Die platonische Anamnesis steht dieser Erinnerung vielleicht nicht fern. Nur daß es nicht um eine anschauliche Vergegenwärtigung von Bildern sich handelt; vielmehr löst in der philosophischen Kontemplation aus dem Innersten der Wirklichkeit die Idee als das Wort sich los, das von neuem seine benennenden Rechte beansprucht. \[361\]

The idea is reached through neither induction nor deduction, but is rather received by the philosopher as a kind of revelation (an event of disclosure).

But this does not mean that the philosopher is passive in her contemplation, or that this is a mystical account of philosophical knowledge. In order for the object to “speak” for itself in the idea, the philosopher must intervene, and she does so in a very concrete way by confronting the word, as concept, with an exemplary particular: the object to be interpreted, which language hopes to be able to ‘name.’ \[362\] The choice of the particular is crucial and requires an exercise of intuition on the part of the philosopher: a combination of receptive attentiveness and artistic creativity. There is no algorithm given for the choice of the particular; thus, philosophical knowledge is never guaranteed. But, once the philosopher finds a suitable particular, the confrontation between it and the concept unfolds into a grouping of conceptual relations that, when fully completed in what Benjamin calls the “constellation,” discloses the idea. The constellation gathers the

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Platonic anamnesis is, perhaps, not far removed from this kind of remembering; except that here it is not a question of the actualization of images in visual terms; but rather, in philosophical contemplation, the idea is released from the heart of reality as the word, reclaiming its name-giving rights.

fragments of discursive language around the object in such a way that the idea arises, so that the non-conceptual in the object expresses itself in language.

The exemplary particular is the one that challenges the inner unity of the concept to the fullest extent.

Und zwar liegen jene Elemente, deren Auslösung aus den Phänomenen Aufgabe des Begriffes ist, in den Extremen am genauesten zutage. Als Gestaltung des Zusammenhanges, in dem das Einmalig-Extreme mit seinesgleichen steht, ist die Idee umschrieben. … Vom Extremen geht der Begriff aus. Wie die Mutter aus voller Kraft sichtlich erst da zu leben beginnt, wo der Kreis ihrer Kinder aus dem Gefühl ihrer Nähe sich um sie schließt, so treten die Ideen ins Leben erst, wo die Extreme sich um sie versammeln.363

The exemplary particular challenges the unity of the conceptual elements that have sedimented around the thing that we want to express. By confronting the concepts with the particular, specific relations between the conceptual elements become exacerbated: relations where they are in tension with, or even straightforwardly contradict, each other in their common application to the thing, or relations where elements of different concepts, which are not connected logically, arise as reciprocally illuminating of some objective features of the thing. These relations, which are not imposed by the philosopher but rather emerge from the confrontation between the various conceptual


[T]hose elements which it is the function of the concept to elicit from phenomena are most clearly evident at the extremes. The idea is best explained as the representation of the context within which the unique and extreme stands alongside its counterpart. … The concept has its roots in the extreme. Just as a mother is seen to begin to live in the fullness of her power only when the circle of her children, inspired by the feeling of her proximity, closes around her, so do ideas come to life only when extremes are assembled around them.
elements in the exemplary particular, are the relations that ultimately draw the boundaries of the “constellation.”

The art of gathering those concepts and placing them in relation to each other in such a way as to reconstitute the lost unity of the name just is the art of constructing constellations. By choosing the exemplary particular carefully, so that it embodies the extremes of the concept, and by actively pushing the concept to the maximal amount of internal tension that it can tolerate without losing its integrity, the procedure delineates the boundary of meaning of the thing in the idea; it reconstitutes the limits of the symbol. And the constellation is successfully constructed only when this outer edge of meaning is fully drawn, when the various concepts sedimented in the object have been confronted with each other and pushed to the maximum degree of tension they can bear, so that these oppositions can draw the boundaries of the constellation. “Die Darstellung einer Idee kann unter keinen Umständen als geglückt betrachtet werden, solange virtuell der Kreis der in ihr möglichen Extreme nicht abgeschritten ist.”

This discussion should be reminiscent of the method we saw Adorno use in his interpretation of Kant’s distinction between phenomena and noumena in chapter 7. The exemplary particular in this case was Kant’s philosophy, which Adorno chooses precisely because, he claims, in Kant’s system the inner contradictions in the conceptual theory, the tensions and “fractures,” are “mit unvergleichlicher Redlichkeit aufgezeichneten” [noted

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364 Benjamin, Walter, *Ursprung des Deutschen Trauerspiels*, in *Gesammelte Werke I* (Frankfurt am Main: Zweitausendeins, 2011), 782. English translation by John Osborne in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (London and New York: Verso, 2003), 47: “The representation of an idea can under no circumstances be considered successful unless the whole range of possible extremes it contains has been virtually explored.”
with incomparable honesty]. This makes Kant’s philosophy particularly amenable to the kind of interpretation that proceeds by exacerbating the inner contradictions and oppositions in the theory, and reading them in light of each other, until a complete picture emerges that brings out a hidden meaningfulness in them (a complete picture that reconstitutes the non-conceptual nature in the object). Philosophical interpretation for Adorno depends on the expectation that when all the contradictions are drawn, theoretically exacerbated, and presented in relation to each other in the constellation, an image of the non-conceptual experience that originally sought expression in the theory should arise.

Adorno’s view that the experience thus recovered is the historical core of the object comes from Benjamin. Benjamin argues in the *Trauerspiel* that the meaning reconstituted in the idea is not an otherworldly unity (e.g. a Platonic idea or self-standing universal) but rather a historical narrative ontologically constitutive of the thing. What is revealed in the manifestation of truth is irreducibly historical. Here we see, in terms of Benjamin’s work, the beginnings of a more materialistic and less theologically grounded interpretation of language—an interpretation that became ever more prominent with his conversion to historical materialism and, for a time, to Bolshevism, and which should remind us of Adorno’s ideas of the ‘core of objectivity’ in things as historical sedimentation, an idea Adorno takes from Benjamin. The idea disclosed in a constellation


To create constellations is to give a voice to nature and, since the history of nature is in its being (in the same way that time is in (ontologically constitutive of) phenomena for Benjamin), the expression of nature tells the history of its historical becoming. The art of constructing constellations is the act of lending a voice to the historical text of nature’s own being. Benjamin calls it the “science of the origin,” and says,

366 Benjamin, Walter, Ursprung des Deutschen Trauerspiels, in Gesammelte Werke I (Frankfurt am Main: Zweitausenendeins, 2011), 782, emphasis mine. English translation by John Osborne in The Origin of German Tragic Drama (London and New York: Verso, 2003), 47: That which is comprehended in the idea

has history, in the sense of content, but not in the sense of a set of occurrences which have befallen it. Its history is inward in character and is not to be understood as something boundless, but as something related to essential being, and it can therefore be described as the past and subsequent history of this being. The past and the subsequent history of such essences is—as a token of their having been redeemed or gathered into the world of ideas—not pure history, but natural history. The life of the works and forms which need such protection in order to unfold clearly and unclouded by human life is a natural life.

367 Benjamin uses the world Ursprung for what gets translated as ‘origin,’ and he emphasizes that his ‘science of the origin’ seeks to uncover the Ursprung, not the Entstehung, of things. However, I have been using Entstehung to talk about what Benjamin calls Ursprung. My use of Entstehung is based on the discussion of these terms in chapter 6, where I explained the genealogical sense that Nietzsche and Foucault give to Entstehung, Herkunft, and Ursprung, and I argued that Entstehung and Herkunft are what Adorno and Benjamin are concerned with in their project to unearth the ‘origins’ of things, which makes their project genealogical in the Nietzschean-Foucauldian sense. Benjamin uses Ursprung in the sense in which I (following Nietzsche and Foucault) have used Entstehung and Herkunft, and he uses Entstehung in the sense of the factual (non-interpreted) origin of things (which is of course not the sense in which the genealogist is interested). See Benjamin, Walter, Ursprung des Deutschen Trauerspiels, in Gesammelte Werke I (Frankfurt am Main: Zweitausenendeins, 2011), 781: “Ursprung, wiewohl durchaus historische Kategorie, hat mit Entstehung dennoch nichts gemein. Im Ursprung wird kein Werden des Entsprungenen, vielmehr dem Werden und Vergehen Entspringendes gemeint. Der Ursprung steht im Fluß des Werdens als Strudel und reißt in seine Rhythmik das Entstehungsmaterial hinein.” English translation by John Osborne in The Origin of German Tragic Drama (London and New York: Verso, 2003), 45: “Origin [Ursprung], although an entirely historical category, has, nevertheless, nothing to do with genesis [Entstehung]. The term origin is not intended to describe that which emerges from the process of becoming
Im nackten offenkundigen Bestand des Faktischen gibt das Ursprüngliche sich niemals zu erkennen, und einzig einer Doppeleinsicht steht seine Rhythmik offen. Sie will als Restauration, als Wiederherstellung einerseits, als eben darin Unvollendetes, Unabgeschlossenes andererseits erkannt sein. In jedem Ursprungsphänomen bestimmt sich die Gestalt, unter welcher immer wieder eine Idee mit der geschichtlichen Welt sich auseinandersetzt, bis sie in der Totalität ihrer Geschichte vollendet daliegt. Also hebt sich der Ursprung aus dem tatsächlichen Befunde nicht heraus, sondern er betrifft dessen Vor- und Nachgeschichte.368

And the question of determining “origins” is not merely an art of speculation without regard for “the facts”: “Denn jeder Ursprungsnachweis muß vorbereitet auf die Frage nach der Echtheit des Aufgewiesenen sein. Kann er sich als echt nicht beglaubigen, so trägt er seinen Titel zu Unrecht.”369 Yet the art of seeking “the origin” is not a merely empirical procedure. Its success and legitimacy depend on the fact or phenomenon (the exemplary individual) that is chosen, and it is in this choice that the philosopher displays intuitive understanding and artistic creativity.

and disappearance. Origins is an eddy in the stream of becoming, and in its current it swallows the material involved in the process of genesis.” The quotation below, in which Benjamin characterizes what he means by ‘origin’ (Ursprung) in more detail should make it clear that he is talking about what I have been calling Entstehung in my discussion of ‘natural history.’ See my original discussion of the terms Urprung, Entstehung, and Herkunft in chapter 6.


That which is original is never revealed in the naked and manifest existence of the factual; its rhythm is apparent only to a dual insight. On the one hand it needs to be recognized as a process of restoration and reestablishment, but, on the other hand, and precisely because of this, as something imperfect and incomplete. There takes place in every original phenomenon a determination of the form in which an idea will constantly confront the historical world, until it is revealed fulfilled, in the totality of its history. Origin is not, therefore, discovered by the examination of actual findings, but it is related to their history and their subsequent development.

369 Benjamin, Walter, *Ursprung des Deutschen Trauerspiels*, in *Gesammelte Werke I* (Frankfurt am Main: Zweitausendeins, 2011), 781. English translation by John Osborne in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (London and New York: Verso, 2003), 46: “For every proof of origin must be prepared to face up to the question of its authenticity. If it cannot establish this, then it does not merit the name.”

A well-chosen exemplary particular, when confronted with its concepts, will yield a coherent history of the thing’s becoming. The philosopher’s method in this process consists not in “forcing” meaning out of the object through the application of logical rules, but rather in knowing how to question the thing through a process that Benjamin calls “mortification” [Mortifikation], in such a way that it expresses its being in a text of its own becoming.

Because the idea expresses the historical being of the thing, Benjamin calls it a “monad.” In the idea, the phenomenon is not an individual that instantiates a concept, but rather the center of a force field around which a number of concepts are arranged in such a way as to tell the history of the phenomenon. But the full history of the thing reflects its historical relation to all other things from the point of view of its own being—of how these relations constitute its own history. “Die Idee ist Monade – das heißt in Kürze: jede Idee enthält das Bild der Welt. Ihrer Darstellung ist zur Aufgabe nichts Geringeres gesetzt, als dieses Bild der Welt in seiner Verkürzung zu zeichnen.”

The idea is

\[\text{Die Idee ist Monade} – \text{das heißt in Kürze: jede Idee enthält das Bild der Welt. Ihrer Darstellung ist zur Aufgabe nichts Geringeres gesetzt, als dieses Bild der Welt in seiner Verkürzung zu zeichnen.}\]

\[\text{370 Benjamin, Walter, } \text{Ursprung des Deutschen Trauerspiels, in Gesammelte Werke I} \text{ (Frankfurt am Main: Zweitausendeins, 2011), 782. English translation by John Osborne in } \text{The Origin of German Tragic Drama} \text{ (London and New York: Verso, 2003), 46:} \]

The authentic—the hallmark of origin in phenomena—is the object of discovery, a discovery which is connected in a unique way with the process of recognition. And the act of discovery can reveal it in the most singular and eccentric of phenomena, in both the weakest and clumsiest experiments and in the overripe fruits of a period of decadence.

\[\text{371 Benjamin, Walter, } \text{Ursprung des Deutschen Trauerspiels, in Gesammelte Werke I} \text{ (Frankfurt am Main: Zweitausendeins, 2011), 783. English translation by John Osborne in } \text{The Origin of German Tragic Drama} \]
comparable to Lebniz’s monad because it contains within its own being all of its relations to other things; but, whereas a Leibnizian monad contains its “objective” relations to other things as would be seen by a divine gaze, Benjamin’s monads tell the story of their being from their own, unique perspective in the order of things. In other words, the phenomenon releases a view of the social-experiential life-world in which it came to be (its ‘origin’ or historical core of objectivity); and in this sense expresses the whole of reality, but only from its unique perspective within the whole.

We see here a motif that we have already found in Adorno, which he took from Benjamin: the idea that the goal of philosophical interpretation is to express the non-conceptual in the object, which is both the innermost core of objectivity in the object, and the social-experiential context in which the object came to be. Adorno, like Benjamin, considers the object to be a ‘monad’ in the sense that its ‘inside’ contains the whole context of its origin (what Benjamin calls ‘Urprung’ and I have been calling, following Foucault, ‘Herkunft’ and ‘Entstehung’) and, when successfully interpreted and expressed philosophically, it provides insight into the whole social and historical world to which the object belongs and how this world survives in the present. In Negative Dialektik, Adorno claims that the very possibility of philosophy depends on “die unverbürgte Erwartung, jedes Einzelne und Partikulare, das sie [die Philosophie] enträttselt, stelle gleich der Lebniz’schen Monade jenes Ganze in sich vor, das als solches stets wieder ihr entgleitet; freilich nach prästabilierter Disharmonie eher als Harmonie.”

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*Tragic Drama* (London and New York: Verso, 2003), 48: “The idea is a monad—that means briefly: every idea contains the image of the world. The purpose of the representation of the idea is nothing less than an abbreviated outline of this image of the world.”

It is not my purpose here philosophically to probe Benjamin’s theory of ideas, but rather to describe it to the extent that it is necessary for understanding its influence on Adorno. With this in mind, there are two points I want to stress about what we have seen of Benjamin’s views on language so far. The first thing is that Benjamin conceives of language not as a human invention but rather as a medium given to the human being (or: the specific kind of being of the human being that allows) for the expression of the world, of objectivity. The relation between human language and non-human reality is one of erotic desire (in the Platonic sense of erōs); the word longs for its completion in the full expression of the thing, and non-human things long for their expression in the word. Adorno everywhere echoes Benjamin’s idea that philosophy is driven by the desire to express the thing in its particularity, and suggests that doing so requires the “Sehnsucht” [longing] of the concept for “die Sache” [the thing]: the “Errettung” der Dinge [the rescue of the thing] “meint die Liebe zu den Dingen” [means the love of things]. Knowledge is only possible because concepts, despite their pathological state, still contain a longing for the thing. Philosophical knowledge requires a relation of desire and love for what is other, and language is the seat of this desire and the condition for the possibility of its expression.

individual and particular which it [philosophy] deciphers presents the whole within itself like a Leibnizean monad (the whole which as such (as the whole) always eludes philosophy), certainly as a pre-established disharmony rather than harmony.”

373 Adorno, Negative Dialektik, in Gesammelte Schriften, Vol. 6 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1970), 152.

374 Ibid., 191: “Die Dinge verhärten sich als Bruchstücke dessen, was unterjocht ward; seine Errettung meint die Liebe zu den Dingen.”
The second thing I want to emphasize is that, in the Trauerspiel account, the idea is a fulfillment of the naming power of language, but the way in which this fulfillment occurs is less esoteric than we might have expected on the basis of Benjamin’s musings in the essay on language. The idea does not give the phenomenon in an unspeakable name but rather in a configuration of relations that disclose the historical being of the thing in relation to all other things. The idea is therefore in a sense not a full restitution of the mystical wholeness of the divine name but rather an illumination of how things and words stand in relation to each other in the intelligibility of the symbol, through which they can each be seen as ruins of an original whole. It is precisely as ruins that they reveal their significance, their very being as a historical text of suffering. Again, this is an idea that Adorno takes from Benjamin and endorses in full.


Adorno takes the idea of constellation construction full-fledged from Benjamin and, like Benjamin, he takes the constellation to offer a ‘method’ whereby the object’s relation to language is both restored—insofar as the object’s non-conceptual nature is expressed in the constellation—and exhibited as a ruin.

There is one more development of Benjamin’s thinking that is essential for our purposes, and that is the final materialistic transformation of his account of the origins of language. In this later development, the theological context that ensured the non-instrumental origins of language is recast in terms of the mimetic faculty of the human being. The latter is for Benjamin a faculty for producing resemblances in a natural world that expresses itself through mimicry.


The moment in which nature and history become commensurable with each other is the moment of passing. This is the central cognition in Benjamin’s *Origins of German Tragedy*. The poets of the Baroque, we read there, envisioned nature ‘as eternal passing, in which the Saturnian eye of that generation alone recognized history.’ And not just that generation’s eye; natural history still remains the canon of interpretation for philosophers of history: ‘When history, in tragedy, makes its entrance on the stage, it does so as writing. The countenance of nature is inscribed ‘History’ in pictographs of passing. The allegorical physiognomy of nature’s history, brought to the stage by tragedy, is really present as a ruin.’ This is the transmutation of metaphysics into history. It secularizes metaphysics in the secular category pure and simple, the category of decay. Philosophy interprets that pictography, the ever new Mene Tekel, in microcosm—in the fragments which decay has chipped, and which bear the objective meanings. No recollection of transcendence is possible any more, save by way of perdition; eternity appears, not as such, but diffused through the most perishable.


Nature produces similarities; one need only think of mimicry. The highest capacity for producing similarities, however, is man’s [the German term actually refers to ‘the human being’ [Mensch],
The account of language in this essay retains a great deal from the earlier account, but with a materialistic or, rather, a naturalistic twist. In the earlier accounts, Benjamin held that the being of all things is expression, and the way in which the expression of things reached its culmination in human language was through the naming activity of human beings, made possible by God’s gift of his original language to Adam. In the new account, the language of nature is mimicry, and the original bridge between things and their expression in human language is no longer the divinely ordained name but rather the onomatopoetic function of language. Additionally, the word’s ability to unite itself with, and give expression to, the thing is no longer understood as a power of naming but rather as the specifically human ability to produce similarities on the basis of nature’s own correspondences—its “mimicry.” Natural correspondences [natürliche Korrespondenzen] are “Stimulantien und Erwecker des mimetischen Vermögens...welches im Menschen ihnen Antwort gibt” [stimulants and awakens of the mimetic faculty that answers to them in the human being].

In mimetic behavior, human beings attempt to recreate the thing—for example, in dancing, in cultic events, etc. The mimetic faculty, in its attempt to express the thing, gives rise to language. Benjamin now sees the origin of language as rooted in its onomatopoetic function—the word’s attempt to replicate the thing, to express it in the thing’s own terms. However, Benjamin’s account involves a rather unusual construal of “onomatopoeia.”


The notion of onomatopoeia is straightforward when we consider the imitation in phonetic language of natural sounds to refer to the event or thing that produces the sound. But, if onomatopoeia is to give an account of the formation of language generally, it must involve the imitation in language of things and events that are not acoustic. So, the relation between the linguistic expression and the (non-acoustic) thing or event is not one of structural or representational similarity, but rather what Benjamin calls *sinnlose Ähnlichkeit*, variously translated as “nonsensuous similarity” or “non-representational similarity.” This is a primordial similarity between language and things, which holds them together because the original language arose from the imitation (mimesis) of things.

Benjamin gives two examples of *sinnlose Ähnlichkeit*, first in relation to the spoken word and then in relation to written language. With respect to the spoken word, he says, “Ordnet man nämlich Wörter der verschiedenen Sprachen, die ein Gleiches bedeuten, um jenes Bedeutete als ihren Mittelpunkt, so wäre zu erforschen, wie sie alle – die miteinander oft nicht die geringste Ähnlichkeit besitzen mögen – ähnlich jenem

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381 Benjamin’s idea that original language expresses the thing by being non-representationally like the thing is strikingly similar to Merleau-Ponty’s view of an “original” language that is constituted directly by an expressive gesture arising from the world, what he calls the “singing of the world.” This expression seems to me particularly apt for expressing Benjamin’s idea of the mimetic origin of language. The original speech, in Merleau-Ponty’s and Benjamin’s accounts, expresses an original experience of the object, where the object expresses itself in the subject’s expression of the emotional texture of the encounter with the object and the world. The relationship between the object and the linguistic expression of the original encounter with it is fully motivated by the object; thus, it is not subjective expression but rather the self-expression of nature.
Bedeuteten in ihrer Mitte sind.” Now, we might say that calling the relation of terms in different languages to a single referent a *sinnlose Ähnlichkeit* is unnecessarily obscure, as the relation at issue is simply that of denotation. However, for Benjamin, explaining the relation between the different terms and their object as simply denotation does not clarify things, because the relation of denotation is an external relation where word and thing are each self-sufficient and come together arbitrarily. For Benjamin, however, the relation between word and thing cannot be contingent all the way; word and thing were originally intrinsically related to each other because the word arose as an attempt to imitate the thing, and some of this intrinsic relation survives in language. It is in fact this intrinsic original relation between word and thing that is crucial for understanding language and its expressive power, without which there is no hope of knowledge or truth. The word’s relation to the thing is inseparable from the very constitution and intelligibility of the word: It is a relation constitutive of the essence of the word.

Benjamin’s second example of *sinnlose Ähnlichkeit* is graphology. Here the relevant “similarity” is a relation between written script and the unconscious of the writer. Benjamin notes,

> Die Graphologie hat gelehrt, in den Handschriften Bilder zu erkennen, die das Unbewußte des Schreibers darinnen versteckt. Es ist anzunehmen, daß der mimetische Vorgang, welcher dergestalt in der Aktivität des Schreibenden zum

382 Benjamin, Walter, “Über das Mimetische Vermögen,” in *Gesammelte Werke II* (Frankfurt am Main: Zweitausendeins, 2011), 447. English translation by Edmund Jephcott in “On the Mimetic Faculty,” in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, vol. 2 (Cambridge and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996), 721: “For if words meaning the same thing in different languages are arranged about that signified as their center, we have to inquire how they all—while often possessing not the slightest similarity to one another—are similar to the signified at their center.”

The notion of *sinnlose Ähnlichkeit* is crucial for Benjamin, and it is also crucial for Adorno (who speaks of much the same thing under the heading of “affinity”) because it is this primordial similarity between words and things, and its survival in language, that affords language its expressive power, through which alone the non-conceptual can be exhibited in the constellation. The case of graphology is helpful for understanding how much is involved in this idea. The handwriting in a piece of script contains indications of the being of the writer, her unconscious attitudes and desires. Similarly, thinks Benjamin, language in general contains traces of the being of natural things. Just like the linguistic expression of an individual expresses her unconscious being, human language in general expresses the unconscious history of humanity, which is a history of nature because it is an archaic memory of the unity between things and their expression in mimicry. Nonsensuous similarity is therefore a relation between explicit meanings in language and an unconscious meaning in which the unity of word and thing is preserved.


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Graphology has taught us to recognize in handwriting images that the unconscious of the writer conceals in it. It may be supposed that the mimetic process which expresses itself in this way in the activity of the writer was, in the very distant times in which script originated, of utmost importance for writing. Script has thus become, like language, an archive of nonsensuous [*sinnlose*] similarities, of nonsensuous correspondences.
Die Annahme liegt nahe, daß dies die Stationen wurden, über welche jene mimetische Begabung, die einst das Fundament der okkulten Praxis gewesen ist, in Schrift und Sprache ihren Eingang fand. Dergestalt wäre die Sprache die höchste Stufe des mimetischen Verhaltens und das vollkommenste Archiv der unsinnlichen Ähnlichkeit: ein Medium, in welches ohne Rest die früheren Kräfte mimetischer Hervorbringung und Auffassung hineingewandert sind, bis sie so weit gelangten, die der Magie zu liquidieren.  

And the *sinnlose Ähnlichkeit* that ties together the explicit meanings of language with the unconscious element in which nature expresses itself in these meanings is made self-conscious in the symbol, in the semiotic element of language. “Alles Mimetische der Sprache kann vielmehr, der Flamme ähnlich, nur an einer Art von Träger in Erscheinung treten. Dieser Träger ist das Semiotische. So ist der Sinnzusammenhang der Wörter oder Sätze der Träger, an dem erst, bitzartig, die Ähnlichkeit in Erscheinung tritt.”

From beginning to end, Benjamin ties the non-instrumental use of language and its ability to express nature to symbolism. The transmission of symbols in language is made possible by the unconscious memory of mimicry contained in language, and the

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‘To read what was never written.’ Such reading is the most ancient: reading prior to all languages, from entrails, the stars, or dances. Later the mediating link of a new kind of reading, of runes and hieroglyphs, came into use. It seems fair to suppose that these were the stages by which the mimetic gift, formerly the foundation of occult practices, gained admittance to writing and language. In this way, language may be seen as the highest level of mimetic behavior and the most complete archive of nonsensuous [sinnlose] similarity: a medium into which the earlier powers of mimetic production and comprehension have passed without residue, to the point where they have liquidated those of magic.

386 Benjamin, Walter, “Über das Mimetische Vermögen,” in Gesammelte Werke II (Frankfurt am Main: Zweitausendeins, 2011), 447. English translation by Edmund Jephcott in “On the Mimetic Faculty,” in Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, vol. 2 (Cambridge and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996), 722: “[T]he mimetic element in language can, like a flame, manifest itself only through a kind of bearer. This bearer is the semiotic element. Thus, the nexus of meaning of words or sentences is the bearer through which, like a flash, similarity appears.”
revelation of this symbolic dimension restores language’s ability to give a voice to nature; it allows nature to speak its history. The symbol itself becomes manifest in the ‘Idea’ that is exhibited in the constellation, and which exhibits the object in its relation to our discursive language as a ruin.\(^{387}\)

\(^{387}\) A word needs to be said at this point about Benjamin’s attitude toward symbolism and allegory. On the one hand, Benjamin is highly critical of the Romantic notion of the symbol—that is, the notion that takes the symbol to be an embodiment of transcendence, and thus to give the object in its wholeness. For Benjamin, this view of symbolism covers over the broken state of the real by giving the appearance of a false totality. Compared to this notion of symbolism, the allegorical view of language (which Benjamin analyzes in his study of the German Träuerspiel) considers the relation between words and things to be merely conventional, accidental, and arbitrary. The allegorical attitude thus acknowledges the gulf that exists between things and post-lapsarian language, and shatters the appearance of totality that characterizes the Romantic view of language as symbolic. Benjamin clearly favors the allegorical attitude toward language as opposed to the Romantic conception of symbolism, for, whereas the Romantic conception of symbolism naively assumes that we can still ‘name’ things (i.e., that language and the thing named come together into a whole in the symbol), the allegorical view replicates the brokenness and alienation characteristic of the modern condition. The allegorical view of language is correct—i.e., adequate to the world—insofar as it corresponds to the state of reality as governed and determined by the commodity form. Benjamin holds that the expression of modern experience is necessarily allegorical, as this form of expression destroys the semblance of meaningfulness in impoverished experience, whereas the Romantic symbol claims to embody a transcendent meaningfulness that is no longer available in experience. As Friedlander puts it, “Allegory...most adequately expresses, or actualizes in experience, the catastrophe that the modern world has become” (Walter Benjamin: a Philosophical Portrait (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2012), 155). By revealing the poverty of modern experience, allegory begins the process of disenchanting a false appearance of wholeness in the object. Thus, the allegorical approach to objects (works of art, texts, etc) is a necessary first step toward discovering whatever truth there is in the object by destroying the false appearance that ordinarily surrounds the object.

But the goal of allegory is destructive: it is to extinguish a false appearance of beauty and wholeness, but it cannot say anything true about the object: allegory destroys the object and is left with nothing; its achievement is just to show the gulf that separates subject and object, language and nature. Allegory is thus not the end of interpretation for Benjamin, but rather must be followed by the attempt to redeem the object through the construction of the constellation, in which the dialectical image (which discloses the “idea”) is revealed. The construction of the dialectical image, however, requires a reversal of the allegorical stand through the redemption of phenomena. And the conception of language that makes the constellation possible is rooted in a second, non-Romantic view of language as essentially symbolic, as capable of revealing intention-less truth. Truth, however, is not revealed by giving the transcendent object as a whole, but rather by expressing the object’s condition of fragmentation as an urgent call for redemption. Whereas the allegorical gaze has a stance of melancholy and detachment toward the object, the dead object, the dialectical image reveals the object as containing life. The life of the object is its past, which lives within the object as a living force in the present, a living force that we are called to garner and deploy for a radical transformation of the object’s present condition. In the dialectical image, the object is revealed as expressing an imperative: the imperative of a revolutionary transformation of the present, which alone can answer to the catastrophes of the past and the broken state of the object. The object is disclosed as containing within it an urgent call for action, for radical change in the instant of the present moment.

The role of language in the constellation that reveals the dialectical image is symbolic because it achieves the goal of expressing the object in the object’s own voice, but it achieves this task not in the manner that Romantic symbolism claims is possible (by giving the transcendent object in language), but
8.2 Adorno’s incorporation of Benjamin’s views on language

First, I want to emphasize the extent to which Adorno borrows from Benjamin’s philosophy of language. I would argue, in fact, that all the elements proper to what I have called the genealogical, or natural-historical strand of Adorno’s thought are indebted to Benjamin. In what follows, I will first quickly go through the main elements that Adorno takes from Benjamin’s philosophy of language and incorporates fully into his account of negative dialectics. Then I will discuss the main difference between Adorno and Benjamin, and I will argue for a way to conceptualize the issue that employs the framework I have developed thus far for understanding Adorno’s negative dialectics; this will yield a new way to thematize the Adorno-Benjamin debate that is, in my view, particularly perspicuous.

Let us briefly consider the discussion of Benjamin above and the extent to which Adorno takes Benjamin’s philosophy of language on board. First, there is the idea that language harbors a capacity to express the non-conceptual, and that it is able to fulfill this capacity by reviving its mimetic function, by which it is able to exhibit its object, not discursively, but rather in (and not through) its rhetorical presentation. I have already emphasized the importance of rhetoric for Adorno: “Rhetorik vertritt in Philosophie, was

rather in a two step process by which, through allegory, the object is first shown to be broken by the catastrophic condition of the present, and then, in a second step that restitutes the symbolic function of language, this catastrophic condition is translated into an imperative for radical transformation, an imperative imposed by the object itself: a cry for redemption uttered by nature. The dialectical image no longer holds a merely melancholy attitude toward the past and the state of the object, but rather fulfills the object in a new configuration of the present: the present as infinite possibility for radical conversion and for a new appropriation of the past. In this sense, the dialectical image achieves a symbolic task, but this task is construed differently from the Romantic conception of symbolism, because the transcendence revealed in the dialectical image is not the transcendence of a meaningful object in-itself, given as reconciled with language; but is rather the transcendence of possibility at the heart of the present.
Anders als in der Sprache nicht gedacht werden kann. And the reason rhetoric is so crucial is because in it survives “ihr integrales Ausdrucksmoment, unbegrifflich-mimetisch” [its integral, non-conceptual mimetic moment]. The idea of language’s “mimetic function,” and its potential to express nature in nature’s own voice, is clearly inherited from Benjamin. More than that: even Adorno’s conception of the method by which the mimetic function of language is released just is Benjamin’s idea of the constellation. Adorno agrees with the procedure that highlights the importance of finding an exemplary particular, one that contains fissures and tensions through which the failure of concepts to express the particular are made obvious. Adorno also argues that the exemplary particular must be pushed to the extreme: that its fissures must be developed into full-fledged contradictions, to the maximum degree possible that still maintains the integrity of the object. Adorno also, like Benjamin, claims that in this procedure the object can guide the receptive thought to gather concepts around the object in a way that reconstitutes the non-conceptual element in the object and expresses it in language.

The process is guided by the object because it consists in language’s attempt to express the object mimetically. In the constellation, language becomes like the object in the sense that it expresses the non-conceptual core of the object. The meaning of this ‘like’ should importantly not be understood (in both Benjamin and Adorno) as a

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structural similarity between the form of the constellation and the object to which it gives voice, but rather a sinnlose Ähnlichkeit between the non-conceptual in the object and an experiential content disclosed in the constellation, a similarity that has nothing to do with representation but rather is exemplified, for instance, in an unconscious binding relation between an emotionally charged encounter with an object and the gasp that follows, where the gasp is literally animated by the encounter with the object.

The similarity between language and object in which the non-conceptual is expressed comes to life only in the experience (geistige Erfahrung) that the reader has (or, can have) when reading the material. This experience re-animates the object not by giving a representation of it that is ‘like’ the object, but by disclosing an experience of the historical core of objectivity in the object—the object’s origin in its particular socio-historical experiential context as it survives in and affects the present. The distance between this origin and what the object ‘says of itself’ (its conceptual components as well as the history of the object’s interpretation) is not bridged but rather made obvious in the experience of distance, loss, and suffering that the reader recreates in her intellectual engagement with the text. Only through the reader’s direct engagement with the text and her actually bringing to life the experiential content in the text is the experience of the non-conceptual disclosed to her; in this sense the method of constellations has an irreducible experiential component.

There are three important consequences that follow from the fact that the constellation is built on the basis of, and with the goal of expressing, a content that is irreducibly experiential—and both Benjamin and Adorno voice these consequences. The first is that the building of a constellation requires a discriminatory and perspicuous eye,
an aesthetic (artistic) ability to see differences that matter and pursue associations
revealed by the object to a receptive and contemplative author, and an imaginative
capacity that is creative and receptive at once. These requirements set the construction
of constellations emphatically aside from the writing of deductive arguments, for
instance. There is no algorithm to follow in order to construct a successful constellation;
the path is in each case unique and uniquely driven by the interpreter’s experience of the
object of analysis in a receptive form of thought. The goal is to open up the
experiential content of the text, which is available in the object but can only be accessed
and exhibited through the use of the right interpretive keys, and there is no general
formula for finding these keys, since they depend on the particularity of the object and
can only be discovered in the interpreter’s experience of the object: “Es kommt der

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391 The ability to make oneself receptive to the core of objectivity in the object, to be able to be
guided by it and to express it linguistically, is not a passive capacity but rather requires a perspicuous and
discriminating eye, according to both Benjamin (as we saw above) and Adorno. See Adorno’s comments
on this topic in Negative Dialektik, in Gesammelte Schriften, Vol. 6 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1970),
54-55

Das Ideal des Differenzierten und Nuancierten...bezieht sich nicht allein auf eine individuelle, für
Objektivität entbehrliche Fähigkeit. Seinen Impuls empfängt es von der Sache. Differenziert ist,
wer an dieser und in ihrem Begriff noch das Kleinste und dem Begriff Entschlüpfende zu
unterscheiden vermag; einzig Differenziertheit reicht ans Kleinste heran. In ihrem Postulat, dem
des Vermögens zur Erfahrung des Objekts—und Differenziertheit ist dessen zur subjektiven
Reaktionsform gewordene Erfahrung—findet das mimetische Moment der Erkenntnis Zuflucht,
das der Wahlverwandtschaft von Erkennendem und Erkanntem.

English translation by E.B. Ashton in Negative Dialectics (New York and London: Continuum, 2005), 44-
45:

The ideal of discrimination, of the nuance...refers not only to an individual faculty which
objectivity can do without. A discriminating man is one who in the matter and its concept can
distinguish even the infinitesimal, which escapes the concept; discrimination alone gets down
to the infinitesimal. Its postulate of a capacity to experience the object—and discrimination is the
experience of the object turned into a form of subjective reaction—provides a haven for the
mimetic element of knowledge, for the element of elective affinity between the knower and the
known.
Second, the successful reading of a philosophy presented as a constellation requires that the reader have a particular experience. That which is disclosed in the constellation, because it is an experiential content, is first of all not just communicated in final form to the reader (like a list of propositions could be), but rather is successfully expressed to the reader only when the latter reads it and experiences it in turn. Benjamin and Adorno both hold that truth is not communicable; it requires subjective experience and not every reader is capable of having, or interested in pursuing, this experience.

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392 Adorno, “Die Aktualität der Philosophy,” Philosophische Frühschriften, Gesammelte Schriften, Band I (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2003), 340. English translation in Adorno, “The Actuality of Philosophy,” Telos, No. 31 (Spring 1977), 130: “The point of interpretive philosophy is to construct keys, before which reality springs open. As to the size of the key categories, they are specially made to order.” See also Negative Dialektik, in Gesammelte Schriften, Vol. 6 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1970), 66: “Als Konstellation umkreist der theoretische Gedanke den Begriff, den er öffnen möchte, hoffend, daß er aufspringe etwa wie die Schlösser wohlverwahrtter Kassenschränke: nicht nur durch einen Einzelschlüssel oder eine Einzelmnummer sonder eine Nummernkombination.” English translation in Negative Dialetics (New York and London: Continuum, 2005), 163: “As a constellation, theoretical thought circles the concept it would like to unseal, hoping that it may fly open like the lock of a well-guarded safe-deposit box: in response, not to a single key or a single number, but to a combination of numbers.”

393 See Adorno, Negative Dialektik, in Gesammelte Schriften, Vol. 6 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1970), 50-52, where Adorno argues that the capacity to have philosophical experience, in turn required for philosophical reflection and knowledge, is not something that everyone has or is interested in having. He notes that this may seem like an elitist argument in a world that makes it compulsory for thought to be presented in the manner of scientific knowledge and replicable by everyone. But philosophical knowledge is not like this, first of all because it requires a critical capacity and motivation in the reader—a capacity that, he argues, the pathological social world in which we live is all but destroying. The individual who can and might be receptive to philosophical experience must not have been completely stripped of her critical and experiential capacities by the social system; she must not have been thoroughly normalized. But being spared total control by the system in the way needed to retain the capacity for criticism requires an element of luck.

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In schroffem Gegensatz zum üblichem Wissenschaftsideal bedarf die Objektivität dialektischer Erkenntnis nicht eines Weniger sondern eines Mehr an Subjekt. Sonst verkürmert philosophische Erfahrung. ... Jedenfalls behält der subjektive Anteil an Philosophie, verglichen mit der virtuell subjektlosen Rationalität eines Wissenschaftsideals, dem die Ersetzbarkeit aller durch alle vor Augen steht, einen irrationalen Zusatz. Er ist keine Naturqualität. Während das Argument demokratisch sich gebärdet, ignoriert es, was die verwaltete Welt aus ihren Zwangsmitgliedern macht. Geistig können nur die dagegen an, die sie nicht ganz gemodelt hat. Kritik am Privileg wird zum Privileg: so dialektisch ist der Weltlauf. ... Kriterium des Wahren ist nicht seine
The constellation provides a field, a carefully arranged mosaic of fragments and connections, intended to be animated by the reader in an experience. But the constellation cannot tell the reader what to think or replace the subjective experience in which alone the objective content of the constellation can become alive. Philosophy, like music, requires an experience in order to become alive and be expressed: “[W]as in ihr [in der Philosophie] sich zuträgt, entscheidet, nicht These oder Position; das Gewebe, nicht der deduktive oder induktive, eingleisige Gedankengang. Daher ist Philosophie

unmittelbare Kommunizierbarkeit an jedermann. Zu widerstehen ist der fast universalen Nötigung, die Kommunikation des Erkannten mit diesem zu verwechseln und womöglich höher zu stellen, während gegenwärtig jeder Schritt zur Kommunikation hin die Wahrheit ausverkauft und verfälscht.

English translation by E.B. Ashton in Negative Dialectics (New York and London: Continuum, 2005), 40-41:

In sharp contrast to the usual ideal of science, the objectivity of dialectical cognition needs not less subjectivity, but more. Philosophical experience withers otherwise. … In any case, compared with the virtually subjectless rationality of a scientific ideal that regards all men as interchangeable, the subjective share in philosophy retains an irrational adjunct. It is not a quality of nature. While the argument pretends to be democratic, it ignores what the administered world makes of its compulsory members. Only a mind which it has not entirely molded can withstand it. Criticizing privilege becomes a privilege—the world’s course is as dialectical as that. … Direct communicability to everyone is not a criterion of truth. We must resist the all but universal compulsion to confuse the communication of knowledge with knowledge itself, and to rate it higher, if possible—whereas at present each communicative step is falsifying truth and selling it out.

394 See Adorno, Negative Dialektik, in Gesammelte Schriften, Vol. 6 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1970), 43:

Das Wesen wird durchs Résumé des Wesentlichen verfälscht. Philosophie, die zu dem sich herabließe, worüber schon Hegel spottete; geneigten Lesern sich anbequemte in Erklärungen darüber, was man nun bei dem Gedanken sich zu denken habe, gliederte der vordringenden Regression sich ein, ohne doch mit ihr Schritt zu halten.

English translation by E.B. Ashton in Negative Dialectics (New York and London: Continuum, 2005), 32:

The essence is falsified by a résumé of essentials. If philosophy were to stoop to a practice which Hegel already mocked, if it were to accommodate its kind reader by explaining what the thought should make him think, it would be joining the march of regression without being able to keep up the pace.

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wesentlich nicht referierbar. Sonst wäre sie überflüssig; daß sie meist sich referieren läßt, spricht gegen sie.”

Finally, the irreducible experiential content of the constellation means that the only way to know whether the constellation succeeds or not, the only way to know if it truly expresses the object in the object’s own voice or not, the only way to evaluate the constellation and be transformed (or not) by it, is through the experience of it. The proof is in the pudding. “Was als solche, in der Gestalt allgemeiner Reflexion, gesagt werden muß, um nicht wehrlos zu sein vor der Philosophie der Philosophen, legitimiert sich allein in der Durchführung, und dadurch wird Methode wiederum negiert. … Philosophisches Ideal wäre, daß die Rechenschaft über das, was man tut, überflüssig wird, indem man es tut.”

In all of these ways of conceiving the constellation, and the way in which the constellation exhibits the non-conceptual in the object, Adorno follows Benjamin. And there is one more similarity between Adorno and Benjamin’s conception of the constellation that I want especially to emphasize, and which goes again a common misconception that takes it that, whereas Benjamin thinks that the constellation succeeds in ‘unlocking’ the non-conceptual, for Adorno it ultimately does not because the distance between language and the non-conceptual is never bridged. Adorno does think that the

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395 Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*, in *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. 6 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1970), 44. English translation by E.B. Ashton in *Negative Dialectics* (New York and London: Continuum, 2005), 33: “The crux is what happens in it, not a thesis or a position—the texture, not the deductive or inductive course of one-track minds. Essentially, therefore, philosophy is not expoundable. If it were, it would be superfluous; the fact that most of it can be expounded speaks against it.”

396 Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*, in *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. 6 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1970), 58. English translation by E.B. Ashton in *Negative Dialectics* (New York and London: Continuum, 2005), 48: “What must be said methodically, in the form of general reflection, in order not to be defenseless against the philosophers’ philosophy, can be legitimized solely in execution, thus denying the method in turn. … The philosophical ideal would be to obviate accounting for the deed by doing it.”
constellation succeeds, and in the same way as Benjamin: namely, in an expression that simultaneously gives a voice to the non-conceptual in the object and maintains a distance from this content because what is given voice to is the object in its state of separation from expression in (fallen) language, so that the relation between the constellation and the object is that of a gaze looking at a ruin (but a ruin that calls for redemption). The content that is expressed—the experiential origin of the object, or, what is the same, the “non-conceptual” in the object—is not identical with the object, but rather discloses the experiential context that first gave rise to the object as an original expression of suffering, and this content stands in ineluctable opposition (non-identity) with the conceptual elements also in the object (both the elements it explicitly offers as self-interpretation and the elements that have become sedimented in the object through its interpretation). It is the very distance (or “non-identity”) between the non-conceptual and the conceptual in the object that is expressed: in other words, the object is exhibited as fragmented. But this does not mean that the constellation fails to reveal the non-conceptual in the object. Adorno says, “Konstellationen allein repräsentieren, von außen, was der Begriff im Innern weggeschnitten hat, das Mehr, das er sein will so sehr, wie er es nicht sein kann. Indem die Begriffe um die zu erkennende Sache sich versammeln, bestimmen sie potentiell deren Inneres, erreichen denkend, was Denken notwendig aus sich ausmerzte.”

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Adorno, Negative Dialektik, in Gesammelte Schriften, Vol. 6 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1970), 164-5, emphasis mine. English translation by E.B. Ashton in Negative Dialectics (New York and London: Continuum, 2005), 162: “By themselves, constellations represent from without what the concept has cut away within: the ‘more’ which the concept is equally desirous and incapable of being. By gathering around the object of cognition, the concepts potentially determine the object’s interior. They attain, in thinking, what was necessarily excised from thinking.”
I have argued that Adorno takes the key ideas of his philosophy of language and his theory of constellations from Benjamin. Like Benjamin, Adorno thinks that language in its discursive, merely conceptual function, is in disarray and cannot “unlock” the non-conceptual element in the object. But disclosing this element is the main goal of philosophy. Like Benjamin, Adorno thinks this goal can be achieved because language has not only a conceptual, but also an expressive function. There is an original tie between words and the world, between words and the original experience of nature that first motivated linguistic expression, and words moreover contain within them the history of fragmentation that now separates them from their original expression “in the name.” This tie is maintained in language because traces of the non-conceptual are constitutive of concepts and can be exhibited through the rhetorical element of language. Benjamin, and Adorno too on occasion, put this idea in terms of the surviving traces of the name in the concept. Again, for both Benjamin and Adorno, recovering the ‘naming’ function of language requires grouping concepts around the object in a constellation.

Both Adorno and Benjamin describe the method to build the constellation as beginning with a careful choice of the object of analysis: the exemplary particular. The philosopher ‘intervenes’ by confronting concepts with an exemplary particular, which is an object that challenges the unity of the concept to the highest extreme. The philosopher proceeds by pushing the conceptual content in the exemplary particular to contradictory extremes, with the goal of finding the outermost logical boundaries of the concepts in the object, as well as the associative relations by which these concepts can be gathered around the object, in order to reconstitute the original phenomenon that first animated the object and the manner in which the origin still constitutes the thing in its present state.
Again in agreement, Benjamin and Adorno argue that the content recovered in the constellation is irreducibly historical: it is the natural history or objective historical core sedimented in the object: the non-conceptual nature in the object displayed as a natural history of the object. The construction of this natural history requires the determination of origins. The success of a determination of origins is shown in recognition of the phenomena in geistige Erfahrung. Adorno and Benjamin both describe this experience as one that reveals the phenomenon as a monad: as intrinsically connected with, and revelatory of, the social-historical life-world in which the phenomenon first arose and the relation of this original experiential content to the present. The constellation, by recovering the relation between the object and its non-conceptual origin, exhibits the relation between language and the object as a ruin, and provides a field in which the reader can experience the painful separation that stands between her world and the very same world seen from the standpoint of nature.

But there is a key difference between Adorno’s and Benjamin’s philosophy, and my last task in this chapter is to clarify it.

My main thesis is that the key difference between Adorno and Benjamin lies in the fact that Benjamin’s theory constitutes only one strand from among the two main strands or standpoints that, I have argued, constitute the theoretical framework of Adorno’s negative dialectics. More specifically, Benjamin’s theory constitutes the specific strand of Adorno’s genealogical or natural-historical method, by which the mediation of the social order by nature is exhibited in the experience of reflection. But Benjamin lacks the other strand that in Adorno’s theory is crucial for philosophical reflection, namely the systematic, dialectical strand which, though in tension and even
opposition to the interpretation of the non-conceptual (i.e., to the natural history of the object), is nonetheless necessary to express the “contradiction in the object.”

Moreover, as I have already argued, the systematic-dialectical strand is essential for Adorno because it corresponds to what the social order is like. The fact that Benjamin does not have this strand is due to the fact that he conceives of the social order differently, and this divergence between Adorno and Benjamin ultimately hinges on their divergent views on society and historical materialism.

Though Adorno was initially extremely close to Benjamin philosophically, differences between them began to emerge in the 30’s, as Benjamin grew closer in his relationship with Brecht and in his commitment to a more orthodox version of Marxism (even to the communism of the Soviet Union), while Adorno grew more and more Hegelian in his views and emphatically rejected orthodox marxism.

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398 My discussion here will be short and limited to the key theoretical difference between Benjamin and Adorno; for an insightful and detailed discussion of the philosophical underpinnings and historical origins of the relationship between Adorno and Benjamin, the reader should consult Susan Buck-Morss excellent study in The Origin of Negative Dialectics (New York: The Free Press, 1979).

399 Susan Buck-Morss says that Adorno was “basically converted by the methodological introduction to Benjamin’s Trauerspiel book” (The Origin of Negative Dialectics (New York: The Free Press, 1979), 168.

400 As Adorno became more and more involved with the Institut für Sozialforschung, and especially after he joined the institute in New York (1938), the institute’s stress on Hegelian mediation (notable in Horkheimer and Marcuse, for instance) became more and more influential on Adorno, even though he never abandoned the method of constellations. In fact, immediately after moving to New York, Adorno engaged in a new study of Hegel’s Logic and wrote to Benjamin on August 2, 1938: “Sonst beschäftige ich mich mit der erneuten Lektüre der Hegelschen Logik, eines wahrhaft ungeheuren Werkes, das heute in allen seinen Teilen zu mir spricht. Sie werden einen Reflex davon im Husserl finden” (Lonitz, Henri, ed. Theodor W. Adorno: Briefe und Briefwechsel, Vol. 1 (Frankfurt Suhrkamp, 1994), 345-346). English translation in Lonitz, Henri, ed., trans. Walker, Nicholas, Theodor W. Adorno and Walter Benjamin: The Complete Correspondence 1928-1940 (Cambridge, Polity Press, 1999), 265-6: “I am busy reading Hegel’s Logic again, a truly astonishing work, which speaks to me today in every one of its parts. You will find this fact reflected in my Husserl piece.”
Adorno’s basic disagreement with Benjamin was that Benjamin was insufficiently dialectical. More specifically, Adorno disagreed with Benjamin’s construction of ‘dialectical images’ [**diektische Bilder**]. These images were supposed to be flashes of illumination in which the constellation finds its climax when it exhibits the non-conceptual. Importantly, as I argued above, Adorno’s complaint was not that the constellation should not result in such a flash of illumination or insight. Rather, Adorno’s complaint was that Benjamin’s actual method for constructing the constellation was flawed, and because of its flaws resulted not in a moment of insight into social reality, but rather collapsed into an unmediated combination of positivism and superstition, of crude social theory and archaism, whereas philosophical insight consists precisely in

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401 In a letter to Benjamin dated November 10, 1938, in which Adorno gives a scathing critique of Benjamin’s first draft of the Baudelaire essay, which he had sent to the Institute in New York a month before, Adorno writes:


> The ‘mediation’ which I miss and find obscured by materialistic-historiographical evocation, is simply the theory which your study has omitted. But the omission of theory affects the empirical material itself. On the one hand, this omission lends the material a deceptively epic character, and on the other it deprives the phenomena, which are experienced merely subjectively, of their real historico-philosophical weight. To express this another way: the theological motif of calling things by their names tends to switch into the wide-eyed presentation of mere facts. If one wanted to put it rather drastically, one could say that your study is located at the crossroads of magic and positivism. This spot is bewitched. Only theory could break this spell—your own resolute and salutarily speculative theory. It is simply the claim of this theory that I bring against you here.
revealing the tension between the social element (the contradiction in the object) and the archaic, regressive moment of reality (revealed through natural history in the construction of the constellation, and grounded in the contradiction in the concept). We can put the point by saying that Adorno did not disagree with Benjamin’s conception of the constellation, but rather considered Benjamin’s method ultimately unable to construct the constellation, and instead collapsing into two unmediated views of the object, both of which Adorno found positivistic and flawed.

Benjamin’s method, like Adorno’s, combines two strands of interpretation: the first is a materialist critique of society, and the second, which Adorno refers to as the “inverse theological” element of “profane illumination” [the latter is Benjamin’s term] is the element that seeks to give voice to the non-conceptual in the object. The difference between Adorno’s and Benjamin’s methods, as is clear time and time again in their correspondence, consists in two (related) things: First, their interpretation of the materialist social critique, and, second, the relation between this critique and the natural-historical critique. The disagreement was not, however, about the natural-historical critique itself, except insofar as, in Adorno’s view, the improper relation between the two forms of critique actually makes the macro-structure of the natural-historical critique (the constellation) flawed and unable to give truly critical insight into social reality. On what follows, I briefly elaborate on these two centers of the disagreement between Adorno and Benjamin.

As I have said, the first crux of disagreement has to do with the materialist critique of social conditions. In the thirties, Benjamin’s materialist critique became more and more congenial to orthodox Marxism, reading superstructural elements as
immediately related to the economic base; one gets the sense that he suggests they are
one-sidedly determined by the economic base, though the issue is precisely that Benjamin
does not thematize the relation between superstructural and economic elements, but
simply builds images of the phenomena and juxtaposes them with images of the
economic conditions. Adorno, as we have already seen (chapter 3) is critical of the
Marxian view of the relation between base and superstructure; he favors a more Hegelian
approach that sees every social element as mediated by, and itself meditating of, the
social totality, and not just determined by or immediately related to the economic base.

In his scathing critique of the first draft of Benjamin’s Baudelaire essay, written in
a letter to Benjamin dated November 10, 1938, Adorno says,

Lassen Sie hier so simpel und hegelisch mich ausdrücken wie nur möglich. Täusche ich mich nicht sehr, so gebricht es dieser Dialektik an einem: der Vermittlung. Es herrscht durchwegs eine Tendenz, die pragmatischen Inhalte Baudelaires unmittelbar auf benachbarte Züge der Sozialgeschichte seiner Zeit und zwar möglichst solche ökonomischer Art zu beziehen.

But, he adds sharply,


Let me express myself in as simple and Hegelian manner as possible. Unless I am very much mistaken, your dialectic is lacking in one thing: mediation. You show a prevailing tendency to relate the pragmatic contents of Baudelaire’s work directly and immediately to adjacent features in the social history, and wherever possible, the economic features, of the time. … I regard it as
This difference in views about the manner in which society is mediated—whether one-sidedly by economic determination or by a mediated, reciprocal co-determination with the social order as a whole—was also a key issue at stake in Benjamin and Adorno’s disagreement over the status of art. In the essay on “Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit” [“The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility”], Benjamin analyzes the loss of art’s aauratic character as a result of the technological advances that make the art object reproducible, paradigmatically through photography and film. This is already a departure from Adorno’s views about the art-object, which he takes to enjoy a kind of independent logos not reducible to social determination, and to evolve at the crossroads of a dialectical relation between the artist and the historically developed techniques of her time. A sharper divergence of views is found in the fact that Benjamin welcomed the change caused in art by reproducible techniques as offering new possibilities for the politization of art as a revolutionary tool for mobilizing the masses. Benjamin even accused the view that celebrates art as autonomous (l’art pour l’art)—a view that Adorno endorses to some extent, though he takes it to be mediated by the ever-threatening tendencies of regression—as involving fascist tendencies. In a letter written on March 18, 1936 in response to Benjamin’s essay, Adorno says of the views of art as autonomous, on the one hand, and as motivated by its service for revolution, on the other, that

methodologically inappropriate to give conspicuous individual features from the realm of the superstructure a ‘materialist’ turn by relating them immediately, and perhaps even causally, to certain corresponding features of the substructure. The materialist determination of cultural traits is only possible if it is mediated through the total social process. (italics in the original, underline mine)
As this quotation makes clear, the disagreement between Adorno and Benjamin was connected to a deep divergence in their views regarding the proletariat: whereas Benjamin was now writing for a proletariat revolutionary subject (this was part of his adoption of Bolshevism in the thirties, and is part of the reason for offering art as a revolutionary tool in the essay on the work of art), for Adorno the very existence of such a subject was no longer tenable, and the belief in the revolutionary subject bespoke a misunderstanding of social and historical conditions.

Adorno maintains, as we have seen (chapters 2-4), that the subjugation of individuals and, particularly, the working class, under conditions of advanced capitalism, is not due just to economic conditions—that is, to a dialectical contradiction between productive forces and productive relations—and class struggle, but rather also to new psychological conditions of direct manipulation by the social totality through the culture industry, film, and other forms of mass communication, a direct manipulation that made possible the ascendancy of productive relations as the determining principle of social life.

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Both are torn halves of an integral freedom, to which, however, they do not add up. It would be romantic to sacrifice one to the other, either with that bourgeois romanticism which seeks to uphold the ‘personality’ and such-like mystification, or with that anarchistic romanticism which places blind trust in the spontaneous powers of the proletariat within the historical process—a proletariat which is itself a product of bourgeois society. To a certain extent, I must charge your essay with this second form of romanticism.
as a whole (this is what I have called the determining role of the principle of exchange). Since he takes it that the social totality mediates every single element of social life, Adorno holds that ignoring the psychological manipulation that brings the individual into virtual identity (albeit a pathological identity) with the social order results inevitably in a misunderstanding of society and, even worse, in ideology—for instance, in Benjamin’s support of Bolshevik Russia. This coercive identity in which the totality and the individual come to relate to each other in advanced capitalism requires in Adorno’s view a dialectical approach, and it is precisely the dialectical deficit in Benjamin’s philosophy that Adorno criticizes and which sets them apart.

Since Adorno holds that every social phenomena and object of analysis must be read in light of its total mediation by the social systematic totality, the social-materialist strand in his thought needs to be connected to the natural-historical strand with a dialectics of suspicion. Benjamin’s different view of the social conditions and the sort of critical analysis that they call for results in a different, undialectical relation between the two critical strands, which, as we have seen, he simply juxtaposes with each other. This takes us to the second main point of divergence in their views that I identified above.

During the thirties, Benjamin’s interpretation of natural history became characterized more and more by an unmediated juxtaposition of social-materialist elements, on the one hand, and archaic elements that are read as anticipating and already containing modernity in them and that are deployed for a critical understanding of the present, on the other. But Benjamin juxtaposed these elements without explicit theoretical reflection on their relation. Whereas Benjamin thought that this method would result in a sudden image that strikes the reader in a moment of illumination, an
illumination of the phenomenon that arises by itself from the patchwork of images laid over each other, Adorno argues that this method in the end simply collapses into the two isolated and unmediated extremes in the image (rather than a sum of the extremes that yields a flash of insight): on the one hand, the crude orthodox Marxist analysis of social phenomena (a sort of crude positivism in Adorno’s assessment), and, on the other, an esoteric display of archaic historical elements and their influence in the present, but without the interpretation that alone shows them to be regressive (a ‘magical’ and positive theology, a new mythology, rather than the inverse theology that Adorno praised in Benjamin’s early essays). As I have already suggested, this is connected to the first disagreement because it is precisely the failure to see how all of social reality is mediated by the social totality as a system that in Adorno’s opinion robs Benjamin’s critique of the ability to exhibit the specific pathological quality of the social world, and the fact that it affects social life as a whole, in its moment of ‘illumination’. (Recall the dispute between Adorno and Benjamin over the latter’s essay on art: In Adorno’s view, it is because Benjamin has an incorrect assessment of the social element that he elevates

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404 I am reconstructing the difference in terms of Adorno’s criticism of Benjamin: that is, in terms of why, assuming Adorno’s view of social reality and critical thought, Benjamin’s method has to be seen as flawed and insufficiently critical. Benjamin, of course, has philosophical reasons to prefer his method. By using a juxtaposition of images and quotations without inserting his own views about how they are connected in the object of inquiry, Benjamin seeks, first, to estrange the image or quotation by displaying it without creating a context for it (thus producing a Brechtian Verfremdungseffekt in the reader), and, second, to bring the reader’s attention away from the information conveyed by an image or quote and toward the “ways of meaning” of the images or quotes (the term ‘ways of meaning’ is used by Eli Friedlander in his excellent study of Benjamin’s philosophy: See Walter Benjamin: a Philosophical Portrait (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2012). For Benjamin, the mosaic of images and quotations lets meaning appear in a way not directed by the intention of the author or the reader, and this form of ‘unintentional presentation of truth’ is the only way in which truth can be ‘revealed’ to us. For Adorno, however, this method is always in danger of becoming regressive. I think whether one agrees with Adorno critique of Benjamin or not ultimately depends on whether one accepts Adorno’s conception of society as a systematic totality characterized by pathology and repression, and therefore in need of a deeper dialectics of suspicion. My aim here is not to defend and endorse Adorno’s critique of Benjamin, but rather only to clarify why on the basis of Adorno’s social theory and epistemology, Benjamin’s method would be flawed.
reproducible art, especially film, as a tool for revolutionary change, not realizing the regressive potential of this art form).

As early as his review of Benjamin’s essay on Kafka in 1934, Adorno showed strong reservations about Benjamin’s method. In a letter dated December 17, Adorno first praises the essay, particularly the method of “inverse theology” that employs natural interpretation to illuminate the supernatural, and the supernatural to illuminate the most natural, but he also says that the work is incomplete: “Denn dies ist ihre Unfertigkeit. Das Verhältnis von Urgeschichte und Moderne ist noch nicht zum Begriff erhoben und das Geligen einer Kafkaintepretation muß in letzter Instanz davon abhängen.”

Adorno discusses specific details from the Kafka piece, but the point seems to be the same in each case: The juxtaposition of archaic and dialectical images needs more conceptual mediation; it remains too image-like, and Adorno recommends a more Hegelian approach, noting that the juxtaposition of unmediated extremes remains “abstrakt im Hegelschen Sinne” [abstract in the Hegelian sense].

Less than a year later, Adorno reiterates the same criticism with regard to Benjamin’s first exposé of the Arcades Project. His main complaint is that the method is undialectical because it presents history and nature by just juxtaposing images of both instead of mediating dialectically between them. In a letter from 2-4 August, 1935,

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406 Lonitz, Henri, ed. Theodor W. Adorno: Briefe und Briefwechsel, Vol. 1 (Frankfurt Suhrkamp, 1994), 92. Adorno also admits that Benjamin is “probably unaware” of just how close his method is to Hegel, but how its shortcomings are already explained by Hegel in the fact that the method remains too abstract.
Adorno says that “Die Formel daß »das Neue sich mit dem Alten durchdringt« ist mir höchst bedenklich im Sinne meiner Kritik am dialektischen Bild als einer Regression. Nicht wird darin aufs Alte zurückgegriffen sondern das Neueste ist, als Schein und Phantasmagorie, selber das Alte.” Adorno argues that both the materialist element and the natural-historical (inverse theological) element suffer from a lack of mediation and become too positivistic; only a “radicalization” of the dialectical moment can prevent a fall into positivism. “Eine Restitution der Theologie oder lieber eine Radikalisierung der Dialektik bis in den theologischen Glutkern hinein müßte zugleich eine äußerste Schärfung des gesellschaftlich-dialektischen, ja des ökonomischen Motives bedeuten.”

The same philosophical difference continued to be evident in Adorno’s response to other works by Benjamin until his death (with the exception of the second Baudelaire essay, which Benjamin corrected in view of Adorno’s criticisms so that it would be published in the journal of the Institut für Sozialforschung, and the “Thesen über den Begriff der Geschichte,” the last of Benjamin’s written work, which Adorno in any case did not see until 1941, after Benjamin’s death). Adorno’s reaction to the first draft of Benjamin’s Baudelaire’s essay was extremely critical. Benjamin’s movement between minute facts and elements of nineteenth century life and the economic conditions was


connected through associations without mediation. Adorno comments in a letter to Benjamin dated November 10, 1938: “Es werden die Motive versammelt aber nicht durchgeführt. ... Als ein treuer Kenner Ihrer Schriften weiß ich sehr wohl, daß es an Präzedenzfällen für Ihre Verfahrungsweise in Ihrem oeuvre nicht fehlt.” But, he asks rhetorically, “ist das ein »Material«, das geduldig auf Deutung warten kann, ohne daß es von der eigenen Aura verzehrt würde?" Adorno’s tone becomes more critical; he says that Benjamin’s essay moves in a realm [ein Bereich] “wo Historie und Magie oszillieren. ... Lassen Sie hier so simpel und hegelisch mich ausdrücken wie nur möglich. Täusche ich mich nicht sehr, so gebricht es dieser Dialektik an einem: der Vermittlung.”

Adorno further explains,


409 Lonitz, Henri, ed. Theodor W. Adorno: Briefe und Briefwechsel, Vol. 1 (Frankfurt Suhrkamp, 1994), 365. English translation in Lonitz, Henri, ed., trans. Walker, Nicholas, Theodor W. Adorno and Walter Benjamin: The Complete Correspondence 1928-1940 (Cambridge, Polity Press, 1999), 281: “Motifs are assembled but they are not elaborated. ... As a close reader of your works, I realize that there is certainly no shortage of precedents for this procedure in your writings.” But, Adorno asks rhetorically, “can such ‘material’ as this patiently await interpretation without being consumed in its own aura?”

brechen: Ihre eigene, die rücksichtslose, gut spekulative Theorie. Es ist deren Anliegen allein, das ich gegen Sie anmelde.\textsuperscript{411}

The difference between Adorno and Benjamin boils down to their disagreement not over the philosophy of language or the method of constellations in its macrostructure, but rather in the fact that Adorno argues that the method requires dialectical mediation—it must contain systematic dialectics at its “Glutkern” [the “fiery core,” translated by Walker as “glowing heart”],\textsuperscript{412} as the force by which the fragments that are arranged in the constellation are held together internally and constitute a monadic expression of the social totality—whereas Benjamin simply juxtaposed natural-historical and social-materialist images without interweaving them dialectically. The difference, I propose, is ultimately based in the fact that Adorno conceives of social reality as really and concretely ordered in accordance with a systematic totality, with an internal teleological structure (see chapter 6), and therefore in need of a Hegelian-dialectical approach—even if this approach is not self-sufficient but is rather located by critical thought at the Glutkern of natural-history. Benjamin does not have the Hegelian-


The ‘mediation’ which I miss and find obscured by materialistic-historiographical evocation, is simply the theory which your study has omitted. But the omission of theory affects the empirical material itself. On the one hand, this omission lends the material a deceptively epic character, and on the other it deprives the phenomena, which are experienced merely subjectively, of their real historico-philosophical weight. To express this another way: the theological motif of calling things by their names tends to switch into the wide-eyed presentation of mere facts. If one wanted to put it rather drastically, one could say that your study is located at the crossroads of magic and positivism. This spot is bewitched. Only theory could break this spell—your own resolute and salutarily speculative theory. It is simply the claim of this theory that I bring against you here.

systematic view of social reality but rather a non-Hegelian Marxian conception (which Adorno assimilates to ‘orthodox marxism’), and this is the key to the difference in Benjamin’s and Adorno’s social-materialist critique. Moreover, not seeing social reality as a dialectically woven totality, Benjamin does not have any reason to think that the combination of his social-materialist critique and his natural-historical method require a dialectics of suspicion: thus the other center of gravity in the Adorno-Benjamin debate, which is the lack of theoretical mediation between the social-materialist and the inverse-theological elements in Benjamin’s dialectical images.

In the end, we can say that while Benjamin provided Adorno with one of the main critical strands in his thought, the natural-dialectical or inverse “theological” strand, Benjamin did not incorporate in his thought the systematic-dialectical strand, which, for reasons we have already discussed, Adorno considered to be a necessary moment of philosophical reflection. From Adorno’s standpoint, we could say that the problem is that Benjamin did not develop the “contradiction in the concept” (see chapter 7), precisely because he did not reflect sufficiently on the Hegelian status of the conceptual system and the way this system has come to mediate social reality in its entirety and therefore cannot be simply cut out from philosophical reflection but must rather be “broken from within.”

8.3 Conclusion

This chapter has sought to flesh out and clarify the philosophy of language that underlies Adorno’s conception of the expressive power by which philosophy is able to exhibit the non-conceptual element in the object (which in turn corresponds to the way in
which nature mediates social reality). This philosophy of language undergirds one side of Adorno’s “contradiction in the concept,” namely the idea that the conceptual element in the object contains traces of the non-conceptual and can be interpreted philosophically in a way that recovers the non-conceptual through the construction of a constellation.

The other side of the “contradiction in the concept,” which emphasizes the inevitability of dealing with the concept as a dialectically structured totality, is thoroughly Hegelian and has been discussed in other chapters (esp. chapter 4). By exhibiting the “contradiction in the concept” in the tension between its two sides, negative dialectics exhibits the object as internally fragmented (“non-identical”) because its conceptual and non-conceptual components oppose and negate each other. *This is ultimately the meaning of Adorno’s claim that negative dialectics is a dialectics of non-identity; in other words, this is the ultimate meaning of the ‘negative’ in ‘negative dialectics.’*

We now have a full view of Adorno’s “contradiction in the concept.” My remaining goal in this work will be to bring together the “contradiction in the concept” (chapters 7-8) and the “contradiction in the object” (chapters 3-4) to draw a full view of Adorno’s conception of contradiction and to explain how it works as the ultimate presupposition and force behind negative dialectics. I turn to this task in the conclusion to this study.
CHAPTER 9:
CONCLUSION

The present study began with the question of how exactly the concept of “contradiction” in Adorno’s negative dialectics can be conceived as “determinate” rather than abstract—a key condition for any notion of contradiction able to give rise to dialectical movement in philosophical reflection (chapter 1). I argued that answering this question is the key to understanding Adorno’s conception of dialectics and how it transforms the Hegelian-Marxian notion into a new (‘negative’) form of dialectic.

Based on a remark in his Vorlesung über Negative Dialektik, where Adorno claims that there are two forms of “contradiction” at work in his negative dialectic—the “contradiction in the object” and the “contradiction in the concept”—I decided to proceed by investigating in detail what each of these conceptions of “contradiction” amounts to. Chapters 2-3 laid the groundwork for the investigation, culminating in the idea that the social order’s internal determination by exchange is the ontological ground for the “contradiction in the object,” while its global mediation by nature is the ontological ground for the “contradiction in the concept.” Chapter 4 then elucidated Adorno’s conception on the “contradiction in the object.” On the other hand, chapters 5-6 presented an interpretation of the mediation of society by nature, and, on the basis of this interpretation, chapter 7 elucidated Adorno’s conception of the “contradiction in the
Having clarified the two conceptions of “contradiction” central to Adorno’s negative dialectics, my goals in this concluding chapter are, first, to show how the two forms of contradiction come together into an overall account of dialectical contradiction; second, to articulate the dialectical structure that follows from this account of contradiction; and, finally, to answer the question with which I opened this study: namely, how the overarching structure of contradiction in Adorno is a form of *determinate*, rather than ‘abstract’ or ‘skeptical’ negation.

Let us begin by recalling the results of our investigations into the two forms of contradiction at work in negative dialectics: the contradiction in the object and the contradiction in the concept.

In chapter 4, I argued that the “contradiction in the object” refers to the contradictory structure between essence and appearance that, according to Adorno, characterizes reified social reality (reality as determined in its totality by the principle of exchange), and that becomes subsumed under ‘appearance’ through the intervention of critical thought. I have argued that, for Adorno, the structure of reified society contains three distinct layers: (i) the layer of appearance, (ii) the layer of essence and its opposition to appearance; and, thirdly, (iii) the layer of interpretation that yields the pathological meaning of the structure of opposition between essence and appearance. ‘Appearance’ corresponds, subjectively, to the ordinary or positivist consciousness of finite elements and ‘facts’ constitutive of social reality and, objectively, to these elements themselves. ‘Essence’ corresponds, subjectively, to the theoretical consciousness of the
social totality as grounding the deep structure of intelligibility of the same isolated elements and, objectively, to the concrete determination of all finite elements of social life by the social totality through the principle of exchange. The idea that appearance and essence are contradictory in reified society, I have argued, is grounded in Adorno’s claim that the beliefs that the logic of finite social facts, considered in isolation from the totality that determines them, leads to conclusions that literally contradict the interpretation that analyzes them as determined by the social totality through the principle of exchange.

And the sublation (Aufhebung) of the contradiction between appearance and essence into ‘appearance’ corresponds to a conception of the social totality as internally defined and held together only by the opposition between appearance and essence, thus neither self-grounded nor grounded in a ‘deeper’ essence.

We have seen that each level of the structure of the “contradiction in the object,” defined by the relations above, corresponds to a specific form of thinking about the social order. Positivistic thought remains at the most superficial level, that of appearance, because it analyzes finite elements of social life and reproduces the structure of their appearance but does not penetrate to their ‘essence.’ The results of positivistic analyses actually contradict the kinds of results that follow from an examination of the same finite social elements or facts as determined by the whole social order of which they are part.

This other kind of examination thematizes the contradiction between appearance and essence by deploying a theoretical approach that reveals the opposition that obtains between the logic of finite facts and the logic of “the whole.” As we have seen, Adorno holds that the elucidation of this opposition requires a Hegelian, dialectical analysis of society. According to Adorno, the structure of concepts replicates the structure of social
reality—that is, the structure of the “contradiction in the object,” and it is in fact because of this homology between conceptual structure and the object (social reality as a whole), where both are systematic, closed, and teleologically ordered by the principle of exchange, that a Hegelian dialectical approach is the only way correctly to reproduce the internal structure of reified society in thought. This approach shows that any finite element under study is not fully intelligible on its own, but that understanding it rather requires that its semantic connections with the totality of which it is part be elucidated. Thus this form of thought is able not only to reproduce the surface level of society’s self-understanding (appearance), but moreover the relation that this surface level of appearance has to the structure of the social system as a whole (essence). The contradiction between appearance and essence is elucidated in the moment in which a finite element of appearance appears to be intelligible only in its antagonistic relation to the whole system, and the structure of the whole comes to the fore.

But the structure of contradiction between appearance and essence that becomes thematicized in this way is itself ‘appearance,’ insofar as it stands in need of interpretation. A form of thought that stops with the reproduction of the contradictory structure of society remains ideological for Adorno because it does not succeed in understanding that the whole structure is a structure of delusion. This is the crux of Adorno’s critique of the Hegelian/Marxian dialectical approach. Though this approach successfully reproduces concrete reality in thought, in the sense that it reproduces the structure of the system that both determines reality and thought, the meaning of the system remains hidden to it. In Hegel and Marx, the internal structure of the system is attributed to the self-sufficient totality, which in turn becomes identified with reason (whether as Geist or as historical
materialism). Thus the system, which is in reality a system of delusions, is transfigured into an autonomous totality whose structure is fully determined and determinable rather than partly non-rational and elusive from within the system.

This brings us to the other form of contradiction: the “contradiction in the concept,” elucidated in chapter 7, for this form of contradiction is discovered in thought by confronting the object of analysis (where ‘object’ refers to a philosophical or scientific theory, a work of art, a cultural production of any kind, or any other cultural product, all of which contain a reflexive structure), whose conceptual-discursive elements have the internal structure of the “contradiction in the object,” with the form of interpretation that examines the object from the standpoint of its non-conceptual natural element.

On the one hand, Adorno holds that the conceptual, discursive component in the object tends to appear as self-sufficient and independent from both the object’s non-conceptual origin in a specific social-historical life-world and the life-world’s relation to the present (i.e., how ‘origin’ subsists in the present). On the other hand, Adorno holds that the conceptual element in the object nonetheless preserves, in its rhetorical, material aspect, ‘traces’ of the non-conceptual element. Crucially, the philosophical interpretation of the rhetorical, material element results according to Adorno in a conception of the object that stands in contradiction to the conception that results from the discursive analysis of the object’s conceptual element. The “contradiction in the concept” refers to the fact that contradictory views of the object arise depending on whether the conceptual element in the object is analyzed discursively or through the method of natural history, which gives insight into the non-conceptual. The ‘constellation’ combines the dialectical method (since it is composed of fragmentary dialectical analyses that interpret
conceptual tensions in the object as revelatory of the ‘contradiction in the object’) and the natural-historical method; the constellation as a whole aims precisely to reveal the non-conceptual element in the object. The two forms of analysis involved in the constellation correspond to the object, and the tension between them, because it is a tension constitutive of the object, reveals the object as internally fragmented.

Let us reflect on the relation between the two forms of contradiction. In the explanation I have reconstructed above, we began with the “contradiction in the object” and found that this contradiction constitutes the conceptual-discursive (dialectical) element in the “contradiction in the concept,” which additionally encompasses a natural-historical element. The “contradiction in the object” reveals the structure of the object as determined by society’s opposition between essence and appearance, but the entire structure of the “contradiction in the object,” because it constitutes the discursive strand in the “contradiction the concept,” can be confronted with a rhetorical analysis of the non-conceptual in the object. The “contradiction in the object” thus appears to be sublated [aufgehoben] in the “contradiction in the concept” as one of its proper moments, since the latter arises from the confrontations of the former with a natural-historical interpretation of the object.

But I have argued that the natural-historical interpretation ‘dissolves’ the riddle initially posed by the conceptual contradictions in the object by showing how the contradictory structure is grounded in the structure of the social life-world from which the object arose (see chapter 7). The natural-historical interpretation “dissolves” the conceptual tensions in a text, for instance, not by resolving them conceptually but by interpreting them as expressions of objective experiences in social life, themselves
revelatory of the contradictory structure of the object-world in which they arose. This is why Adorno holds that the natural-historical interpretation of the object in the constellation reveals the object as a “monad”—that is, as defined by a totality of socio-historical relations with other things in the object’s original life world. For instance, in Adorno’s natural-historical interpretation of Kant’s distinction between phenomena and noumena (chapter 7) we saw that the distinction is traced back to the experience of metaphysical alienation at the point where the dominance of capitalist relations over social reality was becoming totalized.

But this interpretation of the object as a ‘monad’ just means that the object is elucidated in terms of its embeddedness into the social-totality, now understood in a more comprehensive way: that is, in terms of experiences that were not initially evident, but that can now be interpreted as arising from the antagonistic structure of society, and that deepen our understanding of this ‘antagonistic’ order. The opposition initially derived between the object’s conceptual-discursive elements and the non-conceptual social experiences expressed in these elements is now interpreted as a whole in terms of a more encompassing systematic understanding of the social reality that the object expresses. And, if Adorno is right, we always find that this more comprehensive systematic understanding is available and has the internally dirempted structure of the “contradiction in the object.” Thus we are back at the “contradiction in the object,” and it now seems that it is this form of contradiction that sublates the other, the “contradiction in the concept,” rather than vice versa.

But, of course, the object as a whole, now with the structure of the “contradiction in the object,” can be developed in terms of this contradiction—that is, in terms of the
conceptual oppositions that arise from confronting finite elements of the object with the logic of the whole in which they are embedded. Again, these oppositions are never self-interpretive but rather require to be set in opposition with a reading of their structure from the standpoint of natural history. Here we return once more to the contradiction in the concept.

This dialectical movement from one form of contradiction to the other goes on and on, at least as long as the dialectician is willing to continue her analysis: the “contradiction in the object” and the “contradiction in the concept” sublate the other and are in turn sublated by it ad infinitum. The system is relentlessly “broken” by setting it in opposition with the natural history of the object, but this natural history is in turn always subsumed back into a more encompassing system.

So, the first result we reach by bringing together our account of the two forms of contradiction is that they are joined by a logical structure whereby they are always sublated (or sublatable) under a dialectically more developed version of the other. Call this the “structure of concentric circles” (where there is no “final” circle).

This structure explains how dialectical movement is achieved in negative dialectics: how, despite its ‘negativity,’ negative dialectics is in fact a form of Entwicklungsdiälektik whose movement is directed by the object. For the movement does not simply bounce back and forth between the “contradiction in the object” and the “contradiction in the concept” at the same level of complexity. Rather, the “contradiction in the object” is sublated [aufgehoben] by the “contradiction in the concept” as a proper moment of the latter, and then the “contradiction in the concept” is resolved into the natural-historical interpretation of the object as a monadic representation for the social
totality from which the object first arose and in terms of its relation to the present, at
which point the object once again acquires the form of the “contradiction in the object,”
but at a level dialectically higher than before, and the process can be repeated without end. Importantly, each new level of interpretation is more complex than the one before
and sublates \textit{aufhebt} the previous level under it.

The fact that at every step of dialectical analysis one form of contradiction gives rise to the other, in such a way that the first is subsumed and preserved as a proper
moment of the other (that is, in such a way that the first is \textit{aufgehoben} by the next),
means that the contradiction is \textit{determinate} rather than abstract, in the sense explored in
chapter 1. Instead of leading to skeptical negation, the contradiction gives rise to a more
comprehensive view of the object, which then gives rise to a new contradiction and a new
more comprehensive view of the object, etc.

But, as I argued in chapter 1, the idea that a form of contradiction gives rise to
determinate negation requires that there be a substantial \textit{interpretation of the
contradiction} that drives it forward toward a specific new conception of the object.
Moreover, since the structure of Adorno’s negative dialectics moves always between two
different forms of contradiction, where each in turn gives rise to the other, the form of
interpretation that makes them determinate must be internal to \textit{both} the “contradiction in
the object” and the “contradiction in the concept.” Only a form of interpretation internal
to both forms of contradiction can immanently drive the dialectical movement from one
form of contradiction to the other at each step of the analysis. Accordingly, what I want
to do now is to explore what exactly the substantial interpretation driving dialectical
movement forward is, and how it is internally contained in the “contradiction in the
object,” as well as in the “contradiction in the concept,” and finally in the relation that drives each to be sublated by the other.

In what follows, I argue that the substantial interpretation that we are looking for is the notion of paranoid projection that I have attributed to Adorno (see chapter 5). This logical structure is repeated at each structural level of Adorno’s account of dialectics: (1) at the level of the “contradiction in the object,” (2) at the level of the “contradiction in the concept” that subsumes the former, and finally (3) at the higher level that relates the first two levels and subsumes them both under a new notion of the “contradiction in the object.”

(1) The contradiction in the object: The logical structure of paranoid projection is what gives rise to the “contradiction in the object” since the logic of paranoid projection explains the internal structure of the system that defines both conceptuality and social reality. As I argued in chapter 6, section 6.3, it is ultimately the mechanism of projection that accounts for the fact that the system of delusions to which it gives rise has to satisfy the demands of megalomania and the repression of nature (of the hyper-cathexis of the ego following the psyche’s withdrawal from the external world and the reconstruction of new attachments through the reconstruction of the world by projection). But these demands are incompatible: Megalomania requires that the system give rise to the appearance that the betrayed bourgeois promises of happiness and freedom were in fact achieved because the world is structured in accordance with the fully free and rational transcendental structures of the mind; and, on the other hand, the repression of nature requires that the system essentially work against the individual’s satisfaction of instinctual desires (happiness) and against the individual’s autonomy (freedom). The
system has to both increase the repression of nature, and so work against the possibilities of freedom and happiness, and present itself in an appearance that upholds precisely the values of freedom and happiness: Hence the contradiction between the essence and appearance of society, and hence the “contradiction in the object.”

(2) **The contradiction in the concept:** The same logical structure that gives rise to the “contradiction in the object” also accounts for the “contradiction in the concept.” The structure of paranoid projection gives rise to a system of delusions whose role it is to repress nature, which constitutes the form or *eidos* of conceptuality and objectivity, and which is *internally* structured as the “contradiction in the object.” This means that the conceptual-discursive element of the object—any object of analysis—is constituted from the standpoint of the paranoid system whose role is to repress nature. The non-conceptual element in the object, on the other hand, is discovered by giving a voice to the nature repressed by the system. But then it is no surprise that the interpretations of the object voiced from the standpoint of its conceptual element and from the standpoint of its non-conceptual element necessarily contradict each other, since the two constitutive layers of the object are related to each other through the logic of projective negation (see chapter 5, section 2, for my analysis of the mechanism of projection and the peculiar way by which it negates what it seeks to repress).

So, the relation between the system and nature defined by the logic of paranoid projection grounds not only the internal contradictory structure of the system (i.e., the “contradiction in the object”) but also the contradictory structure internal to the object of analysis in terms of its interpretation from the standpoint of the conceptual-discursive
element and in terms of its interpretation from the non-conceptual natural element (i.e., the “contradiction in the concept”).

(3) Return to the structure of the contradiction in the object: The natural-historical interpretation of the non-conceptual element in the object dissolves the “contradiction in the concept” into an account of the object’s original socio-historical life-world and its relation to the social order in the present, and this marks a return to the structure of the system, the “contradiction in the object.” The moment that the geistige Erfahrung of “contradiction” between concepts and nature reaches expression in the concept, it becomes subsumed under the systematic structure of concepts. This is because concepts are essentially subsumptive; the moment we give expression to an object in terms of concepts, the concepts inherently seek to encompass the object fully, and the fact that this claim to encompass the object is in the end spurious has to be once again demonstrated at a higher level of analysis through a confrontation between the discursive-conceptual elements that now define the object in a more encompassing way and the natural-history of the object. The structure of the system (the “contradiction in the object”) always returns to subsume the structure that opposes the natural element to it (to the conceptual element, which is itself structured as the system).

The reason for this ever-recurrent subsumption is explained once again by the logic of paranoid projection, which after all (for Adorno) structures both thought and reality (for us, at least), and thus always brings recalcitrant elements back under its internal order. In fact, the point is not so much that it brings nature back into the system, but rather that the system is never escaped, for the contradiction between the conceptual element in the object and the natural-historical interpretation of the object are in the end
internal to the object, and the object is internal to the system by virtue of being an object that we can think at all, and this means that we return to the “contradiction in the object.” The non-conceptual always appears, even in the best of philosophical circumstances, as repressed.

The attempt to think a-systematically is always fleeting; the system always returns, and this, at least in Adorno, is not just a regrettable but accidental quality of thought, but constitutes rather the fundamental structure of paranoid thought because paranoid projection really structures all of reality, and so thought as well. The struggle to think a-systematically is essential in order to have a geistige Erfahrung of the system’s shattering when confronted with nature, but also of the system’s ever recurring return. A form of thinking that would remain a-systematic would in any case be no window into a deeper or hidden reality, since reality (i.e. our social reality, the only one there is) is ordered by the system and the system’s impulse to encompass all of nature. It is precisely this totalitarian ‘impulse’ of the system that is experienced in geistige Erfahrung. Ultimately, the reason why Adorno holds that negative dialectics has the structure it has is because its object (social reality as a whole) is structured as a paranoid system, and, even though this structure has emerged contingently and historically, it characterizes the historically determined state of the real. Negative dialectics is allegedly philosophically superior to other forms of thinking not because it escapes the paranoid structure of the real, but because it experiences this structure in a self-reflexive manner: the geistige Erfahrung of negative dialectics contains a painful awareness of its own paranoid structure and its inability ultimately to transcend it.
The logical structure of paranoid projection thus defines the object of thought (the historically determined state of reality) and grounds the form of contradiction in negative dialectics (the “contradiction in the object” and the “contradiction in the concept”) as well as the movement that restlessly moves from one form of contradiction to the other in a never-ending dialectical progression. Without understanding the logical structure of paranoid projection, I maintain, we cannot understand the ground for either form of contradiction in negative dialectics, nor the relation between them.

I started this dissertation with the question of what makes contradiction, or “negation,” determinate in Adorno’s negative dialectics: what drives the contradiction forward so that it does not simply collapse into mere formal contradiction but rather gives rise to a new interpretation of the object. I argued that negation in Adorno cannot be made ‘determinate’ in the same way that the Hegelian negation is determinate, because, in Hegel, what makes the negation determinate is that contradictions are driven by a substantial interpretation that leads to their resolution in a position that sublates them: the interpretation is, briefly put, that Reason drives thought and being forward in a direction of the its ever growing actualization because the self-determining movement of “the Concept” is the ultimate structure of all thinkable and experienceable reality. Since Adorno rejects Hegel’s view of reality as essentially and fully determined by the self-determination of Reason, the “contradiction” that impels negative dialectics forward cannot be grounded in the Hegelian “absolute” conception of Reason. The question arose in chapter 1 of whether this entails that negation in negative dialectics is therefore simply “abstract” in the Hegelian sense—that is, a negation that is nothing but sheer contradiction and does not have an immanent principle driving it toward a specific and
substantial interpretation of the contradiction—or if there is instead in negative dialectics a different interpretation of the structure of thought and reality that drives contradiction forward dialectically and thus makes it determinate.

I have now argued that there is in fact such a substantial interpretation driving the contradiction forward, and that this interpretation just is the logic of paranoid projection. This logical structure, as we have seen, gives rise to a dialectical movement with an overall arrangement of concentric circles, where each circle is defined either by the “contradiction in the object” or the “contradiction in the concept,” and is subsumed under the other form of contradiction in the next more encompassing circle.

My answer to the question of what makes negative dialectics possible as a form of dialectical thought thus ultimately hinges in making the notion of paranoid projection central to Adorno’s philosophy. But this emphasis on Adorno’s Freudianism may elicit the danger of suggesting that Adorno’s negative dialectics rises or falls with the fate of Freudian theory—a “danger” that may seem even more pressing in light of the fact that Freud’s theory in general, and its social-theoretical applications in particular, have been under strong criticism for many years and basically fallen into disfavor in the Anglo-American academic world at least. To some extent, this worry is secondary to my purposes in this study, because my goal has been to show that the Freudian conception is in fact central to the logical structure of negative dialectics and its determinate relation to the object of reflection, and whether or not this fact brings on board new philosophical difficulties to an evaluation of the validity of negative dialectics is a further question beyond the boundaries of this investigation. In other words, my guiding goal in this dissertation has been to interpret Adorno, not to defend his theory as a whole. However,
I do want to conclude with some reflections on the philosophical consequences of making (as I have) Freud’s notion of paranoid projection central to Adorno’s philosophy.

The first point I want to stress is that my interpretation does not reduce the conception of paranoid projection that structures Adorno’s negative dialectics to Freudian theory. The logic of paranoid projection that undergirds Adorno’s account is not in every way the same as Freud’s: Freud himself does not for instance consider the system of delusions that arises in paranoia as internally structured along Hegelian lines. The incorporation of Hegel into an account of the paranoid system in a social-theoretic framework belongs specifically to Adorno’s social theory. Moreover, as we have seen, Adorno’s account of the form of interpretation by which the system’s pathological relation to nature is expressed is also not an element belonging to Freudian theory, but is rather grounded in Walter Benjamin’s philosophy of language. The overall logical structure of paranoid projection, as it belongs in Adorno’s philosophy, is thus not just the Freudian conception, but rather a sublation [Aufhebung] of Freud’s account of paranoia that incorporates a Hegelian and a Benjaminian moment, and that is itself altered as a result of this incorporation. This means that Adorno’s appropriation of Freud is not reducible to Freud’s account of paranoia and therefore does not necessarily rise or fall with the latter.

The question, then, is not that Adorno’s notion of paranoid projection just is Freud’s notion, but rather the extent to which Adorno’s notion depends on Freud’s. I will not attempt to answer this question here, but I want to make two points about it: First, that Adorno’s own notion of the logic of paranoid projection has some independence from the Freudian interpretation that he gives to it insofar as we can take the Freudian
interpretation to be not an ultimate foundation, but rather a concrete explanation and interpretation of the experience of thought that Adorno calls ‘negative dialectics.’

Everything hinges on the structure of this experience. However, second, Adorno’s description of the experience requires, minimally, some (perhaps not Freudian) concept of repression and projection and, if the integrity of these concepts is fully denied, then, I believe, the logical ground of negative dialectics as a form of dialectical reflection based on the ontological constitution of the object is denied as well. Let me briefly elaborate on these two claims.

My first point is that Adorno’s notion of the logic of paranoid projection is not logically grounded in the Freudian interpretation, but is rather an abstract logical structure to which the interpretation attempts to give concreteness.

We can try to conceive of the logical structure defined by the “contradiction in the object,” the “contradiction in the concept,” and their relation in what I have called the “logic of concentric circles” as a logical model of thought independent of its embeddedness in Freudian theory. This requires a high level of abstraction. At this level, the structure just is the logical structure that I have described, which describes the analysis of any theoretical object of reflection as unfolding, first (1) in a structure that opposes a layer of essence with a layer of appearance, then (2) in the sublation of this opposition into a dialectically higher concept of appearance that calls for confrontation with a natural-historical interpretation of the object, which confrontation then collapses into (3) a dialectically higher structure of appearance that is internally opposed to another concept of essence, etc.
If Adorno is right, this abstract logical structure is definitive of our experience of thinking, and it confirms its legitimacy, if it does at all, in its inescapable and incessant reiteration throughout our attempts to think any object at all. The claim is that the experience of trying determinately to think an object always begins by breaking the object into an internal and systematically structured contradiction that impels us to think of the ‘other side’ of the object—of an element in the object that escapes the object’s determination by the system—but the very moment we think we grasp this other side of the object, our thinking of the object is relentlessly pushed back into the system, and the process repeats itself again, and again, in our geistige Erfahrung. In the end, Adorno’s notion of negative dialectics is only fully confirmed or disconfirmed by whether or not the experience of thinking is actually described by this structure. The individual has to attempt to follow the movement of negative dialectics first-hand and either be convinced or not by the experience.

If this structure is in fact confirmed in the experience of thought, and since the structure is one of recurrent and inescapable failure at trying to think outside of the systematic constraints of thought, then the experience itself calls for interpretation. As I have described it, the experience of thinking according to Adorno is one of claustrophobia within the confines of systematic thought, and the claustrophobic quality of the experience (if it is in fact revealed in the experience of thinking) would naturally cause us to look for a way to interpret it concretely. One possible interpretation then would be an interpretation along Freudian lines, which constitutes a perhaps helpful but necessarily fallible attempt to make the allegedly claustrophobic experience of thought concrete and to account for its ever-recurrent subsumption of any object of thought under
a higher guise of the system, where this subsumption is in turn again and again shown to
elude a stable and final view of the object. I would argue that the Freudian theory
presented in *Dialektik der Aufklärung* is just such an interpretation, and it is justified
philosophically to the extent that it helps us understand concretely the predicament of our
experience of thinking and the way it arises from and resolves itself back into our
experience of the world. However, the Freudian interpretation is just an interpretation,
perhaps a very good one, but it is not a *foundation* of the experience of thought. There
may be other interpretations capable concretely of explaining and interpreting the
claustrophobic experience of thinking (assuming that the experience of thinking really is
claustrophobic), perhaps even in a more fruitful way than Adorno’s Freudian
interpretation, and I think that the construction of other such interpretations, even if they
are not ultimately compatible with Adorno’s Freudian interpretation, would be in no way
inimical to Adorno’s philosophical impulse but rather fully in line with it.

So, I am saying that the specifics of Freudian theory do not necessarily determine
the validity of negative dialectics. It is rather the underlying logical structure of thinking,
which Adorno interpreted specifically along Freudian lines, but which can perhaps be
interpreted in various other ways, that determine the validity of negative dialectics,
insofar as the latter is confirmed or disconfirmed by whether or not the experience of
thinking follows the abstract logical structure of “concentric circles.”

However, and this is my second point, this abstract logical structure is very
specific and substantive, and it requires, at the minimal level, the concepts of repression
and projection. The logical structure by which Adorno describes the experience of
thinking is, allegedly, a logic by which concepts are related to the object in such a way
that they *repress* the non-conceptual in the object, a logic by which concepts are in fact constituted by a denial of nature that is specifically *projective* (in the sense of paranoid projection), and where this projective mechanism accounts not only for the repressive relation between concepts and objects but also for the systematic and rigid structure of conceptuality. In other words, we need to have both a systematic structure characteristic of concepts, and a ‘natural element’ in both concepts and objects, where the system is related to the natural element through its origin in paranoid projection. This structure may be interpreted (that is, concretely described) through a theory that is not specifically Freudian, but it cannot be interpreted by just any theory whatsoever. The theory must, at the very least, have room for some notion of *repression* and *projection* as constitutive of the concept, of the object, and of the relation between the two. If the validity of the notions of ‘repression’ and ‘projection’ is completely denied, then, I think, the logical ground of negative dialectics is denied as well. So, for instance, if one endorses Foucault’s critique of the repressive hypothesis, it becomes impossible, in my view at least, to salvage the preconditions for understanding negative dialectics as a form of *Entwicklungs dialektik* grounded in the ontological, repressive relation between concepts and objects.⁴¹³

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⁴¹³ Foucault’s criticisms of psychoanalysis and, in particular, of the repressive hypothesis, do not all contradict Adorno’s philosophical position, but there are two claims that Foucault makes that are extremely problematic for Adorno, and specifically for my reconstruction of Adorno’s negative dialectics. The first is an empirical claim: Foucault argues that power in society is not in fact structured in accordance with repression. In fact, Foucault argues that the model of power assumed by the repressive hypothesis remains tied to an obsolete legal-juridical model of power that is still based on the idea of the sovereign. For Foucault, however, power is structured in a different way in modern society: it is a diffuse “field” of “force relations,” always unstable and operating without a unified strategy (rather, tactics and strategy co-determine each other), and always delineating possibilities for reversal, resistance, and the appropriation of discourses in unpredictable ways. For Adorno, however, power does operate in a unified systematic form that acquires ever-greater consistency (hence the ‘systematic totality’), so that there is a common and unified *form* characteristic of the discourses of power, and this discourses can at best be broken down and resisted but not appropriated and reversed. (Of course, for Adorno, the ‘breaking-down’ of the system is
In the end, the philosophical assessment of negative dialectics does not rise or fall with the details of the specific Freudian interpretation, but rather with whether or not the geistige Erfahrung that this interpretation is supposed to elucidate and make concrete is actually an experience of claustrophobia within the system, caused by a repressive relation between concept and object, and constantly accompanied by the quality of pain, suffering, and guilt. And while the question of whether or not this logical structure in fact orders all of our attempts determinately to think an object is something that can only be ‘tested’ in the first-hand experience of thinking, the logical structure itself already presupposes, at the least, the concepts of repression and projection, so that, if the integrity and viability of these concepts are fully rejected, Adorno’s description of the experience of thought must be rejected as well.

never final, as the system always returns in ever more encompassing guises.) Second, Foucault argues that the repressive model inverts the relation of cause and effect by viewing sexuality (and so ‘inner nature’) as a given whose repression results in mechanisms of power and domination. Foucault argues that instead we should conceive of sexuality (or whatever conception we might have of the ‘inner nature’ that is repressed) as produced by mechanisms of power and strategies of knowledge. For Foucault, the structures of power produce the ‘nature’ that characterizes the individual and the social subject as repressed. In a sense, then, Foucault holds a constructivist view of ‘inner nature.’ (For Foucault’s critique of the repressive hypothesis, see The History of Sexuality, vol. 1, trans. by Hurley, Robert (New York: Random House, 1978).) Adorno, on the other hand, views nature and social power (the social totality) as reciprocally mediated—neither is given and more primary, nor the result of the other. Inner nature is in Adorno’s account affected by, and constituted in relation to, the socio-historical realm, but it is not reducible to a social construction. Rather, nature in turn determines the socio-historical realm through in a manner analogous to how the unconscious determines elements of individual behavior and development, as we saw, for instance, in Adorno and Horkheimer’s analysis of fascism (chapter 5). In fact, the paranoid structure of social reality and discursive thought is unintelligible for Adorno without seeing it partly as the result of pathological projection—that is, of the pathological repression of nature.
Works by Adorno in the Original Language (German and English)


**Works by Adorno in English Translation**


**Works by Hegel in the Original German**


**Works by Hegel in English Translation**


**Works by Benjamin in the Original German**


**Works by Benjamin in English Translation**


**Other Sources**


Haynes, Patrice. “‘To rescue means to love things’: Adorno and the re-enchantment of bodies.” *Critical Quarterly* 47 (3): 64-77.


