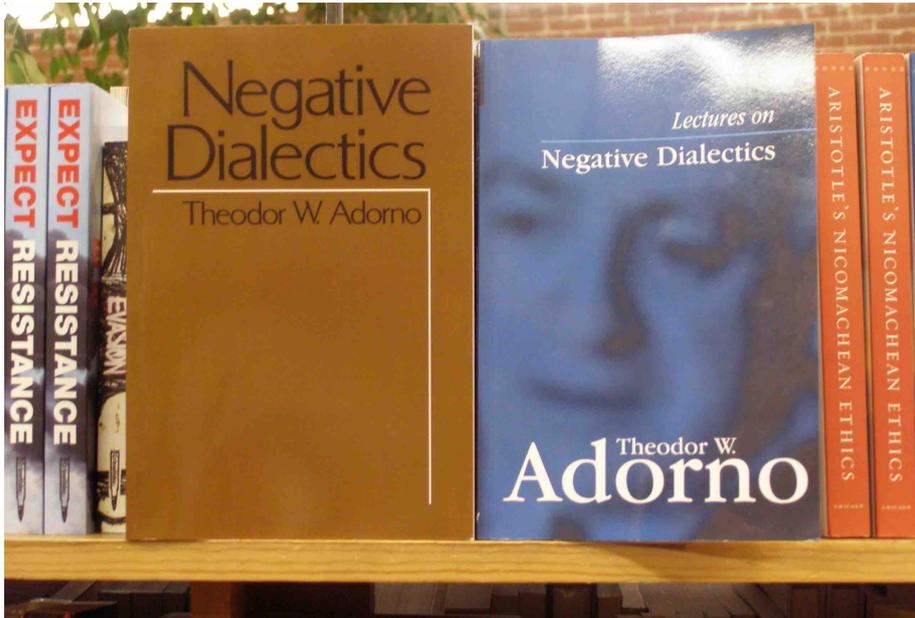


Adorno's Negative Dialectics



Adorno takes Hegelian dialectic to aim at establishing the identity of concepts with being by collapsing everything onto the side of concepts. Adorno takes naïve materialism to aim at establishing the identity of concepts with being by collapsing everything onto the side of being. Negative dialectics aims to preserve the non identity of concepts and being by insisting on the irreducible non - conceptual kernel at the heart of concepts. This non - conceptual kernel is basically the "materialist" element of Adorno. Adorno takes traditional dialectics to consist in the subordination of particularity to the universal. (Eg, in perception, a wooden object of a particular color and a particular shape in a particular spatio - temporal location is subordinated to the concept "table.") The particular is subordinated to the universal of which it is a mere instance, fundamentally interchangeable with any other instance. He thinks capitalism reproduces this subordination at a different level: capitalism eradicates individuality and makes everyone interchangeable with everyone else. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer put it like this:

Abstraction , the instrument of enlightenment , stands in the same relationship to objects as fate , whose concept it eradicates : as liquidation . Under the leveling rule of abstraction , which makes everything in nature repeatable , and of industry , for which abstraction prepared the way , the liberated finally themselves become the ' herd ' (Trupp) , which Hegel identified as the outcome of enlightenment . (p . 9) Negative dialectics insists on preserving particularity . So whatever in the particular cannot be subordinated to the universal testifies to the falsity of the universal . Non - conceptual particulars both make concepts possible and reveal the falsity of the conceptual . The non identity of concepts and particulars is the truth that constantly bubbles up despite the claims of traditional dialectics to grasp the particular by means of concepts . Negative dialectics is meant to grasp this truth , but since this truth cannot be grasped by submitting it to concepts , the technique of negative dialectics is to submit traditional dialectics to immanent critique -- to show the gaps in traditional dialectics where claims to knowledge are grounded on the disavowal of non - identity .

Adorno was an interesting character . One thing to note , and perhaps this is missed , is that Adorno was very , very concerned with the crisis of capitalism and the rise of fascism . To him , things were a lot more worse and urgent than one could possibly even conceive , let alone express in words or in a silly manifesto . With his negative dialectics , Adorno is looking for a kind of philosophical materialism which is not that of Hegel or Kant . He attacks , for instance , Hegel's " absolute spirit " and Kant's distinction between noumena - phenomena and uses that as a spring - board for pushing his concept called " the nonidentical " (das Nichtidentische) . To grasp negative dialectics is to understand this concept . He's always looking to distinguish himself from Heidegger and Hegel , and it is through this originary negativity of the non - identical - in contrast to the affirmations in Hegel - which sets him apart .

One other thing is that Adorno is concerned with the structural components of things or , to put it otherwise , the efficacy or capacity of the form (of objects) to the extent that they impose limits - intrinsic and extrinsic - on what can be done . For instance , in looking at any given piece of technology , Adorno would look at it dialectically and

suggest that it is only by way of its own contradiction that we can come to understand it . A hammer and sickle , for instance , and here I will be a bit tongue - in - cheek , may be used both for production and for , well , bashing fascists . But he would be interested in this certain extent , and under these certain conditions , etc. In practice , one way to look at Adorno's work in action is to see him as a kind of " seer or guardian of the past " . He takes a look at history , pinpoints those aspects of theory and culture which he finds detestable (nationalism , totalitarianism , etc.) , he then targets them specifically , going all out to burn those bridges so that they don't ever re - appear again . He was well - attuned to music , and saw these sorts of notes as disharmonies . His music and aesthetic theory is probably the most worth - while aspect of his work .

Dialectic was a certain process or way of thinking for Hegel , where you always come to something new and unifying , if you think about contradictory terms or notions . For example if you think about the family , it is a unit of persons in love to each other at the first glance . Then it falls apart to roles , like male / female , household and mother and this leads to the notion of (civic) society , where all persons act for themselves only . There is no variant or form of community in the society . This is contradictory to the family . But if you think further , you'll end at the state , which unifies the direct unity of the family with the scattered (persons of a) society in the way of how all persons (for Hegel the male ones only probably) identify themselves with the state as being citizens .

But Adorno stresses negative dialectics much more on the philosophical or epistemological field . He says , that notion and reality won't be synthesized at some point , that there cannot be found any kind of identity between both . You can find some really telling words regarding identity in this book , while I've used this notion in a paradigmatic sense only here . Here it comes to the introduction to the somehow weird and complex notion of non - identity (Ge : (edit) Nicht Identität das Nicht - Identische) . I would translate it like this : it is always useful and fruitful to start thinking with the assumption , that you cannot make your thinking identical to reality or your notions to the things (in German rather Sache than Ding) . You will never be able to get the reality in your hands like you can do it with apples . This is an important difference to larger parts of the philosophical tradition , in which (edit) truthness truth was somehow combined with identity of notions and things (I'm giving very rough hints here only , the actual terminology of the philosophical tradition is much more complex of course) .

Adorno is at his best subjecting Kants philosophy to later day positivists, most of his critique are points thinkers like Hannah Arendt wrestled with in their work. German idealism definitely has had a big impact on modern philosophy from the 18-19th century question of free will, freedom, thinking, rationality, subjectivity to the questions of evil in contemporary philosophy. Adorno is definitely right to call philosophy to wake up from its idealism and wrestle with the social conditions that philosophy finds its self in as part of the world.

One of the more unsettling moments for me was grasping Adorno's critique of Hegel's logic. He arguably identifies an error with the 'being-nothing-becoming' triad which is symptomatic of a fundamental problem in Hegel's thought. This concerns Hegel's imposition of thought and its positive categories on the non-intellectual, the non-conceptual. Adorno is highly dubious of Hegel's claim to bring thought and being into identity with each other. In fact, he comes to reject the category of identity altogether, and calls for a rigorous and unending subjection to the negativity of the objective itself.

The ambiguities and references to philosophical history are distinctly Adorno, and hence, cannot be simply accused as convolutions of otherwise easily simplified ideas. Despite being such a pain to read when you're unfamiliar to the references, the lectures provided a way of easing into the Negative Dialectics.

There is so much pressure towards identity, and striving for it that we need the dialectic and negativity. In a way, however, this is a familiar feature of our own consciousness -- first there is a drive towards identity, then a recognition of its impossibility. However, this is not just a 'cogitative law: It is real' (page 6).

We need to emphasise the particular and the substantive rather than the universal and conceptual. This is the reversal of most philosophy, of course. Even Husserl's conception of essences were still somehow intuited from particulars, just like the old universal concepts, still grounded in subjectivity, and thus still reductionist: concepts remain as subjective reconciliations with objectivity. We need to go beyond such concepts, but this causes problems because you can only ever do this with new concepts. However, this supply of new concepts indicates an interesting presupposition -- that there must be some totality. However, this is not simply a matter of adding concepts together. There is a necessary antagonism between reality and thought, and this is the object of genuine mental experience. Any philosophy which tries to overcome such antagonism is flawed, and this includes idealist subjectivism and social objectivism. There is always an ineffable portion of reality (page 11).

There can be no philosophy without concepts. Even empiricism is forced to use them, and on the other hand the

most 'pure' concepts have a non-conceptual referent (turning on the control of nature).

Why is presentation [including writing style?] so important? Identity thinking aims at mimesis, and it is our duty to prevent subjective experience from degenerating into a mere world view or science. Negativity keeps philosophy free from 'both the positivity of science and the contingency of dilettantism' (page 19). Thought is negation, and resistance, and a good deal of effort is actually needed to positivise it, even though there are tendencies inherent in thought which lead that way -- [Kantian?] judgment, for example. Thought can do violence to objects in attempting to synthesise them, but there is a potential in objects too, and philosophy should expose this, and thus hope to restore the damage done by objectification.

'System' is important as a concept to grasp how heterogeneous things are rendered alike in advanced capitalism, and in this sense the notion of system does order things in order to get on with interpretation. However, a system can also be a scholar's substitute for power (page 20). This reflects on the success of maths and science. Initially, bourgeois reason smashes feudalism, but it then encounters chaos, and reason must be used conservatively, against emancipation. Reason escapes even that goal eventually, and becomes a thing in itself, something apparently natural, apparently coterminous with thought itself. [This is one example of a more general figure in Adorno's work -- the 'dialectic of genesis and validity', page 21]. Such reason tries to overcome its inherent antinomies by eliminating all qualitative referents -- but then it loses its object. In this way, identity prevails and objectivity, in the sense of adequacy to the object, is lost too. Mere pedantic classifications, of axioms and definitions and so on, ensue: 'pedantry [is] the main feature of the ontology of the bourgeois spirit' (page 22). Such elaborations, classifications and systematisations serve as a precaution against doubt, and express a paranoid zeal to incorporate everything.

The recognition of society as an autonomic economic subject entails its critique. What constitutes the economic independence of society and what appears in the appearance of society as a movement of real economic abstractions, upon which 'the life of all men hangs' (Adorno, 1990: 320)?

Social reproduction governed by 'real economic abstractions' entails both chance and necessity, which are experienced as 'fate'. The mythological idea of fate becomes no less mythical when it is demythologised 'into a secular "logic of things"' that on the pain of ruin judges the actions of the actual individuals by means of competing price signals' (Adorno, 1990: 319). Fate is a category of a ghostlike society. Its secret is however not some invisible hand that regulates the economic progress of society, as if by magic. Rather, what manifests itself 'behind the backs of the acting subjects... is their own work' (Marcuse, 1988: 151), and it is their own work that condemns them as economic 'character masks' (Adorno, 1976b: 78) or 'personifications of economic categories' (Marx, 1990: 92).

Adorno's conception of dialectics has to be understood against this background. He conceives of it as 'the ontology of the wrong state of things' (Adorno, 1990: 11). It is to ascertain what is active in things and holds sway in them. His critical theory refuses thus 'to lend itself to sanctioning things as they are'. Intended as a theory without 'affirmative traits', it purports to demystify rigidified, thing-like, congealed relationships, rendering their immediacy transparent -- as socially constituted things (ibid.: 159). For example, Marx writes that in the money fetish, 'a social relation, a definite relation between individuals... appears as a metal, a stone, as a purely physical external thing which can be found, as such, in nature, and which is indistinguishable in form from its natural existence' (Marx, 1973: 239).

For Adorno, therefore, the notion of historical materialism as a materialism of some historically unfolding forces of production is in its entirety tied to the natural appearance of the existing social relations. At its best, historical materialism is not a metaphysics of economic nature and its objectively unfolding forces. Rather, it is a critique of economic nature, one that dissolves the dogma of natural necessity on a social basis. Economic nature is a social nature, and the seemingly independent economic forces manifest therefore the actual relations of life in the form of natural-economic forces. Adorno thus argues that historical 'materialism is ... a dissolution of things understood as dogmatic' (Adorno, 1990: 196). It comprehends the social relations of production as the constituent of the forces of production.

Thus, in the face of mythical economic properties and forces, 'of value as a thing-in-itself, value as "nature"', Adorno's critical theory rejects the 'scientific doctrine of invariants' that identifies some historically active economic nature, which unfolds according to its own innate laws of development. Instead it 'aims at the thing itself from within its own context 'even if in the end it negates the whole sphere it moves in' (Adorno, 1990: 355, 205, 197, see also 407).

Society in the inverted form of the economic object is bewitched. It is governed by the movement of incomprehensible economic quantities. The identity of the bewitched world is entirely abstract. In distinction to a traditional theory, which analyses the empirical veracity of incomprehensible economic forces, critical theory sets out to dissolve their dogmatic posture by negating 'the whole sphere it moves in' (Adorno, 1990: 197)