

Adorno's Reconception of the Dialectic

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Adorno's work contains a number of radical criticisms of Hegel that reveal deep philosophical differences between the two philosophers. He represents Hegel's philosophy as directed, ultimately, against particularity and individual experience. The core motivation of Hegel's philosophy, Adorno argues, is a concern with system and universality. Conceived in this way it is antagonistic to the idea of non-identity, the very idea that lies at the centre of Adorno's philosophical project.

In employing non-identity as a critical concept – that is, in assessing the capacity of a philosophical system to meet the requirement of, and to do justice to, non-identity – Adorno advances beyond the historical-materialist reaction against idealism (seen, e.g., in the work of Marx) in which the replacement of *Geist* with social labour returns philosophy to a concern with human action. Yet it would be mistaken to think of Adorno's engagement with Hegel as motivated by a purely hostile critical impulse. Rather, his many criticisms of Hegel have as their objective the retrieval from Hegel of what Adorno thinks of as important insights. Adorno acknowledges Hegel's discovery that there is a moment of non-identity in conceptualization, an idea that might be said to define Adorno's "negative dialectic". He also refers often to the exemplary model of rationality implicit in Hegel's notion of experience. In essence, Adorno finds a range of revolutionary philosophical insights in Hegel that he himself goes on to develop.

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According to Adorno, however, these are insights that in Hegel's work come to be subordinated to a systematizing agenda. His criticisms of Hegel are designed to release these insights from the compromised roles they allegedly play in the Hegelian system. Adorno's engagement with Hegel is, for that reason, a process of critical appropriation. Central ideas in Adorno's philosophy, such as determinate negation, immanent critique, dialectic, and experience are taken from the Hegelian system and given a materialist transformation. The influence of Kantian and Marxian philosophy colours much of that transformation.

A great many issues, therefore, are involved in a consideration of Adorno's relation to Hegel. There is (1) the complex matter of specifying the influence of Hegel on Adorno. We also need to understand (2) the nature of Adorno's disagreement with Hegel. This latter task involves analyzing the evidence for Adorno's contention that Hegel's philosophy is biased toward system and universality. Finally, since Adorno's critique of Hegel is also a critical appropriation, (3) we must assess the success and coherence of his redeployment of Hegelian ideas. These matters will be considered in turn.

1. Hegel and Negative Dialectic

Adorno interprets Hegel's philosophy as "[o]scillating between the most profound insight and the collapse of that insight".¹ The insight at issue is a nexus of interrelated ideas, those of determinate negation, experience, and dialectic. Central elements of Adorno's position – his negative dialectic – are articulated through the process of retrieving that

¹ Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (London: Routledge, 1973), 160; Theodor W. Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 6 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1973), 162.

insight from Hegel who, Adorno contends, ultimately “violates his own concept of the dialectic”.² Referring to the elements of his own position Adorno claims that “there is not a single one that is not contained, in tendency at least, in Hegel’s philosophy”,³ indeed in Hegel’s “most profound insight”.

1.1. The Core Concepts of Adorno’s Philosophy

Adorno argues that dialectic is essentially negative. This notion of dialectic is intended as a subversion of what he alleges is the positive dialectic of Hegel. It is, at the same time, a subversion that is facilitated by the resources of Hegel’s philosophy itself, as we shall see. In the negative process (as Adorno conceives it) dialectic problematizes what is assumed to be the truth of the object through our experience of the inadequacy of our concepts. In that experience there is, as Adorno usually describes it, non-identity, “the irremovable non-identity of subject and object”.⁴ This experience of non-identity intimates, without determining it, the complexity of the object itself. The subject seeks to grasp an object that it knows to be other than it. This otherness is irreducible, yet the subject strives to conceptualize this object in order to bring itself closer to it. At the same time the subject can never make the object identical with its concepts. But the failure of concepts does not mean that the effort to know – to conceptualize the object – is pointless. The complexity of the object is increasingly specified, albeit negatively, in each of those failures. This capacity for negative experience is the capacity, then, to recognize the failure of concepts

² Theodor W. Adorno, *Hegel: Three Studies*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (Cambridge, MA / London: MIT Press, 1993), 147; Theodor W. Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 5 (1970), 375.

³ Theodor W. Adorno, *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008), 21; Theodor W. Adorno, *Vorlesung über Negative Dialektik, Nachgelesene Schriften*, IV/16 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2003), 39.

⁴ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 85; *Gesammelte Schriften*, 6, 92.

to encapsulate objects, a failure that Adorno describes as “contradiction ” (i.e., between the object in its complexity and the concept). “The less identity can be assumed between subject and object, the more contradictory are the claims made upon the cognitive subject”.⁵ Being responsive to contradiction, then, is the mark of rationality, since it is precisely the capacity for the persistent, self-conscious critique of truth claims. Dialectic stands in sharp contrast to manipulative forms of rationality in which, Adorno claims, the successful categorization of objects is the criterion of knowledge. This process of categorization is a procedure in which, supposedly, an effort is made to render the object identical with the concept. Adorno describes this as the imposed “subjective *adaequatio*”.⁶ That, however, limits our potential for the experience of objects, a potential that is realized in dialectical experience. As Adorno puts it: “Experience forbids the resolution in the unity of consciousness of whatever appears contradictory... contradiction cannot be brought under any unity without manipulation, without the insertion of some wretched cover concepts that will make the crucial differences vanish”.⁷

Adorno sees negative dialectic as “a logic... of disintegration”, of the disintegration of the apparent identity between concept and reality.⁸ It establishes that there are unrecognized contradictions between the two that are obscured by identity claims. In so doing it releases the thing or object from its forced and harmonizing identity or conceptualization,

⁵ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 21; *Gesammelte Schriften*, 6, 41.

⁶ Adorno, *Hegel: Three Studies*, 39; *Gesammelte Schriften*, 5, 284.

⁷ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 152; *Gesammelte Schriften*, 6, 152.

⁸ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 145; *Gesammelte Schriften*, 6, 148.

thereby bringing about a “confrontation of concept and thing”.⁹ According to Adorno this process is one in which critique immanently engages with these conceptualizations in order, as he describes it, “to grasp, through their form and meaning, the contradiction between their objective idea” – what it is that these conceptualizations describe – “and that pretension” – the claims to objectivity in the conceptualizations. This process does not simply end, however, with the rejection of the “pretension” of the concept. Rather, Adorno writes, it “seeks to transform this knowledge into a heightened perception of the thing itself”.¹⁰ The sense of the “thing”, the “matter”, the “object”, is heightened by our experience of failure to encapsulate it. The thing appears more complex than our conceptualization seemed to allow. For Adorno, in fact, this experience contributes ultimately to a reconciliation of subject and object in that the subject’s “heightened perception of the thing” means that it has become conscious of ways in which it has misrepresented the object. This is not reconciliation in the sense of harmony or identity between subject and object: “It is up to dialectical cognition to pursue the inadequacy of thought and thing, to experience it in the thing”.¹¹

The term Adorno gives to the structure of the subject-object relation is “mediation” (*Vermittlung*). Through this structure – in its unimpaired operation at least – the subject experiences the world and its objects in ever richer ways: this is transformative experience. At the same time, through the subject’s increasing awareness of the object’s complexities, which are intimated in nonidentical experience, the object is also

⁹ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 144; *Gesammelte Schriften*, 6, 148.

¹⁰ Theodor W. Adorno, *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber (Cambridge, Mass., and London: MIT Press, 1981), 32; Theodor W. Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 10.1 (1977), 27.

¹¹ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 153; *Gesammelte Schriften*, 6, 156.

understood as a dynamic element in the relation. Adorno describes the mediating role played by the subject as the “how” and the object as the “what” in this relation.¹² As the “how”, the subject is in the business of articulating and conceptualizing the object, whereas the object, as the “what”, is that to which the subject must adjust its concepts. Because of this process of articulation and adjustment the relation of subject and object cannot conclude in the identity of the two. Adorno describes it as follows: subject and object “constitute one another as much as – by virtue of such constitution – they depart from each other”.¹³

1.2. The Hegelianism of Adorno’s Philosophy

These core concepts of Adorno’s negative dialectic can be traced back, “in tendency at least”, to Hegel. The logic of disintegration, as a process of heightened perception, is a version of Hegel’s idea of determinate negation. As Adorno notes, “the negativity I am speaking about contains a pointer to what Hegel calls *determinate* negation. In other words, negativity of this kind is made concrete”.¹⁴ That is to say, negativity, as Hegel claims, can be informative. What Adorno is referring to is Hegel’s characterization of the dynamic of experience as a determinate negation or “a *determinate* nothingness, one which has a *content*”.¹⁵ This dynamic is the productive negation of a belief, a process

¹² Theodor W. Adorno, “Subject and Object”, trans. Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt, in *The Adorno Reader*, ed. Brian O’Connor (Oxford and Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2000), 142; Theodor W. Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 10.2 (1977), 746.

¹³ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 174; *Gesammelte Schriften*, 6, 176.

¹⁴ Adorno, *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*, 25; *Vorlesung über Negative Dialektik*, 44.

¹⁵ G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 51; G.W.F. Hegel, *Werke*, 3 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1970), 74.

Hegel sees as a “labour of the negative”.¹⁶ Hegel contrasts the capacity for determinate negation – that is, the capacity to find something informative in the negation – with that of scepticism, since scepticism effectively holds that the failure of some particular mode of justifying a belief makes it impossible for us to be certain of our beliefs in general. Scepticism thus declares that there is a limit on our ability to gain knowledge of the world. Determinate negation, however, prompts reflection on the failure of justification and thereby a *revision* of the conceptual framework that brought us into the problem in the first place.

Contrary, then, to the logic of scepticism the possibility of determinate negation means that consciousness – the knowing agent – can correct its knowledge. It is not stuck with a fixed interpretation of the object or matter it is trying to understand, and furthermore the process of correction is not imposed by any external authority. In dialectical experience the subject can revise its criteria of knowledge through its engagement *with* objects. Adorno claims, speaking of Hegel, that “[d]ialectic is the unswerving effort to conjoin reason’s critical consciousness of itself and the critical experience of objects”.¹⁷ This is a radical innovation: consciousness is not isolated in the space of its own self-certainty, because it has the capacity for self-correction through its dialectical interaction with objects.¹⁸ As Hegel famously puts it: “consciousness suffers this violence at its own hands: it spoils its own limited satisfaction”.¹⁹ This advance beyond scepticism is based on a theory of experience in which the exercise of critical self-reflection means that

¹⁶ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 10; *Werke*, 3, 24.

¹⁷ Adorno, *Hegel: Three Studies*, 9–10; *Gesammelte Schriften*, 5, 258.

¹⁸ It is, Adorno says, “the moment in which the intentions of the subject are distinguished in the object” (Adorno, *Hegel: Three Studies*, 7; *Gesammelte Schriften*, 5, 256).

¹⁹ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 51; *Werke*, 3, 74.

consciousness is always in process. Furthermore, rationality is embedded in the process of subject-object interaction. It is a rational process in that the subject cannot be satisfied with a contradiction or negativity: reason compels it to go beyond contradiction. Of this rational dimension Adorno notes that “the concept of determinate negation... sets Hegel off from Nietzsche’s... irrationalism”.²⁰ The rather striking contrast that Adorno makes here is that between a process driven by the norms of reason and one – supposedly Nietzsche’s – in which the relation of the subject to the object is one in which only the subject’s evolutionary drives – never the object – play a role in the process.

Experience, with its dynamic of self-correction, has implications not only for the knowing subject and its inventory of beliefs and concepts. The object that is the focus of the experience is also changed, since it reveals new dimensions of itself in and through our increasingly sophisticated understanding of it. In this sense it becomes a changed object: “in the alteration of the knowledge”, Hegel writes, “the object alters for it too, for the knowledge that was present was essentially a knowledge of the object: as the knowledge changes, so too does the object, for it essentially belonged to this knowledge”.²¹ When we alter our concept, then, we actually transform what we take the object under consideration to be since it is only through conceptualization that we can specify what an object is. Since the subject’s beliefs are challenged and transformed in this process and the object in some respects comes to be grasped in new ways, Hegel’s account is one in which the subject-object relationship is dynamic and both components are determined anew. Hegel, Adorno claims, “preserves the distinct moments of the

²⁰ Adorno, *Hegel: Three Studies*, 77–78; *Gesammelte Schriften*, 5, 316.

²¹ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 54; *Werke*, 3, 78.

subjective and the objective while grasping them as mediated by one another”.²² This idea of reciprocal mediation, as we have seen, is carried into Adorno’s philosophy.

An important further feature of determinate negation is that it is, for Hegel, the path of progress. For Hegel determinate negation leads to a transformation of our understanding, forcing us into a distinctive new way of understanding what we do when we think we are making knowledge claims or expressing beliefs. From a perspective that lies *outside* that of experience itself – the perspective of the phenomenological observer – this can be represented as *progress*: “The necessary progression and interconnection of the forms of the unreal consciousness will by itself bring to pass the *completion* of the series”.²³ As we shall see, Adorno’s disagreement with Hegel essentially concerns this notion of progress, the notion that the dialectic leads in a conclusive direction, since that, for Adorno, reduces dialectic to system. Nevertheless, Adorno recognizes within this something of great philosophical significance: the idea of truth as *process*.²⁴ This idea is correlative, of course, to the notion of the dialectic as experience.

2. Adorno’s Disagreement with Hegel

From the material just considered we can see that Adorno’s professed indebtedness to Hegel is no exaggeration. Yet, as we noted at the outset, he is also deeply critical of Hegel. Where does the disagreement between them lie? As suggested, Hegel’s commitment to the progressive character of the dialectic turns out to be the central point of contention. What Adorno rejects is the way in which Hegel, according to Adorno,

²² Adorno, *Hegel: Three Studies*, 7; *Gesammelte Schriften*, 5, 256.

²³ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 50; *Werke*, 3, 73.

²⁴ Adorno, *Hegel: Three Studies*, 38; *Gesammelte Schriften*, 5, 283.

turns away from his own insight into the negativity of the dialectic and ends up with a progressive dialectic that is placed at the service of the system. The evidence cited by Adorno to support this charge of forced progression needs to be examined. Adorno's comments on Hegel's philosophy of history provide an important point of departure for this examination. Hegel's normative commitments are, according to Adorno, instantiated in his socio-historical analyses. These commitments, in the end, drive the dialectic. And, in Adorno's interpretation, they drive the dialectic to follow an agenda, thereby prejudicing the process.

I want to consider separately the issues that motivate Adorno's disagreement with Hegel by examining, first, his critique of Hegel's notion of history and, second, his worries about Hegel's systematization of the dialectic.

2.1. Adorno's Disagreement with Hegel: History

The notion of "universal history" is the foundational idea of Hegel's philosophy of history. It signifies history understood as a narrative of progress that connects temporally separate cultures and societies. As such it is a speculative philosophical construction that gives expression to the idea of a historical continuity that cannot be discerned through empirical analysis. Kant, of course, also proposes a universal history, based on what he sees as the thesis of the unfolding of a providential design of nature.²⁵ It is, however, almost exclusively Hegel's version of the theory that stimulates Adorno's considerable

²⁵ Hegel highlights the difference in this way: "Even if they at the same time profess their faith in a higher power by references to *providence* and a providential *plan*, these remain empty ideas, for they also declare explicitly that the plan of providence is beyond their cognition and comprehension" (G.W.F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), §343n; G.W.F. Hegel, *Werke*, 7 [1970], §343).

analyses on the questions of history and progress. The idea that history is nothing more than a disconnected series of events is denied by the theory of universal history. It is replaced by the idea that history as a whole is meaningful, “that Reason *does* exist there”.²⁶ Universal history is not a narrative pieced together by the philosopher. Rather, this narrative captures (what are taken to be) the objective processes of progressive historical development. Progress, in turn, is specified as the increase of freedom. Hegel writes: “The History of the world is none other than the progress of the consciousness of Freedom, a progress whose development according to the necessity of its nature it is our business to investigate”.²⁷ This notion may be historically disputable. It is certainly philosophically problematic. How is progress carried forward through a series of civilizations that are not connected to one another? How is a level of progress maintained as a new dominant civilization emerges to carry it forward? The contention that *Geist* is the ever evolving repository of progress – and so of continuity – brings history into the arena of metaphysics.

Adorno’s response to the notion of universal history is not entirely critical. This is, perhaps, surprising, given that the notion can easily be conceived (a) as an ideological theory in its assumption of historical progress and (b) as essentially metaphysical in two respects: (i) its processes transcend the space of human decision and action and (b) its selective abstraction of human events produces an essentialization of aspects of material reality. Adorno does indeed agree with and elaborate on all of these criticisms. What makes Adorno’s engagement with Hegel’s theory interesting is that it is philosophically

²⁶ G.W.F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (New York: Dover, 1956), 10; G.W.F. Hegel, *Werke*, 12 (1970), 22.

²⁷ Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, 19; *Werke*, 12, 32.

creative. Unlike conventional anti-metaphysical critics of the theory, Adorno appreciates what Hegel is trying to do. What is required in his view, however, is the materialist transformation or what Adorno refers often to as a secularization of that theory. The allegation, then, is that Hegel understands historical meaning quasi-theologically to operate above the space of human agency.

In his lectures on the philosophy of history Adorno announced that “[i]f you wish to say anything at all about the theory of history in general, you must enter into a discussion of the construction of universal history”.²⁸ Utter repudiation of the notion of universal history leads us to a theory that sees history as a series of disconnected events. But this is not, obviously enough, a thesis that critical theory – the theory espoused by Adorno – can endorse. After all, critical theory is in the business of critically analyzing the patterns of domination that have evolved, almost to the point of total control, with or through (the thesis is ambiguous) the development of capitalism. To see history merely as a series of disconnected facts is a kind of naïveté that serves only to obscure these patterns. At the same time, the theory of universal history is not satisfactory either. One of Adorno’s most quoted lines conceals the true nature of his disagreement with that theory. “No universal history”, he writes, “leads from savagery to humanitarianism, but there is one leading from the slingshot to the atom bomb”.²⁹ This carelessly presents a simple reversal of the Hegelian historical trajectory, replacing a continuous narrative of progress with one of decline. Were that Adorno’s actual position he would merely have substituted one telos

²⁸ Theodor W. Adorno, *History and Freedom*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006), 81; Theodor W. Adorno, *Zur Lehre von der Geschichte und von der Freiheit*, *Nachgelesene Schriften*, IV/13 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2001), 119.

²⁹ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 320; *Gesammelte Schriften*, 6, 314.

for another, and the narrative would be no less metaphysical. That is, it too would be committed to the notion of an inexorable process that transcends human intervention: it would be, in that way, philosophical history. This would leave it open to the criticism of doing violence to historical reality in the name of narrative consistency, that is, of being undialectical. What distinguishes Adorno's theory of history from Hegel's is not, in fact, a reversal of the historical narrative. It is, rather, his introduction of the notion of *historical discontinuity*. This is a complex idea, conceived as a direct criticism of universal history, though not as an outright rejection. What it attempts to capture is the idea that historical events do not simply belong to the historical process; that is, it is not sufficient to understand them simply as "moments" of that process. Rather, they possess a particularity, a specificity that is not to be subsumed under general narratives: "The truth is that, while the traditional view inserts facts into the flow of time, they really possess a nucleus of time in themselves, they crystallize time in themselves. What we can legitimately call ideas is the nucleus of time within the individual crystallized phenomena, something that can only be decoded by interpretation. In accordance with this we might say that history is *discontinuous* in the sense that it represents life perennially disrupted".³⁰ What this means, though, is not that historical events are simply disconnected but that discontinuity and disruption turn out to be part of the historical *process* itself. This, for Adorno, specifically calls into question the Hegelian position. Hegelian history, for Adorno, is a synthetic exercise in which historical events are subsumed under a general concept. By contrast, "the materialist turnabout [*Umwendung*]

³⁰ Adorno, *History and Freedom*, 91; *Zur Lehre von der Geschichte und von der Freiheit*, 134.

in dialectic cast the weightiest accent on insight into the discontinuity of what is not comfortingly held together by any unity of spirit and concept”.³¹

It is important to note that, for Adorno, discontinuity does not stand on its own. History is a *process* made up of discontinuous events. History therefore, Adorno writes, “is the unity of continuity and discontinuity”.³² This is not a paradox: it means actually understanding historical events *as* events and not as moments. When events are conceived as mere moments, history is understood to sweep over the suffering they contain. Hegel situates this suffering within the overarching narrative of progressive history and thereby deprives it of its specificity. In this, Adorno claims, Hegel “transfigured the totality of historic suffering into the possibility of the self-realizing absolute”.³³

Rejection of the notion of progress is, however, no straightforward matter for Adorno. To abandon it means, minimally, (a) denying that progress is possible and, maximally, (b) arguing for its opposite, regression. Option (a) cannot be endorsed without further qualification by critical theory, since critical theory understands itself to be socially transformative and beneficent. And (b), as we saw, would simply be a reversal of Hegel’s notion. What Adorno proposes instead, and against the thesis of universal history, is that progress is achievable but only once the narrative of progress itself is abandoned.

³¹ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 319; *Gesammelte Schriften*, 6, 313–314.

³² Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 320; *Gesammelte Schriften*, 6, 314.

³³ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 320; *Gesammelte Schriften*, 6, 314.

An implication of the progress thesis is that the historical situation in which we find ourselves is now the result of prior historical progress. When societies operate under this positive self-conception, however, they find no need for radical self-analysis. Their central challenge becomes, rather, that of continuing the project of societal amelioration that has already been well established by the historical process. The task of a critical theory is to bring into doubt settled questions about the deepest normative commitments of our society. It is, in this way, as Axel Honneth puts it, “evaluative world disclosure”.³⁴ And the historically specific and concretely situated questions of what we are and what direction we need to take are swept aside once we tie our analysis to the idea of progress framed within universal history. Adorno writes: “No progress may be supposed that implies that humanity already existed and could therefore be assumed to continue to progress. Rather progress would be the establishment of humanity in the first place.... the concept of universal history... cannot be salvaged”.³⁵

These criticisms of Hegel’s conception of progress stem from Adorno’s quite different analysis of the historical condition of humanity. Adorno provides an explanation for why Hegel’s theory falsely posits the notion of progress in spite of (what Adorno considers to be) the overwhelming evidence, evidence that Hegel himself dismissed. If Adorno is right that we are not yet in a position to think of the historical process as one marked by continuous progression, that it is a process of “unspeakable suffering”,³⁶ how could Hegel

³⁴ Axel Honneth, “The Possibility of a Disclosing Critique of Society: The Dialectic of Enlightenment in Light of Current Debates of Social Criticism”, in *Disrespect: The Normative Foundations of Critical Theory* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007), p. 60.

³⁵ Adorno, *History and Freedom*, 146; *Zur Lehre von der Geschichte und von der Freiheit*, 206–207.

³⁶ Adorno, *Hegel: Three Studies*, 82; *Gesammelte Schriften*, 5, 320.

commit himself to a notion of historical harmony even while describing history as a “slaughter-bench”?³⁷ Adorno’s thought is that so long as history is understood to be a metaphysical matter the painful details of material life will not significantly determine its course. And Hegel does indeed regard history as a matter of metaphysics. Adorno’s position, however, is a historical-materialist one in a broadly Marxist sense, and that means that what Hegel has understood as the engine of history, namely *Geist*, must in fact be understood as *labour*. Adorno’s concern is that when Hegel conceives of *Geist* as history as a whole he is, in fact, expressing a conception of society as a whole, one in which each part is fully determined by the whole (just as apparently contingent historical events turn out to be determined by the process of universal history). Hegel’s metaphysical commitments reflect the same tendency as his social ones: to bring systematization to the whole (of history and society). Just as the historical narrative is distorted by Hegel to produce a system of history, so he effectively distorts the social totality. But to construe society under a system is to make it into a coercive whole. That is, Adorno believes, Hegel’s social-normative commitment. The charge is this: Hegel’s “idealism becomes false when it mistakenly turns the totality of labor into something existing in itself, when it sublimates its principle into a metaphysical one, into the *actus purus* of spirit, and tendentially transfigures something produced by human beings, something fallible and conditioned, along with labor itself, which is the suffering of human beings, into something eternal and right”.³⁸ Whereas, then, Hegel presents history as the progress of *Geist* toward an ultimate path of self-realization, Adorno sees it as the ongoing process of social antagonism between the needs of individuals and the needs of

³⁷ Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, 21; *Werke*, 12, 35.

³⁸ Adorno, *Hegel: Three Studies*, 23; *Gesammelte Schriften*, 5, 269.

the social totality: “full reconciliation through spirit in a world which is in reality antagonistic is a mere assertion”.³⁹ The difference between Adorno and Hegel here is a substantial one in that it is a difference that Adorno thinks of as indicative of a difference between materialism and idealism. For Adorno materialism is attentive to individual moments of suffering and to the tangible effects of social arrangements on individuals, whereas idealism, in Hegel’s case at least, involves the construction of narratives whose dialectical development transcends in significance the material beings whose lives are determined by that development.

Adorno further articulates it as a difference between particularism and universalism. Hegel’s position drives history toward a system in which particularity is to be absorbed. This is not simply a dispute about “dialectic”, that is, about whether the dialectic can produce further moments leading to a harmonious systematic culmination. Insofar as history is the social process, it has become, according to Adorno, a process of constant systematization. This systematization is conceived within modern societies as guided by the desire to coordinate and ultimately harmonize the lives of individuals. A systematized harmonization, however, will contradict this desire in that *qua* system its priority is not individual difference.

2.2. Adorno’s Disagreement with Hegel: Dialectic and System

According to Adorno, the normative commitments that are manifest in Hegel’s philosophy of history also have a bearing on his account of the operations of the dialectic in more abstract contexts. As we have seen, Adorno construes Hegel as committed to the

³⁹ Adorno, *Hegel: Three Studies*, 27; *Gesammelte Schriften*, 5, 273.

systematization of historical events into a progressive narrative in which particularity (suffering) is explicated within, and thereby subordinate to, universal history. Adorno's argument is that Hegelian logic, which is supposed to be presuppositionless, is driven by just this synthesizing agenda. Before turning to Adorno's substantiation of this allegation we need to consider what is at stake philosophically, for Adorno, in Hegel's subversion of the dialectic.

For Adorno, the operation of determinate negation is characteristic of experience that is marked by rational responsiveness. Determinate negation, in this context, is an informative moment of experience not because it opens up the object to us directly, but because it indicates the limitation of our judgment about, or conceptualization of, that object. It unsettles our previous belief in the conceptualization of an object. Only indirectly can we read off anything about the object from that process. Adorno argues, however, that Hegel takes the wrong lesson from the process of negativity: he allegedly sees it as bringing us ever closer to the object, indeed to the point at which the object is fully conceptualized. What Hegel's account represents, though, is a subversion of the dialectic, since it is, in this way, an effort to make the latter positive. Against this Adorno argues that "[t]he non-identical is not to be obtained directly, as something positive on its part, nor is it obtainable by a negation of the negative. The negation is not an affirmation itself as it is to Hegel".⁴⁰ For Adorno dialectic – negative dialectic – articulates that non-identity without attempting to carry it into a system as Hegel supposedly does in his pursuit of "absolute consistency".⁴¹ It is for this reason that Adorno alleges that Hegel

⁴⁰ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 158; *Gesammelte Schriften*, 6, 161.

⁴¹ Adorno, *Hegel: Three Studies*, 13; *Gesammelte Schriften*, 5, 261.

attempts to “dispute away the contradiction between idea and reality”,⁴² that is, in effect, to overcome non-identity. While the dialectic is the experience of non-identity, it becomes, ultimately, a moment of the Hegelian system (a reconfiguration that parallels that of the philosophy of history): “Hegel actually takes cognizance of that dimension only for the sake of identity, only as an instrument of identity”.⁴³

Obviously enough, this charge of subversion is quite schematic, though it is hardly new or controversial to think of Hegel as a systematic thinker. What Adorno needs to make good on is the claim that Hegel’s systematicity is actually distorting, that is, that it manipulates “the dialectic” in order to deliver outcomes required for the system. Adorno needs to do this not merely to establish the accuracy of his interpretation of Hegel, but also to justify his criticism of the rationality of Hegelian dialectic itself. Adorno insists that the negative character of the dialectic should mean that it cannot be part of a process that brings about “the completion of the series”. What it truly is is the capacity for non-identity. It therefore cannot be rendered into a procedure that converts moments of non-identity into moments of a system. System implies the final ordering of the moments and resolution of the contradictions. In his published writings Adorno does not justify his criticism in any great detail. A useful corroboration of his interpretation is, however, provided in his posthumously published lectures on the idea of a negative dialectic.

In the lectures Adorno analyzes the most famous example of a “transition” in Hegel’s work, that of being, nothing, and becoming. He argues that the dialectic is distorted to

⁴² Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 335; *Gesammelte Schriften*, 6, 329.

⁴³ Adorno, *Hegel: Three Studies*, 147; *Gesammelte Schriften*, 5, 375.

produce the transition required by systematization. That means that the transitions do not correspond to what Adorno takes to be the ideal of Hegel's philosophy – namely, that of “simply looking on” (as Hegel describes it in the *Phenomenology*) – in which things “themselves speak in a philosophy that focuses its energies on proving that it is itself one with them”.⁴⁴ A transition that does not come about through “simply looking on” is forced and thereby driven not by reason, which presupposes no outcome, but rather by an unstated procedural imperative. The version of the transition that Adorno analyzes is that of the *Science of Logic*, to which we now turn.

Hegel justifies beginning the *Logic* with “pure being” on the grounds that it is “purely and simply *an* immediacy, or rather merely *immediacy* itself”.⁴⁵ It is thus free of determinations, according to Hegel, which should not be presupposed at the start of philosophy. It is “indeterminate immediacy” (*unbestimmte Unmittelbarkeit*). Pure being is thereby “pure indeterminateness and emptiness” (*reine Unbestimmtheit und Leere*). Because it is empty “there is nothing to be thought in it”. And this leads us to the thought that pure being “is in fact *nothing*, and neither more nor less than *nothing*”. This transition from pure being to nothing seems quite unforced. “The second thought simply and immediately comes to mind”, as one commentator puts it.⁴⁶ The literature abounds with criticism of the very idea of “pure being”: it might be dismissed as a pseudo-ontological concept that has no ontological reference, a collapsed concept. However, Adorno's concern is not with the concept itself but with its seemingly purely logical

⁴⁴ Adorno, *Hegel: Three Studies*, 6; *Gesammelte Schriften*, 5, 255.

⁴⁵ G.W.F. Hegel, *Science of Logic*, trans. A. V. Miller (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1969), 70; G.W.F. Hegel, *Werke*, 5 (1969), 69.

⁴⁶ John W. Burbridge, *On Hegel's Logic: Fragments of a Commentary* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1981), 39.

transition to nothing. The criticism is this: Hegel achieves the transition through a subtle substitution of terminology: he starts out with pure being as “the indeterminate”, then without explanation recasts it as “indeterminateness”. Whereas “the indeterminate” can mean *something* that is without determination, “indeterminateness” is the concept of indeterminacy, and as the concept of indeterminacy (a matter entirely different from *that which* is indeterminate) it facilitates the transition to nothing. “The indeterminate” refers to something – something announced by the definite article – whereas “indeterminateness” refers to nothing in particular.

Adorno picks up on Hegel’s third remark following the presentation of the transition from being to nothing to becoming. There Hegel writes⁴⁷ (and is quoted by Adorno): “They [i.e., the thoughts of pure space, pure time, pure consciousness, or pure being] are the results of abstraction; they are expressly determined as *indeterminate* [*als Unbestimmte bestimmt*] and this – to go back to its simplest form – is being”.⁴⁸ Hegel follows this claim – again quoted by Adorno – with a clarification which Adorno sees as actually introducing a further claim, though it is presented, by Hegel, merely as an elaboration on the first: “But it is this very *indeterminateness* which constitutes its determinateness [*diese Unbestimmtheit ist aber das, was die Bestimmtheit desselben ausmacht*]”.⁴⁹ Adorno sees a crucial shift of significance here from “the indeterminate” to “indeterminateness”. He writes: “[t]he indeterminate’ is in the nature of a substratum”.⁵⁰ He argues then that “when Hegel substitutes ‘indeterminateness’ for this, the concept,

⁴⁷ Hegel, *Science of Logic*, 98–99; *Werke*, 5, 103–104.

⁴⁸ Adorno, *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*, 60; *Vorlesung über Negative Dialektik*, 92.

⁴⁹ Adorno, *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*, 61; *Vorlesung über Negative Dialektik*, 93.

⁵⁰ Adorno, *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*, 61; *Vorlesung über Negative Dialektik*, 93.

namely, the absence of determinateness *as such* takes the place of what is undetermined”.⁵¹ And the transition of thought from being to nothing occurs thereby. Yet, Adorno contends, “the equality of being and nothing depends on thinking of being as indeterminateness; in other words, being is supposed from the outset to belong to the conceptual sphere. If it were still the indeterminate – as Hegel writes at first [...] it would not be possible to equate it with nothing. For a something can be undetermined, but it cannot be said of it that it is ‘as good as nothing’.”⁵²

Adorno’s criticism does, at least, raise the issue of the apparent inconsistency of Hegel’s terminology. Hegel uses two terms, but his initial framing of the idea of pure being is as “the indeterminate” which meets his criterion of being a simple immediacy. Indeterminateness, precisely as an abstract concept, cannot, however, be immediacy. A rather awkward defence of Hegel might be that, in fact, Hegel is ambiguous on the matter. His statement that pure being is “purely and simply *an* immediacy, or rather merely *immediacy* itself ” refers both to the substratum idea and the concept. Nevertheless Adorno’s critical analysis puts significant pressure on the text. And it is informative in relation to the broader issue of how Adorno actually roots his programmatic criticism of Hegel, whom he sees as distorting the dialectic, in specific analyses.

The allegation of distortion is not an end in itself. Adorno is not out simply to make a philosophical criticism, but a philosophical point about the fate of non-identity within systematic thinking. He claims that Hegel’s initial “manoeuvre” – from the indeterminate

⁵¹ Adorno, *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*, 61; *Vorlesung über Negative Dialektik*, 94.

⁵² Adorno, *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*, 62; *Vorlesung über Negative Dialektik*, 94.

to indeterminateness – is indicative of a desire to conjure “away the nonconceptual”.⁵³ For Adorno, Hegel’s idea of “the indeterminate” indicates his recognition of the nonconceptual, since it is the idea of something that is not saturated with the concepts or “determinations” of the subject. The transformation of “the indeterminate” into “indeterminateness”, however, conceptualizes it absolutely.

3. The Hegelianism of Adorno’s Critical Theory: An Assessment

Having examined Adorno’s general appropriation of Hegel as well as his specific criticisms of the dialectic, we should now consider whether that appropriation produces a coherent philosophical position. This consideration brings us to the critical employment that Adorno makes of the materialistically transformed notions of determinate negation and dialectic. These notions have specific roles within Hegel’s philosophy, but can they be extracted from that context in order to produce the framework for a form of social critique?

The innovative ambition of critical theory – Adorno’s in particular – is to develop modes of critique that do not operate from ideal or utopian perspectives. After all, those perspectives are easily characterized as arbitrary, ungrounded, and not at all compelling. We might describe utopian assertions as *extra-normative*. They are extra-normative in that they are a demand for transformed social arrangements and human relations that could not resonate with the conventional perspective of the individual for whose benefit the consciousness-raising exercise of progressive social theory is conceived. The demand, for example, for the abolition of private property would place in doubt a great many

⁵³ Adorno, *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*, 62; *Vorlesung über Negative Dialektik*, 94.

conventional assumptions about what society is while also bringing into question moral codes that support the preservation of private property. An extra-normative claim seems to ask the individual to reject all of these assumptions and codes. The critic of extra-normativity denies that such a rejection can come about just by referring individuals to higher values given that so much of an individual's social identity is invested in the conventional perspective. Adorno's term for extra-normative criticism, in fact, is "transcendent" in that it imagines itself to operate outside the influence of the conventional perspective. He writes: "The transcendent critic assumes an as it were Archimedean position above culture and the blindness of society".⁵⁴ This transcendent position or norm is known to the philosopher, thanks to some advanced perspective, but it is unknown otherwise. That is to say, it has no normative force – it is merely a philosophical construction – for the conventional perspective. The problem with extra-normativity, clearly enough, is that as a tool of critique it actually cannot achieve the very thing it needs to achieve, namely, persuasiveness: it lies outside the space of persuasion precisely in being extra-normative. Indeed, Adorno points out that the notion of a transcendent perspective is, in any case, illusory in that it falsely thinks itself free of the effects of reification and the other social conditions it seeks to expose. It congratulates itself on an imaginary purity: "The choice of a standpoint outside the sway of existing society is as fictitious as only the construction of abstract utopias can be".⁵⁵ For Adorno, the critique of society ought not to be guided by a transcendent moral preference: to set out a view of the right society with which to contrast the deficiencies of contemporary society simply begs the question.

⁵⁴ Adorno, *Prisms*, 31; *Gesammelte Schriften*, 10.1, 26.

⁵⁵ Adorno, *Prisms*, 31; *Gesammelte Schriften*, 10.1, 26.

But where do we go if current norms are compromised and extra-normativity is simply transcendent? Adorno's proposal is *immanent critique*. Immanent critique involves an examination of the coherence of a position by assessing it through its own standards. Adorno writes: "If an assertion [*Behauptung*] is measured by its presuppositions, then the procedure is immanent, i.e. it obeys formal-logical rules and thought becomes a criterion of itself".⁵⁶ Hence arbitrary transcendence is avoided and no illusion of social detachment on the part of the critic is implied. The criterion of reasonableness is provided by whatever the position under examination normatively aspires to, so long, of course, as those holding the position are also committed to "formal-logical rules", that is, they can recognize the force of contradiction. In revealing the tensions between the reality of a position and what it takes itself to be, immanent critique, Adorno writes, "pushes with the latter's own force to where it cannot afford to go".⁵⁷ It is not simply that the position is shown to be contradictory, but rather that it is a contradiction alone that gives it its reality: it is essentially contradictory, though it claims to be rational.

Since immanent critique operates on the basis of the revelation of contradictions that might produce new perspectives on the supposed reasonableness of the social totality, it is, in fact, a process of determinate negation. As we saw when looking at this idea in Hegel, determinate negation is not driven by external norms. It proceeds through a rational response to the experience of contradiction, a contradiction that is not between a claim and a wholly different counter-claim, but rather between the claims that make up

⁵⁶ Theodor W. Adorno, *Against Epistemology: A Metacritique*, trans. Willis Domingo (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1983), 25; Theodor W. Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 5 (1970), 33.

⁵⁷ Adorno, *Against Epistemology*, 5; *Gesammelte Schriften* 5, 14.

the phenomenon that is being examined (the complex of beliefs that can be judged true or false). The dimension of contradiction is central to both determinate negation – as the *productive* experience of contradiction – and immanent critique – as the *destruction* of a position once its inner contradictions are exposed (the logic of disintegration). And contradiction is proposed as something informative insofar as contradiction – immanently identified – points us toward what is problematic. Any individual committed to “formal-logical” thinking ought to be prompted to further reflection by the apparent contradiction that immanent critique uncovers. As Rahel Jaeggi notes: “In precisely this sense critique means the critique (*bestimmte Kritik*’, linked to Hegelian ‘determinate negation’) of ‘particular social moments’ that ‘have their standard in the constantly renewed idea of a right society’. The negative is then not only what *should not be*, but rather what cannot exist, what cannot be thought and lived, without contradiction”.⁵⁸

We have seen the features of determinate negation that might seem to provide the theoretical underpinnings of an immanent form of social critique: (i) it is situational (what needs to be negated is intelligible only in context) and (ii) it does not appeal to any predetermined standards of truth or excellence, but relies instead on the expectation of a facility in the individual who engages with the critique to act in the face of “contradiction”. Immanent critique appears to be a promising alternative to the question-begging transcendent or extra-normative critique of society, precisely because it seems to assume very little: it aims to understand a position merely on its own terms. Ultimately, however, it is subject to a serious difficulty: society is not a text that is set out in

⁵⁸ Rahel Jaeggi, “‘No Individual Can Resist’: *Minima Moralia* as Critique of Forms of Life”, *Constellations*, 12, no. 1 (2005), 76.

propositions and that would therefore be amenable to the kind of conclusive analysis in which contradiction appears. (Adorno offers some powerful instances of the immanent critique of philosophical texts. But texts are determinate in that their central claims can be identified.) Indeed, as Adorno frequently argues, society is a totality that does not reveal itself as such. It cannot be identified through “facts”. He writes: “For while the notion of society may not be deduced from any individual facts, nor on the other be apprehended as an individual fact itself, there is nonetheless no social fact which is not determined by society as a whole. Society appears as a whole behind each concrete situation”.⁵⁹ What makes society what it is, in other words, is not apparent; it is not encounterable in facts at least. This means that what we, as social theorists, identify as the defining claims and practices of society are not facts that speak for themselves. They are interpretations that can be quite easily disputed by opposing styles of social theory. The only tools we have in the task of clarifying the very notion of society are, after all, hermeneutic and not empirical.

We might analyze this difficulty more concretely through consideration of a typical instance of immanent critique from Adorno’s social theory. Adorno claims that in modern society the individual defines him- or herself as free, yet is compelled to be something in particular by society. There is therefore a “contradiction” between the concept of freedom and the restricted life choices open to an individual: “a contradiction like the one between the definition which an individual knows as his own and his ‘role’,

⁵⁹ Theodor W. Adorno, “Society”, trans. Frederic Jameson, in *Salmagundi* 10–11 (1969–1970), 145; Theodor W. Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 8 (1972), 10.

the definition forced upon him by society”.⁶⁰ This contradiction is one that allegedly sustains society. But the very formulation of this “immanent critique” is not neutral, since the notion that social roles are “forced” upon individuals is disputable. It is certainly not consistent with all reported experience. The significant point here, then, is that in the absence of texts the very idea of what comes to be seen, through immanent critique, as contradictory cannot draw any neutral reader into the argument. What happens, in fact, is that once neutrality is violated we fall into the same difficulty that nullifies the force of transcendent critique.

In view of this problem with neutrality there is a serious question about whether immanent critique can provide a foundation for the variety of critical theory that wishes specifically to avoid extra-normativity. It is, however, unclear whether Adorno himself wanted immanent critique to be regarded as a foundational principle. A great number of Adorno’s pronouncements about the “false life” of modern society are unapologetically based on his moral sensibility (and it is still a matter of dispute among Adorno scholars whether that sensibility is the articulation of a philosophically grounded position). To add to the complexity, Adorno occasionally warns us against an exclusively immanent critical approach. For instance: “The alternatives – either calling culture as a whole into question from outside under the general notion of ideology, or confronting it with norms which it itself has crystallized – cannot be accepted by critical theory. To insist on the choice between immanence and transcendence is to revert to the traditional logic criticized in Hegel’s logic”.⁶¹ This is certainly confusing, as transcendent norms surely cannot be

⁶⁰ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 152; *Gesammelte Schriften*, 6, 155.

⁶¹ Adorno, *Prisms*, 31; *Gesammelte Schriften*, 10.1, 26.

allowed to creep into the critique without undoing the alleged achievements of immanent critique. Yet it is clear that, for Adorno, immanent critique is merely one moment of social criticism that brings to light problems in society but does not provide constructive solutions to them. It is for this reason that immanent critique and determinate negation are placed together in a single theory: they are distinguishable moments of critique that capture both immanence and transcendence. Determinate negation provides the moment of transcendence in the Hegelian sense, since it takes us beyond what is merely given, through a process of concept revision (or at least through prompting society to reflect on the *limits* of the concepts that structure its view of the world and on the possibility of revising those concepts). It is to an examination of the coherence of that single theory that we now turn.

As we have seen, determinate negation is, for Hegel, a form of negation, one that has a result. It is the result that emerges from the complication that consciousness experiences as it “suffers... violence at its own hands”. Precisely as a result, a determinate negation is posterior to the moment of complication in the sequence of experience: it is the moment when the need to reflect on the commitments that led to that complication becomes apparent to the consciousness undergoing the experience. Let us take two quite different examples. A racist consciousness must confront some of its commitments when it fails to understand why one or more particular members of the ethnic group that he or she denigrates is more talented, intelligent, virtuous than the allegedly superior group to which the racist belongs. A racist society persists, however, for as long as these contradictions are not thematized by the society itself. Or we can consider Hegel’s

analysis in the *Phenomenology* of the collapse of the epistemological explanation of knowledge as simple sense certainty. This explanation is built on the insight that the relation between a subject and an object is essentially a relation of a perceiver to a particular. However, dimensions of knowledge are not captured by this explanation. For instance, the sheer immediacy of simple sense certainty excludes conceptuality: concepts are both universals and are mediated. The exclusion of concepts, however, renders knowledge inexpressible. No doubt the theorist of simple sense certainty might want to reformulate the theory in order to accommodate the conceptual dimension without abandoning the priority of particularity. Nevertheless, the commitments that produced the theory in its original articulation are challenged by the *experience* of sense certainty itself.

The materials of immanent critique – the contents of its judgment – are differently arranged, I suggest. Immanent critique does not explore the complications that consciousness or society *itself* experiences, but it sets out what the *critic* of consciousness or society understands to be the contradictions inherent in the object of examination. The social critic thus assembles evidence that critically undermines the supposed rationality of current arrangements (as we have just seen) by showing that they are by their own standards irrational. That is, the critic demonstrates that specific conventional social commitments that sustain society in its current form are, in fact, compromised by the very arrangements that supposedly guarantee those commitments (e.g., the freedom that capitalist societies value is undermined by capitalism itself). However, in order to be motivated to undertake an immanent critique of this kind the social critic must, in fact, be motivated by some *prior* intuition about the problematic society he or she is interpreting,

that is, that it is contradictory. The process of immanent critique is thus not – like determinate negation – an unexpected problematization of society. The result of determinate negation is, precisely, the unexpected unsettling of what had seemed to be effective commitments. Immanent critique, by contrast, is that which emerges from what the critic identifies as – what we might call – the structured hypocrisy of society. Hence, if society is understood by its members as that which provides the context for rational (as opposed to natural) freedom and yet the obligation to undertake structured work within the capitalist workplace is unavoidable, since it is the only means of self-preservation within capitalism, then society by its own standards is problematized. The social critic seems here to have revealed a point of fundamental significance without introducing theories from abroad. However, the social critic does not discover these problems serendipitously. What is the outcome of immanent critique? The answer to this question reveals another key difference from the process of determinate negation. Immanent critique as a logic of disintegration sees the collapse of the positions it immanently criticizes. A logic of disintegration is certainly that: the collapse is supposedly undeniable. Although the social critic may wish to *use* this contradiction as a judgment on the falsehood of society, the contradiction does not, in fact, give rise directly to a logic of transformation. That is, the awareness of the apparent incoherence of society's beliefs is not the same thing as moving beyond them.

In this specific way immanent critique is quite a different matter from “determinate negation”, which is newly informative about the *limits* of the criteria through which we know some given phenomenon and thereby implicitly points to the possibility of *revising*

those criteria. In Hegel, as we have seen, determinate negation is, indeed, progressive for the phenomenological observer and contributes to “the completion of the series” of the forms of consciousness. In contrast, precisely as a disintegrating critique, immanent critique, if we deploy it more strictly than Adorno, does not point beyond itself. For example, the disintegration of the ideology of the allegedly free society is no more than just that. It cannot be rigorously interpreted as a demonstration of a dissatisfied demand for freedom or of the fact that freedom is in an unfinished condition any more than it can be read as a demand for total capitalism (the other part of the claim). But could it not be that the outcome of immanent critique – revelation of contradiction – is informative and thus in some sense a determinate negation? It should be clear that the logic of the two processes does not allow for this synthesis. That is not to say that one could not use them both in a unified critical strategy. What one cannot do, however, is to conflate them, as Adorno does. This is a serious matter in that it is a synthesis of the two ideas that produces the distinctive form of social analysis offered by Adorno’s critical theory. We can perhaps give greater sharpness to their divergence by looking at the distinction of perspectives that is crucial to the very structure of Hegel’s *Phenomenology*. I suggest, indeed, that these two perspectives parallel those of social criticism. This can be explained as follows. The social critic occupies a vantage point different from that of the experiencer whose beliefs undergo the process of determinate negation. The social critic is aware of what she takes to be conflicting social beliefs, the necessary contradictions sustaining capitalist society. She knowingly assembles the evidence from the social totality. To move seamlessly between immanent critique and determinate negation is to commit the mistake of conflating these two perspectives.

The two perspectives parallel those of the perspectives of the *experiencer* and the *observer* in the *Phenomenology*. As Michael Rosen explains, Hegel “explicitly draws the distinction between the experience of the consciousness whose development the *Phenomenology* charts and the consciousness of the author and reader to whom it is displayed, observing that consciousness’s progress is intelligible ‘for us’ in a way that it cannot be for itself whilst undergoing the process”.⁶² This crucial contrast for the *Phenomenology* captures the key differences between determinate negation and immanent critique. The beliefs of the experiencer undergo the process of determinate negation, but the full significance of determinate negation is nonetheless not transparent to the experiencer. He follows through on the commitments of his beliefs, though there is no predetermined path, which means that he will come to grasp, for example, the principle, to which critical theory is committed, that the bourgeois-individualist concept of freedom compromises the very possibility of freedom. While determinate negation is progressive within the structure of the completed system of knowledge, the individual undergoing this experience cannot see it as progress. The individual is prompted by his experience to reflect on the limits of the criteria that underlie his point of view (and, indeed, to consider the possibility that these criteria may have to be revised), but such reflection is simply *unsettling* for the individual, not liberating. It is for this reason that Hegel uses the term “violence”: the individual’s experience is not one of success but of loss, albeit one that has a significance. It is only the *observer*, therefore, for whom

⁶² Michael Rosen, *Hegel’s Dialectic and Its Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 41–42.

determinate negation (and the experience through which it results) constitutes a moment in the unambiguous *progress* of consciousness.

The perspective of the social critic, by contrast, is an external one for whom contradiction plays a key role in the critique of society. Although Rosen does not set out the distinction between immanent critique and determinate negation as I do, as a distinction between the perspectives of the social critic and that of the experiencer, he nevertheless shows how the distinction between the two perspectives of the *Phenomenology* cannot be crafted into a social-criticism version of Hegel. He takes issue with Habermas's redevelopment of the notion of determinate negation, which, he argues, "identifies it with the phenomenological path taken by self-consciousness".⁶³ The intention of Habermas's construction is to offer determinate negation as the knowledge of progress, whereas the dual perspective of the *Phenomenology* assigns that to the perspective of the observer. Rosen cites Habermas: "The figure of determinate negation applies not to an immanent logical connection but to the mechanism of the progress of a mode of reflection in which theoretical and practical reason are one.... A *form of life* that has become an abstraction cannot be negated without leaving a trace, or overthrown without practical consequences. The revolutionized situation contains the one that has been surpassed, because the insight of the new consists precisely in the experience of revolutionary release from the old consciousness".⁶⁴ And what Rosen charges against this is that Habermas's deployment of the notion of determinate negation "goes beyond what the model licenses". Rosen is arguing not against the idea that determinate negation produces a result, but rather against

⁶³ Ibid., 36.

⁶⁴ Jürgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests*, trans. Jeremy Shapiro (London: Heinemann, 1972), 18, quoted in Rosen, *Hegel's Dialectic and Its Criticism*, 36.

“the claim that it represents a model of rational progress”.⁶⁵ Rosen is certainly correct here in that what Habermas actually does in seeing determinate negation as rational progress is to introduce the perspective of the social critic who understands it as a progressive immanent critique.

If we disentangle immanent critique and determinate negation – as we must – we are left with a significantly less potent form of social criticism. Immanent critique is, as we have seen, the privileged perspective of the observer, bearing witness, as it were, to the inner contradictions of society and imagining a society that is free of them. The revelation of these contradictions does not by itself point beyond what generates the contradictions – and in that sense does no more than *disintegrate* the society under examination – but it is nonetheless motivated by the desire for social progress (in the nuanced sense I attributed to Adorno above). Determinate negation, by contrast, is the actual *experience* of contradiction, the full significance of which is not transparent to the experiencer. Conflating immanent critique and determinate negation, as Adorno’s social critique does, seems to allow the experience of determinate negation in itself to be *progressive* (since it takes us beyond the contradictions of society) and immanent critique seems to be *unforced* (since it proceeds by working through the experience of determinate negation). It is, however, a conflation – of Hegelian theses – that falls apart on close analysis.

As we have seen, Adorno’s appropriation of Hegel’s dialectic generates significant philosophical ideas. Non-identity, experience, and mediation – all of them materialist transformations of Hegelian notions – are distinctive and challenging philosophical

⁶⁵ Rosen, *Hegel’s Dialectic and Its Criticism*, 37.

proposals. At the same time, the extraction of Hegel's dialectic from its speculative context, in order to construct a new form of social critique, cannot, as the analysis shows, proceed in the form that Adorno develops.⁶⁶

⁶⁶ I am grateful to the editors of this volume for their many comments and suggestions, which helped greatly in the preparation of this chapter.