

# Diabolus in dialectica

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## Abstract

Adorno's *Drei Studien zu Hegel* (*Hegel: Three Studies*, 1963) offers his most focused treatment of what he took to be the core principles of Hegelian dialectic. Moreover, the book professes the central importance of Hegel for Adorno's own development. As such, it is a pivotal document that simultaneously looks back towards Adorno's most sustained personal work, *Minima Moralia* (1951), and ahead to what he took to be his most important systematic work, *Negative Dialectics* (1966). Adorno's interpretation of Hegel is critical and unique in both its tone and substance. Although there are many cross-cutting lines of argumentation, the one that stands out is Adorno's understanding of determinate negation in Hegel and his own suggestion for improving that concept. This paper reconstructs Adorno's main arguments in this domain, assesses them as interpretations of Hegel and investigates their importance for Adorno's emerging conception of 'negative dialectics'.

Adorno's *Drei Studien zu Hegel* (*Hegel: Three Studies*, 1963) is the developmental lynchpin between the 'personal testament' *Minima Moralia* (1951) and the work he considered his most important systematic statement, *Negative Dialektik* (1966). The first of the *Drei Studien* had appeared as a self-standing monograph under the title *Aspekte der Hegelschen Philosophie* in 1957, with a dictum from section 29 of that testament set as its epigraph—'Das Ganze ist das Unwahre' ('The whole is the untrue'; *AGS* 4: 55),<sup>1</sup> indicating its connection with the earlier book.<sup>2</sup> Adorno alerts the reader to *Drei Studien's* pivotal role in securing place for future work even more patently by concluding the Preface with the statement that it 'is intended as preparation for a revised concept of dialectic' (*AGS* 5: 250).

'The whole is the untrue' is, of course, a critical adaptation of Hegel's pronouncement in the Preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit* that 'the true is the whole' (*Das Wahre ist das Ganze*) (*HW* 3: 24).<sup>3</sup> Adorno's reversal of the motto encapsulates his assessment that there is philosophically productive ambivalence at the centre of Hegel's thought. Assessing Adorno's reversal of Hegel's claim requires attention to the special meaning Hegel gives to the concept of a whole.

For Hegel ‘the true’ that is ‘the whole’ is not one whose wholeness inheres in it antecedent to any internal development; the truth is a whole in virtue of the completion of an entire and replete developmental series:

But the whole is just the essence fulfilling itself through its development [*durch seine Entwicklung sich vollendende Wesen*]. One must say of the absolute that it is essentially a *result* [*Resultat*], that it is only at the *end* what it truly is [*daß es erst am Ende das ist, was es in Wahrheit ist*]; and precisely herein is its nature to be something actual, subject, or the coming-to-be-of-itself [*und hierin eben besteht seine Natur, Wirkliches, Subjekt oder Sichselbstwerden zu sein*]. (HW 3: 24)

Hegel allows that this idea ‘may seem contradictory’ (i.e., that the true is the whole but that the whole is not a static thing but a completed series), but goes on to give an extremely compressed tutorial in Hegelian dialectical ontology that ‘puts right the appearance of contradiction’. One practiced in reading Hegel will pause at the phrase ‘appearance of contradiction’ (*Schein vom Widerspruch*), for it is boilerplate that ‘appearance’ (*Erscheinung*) is never a nugatory category for him; the development of the whole and its being ‘the true’ is dependent on its *apparent* instantiations. Hegel adopts the same attitude towards contradiction: appearance and contradiction are intrinsic to the whole, not deviations from it. (One almost here wants to read the dative as indicating agency.)

Adorno is far from wanting to deny the qualification; in fact, Adorno wants to drive it deeper into Hegel’s thought than he takes Hegel to be capable of doing. In order to do justice to Hegel’s deepest insight, one should *both* (1) hold the whole to be the untrue and, (2) embrace the transposed proposition that what is true is the ‘not-whole’ (see *AGS* 5: 277). This sets Adorno on the trail of identifying a form of dialectical reason that retains what he takes to be those elements of Hegel’s conception of the same that have standing critical potential while rejecting those that do not. This sorting is, Adorno recognizes, a complex matter since Hegel’s views on any one subject are highly interactive with, and often inextricably dependent on, views on other subjects. One cannot pick and choose *ad libitum*.

Nonetheless, it is easy to see which main element of Hegel’s Adorno rejects and why: he rejects what he rightly takes to be the teleology that drives dialectical movement and the ground for the rejection is Hegel’s hyperbolic idealism—slightly more specifically, the overly constrained role that Hegel allows *the object* in dialectical determination. But the details of Adorno’s treatment are at times difficult to discern, not merely because his interpretation of Hegel is at times imprecise but also because many of Adorno’s criticisms of Hegel are overdetermined. True to his ‘constellar’ method, Adorno does not clarify

concepts primarily through analysis; rather, he gleans their contours by surrounding them with what he takes to be relevant contrasting concepts, the more the better. Accordingly, it can be difficult to home in on the telling criticism.

Adorno is in the company of a host of others who credit what they take to be the force of Hegel's conception of dialectic but wish to liberate it from what they construe as its back-sliding into a form of rationalism. This line of reaction to Hegel was well known to Adorno in its three main camps: the Young Hegelians of the 1830s and 40s, the *Lebensphilosophie* of Dilthey and, most historically proximate to Adorno, Francophone interpretations of Hegel at work in Wahl, Koyré, Kojève, Hyppolite, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty. Reclaiming in better form—or, as Adorno prefers to say following Walter Benjamin, 'rescuing' (*AGS* 5: 320, 354)—Hegelian dialectical thought is Adorno's main play in what one must count as *the* high-stakes philosophical game in Europe after World War II, i.e., laying claim to the historical preserve of what is sometimes called, a bit too grandly, 'classical German philosophy'. Adorno comes to the table with a hand comprised of cards of various suits *inter alios* Kant, Kierkegaard, Marx, Freud and Weber—but he reckons Hegel, i.e., his version of Hegel, to be his trump.

What Adorno takes to be distinctive about his approach to Hegel becomes apparent when, at the outset of the book, he contrasts that approach with Croce's. Adorno holds that Croce's answer to the question of *ciò che è vivo e ciò che è morto nella filosofia di Hegel* (what is living and what is dead in Hegel's philosophy) results from a philosophically unsophisticated treatment of its subject. The test for 'what is alive and what is dead' deploys criteria that are expressions of settled contemporary views about which forms of philosophy are worthwhile and which are not (Croce 1906: 3–143).<sup>4</sup> Looking for Hegel's 'relevance' in such terms indicates a felt philosophical superiority that, in turn, forms the basis for cleanly partitioning the object of inquiry into what is acceptable and what is not. The overall tendency is to assimilate Hegel to one's own philosophical framework, a framework that is, as a general matter, in better order than was Hegel's—thus the direction the assimilation takes (Hegel to the present, rather than the reverse).

This moves in precisely the opposite philosophical direction to Adorno's project. For Adorno, a historical view's pertinence almost always lies in its *not* fitting neatly into contemporary categories. The history of philosophy for him is not an incremental forced march to the truth, where one view begets the next in such a fashion that what is left to the side historically is of mere historical interest. Taking another cue from Benjamin, he holds that under conditions of modern culture, a culture that more and more readily discards its past, what is discarded—its detritus—is what may best register in its being-discarded what remains salient. The overlooked is 'an X-ray' that reveals the unstated historical conditions in force which make such things irrelevant (*AGS* 10.1: 145; *ANS* IV.4: 52). After all, these leftovers were not historical accidents; they were not made to be

ephemeral; they were made to answer to human desires, needs, hopes, etc. Their marginalization may exhibit latent resistance in them to being easily swept away in the commodity-stream of the status quo. Their weakness is their strength. Benjamin's overarching example of this phenomenon is the Parisian arcade of the late nineteenth century, in which are collected for display, sale and resale various such detritus, things that have all but reverted back to their pure use values.

Adorno casts Hegel's philosophy as just such an object. Of course, Hegel's thought is not completely discarded as a philosophical matter, otherwise questions like Croce's would never arise. But taking Hegel's philosophy in its unwieldy *entirety*, as the whole that Hegel meant it to be, is in Adorno's estimation the only way to preserve its critical function. That is, one can only judge the contemporary force of Hegel's philosophy by allowing its seemingly outdated aspects full reign, in stark juxtaposition with what one takes the present state of affairs to be. In so doing one generates maximal possible friction between Hegel's views and the views of contemporary philosophy, contemporary neo-Hegelianism included, as the handy compartmentalization of Hegel's thought is just another way to mark Hegel's irrelevance. Instead, one should see whether what counts nowadays as relevant is itself a well-formed category by submitting it to the measure of Hegel (*AGS* 5: 251).

## I. Totality and singularity

Recall Adorno's reversal of what he takes to be the central, ambivalent Hegelian thought: 'Das Ganze ist das Unwahre'. Like Hegel, Adorno operates with a specific sense of 'the whole' that he terms 'totality' (*Totalität*) (*AGS* 5: 252). Adorno here is adapting a concept from Lukács, who first introduced the term in *Die Seelen und die Formen* (1911) and further developed its meaning in *Die Theorie des Romans* (1916/20). Here totality is a concept used to construct an aesthetic taxonomy relating the genres of epic, drama and the novel.<sup>5</sup> As Lukács repurposes the concept in *Geschichte und Klassenbewußtsein* (1923), it captures a methodological point in social epistemology and ontology: one must understand individuals fundamentally as components in an overall, organically structured whole. That is, the primary units of social analysis are whole structures. Totality is the power of such structures to condition the form and content of their constituent parts. Understanding any one part is to understand it relative to totality along two dimensions: (1) *vertically*, in terms of the whole structure and (2) *horizontally*, in terms of other parts at co-ordinate levels of membership. (2) ultimately depends on (1), for what parts are, such that they can be related to other parts, is parts *of the whole* (see Lukács 1967a: 21–22, 39–41, 167, 190). Lukács holds that it is in principle possible to achieve knowledge of a new, modern

form of totality, if one is the right sort of subject. Such a subject would have to be of a proper sort and in a proper position to cognize the whole structure. Lukács holds that this requires a collective form of agency (a class) that is clear on its vocation (has a particularly lucid knowledge of its class identity). In his estimation, only the proletariat qualifies.<sup>6</sup>

Adorno demurs. The foremost lesson he takes from this aspect of Lukács's work concerns the perils inherent in handling the concept of totality. More specifically, one must not collapse the semantic specificity of components of a structure into the semantic generality of the structure as a whole. Adorno holds that one must be constantly watchful on this score in the modern world, a world in which one is apt to experience systematic efficiency to be an intrinsic and, indeed, peremptory good. Such collapses can range from the minimal requirements of whatever concept one likes—i.e., the demands of any general discursive thought for the homologous—through more invidious forms of stereotyping, formal attempts at 'reduction', 'reconstruction', or even elimination. To put it coarsely: the enemy to be faced is the apathy contained in thinking of what is singular as having its value in terms of being classified and acted upon on the basis of its being-the-same as other things. In Adorno's estimation Hegel passes in part and fails in part the test of proper circumspection. Moreover, the way in which Hegel passes and fails provides a clue to which aspect of his conception of dialectic is most fruitful for further development (*AGS* 5: 251–52, 289).

For Hegel, an adequate philosophical understanding of conceptuality treats concepts not as discrete, binary, static entities but rather as runs of discursive development—as *processes*. But this is decidedly not how concepts present in ordinary life and thought. Hegel is well aware of this, and a large part of the project of phenomenology for him is to develop the internal resources of these philosophically inadequate yet experientially significant concepts so that they yield by necessity (after a long and tortuous set of 'derivations') philosophically adequate understanding. Roughly, step-wise increase in reflection on the form and content of concepts as they are given in ordinary experience makes it possible for one to develop, by immanent means, a full-fledged conception of concepts as processes.<sup>7</sup> More than this, Hegel holds that it is possible to show by such means that there is a single, uninterrupted and complete process that encompasses all such basic concepts—to speak loosely, that such concepts, or 'the Concept', have what logicians call 'categoriality' (and thereby 'completeness').<sup>8</sup> At the level of ordinary experience, concepts are binary; they are determinate and determining in the sense that they sharply include and exclude the range of things that fall under them and, coevally, in the sense that each concept is richer and more powerful to the extent that it is differentiated from others. Hegel's account of conceptuality, then, trades on this binary nature of general thought in order to generate an account of concepts that ultimately dismisses binary conceptual structure in favour of the

more process-oriented model mentioned above—Hegelian dialectic turns binary thought against itself to yield a deeper account of thinking as non-binary.

There are recognizable antecedents in German Idealism and Romanticism to the procedure of pressing beyond the surface features of thought (grammar) to more basic levels, in terms of which the surface is to be correctly understood as a limited case of the deep, but Hegel's account of how to achieve this is unique in a number of its features. The driving force behind Hegelian dialectic is the friction between the retention of binary conceptual force, on the one hand, and the confrontation with a world in which any and every thing is related in some way to all else, on the other. Adorno, when writing about Hegel, sometimes calls such relation 'affinity' (*AGS* 5: 285); such relations operate on single concepts to press them towards their internal 'extremes' by having to incorporate that which once stood as alien to them in meaning, which foreignness allowed for their individuation in the first place (*AGS* 5: 255, 257).<sup>9</sup> The harder one looks at the world with one's binary categories in hand, the more one will see that those categories must fail to discriminate what is included and excluded from the content of the category. Hegel holds that the motor impulse behind dialectic is the dogged determination to make our 'natural' concepts stick to experience and allow stable orientation in the world. What's more, he holds that this 'going-beyond' itself is a tacit part of the *content* of any such attempted local determination. The concept will attempt to preserve its status as determinate by broadening its extension to the point at which it is so destabilized in terms of its original (and adaptive) determinacy that it will 'go over into its opposite' or into 'what it is not'. The moral here is that all concepts, save the complete system of them, have what determinacy they enjoy only by dint of background context, which context is provided ultimately by the holistic interweaving of *all* concepts.

What Adorno rejects about this scheme is not the idea that concepts are processes or the complementary notion that strict conditions for determinacy are not available absent background conditions. Nor does he dispute Hegel's denial of an ultimate divide between what is a priori and what is a posteriori (*AGS* 5: 252–55, 305). Instead, Adorno's worry is that Hegel's idealism leaves unworked the central insight that properly guides *any* dialectical thought: that concepts deliver cognitive and conative orientation only by suppressing the teeming singularity of things. Hegel's default to teleology—albeit to a rather rarefied form of it—constitutes to Adorno's way of thinking a final submission to the pressures of conceptual hegemony *cum* determinacy.<sup>10</sup> Hegel's devotion to the principle that philosophical systems must be closed around their basic constituents, a devotion whose result is all the more convoluted because of the necessity to encompass the concept-as-process view, is *both* what must not be papered over (or simplistically excised) in attempts to understand his views *and* what must be criticized.

## II. Determinate negation

The main point of divergence is the conception of determinate negation, which Adorno rightly identifies as the central operation of Hegelian dialectical rationality. Instead of negating negation in order to reach affirmation, as he takes Hegel to do, Adorno wishes to affirm negation in order to preserve denial. Adorno holds that this more negative form of dialectic is compatible with the requirement that negation is determinate, but the sense in which it is so will have to change. Of course, the need to reformulate determinate negation is only pressing on the assumption that totality is false. But before considering more fully the grounds for Adorno's rejection of totality, it is worthwhile to be a bit more specific about the structure of determinate negation in Hegel.

Hegel uses the term 'determinate negation' (*bestimmte Negation*) in several contexts; rather than having one precise referent, it has at least three. As already mentioned, the term is meant to capture what Hegel takes to be the basic semantic relation between a concept and the network of other concepts in which it is situated. This is determinate negation in its most limited dimension. In this instance, that a concept has a determined meaning depends on its being contrasted with (or 'opposed to') other terms that it is *not*. That the contrast is with other specific concepts, and not with 'nothing', as Hegel sometimes puts it, is what makes the constitution by contrast also *specifically* oppositional and not merely 'abstract' (see *HW* 5: 73).<sup>11</sup> Hegel sees in Spinoza's treatment of finite modes of substance a precursor of this idea. So put, however, determinate negation does not necessarily have to do with developmental arcs of concepts; the picture is for Hegel unacceptably static.

Accordingly, 'determinate negation' *also* refers more expansively to the *process* of self-differentiation that gives rise to items that are 'other' than the concept in question. This provides, as it were, a playing field of negations that the concept is both to take as what makes it, the concept, definitive and as what it sequentially encounters and finds to be not merely negative but a positive part of it. And, last, 'determinate negation' can also mean any 'rounding off' or ending of such a developmental arc, where enough and only enough negations have been overcome such that the determination of the concept is changed and a new background of determination (in the first sense of the term) is created, so that the process can repeat itself at a superior level of conceptual articulation and dialectical sensitivity. 'Determinate negation' in this last sense is co-extensive with what Hegel calls the 'negation of the negation'. Here the balance of the term shifts a bit; what is determined by and in negation is not merely a concept but an entire run of its negations. One might call the first sense of 'determinate negation' its *anterior* aspect and, following this, the second and third senses as *mediate* and *posterior*. Hegel holds ultimately that all three aspects operate in tandem.

Adorno takes Hegelian dialectic to forsake its own best impulse when it posits that one can develop the entire possible conceptual space of dialectical thought and, consequently, that all concepts have indirect though complete determination relative to that whole. This is the sense in which Hegel's philosophy for Adorno is too 'affirmative' or 'positive'. This objection to *the* system, or any closed system of thought for that matter is significant, but it is of the utmost importance to see that this objection has microstructural consequences; that is, it impacts on the issue of possible dialectical transition from one concept to the next. Hegel's view is that the connections between adjacent concepts are necessary and univocal. The negation of the negation of concept *c* uniquely and with no intervening requirement results in its successor, which successor bears within it a (imperfect) retrospective rendering of precisely that transition. If one robs Hegel's system of its overall teleological character, this tight dialectical bond simply cannot exist.<sup>12</sup> Adorno appreciates this; this is why, in addition to making the usual complaints about teleology and metaphysics in Hegel, he attempts to reinvent dialectical interaction at this microstructural level.

One might say that, in Adorno's estimation, Hegel pushes dialectical negation as far as he can without sacrificing overall conceptual positivity, and putting matters in this fashion reveals a key thought: Adorno wishes to subvert Hegelian *idealism*. 'Idealism' is a philosophical position that aspires to reduce the world (the 'non-identical') to thought ('the identical').<sup>13</sup> The changes Hegel rings on Schelling's formulation of a 'philosophy of identity', i.e., that his philosophy is one in which there is 'identity of the identical and the non-identical' (*HW* 2: 96), are reversed in Adorno's characterization of the desideratum of modern dialectical thought, which demands 'the *non-identity* of the identical and the non-identical' (*AGS* 6: 19).<sup>14</sup> This mirror-slogan is a companion to the reversed image in which 'the whole' goes from being 'the true' to 'the untrue'. The main contention is that Hegelian idealism renders impossible proper constraint of thought by objects, objects, that is, *considered in their own terms*. Indeed, boundless thought is the sought result of idealist dialectic; the idealist conceives of objects as mere foils for conceptualization, as a necessary posit needed to reflect thought back to thinker.

Adorno does not offer a set of arguments intended to subvert idealism from within in order to counter this unbridled extension of thought to world; his approach to Hegel is not, that is, one of immanent critique. Adorno allows that Hegelianism is perfected idealism; it is a closed, coherent structure, in which the parts can always be adjusted in terms of the whole (*AGS* 5: 251–53, 370). Adorno, rather, confronts the view with what he takes to be an undeniable 'fact' that it is outside the capacity of idealism to perceive honestly.<sup>15</sup> When Adorno calls Hegel's social and political theory the *bourgeois* (*AGS* 5: 274–75), what is behind the remark is the contention that Hegel does *not* find his society contradictory. It is, rather, generally in order—although the details might need



to be sorted out (*AGS* 5: 277). To the contrary, the world is riven by many unresolved ‘contradictions’, some of which have cardinal political, ethical and aesthetic impacts. A partial list includes: the Shoah; the atom bomb; environmental catastrophe; and so on (see *AGS* 10.1: 30; 11: 125). For Adorno this fact ‘disproves’ Hegelianism (see *AGS* 5: 265–67, 322–23).

Adorno is thoroughly a *realist* here; he implores one just to look around, see massive deprivation, and then ask oneself if a theory that posited that the complete run of ethically relevant basic concepts is closed could account for such discrepancy.<sup>16</sup> Hegel claims that one powerful way of characterizing what ‘the system’ has on offer is as a ‘true theodicy’ (*HW* 20: 455). Adorno in essence wishes to place Hegel in the uncomfortable position of having to retreat into ‘false theodicy’, i.e., into claims like Leibniz’s that the actual world, for all its defects, is the best it could possibly be (see Leibniz 1969: I.8). One might say, in a way, that this is Adorno’s ‘Jacobian moment’. Jacobi viewed Spinoza as an ironclad rationalist—a thinker all but unassailable from within the framework of rationalism because the most systematic and exaggerated form of it. The result is ‘nihilism’ on a number of cherished epistemological, ethical and religious fronts (see Jacobi 2000). Likewise, Adorno forwards Hegel as the most systematically rigorous of idealists, unimpeachable in his own terms. The results: idealism pushed to the brink and a coordinate quietism about how the world of human making is yet a place of rampant suffering.<sup>17</sup>

Adorno holds that Marx is the beginning of an antidote to hypertrophic idealism (*AGS* 5: 265), but does not read Marx back into Hegel as he takes French interpretation to do. Marking the scope of Marx’s ‘correction’ to Hegel in this way permits one to see more clearly the philosophical stakes at hand. Adorno contends that a conception of agency built around labour brings with it a corrected conception of nature as being irreducible to conditions afforded by subjectivity (*AGS* 5: 269–70).<sup>18</sup> Labour is the mediating term between humans and nature, and society must be understood as the product of the interaction of the two (*AGS* 5: 271–73). So, while Adorno endorses Hegel’s pronouncement that truth ‘is not a minted coin that can be readily given and pocketed’ (*nicht eine ausgeprägte Münze ist, die fertig gegeben und so eingestrichen werden kann*) (*HW* 3: 40), Adorno extends the point:

[I]n it [the truth – FR] something always wins through [*sich durchsetzt*], that which, without being isolatable, cannot be reduced to the subject [*aufs Subjekt nicht sich zurückführen läßt*], something that traditional Idealist epistemologies believe they may neglect as a mere placeholder [*als bloßes X glauben vernachlässigen zu dürfen*]. (*AGS* 5: 284)

The interrelation of subject to object, of conceptual structure to non-conceptual base, is fundamentally asymmetric. The structure of dialectic—at least under

present conditions in the modern world—must forbid any closure of concepts around objects, and this forbearance must be written into the structure of dialectic *formally*. This means that dialectic cannot be progressive in Hegel's sense because no dialectical node can have a proximal successor on account of the affirmation inherent in the negation of the negation. Put another way: Adorno wishes to reformulate the concept of *Aufhebung*, the idea that a successor concept simultaneously expunges, elevates and preserves the content of its predecessor.

One sense in which one might take Adorno, compared to Hegel, to be more emphatic in his defence of negation is simply that, in an open-ended dialectic, there will always be a place for *further* negation. Adorno incorporates the needed circumspection about the adequacy of concept to object as one might expect, i.e., by endowing objects with the status not merely of 'what-is-not-yet-conceptualized' (*das Vorbegriffliche*) but rather of 'what-is-outside-all-conception' (*das Ausserbegriffliche*).<sup>19</sup> Adorno's aim is to vouchsafe ongoing critique of whatever presents itself as settled and in good order, which critique displays indirectly the 'non-identical' in virtue of its unstinting refusal to rest with any final identity.

Put more prosaically, negative critique of a state of affairs shows that there is always *something or other* beyond what has been rejected, a residuum of the object of thought, to which thought must be held accountable (*AGS* 5: 308, 310).<sup>20</sup> So long as the world is 'in contradiction', there will be such a thing. In such a situation, it is individual resistance to the overwhelming status quo that bears the interest of totality, in the sense that it is only through such restlessness that one keeps in view what *might be* better, but *is not*.<sup>21</sup> This reconstruction of the point at issue may indeed limn Adorno's reconceptualization of negation. But it is not yet clear why negation so understood would be *determinate*, as Adorno insists it is.

### III. Mimesis and negative determinate negation

Adorno develops a conception of an experiential zero-limit correlative to this form of dialectical negation, by which he means to establish within human experience the least 'identity-oriented' form of cognitive interaction and, therefore, the mode of human address to the world that is least taken with issues of prediction and control. This he terms 'mimesis'; again, Benjamin is the source of the doctrine.<sup>22</sup> Mimesis is a pre-discursive activity in which one encounters the world non-categorically in terms of a shifting balance involving (A) *immersion* or 'becoming-like' objects and (B) *distance* or 'becoming-other-than' them. The interactive formative balance between 'like' and 'other' in mimesis is a mark of its dialectical structuration.

Adorno mines materials for the first, immersive aspect of this activity from a deep vein in German Idealism and Romanticism, in which the condition for

being even minimally individuated as an agent is understood as being in proximate contact with an undifferentiated, surging metaphysical undertow (e.g., Schopenhauer, late Schelling, early Nietzsche, Freud (on some readings of some works), Jung, Klages). There is always a pull to de-individuate oneself in response to one's emergent sense of standing over and against nature so conceived. The second aspect of the activity, distancing, is also reactive to the object, this time involving a pulling back that permits both some relief from encroachment and the beginnings of a capacity to reflect on the object. It is crucial to mark that mimesis is in this aspect responsive, not 'spontaneous' in the sense standardly operative in idealism. It is an address towards objects that respects their qualitative uniqueness.

Thought is at base mimetic and, to that extent, is 'mediated' by the object *qua* object.<sup>23</sup> All experience is materially laden, containing some part of the non-conceptual. This is more than a descriptive claim for Adorno. Concepts should display such dependency; only a concept that 'saturates itself [*sich sättigt*] with the weight of the object rather than shooting out beyond itself [*über ihn hinauszuschießen*] without delay [...] is worth anything' (AGS 5: 320). Subjects and their concepts must adapt themselves to resources experienced both as providing the basis for any one experience and, *in that provision, exceeding the limits of that provision*. In *Negative Dialektik* Adorno makes the same point when he insists that concepts owe a 'debt' (*Schuld*) towards the object that ought to be repaid in the currency of the recognition of conceptual limitation (AGS 6: 17). So, while a concept is by its very nature reductive, seeking identity of thought and object, that very identification is only possible against the broader background of the adaptation of the subject to the demands of the object as such, i.e., to what is not-identical with thought.

If, like Adorno, one conceives of the object as always outpacing conceptual resources that aim to exhaust its nature, then further conceptual determinations will always in principle be on offer. If determination works by negation, then *a fortiori* determinate negation will be an unending activity and to that extent there will be an intensification of the philosophical role of the activity. This is one (rather informal) sense in which one might take it that Adorno's reconceptualization of negation's place in dialectic yields determinate negation. But Adorno must have something more formal in mind as well, having to do with the *intensive*, and not merely extensive, character of Hegelian dialectic. Dialectic is, if anything, an account of thought for which the transitions between thoughts are more telling than the points at which thought is apparently stable. It is not the result of determination that is important, but the ongoing activity of determining. At the limit, one might say that transition is all, that thinking is essentially the movement from thought to thought, and that it is only an appreciation of this primacy of the activity of thinking over the having of individual thoughts that brings out

philosophically the nature of those thoughts—as inherently proleptic and retroactively reliant. Transition can occur without progression, so Hegel's insistence that the transitions are necessarily progressive is an addition to this scenario. Still transition requires that, in addition to the transit, there both be a *terminus a quo* and a *terminus ad quem* relative to the transition. Transition must be *from* some *point* to some *next point*. Determinate negation in Hegel furnishes such termini, although *qua* termini they are all relative to the transition in question. Notwithstanding the conceptual independence of (1) the idea that transition between concepts is of such importance that one might as well call the transition itself 'the Concept' and (2) the idea of a progressive sequence of such concepts, Hegel does hold dialectical transition to be progressive, and not just certain runs of it. As already suggested, the overall teleological cast of Hegelian dialectic might be seen as a way to ground just this sort of requirement. Adorno's rejection of this necessitarian component raises formal questions about the character of the transitions in negative dialectics. Put simply: what is a transition between conceptual arrays for Adorno and why would one call it 'dialectical'?<sup>24</sup>

Assume that a certain conceptual array has been subjected to a successful application of negative dialectics. What *results* from that application? One might take it that such an application would show that the array in question could not maintain its claim to correctly determine the world. Classical capitalism's claim that it alone increases freedom and, at its notional limit, would make humans most free, is found to be incorrect when measured against social-historical reality. Perhaps at an earlier time, when the world was differently constituted (i.e., when the *ancien régime* was just breaking down) this would have been impossible to see. But now it is impossible to miss; the ways in which classical capitalism cannot answer demands for freedom are before one. Does this recognition in and of itself require a core of a new conceptual content around which one can build up a new conception of freedom, or is one left only with negative critique? The answer must be, on the one hand, one is left with a number of aspects, but perhaps not an exhaustive specification, of what is lacking in the classical concept of capitalism with regard to freedom. There are determinate negations, but perhaps not ones that converge in their negativity to the degree necessary to yield a unique and positive end to criticism on that level. Adorno simply has no means native to his conception of dialectic to select from among those many possible negations ones that are essential.

The first formal lesson about determinate negation in negative dialectics, accordingly, is that there is less 'forcing' of the transition to a new conception, even if the specification of the new conception at the outset is purely negative, i.e., what classical capitalism relative to freedom by its own lights is *not*. One might always linger dialectically with capitalism with the hopes of teasing out a new criticism. Now, by strict Hegelian lights this would not count as determinate negation

at all; rather, it would register as conceptually indeterminate—in fact, as rather close to what Hegel finds objectionable in romantic irony. One might even be tempted to call this conception of continuous criticism a ‘bad infinity’.

Assume now, further, that there *is* a somewhat stable, yet ultimately contingent, new conceptual array consisting of the negative critique of the former. *Need* it coalesce in a positive set of views *at all*? Evidently not. Negative critique of a concept relative to a certain context might cause one to investigate by imaginative variance, comparison, or sheer juxtaposition that context or even, at a limit, call the context into question. But this would not be mandatory in the sense in play in talking about the formal nature of dialectical rationality. Adorno’s object-oriented conception of dialectic all but guarantees the result. One would expect that whatever ends up constraining transition will be pragmatic, not semantic, contingent, not required. For the ‘debt’ paid to the object by thought, to put the point in Adorno’s rather dramatic terms, is just that which is ‘progressive’, a deliverance in part of historical–ontological elements outside conceptual capture. To dig deeper into a given object in this way may not be a progression *of* concepts, yet it might be a progression *in* conceptualization.

This does not strike me as an incoherent conception of dialectic, so long as one allows for readjustment of terms. It is ‘determinate’ in the sense, not that negation is within the control of conception (the Hegelian view), but rather that the conjunction of negation and what is negated will yield critically specific complexes of thought, complexes self-aware enough to be suspicious of any claim that they incrementally exhaust the object by determining it. Although he does not make the point exactly in this way, one might say that Adorno takes himself to be forwarding a specifically Hegelian agenda because he takes himself to make an even more radical distinction than Hegel does between what is determinate and what is *definitive*. The distinction is present in Hegel, and Hegel makes it a centrepiece of his account of conceptuality, but he betrays the resources of his own thought in finally allowing the distinction to collapse under the weight of teleology. What Adorno envisions, then, is a form of dialectical thought whose critical function is multidirectional, not sequential.

#### IV. Hegel, the obscure

Adorno emphasizes throughout *Drei Studien* that reading Hegel is itself the experience of dialectical thought—that working through the transitions in, say, the *Phenomenology* instantiates dialectic (see *AGS* 5: 297; see also *HW* 3: 78–79). The medium of the dialectical experience of the reader is of course inherently linguistic, but Adorno judges Hegel to be ‘indifferent to language’ (*AGS* 5: 339, 342–43), to exhibit an ‘adversarial impulse’ and ‘skepticism’ towards it, and to

treat it as inherently unphilosophical on account of its representational nature (AGS 5: 350–51, 353). While this may not be altogether fair, it is not going too far to say that Hegel never developed a philosophical style lapidary enough to capture the constant movement of dialectic. Adorno is obsessed with the idea of crafting a special form of language for dialectical thought and, in keeping with that, proposes a way to read Hegel ‘against the grain’ (*gegen den Strich lesen*) (AGS 5: 368), pivoting language away from its representational function, in order to make more prominent the linguistic resources he takes to be latent in the texts (AGS 5: 351, 353).

The guiding idea is to approach the texts at two levels of reading simultaneously, as one might hear intertwining musical structures as at one and the same time as discrete and yet as constituting a single experience. At the first level, one should be carried along by the kinetics of Hegel’s thought and not pause at individual junctures to assess whether that movement is philosophically well motivated. Adorno’s intent is not crystal clear, but he seems to pair this approach to and experience of the text with its historical dimension—i.e., with the way that, at least in many of Hegel’s texts, dialectical movement is presented as historically ‘tensed’ (AGS 5: 359–60). At the second level, which Adorno considers more ‘intellectual’ or, in Hegel’s sense ‘logical’, the reader engages in a ‘slow motion method’ (*Zeitlupenverfahren*) when one finds oneself ‘at the cloudy places’ (*bei den wolkgigen Stellen*), so that the motion can be seen as dependent on specific dialectical structure (AGS 5: 355).

Adorno here deploys an extended musical analogy.<sup>25</sup> Inhabiting these two frames at once, one ‘composes’ (*komponiert*) a ‘reprise’ (*Reprise*) in which Hegel’s dialectic is brought back to itself in a different form, one in which the non-identical is an irreducible element in the structure of concepts, not merely an external relation among concepts (AGS 5: 363, 366; see also AGS 5: 354).<sup>26</sup> What Adorno has in mind becomes a bit clearer when he states that dialectical thought must move backwards and forwards at the same time (AGS 5: 366). Again, simultaneity is key. Adorno is not here reciting from the Hegelian breviary to the effect that dialectical progression includes within it at each and every stage a retrospective recasting of dialectical connection between components. It is rather that the ‘reading backwards’ yields a coeval progressive/regressive structure that shows how previous objects evaded complete conceptual specification, and so will do. Hegelian retrospection is merely consequent on progression, not in equipoise with it. Moving backwards *and* forwards at the same time contrasts with moving backwards *in* moving forwards; the latter is Hegelian, the former Adorno’s own procedure. Reading Hegel in this way penetrates the ‘experiential core’ of his thought (AGS 5: 368).

None of this is particularly clear, but perhaps that is less to the point than one might think. Adorno includes in the title of the third and concluding essay the Greek word *skoteimos*, which can mean ‘darkness’, ‘blindness’ or ‘obscurity’.

The term has a philosophical history of sorts: Herakleitos was known widely as ‘the obscure’ (*ho skoteinos*). Needless to say, in the context of pre-Socratic utterance, the epithet ‘obscure’, or even ‘*the* obscure’, does not necessarily imply criticism.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, Adorno mentions one of Hegel’s comments on Herakleitos (from the *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*), to the effect that the obscurity in question is a sign of profundity (*AGS* 5: 337; see also *HW* 18: 322–23). It is reasonable to conclude that the title alludes to the ancient moniker as it is nested in Hegel’s assessment of it. More to the point: Hegel is to the philosophical present as Herakleitos was to the ancients. How does one speak clearly of the obscure without overwriting the profundity? Adorno offers an answer:

Here too philosophy would confront a paradox: to *clearly* say what is *unclear*, what lacks firm outline, what is not in compliance with reification, to do so, that is, so that the moments that elude the beam of the fixating gaze [*dem fixierenden Blickstrahl entgleiten*] or are entirely inaccessible are marked with utmost clarity. (*AGS* 5: 335) (emphases added)

Only by immersing oneself in the whole of Hegel’s thought, unselectively and with historical subtlety, will one be able to see it in terms of its sheer impetus, not clotted by its savings clauses and responsiveness to internal detail. What is revealed thereby is Hegel’s struggle to detach himself from the ‘myth of enlightenment’ even as he lays grounds for its critique. It is the ‘Janus character of [his] philosophy’ (*AGS* 5: 289). The teleological cast of Hegelian dialectic tokens its rationalist residue and, with that, a former and outdated mode of hope, replete with a vision of philosophical harmonics of symphonic dimension. *Drei Studien* suggests that one work instead in miniature or with the large forms broken apart and then put back together again with joints showing.<sup>28</sup>

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Abbreviations:

*AGS* = Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. R. Tiedemann (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1972).

*ANS* = Adorno, *Nachgelassene Schriften*, ed. Theodor-Adorno-Archiv (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2002–).

*HW* = Hegel, *Werke*, ed. E. Moldenhauer and K. Michel (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1970).

All translations are mine.

<sup>2</sup> The epigraph is not reprinted in the collected version of the essay. The second essay in the volume, 'Erfahrungsgehalt', had appeared previously under the title 'Erfahrungsgehalte der Hegelschen Philosophie' in the periodical *Archiv für Philosophie* 9 (1959): 67–89. 'Skoteinos oder Wie zu lesen sei', the final essay in the collection, previously unpublished, was composed in the winter of 1962–3.

<sup>3</sup> It is important not to translate Adorno's *bon mot* unqualifiedly as 'the whole is the false'. This is because 'false' and 'untrue' are emphatically *not* synonyms in the Hegelian context in which Adorno's interpretation operates (not to mention Adorno's own thought). We shall see why this is the case in what follows, but as a first pass simplification one might offer: the untrue is truth that one is not yet in a position to express adequately, not what is not true *simpliciter*. In other words, the German prefix *un-* is not strictly speaking privative.

<sup>4</sup> Croce's answer: jettison Hegel's 'panlogicism'. This interpretation would prove important for Gramsci.

<sup>5</sup> I cannot hope to provide an adequate account of the development of the concept in Lukács's early work. Broadly speaking, *Die Seelen* presents the concept as part of a diagnosis of the nostalgic wish to look past modern cultural fragmentation. While art can introduce fictional versions of such completeness, the main value of this is in the contrast between art's completeness and the world incompleteness. Even better is art that registers the fragmentation: to manifest what Lukács's teacher Simmel called *die Tragödie der Kultur. Theorie* shows Lukács moving away from his Southwest Neo-Kantian roots towards Hegel. It considers the concept more historically, the pure form of such unity being Homeric epic. The history of literature since the archaic Greek context is more or less a stepwise descent away from totality to the modern period, which conspicuously lacks this property. Indeed, the condition precedent for modern life is the 'destruction' of totality. It must be said that Lukács's account of Greek literature is potted—really bits and pieces of materials that were common intellectual property for a century. His historical taxonomy of the novel is, for all the Hegelian goings-on, stipulative and haphazard, forcing him to say unlikely things about, e.g., Cervantes. In any event, for the Lukács of *Theorie*, the modern art form *par excellence* remains the novel. He lays particular emphasis here on the psychology of the protagonist. Some novels can achieve a subjective simulation of totality (i.e., epic stillness) by portraying characters whose inner lives are consummated. But this is not truly totality, which would have to be objective; it remains mere striving for totality. Instead, the summit of modern art is a novel that reflects upon just that failure to cohere. Dostoevsky is the way forward in this regard.

<sup>6</sup> Lukács alters this within a year in Lukács (1967b) to 'may soon qualify, provided the right pedagogy', but that is another matter.

<sup>7</sup> It is well known that Hegel does not deploy the adjective 'immanent' (*immanent, innevobnend*) to refer to the requirement that critical rationality only operate with the cognitive stock and formal procedures available in a given intellectual scheme or Concept. Nonetheless, that it is a requirement for him is evident on even cursory reading.

<sup>8</sup> It goes without saying that I do not mean to imply that any logicians who deploy the concept would credit Hegelian Logic as logic.



<sup>9</sup> Provenance for this particular use of the term is Kantian. Most pertinent is Kant's use in his account of imaginative synthesis. See Kant (1990: A 113–14, 122–24). Kant also uses the term in the Appendix to the *Dialectic* to the first *Critique* to refer to a transcendently necessary but merely regulative principle of gapless continuity in the systematic relation of empirical concepts and laws. See Kant (1990: A 658–61/B 685–89). Adorno allows that Kant's transcendental idealism already makes thematic the problem of 'non-identity' and that Hegel is mistaken to think of Fichte as an improvement on Kant in such terms. See *AGS* 5: 259–60.

<sup>10</sup> Adorno seems confused about one quite important element of Hegel's account of philosophical systematicity. At times, he seems to ascribe to Hegel the idea that systematic closure is afforded by a highest, cumulative covering principle discrete from the total series that it conditions. See *AGS* 5: 261 (this is 'the Hegelian *skandalon*', i.e., a trap, an impediment, or an offence). He even goes so far as to say that the very idea of an absolute that is nothing above the serial iterations of self-negating thought is incoherent. See *AGS* 5: 266. This is an elementary error, for Hegel precisely does not hold *Geist* to be a substance in the sense of what must undergo change yet itself remain constant. In other passages, Adorno has the correct view, i.e., as when he says early that the whole is merely the 'quintessence' of its partial serial moments. Indeed, Adorno holds that this is the meaning of 'totality' for Hegel (*AGS* 5: 253–54; see also *AGS* 5: 258, 269–70).

<sup>11</sup> *HW* 5: 121; cf. *HW* 8: 196 [§ 91 Zusatz]. The operation of the idea in Spinoza is a complicated affair, and it is far from clear that Hegel's conception of it is very much like Spinoza's. Nevertheless, the idea in Hegel is Spinozistic, provided him by Jacobi's formulation of its import.

<sup>12</sup> The necessitarian component comes out perhaps most clearly in interpretations of Hegelian dialectic that emphasise its metaphysical or ontological character. Here dialectic has the property *ex ante* of sequential conceptual expansion and constraint which only has rigorous expression in univocal and necessary progression. It might be thought that interpretations that treat necessity of dialectical transition as the result of a retrospective narrative requirement that the sequence vindicate one's standpoint as uniquely privileged when one looks back on the series escape the full brunt of Hegelian teleology. Such 'non-metaphysical' views do not. For either it is the case that such retrospection is not itself possessed of necessitarian elements and its retrospection merely creates a reasonably tightly wound but ultimately contingent story concerning dialectical transition and unity of series, or the retrospection does have such power (as Kantian categories might). But if the former, then one must explain away Hegel's frequent claims concerning the superior systematicity of his philosophy relative to the necessitarian character of prior German idealist systems. But if the latter, one has to identify a form of necessity not in itself possessed by the series *qua* the series, but one that is imposed by the retrospection. This also seems quite un-Hegelian, for all sorts of reasons. Most telling perhaps is that it forces Hegel into the sort of form/content dualism that he seeks to avoid at all costs.

<sup>13</sup> For a discussion of the use of the term 'idealism' in early critical theory, see Rush 2004.

<sup>14</sup> The central work to which Hegel had access from this period in Schelling's ever-changing output is the 1801 *Darstellung meines Systems der Philosophie*.

<sup>15</sup> Adorno is as a general matter not very comfortable with the concept of a fact, which he takes to rest on the further concept of an unanalyzable datum. See *AGS* 5: 267. This would not be the role of the ‘fact’ that is under discussion here: it is precisely what wants philosophical treatment.

<sup>16</sup> One might of course wax Kantian about this: the world of ethics and that of politics are two different things—political convergence on best ethical principles would be optimal, but the best politics *qua* politics and the best ethics *qua* ethics have no necessary relation to one another. This route is decidedly not open to Hegel, who famously treats ethical and political structures as ultimately two sides of the same coin. Nor could Hegel allow that such basic large-scale social and ethical deformities are merely messy bits of contingency that one can expect to be tidied up. Moreover, his account of the relation of belief to action forbids treating the closed dialectical run of concepts as of merely ‘regulative’ value.

<sup>17</sup> For a perceptive treatment of Adorno’s position with regard to subject–object dependency, see Bernstein 2006.

<sup>18</sup> Adorno identifies labour in this sense with mimesis (see *AGS* 5: 272), a concept discussed below. This is to be contrasted to the Hegelian case, in which labour is transmuted into, Adorno writes, an *actus purus* (*AGS* 5: 269). Adorno is referring to the conception of God in scholastic philosophy as the sole being whose existence is not made possible by any other being.

<sup>19</sup> This is my terminology, not Adorno’s.

<sup>20</sup> To hold otherwise is to capitulate to ‘reification’, a category Adorno inherits ultimately from Marx, but in a form provided by Lukács. See *AGS* 5: 312.

<sup>21</sup> See *ANS* IV.13: 63. Adorno writes that Hegelian philosophical systematicity is a form of ‘antagonistic totality’ and that any totality that is ‘reconciled’ ceases to be a totality. See *AGS* 5: 316, 317; cf. *AGS* 5: 323. This is totality in Lukács’s sense: as a regulative, utopian notion that must be kept in place in order to show that the status quo is not so harmonised. But, as we noted before, Adorno also uses the term ‘totality’ to refer such a reconciled whole (he in essence thinks Lukács slides from the first specification of the concept to the second). Accordingly, he must mean by ‘antagonistic totality’ here one of two things: (1) totality, which has the necessary form of conceptual opposition, a form that nevertheless ‘closes’ in a non-antagonistic completeness or (2) a system of thought that is characterised by *standing* antagonism. (1) is what Hegel’s own thought delivers; (2) is the resource in Hegel’s philosophy whose maintenance requires the added resources of negative dialectics. See also note 10 above.

<sup>22</sup> The best treatment of this aspect of Adorno’s thought is still Früchtl 1986.

<sup>23</sup> On the several senses of the term ‘mediation’ (*Vermittlung*) in Hegel and Adorno, see O’Connor 1999.

<sup>24</sup> For a negative overall assessment of negative dialectics on the grounds of dialectical incoherence, see Rosen 1980. For a comprehensive refutation of Rosen’s view, see Baeza 2012.

<sup>25</sup> Adorno quotes Marx’s description of the music of Hegel’s thought as a ‘grotesque melody of the rocks’ (*groteske Felsenmelodie*) (*AGS* 5: 372). The quotation is from a letter of Marx to his father, in which he tries to explain his initial, mildly adverse reaction to his first reading of Hegel (Marx 1967: Suppl. vol. 1, 8).

<sup>26</sup> Adorno does not make very clear how approaching Hegelian dialectic in this way is helpful; however, he does give some guidance by offering Beethoven's compositional practice as paradigmatic (*AGS* 5: 366–67). There the reprise in question is the recapitulation in sonata allegro form. Here is Adorno, writing in 1953, on how seriously he takes the parallel:

The kinship of Hegel's logic and Beethoven's method of composition, which can be proven in detail, increasing in weight the more one absolutely excludes any thought of influence, as is valid between Schopenhauer and Wagner, *is more than mere analogy*. It is grounded in the historical constellations that, in both cases, form the organon of truth [*sie gründet in den geschichtlichen Konstellationen, die hier wie dort das Organon der Wahrheit bilden*]. (*AGS* 18: 159) (emphasis added)

And, reversing field a bit, he states in the notes for his unfinished Beethoven book: 'the principle of the daimonic in Beethoven is that of subjectivity in its contingency. – The interpretation of tonality is possible only in its *dialectii*' (*ANS* I.1: 85). This is no proper place to introduce a primer in the historical or formal properties of musical recapitulation. Adorno singles out Beethoven for a variety of possible reasons, but primary must be the radical developmental pressure to which Beethoven subjected the material of the exposition, introducing harmonic tension to the breaking point such that the very possibility of resolution becomes problematic and, for that reason alone, thematic (*AGS* 17: 300–1; see also Adorno 2001: 78). Recapitulation would correspond, then, to negation of the negation. The following schema results: the concept (i.e., exposition) has 'gone out' to 'what-it-is-not' (i.e., development) and 'come back to itself' in more developed form (i.e., recapitulation). See *AGS* 5: 366. The comparison of Beethoven and Hegel is a recurring motif in Adorno.

<sup>27</sup> The remark appears in the treatise *De mundo*, traditionally but incorrectly ascribed to Aristotle. See Pseudo-Aristotle 1955: 396b20.

<sup>28</sup> I thank Karl Ameriks, Martin Jay and Brian O'Connor for their discussion and comments.

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