

Lectures on

Negative Dialectics

Theodor W.
Adorno

Lectures on Negative Dialectics

LECTURES ON
NEGATIVE DIALECTICS
Fragments of a lecture
course 1965/1966

Theodor W. Adorno

Edited by Rolf Tiedemann

Translated by Rodney Livingstone

polity

First published in German as *Vorlesung über Negative Dialektik*, edited by Rolf Tiedemann © Suhrkamp Verlag Frankfurt am Main, 2003

This English edition © Polity Press, 2008

Polity Press
65 Bridge Street
Cambridge CB2 1UR, UK

Polity Press
350 Main Street
Malden, MA 02148, USA

All rights reserved. Except for the quotation of short passages for the purpose of criticism and review, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher.

ISBN-13: 978-0-7456-3509-5

ISBN-13: 978-0-7456-3510-1(pb)

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Typeset in 10.5 on 12 pt Sabon
by SNP Best-set Typesetter Ltd., Hong Kong
Printed and bound in India by Replika Press Pvt Ltd, Kundli, India

For further information on Polity, visit our website: www.polity.co.uk

Contents

Translator's Note	ix
Editor's Foreword	xi
Lecture 1: <i>The Concept of Contradiction</i>	1
After Paul Tillich's death ■ Plan and intention of the lecture course ■ Negative dialectics and the logic of disintegration ■ Contradiction in the concept ■ Logic as a coercive force to bring about identity ■ Contradiction in the object; antagonism in society; mastery over nature ■ Idealist, materialist and negative dialectics	
Lecture 2: <i>The Negation of Negation</i>	12
Abstract subjectivity and social objectivity ■ The negation of negation as a positive; Hegel's critique of positivity ■ Critique of Hegel's vindication of institutions ■ Against the fetishization of positivity as such ■ The actual is not rational ■ Critical theory and negative dialectics; philosophical criticism of the hypostasis of spirit	
Lecture 3: <i>Whether Negative Dialectics is Possible</i>	22
The ideology of the positive; reified thought ■ Resistance to reification, determinate negation, immanent critique ■ The positive as an aspect ■ Hegel's philosophy circular; <i>Falsum index sui et veri</i> ■ Critique of synthesis ■ The concept of system (I)	

-
- Lecture 4: *Whether Philosophy is Possible without System* 33
- The concept of system (II) ■ System and systematization
 Heidegger's latent system ■ Negative dialectics as secularized system ■ The unifying aspect and resistance of the positive; analysis of the singular and the power of system ■ Enforced provincialization ■ The eleventh Feuerbach thesis today
- Lecture 5: *Theory and Practice* 44
- The transition to practice a historical failure ■ Marx's concept of science; the definition of philosophy ■ The forces of production and the relations of production in conflict ■ Against the cult of practice ■ Interpretation as critique; philosophy and revolution; referring science back to philosophy ■ Left Hegelianism and thinking as a mode of behaviour
- Lecture 6: *Being. Nothing. Concept* 55
- Philosophy as self-criticism ■ The philosophy of the non-conceptual; 'a pause for breath' ■ The mastery of nature and social domination ■ No identity of thinking and being ■ Indeterminate and indeterminateness in Hegel ■ The self-reflection of the concept; the concept and the non-conceptual; formal or substantive philosophy
- Lecture 7: *'Attempted Breakouts'* 65
- Formalism and chance; Heidegger's archaic tendencies ■ Hegel's existent being [*Seiendes*] as a concept; Krug's 'quill' and Freud's 'dregs of the phenomenal world' ■ The non-conceptual as the neglected factor; the micrological method ■ Bergson and Husserl ■ Bergson's 'images'; Proust puts Bergson to the test; Husserl's conceptual realism ■ The failure of historical attempts to break out; the task of a breakout through self-reflection ■ The idea of infinity; against 'exhaustion'
- Lecture 8: *The Concept of Intellectual Experience* 76
- The concept of infinity in idealism ■ The finitude of categories; against the claim to infinity ■ On a philosophy of 'openness' ■ The concept of intellectual experience:

experience vs. deduction; the experience of the new; the meta-critical turn against first philosophy ■ The relation of works of art to the philosophy of art ■ Dialectic of enlightenment; philosophy's fallibility in principle

Lecture 9: *The Element of Speculation* 87

Relation to the empirical; intellectual experience and spiritualization ■ Earnestness and play ■ The uncontrolled, irrationality and the mimetic element; the affinity between philosophy and art ■ Intuition, inspiration, association ■ Concept and non-concept ■ The concept of speculation; the speculative element in Marx ■ 'The metaphysics of the forces of production'

Lecture 10: *Philosophy and 'Depth'* 98

Essence and appearance; speculation and ideology ■ Philosophy as 'resistance' ■ The theodicy of suffering; suffering and happiness ■ The invocation of depth or metaphysical meaning ■ Critique of the thesis of the meaningful; 'inwardness' ■ Resistance to bleating ■ Depth: the expression of suffering

Lectures 11 to 25: *Negative Dialectics* 111

Adorno's Notes: expression and presentation, thinking as negativity ■ Second reflection, making concrete ■ 'Strait-jacket', relation to system ■ Bourgeois ratio and system ■ Exchange principle and system, critique of system ■ Ambiguity of system ■ System and fragment, immanence and transcendence ■ The subject within objectivity, the concept of the qualitative ■ Truth as concrete ■ Relativism, the fragility of truth, truth unfathomable ■ Dialectics and firm ground; against synthesis ■ Unity and multiplicity ■ Negative ontology of perennial antagonism ■ Method and the creation of content ■ Principle of domination, Existentialism ■ Spontaneity in Sartre, Sartre's 'Götze', language and history

Additional Notes 178

Thing, concept, name ■ Against the current ■ Tradition ■ Rhetoric ■ Plato's *Cratylus* ■ Linguistic precision ■ Knowledge and utopia ■ Thought and non-being

Appendix: Towards a Theory of Intellectual Experience	183
Notes	211
Bibliographical Sources	260
Index	263

Translator's Note

The German word *Geist* (spirit, mind, intellect) and its adjective *geistig* have presented particular difficulties in this translation. Normally, the translator tries to achieve consistency, but that has proved hard in this instance. *Geist* is commonly translated as 'spirit' (as in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*), and this was an important component of Adorno's intellectual heritage. 'Spirit' has therefore been the translation of choice in some instances. But to translate the essay in the Appendix 'Zur Theorie der geistigen Erfahrung' as 'The Theory of Spiritual Experience' would convey entirely the wrong impression in English, because of the strong theological overtones that are quite absent from Adorno's text. In the published version of *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno refers to *Geist* as 'a semi-theological word' (p. 38), but those overtones are too intrusive in English. Equally, mind in the sense of mind and matter is normally rendered in German by *Geist und Materie*. 'Mind' and 'mental' have proved to be possible renditions in a number of passages, but I have opted on the whole for 'intellect' and 'intellectual' in the example given above and elsewhere. However, no single term has proved viable in every case. The fact is that the term *Geist* falls somewhere between the available English words – spirit, mind, intellect – with all of which it also overlaps. Each of these terms seems to work in some instances, but not in all. For that reason I have felt constrained to sacrifice consistency to what seemed appropriate in the given context. Something of the word's flavour can perhaps be gleaned from this passage from Lecture 9: 'Admittedly, you must be very clear in your own minds

that this concept of intellectual [*geistig*] experience is infinitely far removed from the trivial concept of experience. This is because the concept of the fact, of data, that is canonical for empiricist philosophies and which is based on sense experience, that is, on *sense* data, has no validity for *intellectual* experience, which is the experience of something already intellectual and is an intellectually mediated experience' (p. 89).

Editor's Foreword

Between 1960 and 1966 Adorno accompanied the writing of *Negative Dialectics* with four courses of lectures.¹ In the last of these he developed the themes that stand at the beginning of the book which finally appeared in 1966. They figure in what he called the Introduction, doubtless an echo of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Hegel's introduction, like his book as a whole, treats the 'experience of consciousness', or rather the 'science' of consciousness, and this appears to have been echoed in Adorno's own terminology when he considered giving his introductory text the title 'Theory of Intellectual [*geistig*] Experience', adding that he wished 'to expound the concept of philosophical experience' (*Negative Dialectics*, p. xx). Adorno did not hesitate to use 'intellectual experience' as a synonym for 'full, unreduced experience in the medium of conceptual reflection' (*ibid.*, p. 13; see also p. 82 below). A 'theory of intellectual experience' such as the one he sketched in the introduction to *Negative Dialectics*, and parallel to that in the lectures on the same topic, would amount to something like a methodology of his philosophy, if we could speak of such a thing. Adorno himself referred to *Negative Dialectics* as a whole as 'a methodology of his material works' only to contradict this in the very next breath: 'No continuum exists between those works and it, according to the theory of negative dialectics. The discontinuity will be dealt with, however, and so will the directions for thought to be gleaned from it. The procedure will be justified, not rationally grounded. To the best of his ability the author means to put his cards on the table – which is by no means the same as playing

the game' (ibid., p. xix). These observations strikingly fail to do justice to the text of *Negative Dialectics*. Adorno repeatedly emphasized that his material works could not be subsumed under a fixed 'method', that they could not be separated from their objects, and that their contents could not simply be transferred to other topics. When we examine his texts, this becomes only too apparent. But what could *Negative Dialectics* be other than an ensemble of 'material works' – on ontology, on the philosophy of history and moral philosophy or on metaphysics; we might also say: on Heidegger, Hegel or Kant or the possibility of philosophy after Auschwitz? At best, the central section of the book, on the concept and categories of a negative dialectics, might be construed as belonging to what has traditionally been thought of as a doctrine of method. And as far as ineffectual 'Instructions for Thinking' are concerned – no opponent of Adorno's could do him a greater injustice than to attempt to reduce his *chef d'oeuvre* to vague instructions of whatever sort. After all, what could the 'game' be if not the treatment of the discontinuity between material and methodological philosophizing? Only if we stick to the literal meaning of methodology, to the λόγος immanent in every method; only if we expect no method in particular, but the justification of a plurality of methods and, tendentially, of the various distinct methods of all Adorno's writings, does the concept of method used in the 'Preface' of *Negative Dialectics*, and also in the present volume of lectures, make sense. It would be better, however, for us to follow Adorno's example in his essay on 'The Experiential Content of Hegel's Philosophy' and speak of the 'models of intellectual experience' that 'motivate' Adorno's thinking and make up its 'truth content' (see *Hegel: Three Studies*, p. 53). The verse of Kästner's cited in the present volume of lectures, 'Herr Kästner, where's the positive side?' (see pp. 12 and 17 below), could be matched – and can still be matched today – by the equally insipid question 'What method do you use, Herr Adorno?' It appears as if on one occasion he wished to make a few concessions in this direction and force his thinking into the requisite methodological corset, only to end up by going against his own intentions and immersing himself once more in material philosophizing, be it only philosophizing about the antinomy of method and intellectual experience.

Adorno frequently attempted to formulate the deeply unsatisfactory nature of all traditional philosophy, its inappropriateness to its subject, its repudiation by the worldly wise. He hoped to lead thought along the 'only critical path that remains open', by identifying such fallacies as 'thinking of a first philosophy', 'origin' thinking, the primacy of subjectivity, the universal rule of domination – and also

as the constitution of method. 'Method in the precise sense' was for him 'an intellectual approach which can be applied everywhere and at all times because it divests itself of any relation to things, i.e. to the object of knowledge' (*Against Epistemology*, p. 11, translation modified). The approach in question is that of ubiquitous mathematicization, just as the ideal of every express method has always been mathematics, which soared above the lowlands of empirical reality like a Platonic heaven. Adorno claimed to discern this 'triumph of mathematics and every such triumph' in the Socrates of Plato's *Meno*, who strove to 'reduce virtue to its immutable and hence abstract features' (ibid.). Abstraction is the procedure whose every method must start off by formulating concepts: it must ignore the particulars with which it is concerned at every turn; it must make its material manageable, that is to say, capable of being controlled. But the methodologists and logicians are mistaken in their belief that only by such means will they be able to gain a hold on the general as the other of the particular, the finite, the existent; just as mathematics is a gigantic tautology 'which exerts a total dominance over what it has itself prepared and formed' (ibid.; see also p. 27 below), so too methods are always concerned with themselves, with the flimsiest, most abstract vestige of what they have reduced the world to by treating anything and everything only in terms of general concepts, while declining to engage with the object itself. In this dire situation idealism has made a virtue of deducing every not-I from the I, of defining every object as a subject or, as they call it, of 'postulating' the former by means of the latter: each thing is like this and not otherwise and it is subject to the rule of subjectivity to which it has owed its very existence from the outset. Understood in this way, such methods come together in the societal model on which they are based: the principle of equivalence of the barter society in which use values appear only as quantities, as exchange values, as values comparable in money terms, not as distinct qualities. In the 'Introduction' to *Against Epistemology*, Adorno gave an account, one not yet adequately appreciated, of what, despite Kant and lasting well beyond his work, we must call the 'uncritical' path taken by both mind and reality. It is a truly philosophical account of the history of philosophy, and at the same time a literary feat in the linguistic desert that has prevailed in the world of German-language thought since Nietzsche's death. Adorno's 'second introduction', that to *Negative Dialectics*, is the continuation of that first one, since it progresses from a critical, negative methodology to a negative-dialectical one.

Adorno advanced the idea of philosophical or, more generally, intellectual experience as a weapon with which to oppose the

fetishism of method. By this he meant starting out from the concrete individual, the *individuum ineffabile*; he insisted that it was vital to dwell on the individual thing and entrust oneself to it, without confining oneself entirely to this trusting stance. In contrast to the abstracting method, intellectual experience is interested in differences, not in what makes things identical with other things; 'what is meant by negative dialectics – the dialectics not of identity but of non-identity' (p. 1 below). There can be no doubt that Adorno's emphatic use of the concept of experience stresses its closeness both to Aristotle's ἐμπειρία and to what English empiricism understands by 'experientia' and 'experience': namely the belief that the kind of thinking to which negative dialectics aspires is subject to the primacy of the individual; that it consists of the gaze of an individual fixed on individual beings or that it at least starts from there. It is in this sense that Adorno could maintain that the 'turn' he was striving for 'includes a salvaging of empiricism, albeit in a somewhat convoluted, dialectical fashion. That means that cognition always proceeds in principle from below to above, and not from the top down; it is concerned with leaving things to themselves and not with a process of deduction' (see p. 82 below). That 'includes' is crucial: Adorno's empiricist turn is *also* a salvaging of empiricism, but by no means the old or a new empiricism. According to Isaiah Berlin, 'an alliance of mysticism and empiricism against rationalism' was to be found in such figures as J. G. Hamann, a man with whom Adorno had a certain affinity despite his hostility to many of Hamann's ideas. (See Isaiah Berlin, *J. G. Hamann und der Ursprung des modernen Irrationalismus*, trans. Jens Hagerstadt, Berlin, 1995, p. 74; see also *History and Freedom*, p. 103 and note 10, p. 292ff.) In contrast to Hamann, we may characterize Adorno's thought as consisting of an alliance of rationalism and empiricism against mysticism. 'The thinker does not actually think but rather makes himself into an arena for intellectual experience, without unravelling it.' That is Adorno's view of the specific nature of 'The Essay as Form' (*Notes on Literature*, vol. 1, p. 13), of the 'essayistic thinker' who is no philosopher, however close he may become to being one. In contrast, the philosopher sees his task precisely in 'unravelling' the experience he is exploring; thinking actually coincides with 'unravelling' his experience of the *facta bruta*. Experience is one thing, the intellect another. While Locke maintained that all thought is based on experience, Leibniz's doctrine of ideas cannot be left out of account: nihil est in intellectu quod non fuerit in sensu, *nisi intellectus ipse* [There is nothing in the mind that was not already present in the senses – *except the mind itself*]; for experience to become intellectual experience, experience must be

penetrated and transcended by intellect. However, that will not work, an insight Adorno shared with Hölderlin. 'Spirit is not what it enthrones itself as, the Other, the transcendent in its purity, but rather is also a piece of natural history. . . . Reality's spell over spirit prevents spirit from doing what its own concept wants to do when faced with the merely existent: to fly' ('Progress', *Critical Models*, p. 156f.). Experience alone, experience as such, does not suffice; only where experience acquires an intellectual dimension – the 'additional factor' without which a negative dialectics cannot thrive – can existing reality yield up those evanescent 'traces of otherness', fragile pointers to the fact that 'what exists, is not all that exists'. The irrational element that may be inherent in this is nevertheless far from implying an endorsement of irrationalism. On the contrary, 'Whoever thinks philosophically hardens intellectual experience by testing it against the same logical consistency at whose opposite pole he functions. In the absence of that, intellectual experience would remain rhapsodic. Only in this way can reflection become more than a repetitious presentation of what is experienced' ('Notes on Philosophical Thinking', *Critical Models*, p. 133, translation modified). But this merely provides confirmation that intellectual experience cannot subsist in a loose relation to conceptuality, but rather has to prove itself against strict yardsticks for discursiveness and rationality.

Adorno's negative dialectics cannot be thought of as a 'philosophy of difference' in Derrida's sense. Derrida distinguishes between *différence* and the non-word *différance* and hopes that this conjuring trick will enable him to evade the fate of imprisonment in conceptuality. But by the same token, now that idealism is dead, we can no longer speak of an identity of object and subject, whether given or to be established. Things and words no longer coincide in the sense that we might say that the latter contained the meaning of the former. For negative dialectics 'the thing itself is by no means a thought product. It is non-identity through identity' (*Negative Dialectics*, p. 189). What is needed to achieve the objective specificity of a thing is a greater effort on the part of the subject, not a smaller one; what is needed is 'a more sustained subjective reflection than the identifications of which Kant taught that consciousness performs them, as it were, unconsciously and automatically. That the activity of the mind, and even more the activity which Kant ascribes to the problem of constitution, is something other than the automatism he equates it with – this, specifically, constitutes the mental experience which the idealists discovered, albeit only in order to castrate it on the spot' (*ibid.*, p. 188f.). Thus if the concern of philosophy is with the sphere of the non-conceptual that Hegel dismissed as 'worthless existence'

and ignored, then this sphere that is 'suppressed, disparaged and discarded by concepts' (ibid., p. 10) can receive fair treatment only in the language of concepts. Negative dialectics is unable to abolish conceptuality and abstraction or to replace it with knowledge of a different type, one that would necessarily come to grief on the rocks of reality. Nor does it involve an immediate reflection on reality, but reflection on what makes it impossible to achieve consciousness of things; on the social conditionality of a knowledge that is possible only through abstraction, by means of discursive language. Such reflection does not aim to step outside discourse, but would like 'to prise open the aspect of its objects that cannot be accommodated by concepts' ('The Essay as Form', *Notes on Literature*, vol. 1, p. 23). When for once Adorno did not shy away from speaking of the kind of knowledge to which he aspired in the form of a definition, he did not hesitate to frame it conceptually: 'The cognitive utopia would be to use concepts to unseal the non-conceptual, without making it their equal' (*Negative Dialectics*, p. 10). This non-conceptual realm, however, things themselves, the non-identical or the non-intentional – concepts with which Adorno sought to point to things that were not to be regarded as the exemplars of a species – is not something already given, already available, that existing knowledge somehow fails to reach; such knowledge would 'be fulfilled only by revealing their social, historical and human meaning' (*Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 20), but it is potentially implicit in the abstract concepts themselves that compel us to go beyond their rigid, would-be conclusive, fixed meanings. This compulsion is one that negative dialectics tries to satisfy, and, at the same time, the dialectic strives to prise open the categories that have classified and pacified the real once and for all, and to open them up once more to what is new.

The non-identical cannot be unlocked by a particular concept in isolation – that would have led readers to criticize Adorno's 'mere conceptualizing' – but at most by a plurality, a constellation of discrete individual concepts: 'True enough, the idea of classification which subsumes the particular as an example does not open it up; this can be done only by the constellation of concepts that the constructive mind brings to bear on it. – Comparison with the number combination of a safe' (p. 139). Thus far Adorno in the present course of lectures. The notion of mental constellations or configurations is one that Adorno pursued stubbornly over the longest possible period of time. As early as his lecture on 'The Idea of Natural History' of 1932, a kind of first stab at a programmatic statement of his philosophy, he draws attention to his profound dissatisfaction with thinking in universal concepts on the grounds that it seems to eliminate the

best part of the reality that the thinker is focusing on, the specific nature of every particular reality. So as to remain useful as instruments, the concept retains of things only the abstract qualities that they possess in common with many others. Adorno's ambition is to present a method 'with a different logical structure' from the usual philosophical thinking in universal concepts: 'It is the method of the constellation. Instead of explaining concepts from each other, the focus is on a constellation of ideas. . . . These are not treated as "constants"; the intention is not to refer back to them, but instead they congregate around the concrete historical factuality which opens up in all its uniqueness in the interplay with those moments' (GS, vol. 1, p. 359). The sole object of Adorno's philosophy was this 'uniqueness', this 'concrete historical factuality' – he held fast to this right up to his last writings, even though he never provided a fully elaborated, coherent theory of constellational knowledge. Not even the constitutive limbs from which the constellations and configurations were composed or from which they came together were always the same. Concepts, ideas, aspects, *τά όντα*, were all things against which constellational thinking had to be tested. 'The specificity of philosophy as a configuration of moments is qualitatively different from a lack of ambiguity in every particular moment, even within the configuration, because the configuration is more, and other, than the quintessence of its moments. Constellation is not system. Everything does not become resolved; everything does not come out even; rather, one moment sheds light on the other, and the figures that the individual moments form together are specific signs and a legible script' ('Skoteinos or How to Read Hegel', in *Hegel: Three Studies*, p. 109). However unsatisfactory the numerous epistemological and methodological explanations of the concept of the constellation may be, the theory of the constellation was conceived as a counter to traditional theory of knowledge. Its fulfilment is enacted solely in Adorno's material writings, all of which represent the specification of the signs, the reading of the script, which constitutes the existing world as formed by the constellation. Negative dialectics is to be the dialectics of non-identity: that is to say, the truth content of the intellectual experience that that dialectics produces is a negative one. It registers not only the fact that the concept never does justice to the thing it refers to – does *not yet* do so. 'In the unreconciled condition, non-identity is experienced as negativity' (*Negative Dialectics*, p. 31). This constitutes the philosophical signature of *Negative Dialectics* and the nature of its intellectual experience.

The 'introduction' to *Negative Dialectics*, like the present *Lectures on Negative Dialectics* that report on and provide variations on the

published book, are late works, not just literally in the sense that they were written and given when *Negative Dialectics* was already completed in manuscript form, but also in the further sense that Adorno's death turned them into late works biographically speaking. Above all, both form part of the 'last philosophy' that Adorno believed to be 'timely' once the collapse of civilization and culture in the first half of the twentieth century had inaugurated an age of barbarism that persists to this day.

This edition of Adorno's lectures is unfortunately fragmentary. The first ten lectures are based on transcripts from tape recordings that were made in the Institute for Social Research and are now lodged in the Theodor W. Adorno Archive with the classification numbers Vo 10809–10919. In preparing the text the editor has attempted to follow Adorno's own example in editing the texts of lectures that he had given extempore, once he had agreed to their publication. A particular effort has been made to preserve the informal character of the lecturing situation. The editor has tried to meddle with the text as little as possible and no more than was necessary. After his previous experience in editing Adorno's lectures, however, he felt able to act with somewhat greater freedom, both in the present instance and in his earlier edition of the lectures on *Ontologie und Dialektik*. In particular, he felt he could make more liberal use of drafts, some of which neither emanated from Adorno himself nor were authorized by him. Anacoluthons, ellipses and grammatical slips have been corrected. In addition to the cautious elimination of over-obtrusive repetitions, occasional attempts have been made to disentangle obscure syntactical constructions. Adorno tended to speak relatively quickly and individual words not infrequently became garbled in the process. Corrections have been inserted wherever it was possible to ascertain his meaning unambiguously. Fillers, especially 'nun', 'also' and 'ja', as well as a somewhat inflationary use of 'eigentlich' [actually], have all been cut out where it was evident that he was searching for the right word or thought. Since in the nature of the case punctuation had to be added by the editor, he felt most at liberty to impose his own practice there. He did so with the aim of achieving maximum clarity and unambiguity, without regard to the rules Adorno followed in preparing his own texts. At no point was any attempt made to 'improve' Adorno's writing; the aim was always to present *his* text to the best of the editor's abilities.

In the case of lectures 11 to 25, Adorno's notes have to stand in for his lectures. These notes are archived with the classification numbers Vo 11031–11061. While they allow us to reconstruct the

course of the lectures with some precision, they do not reveal very much about the arguments Adorno used. To make good this gap, excerpts from the talk on which Adorno based the notes have been supplied parallel to them on the left-hand side of the page. The printed notes have been kept as closely as possible to what Adorno actually wrote. Where the reading was uncertain this is indicated by a question mark.

In the endnotes the quotations referred to by Adorno have been cited in full wherever possible, together with passages to which Adorno alludes or may have had in mind. In addition, parallel passages from his writings have been added or referred to wherever they can shed light on his remarks. They also help to make clear the manifold interconnections and overlaps in his writings and lectures. 'One needs to develop a faculty for discerning the emphases and accents peculiar to a particular philosophy in order to uncover their relationships within the philosophical context, and thus to understand the philosophy itself' (*Metaphysics*, p. 51). The endnotes aim likewise to facilitate a reading that takes Adorno's injunction seriously. They would like to help make visible the cultural sphere surrounding Adorno's activities as a lecturer, a world of the mind which can no longer be taken for granted. The endnotes to the four sets of lectures associated with *Negative Dialectics* amount to a catalogue raisonné of the important concepts of Adorno's philosophy.

*

I would like once again to thank Michael Schwarz for his assistance. I owe a great debt of gratitude to my friend Hermann Schweppenhäuser, who as always has placed his vast experience and knowledge at my disposal. Since this is the final volume in the editions I have prepared for the Theodor W. Adorno Archive, I should like to record my thanks to the committee of the Hamburger Stiftung zur Förderung von Wissenschaft und Kultur and especially Jan Philipp Reemtsma, without whose support my work during the past seventeen years would not have been possible.

24 September 2002

LECTURE 1

9 November 1965

The Concept of Contradiction

Notes

Begun on
25 October 65¹

The special relationship of research and teaching.
The lecture course derived from work in progress.

Plan:

- (1) Introduction to the concept of a negative dialectics
- (2) Transition to neg[ative] dial[ectics] from a critique of present-day philosophy, especially the ontological approach
- (3) Some categories of a negative dialectics.

What is meant by neg[ative] dial[ectics] – the dialectics not of identity but of non-identity. Not the triadic form, too superficial. In particular, the emphasis on the so-called synthesis is absent. Dial[ectics] refers to the fibre of thought, the inner structure, not an architectonic pattern.

Basic conception: structure of contradiction, in a twofold sense:

- (1) the contradictory nature of the concept, i.e. the concept in contradiction to the thing to which it refers (explain: what is missing in the concept and in what respect it is something more. Contradiction = discrepancy. But with the emphatic

- sense of concept this becomes contradiction. Contradiction in the concept, not merely between concepts.[)]
- (2) the contradictory character of reality: model: antagonistic society. (Explain, life + catastrophe; today society survives by means of what tears it apart.)

This twofold character is no miracle. It shall have to be shown that the elements that shape reality in an antagonistic fashion are those that predispose the mind, the concept, to a state of antagonism. The principle of the mastery of nature intellectualized to the point of identity.

This implies that dialectics is no arbitrary invention, no world-view. My task will be to demonstrate the rigour of the dialectical method; that is what this is really all about.

Two versions of dial[ectics]: idealist and materialist.

So why negative dialectics.

The expert objection. Negation the dialectical salt (cite the Preface to *Phen[omenology of Spirit]*, 13.² Subject: thought itself is initially the simple negation of the given.

All dialectics are negative: if so, why use the term? Tautology?

9 November 65

Transcript of the lecture

Dear colleagues, a few weeks ago Paul Tillich³ died. He had occupied the only chair in philosophy at this university from 1929 to 1933, in other words until we were all driven out by Hitler. (Horkheimer's chair was not established until 1932.) It is not my place, nor am I entitled, to speak about the subject that was crucial to both the life and the work of my late friend Paul Tillich, namely theology. Arrangements have been made for Professor Philipp to give a public lecture on his work.⁴ I do not wish to make use of this hour, or a significant part of it, to speak about Tillich. I believe that I am relieved of that necessity by the fact that it is our intention to devote the first hour of the senior philosophy seminar, i.e. the first session next Thursday, to the relationship between philosophy and theology and, in particular, to focus on the problems that were of importance to Tillich.⁵ Nevertheless, I think I owe it to you and also to myself to say that Paul Tillich, who I am sure is no more than a name to many of you, was one of the most extraordinary people I have ever met in my life

and I owe him the most profound debt of gratitude for having approved of my Habilitation thesis in 1931, in other words, at a time when fascism with all that this meant was on the rise. It is a debt such as I owe to few others. Had he not exerted himself on my behalf, something he did despite the differences in our respective theoretical points of view, differences that we frankly declared to one another from the very outset, it is very questionable whether I would be able to speak to you today; it is even questionable whether I would have survived. This is no mere private reminiscence but something integral to Tillich's unprecedented and truly unique qualities of character: an openness and open-mindedness such as I have never encountered in anyone else. I am fully aware that precisely these qualities in Tillich provoked criticism, and I myself was among those who made such criticisms early on. But I should like to take the opportunity to say here and now that Tillich's liberal-mindedness set an example of enduring worth. This is because his almost boundless willingness to entertain every intellectual experience – and I know of no one who could equal him in this respect – combined a genuinely irenic temperament with the greatest resoluteness in his personal conduct. His extraordinary charisma went hand in hand with what can only be called 'leadership' qualities. It goes without saying that the National Socialists made overtures to him – and I know as a fact that they did so. As late as the summer of 1933 when we spent time together in Rügen he told me a good deal about these matters. He unhesitatingly rejected all such temptations – although they must have appeared tempting even to him. His open-mindedness did not prevent him from drawing the necessary conclusions when what was at stake was the need to show whether or not he was a decent human being. And in that particular historical context, the plain statement that a person is a decent human being gains an emphasis that it perhaps does not otherwise possess. If I may say a few more things about Tillich, particularly at the beginning of these lectures which are attended by so many young people, I do so because I am mindful of his gifts as a teacher, gifts that are related to his open-mindedness. I do not exaggerate when I say that I have never seen a man with greater pedagogic gifts than his. In particular, thanks to the boundless humanity with which he treated students' reactions, he was able to draw the maximum out of very modest and even minimal abilities. If one had the opportunity to be present at Tillich's seminars – and I was unofficially his assistant for a number of years before I became a privatdozent – one had the feeling that the way he conducted himself with young people went some way towards anticipating a situation in which the usual distinctions of ability, intelligence and so on were of

no account. It was as if these distinctions were somehow negated by actual human contact, so that even a limited and repressed mind could blossom in a way that has been almost entirely ruled out everywhere nowadays. I should like to add that whatever I have myself acquired in the way of pedagogic expertise and whatever may have encouraged you to place some confidence in me, namely this ability to encourage the growth of objectivity in other people's minds, as far as that is possible, and to achieve a meeting of minds; that whatever of this I have learned – even though I am very aware how far I lag behind Paul Tillich in this respect – I owe to him and the years of our seminars and junior seminars together.⁶ You may take my word for it that not only are there very few people who have meant so much to me but that I attribute an influence to them that far surpasses anything that is contained in their writings. Tillich belongs in the ranks of those thinkers who give far more through personal acquaintance and living initiative than is to be found in their writings. And you who have not known him or have perhaps only seen him once or twice in one of our joint discussions⁷ will really struggle to form any conception of this. – I would be grateful if you would all stand out of respect for Paul Tillich.

Thank you.

Ladies and gentlemen, you are aware that the traditional definition of a university calls for the union of teaching and research. You know likewise just how problematic it can be to achieve the fulfilment of this idea despite the fact that it is still generally upheld. My own work has had to suffer a great deal from this situation: the quantity of teaching and administrative chores that I have gradually accumulated render it almost impossible to continue with my research during term time – if indeed we can speak of research in connection with philosophy – with the diligence that is not only objectively indicated but would above all reflect my own inclination and disposition. In such a situation, and given such compulsion and pressure, one tends to develop qualities that are best described by the words 'peasant cunning'. My solution to this problem, one that I have had recourse to during the last two semesters and shall do so again this semester, is to take the material for my lectures from a voluminous and somewhat burdensome book that I have been working on for six years now with the title 'Negative Dialectics', the same title I have given to this lecture course. I am very aware that objections may be raised to this procedure, in particular those of a positivist cast of mind will be quick to argue that as a university teacher my duty is to produce nothing but completed, cogent and watertight results. I shall not

pretend to make a virtue of necessity, but I do believe that this view does not properly fit our understanding of the nature of philosophy; that philosophy is thought in a perpetual state of motion; and that, as Hegel, the great founder of dialectics, has pointed out, in philosophy the process is as important as the result; that, as he asserts in the famous passage in the *Phenomenology*, process and result are actually one and the same thing.⁸ Moreover, I believe that what characterizes philosophical thinking is an element of the tentative, experimental and inconclusive, and this is what distinguishes it from the positive sciences. Not the least of the tasks I propose in this course of lectures is to explore this question. In consequence, what I shall present to you here are reflections which will retain this experimental quality until, in so far as my own energies will allow it, they have acquired their appropriate linguistic form, their definitive shape. And I can only encourage you – I am reminded here once again of Paul Tillich – to think your own way through what I have to say to you and to assemble your own ideas on the subject rather than for me to transmit definite knowledge for you to take home with you. The plan that I have in mind is roughly as follows. I tell you this as a guide to finding your way around these perhaps rather convoluted lines of thought. I should like to introduce you to the concept of negative dialectics as such. I should like then to move on to negative dialectics in the light of certain critical considerations drawn from the present state of philosophy. I should like, in short, to unpack the idea of a negative dialectics and to present it in all its rigour, as far as I am able. I should then like to give you some of the categories of such a negative dialectics. Perhaps I should add that, in external, crudely architectonic terms, the plan I envisage corresponds roughly to a methodical account of what I do in general. In other words, what you will find here are some of the fundamental ideas that you will find repeated in very many other studies with different material, with different subject matter. I should like simply to try and answer the question that must have occurred to those who are familiar with my other writings: how does he actually arrive at this? What is at the bottom of all this? I want to try and put my cards on the table – in so far as I know what my own cards are, and in so far as any thinker knows what cards he holds. Such things are not as obvious as you might imagine. On the other hand – and this too is a matter I shall treat in the course of these lectures – what I have just outlined is made difficult and even problematic by the fact that I do not recognize the usual distinction between method and content. In particular, I maintain that so-called methodological questions are themselves dependent upon questions of content. A feature of the themes we

shall be discussing is that you may well become confused about the customary distinctions that you have learnt in your subject disciplines, which are in the habit of placing method on the one side and subject matter on the other.

Now I should probably start by anticipating my entire enterprise and telling you what I mean by the concept of negative dialectics, and I should do so in a manner that calls for a resolution of the issues it raises. A rather meagre, formal definition is that it sets out to be a dialectics not of identity but of *non-identity*. We are concerned here with a philosophical project that does not presuppose the identity of being and thought, nor does it culminate in that identity. Instead it will attempt to articulate the very opposite, namely the divergence of concept and thing, subject and object, and their unreconciled state. When I make use of the term ‘dialectics’ I would ask you not to think of the famous triadic scheme of θέσις [thesis], ἀντίθεσις [antithesis] and σύνθεσις [synthesis] in the usual sense, as you encounter it in the most superficial account of school dialectics. Hegel himself, who after all did possess something like a system that aspired as a system to be a σύνθεσις, did not adhere consistently to this scheme. In the preface to the *Phenomenology* which I have already referred to he has spoken of this creaking triadic scheme with utter contempt.⁹ In particular, and to anticipate my discussion of what I believe to be a crucial issue, you will find that in negative dialectics the concept of ‘synthesis’ is very much reduced in importance. I can only explain this here in linguistic terms, namely with reference to my deeply rooted aversion to the term, an aversion I have felt ever since I started to do any thinking at all. And since philosophical thinking consists essentially in reflecting on one’s own intellectual experiences – you may perhaps have seen my ‘Notes on philosophical thinking’ in the *Neue Deutsche Hefte*¹⁰ in which I discuss this – one motif of such a negative dialectics is to try to find out why I resist the concept of synthesis so strongly. A further motif is that my oldest independent (i.e. non-interpretative) piece of philosophical writing, one that has not survived, was concerned with a logic of disintegration.¹¹ This may be regarded as an alternative, albeit rather more pretentious title for such a negative dialectics. So when I speak here of negative dialectics, I would urge you to be clear in your minds that what I mean by it is not this superficial, skeletal format, but the very fibre of thought, its inner structure, the way in which, as Hegel used to express it, the concept moves towards its opposite, the non-conceptual. That is what you should be on the lookout for and not a kind of intellectual scaffolding that in fact you will seek in vain.

Nevertheless, what I intend to present to you as negative dialectics possesses something quite crucially related to the concept of dialectics

in general – and this is something I wish to clarify at the outset. It is that the concept of contradiction will play a central role here, more particularly, the contradiction in things themselves, contradiction *in* the concept, not contradiction *between* concepts. At the same time – and I am sure that you will not fail to see that this is in a certain sense the transposition or development of a Hegelian motif – the concept of contradiction has a twofold meaning. On the one hand, as I have already intimated, we shall be concerned with the contradictory nature of the concept. What this means is that the concept enters into contradiction with the thing to which it refers. I should like to demonstrate this to you quite simply, in a way that perhaps some of you will think almost childish. However, my intention is merely that our discussions should not cause you to lose touch with simple, straightforward realities. For even though I believe that thinking involves raising oneself above primitive things, an essential part of thought is that it should remain in touch with immediate experience. So what I mean here – and in the first instance I am speaking of the concept and of what is meant specifically by the concept in dialectics – that is something that we shall have to discuss. (The fact is that I am not talking about ‘concept’ in the ordinary sense, but about concept that is already theory.) But if you will allow me to illustrate this, I can put it all quite simply. If I subsume a series of characteristics, a series of elements, under a concept, what normally happens is that I abstract a particular characteristic from these elements, one that they have in common: and this characteristic will then be the concept, it will represent the unity of all the elements that possess this characteristic. Thus by subsuming them all under this concept, by saying that A is everything that is comprehended in this unity, I necessarily include countless characteristics that are *not* integrated into the individual elements contained in this concept. The concept is always less than what is subsumed under it. When a B is defined as an A, it is always also *different from* and *more than* the A, the concept under which it is subsumed by way of a predicative judgement. On the other hand, however, in a sense every concept is at the same time more than the characteristics that are subsumed under it. If, for example, I think and speak of ‘freedom’, this concept is not simply the unity of the characteristics of all the individuals who can be defined as free on the basis of a formal freedom within a given constitution. Rather, in a situation in which people are guaranteed the freedom to exercise a profession or to enjoy their basic rights or whatever, the concept of freedom contains a pointer to something that goes well beyond those specific freedoms, without our necessarily realizing what this additional element amounts to. This situation, that the concept is always both more and less than the elements included