
Preface

Adorno's negative dialectic, the name he gives to the purely philosophical parts of his work, often appears to be quite remote from the concrete business of a critical theory of society. Indeed, Adorno's philosophy remains remarkably close to what might be considered a traditional concern of "pure" philosophy: the structure of experience. Furthermore extensive criticisms of seemingly esoteric parts of modern philosophy—particularly of modern German philosophy from Kant to Heidegger—are interwoven with arguments presented in support of a particular account of experience. In contrast, critical theory is supposed to be a consciousness-raising critique of society in which empirically specific aspects of society are examined.¹ Adorno himself, however, urges us to think of his apparently theoretical work as intimately connected with the "concrete" aims of critical theory. In the preface to *Negative Dialectics* he writes: "[T]his largely abstract text seeks no less to serve authentic concretion than to explain the author's concrete procedure" (*ND* 9–10/xix). But what can "concretion" amount to in a discussion of abstract philosophical problems?

I suggest that the answer to this question is to understand the negative dialectic as the theoretical foundation of the sort of reflexivity—the critical stance—required by critical theory. In the negative dialectic we are offered ways by which, for instance, we might question "the given" or recognize distortions of experience. These theoretical issues are painstakingly developed by Adorno, but not because he wants to add one more theory of knowledge or experience or whatever

to the history of philosophy. Rather, he wants to demonstrate that there are radical alternatives—supported by philosophy—to how we take our reality to be; that it makes sense, simply, to claim that reality is available to us in ways which go beyond appearances. This is both an abstract philosophical exercise and one which lays the foundations for the applied “concrete” critique of appearances—for critical theory itself. Philosophy, then, not only exemplifies the critical attitude, it also, in fact, demonstrates that it is possible.

It can only be because Adorno is committed to the “concretion” of philosophy—that is, to developing a philosophy which lends itself to the task of criticism—that he is concerned with responding to the charge that philosophy “had merely interpreted the world” (*ND* 15/3). For him, “inadequate interpretation” and inadequate philosophizing lie behind the failure of the traditional Marxist program of praxis. What is required is not simply an adequate interpretation of the world but reflection on what philosophy thinks it is doing when it thinks it is criticizing. Adorno’s relentless critique of key modern German philosophers is ultimately conducted in the name of this reflection. He gives particular attention to the subject-object relation in philosophy. This relation must take a particular form, Adorno believes, if critical theory is to be possible. After all, if objects, for instance, can be nothing other than what they are determined as being by subjectivity then there is no philosophical basis to the effort of critical theory to correct the misconceptions of the false consciousness of subjectivity. As Adorno writes: “The subject is the object’s agent, not its constituent; this fact has consequences for the relation of theory and practice” (*SO* 752/146).

Given the tight connection that Adorno makes between “abstract” philosophy and the task of concretion it is surprising to find that the negative dialectic has been somewhat neglected in considerations of his work. No book-length examination has yet appeared in English on the subject, and those in German have tended to interpret Adorno’s philosophical work through the framework of his writings on aesthetics and sociology. Of course reading Adorno’s philosophy through other parts of his writings is a perfectly permissible way of thinking about his work, although it comes with the built-in disadvantage that it does not address the purely philosophical justifications that Adorno actually gives for the

various claims made in his negative dialectic. Although Adorno sees the negative dialectic as the route to concretion he is quite determined to conduct philosophy in a rigorous and internally rational way: that is, philosophical arguments are by no means bent to the needs of a theory of society. Rather, the more rational philosophy is, the more it supports the development of the critical stance. To examine Adorno's negative dialectic *on its own terms* then, to treat it in its purely theoretical expression, is actually to carry through on Adorno's idea of concretion. For that reason I think that it is important to consider Adorno's negative dialectic in isolation from the sociological specifics of his critical theory. In this book I want to do just that. I will explore the structure of Adorno's dialectic, its key concepts, and its historical influences. I will show also that Adorno's philosophy, although sometimes flawed, contains concepts and arguments that are philosophically valuable. In particular, I want to point out how Adorno's philosophy offers us challenging ways of thinking about certain problems in epistemology and the philosophy of the subject, not necessarily because Adorno always has superior alternative theories within these areas of philosophy, but because his contributions in these areas remind us of what it is that philosophy is to do if it is to play a role in the development of critical rationality. It will become apparent, in this regard, that Adorno's philosophy is a "transcendental" one, something which has not previously been appreciated. It is strongly committed, I will show, to a connection between experience and rationality, claiming no less than that philosophical positions that fail to recognize the structure of experience (as Adorno will describe it) will deprive themselves of the ability to express themselves rationally.

Certain difficulties stand in the way of the examination I propose here. First, and perhaps most obvious, is the complex style used by Adorno to present his arguments. His way of putting things demands a great deal of the reader, though it is important to know that Adorno painstakingly defends the stylistic aspects of his philosophical writings.² Unfortunately, he has not persuaded very many of his readers. His texts are labeled variously as pompous and pretentious. Maybe so, but he is not, I think, impenetrable. With some patient restatement of Adorno's ideas, clear lines of thought can be revealed. A second difficulty for the interpretation of Adorno's work

is the change in philosophical circumstances since the time in which Adorno wrote. His key works, as far as this examination of his work is concerned, are the *Metacritique of Epistemology* of 1956 and *Negative Dialectics* of 1966. These works are hardly ancient, yet the theoretical framework that can make sense of much of their content is no longer familiar to a great many of Adorno's readers, in particular to readers who think of philosophical problems through the prism of the linguistic turn. Although by no means reducible to German Idealism, much of what Adorno has to say is cast within the concepts of German Idealism. Reading Adorno's work involves taking a tour through the entire tradition of modern German philosophy, from Kant to Heidegger. Inevitably, unfamiliar and obscure terminology will lead to some confusion. Little wonder, indeed, that, as Rüdiger Bubner remarks, "*Negative Dialectics* remains a book whose seals are in no sense all entirely broken."³ A key objective of this book will be to explicate the context in which Adorno's philosophy operates. Much space will therefore be given to considerations of the ideas of the major philosophers with whom Adorno is in debate.

I have set out this examination of Adorno's philosophy in the following way. In the introduction I shall give a historical account of what Adorno himself saw as the key problems of contemporary philosophy. What contemporary philosophy cannot do, he argues, is explain experience. Its failure to do so is connected with the inadequacies of the various methodologies it employs, methodologies which actually inhibit the development of criticism. I will introduce the notion that Adorno's philosophy is a philosophy for modernity by examining the influence of Georg Lukács's protocritical theory (with particular attention to Lukács's account of the relation between philosophy and socially sanctioned forms of rationality.) In chapter 1 I shall read through various selected parts of Kant and Hegel since those parts, I argue, are appropriated in various ways by Adorno in order to enable him to construct an alternative model of philosophy (one that in explaining experience would avoid precisely those difficulties identified in the introduction). That model will be based on a particular theory of subject-object interaction. In chapter 2 I look at Adorno's theory of objects—their role in experience, the part they play in subject-object epistemology and the manner in which they are misrepresented by

noncritical philosophy. Chapter 3 will examine the role of subjects. Chapters 2 and 3, then, will give us the essential arguments of Adorno's philosophy. Adorno's philosophy, however, achieves great precision in the criticisms it makes of other philosophies; that is, in the application of the principles we will have seen in chapters 2 and 3. Criticism of other positions enables Adorno to demarcate the limits of his own commitments. For that reason the remaining two chapters will deal with the most significant of Adorno's critiques: chapter 4 is concerned with the critique of Kant, emphasizing what Adorno sees as the excesses of Kant's theory of subjectivity, and chapter 5 turns to phenomenology. Phenomenology is a particularly important position in Adorno's view since Husserl, in some places, argues for a version of objectivity which, like Adorno's position, aims to avoid subjective reductionism, whereas Heidegger explains experience by means that seem to undermine Adorno's subject-object theory. The conclusion offers a closing defense of Adorno's position. There I will argue that two key objections regarding the fundamental coherence of Adorno's position can be answered, provided we properly contextualize the problems with which Adorno is concerned.