

Université de Montréal

**The Persistence of Non-Identity:
Spiritual Experience in Adorno**

par Michael Restagno

Philosophie
Faculté des arts et des sciences

Mémoire présenté
en vue de l'obtention du grade de maîtrise
en philosophie
profil Recherche

Janvier 2019

© Michael Restagno, 2019

Abstract

Adorno's conception of spiritual experience gains its critical import from its predominantly negative character: experience is no longer understood as a vehicle for what is communicated to us directly, but instead as the expression of an objective lack that blocks the possibility of direct communication altogether. This lack is expressed epistemically by the subject-object split in Idealism, and socially by the process of "disenchantment" that is intrinsic to modernity. The aim of reconstructing Adorno's conception of spiritual experience is to show how this social lack can be adequately communicated within an epistemic context that blocks the possibility of *direct* communication; conversely, it is only once this problem is surmounted that the critical import of spiritual experience can be established. We will reconstruct Adorno's conception of spiritual experience on the basis of its relation to what is given, or what we assume is communicated directly to us in experience. As the given gains its problematic character in relation to idealistic accounts of experience, we will depart with the failure of subjective idealism to properly account for the given object in experience. Following this, we will show how the positive aspects of spiritual experience are established through the sustained critique of reified accounts of experience such as positivism and phenomenology. As both accounts aim to smooth-over the subject-object split by grounding experience in a particular form of givenness, we will show how their respective failures in reducing experience to givenness express the possibility of an un-reduced account of the former. The final section of the work will attempt to establish Adorno's conception of spiritual experience as a positive response to these failures: in other words, it attempts to get something right about experience on the basis of how the latter is wrongly construed. More precisely, the concept's adequacy as a response is demonstrated through its ability to make connections between the epistemic insufficiencies of reductionistic accounts of experience and the social processes which underpin the phenomenon of disenchantment.

Keywords: Theodor Adorno, Spiritual Experience, The Given, Positivism, Phenomenology, Idealism.

Résumé

Chez Adorno, l'expérience spirituelle devient un concept critique grâce à son caractère négatif; ce dernier n'est plus compris comme une voie par laquelle l'expérience immédiate est possible, mais plutôt en tant qu'expression d'une carence objective, bloquant la possibilité de fonder l'expérience sur l'immédiat. Le séparation entre sujet et objet devient l'expression épistémologique de cette carence, le processus de 'désenchantement du monde' son expression sociale. En reconstruisant la conception d'expérience spirituelle, il devient possible montrer dans quelle mesure cette carence sociale peut s'exprimer directement, tout dans un contexte épistémologique qui bloque la possibilité de communication directe; du coup, c'est seulement en répondant à ce problème que l'expérience gagne son caractère critique. Notre reconstruction se sert du concept de 'donné' (ou, l'objet de l'expérience immédiate) comme fil conducteur. Comme le concept de donné devient problématique dans le cas de l'idéalisme subjectif, nous partons de l'échec que subit l'idéalisme dans son inclusion du donné dans son schéma transcendantal. Après nous établirons les aspects positifs de cette conception de l'expérience, qui deviennent intelligibles lors de sa critique du positivisme et la phénoménologie. Ces deux disciplines recouvrent le problème du désenchantement en fondant la possibilité de l'expérience sur une conception particulière du donné; c'est donc dans l'impossibilité d'une réduction de l'expérience au donné qu'il est possible de cerner comment l'expérience non-réduite pourrait se présenter. Dans la section finale, le concept d'expérience spirituelle est présenté dans sa positivité, en tant que réponse aux échecs du positivisme et la phénoménologie: autrement dit, le concept peut proprement exprimer l'expérience dans la mesure qu'il comprend comment l'expérience peut être faussée. En tant que réponse aux échecs des conceptions réducteurs de l'expérience, la qualité du concept d'Adorno est démontrée à travers sa capacité d'établir des connections entre la carence épistémique de ces conceptions réducteurs et les processus sociaux constituant le phénomène de désenchantement du monde.

Mots clés: Theodor Adorno, Expérience Spirituelle, Le Donné, Positivisme, Phénoménologie, Idéalisme.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to my family for their unending love and support.

From it I gain the confidence to engage in the pursuits that make life meaningful.

Thanks to Manon for grounding me.

You are a constant reminder that life takes place outside the confines of one's own head.

Thanks to Iain for shaking me up when I thought I was actually grounded.

What I assumed to be a moment of rest was rightly transformed into an opportunity to move forward.

Thanks to Augustin for pushing me in the right direction.

Like a good critical theorist, you had me figured out better than I had myself.

Thanks to my friends, to whom I hardly give any moments of rest.

You are the coordinates that allow for constant re-adjustment.

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	2
Résumé.....	3
Acknowledgements.....	4
Table of Contents.....	5
 Introduction: The Problematic Character of Spiritual Experience.....	6
 1. The Problem of Idealism	
1.1 Adorno’s Hegelian Motivation: The Concept of Determinate Negation.....	11
1.2 Sketching the Problem of Idealism.....	16
1.3 Adorno’s Understanding of Subject-Object Identity.....	18
1.4 Transcendental Subjectivity and the Tautological Structure of Experience.....	24
1.5 Subject-Object Identity and Reification.....	29
1.6 Subject-Object Mediation and the Priority of the Object.....	35
 2. Failing to Secure Experience: Positivism and Phenomenology	
2.1 Positivism and Phenomenology as Manifestations of “Non-Real Consciousness”	38
2.2 Positivism and the Restriction of Experience to Facticity.....	39
2.3 The Lack of Self-Awareness in Positivistic Accounts of Experience.....	42
2.4 The Potential of Phenomenology: The Subjective Mediation of the Given.....	46
2.5 Husserl’s Idealism: Bundling-up Materiality and Ideality.....	49
2.6 The Ambiguous Conception of The Given in Phenomenology.....	56
 3. The Role of Spiritual Experience in a Critical Theory of Society	
3.1 Against Methodological Thinking: Spiritual Experience and Interpretation.....	59
3.2 The Object of Interpretation: Givenness as Mutilated Experience.....	63
3.3 Interpretation and the Immanent Critique of the Totally Administered Society.....	67
3.4 The Constellation and the Figurative Reconstruction of Experience.....	70
3.5 Philosophical Antinomies as Expressions of an Antagonistic Society.....	73
3.6 The Dialectical Character of Experience and the Negative Conception of Truth.....	78
 Conclusion: The Critical Potential of Spiritual Experience.....	82
 Bibliography.....	87

Introduction:

The Problematic Character of Spiritual Experience

Theodor Adorno's philosophical work culminates in a theory of spiritual experience (*geistige Erfahrung*). From his inaugural lecture in 1931¹, Adorno has advanced this conception of experience through sustained criticism of its contemporary accounts: in the inaugural lecture alone, Adorno's tentative presentation of his project is intertwined with a string of refutations that range from logical positivism to fundamental ontology. Adorno was dissatisfied with the majority of these accounts insofar as they committed a common error by grounding the possibility of knowledge either on what is given within experience, or on what is given prior to experience: for example, neo-Kantianism and fundamental ontology were concerned with the grounding of experience in *a priori* concepts, while opposing accounts such as positivism would limit experience to what is given empirically. In this sense, givenness is associated with indubitability, whether this has to do with what is true to consciousness or the truth that is independent of the latter. Adorno argues that either forms of givenness are false: what is given conceptually is the result of cognitive activity which produces concepts within experience, and what is given empirically can only be understood in relation to the subject who produces these concepts. As a result, the idea of immediate givenness seems to be a product of false consciousness, in the trivial sense of mistaking something mediated by human activity for something that is irreducible to that very activity – ie, nature.

But if we are to hold that the given is always mediated by some form of subjective activity, we then might slip into the type of subjective idealism that Adorno himself rejected in his critiques of Kant and Hegel. Adorno avoids this problem by arguing against the idea that subjectivity structures the *totality* of experience: what we experience is not perfectly reducible to the subjective concepts whose 'givenness' seems to (falsely) precede

1 Theodor W. Adorno, "The Actuality of Philosophy", *Telos* 31 (1977).

experience. While the upshot is that the object of experience is now understood to possess a non-conceptual character, the problem persists: how can we actually understand non-conceptuality in its positivity when Adorno's epistemic strictures hold that we cannot equate it with the seemingly mind-independent character of what is given empirically?

The concept of the given seems to possess a demonstrably contradictory character. Brian O'Connor lays this out by noting the concept's 3 different characteristics:

[Adorno's] claims are: (1) that idealism is essentially correct about the cognitive composition of our world (so even 'the given' must bear the determinations of consciousness); (2) that in experience there is an epistemically significant relation to something non-conceptual; (3) that the very notion of the given is ideological in character in that it fails to consider the social construction of 'what there is', a construction that Adorno rejects for the reasons that are familiar to the critical theory perspective. On the face of it these are claims that do not fit easily together: (1) and (2) are mutually exclusive, and (3) appears to render (2) naïve.²

Givenness can possess these seemingly contradictory characteristics because Adorno's conception of experience is structured temporally: it is on the basis of these very contradictions that the concept *transforms* itself through experience, from our initial encounter to its eventual dissolution. Briefly sketched, the departing moment of spiritual experience is found in the antinomy between the intuitive concepts (1) that we immediately pin to objects of direct experience and the objects themselves (2), which have a non-conceptual character. Finally, what we assumed to be given is dissolved in the unfolding of this antinomy (3), as the object's immediate character is now understood to be the result of inadequate conceptualization; the object of experience is subsequently transformed into something more determinate *through* our experience of this inadequate conceptualization, revealing the necessity of its subjective-mediation in experience, as well as the social origin of the inadequacy. Adorno's conception of spiritual experience must be understood as a *process*; it gains its specificity through the temporal character that it brings to seemingly immutable philosophical concepts. This character is the clue to why the given departs from being an intuitively immutable concept and ends up dissolving itself under the weight of its

2 Brian O'Connor, "Adorno and the Problem of Givenness", *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 58, vol. 227 (2004); 1.

own contradictions. As we cannot presume that the given is inherently “false” – this would ignore its non-conceptuality, – we must instead reconstruct the *process* of spiritual experience in order to map the concept’s transformation.

The first chapter will frame the problematic nature of subjective idealism. It departs with a basic explanation of the “motor” that allows for the transformation of given objects or concepts in experience, subsequently giving the latter its temporal character: determinate negation (*bestimmte Negation*). Afterwards, we will establish Adorno’s critique of subjective idealism through the latter’s inability to allow for the *full* experience of determinate negation, namely on the basis of its commitment to subject-object identity as the structure of experience. We will end with a tentative sketch of Adorno’s key theoretical commitment in the establishment of his concept of experience: the priority of the object (*Vorrang des Objekts*), which entails that we let the object’s non-conceptuality guide us towards re-adjusting the concepts that we take to be intuitively given.

The second chapter will expand this theoretical commitment through a reconstruction of Adorno’s critiques of contemporary accounts of experience. Adorno was an ardent critic of what he believed to be the two most advanced attempts at escaping from subjective idealism: positivism and Husserlian phenomenology. Positivism aims to ground the possibility of knowledge in the existence of mind-independent objectivity, its irreducibility to concepts serving as a thorn in the side of idealism; phenomenology, on the other hand, aims to ground the possibility of knowledge on the immanent meanings that accompany the objects of immediate experience, all without recourse to the empirical givenness of these very objects. Each account is grounded on an antinomial conception of the given (empirical or conceptual), and both fail because in their haste to exclude the other, they end up solely equating the object with their respective conception of givenness. As such, neither can adequately prioritize the object in experience: in positivism there are no conceptual givens for the non-conceptual object to brush against, and in phenomenology there is no non-conceptual object which spurs us to re-adjust the concepts we thought to be merely intuitive.

In the final chapter we will use the point of convergence between the failures of positivism and phenomenology as a springboard to the positive elaboration of Adorno's conception of spiritual experience. Positivism and phenomenology operate within the logic of a "gap" between facticity and transcendence, and their *situation* within this gap expresses the fact that the empirical reality of society contradicts the promises held in the conceptual categories that we use to grasp it. We will start by demonstrating how Adorno's conception of philosophical interpretation differs from the "methodological thinking" that underpins positivism and phenomenology: unlike both disciplines, Adorno refuses to analytically separate the conceptual and empirical aspects of experience and reify them into givens. Reifications of this sort allow for scientific methodologies to end up obfuscating the possibilities within experience because their respective conceptions of subjectivity and objectivity are too abstract to properly account for the experience living individuals. This is no accident, as the most significant of these experiences are ones that have to do with suffering, which exists as an expression of the antagonism between society's promises and its "grim empirical reality". Reductionistic accounts of experience have a wider social function: to provide the conceptual infrastructure for the "smoothing-over" of social antagonisms. Adorno will require a type of procedure to think through the antagonisms of the social totality within the particular objects that we experience, all while negating their givenness: the concept of the constellation. After presenting the concept, we will show how it structures the immanent critique of Husserlian phenomenology presented in the second chapter. This will allow us to provide a full picture of how experience departs from the given particular to the constitution of the universal, now depicted negatively in the form of an antagonistic society.

The wider aim of reconstructing Adorno's conception of experience is to establish a bridge between the epistemological and sociological character of his work, as the latter is often misread as being 'hostile' to the idea of individual experience which serves as the object of epistemological inquiry. In his concern with the problem of the given, Adorno equips critical theory with a socially-oriented conception of experience, which is one that eschews appeals to intuition and immediacy in favor of a sustained, polemical relation to

the social entities that seem to simultaneously exceed our very control. By tying the meaning of experience to the repeated negation of what we take for granted as individuals, our experience of the world is no longer passive: in a society rife with abstractions, one is then able to “stay sharp” and persistently resist against the irrational process of their concretization.

Chapter 1

The Problem of Idealism

1.1 Adorno's Hegelian Motivation: The Concept of Determinate Negation

Adorno's conception of spiritual experience is primarily indebted to Hegel: experience is understood as a temporal *process* that departs from the given particular and culminates in the constitution of what is understood to be universal truth. The processual nature of experience confers a particular quality to error: as experience is understood as a progression, errors cannot simply halt the process of knowledge's constitution. While in Hegel the *necessity* of this particular quality ends up dissolving with the appearance of the universal, for Adorno it is one that experience can never part with.

In Hegel, negativity is not merely a form that represents a lack of concrete experiential content, for if this were the case the status of "error" would then disintegrate the content of experience into nothingness. Put differently, error should not be accompanied by the intuition that the truth was never there to begin with: "such a one-sided view is the skepticism which sees in the result [of negation] always only pure nothing and which abstracts from the fact that this nothing is determinately the nothing of that from which it results. However, only when taken as the nothing of that from which it is emerges is the nothing in fact the true result; thus it is itself a determinate nothing and it has a content".³ In this passage, Hegel presents error as part of process, as the former is the *result* of something determinate that has preceded it. The negativity of the error represents an objective lack within the particular's process of *actualization*, of becoming-concrete; conversely, this process of actualization manifests itself within the subjective concepts that mediate the content of experience. The determinate character that Hegel accords to negation is meant to convey that error is something that is *experienced*: it must thus have experiential content as

3 GWF Hegel, *The Phenomenology of the Spirit* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press), 57. Additions are made in order to clarify the process that ends in the 'result'.

well as a living subject who mediates it. Let's provide a rather banal example to express how fundamental this concern is for Adorno:

Let's say that I am experiencing two qualitatively distinct objects that also resemble each other almost perfectly when given empirically: salt and sugar. I then happen to mistake the salt for the sugar and pour it into my coffee. While it is not until I actually drink the coffee that I know which is which, the act of drinking coffee does not merely end in the knowledge that my coffee does not contain sugar. For if it did end here, there would be nothing *spiritual* about experience at all: as a knowing subject, I wouldn't be able to determine anything more about my relation to the world other than the fact that my senses can mistake something for an other. If my error prompts me to adopt a skeptical viewpoint on the basis of the unreliability of the senses, following the latter to its logical conclusion entails that I cannot actually know the difference between salt and sugar, namely because my sense of taste can be just as deceptive as my sense of sight. For Hegel, this type of negation is abstract as it does not allow experience to *unfold* into more determinate knowledge – which he associates with the process of becoming concrete: “Skepticism which ends with the abstraction of nothingness or emptiness cannot progress any further from this point, but must instead wait to see whether something new will present itself and what it will be, in order that it can also toss it into the same empty abyss”.⁴

Yet if we take the contrary view – that spiritual experience does not merely end in error but instead departs from it –, my relation to the world as a knowing subject opens up to reveal aspects that did not originally appear within my immediate experience of the object. In this renewed context, what my error tells me is that what is given empirically in experience is not a proper criterion of truth, and this is because certain experiences can trick the senses. On the other hand, the experience of error necessarily moves beyond mere skepticism, as it is *possible* to differentiate between salt and sugar: for one, both substances have been pre-arranged into their respective shakers instead of being mixed together. Yet I also cannot rely on the *assumption* that this prior arrangement is correct, as this would posit that the difference between salt and sugar is already immediately “present” in the

4 Hegel, *The Phenomenology of the Spirit*, 57.

surrounding world – despite the fact that in this particular case the difference itself must be experienced negatively, through error.

The example above shows that I cannot simply pin the concept of sugar to what I assume to be its corresponding object without experiencing it, as this would admit to an *a priori* ‘background’ in which object and concept are already identical. On the contrary, this is exactly what will be proven wrong: my assumption that the concept of sugar is being pinned to the contents of a particular shaker will be negated through a significant experience of the object. Yet I can neither *emphatically* experience an object without a prior concept for it to ‘brush’ against, for the latter serves as the standard of cognition that is to be modified by the experience of error. If the concepts which seem to exist prior to experience are actually treated as *separate* from experience, then experience itself is meaningless: when isolated from each other, the conceptual and empirical aspects of experience become givens – what Hegel deems to be forms of “*non-real consciousness*”.

While conceptual and empirical givenness share an immediate character, their objects come from different sources: what is indubitable to the senses originates from a source that is independent to subjectivity, while what is indubitable to reason comes from within the concepts that constitute subjectivity. As both forms of “non-real consciousness” are concerned with different yet equally-significant aspects of experience, the precise way in which each fails to do justice to reality on its own is determined by the other in the form of an objective lack: empirical givens lack conceptuality, and conceptual givens lack a real object to mirror and subsequently be measured against. These forms of consciousness are non-real in the sense that they have yet to be actualized; yet because the actualization of one form of non-real consciousness requires it to confront the other, both are negated in the process: “The completeness of the forms of non-real consciousness will emerge through the very necessity of their progression and their interrelations”.⁵ The result is the actualization of a form of consciousness that is increasingly “attuned” to the objects of experience, as the latter have now become more determinate through the experience of error. Once error prompts one to understand that the particular object was merely appearing *for*

5 Hegel, *The Phenomenology of the Spirit*, 56-57.

consciousness instead of communicating to us directly what it is in itself, the particular consciousness experiences a new object:

We see that consciousness now has two objects: One is the first in-itself, and the second is the being-for-it of this in-itself. The latter seems at first to be only the reflection of consciousness into itself, a representing not of an object but rather only of its knowing of that first object. But as was previously shown, the first object is, to consciousness, thereby altered. The first object ceases to be the in-itself and, to consciousness, becomes that which is only the in-itself for consciousness. However, this way there is this: the being-for-it of this in-itself, the true, which however means that this is the essence, or its object. This new object contains the nothingness of the first; it is what experience has learned about it.⁶

Yet the consciousness that now experiences this object is also altered, as the negation of the original object also contains that of the consciousness which experienced the original object in its immediacy, as being 'in-itself'. The negative content contained within the new object is the imprint of its subjective mediation, now understood as inadequate conceptualization. Once this particular moment of subjectivity becomes objectified, it can then be knowable: "While it therefore finds on its object's part that its knowing does not correspond to the object, the object itself also does not endure. That is, the standard for the examination is altered when that for which it was supposed to be the standard itself fails the examination, and the examination is not only an examination of knowing but also an examination of the standard of knowing".⁷

For Hegel as for Adorno, spiritual experience is determined by a relation of co-constitution between subject and object: the alteration of consciousness is contingent upon the alteration of the object that is experienced through error, and the alteration of the object is contingent upon the alteration of the consciousness that experienced it. "This dialectical movement which consciousness practices in its own self (as well as in its knowing and in its object), insofar as, for consciousness, the new, true object arises out of this movement, is properly what is called experience".⁸ Experience is understood as a dialectical process of subject-object *mediation*, as subject and object modify each other both ways. The dialectical

6 Hegel, *The Phenomenology of the Spirit*, 60.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid, 60-61.

movement of experience thus leads us from the particular to the universal: the particular individual's experience of objectivity leads to an objective understanding of how subjectivity works as a whole, and the particular objects that subjectivity encounters become increasingly "spiritualized" through their interrelation with this whole. It is up until this stage that Adorno remains within Hegel's idealistic framework, as he will now dissent regarding the way in which the universal is experienced in its actuality.

The spiritual character of experience – the fact that it moves from particular to universal – is contingent upon the fact that the individual's experience is always mediated by society. In other words, experience of the universal is possible because experience takes place within an *actualized* context of universality: society is none other than the universal in its actuality, the realization of reason itself. While Adorno agrees with the first statement, his experiences lead him to disagree with the second; unlike Hegel, Adorno understood the society in which he lived as the actual concretization of an irrational process, one that prevents subjects from fully experiencing reality.

Despite the fact that society exists, it does not exist in the same way as a standard "object" insofar it cannot be experienced as given. In other words, while objects can be experienced directly, society is experienced indirectly. Experience of society is indirect because – while it might be concrete – it is a concrete *totality*: it is the mediating context in which particular objects appear immediately as givens. Here both Adorno and Hegel are in agreement. The mediating power of society operates through an internal logic, which for Adorno is represented in modernity by the principle of equivalence that allows for objects to be exchanged amongst each other: all objects are thus commensurable in exchange as long as they each possess an exchange value. Translating the intrinsic value of objects to exchange value comes at an experiential cost: objects are mediated by the mechanism of exchange through the compression of their individual qualities into a quantifiable exchange value. Yet when the object is submitted to the movement of the market, its exchange value seems to be an intrinsic property despite the fact that it is the result of a systematic process of social labor; the "experiential cost" is thus illegitimately recuperated. The fact that this systematic process of social labor is "baked-in" to the object without being directly

experienced is testament to the fact that whatever we experience as a given can only be the result of something else that is much more significant. So how can we experience something that indirectly mediates what we experience directly? This is where Adorno parts ways with Hegel: while the latter believes that we can develop a *positive* understanding of society as a totality, the former argues that as rational subjects we can only experience it *negatively*, namely due to the fact that its irrational character becomes the catalyst which can spur subjectivity to shed light on the block possibilities contained within it.

While we cannot presuppose the empirical givenness of society by construing the latter as an object of experience, we can neither *presuppose* its totalizing character by equating what makes it essential – its capacity to exceed all particulars contained within it – with a particular set of concepts. According to Adorno, this is what Hegel eventually falls victim to, as his commitment to subject-object identity forces him to identify the rational structure of society with the rational structure of subjectivity: as subjective knowledge progresses towards truth about society, the latter then becomes the actualized universal through which subjectivity is constituted. Yet if society in its empirical actuality is not merely given, we also cannot presuppose a concept of rationality through which we can move beyond this empirical givenness in order to gain more determinate knowledge about society “in itself”. If the intrinsic rationality of society and coherence of social-relations are presupposed, they are not experienced in their actuality: and if they are not experienced in their actuality, they can not be negated in experience. Reason can never amount to coinciding with reality if we assume that it already does, as there is no longer any negative aspect of experience that prompts us to correct the standards through which we evaluate the world around us; if subjectivity cannot re-evaluate its standards, it is because its standards are deemed to be already correct.

1.2 Sketching the Problem of Idealism

For Adorno, an idealistic conception of experience is one where the appearances within the empirical foreground of experience are subordinated to the concept of essence, the intelligibility of which exceeds the realm of appearances. As appearance is mediated by

the senses and what we understand to be essence is mediated by subjective concepts, both should co-exist within a relation of perpetual differentiation insofar as their respective objects originate from different sources. Yet in idealism, the subordination of appearance to essence occurs within a relation of immediacy: what appears in experience as an individual particular reverts back immediately to its conditions of possibility, which are then intelligible to reason in the form of universals.⁹ But if objects only appear *within* experience, and that these universals *precede* appearances as their conditions of possibility, then how can these universals become immediately intelligible to reason if they are not – like the objects they constitute – immediately “present” in experience? Idealism solves this problem by grounding experience within the confines of consciousness itself: as such, the universals which mediate the existing particulars can be identified with the given concepts which constitute the essential aspects of subjectivity. Idealism thus possesses two features that distinguish it from other conceptions of experience. The first feature is to “found notions such as reality or truth on an analysis of consciousness”¹⁰, while the second is a fundamental relation of *identity* between the knowing subject and objective world. If experience can only be founded on an analysis of consciousness, it is because idealism *posits* a necessary relation of identity between consciousness and the objects that it is meant to apprehend.

The problematic nature of this identity-relation can be expressed in idealism’s relation to the ‘given’: while objects that are immediately given to consciousness through sensation must come from a source beyond consciousness, in idealism this source is only comprehensible in relation to the conceptual machinations of a knowing subject. Conversely, if there exists a relation of non-identity between subject and object, then the object is construed as knowable all while possessing aspects that have not yet been adequately conceptualized by the subject. Adorno calls this particular aspect of the object

9 While for Hegel “essence must appear”, appearance is finally identified with essence in the culmination of the rational process in which it appears. Subject and object become Absolute Spirit, and Absolute Spirit becomes immediately discernible within the subjects and objects which appeared and perished before it.

10 Theodor W. Adorno, “Husserl and the Problem of Idealism”, *The Journal of Philosophy* 37, no.1 (1940): 5.

its ‘non-conceptuality’, conversely understood as a ‘surplus’ that exceeds the subject’s ability to exhaust an object by forcing the latter to into the concept that is meant to contain it. If subject-object identity were *not* presupposed by idealism, then the givenness of the object would be the source of *non-identity* between itself and subject insofar as objects are first experienced as being given from a source outside subjectivity.

1.3 Adorno’s Understanding of Subject-Object Identity

The aim of idealists such as Kant and Fichte is to secure subjectivity as the condition of all possible knowledge by grounding the possibility of experience on the principle of subject-object identity. Subject-object identity is established by granting autonomy to consciousness and its corresponding concepts in the *constitution* of knowable reality: “The *autonome ratio* – this was the thesis of every idealistic system – was supposed to be capable of developing the concept of reality, in fact, all of reality, from out of itself”.¹¹ The idea of constitution entails that what we can understand as reality is only intelligible in the context of its production by consciousness and the conceptual categories that are intrinsic to it: the object is either ‘transformed’ from undetermined, ‘raw’ material, as in Kant; or it is posited absolutely by the subject, as in Fichte and Hegel.

Adorno’s understanding of ‘autonomous subjectivity’ is resolutely materialistic: the concept itself stems from the realm of human activity, where the subject retains a relative independence in regard to the object in experience, just as a craftsman is independent of what they are producing. Like the craftsman, subjectivity is independent in relation to its object because in experience it not only precedes the constitution of the object itself, but is also the latter’s condition of possibility: without the “mixing” of one’s conceptual labor, the object persists as undifferentiated material, which cannot provide the basis for a proper understanding of reality insofar as it lacks any conceptuality whatsoever. “Hence talk about thought is always accompanied by talk about a material that thought knows to be distinct from it, a material it processes the way labor processes its raw materials”.¹² In other words,

11 Adorno, “The Actuality of Philosophy”, *Telos*, 120-121.

12 Theodor W. Adorno, *Hegel: Three Studies* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), 21.

the convergence of the rational and the real is predicated on the existence of a rational subject that precedes the constitution of (what we take to be) reality itself. Subjective autonomy is what permits consciousness to determine whether the real is rational or not, and this is done by measuring the object against the concept that it represents; objects have little say in the matter, as their very objectivity is only intelligible insofar as it is to be apprehended by consciousness in the first place. In idealism this relation of independence actually goes one way instead of two: despite the fact that “talk about thought is always accompanied by talk about a material that thought knows to be distinct from it”, the object’s independence to subject is given a reduced role, as it serves no other purpose than being formed through purely conceptual activity. In other words, subjective autonomy results in the relative dependence of the object to the conceptual categories of the subject, as there is nothing in the former that is not already reducible to the latter.

Brian O’Connor argues that Adorno’s conception of “identity” can be distinguished on two levels: while *de-facto* identity “posits the exclusive meaningfulness of concepts” in the sense that objects only become determinate to thought through the use of concepts, “*de jure* identity misconstrues the subject-object relation as one of exhaustive correspondence”, in which “meaning is a matter of an object strictly fitting to a concept”.¹³ *De facto* identity is a necessary condition for what O’Connor calls the “vertical dimension” of the subject-object relation, “in which a subject has a directly physical yet significant experience of an object”.¹⁴ In this basic relation, significant experience of a physical object is only possible through the mediation of subjective concepts, as nothing is experienced directly without first “passing through” our conceptual apparatus; an example of this type of mediation can be found in Kant’s “pure concepts of the intuition”. The experiential role of sensation is meaningful in this particular dimension, as it is the condition through which the materiality of the object is given; before passing through the pure concepts of the intuition, the object cannot even be constituted spatio-temporally – let alone be given any determinate qualities – and thus cannot even be given to sensation in the first place. Yet in this dimension

13 Brian O’Connor, *Adorno’s Negative Dialectic* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), 17-18.

14 O’Connor, *Adorno’s Negative Dialectic*, 15-16.

experience itself is still *relatively* dependent on the object, as there must still be an object that precedes us if we are to have “a directly physical” experience of it; on the other hand “significant experience” of a physical object also implies that there are aspects of the object that are meaningful to the subject, and must thus be translate-able into concepts. As such, “there are features of the object that are in some sense both beyond subjectivity yet also capable of providing a key requirement for the realization of subjectivity”.¹⁵

In Kant the object retains its independence from the subject, but only in a trivial manner¹⁶: the object is first understood as matter to be processed by consciousness, as the “essential” character that makes it fully independent from subjectivity – the object taken ‘in itself’ – is deemed to be beyond the subject’s epistemic limitations. While Adorno agrees that subjectivity is necessarily limited in its capacities to understand objects, he does not agree that these limitations should be established prior to experience: for if they are, the independent object is always experienced as transcendent – as something that cannot be determined conceptually. As a result, Adorno will not only try to radicalize the Kantian motive of according the object independence in experience, but also guarantee that object-independence is preserved without recourse to the idea that the latter is transcendent.

Adorno is more cautious regarding *de jure* identity, which occurs within the “lateral dimension” of the subject-object relation, “in which a subject judges – applies a concept to – an object which is itself a conceptual whole”.¹⁷ In this dimension, the fact that the object is already subjectively mediated is prioritized over the object-independence found in the vertical dimension: the object is construed “as a conceptual whole” because it must be converted into a concept in order to undergo the process of inter-conceptual mediation. For O’Connor, this is best represented in Hegel, who regarded the given object of immediate experience as mediated through-and-through by subjectivity; conceptual activity – the dialectical mediation of the object – would thus proceed on the basis of the subjects’ critical self-reflection of its mediating role in experience. While self-reflection leads to the absolutization of (*de jure*) subject-object identity in Hegel, Adorno’s commitment to non-

15 Ibid, 16-17.

16 In Adorno’s view, object-independence in Kant remains a blocked possibility.

17 O’Connor, *Adorno’s Negative Dialectic* 16.

identity aims to ensure that the non-conceptual remainder is preserved at each stage of the subject's conceptual activity, thus cementing non-identity as the internal logic of subject-object mediation. Here Adorno is immanently criticizing Hegel: experience leads to more determinate knowledge only if we take non-identity to be one of its conditions of possibility¹⁸. The "lateral dimension" of the subject-object relation is crucial to Adorno because it is here that the subject of spiritual experience engages in the type of conceptual activity that can possibly exceed the strictures of constitutive subjectivity; namely by systematically according priority to the significant aspects of the object that are encountered in the vertical dimension of experience.

The introduction of the problem of non-conceptuality establishes the key difference between both forms of identity. *De facto* identity still allows for non-identity to appear within the subject-object relation insofar as the object's non-conceptual features can prompt the subject to re-adjust its concepts as a rational response. Conceptual adjustment occurs within the lateral dimension of experience, where it also becomes possible for the subject to merely force an object into a concept under the logic of *de jure* identity; this consequently extinguishes the possibility of further re-adjustment, as the non-identity between subject and object can no longer appear once object is reduced to subject. Here the dialectic turns to a standstill, which is what Adorno's critique of Hegel will center itself around:

From the outset of Hegel's *Logic*, the equation of Being and Nothingness on the basis of absolute indeterminacy¹⁹ first limits the possibility of non-identity within the vertical dimension of experience, as the object is understood as totally indeterminate – meaningless to experience – in its absolute independence from the subject. While it seems like Hegel is making the same mistake as Kant, Adorno believes that Hegel goes further in his error: as the subject must already mediate the indeterminate object in order to make it into something determinate, the *possibility* of mediation is thus predicated on the *a priori* identity of subject and object. Hegel's conception of experience culminates in subject-object identity, as it is only under a relation of total dependence on the subject that: 1) the

18 In *Adorno's Negative Dialectic*, O'Connor argues that Adorno is a transcendental philosopher on the basis of his reliance on transcendental argument in his immanent critique.

19 Theodor W. Adorno, *Lectures on Negative Dialectics* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2008), 184.

object becomes absolutely determinate through subjective activity; and 2) that objectivity becomes the totality that mediates the sum of these determinations. Conceptual readjustment in Hegel might proceed on the basis of negativity, or non-identity between subject and object, but the negation itself is negated in the appearance of the new object. As a result, the new object of experience is more determinate, but only because it is ‘closer’ to the conceptual categories of a subject than its previous incarnation; conversely, the new subject of experience is equally ‘closer’ to its object due to the re-evaluation of the standards through which the latter is understood. While the perpetual re-evaluation of our cognitive standards should entail that an absolutizing conception of subjectivity is never reached, this would then negate the conception of subject-object identity that grounds the vertical dimension of experience. Hegel’s conception of experience resolves this problem by propelling itself towards the *absolutization* of the more restricted relation of subject-object identity that occurs in this vertical dimension: “By such mischievous means [...], Hegel secures from himself the priority of the concept that then emerges at the other end as the conclusion of the entire work”.²⁰ In Hegel, the “motor” of the dialectic is that of non-identity, yet this is only possible because subject-object identity has been posited at the outset.

With this example in mind, we now have a better idea regarding the intertwinement of both dimensions of experience, each of which are equally important to Adorno: “From Kant, then, we get the transcendental structures of experience, whereas Hegel can explain the nature of our experiential engagements, engagements by subjects in the conceptual activity of knowing particular objects”.²¹ Adorno’s conception of spiritual experience privileges the aspects of each dimension that are diminished or outright excluded by their respective thinkers. In the vertical dimension, Adorno is concerned with the very independence of object to subject, which Kant diminishes by delimiting the thing-in-itself to the noumenal realm: “There is a moment in Kant, and this was mobilized against him by Hegel, which secretly regards the in-itself beyond the concept as something wholly

20 Adorno, *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*, 184.

21 O’Connor, *Adorno’s Negative Dialectic*, 17.

indeterminable, as null and void”.²² Conversely, in the lateral dimension the object is stripped of its historically-sedimented particularity while it is transformed into its concept: in our haste to leap towards the object’s essential character, the latter’s actual existence – and thus its possible non-identity with what we assume to be its essence – is conveniently passed-over.

The concern with object-independence and the individual particular both fall under the heading of ‘prioritizing’ the object. This priority is guaranteed by the latter’s preponderance in relation to subject: there are aspects of the object that are both necessary in the constitution of experience, yet irreducible to the conceptual machinations of subjectivity. Prioritizing the object thus involves unifying both the latter’s vertical and lateral aspects through the concept of non-conceptuality: the non-identity between subject and object in the vertical dimension is what prompts the activity within the lateral dimension towards self-correction, which becomes the process of discovering the determinate ways in which subject and object differ within their particular historical configuration. The end product of spiritual experience is the reflection of the universal within the particular, but unlike idealism the particular now reflects the universal on the basis of their relation of non-identity; as such, the individual particular is preserved insofar as its “essence” is now construed as that which cannot be immediately identified with higher concepts.

For Adorno, the transcendental structure of experience is necessarily one of non-identity between subject and object, for otherwise knowledge would be tautological in the sense that what is developed in the lateral dimension of conceptual activity is nothing more than a re-iteration of its conditions of possibility, which are to be subsequently found in the vertical dimension. The transcendental subject – as a guarantor of the inverse structure, of the identity between essence and existence – is itself unchanging insofar as it is prior to the *temporality* of lived experience.

22 Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (Un-Official Translation by Dennis Redmond), 16-18.

1.4 Transcendental Subjectivity and the Tautological Structure of Experience:

The law-like nature of the object's dependence on subject is established by the concept of transcendental subjectivity: reality is to be understood as a whole only in relation to the *unity* of consciousness from which this 'whole' can be established. If the totality that mediates the objects in the vertical dimension of experience is meant to be rendered intelligible through conceptual re-adjustment in the lateral dimension, then the subject that structures the vertical dimension must be *rationally determinable* within the lateral one: in order to correct itself, the subject must possess an understanding of what it is correcting. Yet if the subject must objectify itself in order to engage in the type of self-reflection that is necessary for conceptual re-adjustment, the non-conceptual character of objects becomes an obstacle insofar as the subject, now reflecting upon itself as an object, might very well be irreducible to the concepts that are supposed to seize it totally. In other words, the subject that is merely reduced to object is a subject that has not been adequately conceptualized: in this case, the subject becomes the historically-contingent individual particular, which idealism subsequently considers to be an unsuitable ground for the possibility of knowledge. This is why in idealism, "taking as one's point of departure the pure immediacy of the 'this thing there', which is presumably what is most certain, does not get one beyond the contingency of the individual person who simply exists".²³ In order to guarantee that our experience of objects – and consequently, subjects – is not contingent, idealism presents the transcendental subject as the necessary condition of experience itself: as a result, what is encountered *within* experience is guaranteed its conceptuality by a unified subject that is *prior* to experience. This ensures that the concept of transcendental subjectivity provides a rational foundation for the immediacy of experience, and it must do so by operating prior to our lived experience of immediacy.

Yet for Adorno, this direct path from immediacy to mediation is a false one. If the transcendental subject is an immaterial *condition* of all possible knowledge, then it follows that this form of subjectivity resides outside of the historically-mediated, *factual* sphere of

23 Adorno, *Hegel: Three Studies*, 63.

experience: “as pure apperception²⁴, subject should be the absolutely Other of all existents”.²⁵ Adorno argues that objects only appear as given within the empirical experience of particular, living individuals. The concept of the given in its traditional form – which is meant to account for the way in which we experience things *immediately* – gains its initial meaning from our experience of facticity: yet once the given object is *constituted* through conceptual means, its immediate character is negated. This entails that the subject of the given cannot be a transcendental one, as nothing can be “given” to a subject that is prior to empirical experience itself: “No subject emancipated from anything empirical can ever be a form for the given; to no such subject can something be given (referring to “it” as “it” or “him” is already problematic); none can receive such content in whatever manner”.²⁶ Despite idealism’s attempt to establish empirical subjectivity on the basis of the transcendental character of experience, there *remains* a relation of non-identity between empirical and transcendental forms of subjectivity, caused by the existence of the given – immediacy – within idealism’s conceptually-determined account of experience.

Transcendental subjectivity cannot be prioritized as a condition of possibility of experience if there are aspects of factual experience that are irreducible to it. Because these aspects of experience must also be rationally accounted for, the idealist must do so without recourse to the concepts which derive from empirical understandings of subjectivity such as psychology. If not, then idealism would have to employ two antinomic forms of subjectivity in order to develop a richer account of experience. For Adorno it is here that the idealist has a chance to incorporate a corrective to the concept of transcendental subjectivity, as the irreducibility of the experience of the living subject to transcendental concepts and categories serves as an objective “block”, one which requires the idealist conception of subjectivity to be corrected if it is to be surmounted without recourse to abstraction. With the dismissal of empirical subjectivity as an irreducible aspect of

24 The term “pure apperception” is taken from Kantian terminology, where it is meant to signify the transcendental subject.

25 Theodor W. Adorno, *Critical Models*, (New York City, NY: Columbia University Press, 2005), 255.

26 Theodor W. Adorno, *Against Epistemology* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2013), 142.

experience²⁷, the critical function of concepts – their ability to reveal the deficiencies of other concepts that they are configured around – is now negated: both empirical and formal concepts cannot actually be configured around each other without becoming simplified in order to make room for the intricacies of the other. The irrational contingencies of lived experience – what is given in administered society – cannot be *properly* criticized from the viewpoint of a subject that is prior to it, just as a formalized account of experience cannot merely be criticized from the isolated viewpoint of the living individual. By digging an insurmountable gap between the empirical and the intelligible, idealism prevents their peripheral concepts from having the necessary relationship of *proximity* for mutual correction. The possible result of mutual correction – the discovery of the subject’s real dependence on the object – becomes blocked from view:

Idealism becomes false when it mistakenly turns the totality of labor into something existing in itself, when it sublimates its principle into a metaphysical one, into the *actus purus* of spirit, and tendentially transfigures something produced by human beings, something fallible and conditioned, along with labor itself, which is the suffering of human beings, into something eternal and right [...] one might surmise that the extension of spirit to become totality is the inversion of the recognition that spirit is precisely not an isolated principle, not some self-sufficient substance, but rather a moment of social labor, the moment that is separate from physical labor. But physical labor is necessarily dependent on something other than itself, on nature. Labor – and in the last analysis its reflective form, spirit, as well – cannot be conceived without the concept of nature, any more than can nature without labor: the two are distinct from and mediated by one another at the same time.²⁸

As we can see in the passage above, the empirical conception of the given plays a decisive role in experience, similar to that of nature within the realm of human activity: on the basis of its relation of *externality* to the subject, the given objects of experience are what the latter must sharpen its concepts against if they are to cut through to the “core” of

27 For Hegel, the moment in experience in which the subject understands itself empirically is only meaningful insofar as it is to be negated through the conceptual movement which leads to the constitution of Absolute Spirit. As such, the empirical subject is merely an incarnation of reason that has yet to be actualized; sociologically-speaking, this manifests itself in the necessity to assimilate empirical individuals into institutions which are meant to “rationalize” their behavior.

28 Adorno, *Hegel: Three Studies*, 23.

reality – the thing-in-itself. By presupposing subject-object identity, idealists such as Kant imagine their concepts to be sharpened from the outset, in the sense that they are eternally-valid; on the other hand, idealists like Hegel believed that the possibility of sharpening one's concepts in such a way was already present in reality. In both cases, the result is that the given plays a diminished role in experience: in Kant the given is reduced to what cannot be cut-through by concepts *tout court* – the thing-in-itself –, while in Hegel the negation of the given is already embedded in its concept. While Adorno agrees that the given must be negated if experience is to culminate in more determinate knowledge, the idea of embedding this necessity in a concept before the concept itself is experienced in its actuality is another way of subordinating appearance to essence: we encounter the given on the basis of pre-established expectations, despite the fact that the quality of givenness entails that the existence of the object precedes these very expectations. In idealism, the foundation from which subject and object can be identified is treated as a “monistic principle of world explanation, which by its sheer form promotes the primacy of a spirit which dictates that principle”.²⁹ Primacy is accorded to consciousness because the means through which it can dictate its “monistic principle” are already present within it; this is necessary in idealism, as it is the only way that the immediately-given world can become intelligible to a transcendental subject who resides outside of the immediacy of factual experience.

Positing the existence of a transcendental subject inverses the traditional, rationalistic account of experience, which departs from the givenness of the particular and *ascends* to the universal. In the rationalistic account, the transcendental subject – as a formal conception of subjectivity – must be regarded as the end-point of experience insofar as one must first experience the empirical world in order to then purge its various contents from subjectivity, consequently purifying it from the contingencies that stem from the living individual's particular spatio-temporal situation. Yet in idealism, the transcendental subject is present at the outset of experience, as the schema through which experience and its objects are rendered immediately “presentable” to consciousness. Idealism cannot allow

29 Adorno, *Against Epistemology*, 183.

for any other conception of subjectivity in its account of experience, as only transcendental subjectivity guarantees subject-object identity. Subjective idealism thus falls into the same “temporal” impasse as Hegel: subject-object identity is both the condition on which adequate notions of truth and reality are possible, as well as what is *finally* discovered through our experience of truth and reality. In other words, the transcendental subject – now the locus of subject-object identity – is both the point of departure and arrival for philosophical investigation: experience thus unfolds in circular fashion. Adorno did not mistake this circularity for anything dialectical. Quoting Nietzsche: “it consists in confusing the last [for] the first”.³⁰ This temporal impasse entails that experience in idealism can only be *positively* construed. Experience is positive in the sense that it unfolds in accordance with a *pre-established* relationship between our subjectivity and the objective world; as such, there is nothing outside of the subject that can negate its own employed concepts since those concepts are the sole guarantee of anything that is “outside” of the subject in the first place. As experience’s points of arrival and departure are the same, there is no possibility of straying from a singular path: the knowledge derived from idealist accounts of experience is effectively tautological, namely by “the limitation of its total dominance to what it itself has already prepared and formed”.³¹

In idealism, what is immediately given in experience cannot actually problematize our conceptual apparatus, because the given is already identified with the conceptual categories that constitute it; any negative – or non-identical – moment within experience is but a transitory step towards identification between object and concept. The reason for which negative aspects of experience *cannot* have the final word in the determination of the subject-object relation is because they express a fundamental relation of *non-identity* between subject and object. Yet if the foundational structure of experience is understood to be one of non-identity between subject and object, idealism’s central project becomes untenable.

30 Adorno, *Against Epistemology*, 18.

31 Ibid, 11; While the object of the original quote is mathematics, Adorno uses mathematical knowledge as an example for the tautology of all knowledge derived from abstract first principles.

1.5 Subject-Object Identity and Reification

The failure to provide a rationally-grounded foundation for subject-object identity condemns consciousness to navigating the *gap* between subjectivity and objectivity instead of unifying them, as non-identity between subject and object blocks the possibility of total integration of object into concept from the outset. Never truly reaching objectivity through conceptual readjustment in the lateral dimension of experience, consciousness then retreats into subjectivity, where autonomous reason feigns immediate mastery of the world within the vertical dimension by forcefully integrating its possible objects into pre-established conceptual categories. If the autonomy of reason is an essential by-product³² of subject-object identity, and that subject-object identity is presupposed at the outset of the idealist project, then idealism must preserve this autonomy at all costs: “mind’s claim to independence announces its claim to domination”.³³

The priority of the transcendental subject over the particular object necessarily transforms objects in their state of possibility – what they could become in this particular historical context – into mere reflections of the means through which subjectivity already understands itself: “Traditional philosophy believes that it knows the unlike by likening it to itself, while in doing so it really knows itself only”.³⁴ The conceptual categories through which subjectivity understands itself are treated by the latter as given, as they present themselves as the sole means of conferring immediate intelligibility to the aspects of subjectivity that cannot be experienced directly insofar as they are *constitutive* of experience itself. As the object is posterior to the subject in idealism, it must reflect the conceptual categories which grant it the necessary solidity it requires to be given immediately in experience. The objectivity conjured by this reflection then becomes the second pole of the subject-object relation: objectivity is thus construed as totally external to subject on the basis of its immediate character. It is in this sense that subjectivity and objectivity become identical: on one hand, the givenness of the object in experience – what is supposed to differentiate it from subject – is but the mirror-image of the subjective

32 Or in Adornian parlance, a “necessary illusion”.

33 Adorno, *Critical Models*, 246.

34 Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 153.

concepts that have constituted it; on the other, “The solidity of the epistemological ego, the identity of self-consciousness, is obviously modeled after the unreflected experience of the enduring, identical object”.³⁵

By “likening the unlike to itself”³⁶, subjectivity’s coercive manipulation of objects into its conceptual schema signals its retreat from reality: if identity-thinking is characterized by the assignment of concepts to objects by identifying the latter with the determinations of the former, it loses its rational character once the *need* for identification takes precedence over questions regarding the subjects’ *capacity* to identify in the first place. The loss of rationality is signaled by the reversal of the traditional relation between identity-thinking and external reality: “Non-identity wants to say what something is, while identity thinking says what it falls under, of what it is an exemplar or representative, thus what it is not itself”.³⁷ By projecting itself into the object, subjectivity artificially strengthens what was originally guaranteed – but never fulfilled – by its founding subject-object relation: the identity between the concept and the thing in itself. Mind-independent objectivity now mirrors consciousness: it presents itself to the subject as a unified and coherent totality. Adorno understands this as product of mimetic rationality, which becomes a form of reified consciousness when it posits its originating act as the condition of possibility of experience.

Adorno’s concept of reification is taken from Georg Lukacs, who first presents it in “History and Class Consciousness”.³⁸ For Lukacs, the concept signifies the propensity for historically-transient phenomena such as social relations to solidify into purportedly eternal aspects of human nature and sociality. In “History and Class Consciousness”, the concept of reification presents the way in which relations of production under capitalism assume the same “essential” character as the commodities that they produce. Yet reification does not only occur “outside” of the subject; it is always accompanied by a similar process that takes place within consciousness itself. Reified consciousness implies that the transitory

35 Adorno, *Critical Models*, 256.

36 Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 153.

37 Ibid, 152.

38 Georg Lukacs, *History and Class Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1972).

character of thought becomes subjected to the object-like laws that it projects into external reality in order to make the latter intelligible to itself. In Adorno's case, the concept of reified consciousness is employed to present the erasure of the historically-mediated character of experience in modernity: reified consciousness deems its own conceptual categories to be an eternally-valid structure of experience, as they are *immediately* discernible reflections of an eternally-present external world. For Adorno, this is the common ground between the social and intellectual aspects of reification: "Philosophy which presents reality as such today only veils reality and eternalizes its present condition".³⁹

Ironically, Adorno will then level the same accusation against Lukacs, the latter's concept of reification being problematic insofar as it falls victim to its own logic: "Lukacs' postulate of a Being which transcends consciousness in its ontological indifference to the activity of subjectivity is synonymous to a betrayal of dialectics: the idea of the trans-subjectivity of being seems to restore a static dualism between being and consciousness".⁴⁰ In Adorno's view, Lukacs presupposes an immediately-discernible link between the universality of the social totality and the particularity of false consciousness; as such, the reified character of the social totality is not "determined" through the critical investigation of particular modes of false consciousness, but instead presupposed as the totality from which false consciousness is derived. In other words, experience does not commence with false consciousness and ends in a more precise determination of the social totality's reified character, but instead begins with the reified social totality and ends with the determination of false consciousness. The object of experience is conceptualized as reified before it is even experienced in the first place: despite Lukacs' intentions, the possibilities latent within the object's non-conceptuality are extinguished before experience begins.

In order to solve this issue, Adorno will modify his conception of reification by tying it to experience itself. In this sense, experience still departs with our encounter with a reified, given object, but instead of merely providing an immediate image of the social

39 Adorno, "The Actuality of Philosophy", *Telos*, 120.

40 Nicholas Tertulian, "Adorno-Lukacs: polémiques et malentendus". *Cités*, 22 (2005): 205. (my translation).

totality in which it appears, the non-conceptuality of the object instead pushes the subject to determine it further by differentiating the object from its assigned concept. For example, instead of pinning the concept of reification to a particular type of social relation, we could instead experience the social relation in its non-identity to the type of reification that it *should* be an exemplar of: as a result, the general concept of reification becomes more determinate in relation to its object. The upshot is that we can then provide a more precise account of our experience of reification in its *actuality*. The reified character of society is thus *developed* within the experience of a particular object instead of presupposed as universal from the outset, and this development occurs within the context of subject-object mediation. Unlike that of Lukacs, Adorno's conception of reification must be understood as a *lack* of reciprocity instead of a positive relation of domination between subject and object; conversely, the *possibility* of reciprocity remains. If we accept Lukacs' vision on the other hand, then reification merely "is" and cannot be surmounted without the total upheaval of society – which would consist of a *forced* reconciliation between subject and object.

Adorno's conception of reification as non-reciprocity not only allows us to understand the determinate relations between false consciousness in the subject and reification in the social totality, but also between the seemingly opposing accounts of experience which result from them: "Philosophies submit to reification and to what [Adorno] calls "identity thinking" when they simplify the reciprocity of experience, either by assuming that the object can be mastered in its totality by the subject (idealism), or by attempting to remove the subject from the process of knowledge altogether (positivism)".⁴¹ The subject of reified consciousness either identifies subjectivity *under* objectivity by removing the qualities that give the subject its irreducible nature in relation to object (positivism); or it does the opposite by identifying the givenness of the object with the subject's conceptual categories, thus extinguishing the possibility of apprehending the object in its irreducibility to cover-concepts (idealism). As the objective process of reification represents the strained and coercive establishment of an identity relation

41 Jared Miller, "Phenomenology's Negative Dialectic", *The Philosophical Forum Quarterly* 40, no.1 (2009): 104.

between subjects and objects within society, its manifestation within consciousness is tasked with covering-up the antinomic relation between both; this is the function of false consciousness within the “totally administered society”, and it is why Adorno considers positivism and idealism to be its exemplars. In either case, reified consciousness is barred from critical reasoning because its thoughts become indistinguishable from the uncritical conception of reality that they have produced. Once we understand the subject-object split and its corresponding philosophies as a part and parcel of the process of reification in modernity, it then becomes apparent that they cannot offer rational accounts of experience insofar as they prevent their subjects from *fully* experiencing reality. And if the subject cannot experience reality in its fullness, then it cannot possibly develop the requisite understanding of the latter that is necessary for the establishment of social critique; in other words, the rational motives behind subject-object identity start to disintegrate.

Because idealism fails to generate a rational account of subject-object identity, it immediately loses hold of the object that it initially aimed to seize: a totalizing conception of reality. Adorno announces this loss in the first sentence of his inaugural lecture: “Whoever chooses philosophy as a profession today must first reject the illusion that earlier philosophical enterprises began with: that the power of thought is sufficient to grasp the totality of the real”.⁴² The loss of the terrain once held by idealist systems was not regained; it was either surrendered to empirical sciences such as psychology, or scorched and discarded as mere metaphysical speculation. Contrary to the ‘internal’ aspect mentioned above⁴³, this consists of the external aspect of philosophy’s inclusion within the crisis of idealism: as a discipline, it is now forced to re-evaluate its own capabilities in relation to this significant loss of terrain. Much like that of idealism, the philosophical profession’s response to the crisis was a reactionary one: it took what little land it had left and hastily tried to delimit it into various possible groundings for further philosophical investigation. Philosophy’s self-sabotage was conditional upon its inability to account for the *changing* nature of reality in the modern age; instead of adapting itself in order to critically assess

42 Adorno, “The Actuality of Philosophy”, *Telos*, 120.

43 Philosophy retains the same impulse to liken what is “other” to itself.

new historical phenomena, it aimed to re-root them into barren soil: the structures of a transcendental subject or mind-independent objectivity. Stuck in the gap between subject and object, contemporary philosophies could only point to isolated versions of either as a possible future foundation: while irrationalist currents such as fundamental ontology clung to a type of subjectivism that eschews systematicity in its presupposition of the category of totality⁴⁴, their positivist counterparts clung to the scientific idea of an immediately-given empirical reality as the condition of all certain knowledge.⁴⁵ In any case, philosophy's key concepts were reified due to their immutable character: transcendental subjectivity and myth serve as reified conceptions of mind and nature, as to understand the latter concepts in their historicity would render them contingent. It is this lack of contingency that conversely provides the stable ground from which further philosophical investigation can arise. In philosophy as in idealism, an unchanging mental schematic can project itself into an equally unchanging world due to the immutable nature of their identity-relation: "It is a fallacy that what persists is truer than what perishes. The order, which models the world into disposable property, is passed off as the world itself. The invariance of the concept, which would not be unless the temporal determinacy of what is grasped under concepts were ignored, is confused with the unchangeability of being itself."⁴⁶

Once truth – seen as a correlation between subject and object – becomes historicized, then so does its *structure* of subject-object identity; yet once the subject-object structure is historicized, it can no longer be one of identity. This is because history, in accordance with its concept, implies the renewal of qualitative change: "[history] is a movement that gains its true character through what appears in it as new".⁴⁷ The existence of 'the new' strengthens the case for non-conceptuality: historically-mediated objects cannot be *totally* grasped by old concepts, as that which the old concept was meant to grasp is no longer what the subject has in front of its very eyes. It is thus non-conceptuality that underpins the givenness of the object within experience, as objects are given immediately

44 Adorno, "The Actuality of Philosophy", *Telos*, 123.

45 Ibid, 124-125.

46 Adorno, *Against Epistemology*, 17.

47 Theodor Adorno, "The Idea of Natural History", *Telos*, no.60 (1984): 111.

to the subject as things which have *yet* to be adequately conceptualized. This non-conceptual feature pushes the subject to actively modify its concepts in order to apprehend the very specificity of the every-changing, historically-mediated objectivity that surrounds it. The non-conceptuality of the object thus precedes the autonomy of the subject, as subjectivity is only autonomous as long as it *posits* its autonomy over something that is *already* external to it. If objects necessarily possess some aspects of non-conceptuality due to their historically mediated nature, then the subject is dislodged from its position of priority, blocking the possibility of subject-object identity.

The non-conceptuality of the object is what allows Adorno to *prioritize* the latter in experience: as non-conceptuality is predicated on the object's historically-mediated character, prioritizing the object on the basis of its non-conceptuality is the only way of according to priority to objectivity without reifying it into something eternally-enduring. In other words, objects are experienced as inadequately conceptualized precisely because their historically-mediated character graces them with type of contingency that must be discarded if we are to merely 'pin' concepts to them. By attempting to integrate what it considers to be *given* objects of consciousness into an eternally-valid conceptual schematic – all while ignoring the fact that their very givenness is historically mediated –, idealism has betrayed its original intent: what it thought to be immediately understandable was precisely what it had to problematize from the outset. Instead of illuminating the objects by problematizing their non-conceptuality, idealism furthers obscures them by treating this essential feature as a mere moment to be surpassed in the further development of conceptual thinking.

1.6 Subject-Object Mediation and The Priority of the Object

The prioritization of the object is one of Adorno's most significant commitments: by structuring experience on the basis of non-identity, it becomes the sole condition of possibility for the experience of the qualitatively new. The object can only be properly accounted for in experience if we follow two interrelated guidelines: the first is that we are to understand the individual subject as *one* of the object's constitutive moments, and not its

only moment; because the object's "material" moment only becomes significant within the immaterial, mediated confines of conceptual thinking, the object cannot be understood as what is left after subjectivity is subtracted. As the moment of subjective constitution is no longer *foundational* in experience, the object gains the right to its moment of non-conceptuality. Here, the object possesses a constitutive role over subjectivity without having to determine the latter entirely, as conceptual thinking still establishes the motor of spiritual experience. To prioritize the object is thus to guarantee the *co-constitution* of subject and object in experience, as one cannot be excluded from or reduced to the other. Only constitutive subjectivity's self-professed autonomy over the object allows it to either collapse the latter into itself or exclude it entirely from conceptuality; in this sense, prioritizing the object means that we must protect it from the overreach of constitutive subjectivity as well as the reified conception of first nature that serves as its complementary concept of objectivity: "Knowledge of the object is brought closer by the act of the subject rending the veil it weaves about the object. It can do this only when, passive, without anxiety, it entrusts itself to its own experiences. In the places where subjective reason senses subjective contingency, the primacy of the object shimmers through: that in the object which is not a subjective addition".⁴⁸

The second guideline flows from the first: if we are to 'entrust ourselves to our own experiences', then we must understand experience as something that pertains to living individuals instead of a transcendental subject. In other words, the prioritization of the object is achieved by limiting the subject's capacity for domination by focusing on its *own* objectivity, encompassing its real *limitations* within the empirical world. For Adorno, the experience of the universal is dependent on the prior existence of a particular living individual instead of a transcendental subject, the latter now losing its position of priority to what is *actual*: "The individual subject [...] is an integral component of the empirical world. Its function, however, its capacity for experience – which the transcendental subject lacks, for no purely logical entity could have any sort of experience – is in truth much more

48 Adorno, *Critical Models*, 254.

constitutive than the role idealism ascribed to the transcendental subject”.⁴⁹ In this passage, we can see that the transcendental subject is not an actual subject of experience, but rather the latter’s condition of possibility: as such, there is no possibility of non-identity between a transcendental subject and the objects whose appearance it guarantees. This is problematic because the “new” that appears within a particular context of historical sedimentation is conditional on the non-identity between the subjects and objects contained within it: without this form of non-identity, we simply grasp possibly new objects with outmoded concepts. In other words, the subject can employ universal concepts in order to *meaningfully* engage with historically-mediated particulars precisely because it itself is a historically-mediated particular: as the individual’s use of concepts is contingent, they can be subjected to the type of errors that give us a more determinate picture of the context in which they appeared. Adorno believes that the actual experiences of individuals can shed more light on the social totality than a subject that is prior to it because he understands the spiritual experience of the living individual as a cryptic reflection of the type of larger objective tendencies that are either presupposed by idealism or considered “epistemically unavailable” by positivism: “According to its present, and polemical, status in the philosophy of history, unreduced subjectivity is capable of functioning more objectively than objectivistic reductions. [...] At times subject, as unrestricted experience, will come closer to object than the residuum filtered and curtailed to suit the requirements of subjective reason”.⁵⁰

The priority of the object is meant to ensure that the dialectic – the co-constitution of subject and object – remains grounded within a materialistic framework: only by prioritizing the object can we do justice to subjectivity *in its actuality*; only by prioritizing an actual, living subject over its transcendental incarnation can we do justice to objectivity itself.

49 Adorno, *Critical Models*, 257.

50 Ibid, 253.

Chapter 2

Failing to Secure Experience: Positivism and Phenomenology

2.1 Positivism and Phenomenology as Manifestations of “Non-Real Consciousness”

While contemporary idealist currents were deeply affected by the crisis, Adorno was more interested in its various philosophical reactions, often coming from schools of thought that have positioned themselves against subjective idealism from the outset. Such attempts are in vain: the failure to recognize the crisis of idealism as a larger objective tendency is what permits anti-idealist currents to inadvertently employ idealist concepts in their respective reconstructions of experience. The dialectical nature of these failed attempts – the fact that they aim to criticize idealism’s features without knowing that they are already inside of its conceptual framework – is of key interest to Adorno as they represent inner contradictions within the overarching logic of idealism. Like quicksand, the latter compels those who are trapped inside to try and escape; once escape is attempted through immediately *intuitive* means, the victim only falls deeper into the trap.

For Adorno, the *pertinent* reactions to idealism’s crisis stem from two separate currents: positivism and Husserlian phenomenology. Both currents share common ground insofar as they fail to properly account for givenness in experience. Their attempts to found experience on a particular version of givenness fail in the same way, as neither is developed while taking the other into account. Positivism accords priority to what is given empirically by *reducing* the subject’s cognitive role in experience: objects are reduced to what our senses take them to be, thus excluding the possibility of experiencing aspects of objectivity that exist without being immediately present to our senses – society being Adorno’s primary example. Phenomenology, on the other hand, privileges the givenness of the *a priori* concepts that frame our intuitions of empirical objects by bracketing the latter’s empirically-given aspects.

Because both conceptual and empirical givens possess determinate roles in experience, each current will have to make its privileged aspect also account for what has been simultaneously excluded, and it is precisely in this moment of “translation” that their respective concepts fall into antinomy. The result of each critique is a particular, negative image of what makes experience possible. The critique of positivism reveals to what extent conceptuality is necessary by showing how our experience of empirical objects is diminished when the cognitive role of the subject is artificially limited; while the critique of phenomenology cements the necessity of the empirical moment of experience by showing to what extent concepts themselves are dependent on the *presupposition* of material objectivity. The failure of both currents to rationally account for experience demonstrates the objective need for subject-object mediation in the latter’s reconstruction: without it, experience remains fragmented within the dualism of the empirical and the intelligible.

Adorno is more concerned with the failure of Husserlian phenomenology than that of positivism, as Husserl’s attempt at resolving the crisis possessed critical potential while that of positivism did not: Husserl granted his subject the ability to bracket empirical givenness in order to mediate the given object on the basis of its conceptuality, which is a step *towards* an account of experience that does not found itself on a reified conception of mind-independent objectivity. In order to understand phenomenology’s early critical potential, we must first reconstruct positivism’s failure at providing the conditions for a *critical* conception of subjectivity.

2.2 Positivism and the Restriction of Experience to Facticity

Despite the fact that his criticism of positivism is established in a more fragmentary manner than those of idealism and its phenomenological variants, it is possible to sketch the general idea of positivism employed by Adorno if we limit ourselves to the problem of constitutive subjectivity. Positivism’s distinguishing experiential feature is its commitment to securing the criterion of truth within what is independent of consciousness; what is independent of consciousness is thus all that we can encounter *within* experience. Put simply, positivism rejects the possibility of experiencing what is constitutive of experience

itself, while idealism grounds its critique of knowledge on the necessity of this type of experience. Positivism widens the gap between essence (*constituens*) and appearance (*constitutum*) by concerning itself solely with appearances in its account of experience. When ignored in this way, essence is effectively reduced to what it makes possible: what is *essential* to experience is what appears to us as immediately given to our senses. This is problematic for Adorno, as “[The category of totality] is not separate from the facts but is immanent to them as their mediation”.⁵¹ As in Hegel, the universal that is reflected from the object is none other than the totality in which it is contained; as such, even the most partial and isolated facts are “spiritual” in the sense that they are intrinsically connected to a *constitutive* whole.

Adorno cannot criticize positivism by *positing* the necessity of the concept of essence in the reconstruction of unreduced experience, as this would subsequently require him to found the possibility of experience on an essential principle which resides within the latter’s supra-historical “background”. Adorno takes the dialectical route instead: while the existence of such an “essential” whole is problematic, it is only so when *confronted* with the logic of appearance. While it is possible to construct such a whole theoretically, to determine it in its *actuality* is problematic because we must evaluate something that is – much like a particular object – historically contingent, yet simultaneously *essential* in the sense that it *functions* like a concept as well: while the social totality is a historical contingency, the alienated subject still experiences it as an *immutable* condition of existence. In other words, the antinomy is found in the fact that there now *exists* something that seems to simultaneously *exceed* all other appearing existents. Adorno’s critique of positivism – and his subsequent conception of spiritual experience – thus proceeds by preserving the idealist distinction that is erased in order to render positivism’s account of experience coherent: “Not the least significant of the differences between the positivist and dialectical conceptions is that positivism [...] will only allow appearance to be valid, whilst dialectics will not allow itself to be robbed of the distinction between essence and

51 Theodor Adorno et al., *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*, (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann Educational Books, 1981), 12.

appearance”.⁵² Instead of going the idealist route and merely according primacy to essence over appearance in the constitution of knowledge, Adorno will show how an unreduced account of experience unfolds on the basis of the very tension between both of these concepts. Just like the example of sugar and salt, I understand more about objects and my particular way of apprehending them once I get a grasp on how I can possibly fail to apprehend them *immediately*: when the immediacy of my cognitive act recedes, the *situation* in which the act takes place comes to the fore. As this situation itself cannot be presupposed, the critical mediation of the object is the only possible path we can take if we are to make this situation intelligible in the first place.

In order for Adorno’s critique of positivism to hold, he must provide an explanation for how essences can appear *within* experience in order to then *be* experienced by living individuals. Adorno’s response to this problem is simultaneously anti-positivistic and anti-idealistic: “Dialectical thought counters the suspicion of what Nietzsche termed nether-worldly”, and it does so “with the assertion that concealed essence is non-essence”.⁵³ Here Adorno is arguing that the ‘essence’ which remains concealed within the supra-historical “background” of experience as a first principle is not essential at all. On the contrary, essences are no longer fixed outside of experience, but are instead manifestations of a historical process of becoming, the results of which can only be determined within experience itself: “One must adhere to Hegel’s statement that essence **must** appear”.⁵⁴ The dialectical response to the problem of a reality behind appearances consists of mediating between essence and appearance by according a temporal character to essence – one which would normally be reserved to the phenomenal aspect of objects. Essence thus becomes intelligible within the temporal logic of appearance instead of dictating it from the other side of the ontological gap: eternity. While Adorno agrees with the fact that we experience objects *as* appearances, it is the *decryption* of these very appearances that leads us to their “essence”: now understood as sedimented history, what is essential about an object is found in the reconstruction of the process of sedimentation itself. Adorno’s response thus

52 Adorno et al., *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*, 11.

53 Ibid.

54 Ibid, 12.

preserves the distinction between essence and appearance, but sets both concepts into dialectical motion instead of digging an insurmountable gap: against idealism, Adorno argues that essence can only be understood as appearance; against positivism, he then argues that appearance – what is given – is only meaningful when understood in its essentiality, or within the context of its *proper* role in experience.

Unlike the positivist, Adorno is careful not to reduce essence to appearance in the determination of the former's experiential role; while the former can only become intelligible in its relation to the latter, the relation itself is one of difference: "Dialectical thought, irreconcilable with the philosophical tradition, affirms this non-essence, not because of its power but instead it criticizes its contradiction of 'what is appearing' and, ultimately, its contradiction of the real life of human beings [...] Totality is not an affirmative but rather a critical category".⁵⁵ The significance of the concept of essence is thus discovered in its *negative* relation to the content of appearance, which is itself temporal in two ways: as the result of a process of historical sedimentation, as well as being experienced by the subject in a processual manner. The sedimented character of the object is the locus of its non-identity with concepts; it provides the context in which the solidity of the concept – its seemingly eternal character – is called into question and subsequently criticized. The exclusion of the concept of essence from experience negates the temporal structure of the latter in both senses: as experience is reduced to what is immediately given to the subject, the latter cannot engage in the type of conceptual re-adjustment that moves beyond the object's givenness; consequently, the object cannot be experienced as the result of a *process* of historical sedimentation.

2.3 The Lack of Self-Awareness in Positivist Accounts of Experience

If 'sticking to the facts' entails that we cannot point to the totality that exceeds them, then experience cannot be spiritual: "it is almost tautological to say that one cannot point to the concept of totality in the same manner as one can point to the facts, from which totality distances itself as a concept. That society does not allow itself to be nailed down as a fact

55 Adorno et al., *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*, 11-12.

actually only testifies to the existence of mediation”.⁵⁶ While thinking of the social totality as a fact confers an immediate intelligibility to its object, it overlooks the very aspect that gives the latter its specificity: the fact that it is both constitutive *of* and constituted *by* subjectivity. Without the ability to reflect on the subject-object relation, these two features remain undifferentiated, thus condemning experience to one-dimensionality.

If the possibility of self-criticism is a necessary aspect of understanding objectivity without reifying it into what we merely *think* it is, positivism falls back into a form of inverted subjectivism. By excluding the constitutive power of subjectivity from experience, positivist methodology inadvertently protects the latter from being criticized, and by doing so cannot possibly understand the extent to which its ‘givens’ are constructed through a subjective process: “Object is no more subjectless residuum than it is posited by subject. The two conflicting determinations fit together: the residue, for which science settles as its truth, are a result of its manipulative procedures that are subjectively organized. To define what object is would in turn be itself part of that organization”.⁵⁷ In this sense, Adorno’s critique of positivistic methodology echoes that of Hegel, whose concept of reification is “motivated by the idea that science is concerned less with the life of things than with their compatibility with with its own rules”, insofar as “rational science [...] trims objects down to size and processes them until they fit into the institutionalized, ‘positive’ disciplines, and does so in the service of its own ordering concepts and their immanent practicability and lack of contradiction”.⁵⁸

Adorno understands positivism as a form of subjectivism without a subject: as what it is possible to experience is equated with the givenness of mind-independent objectivity, subjectivity can only understand itself in the limited way that it understands objects in general. This is of crucial importance to Adorno’s critique of society, as it is by departing from the relation of non-identity between it and its particulars that we can criticize this particular configuration of the social totality as a false universal. The actuality of the object – what makes it a particular – is extinguished when categorized before it is actually

56 Adorno et al., *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*, 10-11.

57 Adorno, *Critical Models*, 253.

58 Adorno, *Hegel: Three Studies*, 73.

experienced, and this is because the condition of possibility of the former is its containment within the social totality, a concept which cannot be exhausted analytically. As positivistic concepts must conform to this requirement, the background in which the particular is individuated is transfigured into one that can be *organized* through methodological thinking. Unlike the idealist subject, the empirical individual is not granted its universality on the basis of its own transcendence in relation to experience, but instead on the transcendence of nature:

The crucial difference between the dialectical and the positivistic view of totality is that the dialectical concept of totality is intended 'objectively', namely, for the understanding of every social individual observation, whilst positivistic systems theories wish, in an uncontradictory manner, to incorporate observations in a logical continuum, simply through the selection of categories as general as possible. In so doing, they do not recognize the highest structural concepts as the precondition for the states of affairs subsumed under them.⁵⁹

The particular individual is covered-over by the universality of its species because there is nothing within our possible experience of individuals that grates against such a category: they are merely perceived as particular amalgamations of contingent traits, each formalized into sub-species. In other words, the fact that there is nothing essential about the experience of the living individual is what allows positivism to merely chalk up individual experiences in general as contingent; as such, the subject of experience is instead identified with the naturalistic categories in which its contingent traits are contained. In opposition to this, Adorno encourages us to instead treat the “material moments originating in the real life process of socialized human beings as essential and not merely contingent”.⁶⁰

While scientific research concerns itself with what is merely contingent, it only does so because it can bar the concept of essence from its epistemic vocabulary. Yet the concept of essence is critical for scientific research: its problematic character sheds light on exactly what *content* is being lost when experience is reduced to a formal principle that accords priority to what already exists in the realm of appearance. Adorno argues for the interdependence of scientific research and philosophical investigation on the grounds that

59 Adorno et al., *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*, 14.

60 Adorno, *Hegel: Three Studies*, 67.

self-correction in regard to instruments and the self-reflection of their user are necessarily intertwined, be it within social scientific practice or spiritual experience.⁶¹ While the possibility of self-reflection must necessarily precede the correction of methods or concepts, for the positivist “philosophy becomes solely an occasion for ordering and controlling the separate sciences, without being allowed to append anything from itself to their findings”.⁶² Positivism thus insists on the very deficient conception of self-correction that Hegel mentioned in the introduction to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, one in which solely the “instrument” into taken into account instead of its user⁶³: self-correction thus occurs within the context of a pre-established criterion of truth, the latter being reflected in the very instruments prioritized by scientific methodology. A wider form of epistemic self-correction – in the sense of re-evaluating the criterion of truth presupposed by the tools we use to evaluate the world – would require the possibility of self-reflection, where the user mediates between itself and its tools on the basis of the wider context in which both differ. It is in this sense that philosophy for Adorno takes on a more emphatic role towards objectivity than the sciences:

Experience in the emphatic sense – the net of [non-mutilated] cognition, such as may serve as a model of philosophy – differs from science not through a higher principle or apparatus, but rather through the use which it makes of its materials, especially the conceptual (which as such match those of science), and through its position towards objectivity”⁶⁴ [...]

The central difference lies far more in that the separate sciences accept their findings, at least their final and deepest findings, as indestructible and static, whereas philosophy perceives the first finding which it lights upon as a sign that needs unriddling.⁶⁵

The fruitfulness of the philosophical position towards objectivity is found in the fact that it can account for the non-conceptuality of the object in experience – one that it construes as a “sign that needs unriddling” – while in positivism it is not problematized at all. Despite the fact that the object gains its priority in experience on the basis of its

61 Adorno, “The Actuality of Philosophy”, *Telos*, 127.

62 Ibid, 125.

63 Hegel, *The Phenomenology of the Spirit*, 49-51.

64 Adorno, *Against Epistemology*, 45.

65 Adorno, “The Actuality of Philosophy”, *Telos*, 126.

independence from the *productive* faculties of consciousness, the non-conceptuality of the object is only meaningful in the sense of its non-identity with a subject. If there is no *essential* role in experience for subjectivity, then positivism does not prioritize the object: because positivism does not grant the concept of the ‘given’ the metaphysical context it requires in order for conceptual movement to occur, experience merely departs and ends with the object in its un-mediated givenness. Positivism thus takes the tautological structure of idealism and merely converts it to the logic of appearance that governs the empirical realm.

2.4 The Potential of Phenomenology: The Subjective Mediation of the Given

Adorno’s appreciation of Husserl stems from the idea that the latter “recognized in the meaning of the concept of the non-deductible given, as developed by positivist schools, the fundamental problem of the relationship between reason and reality”.⁶⁶ For both thinkers, the irreducible givenness of empirical objects is problematic in the establishment of a direct relation between reason and reality insofar as it represents an aspect of the latter that is irreducible to consciousness. Husserl was aware that an enriched account of experience could not employ mind-independent objectivity as its sole criterion of truth, as that which *presents* itself to consciousness as fully independent is merely contingent, serving no purpose in the establishment of the necessities that underpin experience:

The essential fault in empiricistic argumentation consists of identifying or confusing the fundamental demand for a return to the ‘things themselves’ with the demand for legitimation of all cognition by *experience*. With his comprehensible naturalistic constriction of the limits bounding cognizable ‘things’, the empiricist simply takes experience to be the only act that is presentive of things themselves. But *things* are not simply mere things belonging to Nature, nor is actuality in the usual sense simply all of actuality; and the originary presentative act which we call experience is *relates only to actuality in Nature*. To make identifications here and treat them as supposed truisms is to blindly push aside differences which can be given in the clearest insight [...] Simply to assert that all judgements admit of, indeed even demand, legitimation by experience without having previously submitted the essence of judgements to a

66 Ibid, 122.

study with respect to their fundamentally different species and without having, in so doing, considered or not whether that assertion is counter-sensical: that is a ‘speculative construction a priori’ made no better by the fact that it happens to issue from the empiricistic camp.⁶⁷

In this passage, the Husserlian and Adornian critiques of positivism and its “natural attitude” intersect; for both, this account of experience limits itself to what is immediately available to the empirical consciousness of the contingent individual without ever calling this limitation into question. This leads to a subject who can assign given particulars under traditional analytical categories, but cannot determine whether such an ‘assignment’ is actually legitimate in the first place. As Christian Skirke puts it, the positivistic conception of truth “may be correct but cannot account for itself”.⁶⁸

In its inability to account for itself, positivism lapses into a form of relativism insofar as it cannot establish the aspects of experience that are necessary for the constitution of truth. Husserl’s recourse against this form of relativism consists of a re-valorization of the objectivity of truth: in other words, the validity of logical laws can be made intelligible *without* reference to the experience of the particular, contingent individual. Jared Miller breaks down Husserl’s argument into 3 claims: “(1) If logical laws are inductive generalizations drawn from empirical observation, then their validity is merely probabilistic, which it is not; (2) if logical laws imply factual conditions, then their truth would be contingent upon those facts, which it is not; and (3) the reduction of logic to psychology leads invariably to relativism, which is necessarily self-defeating”.⁶⁹ The positivistic reduction of subject and object to contingency is what prevents the subject from encountering essential aspects of experience – such as validity – in their very *necessity*; conversely, the objects of experience remain contingent because we cannot develop an understanding of them in their essentiality, or the necessary way that they relate to consciousness.

67 Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*, (The Hague, NL: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1983), 36.

68 Christian Skirke, “Metaphysical Experience and Constitutive Error in Adorno’s ‘Meditations on Metaphysics’”, *Inquiry* 55, no.3 (2012) : 322.

69 Miller, “Phenomenology’s Negative Dialectic”, *Philosophical Forum Quarterly*, 105.

So how do objects necessarily relate to consciousness in the constitution of truth, and how do we determine this without employing the empirical character of the object as the locus of such necessity? The method of phenomenological reduction is meant to solve this issue by purging the object of all of its transcendent, empirically-given determinations in order to paint a picture of how the latter necessarily presents itself *for* consciousness – instead of *what we would think* to be ‘for itself’. In other words, the object is stripped of the reified layer of objectivity that results from the natural attitude’s positing of the former as immediately given:

We put out of action the general positing which belongs to the essence of the natural attitude; we parenthesize everything which that positing encompasses with respect to being; thus the whole natural world which is continually ‘there for us’, ‘on hand’, and which will always remain there according to consciousness as an ‘actuality’ even if we choose to parenthesize it [...] I am not negating this ‘world’ as though I were a sophist; I am not doubting its factual being as though I were a skeptic; rather, I am exercising the phenomenological [epoche] which also **completely shuts me off from any judgment about spatiotemporal factual being**”.⁷⁰

While this move seems to harbor a Hegelian motivation in the sense that the object is understood as it appears “for consciousness”, the latter is extinguished because the result is a product of *subtraction* instead of mediation. Once the empirical aspects of the object have been ‘bracketed’ by consciousness, what is left of the object – its ‘phenomenological residue’ – should present it in its irreducibility to the natural attitude of the positivistic subject; in other words, while the empirical object is put into parentheses, its immanent meaning persists as a conceptual remainder. While this remainder is the product of conceptual mediation, Husserl presents it as being prior to mediation in order to employ it as a foundation for our experience of objects.

70 Husserl, *Ideas I*, 61.

2.5 Husserl's Idealism: Bundling-up Materiality and Ideality

Before we re-construct Adorno's critique of Husserl, we must first make a disclaimer regarding the controversial status of Adorno's claims. This particular critique of Husserl is centered around the latter's foundationalism, which Adorno understood as expressive of a larger tendency in modern society: the necessity of a recourse to abstract first principles in the re-construction of the withered experiences of living individuals. This type of philosophical critique is polemical in the sense that it ties what Husserl considered to be a philosophical project to a set of social processes that it could not possibly interrogate. Yet for this to hold, we must first agree with the idea that Husserl is a foundationalist in the first place; unlike Adorno's political charges, this is the actual source of controversy. As Jared Miller points out, this type of claim is by no means accepted within the literature on the subject: "Edmund Husserl has emerged as a highly disputed figure in the foundationalism debate that wages across the historiography of philosophy. A number of scholars have attempted to defend Husserl against the charge of foundationalism by emphasizing the anti-representationalist, non-foundationalist, and even post modern tendencies of his thought."⁷¹ In order to avoid convoluting the re-construction of Adorno's critique of Husserl, we will follow Peter Gordon's approach⁷² and pass judgement on whether Adorno's charges against Husserl are justified or not. This will allow us to faithfully re-construct Adorno's argument without trying to 'make it ring more true'.

Adorno's criticism of Husserl is not only a philosophical critique that expresses "the idea that logical absolutism is committed to a concept of truth that it cannot deliver"⁷³, but also possesses a *meta-philosophical* character, providing the idea that "Husserl could never have regarded logical absolutism as the necessary consequence of the refutation of psychologism had he not already been committed to certain presuppositions about the character of objectivity".⁷⁴ Our reconstruction of Adorno's critique of Husserl will aim to establish the unity between its philosophical and meta-philosophical features.

71 Miller, "Phenomenology's Negative Dialectic", *Philosophical Forum Quarterly*, 100-101.

72 Peter E. Gordon, *Adorno and Existence* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016)

73 O'Connor, *Adorno's Negative Dialectic*, 134.

74 Ibid.

Let's first consider Husserl's 'meta-philosophical' presuppositions regarding objectivity. While Husserl's inaugural gesture was to rescue the concept of the given from the reductionist conception of psychologistic subjectivity held by positivism, Adorno deemed that his project would be destined to failure once it required him to employ his own concepts in a positivistic manner:

...the tendencies by which [Husserl] became an enemy of the psychologistic positivism of his time [...] have their roots in positivism itself. [...] That is to say, if he criticized the psychological approach to mathematics and hence to logic, his motive was not one of metaphysical speculation, but he found that when analyzing scientifically the nature of mathematical truth such as this truth is given in positive mathematical science, it could not possibly be reduced to the psychological acts of thinking related to those truths.⁷⁵

The positivistic propensity to identify givenness with mind-independent objectivity is present in Husserl's attempt to divorce givenness from psychologism: because mathematical truth exists independently of the contingencies of the empirical individual's psychology and the thinking which stems from it, its logical validity is not a *product* of subjectivity. The objectivity of truth is thus 'given' in the same way as the positivist conception of mind-independent objectivity: "Husserl thought he was insisting upon facts themselves, namely, the 'fact' of mathematical truths as ideal unities unrelated to any factual existence. These truths themselves have to be regarded as facts in the sense of something given which has to be accepted as it is and can not be modified by any explanatory hypotheses".⁷⁶

The attempt at making a necessary connection between empirical objects and *a priori* concepts ends up in the subordination of the former to the latter through the concept of "sense" (*Sinn*), or the immanent *meaning* of the object that persists regardless of the empirical aspects of its contingent spatio-temporal situation⁷⁷. The concept of sense is what Husserl uses to move from the critique of the psychologistic conception of logic to that of epistemology: "Husserl argues by inquiring about the sense of logical propositions. Such a

75 Adorno, "Husserl and the Problem of Idealism", *The Journal of Philosophy*, 8-9.

76 Ibid, 9.

77 Husserl, *Ideas I*, 309.

‘sense’ then becomes the canon for the theory of authentic consciousness”.⁷⁸ The inquiry into the sense of logical propositions demonstrates their objectivity *in relation* to the subject, namely by establishing the subject’s dependence on them if it is to be certain about anything in experience: “We begin with the usual equivocal verbal reference to the content of consciousness. As content we take the ‘sense’, of which we say that in or through it consciousness relates to something objective as ‘its’ something objective”.⁷⁹ This peculiar form of subject-object relation is called intentionality.

The concept of intentionality is employed to bundle-up the object to the conceptual mediation that the subject requires to make the latter “its own”, all while preserving the object’s immediacy in experience – or, that which should result from its independence to subject. Intentionality is meant to unify the “sense-bestowing activity of consciousness”⁸⁰ (*noesis*) and the “objective correlate”⁸¹ that it is directed at (*noema*). Sense cannot be easily equivocated with *noema*, as the former exists as “intentional content” that is meant to be fulfilled through the noetic act, while the latter exists as the “abstract entity” which is immanent to *noesis*.⁸² In other words, Adorno understands the *noema* as a type of non-real placeholder for what we *used* to take for granted as the actually-existing, empirical object of the natural attitude: “The noema is a hybrid between subjective immanence and transcendent objectivity”.⁸³ The concept of intentionality is thus meant to guarantee two things: on one hand, the object of experience is now mediated by subjectivity in the sense that its immanent meaning (*Sinn*) is the result of a correlation between *noesis* and *noema*. On the other hand, the intentional object now gains a renewed sense of objectivity, in the sense that its transcendent character – its givenness – no longer originates from a contingent source (sensuous materiality) and is instead derived from the *cognitive acts* that necessarily pre-figure our sensory experience of objects.

78 Adorno, *Against Epistemology*, 109.

79 Husserl, *Ideas I*, 309.

80 Olga Nikolic, “Husserl’s Theory of Noematic Sense”, *Filozofija I Društvo*, 4 (2016): 849-850.

81 Ibid.

82 Ibid, 850.

83 Adorno, *Against Epistemology*, 161.

Now that we've established the concepts that Adorno will criticize, we can turn to his philosophical misgivings with Husserl's logical absolutism. These are centered around the idea that "logical absolutism is committed to a concept of truth that it cannot deliver"⁸⁴, and this is because "it operates outside of the conditions of intelligibility: mediation".⁸⁵ When we state that the concept of intentionality allows for the object to be mediated subjectively in experience, the concept of "mediation" means different things for Husserl and Adorno. While the term implies a certain form of conceptual re-adjustment for Adorno, this cannot be the case for Husserl because he has yet to *secure* this very possibility:

...the only way in which the 'real', the psychological reality of man, and the ideal, the absolute validity of logical and mathematical truths, are interconnected, is the very same principle which was rejected as a means of justification in the first volume of the *Logische Untersuchungen*, namely, the process of thinking. For the ideal truths are truths of thinking and thinking only. [...] On the other hand, thinking means human thinking and we know of no thought which would not presuppose actual psychical acts of thinking of actual living individuals.⁸⁶

In other words, while Adorno understands mediation as a process of thinking, Husserl instead understands it as an intrinsic property of the intentional object. This is problematic for Adorno, as conceptual givens such as 'intrinsic' properties can only be determined by means of systematic thought. The idea that concepts can be 'given' is a necessary condition of transcendental subjectivity: concepts are 'given' in the sense that they seem to precede the process of spiritual experience itself, structuring the latter as a whole. Yet while 'given' concepts are effectively 'baked-into' the transcendental subject in the form of categories, what is given empirically possesses a non-conceptual 'remainder' that cannot be immediately integrated into a pre-established conceptual apparatus. The empirically-given object must first be experienced in its actuality – or non-identity to subjectivity – in order for the subject to then 'produce' the remainder through the experience of error – which now serves as a clue to the inadequate conceptualization that has just occurred. Only once the object is experienced can it prompt one to determine whether the concepts they take for

84 O'Connor, *Adorno's Negative Dialectic*, 134.

85 Ibid.

86 Adorno, "Husserl and the Problem of Idealism", *The Journal of Philosophy*, 10-11.

granted are actually allowing them to *develop* an adequate experience of the object in the first place. In this sense, Adorno's charge against Husserl is of Hegelian origin: "Objectivity and ideality in logic – its reified being in-itself – which is supposed to be proved by philosophical critique, is already presupposed by a method which attributes to logic a rationality and clarity independent of the state of its development [within subjectivity] and is thus satisfied with substantiating it descriptively".⁸⁷

For Husserl, the relation of necessity between the noetic act and its intentional object must exist prior to the experience of error that prompts the subject to re-adjust its concepts: just like mind-independent reality, the object's sense must be *received*. This is misguided in Adorno's view, as objects can only be 'received' by sensation in their empirically-given form. In other words, the object's corresponding concept is not received inasmuch as it is developed through the subject's encounter with the object itself. The possibility of intuitively *receiving* an object's "sense" before actually mediating the latter through the conceptual activity of thought is thus contingent upon the *immediate* manner in which *noema* and *noesis* relate:

Husserl immediately interprets the act [noesis] which is directed to the 'abstract part moment' of content as the intuition of the species, as long as that moment is based on something hyletic [immediate to sensation]. He profits to a degree from two mutually exclusive qualifications: First, the immediacy with which something is perceived should guarantee the intuitive character of [noesis]; but secondly, so that the sense perceptible does not thus present itself as isolated, but rather as intertwined with thought, that immediacy should also turn the immediately intuited into something mental, ie. a concept, which shines immediately on singularity, heedless of the character of the concept as the abstract unity of identical moments.⁸⁸

In the intentional relation, reality can be unjustly collapsed into ideality via the subsequent identification of both on the basis of their purported immediacy in experience: the *noetic* act of perception immediately seizes the object's *noematic* core – which now takes the place of its *essence* –, the result of which is the intuition of its species, the immediate "sense" that covers over the tension between the object's real and ideal features. What

87 Adorno, *Against Epistemology*, 60-61.

88 Ibid, 99-100; my additions.

remains is the object in its ideality, yet consciousness relates to it *as if* it were an actually existing object: ideality now takes the place of *materiality* in the unfolding of experience.

For Adorno, “The controversy of universals cannot be settled by a decree according to which the universal, as just the meant ‘itself’ converges with what exists, the given, the res”.⁸⁹ The aim of the Husserlian project is thus contradictory, namely due to the ambiguous nature the latter assigns to givenness: the immediately-given intuition must be transformed into what is actually a mediated concept without recourse to the systematic thought that determines such a transformation. In Adornian parlance, it wants to immediately achieve universality without paying the necessary price of abstraction: “Reification nestles in the *prima characteristic* of the given (on which the whole of phenomenology is based) as something already determined [mediated]. It nestles in the belief that one may attain mental states-of-affairs without the ornament of thought”.⁹⁰

Husserl can “attain mental states of affairs without the ornament of thought” because of their ambiguous character: they are ‘mental’ inasmuch as they are products of thought, yet they are treated as objective “states of affairs” that can be received prior to the movement of conceptual adjustment. Speaking of the pre-given truth that is immediately received during the noetic act (*sachverhalte*), “Husserl⁹¹ says: ‘The *Sachverhalt* is related to the more or less ‘giving act’ of becoming aware of it as the sensual object is related to sense perception. We feel impelled to go even so far as to say, the *Sachverhalt*, the purely logical idea of truth, is related to its intellectual perception as the sensual object to sense perception’”.⁹² Adorno clarifies this further in “*Against Epistemology*”:

There results a quid pro quo between sensation and perceptions thanks to which immediate certainty secured by sense-impressions is bound up with the objecthood assumed in Husserl’s conception of intentionality. [...] For the sake of the purification of the [factually contingent] from activity, perception is reduced to the passivity of absolute immediacy, translated back, so to speak, into sensation, though more cognitive performance is demanded of it than of

89 Adorno, *Against Epistemology*, 124.

90 Ibid, 31; my addition.

91 Edmund Husserl, *Logische Untersuchungen*, Vol. II, 2, 140.

92 Adorno, “Husserl and the Problem of Idealism”, *The Journal of Philosophy*, 13;

sensation.⁹³

For Husserl, our perception of intentional objects – the condition of *noesis* – functions in a similar way to sensation, despite the fact that sensation itself is dependent on the very empirical aspects of the objects which are bracketed by phenomenological reduction: “The composition of the object out of the elements of cognition and their unity assumes what is to be deduced. Terms like stuff and matter [...] which denote the given in all philosophy of immanence, recall, and not by chance, that character of the established or in-itself which is distilled from transcendent things”.⁹⁴ In other words, Husserl’s notion that concepts can be given in a similar way to objects is what leads him to “interpret thinking not as action, but as looking at things”.⁹⁵

Adorno believes this to be mistaken because both intellectual perception and sensation function in distinct ways: sensation is what receives the immediate, undetermined data of experience, while intellectual perception is what allows us to mold this data into particular objects. Both necessarily interconnect on the basis of these differences: intellectual perception mediates sensation by anticipating what is to be formed into objects, and sensation mediates perception by providing the content that is to be formed. For example, the encounter with a tree is not merely an encounter with a variety of colors and materials; instead we encounter this variety *as* a tree – an already-formed perceptual object. While Adorno agrees with the fact that sensation is always mediated by perception in experience⁹⁶, it does not mean that the former can merely be subordinated to the latter. On the contrary, the main point of keeping both separate is that they harbor the possibility of non-identity: the immediate data that we form into objects can end up falsifying the very concepts employed by intellectual perception in this formation, consequently allowing for the possibility of determinate negation. The upshot is that each faculty serves as a necessary corrective to the other: perception requires sensation in order to ensure that it does not fall

93 Adorno, *Against Epistemology*, 151-152.

94 Ibid, 139.

95 Adorno, “Husserl and the Problem of Idealism”, *The Journal of Philosophy*, 6.

96 Adorno, *Against Epistemology*, 142.

into disillusion, and sensation requires perception in order to shape sense-impressions into objects:

...no sheer sensation can be detached from perception in the real life of consciousness. The two can be distinguished only by dint of a theory which posits sensation as the placeholder for the thing-in-itself [...] Sensation, despite its somatic essence, is completely diluted of full reality through the reduction to subjective immanence [...] On the other hand, individual perceptions are also not the source of justification for cognition [...] Perception, as consciousness of each object, as rudimentary judgement, is for its part exposed to disillusion and not incontrovertibly there.⁹⁷

2.6 The Ambiguous Conception of The Given in Phenomenology

The result of the failure to identify immediacy and mediation is Husserl's 'renewed' conception of the given. The concept is stripped of the very power it had over the idealistic notion of the transcendental: "Husserl's broadening of the concept of givenness changes it qualitatively. Givenness loses what it was originally conceived for, a sense which Husserl maintains: the opaque, what cannot be removed, what must simply be acknowledged, and which prescribes to thought its fixed boundaries. Husserl's interpretation of mediate givenness suffers from the fact that he further credits it with what vanishes with those modifications, viz the immediacy of what is meant".⁹⁸ In its inability to negate its positivistic conception, Husserl's conception of the given is identified with intentionality instead of becoming a more *concrete* concept. This ambiguity allows for the world of immediate meaning – what is given conceptually – to be functionally identified with the material world:

Since acts of thought as such may be immediate facts of consciousness just as much as immediate impressions of sense-perception, then what for Husserl is in each case thought in acts of thought –is mediated by them –, becomes for its part, immediacy [...] Hence intentionality in the pregnant sense, which Husserl gave the term, would in the end be identical with givenness. Since the mediated, what is already thought through intention, should simply be assumed, the concept of immediate givenness becomes total. Perception

97 Adorno, *Against Epistemology*, 156-157.

98 Ibid, 128.

becomes knowledge of something, this knowledge becomes the primary, irreducible factual state of consciousness and the perceived thing-world becomes, so to speak, a radical first.⁹⁹

The concept of intentionality – now equated with givenness itself – allows for the establishment of an absolute beginning for philosophical investigation: as the ‘purified’ object – itself the result of mediation – can now be understood in its objectivity without recourse to mediation, philosophy has a foundation from which all further conceptual mediation can depart. A foundation such as this one is necessary, for if objects are not *completely* covered by intentionality – in the sense that some of the object’s features are not made immediately intelligible as *noema* in the light of *noesis* –, they would then possess a *contingent* form of transcendence, which is consequently unusable in the founding of knowledge’s possibility: “Husserl calls the mediate immediate because he believes in the datum: he wants to detach the mediate, that is, the *verités de raison*, from the mere possibility of being fallacious. In turn he attributes to the immediate a generality and necessity which can be obtained only by mediation, by the process of reflection”.¹⁰⁰

Husserl’s commitment to foundationalism results in the grounding and establishment of an essential ‘field’ that can then be surveyed and analyzed scientifically. Seeing as *all* possible objects of sensation are immediately given, intentionality now gains this same relation to its own totality, that of sense: “We have not lost anything but rather have gained the whole of absolute being which, rightly understood, contains within itself, ‘constitutes’ within itself, all worldly transcendencies”.¹⁰¹ The totality of “sense” is available to *noesis* because of the concept’s symbolic function, which allows the subject to immediately refer to other noetic acts and their respective ‘senses’. ‘Senses’ are not understood in their contingency as historically-determined and ever-changing meanings, but instead understood *as if* they were material objects: “meaning can be shifted to something static, viz. the expression, as its specific and even [...] thingly, definitely present quality. Intentionality serves so well as a foundation of the doctrine of essence, however,

99 Adorno, *Against Epistemology*, 129-130.

100 Adorno, “Husserl and the Problem of Idealism”, *The Journal of Philosophy*, 16.

101 Husserl, *Ideas 1*, 113.

because the symbolized is voided of sheer existence in acts which always pass for pregnant ‘consciousness’, viz. consciousness of something”.¹⁰² If ‘sense’ were revealed to be relative – if the seemingly immutable meanings of individual objects were dissolved through the experience of disenchantment – it would be impossible to immediately seize them in their totality insofar as certain senses might *no longer* serve as fixed references for others. The world of sense unearthed by Husserl is thus a static inversion of the dynamic world that living subjects actually engage with. Conversely, its subject assumes the same character: a transcendental monad that cannot engage with the world reciprocally insofar as it precedes the very constitution of the world itself.

For Adorno, transcendental subjectivity serves as a placeholder for what is lacking in our ability to immediately pin a concept to an object. After the process of phenomenological reduction, what is left is no longer an object in the emphatic sense, but instead a reduced version of the object that has been tailor-made to function within the transcendental subject’s pre-determined conceptual apparatus: “Thanks to this equivocation [between meaning and objecthood], Husserl succeeds in slipping into every individual [noetic] act a result which is fulfilled not by the fact but, idealistically speaking, by the synthetic unity of apperception”.¹⁰³ Yet if this is the case, then Husserl cannot provide the basis for a critical conception of experience, as the content of the latter consists of immutable givens that are passively received by a subject that cannot *actively* experience anything. The Husserlian subject becomes a reflection of the reified world, and the world inventoried by this subject becomes a petrified reflection of its condition of possibility: “If the subject includes ‘everything’ in itself and bestows meaning on everything, then it might just as well not be there as an essential moment of cognition. [...] Since the ego as constituting or sense-providing condition espouses and assumes itself before all objectivity, it renounces any interference from cognition and certainly praxis. Uncritically and in contemplative passivity it lays out an inventory of the thing world as that world is presented to it in reigning order”.¹⁰⁴

102 Adorno, *Against Epistemology*, 110.

103 Ibid, 114.

104 Ibid, 96-97.

Chapter 3

The Role of Spiritual Experience in a Critical Theory of Society

3.1 Against Methodological Thinking: Spiritual Experience and Interpretation

The aim of reconstructing Adorno's critiques of positivism and phenomenology is to establish their point of convergence. Both sacrifice the possibility of an unreduced account of experience in exchange for one whose contents can be established in their totality, namely from the methodological basis of a first principle: the subordination of experience to isolated conceptions of facticity (appearance) or transcendence (essence). Positivism and phenomenology turn away from the richness of experience – the result of its heterogeneity with what merely 'is' and the conceptual apparatus that is tasked with capturing it – for the certainty that is granted to them by their respective principles. Certainty is ensured by 'preparing' the object before the latter is actually experienced, namely by analytically separating the latter's empirical and essential aspects before their actual non-identity can become apparent within experience itself. After one aspect is subtracted, the content of experience can be construed as given by identifying it with what remains after the subtraction: this is no coincidence, as the 'other' form of givenness is effectively antinomical to the remainder. It is in this sense that positivism can limit experience to what appears, while phenomenology can bracket the phenomenal appearance of objects in order to establish a world of sense which necessarily structures experience before it actually occurs. As first principles are posited as being prior to experience in the sense that they are a condition of the latter's possibility, Adorno understands first principles as residing outside of the historical bounds of experience: they remain supra-temporal, unlike the transient, historically-sedimented objects whose possibility they are meant to secure. While phenomenology makes explicit its aim to secure the possibility of experience on a first principle, positivist methodology simply establishes the principle of equivalence between truth and mind-independent objectivity before experience itself is submitted to analysis; in both cases, experience is accounted for from without. The fact that experience can only be accounted for

from without in order to become intelligible represents an objective lack, pointing to the fact that experience itself is incoherent within this particular historical situation: if the latter were internally coherent, it would not have to be explained from a vantage point other than its own.

The commitment to method allows for positivism and phenomenology to serve as complementary ways of accounting for – and artificially unifying – the aspects of experience that are mutilated within administered society. Experience is to be broken down into parts, inventoried and efficiently re-assembled into a configuration that prioritizes either its essential or empirical components – each appropriately formalized. Roger Foster correctly points out that this represents a significant difference between methodology and the type of dialectical thinking that we require in order to grasp experience in its spiritual sense: “Conceptual cognition becomes pure classification (knowing how to group things under a concept) when it is pulled out of the context of human life and interests that gives the word its experiential significance”.¹⁰⁵ Once particulars are classified in this way, the whole that they express takes on the same quality: it is understood as a given, no longer ripe with experiential possibilities that appear within its antagonistic character. The world of experience presupposed by methodological thinking is thus “a closed world in the sense that absolutely everything that is possible within experience is already regarded or experienced by human beings as something pre-formed by society”.¹⁰⁶ Possible experience becomes part and parcel of what is actual, and what is actual is solely construed as what can be guaranteed empirically by the logic of exchange society. In order to identify what is experienced with what is systematically guaranteed by society prior to the unfolding of the former, methodology arms itself with its own “systematic structure”, established by “finding the conceptual forms which correspond to this pre-organized character, which are already foisted upon everything that is [...] through the phenomenon of the administered world”.¹⁰⁷ It is thus in the practical context of the administered world that methodological thinking unites the seemingly disparate projects of positivism and phenomenology on the basis of their appeals

105 Roger Foster, *Adorno: The Recovery of Experience* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2008), 14.

106 Theodor W. Adorno, *Introduction to Dialectics* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2017), 178.

107 Ibid.

to immediacy: “what is immediately given and the forms, which are equally simply given, are tailored complementarily to each other”.¹⁰⁸

Adorno affirms that “The goal of philosophy, pace Wittgenstein, would be to say what cannot be said”¹⁰⁹, and this is because there exists possible knowledge of society that cannot be formulated within the systematic methodological structure that is meant to organize its particular elements. This requires us to give ourselves to the particular object “without reservation”, as that which cannot be said is effectively harbored within the latter. If we are to “entrust” ourselves to our experiences¹¹⁰, – if we are to open ourselves to what is radically *other* – we must thus be wary of first principles. On the other hand, to entrust oneself to their experiences means that one must work from *within* the historically-mediated context of experience, and to consequently view its contingencies as parts of a cipher instead of methodological dead-ends. We must thus allow the object to ‘have its say’ in experience, regardless of how contingent we think it is: “philosophy, persistently and with the claim of truth, must proceed interpretively without ever possessing a sure key to interpretation; nothing more is given to it than fleeting, disappearing traces within the riddle figures of that which exists and their astonishing entwinings. The history of philosophy is nothing other than the history of such entwinings. Thus it reaches so few ‘results’”.¹¹¹

The form of thought that actualizes this relation of trust is called “interpretation” (*Deutung*). Adorno’s concept of interpretation can already be given substance by what we have concluded in the reconstruction of his critiques of positivism and phenomenology. In the critique of positivism we have shown that philosophical interpretation differs from scientific methodology because the latter’s findings appear as “indestructible and static” while those of the former appear as “signs that need unriddling”.¹¹² In other words, what one comes across when interpreting a phenomena consists of a set of clues that beckon the interpreter to think beyond the givenness of the latter by effectively ‘pointing’ to the universal conditions which mediate that very givenness. Yet in reconstructing Adorno’s

108 Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 187-190.

109 Adorno, *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*, 185-186.

110 Adorno, *Critical Models*, 254.

111 Adorno, “The Actuality of Philosophy”, *Telos*, 126.

112 *Ibid.*

critique of phenomenology, we have also shown that the universals which mediate givenness are not immediately discernible to thought as a coherent whole. This is because the sense of a given object cannot be both universally-applicable and immediately intelligible insofar as universals are always constructed via the mediation of subjective concepts, all of which only gain their significance during the unfolding of experience itself. As interpretation does not presuppose the givenness of its object, it also refuses to presuppose its own concepts in order to totally determine the object.

On one hand, by submitting everything that is given in experience to the universality of the concept, interpretation is a form of total mediation insofar as it eschews direct appeals to immediacy in the reconstruction of experience. On the other hand, in its refusal to presuppose the universality of the concept, interpretation also preserves the possibility of experience's non-identity with what is already expected of it – when the object asserts its alterity against what we would traditionally assign it under. While this resistance is possible on the basis of the object's purportedly immediate character, the object only has a place in experience if we are to understand it as something already mediated: if we don't, we cannot distinguish between the productions of spirit and their non-conceptual 'remainder', as this remainder only comes into view if we understand it in the context of what it is not, or that which it resists. As the remainder only appears in the unfolding of the process of spiritual experience, the particular and historically-mediated function of the immediate is rescued from the realm of transcendence – the *a priori* – and thrust into experience itself. It is in this sense that Adorno abides by the Hegelian notion that “the *a priori* is also the *a posteriori*”, insofar as it “inspires both his criticism of a grim empirical reality and his critique of a static apriorism”.¹¹³ Before explaining how interpretation is meant to rescue this remainder we will have to expand on how it is fragmented and then suppressed within the “grim empirical reality” of exchange society. We will then establish how this suppression mimics the process of conceptual identification that occurs on the basis of a “static apriorism”.

113 Adorno, *Hegel: Three Studies*, 3.

3.2 The Object of Interpretation: Givenness as Mutilated Experience

Experience is mutilated in administered society insofar as it is separated on the basis of its empirical and intelligible aspects (appearance and essence; reality and reason), which consist of the isolated ‘fields’ where positivism and phenomenology ground their respective projects. These aspects are incommensurable because the immediate, empirical side of experience – the object of the ‘natural attitude’ – enters into contradiction with the intentions of the social totality that mediates it. For Adorno, these intentions are apparent within society’s conceptual infrastructure, which derives from the principle of exchange-value and establishes the ‘logic’ of integration in which all particulars are submitted to the mechanism of exchange. The mechanism of exchange requires its subjects to submit to the principle of equivalence – the idea that everything can be reduced to its exchange value – by selling their labor and consequently fitting into particular role in society. The principle of equivalence has an individuating function, as it centers the subject’s individuality around its particular role in the production process. Yet the integration of the subject into a pre-determined role then requires that individuality to be extinguished: this is because one’s individuality is the result of contingencies, while the logic of the production process is bound by a nature-like necessity – in reality, a mere denial of contingency.

The psychological aspects found on the empirical side of experience reveals the failure of society’s logical infrastructure to integrate the particularity of the former into itself: experience becomes tragic, an exemplification of the submission of the individual to the demands of the mechanism of exchange. The real conditions of living beings – what makes them ‘individuals’ in the first place – exist as fractures within the supposed ‘positive’ experience of society, where the latter is merely experienced ‘as it is’: “since society is made up of human subjects and is constituted through their functional connection, its recognition through living, unreduced subjects is far more commensurable with ‘reality itself’ than in the natural sciences which are compelled, by the alien nature of a non-human object, to situate objectivity entirely within the categorial mechanism, in abstract subjectivity”.¹¹⁴ In other words, the heterogeneity of the individual thus serves as an

114 Adorno et al., *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*, 15.

objective barrier to the homogeneity that underpins the integration of the latter into the commodity structure.

These fractures are negative experiences in the trivial sense; categorized by Adorno as manifestations of suffering, the latter now becomes the ‘immediacy’ from which critical mediation departs: “there actually is a mental experience—fallible indeed, but immediate—of the essential and the unessential, an experience which only the scientific need for order can forcibly talk the subjects out of. Where there is no such experience, knowledge stays unmoved and barren. Its measure is what happens objectively to the subjects, as their suffering”.¹¹⁵ Adorno understands suffering as “the weight of objective realities bearing down on the individual”.¹¹⁶ Yet suffering is not only expressed by living subjects, but also within the very objects that must also be submitted to the logic of exchange: “Dialectical critique seeks to salvage or help to establish what does not obey totality, what opposes it or what first forms itself as the potential of a not yet existent individuation”.¹¹⁷ The process of abstraction which underpins the erasure of the object’s particularity is contained within the latter’s sedimented history, just like the memories of suffering that comprise the life of the living individual. With this in mind, there now seems to be an affinity between the logic of conceptual identification that underpins the classificatory strategies of methodological thinking and the total integration of living beings into the mechanism of exchange. Conversely, Adorno’s interpretative strategy is meant to establish the actual process through which individual subjects and objects can be come indistinguishable.

The administered society’s ‘corrective’ to the structural problem of the heterogeneous particular is the subordination of individuals to the demands of exchange on an ever-increasing level of abstraction. Simply put, heterogeneous qualities are purged from the particular individual until it can no longer provide a basis for the latter’s particularity. Methodological thinking provides the intellectual framework in which these abstractions are coherently maintained. Positivism achieves this by reducing heterogeneity to mere contingency through the *equation* of experience with what is merely given empirically.

115 Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 169-172.

116 Adorno, *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*, 190.

117 Adorno et al., *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*, 12.

While the moment of empirical givenness is a necessary part of unreduced experience, it cannot serve its purpose if experience itself is confined within it: once this occurs, the objects encountered in this moment cannot assert their heterogeneity to subjective concepts because our conceptual apparatus is already bound to the limitations which give this moment its very coherence. The socially-mediated character of experience becomes ‘off-limits’, resulting in the identification between the natural and the historical: the ‘natural’ traits of the empirical individual (say, bourgeois values such as self-assuredness, prudence, politeness, and so on) are none other than the socially-mediated behaviors required by the mechanism of exchange. Once the form *and* content of experience is rendered contingent by positivism, the phenomenological method gains its reason for excluding the empirical moment of givenness in the determination of experience, consequently allowing for the concept of givenness to now be equated with the pure rationality of transcendental subjectivity.

While it is apparent that positivism and phenomenology become unified in the methodological sense by their reliance on immediacy as a ground for experience¹¹⁸, we can now establish their function within the social totality: both methodologies block the possibility of rendering the immediate experience of suffering into a direct expression of the antagonistic totality. By doing this, positivism and phenomenology assist in legitimizing the social production of abstract subjects:

The more individuals are in effect degraded into functions within the social totality as they are connected up to the system, the more the person pure and simple, as a principle, is consoled and exalted with the attributes of creative power, absolute rule and spirit. [...] The living individual person, such as he is constrained to act and for which he was even internally molded, is as *homo oeconomicus* incarnate closer to the transcendental subject than the living individual he must immediately take himself to be. [...] If the standard structure of society is the exchange form, its rationality constitutes people: what they are for themselves, what they think of themselves, is secondary. They are deformed at the outset by the mechanism that was then philosophically transfigured into the transcendental. What is supposedly most obvious, the

118 Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 187-190.

empirical subject, would actually have to be considered as something not yet existing; from this aspect the transcendental subject is 'constitutive'.¹¹⁹

Passages such as these remind us of the idealist reversal of the rationalist account of experience, which departs from the subtraction of the given contingencies of empirical subjects to the establishment of the necessary – or transcendental – features of subjectivity which underpin them. Yet in exchange society, individuals are already deformed due to their immediate inclusion within the mechanism of exchange; in other words, it is impossible to become an individual because the process of 'becoming' will always lead to a pre-established form of personhood (*e.g.*, conformity to accepted social norms). In this case, one's experience is pejoratively construed as 'positive' by Adorno, in the sense that it is not supposed to fall into contradiction with its end.

Fortunately for the critical theorist, our experience of the totality is not necessarily positive. What in practice appear to be rational "laws" do not necessarily conform to the individuals who are experiencing them:

...social laws are purposive-rational ones which are defined by the process of exchange [...], whereas the sphere which we characterize as that of psychology in the genuine sense specifically embraces those dimensions in human beings which are not simply exhausted in such rationality [...] psychology in the emphatic sense is always concerned irrational phenomena, in other words, with all those phenomena which arise whenever particular individuals withdraw from the demands of rationality imposed upon them by society as a whole.¹²⁰

It must be stressed here that Adorno is not criticizing the process of rationalization from a romantic or irrationalist standpoint, but instead from the opposite side: in his view, it is the very irrationality of the process of rationalization that forces individuals to either withdraw from its demands or conform to them entirely. "the objective rationality of society, namely that of exchange, continues to distance itself through its dynamics, from the model of logical reason. Consequently, society – what has been made independent – is, in turn, no longer intelligible".¹²¹ Society only remains unintelligible if we've already decided that the

119 Adorno, *Critical Models*, 248.

120 Adorno, *Introduction to Dialectics*, 179-180.

121 Adorno et al., *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*, 15.

process of differentiation between its “objective rationality” and “logical reason” is itself unintelligible; if the latter can be rendered intelligible, then we can understand society as a process of concretization that ends in the objectivity of irrationality instead of the actualization of reason itself. In other words, if we are to follow Hegel’s statement that “essence must appear”, the essence of society – what is supposed to be logical reason – becomes irrational throughout its actual process of concretization. Conversely, the critical tension between essence and appearance must be preserved if this antagonistic process of concretization is to be understood properly.

3.3 Interpretation and the Immanent Critique of the Totally Administered Society

The real discontinuity between the intentions of the administered society and that which it administers is what forces contemporary philosophy to sacrifice truth in the reconstruction of a reconciliatory conception of experience. Once the empirical foreground of administration and the conceptual background of intentions are separated analytically, experience only becomes coherent if we employ either one of the categories as its sole principle of intelligibility:

The dualism of the intelligible and the empirical [...] is better ascribed to the idea of research than that of interpretation – the idea of research, which assumes the reduction of the question to given and known elements where nothing would seem necessary except the answer. He who interprets by searching behind the phenomenal world for a world-in-itself which forms its foundation and support, acts mistakenly like someone who wants to find in the riddle the reflection of a being which lies behind it, a being mirrored in the riddle, in which it is contained.¹²²

The riddles present in the givenness of ‘what is’ only appear to us within a particular historical situation – albeit in a cryptic manner – as fragments of an antagonistic totality that must be re-assembled by interpretation. The aim of re-assembling such fragments is not to provide a direct answer to the riddle, but instead to dissolve the latter insofar as it is understood as a product of a false totality; in other words, re-assembly helps us “decode the

122 Adorno, “The Actuality of Philosophy”, *Telos*, 126-127.

life conditions that make the riddle appear in the first place”.¹²³ Adorno provides a tentative explanation of this in his inaugural lecture;

The function of riddle-solving is to light up the riddle like lightning and negate it, not to persist behind the riddle and imitate it. Authentic philosophic interpretation does not meet up with a fixed meaning which already lies behind the question, but lights it up suddenly and momentarily, and consumes it at the same time. Just as riddle-solving is constituted, in that the singular and dispersed elements of the question are brought up into various groupings long enough for them to close together in a figure out of which the solution springs forth, while the question disappears.¹²⁴

To achieve this, we must take care to render the historical relation between these fragments intelligible without deferring the locus of that very intelligibility to an atemporal ‘background’, as “there is no hidden meaning which could be redeemable from its one-time and first-time historical appearance”.¹²⁵ If we do not, the riddle merely mirrors this background, giving us the impression that a direct answer is all that it takes to illuminate it. Such an answer is unsatisfactory insofar as it deepens the riddle-like character of the original question: in response to this, interpretation is meant to dissolve the riddle by illuminating the social conditions that it is symptomatic of – in this case the necessity of viewing objects as merely contingent and subjects as abstractions. As this can only be revealed through the determinate negation of concepts, we cannot merely dissolve the riddle on the basis of prior knowledge: we must thus depart from the basic aspects of experience in the foreground and then move towards the dissolution of increasingly mediated concepts that structure what is commonly assumed to be the background. Adorno thus limits conceptuality to experience, in the sense that conceptualization – as well as the necessity of conceptual re-adjustment – always departs from a historically-contingent situation. For example, in relation to orthodox Marxism’s simplistic invocation of a necessary background to history – in which universal-historical law unfolds –, Adorno argues that it is the reduction of late capitalism’s *inner* dynamism to forces that reside

123 Foster, *Adorno: The Recovery of Experience*, 48.

124 Adorno, “The Actuality of Philosophy”, *Telos*, 127.

125 *Ibid*, 128.

outside of its historical contingency that hinders any further understanding of the latter's historical *specificity* – which allows us to subsequently distinguish between 19th century capitalism and the 'late capitalism' of Adorno's era. As our understanding of universal laws of history is already mediated by this inner-dynamic, the invocation of a determinate 'background' does injustice to the matter at hand – the social totality – by covering over its role in the mediation of the very narratives that we employ to illuminate it.¹²⁶

The idea that exchange society fulfills its intentions is founded on the notion that what we experience in its foreground is a direct translation of the promises implicit in its background. Yet what we experience is not a direct translation, but instead an indirect one: we instead experience the lack of coherence between background and foreground, which then becomes the point of entry for a critique of society. Adorno employs the strategy of immanent critique in order to productively depart from this incoherence. Immanent critique consists of the refutation of a claim on the basis of its inability to make good on its own premises. As the whole itself is contradictory in the sense that organizational society is effectively un-organizable in its very totality, it only becomes intelligible through its discontinuities, or the breaks within the systematic integration of particular elements of society into the whole:

There is absolutely no question that productive thinking today can take the form only of one that works through breaks and fractures, whereas any thinking which is simply oriented in advance to unity, synthesis and harmony can only serve to conceal something which thinking is called upon to penetrate, for it then inevitably contents itself with simply reproducing, or even reinforcing, the facade of what is already there in the medium of thought.¹²⁷

Yet the disintegration of the determinate relation between background and foreground cannot have a solely negative result, as this would then allow the fragments found in the foreground to remain as an arbitrary multiplicity, the results of what Hegel calls "abstract negation". In order to produce something positive – the figurative reconstruction of experience –, these fragments must be *imaginatively* re-assembled: in other words we must not follow a pre-ordained schematic.

126 Adorno, *Introduction to Dialectics*, 142.

127 Ibid, 149.

3.4 The Constellation and The Figurative Reconstruction of Experience

We have shown that for Adorno, experience of the given is meant to be decoded via the imaginative re-assembly of its contradictory elements, which disperse into fragments at every arbitrary attempt to reconcile them. These fragments are organized into analytical categories on the basis of the methodological ‘questions’ that they are supposed to answer. The fragments must be reconfigured in a new way if one is to negate the question in response to which they were created. The non-identity between the figure produced by the re-configured fragments and its corresponding methodological ‘question’ allows us to consequently negate the latter and reflect on the actual context in which these questions are posed:

The task of philosophy is not to search for concealed and manifest intentions of reality, but to interpret unintentional reality, in that, by the power of constructing figures, or images, out of the isolated elements of reality, it negates questions, the exact articulation of which is the task of science, a task to which philosophy always remains bound, because its power of illumination is not able to catch fire otherwise than on these solid questions [...] Interpretation of the unintentional through a juxtaposition of the analytically isolated elements and illuminations of the real by the power of such interpretation is the program of every authentically materialist knowledge.¹²⁸

If these fragments of experience are erroneously re-constructed as givens within scientific research, then ‘re-configuration’ is a crucial moment in spiritual experience: in the context of the newly re-configured object, the universality of exchange society becomes apparent within the particular via the negation of the latter’s givenness. Once the particularity of the object negatively reflects the universality of exchange society, it can no longer be given insofar as its mediated character is now intelligible to the critical subject. The object is thought beyond its givenness, thus prompting the concept to surpass itself – to better interpret what we (wrongly) took to be the case: “The philosopher’s task is to make the effort required to transcend the concept through the concept itself, without yielding to the delusion that he already has possession of the matter to which the concept refers”.¹²⁹ Now

128 Adorno, “The Actuality of Philosophy”, *Telos*, 127.

129 Adorno, *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*, 188.

that we have an idea why the re-configuration of experience's fragments is necessary, we can sketch how this re-configuration occurs.

The critical subject of experience must engage in the total conceptual mediation of what is immediately given because conceptualization is the sole means of "moving beyond" the moment of immediacy in experience. Yet conceptuality must be restrained if we are not to identify it with the conceptual form of givenness that underpins transcendental subjectivity. Adorno will make use of the Benjaminian concept of *constellation* in order to achieve this. The function of the constellation is to preserve non-conceptuality within conceptual mediation. We proceed by reconfiguring the isolated elements of the given object – what the particular individual experience as fractures – into a constellation of concepts. What is meant to crystallize within the constellation is the object in its non-conceptuality, as the interrelation between concepts in the constellation demonstrates the lack within the systematic *process* of "pinning the object down" to its traditionally-assigned concept.

The "bodies" in the constellation – the peripheral concepts which gravitate around the object at its center – are maintained at a critical distance, or else they will be integrated into the traditionally-assigned concept that reified thought uses to totally mediate the object. Yet to maintain such a tension involves simultaneously holding its elements together, so that they do not disperse into fragments again. The constellation thus makes productive use of the two opposing forces within the concept, which intersect during spiritual experience: the subjective impulse to integrate the non-identical through conceptual identification and the objective impulse of conceptual differentiation that stems from the inherent non-identity between concepts – the source of which is located in the very objects that they are dependent on. The constellation's ability to constrain conceptual identification on the basis of conceptual differentiation is predicated on the fact that it is a multiplicity: its concepts cannot converge into a higher one – the role of which is to totally determine the object – without falling into antinomy, which occurs when its concepts are brought into close proximity. The "solidity" of the concept is preserved in this moment:

despite their historical contingency, concepts do possess a “*kind of firm core*”¹³⁰, in the sense that they have necessary qualities that grant them their distinct character in relation to other concepts. Adorno avoids assuming the intrinsic solidity of the core by according priority to the concept’s periphery, or the constellation of associated concepts which end up illuminating the core. Concepts intersect when their peripheries meet, as the transience of the relations that occur on the periphery makes it impossible to solidify their respective cores to the point of reification. In other words, concepts retain their definitions, but only to the point that these definitions allow for differentiation between concepts: once a concept’s definition becomes too determinate, it does not allow for the concepts that surround it to mediate its core.

If the concept’s core cannot be rigidly defined at the outset, the only way of determining it is negatively, through the analysis of the gaps that occur within these peripheral relations between concepts. What could make the concept more determinate is presented as a blind-spot between the concepts that surround it: as non-conceptuality is the mark of inadequate conceptualization, this aspect can only appear within these conceptual gaps. This then leads to is the restructuring of the concept’s ‘life’: instead of being immediately defined, the concept only develops its definition as the process of inter-conceptual mediation unfolds.

...the sense and point of [...] philosophical definitions is precisely to generate such magnetic fields without arresting the movement of concepts. [...] And if it is precisely the task of dialectic to transform what is given in reified form, to transform the merely existent, into a force field of this kind, then we might even describe definition in this higher sense as the instrument par excellence of dialectical thinking; and perhaps the reason why dialectical thought is especially allergic to the vulgar use of definition is precisely that it violates what philosophy must achieve at the end by placing what can only be a result and a process right at the beginning.¹³¹

It is in this sense that the constellation is employed by Adorno as a corrective to methodological thinking. Once method reifies a concept through a pre-established definition, it can then be used to classify objects; the object could then be identified under a

130 Adorno, *Introduction to Dialectics*, 199.

131 Ibid, 201.

conceptual category by filtering-out its features that are non-identical to the concept itself. The framework of the constellation allows us to map out this process of improper conceptual identification, as the given object is the result of its sedimented history. Expressed in the latter is the process of inadequate conceptualization that lead it to be construed in abstraction as a given: “The goal is not to produce a more exact classification of the object, but to retrace the steps of the extinguishing of contextual meaning that makes the object accessible in the terms of static classification. Hence the sedimented history in the object is the history of what has happened to the object as a result of this process”.¹³² This form of self-reflection requires a process in which this inadequacy can reveal itself, and the constellation provides its framework. Now that we’ve established the basic function of the constellation, we can delve deeper into its role as a bridge between these conceptual inadequacies and the social antagonisms that they express.

3.5 The Constellation and Social Physiognomy: Philosophical Antinomies as Expressions of an Antagonistic Society

Adorno is suspicious of the fact that purely philosophical endeavors seem to justify the social processes that philosophers themselves have purposely ignored, and this is because they construe the individual particular as a merely “repeatable property” of a universal which is presupposed before the particular can actually be experienced¹³³: the abstract logic of exchange society. The constellation allows Adorno to thrust the universal back into the process of spiritual experience, namely by allowing particulars to directly express this universal in its actually-existing form instead of its abstract, conceptual placeholder. As Roger Foster puts it: “Rather than constituting the experiential item as a discrete and repeatable exemplar, the subject makes interpretive connections between the experiential item and all the elements surrounding it in its historical context, “attracting” those elements toward it by demonstrating how the positioning of those elements illuminates the intrinsic features of this experiential item [...] the type of universal that

132 Foster, *Adorno: The Recovery of Experience*, 19.

133 Ibid, 3.

follows from this interpretive practice is simply the fully developed contextual significance of the particular in question”.¹³⁴ As Adorno cannot merely *posit* the existence of these social processes as necessary determinants of philosophical thought, he will instead criticize these “pure” endeavors on the basis that they *exceed* their original scope: the excess in question being the philosophical content that is meant to re-contextualize experience within a social totality that renders its full expression impossible. This excess then paints a more determinate picture of society insofar as it departs from particular philosophical abstractions and slowly rises to the social conditions that render them necessary. In other words, the “progressive” character of the determinate negation is not found in the fact that it can *eventually* produce a definitive image of the society in place, but rather in that it constantly re-centers critical questions around their particular objective conditions. This re-energizes the Hegelian motivation intrinsic to Adorno’s conception of spiritual experience, where “every step taken by thought comes up against society, and no step can pin it down as such, as one thing among others.”¹³⁵

Adorno’s critique of phenomenology provides an example of how we can use the constellation to establish the insufficiencies of a particular process of conceptual identification, and then allow these insufficiencies to express the concrete social processes that govern their necessity. As Husserl aimed to develop a ‘mediated’ conception of the given – a concept that traditionally concerns the individual particular alone –, all Adorno had to do was configure the opposing concepts that interrelate around givenness (such as sensation and intellectual perception; mediation and immediacy) in order to show how the identification between both creates a chain-reaction that eventually re-configures fundamental aspects of experience such as subject and object into abstractions. While identifying perception with sensation seems like a way towards developing a mediated conception of givenness – sensation no longer being the locus of immediacy in experience now that perception assumes its previous role –, it forces us to make too many concessions when it comes to necessary aspects of experience: Husserl’s conception of givenness

134 Foster, *Adorno: The Recovery of Experience*, 18.

135 Adorno, *Hegel: Three Studies*, 20; I have modified the English translation in order to avoid confusion.

requires us to identify ideality and materiality under the guise of intentionality, the latter being a reconstruction of the type of object that is experienced by a transcendental subject. Even though they present a reductionistic account of experience, the transcendental subject and intentional object are necessary in Husserl's case because their interconnection provides the answer to his fundamental epistemological question: how is experience possible – what are its necessary features – if every immediately-experienced empirical particular is contingent? It is once we re-configure his answer around the key concepts which make it possible that we start to notice the antinomies – and the erroneous responses to them – that unfold throughout. As they appear inside the answer to a certain question, the unfolding of these errors leads us to re-assessing the *scope* of the question that produced them. In other words, if we require these types of abstractions in order to *secure* a foundation for experience, then maybe we are forcing a philosophical answer onto a question that cannot be resolved philosophically: “why is it impossible to reflexively reconstruct experience without recourse to abstraction”? The field of possible answers is not always enlarged, but effectively reconfigured: instead of being restricted to subjectivity, the locus of this “lack” is now shifted towards the objective, socio-historical conditions that constitute subjectivity itself. It is within the context of these socio-historical conditions that abstractions that we submit to criticism possess a function which exceeds the philosophical question that they were meant to answer: the identification of the individual with the demands of the mechanism of exchange.

This example shows that when the constellation of concepts is re-configured into a cipher, the latter dissolves the questions in response to which these seemingly given, isolated abstractions sprung forth as answers. In this case, Husserl's mediated conception of givenness is an answer to a particular question; instead of merely negating the answer as a false one, we will instead prod around the answer in order to determine why it is a necessary response to a possibly false question. This is a decisive aspect of Adorno's philosophy, as it is what effectively allows him to move from a philosophy of consciousness to a philosophy of praxis. Roger Foster provides a lucid explanation of what is going on here: “The ‘dissolution’ of philosophical questions is supposed to reflect the

attainment of self-awareness about the status of philosophical problems. In both cases, one discovers that the nature of philosophical problems is other than one had previously thought. This is not to be thought of in terms of a new piece of knowledge that solves the problem, it is rather an insight that puts the problem itself in a different light, dissolving it as a problem requiring a philosophical solution”.¹³⁶ To re-think the traditional philosophical questions that animate our understanding of experience, we must thus reconstruct its fragments. In other words, once we become aware of what types of questions we are asking ourselves, we can better determine whether their answers can illuminate the fragmented discontinuities within our experience of the social totality. When a question is deemed inappropriate and consequently negated, we re-frame a new question around the configuration of concepts that displaced the previous one. The subjective mediation of objects can then free the latter of the prior expectations set forth by methodological thinking. It is thus through the constellation that the universal can be negatively reflected within the particular, and the gap between the particular object and the universal concept now becomes the locus of this reflection.

As the particular must be rescued by conceptual thinking against the latter’s own “objective” compulsions, Adorno needs to mediate between the objectivity of the concept and the spontaneity of the subject. The constellation can achieve this because it is a form of presentation (*Darstellung*), which is crucial to Adorno’s conception of spiritual experience:

It is only the process of presentation which allows thought to go beyond the merely pre-given character that a concept already brings with it [...] Insofar as I offer a resistance to these concepts through the process of presentation, insofar as I employ them in such a way that they express precisely that and only that which I want to express with them, there is a sense in which I challenge the blind power of what they bring with them, and this facilitates that communication between the mere opaque objectivity of conceptual meaning and the subjective intention in which the life of these concepts actually consists. But the distinctive feature of presentation in the medium of language lies in the way that this contribution of subjectivity, which transpires wherever presentation lays hold of its concepts in an emphatic sense, is not in turn an arbitrary matter, does not simply spring from the mere caprice or particular taste of the

136 Foster, *Adorno: The Recovery of Experience*, 46.

singular individual, but itself contains in turn a moment of objectivity which is first mediated through subjectivity over against the rigid and merely pre-given objectivity of the concept.¹³⁷

The constellation is Adorno's privileged mode of presentation because it is a tailored solution to the problem of the subject-object split that we have sketched in the first chapter and have re-assessed in the second: it is meant to present the object in its non-conceptuality through conceptual mediation alone – that which idealism cannot accomplish without recourse to a systematic and teleological account of subject-object identity. The constellation is understood as an *imaginative* form of re-assembly because the necessity of mediating between subjective impulse and the independent object takes on a different appearance in respect to the particular subject-object structure in question. As such, truth must be adequately presented if it is to break the structure of subject-identity that robs it of its own alterity.

The constellation can present the object in this way due to its physiognomic function, or its ability to enrich its object by presenting it as something that it is *not*; in Adorno's case, the object can only be presented as non-conceptual if we first present the object *as if* it were a concept. The presupposition of subject-object identity that predicates this “as if” is then negated within the process of conceptual mediation. This “as if” is what links the abstractions of conceptual identification and total integration of individuals into the mechanism of exchange: as we've seen, if individuals can be treated *as if* they were either merely empirical objects or transcendental subjects, it is because their particularity is erased within their actual existence. The key feature of the physiognomic mode of presentation is thus found in its capacity to express this relation directly:

...instead of accepting the given appearance of the phenomena without further analysis, "physiognomies" interpreted the phenomena critically as unintentional expressions of truth about a faulty social totality [...] Physiognomics showed how the superstructure details contained in the substructure totality in monadological abbreviation, so that the particular, once interpreted, became historical, a dialectical image of the whole.¹³⁸

137 Adorno, *Introduction to Dialectics*, 211-212.

138 Susan Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics* (New York, NY: Free Press, 1979), 176.

3.6 The Dialectical Character of Experience and the Negative Conception of Truth

Spiritual experience departs from the inconsistencies that arise within subjectivity's attempt to 'capture' its object, and ends with a practically-oriented, non-reifying critique of the social totality in which that object is constituted as 'given'. While the subject cannot properly criticize society at the beginning of the process, it can do so as experience unfolds: the subject negates the concepts that cannot properly account for the object in experience – once negated, thought cannot present the object to itself as given. As the quality of givenness is a product of a reified conceptual apparatus, the negation of the given spurs the concepts within the apparatus into movement, as they must now re-adjust themselves around an object that is reconstructed on the basis of its socially-mediated character. The latter is less abstract, more determinate and most importantly, understood at its 'most historical'.

It is in this sense that Adorno's conception of mediation is one in which subject and object co-constitute each other: "there is conceptual being solely in relation to some determinate factual being, and likewise there is factual being only as being that is mediated by cognition, and cognition cannot be thought otherwise than as conceptual cognition. Neither of these two moments can therefore be exchanged in favor of the other; both must be grasped in their necessary reciprocal relationship".¹³⁹ Yet co-constitution is an activity in the sense that it cannot be static: it is a *process* of mediation in which each concept prevents the other from becoming a first principle. As such, the process of co-constitution departs with the encounter between abstract forms of subjectivity and objectivity, the non-identity between which is the catalyst for the unfolding of their differentiation. This is why critique seems general and abstract at the beginning of the process – what Hegel would call "abstract negation" –, all while becoming increasingly determinate as the mediation of its object unfolds. The subjective act of negation gains its "determinate" character because its conceptual activity is always tied to its object, now understood in its non-conceptual sense:

139 Adorno, *Introduction to Dialectics*, 205-206.

For dialectic knows that it is bound not to any process of definition but to the matter itself, to the life at work in the concept. Insofar as such conceptual determination does not appeal to definitions, it can only emerge [...] through configuration, through the reciprocal interaction into which these concepts are drawn. The way in which these concepts can only be properly determined in and through this interaction with one another reveals [not only] the insufficiency and inadequacy of each individual concept on its own, but also the essentially relational character of them all.¹⁴⁰

When the object is understood as if it were a concept, the latter's inability to totally determine the object comes to the fore, namely through its interrelation with the concepts that hover over its periphery. The 'relational character' of concepts is thus predicated on their non-identity: both amongst each other as a multiplicity and in relation to the particular object that they are configured around. The non-identity between abstract concepts and isolated particulars leads to the constitution of determinate concepts and the spiritualization of the particular: the extremes of the isolated, empirical particular and the conceptual given are not preserved in order for mediation to reach a "middle-ground" between the two, but are instead disintegrated on the basis of their non-identity. With this, experience can move from particular to universal without reifying the former into its given form and presupposing the latter in the form of an abstract, general concept.

The motor of this movement is determinate negation, which we have now demonstrated through the use and analysis of Adorno's privileged mode of presentation: the constellation. Determinate negation is fueled by truth in its traditional form: it consumes this type of truth by stripping the object of its givenness – the solid foundation on which the traditional conception of truth rests. The negation of truth in its positivity is hardly an irrational byproduct of determinate negation; it is instead the metaphorical *culmination* of dialectical reason. For Adorno, "the dialectical concept of truth is a negative concept of truth" insofar as there is "there is no tangible, positive or thing-like concept of truth".¹⁴¹ While the traditional conception of truth must be posited, it is but a mere moment insofar as "it is more a source of illumination by which determinate negation or insight into

140 Adorno, *Introduction to Dialectics*, 208.

141 Ibid, 190.

determinate untruth may transpire”.¹⁴² Truth appears within the relations between concepts that we have noted above; as these relations can only exist as part of a process, “the concept of truth is not fulfilled in relation to any one particular moment of cognition [and] that no particular cognition can redeem its whole truth since each refers back and relates to every other”.¹⁴³

Determinate negation *animates* the relations between concepts, and thus requires a logical structure to do so: conceptual movement must be restrained if it is not to become arbitrary, and these restraints are understood as a set of positive rules for conceptual identification. Yet the transformation of truth from something given to mediated is predicated on the *simultaneous* transformation of the logical structure of experience: if truth is neither conceptually or empirically-given, then the logical structure that allows us to develop the truth cannot have recourse to identity as its foundation. While a logical structure to conceptual movement is necessary, the very purpose of determinate negation implies that it can never simply contend with the *givenness* of such a structure; as such, truth – and its logical foundation – must be understood precisely in the untruth of their own givenness:

...dialectic is the attempt [...] to break free of the compulsive character of logic – in which indeed the compulsive character of society is comparably reflected [...] The course of logic must be challenged by appeal to its own means, challenged therefore by bringing logic itself – concretely in relation to all of its determinations – to an explicit consciousness of its own insufficiency, allowing it to disintegrate through its own power. And the power which accomplishes this disintegration, this negative power of the concept in the Hegelian sense, this essentially critical power is indeed in truth identical with the concept of truth itself.¹⁴⁴

Truth culminates in universality, but not in the way that we traditionally assume: truth only becomes “universal” once it has mediated the inevitable confrontation with its own untruth. If “to think means to identify”¹⁴⁵, Adorno’s negative-dialectical approach is a corrective to a logical form of thinking that suffers from the necessary compulsion to identify whatever it

142 Adorno, *Introduction to Dialectics*, 190.

143 Ibid, 198-199.

144 Ibid, 216-217.

145 Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 16-18.

encounters with itself: “The contradiction is the non-identical under the aspect of identity; the primacy of the principle of contradiction in dialectics measures what is heterogenous in unitary thinking. By colliding against its own borders, it reaches beyond itself. Dialectics is the consistent consciousness of non-identity. It is not related in advance to a standpoint. Thought is driven, out of its unavoidable insufficiency, its guilt for what it thinks, towards it”.¹⁴⁶ Suffering is the untruth that the logical structure of truth must contend with, as the latter cannot dispense with what it will inevitably produce; as such, the phenomenon of suffering persists within experience, regardless of the positivity of its account. The “presence” of suffering within the sedimented history of the given object becomes the clue that leads us out of the tautological structure of experience: “Where speculation goes beyond what it can legitimately cover – there is freedom to be found. It is grounded in the human subject’s desire to express itself, a precondition of all truth; in the need to lend a voice to suffering”.¹⁴⁷

In the determination of its untruth, the truth-content of the given – its role in experience – becomes apparent: its necessity *for* experience is predicated on the necessity of its transformation *within* experience. The compulsive character of necessity no longer becomes an “objective block”, but instead an opening for the possibilities latent within what we used to take for granted; what merely “is” no longer becomes an obstacle to thought once its transient character comes to the fore. While the opening-up of these possibilities requires subjective agency, they then become the constitutive aspect of that very agency: experience spirals into the new, re-invigorated by its critical relationship toward its own conditions of possibility.

146 Ibid.

147 Adorno, *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*, 189-190.

Conclusion

The Critical Potential of Spiritual Experience

Reconstructing Adorno's conception of spiritual experience allows us to illuminate the connection between the latter's epistemological and sociological works. While we departed from the insufficiencies that arise when establishing the given as a ground for experience, we have attempted to show how they are centered around an objective lack: the impoverishment of experience within the process of disenchantment¹⁴⁸ that is intrinsic to modernity.¹⁴⁹ Epistemology cannot escape this problem; as such, its wider purpose is to square our formal understanding of experience with the actual, withered experiences of living individuals. This can be done in two ways: either by denying the actuality of experience and re-enchanting the world in its place (phenomenology), or by affirming disenchantment by equating the possibility of experience with its impoverished iteration (positivism). In either case, experience is tied to an abstract subject instead of the actual individual: it is either grounded in a transcendental subject that precedes experience, or the psychological categories of the 'natural' subject, which is the result of classifying individual particulars into the formal category of 'species'. In both cases, the subjectivity of living individuals is always constituted by something that effectively exceeds them, be it conceptual or natural categories; what it is possible to experience is always established before experience can actually unfold. In reality however, what exceeds individuals is nothing other than society itself; as such, epistemological accounts of experience obfuscate the latter's socially-mediated character.

If the concept of the transcendental concerns what is prior to experience in the constitutive sense, then Adorno's conception of spiritual experience consists of its immanent critique: the task is thus to "break through the delusion of constitutive

148 We employ the term in its Weberian usage, as to signify the phenomenon of the "disenchantment of the world".

149 Foster, *Adorno: The Recovery of Experience*, 9-10.

subjectivity by means of the power of the subject”.¹⁵⁰ Adorno’s conception of experience presents a novel challenge to the transcendental notion of constitutive subjectivity, and does so in two interrelated ways. The first is that it challenges the core presupposition of transcendental thought, yet it does so from within the latter’s own framework; contra positivism, the tradition of critical philosophy is thus re-invigorated against those who would opt to return to a pre-critical way of thinking in its wake. Adorno does not merely negate the implicit presupposition of transcendental thought, as one would do in abstract negation. Instead, his dialectical form of critique prompts him to inverse the presupposition itself; as such, transcendental thought is put on a new footing instead of being relegated to the dustbin of history. The second way flows directly from the first, and shows that if one is to move on from a conception of experience to a critique of society, the pre-critical path undertaken by positivistic and phenomenological methodologies leads to a dead end. In order to understand the relevance of Adorno’s conception of experience for contemporary philosophy, we will now expand on how both of these challenges intersect.

Adorno’s conception of spiritual experience is established through a critique of the principle of subject-object identity that governs transcendental accounts of experience such as subjective idealism. In subjective idealism, the conditions of possibility of experience are predicated on a relation of identity between subjective concepts and the objects of experience. Yet as subject-object identity cannot account for the totality of experience – the objects of experience being non-identical to subjective concepts due to their containment in an antagonistic social totality –, its failure promotes incomplete responses such as positivism and phenomenology. Responses such as these are deficient because they try to ground the possibility of knowledge on either the givenness of mind-independent objectivity or the presupposition of *a priori* concepts – the two sides of the ontological gap. For Adorno, accounts of experience such as these effectively operate within the framework of idealism’s failure, which opens up a seemingly insurmountable chasm between facticity and transcendence. This then allows both disciplines to subsequently submit the excluded correlate – a necessary aspect of experience in its own right – to the demands of the other,

150 Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, xx.

now construed as a first principle. As first principles are necessarily the product of subjective mediation, these accounts take something that is supposed to be mediated in experience and instead establish it as the condition of possible experience – and subsequently, mediation. Both of these accounts of experience fall into a framework that necessarily prioritizes abstract subjectivity over objectivity as the ground for experience, whether they are aware of it or not.

Adorno's solution is to establish the possibility of experience on the basis of a relation of subject-object *mediation*¹⁵¹, which we now understand as a form of co-constitution. Co-constitution entails a relation of reciprocity between subject and object, yet one which guarantees that the subject does not gain priority over the object: in other words, reciprocity requires subject-object non-identity. Subject-object mediation thus consists of the determinate *negation* of given objects on behalf of a critical subject, who then re-adjusts what they took to be intuitive concepts on the basis of the non-conceptuality of the object. In order for experience to be possible, the object must be accorded priority in experience, in the sense that the subject must 'give itself' to the object if the latter is to serve as a clue to its inadequate conceptualization. If not, the object is mistaken for what our intuitive-yet inadequate concepts already assumed it to be, and the subjective framework that holds these concepts together – transcendental subjectivity – remains in a position of priority in experience, as a condition of the latter's possibility.

Brian O'Connor is right to point out that regardless of its emphasis on the non-identity between subject and object, Adorno's negative dialectic consists of a transcendental account of experience¹⁵², insofar as he is still concerned with the latter's conditions of possibility in the wake of idealism's failure. As such, the founding principle of the transcendental approach is dissolved and replaced with its opposite: what was once understood as an insurmountable correlation between thought and being must now be understood as a lack of coherence between both. While this lack of coherence is objective, the context in which it gains its objective character cannot be presupposed in the same way

151 O'Connor, *Adorno's Negative Dialectic*, 55-57.

152 *Ibid.*, 55-57.

as an object; instead society is an actualized form of totality, which necessarily encompasses any given object that appears within it. The inability to precisely determine the social totality at the outset of experience is what allows the latter to unfold towards more determinate knowledge of the wider context in which this lack is maintained. Like idealism, the process of spiritual experience leads to the constitution of knowledge, but unlike idealism this knowledge is constituted negatively; as the universal that underpins modern society – the logic of exchange – is irrational in its concretized form, the Absolute is only discernible through its own negation in spiritual experience. For Adorno, this tension is constitutive of the *actual* relation between reason and reality

It is here that both challenges intersect. The first challenge rightly criticizes what we thought to be the organizing principle of the transcendental account of experience, and replaces it with a type of relation that preserves the interaction between subject and object without forcing the former to determine the latter. As a result, one does not need to merely think of concepts as being prior to objects in experience; on the other hand, mind-independent objectivity is no longer understood as something from which subjectivity has been subtracted, as this would then equip us with an incomplete understanding of the Absolute. Instead, the Absolute is understood as something that simultaneously informs and evades the subject, prompting the latter to retain its critical ethos in relation to the objects that it experiences. This is significant in relation to the second challenge, which consists of the transition between a purely philosophical account of experience to the praxis of social critique. While Adorno believes that the critique of society does not require an Absolute subject like in Hegel, nor a historical subject as in Marx, it must still be criticized from the standpoint of the actual, living individuals that it submits to its abstract logic; if not, it is impossible to reveal any inconsistencies between the intentions of society and the “grim empirical reality” that it submits individuals to in order to fulfill those very intentions. In other words, without a subject of critique, the object of critique – the empirical reality of society – becomes identical with the intentions of society. This particular configuration of empirical reality is normalized through an equation between the natural and the historical. “Naturalization” is conversely achieved by extinguishing the historically-contingent

qualities of society's subjects, the content of that informs their very particularity as living individuals. In Adorno's view, this form of identification is ideological in the sense that it serves a wider social function: the submission of the living particular to the abstract logic of exchange society, now taking the form of 'natural' law.

Adorno's response is to bring the problem of the transcendental back into the confines of experience, namely through the critique of the authority gained by the latter when it structures experience from without. If the concept of the transcendental concerns the universal concepts that seem to exceed the concrete existence of the subject, it must be understood as a problem in the same way that society is understood as a problem when its processes end up subordinating subjects to a logic that seems to elude their very ratiocinations, consequently transforming them into passive objects. This is subject-object identity expressed in its actual form: the suffering expressed in the object coincides with the suffering experienced by the subject, as both are rendered functionally identical. As suffering can only be experienced by living individuals and expressed within the sedimented history of particular objects, the particular becomes more constitutive of experience than the universals that are assumed to mediate it transcendently. In other words, society is only constitutive of experience insofar as it fails to totally mediate it; conversely, the whole can only be grasped in its falsehood. Society no longer becomes a meaning-fulfilling, positive category, but a complex of breaks and fractures through which its extinguished possibilities can still be retrieved: "The interpretation of given reality and its abolition are connected to each other, not, of course, in the sense that reality is negated in the concept, but that out of the construction of a configuration of reality the demand for its real change always follows promptly".¹⁵³ If we must recover the relevance of first-generation Frankfurt School thinkers such as Adorno, it is by taking the problem of the transcendental – and consequently, the concept and sustained critique of society itself – to heart.

153 Adorno, "The Actuality of Philosophy", *Telos*, 129.

Bibliography

Adorno, Theodor W. *Against Epistemology*. Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2013.

_____. *Critical Models*. New York City, NY: Columbia University Press, 2005.

_____. *Hegel: Three Studies*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994.

_____. "Husserl and the Problem of Idealism", *The Journal of Philosophy* 37, no.1 (1940)

_____. *Introduction to Dialectics*. Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2017.

_____. *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*. Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2008.

_____. *Negative Dialectics*. Un-Official Translation by Dennis Redmond, 2001.

http://monkeybear.info/ND_Full.pdf

_____. "The Actuality of Philosophy", *Telos* 31 (1977).

_____. "The Idea of Natural History", *Telos*, no.60 (1984)

Theodor Adorno et al., *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann Educational Books, 1981.

Buck-Morss, Susan. *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*. New York, NY: Free Press, 1979.

O'Connor, Brian. "Adorno and the Problem of Givenness", *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 58, vol. 227 (2004).

- O'Connor, Brian. *Adorno's Negative Dialectic*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004.
- Foster, Roger. *Adorno: The Recovery of Experience*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2008.
- Gordon, Peter E. *Adorno and Existence*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016.
- Hegel, GWF. *The Phenomenology of the Spirit*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press)
- Husserl, Edmund. *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*. The Hague, NL: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1983.
- _____. *Logische Untersuchungen Vol. II, 2*. Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag 1921.
- Lukacs, Georg. *History and Class Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1972).
- Miller, Jared. "Phenomenology's Negative Dialectic", *The Philosophical Forum Quarterly* 40, no.1 (2009)
- Nikolic, Olga. "Husserl's Theory of Noematic Sense", *Filozofija I Društvo*, 4 (2016)
- Skirke, Christian. "Metaphysical Experience and Constitutive Error in Adorno's 'Meditations on Metaphysics' ", *Inquiry* 55, no.3 (2012)
- Tertulian, Nicholas. "Adorno-Lukacs: polémiques et malentendus". *Cités*, 22 (2005).