

# **Adorno Under the Spell:**

## **Utopia, praxis and the limits of critique**

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Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the  
degree of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) in Philosophy

Cardiff University, September 2019

This thesis presents an interpretation of Theodor W. Adorno's philosophy that emphasises the notion of the spell. This has been commented on, but rarely centred, in previous scholarship on Adorno. The spell represents Adorno's understanding of the way in which totalising trends in society (including 'identity thought', and the tendency toward ever-greater integration, hierarchy and domination) exerts an ideological force that is so great it informs the way in which we are able to think and act in the world. I argue that, in light of this, Adorno's negative dialectics should be understood as an attempt to criticise the spellbound world immanently, i.e. without postulating any alternative vision, but only acting to reveal what is excluded under the spell and what, therefore, is false within it. This reading builds on recent work on Adorno's 'inverse theology', extending this to an inverse theory of truth in Adorno, and taking seriously his argument that negative dialectics holds only so long as we are in the 'wrong state of things' (*ND* 11). For all this, however, Adorno is motivated in his critique by a strong sense of utopian possibility and the potential, however distant, of moving beyond the spell. The interplay between these two positions causes difficulty for Adorno at times, particularly in his account of experience, and notoriously when it comes to the question of political action. I argue that there are nevertheless grounds to believe that Adorno's utopian urge and his critical practice can be reconciled, and I give a distinctive argument that changing social and political conditions since Adorno's death could allow for meaningful, legitimate praxis that could lead us toward overcoming the spell, which I establish through the politics of climate breakdown.

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*For Dad.*

## Acknowledgements

I am truly grateful to have been able to draw on the support of so many people in researching and writing this work.

I have been extremely fortunate to work with an excellent supervisory team. Dr Andrew Edgar has been a mentor and an inspiration and it is fair to say that, over the years, he has shaped the way I think about and practice philosophy on a profound level. His encouragement, knowledge and advice have been invaluable, and without our long and frequently tangential discussions I am sure this thesis would not be the same. In addition to his profound depth of knowledge, Andrew is a kind and decent man and working with him has been a joy.

Professor Christine Hauskeller acted as my co-supervisor, and through her dedicated support I have benefited more than anyone I know from this arrangement. Christine's genuine interest and expert insight into my work has helped me to articulate my ideas and even at times helped me to understand what my ideas are. Her feedback is often frank, but never unwelcome, and has challenged and developed my work and thought. In addition to her personal support and friendship, Christine has encouraged my professional development and welcomed me into the department at Exeter.

Dr Peter Sedgwick has had the difficult task of supervising this work at the very beginning and the very end of the process. He has helped me to articulate my aims and intentions and has been a well-spring of practical advice as well as pastoral help. Peter has helped resolve a number of issues in this process and offered vital perspective during trying times. He has been unfailingly supportive of both myself and this project.

I would also like to thank Professor Christopher Norris and Dr Orestis Palermos, who have reviewed my work at various stages of this project and offered insightful comments and criticisms. Academic staff at both Cardiff University and the University of Exeter have offered their support, encouragement and interest.

Cardiff University's professional services staff, in particular Rhian Rattray and Samantha Stanway of the school Postgraduate Office, have not only been extremely helpful in their professional capacity but are kind, uplifting and generous people. This project would have been much harder without their support.

I am grateful for all those who have commented on my research, when I have presented it at various Work in Progress groups, conferences and colloquiums. I have been particularly fortunate to have been a part of the Exeter Critical Theory Colloquium and received detailed and insightful commentary from the participants there.

Garmon Iago has been a constant companion in Adorno-land and through our reading groups and frequent discussions I have benefitted from his friendship, engagement and depth of knowledge. Dr Jaanika Puusalu has been a generous and

supportive commentator on my work. I have been glad to be a part of a strong community of postgraduate philosophers: Mubashir Khan, Amanda Courtright-Lim, Dr Andrew Jones, Dr Carl Murphy, Dr Ethan Chambers, Dr Tom Constant, Matthew Jenkins, Benjamin Smart, and Paul Hampson. I am proud to call them all my friends.

This work has been funded by the AHRC under the South West and Wales Doctoral Training Partnership. I am grateful for their financial support, and for the SWWDTP's co-supervision and training arrangements.

My fiancée, Ffion Meijer, has been with me through the highs and the lows and her constant love, patience and encouragement has meant the world to me. My son, Dylan Lovell Meijer, was born partway through my PhD studies and seeing him grow up has given me joy beyond words.

My father, Christopher Wolfe, to whom this thesis is dedicated, remains a source of strength, kindness and wisdom and a model for the person I would like to be. I love and miss him every day.

There are many more friends and family I would like to thank, who have given me support, love and encouragement along the way. They will know who they are, and I thank them from the bottom of my heart.

## Introduction

People, of course, are spellbound without exception, and none of them are capable of love, which is why everyone feels loved too little. But the spectator's posture simultaneously expresses doubt that this could be all [...] (*ND* 363)

The work of Theodor W. Adorno (1903-1969) represents a comprehensive attempt to chart the course of life under an oppressive and totalising, yet false, system, and how it may yet be overcome. In it we are presented with resources to critically analyse the 'social totality', the 'wrong life' and the 'spell'. These terms give an idea of Adorno's social critique: our current world is total, i.e. it attempts to force all people and phenomena into an ordered, hierarchical system; it is wrong, because this totality is exclusive and distorted; and it operates through a spell, something resembling an ideological enchantment that distorts our ability to think outside its terms.<sup>1</sup> This thesis argues that reading Adorno through the lens of the spell highlights what is distinctive about his critical theory, offering an interpretation of his negative dialectics which emphasises the utopian urge Adorno expresses and the way in which this utopian hope comes into tension with his critical thought. Adorno, I argue, is not only a philosopher of the spell, but a philosopher self-consciously in the spell, recognising the difficulties that would accompany any serious attempt to go beyond the current state of things while attempting to lay the groundwork for doing just that. The spell is powerful, but it is not all-powerful: Adorno's reflections on it begin to show us its falsity and I close by arguing that we may yet be able to rescue the utopian urge.

We must understand Adorno as a philosopher both of ruins and of hope. He relentlessly criticises life under late capitalism, seeking to highlight the ways in which the spell creates a wrong life and a wrong society which also prevents us from actualising something that would be better. Adorno also relentlessly seeks this 'something better', attempting to use his critical methodology to open up the space by which this spell might be transcended. The spell, which I argue should be understood as a primary analytic category for Adorno, refers to the interconnected

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<sup>1</sup> These terms will all be considered in further detail later in the thesis.



ideological, structural and spiritual (in the sense of intellectual) phenomena that make up our basic ideas about the world and the objective social and economic relationships that undergird them. The goal of critical theory is to identify the operation of this spell, and by doing so to open the space for something better.

Adorno's work has been read and interpreted many times before, and I will explain my interpretative strategy in this introduction. This will pave the way for exploring some of the basic ideas in Adorno's work: the social totality, identity thought, the wrong life and the primacy of the object. Understanding these ideas is important to understanding Adorno's critical project, and in particular the negative dialectical methodology which Adorno uses. I then outline the argument of the thesis chapter-by-chapter, and consider the position of my argument within the existing literature on Adorno. The introduction ends with some remarks on translation, referencing and thesis style, for the benefit of the reader.

### **Reading Adorno**

This thesis does not attempt a comprehensive account of Adorno's work. In part, this is because of the sheer breadth of Adorno's output: Adorno wrote work in philosophy, aesthetics, musicology, literary theory, sociology, and more besides, and to cover all this would require either much more space than is available or much less depth in argument. What I am concerned with here is to develop an account of Adorno's philosophical project, and in particular that project as it is presented in *Negative Dialectics*. *Negative Dialectics* is in some ways a *summa* of Adorno's critical theory, presenting both a model for critique and the utopian hope that accompanies it in a thorough, if for some maddening and frequently obscure, manner. The vast majority of scholarship on Adorno's philosophical work rightly situates *Negative Dialectics* as the key work for understanding Adorno's project. While this does mean that this thesis neglects somewhat some of the wider resonances of Adorno's critical project, it is also important to note that negative dialectics is not a model that is restricted to philosophy. Many of the topics and areas that I will discuss over the course of this thesis were also articulated by Adorno in different contexts: the question of art, for instance, draws upon Adorno's contentions about the wrong life and on the operation of negative dialectics. Likewise, Adorno's philosophical thought refers outward to social critique, aesthetics and cultural criticism. By focusing on this aspect of Adorno's thought, then, I do not mean to

minimise the breadth of Adorno's concern but rather to highlight how his critique proceeds and the philosophical arguments on which it is based.

One assumption in the preceding paragraph is that there is a unified critical method in Adorno's work. This might be surprising, given that Adorno professes to be preparing an 'anti-system' (*ND xx*). The prefix 'anti-' can be misleading in this context. What Adorno is not doing is delegitimising the idea of a coherent critical approach in favour of a critical nominalism that approaches each phenomenon as separate, self-contained and to be judged according to criteria particular to that phenomenon. Adorno's point is rather that the anti-system is a critical interrogation of the idea of a system: it is telling that his claim for an 'anti-system' is made in direct reference to 'anti-drama' and the 'anti-hero' (*ND xx*). The anti-hero, for example, is not a not-hero; rather, they are a hero who shuns some core conventions of heroism. Likewise, the anti-system maintains a coherence of purpose and critical form but shuns some core aspects of a system. For Adorno, the main thing to reject is the idea of totality, that a philosophical system could be sufficient to explain all phenomena in a closed and ordered totality of knowledge. This is expressed most pithily in his statement, inverting Hegel, that 'the whole is the false' (*MM §29*).

Systematic thought, for Adorno, is a form of reason that sees itself as all-encompassing, and is therefore connected intrinsically to idealism (*ND 26*). Any form of thought that sees the world as entirely permeable to rational, ordered systematic thought is, for Adorno, a form of idealism, because it reduces the object of thought to a concept in thought. This will, Adorno argues, eventually lead to the object's displacement by the concept — as we will see in Adorno's account of the primacy of the object, below. It is in this way that systematic thought as such tends toward idealism, and 'turns the character of thought ... into metaphysics' (26), which is to say, transforms a statement about how we think into a general statement about how the world is. Systematic thought is also static. Although a system can have dynamic elements, such as Hegelian 'becoming', the fact that a system is supposed to be closed (i.e., there is no phenomenon outside it) means that these dynamic elements are false: 'implicitly, each single definition in [Hegel's system] was already preconceived' (27). It is this attempt to explain each phenomenon inside the system that ultimately causes that system's closure and guarantees its falsity. Everything

becomes predetermined insofar as it fits within a pre-existing order, and what cannot be explained within that order is simply ignored.

This account connects with Adorno's social critique, and in particular with Adorno's attempt to centre the 'non-identical' and 'non-conceptual', both of which are excluded under systematic identity thought. This thread will be picked up throughout the thesis, and articulates something of what may be called Adorno's methodology.<sup>2</sup> Here I am referring to Adorno's encouragement of 'a philosophy in fragment form' that could, alone, serve as a means to present 'conceptions, in the particular, of the totality that is inconceivable as such' (*ND* 28). Through the particular, that is, we can come to understand the whole, but a whole which is presented through fragmentary instances which interrelate with each other and none of which present a totality in themselves. Stewart Martin argues that this 'processual, open, and non-self-sufficient — that is, fragmentary — apprehension of the absolute', as an inheritance from Romantic philosophers, points the way toward an understanding of the system in which the absolute 'is not apprehended in terms of a system, [but] the system is apprehended in terms of the absolute' ('Adorno's Conception of the Form of Philosophy' 58). In other words, the totality is not a conclusion presupposed by the system; rather, the system is to be revealed and worked out by the presence of a totality — although not a metaphysical totality.

Adorno valorised the fragment form in his 'Essay as Form', which argues that the essay itself is a critique of systems: by presenting itself as a fragment, it 'allows for the consciousness of non-identity, without expressing it directly' ('Essay as Form' 9). It 'suspends the traditional concept of method' (11), through its presentation of its object as it is without 'reducing' it to any other explanation. The essay is an analysis of a phenomenon in terms of its social context, without positing any absolute origin. As Gillian Rose rightly says, it 'has all the features of the "anti-system"' (*The Melancholy Science* 19). Furthermore, as a fragmentary method, the essay shows that 'each [fragment] is equally close to the centre' (Martin, 'Adorno's Conception of the Form of Philosophy' 58). In other words, a fragmentary philosophy does not necessarily advance by way of a single narrative argument, but develops depending on the phenomena that are being analysed, elements of which are drawn out at

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<sup>2</sup> Notwithstanding the comments in the paragraph below on the traditional understanding of a 'method'.

different points of the text. Only once the interrelations between fragments are worked out can an understanding of the whole begin.

Adorno's work thus presents itself as a critique of the system which operates, in its own way, systematically. Adorno rejects the idea of a total, integrated order but nevertheless attempts to understand social phenomena and philosophical argument through 'fragments' which reveal something of a whole. This style is especially apparent in *Minima Moralia* and *Negative Dialectics*, which progress in the style of short reflections rather than in a more traditional manner. Before I discuss the implications of this for interpreting and reading Adorno, I will attempt to clarify Adorno's approach using the distinction he refers to between the '*esprit de système*' and the '*esprit systématique*' (ND 24).<sup>3</sup> Adorno opposes the *esprit systématique* to hierarchical, ordered forms of systematic knowledge. The *esprit systématique* is rather compared to the Encyclopédie: it is 'rationally organised and yet discontinuous, unsystematic [in the hierarchical sense], loose' (29). Indeed, the Encyclopédie itself was a reaction against previous hierarchical systems: as Diarmaid MacCulloch argues, its alphabetical arrangement 'was the eighteenth century's levelling riposte to the systems and classifications of Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas, and the insistence on subverting contemporary hierarchy was all-pervasive' (*A History of Christianity* 801). A purely alphabetical ordering creates coherence without hierarchy: cross-referenced, it instead presents phenomena as interconnected. Sometimes this is to subversive effect — MacCulloch notes that the article for Anthropopages (cannibals) includes 'the straight-faced instruction to "see Eucharist, Communion"' (801). This form of system has clear resonances with Adorno's work. Adorno argues that:

To comprehend a thing itself, not just to fit and register it in its system of reference, is nothing but to perceive the individual moment in its immanent connection with others. [...] What the conception of the system recalls, in reverse, is the coherence of the nonidentical, the very thing infringed by deductive systematics. (ND 26)

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<sup>3</sup> This is a distinction also noted by Stewart Martin, who connects it directly to Adorno's reference in *Catchwords* (published as part of *Critical Models* in English) to attempting to create a new philosophical dictionary, per Voltaire (Martin, 'Adorno's Concept of the Form of Philosophy' 59-61). Martin's conclusions are sound, although I stress a different aspect of this project.

This argument helps to explain Adorno's use of the constellation as an alternative means of using concepts, which is elaborated in the course of this thesis. The key idea is that, despite the falsity of totalising systems, there is nonetheless a 'coherence' in which things are interconnected and mediated. By critiquing the bad totality that attempts to put all things in an ordered relationship to the absolute, we come across the critical possibility of recognising the right systematic approach.

What this means in practice is that Adorno's anti-system is an open system that is instantiated through critique. The use of the false (the wrong system, here) to discover something closer to the truth (although, as I will argue, never attaining 'the' truth) is a basic Adornian move that will be discussed in later chapters.

This is all by way of framing the way in which we should read and write about Adorno. Adorno himself writes allusively, referencing ideas and concepts that he sometimes does not explain until further into the text. He operates in fragments which do not always form a clear argumentative progression. This makes discussing Adorno's thought in the form of a more traditionally-structured philosophical text rather difficult.<sup>4</sup> In interpreting his ideas, there is necessarily a good deal of work to be done to reconstruct the order in which arguments are made and how to separate the normative or utopian elements from the critical ones. This is not always easy, and chapter 4 turns on the difficulty of knowing exactly what role one of these arguments (on experience) is supposed to play. I have understood Adorno in the context of the spell: this offers a coherent and, I think, interesting perspective from which to understand Adorno's practical concerns and the importance of his critique. In doing so, I recognise that this is not a comprehensive account of Adorno's work, although I think utilising the idea of the spell takes us further to a comprehensive account than we might think. More pragmatically, it means that I have had to choose when and how to introduce some of Adorno's ideas. This means that there is a degree to which this text is de-centred: reference will be made to ideas that are discussed in detail in later chapters, and later chapters will develop lines of thought introduced earlier. Although I have attempted to present Adorno's ideas in as straightforward a manner

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<sup>4</sup> I am far from the only commentator to notice this. One good explication of the difficulties is in Fabian Freyenhagen, *Adorno's Practical Philosophy*, 15-16.

as possible, a degree of interconnection such as this is to some extent unavoidable without mangling the structure of the work.

The second way in which Adorno's methodology bears on this work is that I frequently proceed through analysis of Adorno's arguments in certain salient passages, in a quasi-hermeneutic style. There is a risk in doing so in English, which I discuss in part in the question of translation below, but there is also the question of whether this approach gives an accurate reading of Adorno's project. Given Adorno's fragmentary style, and the approach to systematic thought described above, approaching Adorno's texts as fragments that cohere into a critical method would appear to be an appropriate way to understand them. Taking a section of text, and subjecting it to analysis which connects it to wider arguments in Adorno's work, can offer a stronger interpretation than attempts to view Adorno's work 'in the round', which risks passing over ideas of decisive importance that are sometimes referred to very briefly in Adorno's writing — something like this has happened to the understanding of the role of the spell in Adorno's thought, which I discuss in chapter 2. The opposite error, to magnify something of comparatively little importance into a grand theory, is possible using this method, and I have taken care when discussing Adorno's ideas to ensure that there is a solid and repeated textual basis for giving them the emphasis I do.

In the final paragraph of *Negative Dialectics* Adorno argues that a 'micrological view cracks the shells of what, measured by the subsuming cover concept, is helplessly isolated' (*ND* 408). This emphasis on the 'smallest intramundane traits' helps escape from the idea of totality towards something that recognises non-identity and non-conceptuality (408). This highlights Adorno's focus on analysing phenomena both as they present themselves in the social totality and in terms of what is excluded from that totality. This is the attempt to consider things from the 'standpoint of reconciliation' (*MM* §152), which is to say, from the standpoint where that totality has already been recognised as not total. The 'anti-system' is, however, connected to that totality. It is, as negative dialectics, 'the self-consciousness of the objective context of delusion: it does not mean to have escaped from that context' (*ND* 406). The tension that develops between Adorno's attempt to move beyond the system and his methodological reliance on that system is highlighted throughout this thesis.

### **Social totality, identity thinking and the ‘wrong life’**

To begin to explain this, I will now introduce some of Adorno’s major ideas about the operation of the system and its interaction with the world. I have separated this into two sections: the first considers the idea of the social totality and identity thought, factors which contribute to the spell which will be discussed in chapter 2. The concept of totality here corresponds to the idea of the hierarchical system discussed above, and for Adorno it is this sort of social totality that operates within the world today. Its systematic nature also leads to the predominance of identity thought, a form of thinking which has significantly negative consequences for Adorno. It is in this context that I discuss Adorno’s claim that we live in a ‘wrong life’, a claim which has consequences for his view on how we might create a better world. The next section considers a major reason Adorno is critical of identity thought: the primacy of the object thesis. This argues that our understanding of the relationship between subject and object is distorted, and that recognising the primacy of the object is important for critique and for understanding what is excluded under the totalising force of the spell.

The idea of a social totality stems from Adorno’s reading of Hegel and Marx, and I will consider this in more detail in chapter 1. But it is also connected, as much in Adorno’s work is, with the question of Auschwitz. Adorno, Rolf Tiedemann argues, ‘would hardly ... have philosophised without fascism, or at least have philosophised *in that way* [emphasis in original]’ (“Do you know what it will look like?” 125). Part of this is borne out in Adorno’s understanding of society as a would-be totality, that is, as an increasingly integrated and hierarchical system seeking to bring all phenomena under its aegis. Society tends ‘universally to resemble the extermination camps’ (Tiedemann 132) as this process develops. This process comes in part from the application of the exchange principle, which reduces all things to their power to achieve a price in the market. This totality is not a system that coheres, however: it is antagonistic, constantly seeking to ‘expand, progress, advance its frontiers, not respect any limit, not remain the same’ (ND 26). It is totalising, because it seeks to reduce all subjects and objects to their value as exchange, and it is total because it does not allow for dissent. Alongside these economic forces, there are political attempts at integration. These take the form of making the other like oneself, the better to fit them into a system. It is for this reason that Adorno argues that

‘[g]enocide is the absolute integration’, the use of raw concentrated power to abolish difference — ‘administrative murder’ (*ND* 362).

The social totality is not a fully-integrated totality, however. The antagonism within it, and in particular the urge to widen its scope, means that it remains incomplete in reality, although socially and ideologically, however, the totality is presented as fact, as a ‘second nature’ that presents itself as a universal truth. The ideological form of the totality is expressed, in part, by the predominance of identity thinking. What identity thinking has in common with the social totality is the desire to make everything that is ‘other’ into what is the same: either to make everything subject or everything object, and in any event to make everything fall under a correct classification. It is a totalising form of thought. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer relate this process to ‘mythic fear’: the fear of the unknown, the outside, the heterogeneous (*Dialectic of Enlightenment* 16). The process of enlightenment is the movement of bringing what is unknown under a rational and ordered system. In such a way, it is ‘totalitarian’ (6): it refuses to consider anything except ‘what can be apprehended in unity’ (7) and anything outside this is ignored entirely.

Identification itself, however, is an inescapable part of thought. Thought operates in concepts, which are by necessity identifications. Adorno does not seek to merely condemn identity thought, but rather to recognise the non-identity that is latent within it, and bring this to light (Jarvis 167; *ND* 149). Simon Jarvis compares this to Adorno’s immanent critique of the exchange economy: the problem is not necessarily with exchange *per se*, but rather that an apparently ‘fair’ exchange is in reality unequal (Jarvis 167). Likewise, identification is not *per se* wrong, but its limitations should be brought to light and recognised. Thus ‘the ideal of identity must not simply be discarded’ (*ND* 149). Instead, the critique of identity should look to bring non-identity and non-conceptuality to light within it. In this way, identity would ‘undergo a qualitative change’ towards an affinity relationship (*ND* 149). We will see this form of critique in more detail when we consider the idea of constellations later in the thesis.

Identity thought, it should be clarified, is not a matter of individual human consciousness as much as it is a social phenomenon. The urge to bring objects under



a structured system is mirrored in the social development of a hierarchical and self-referential social totality, a society which aims to totally integrate its members and define them according to their position within it. Indeed, the movement in thought and the movement in society are part of the same tendency. Both identity thought and social totality seek the integration of what is outside it, and both seek to place their objects into ordered and hierarchical systems.

This is because of a form of ‘species-reason’ that is connected with the idea of self-preservation (Adorno, *History and Freedom* 44). Self-preservation is, Adorno argues, a primitive form of psychic life. It is a motive force behind identity thought because it seeks to remove sources of fear and stress that threaten the individual, including those elements that fall outside the realm of knowledge and into myth. But individual self-preservation also leads to a form of species self-preservation. This species self-preservation likewise attempts to remove what threatens it — including, potentially, the ‘individuals it comprises’ (44). Identity thinking is one way in which the individuality of the individual can be reduced to a concept, and therefore made suitable for a system.

Because the social totality is both a socially objective phenomenon, i.e. it exists in the world as a process of ever-deepening integration, and is also an ideological phenomenon, i.e. through identity thought it causes us to think in totalising ways, it exerts a powerful hold on our thought. This is one aspect of the spell, which is elaborated in further detail in chapter 2. The totality is a mediating force that is itself mediated by the totality, producing ‘a second and deceptive immediacy’ (Adorno, ‘Late Capitalism or Industrial Society?’). This immediacy means that the mediating moment is ‘forgotten or repressed in consciousness’ and, crucially, means that we cannot see that the supposed rationality of the system is driven by a thoroughly irrational *Gesetzmaessigkeit* (translated as ‘nomotheism’, but also given as ‘lawfulness, juridicality’) which represents the totalising urge (‘Late Capitalism or Industrial Society?’). In this way, we simply are not able to take a stance outside the system: we are too enmeshed in its false immediacy and its ways of thought to even conceive of something outside it. This is why Adorno’s critical theory sets itself up as being an ‘ontology of the wrong state of things’ (ND 11): it is an attempt to show what is hidden and repressed under the spell, rather than to formulate an allegedly true account of what the right would be. This is what is sometimes called Adorno’s

‘wrong life claim’ (e.g. in Whyman, ‘Adorno’s Wrong Life Claim and the Concept of Despair), which takes its cue from the aphorism in *Minima Moralia* that ‘wrong life cannot be lived rightly’ (*MM* §18). This phrase, in German ‘*Es gibt kein richtiges Leben im falschen*’ (*Gesammelte Schriften* [GS] 4, 43), also translates as ‘there is no right life in the wrong/false one’: *Falschen* denotes something incorrect rather than something that is morally wrong. It is similar to Adorno’s claim that ‘the whole is the false’ (*MM* §29) or ‘*Das Ganze ist das Unwahre*’ (GS4, 55): *Unwahr* means untrue. The wrong life claim is that our life under the social totality is not true, that the totality creates a false and therefore misleading of the picture of the world. But we are so enmeshed in this false life, precisely because it presents itself as a totality which affects every aspect of our thought and, indeed, our existence, that we cannot step outside it from a ‘right’ vantage point. The claim of critical theory is rather that we should, by critique, show that the totality is false, that it excludes and distorts things that are of importance and that it fails to accurately capture things. In this way, it will also show that we ourselves are distorted by the spell, and this causes suffering both socially (through malign political programmes) and on an individual basis (the distortion caused to our own very selves through the false totality).

This is why Adorno argues that ‘the chances are that every citizen of the wrong world would find the right one unbearable’ (*ND* 352). Even the ‘sharpest critic’ of the current world cannot imagine what the right one would look like: our imaginings ‘remain chained to [us] and to [our] present time as static points of reference’, meaning that even our dreams of a utopian order exist only within the context of the wrong life and are therefore shaped by it (352). We simply do not know what a good world would look like, and we are incapable of imagining it, because we are too caught up in the wrong one. What critique does is to attempt to take the ‘standpoint of redemption’ (*MM* §153), what Elizabeth Pritchard (‘*Bilderverbot* Meets Body’) calls an ‘inverse theology’. This does not mean giving any substance to what redemption (or a positive theology) might look like, but by showing what is not redeemed, not reconciled, in the current order to show inversely how the right life might appear — through a glass darkly, a reference evoked by Deborah Cook in her article on inverse theology (‘Through a Glass Darkly’). ‘As impenetrable as the bane [*Bann*] is, it’s only a spell [*Bann*]’ (Adorno, ‘Late Capitalism or Industrial

Society?’), which is to say that the totality is omnipresent, but not yet omnipotent. There are still ways to reveal its falseness, even if we cannot go beyond that to any substantive idea of what the right would look like.

### **The primacy of the object**

Adorno thus both upholds the totality of the totality and its falseness, which leaves it open to critique. One way in which this is done is through the primacy of the object, Adorno’s argument that identity thought goes wrong because it is incapable of capturing wholly its object under a concept. Indeed, no concept can wholly capture an object. The primacy of the object is something that is revealed by critique, but it is also something which can be experienced, and which helps to motivate critique. This invites objections, and I will address these in chapter 4, which considers the question of how the primacy of the object is experienced in much greater detail. Nonetheless, an idea of what the primacy of the object is is important, because in many respects it is the consistent thread through Adorno’s critical project. The primacy of the object explains why a negative dialectic is possible; it grants the critique of totality / the spell a concreteness that it might otherwise lack; and it offers some justification for the direction of Adorno’s thought when he looks towards dissolving the spell through constellations.

In brief, the idea of the primacy of the object is contained in the thought that each subject is also an object, but not every object is a subject (*ND* 183). In other words, each subject — whether that be an individual, or a shared set of attributes among consciousness in general (as in a social subject) — is also an object: we exist in a material world, and are objects for others just as we sometimes are to ourselves. This is a point that has been made in the phenomenological literature. For instance, Edmund Husserl’s *Cartesian Meditations* argues that the other appears to us as an object of our perception, just as we appear as an object of perception to them (§56). While Adorno was not himself a Husserlian, the logic of his argument is similar. Subjects are also objects, because we can appear as such in experience and in relation to the material world. Indeed, because being an object is part of what makes us a subject, we cannot separate subject and object in the subject.<sup>5</sup> But not every

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<sup>5</sup> The justification of this argument has to do with Adorno’s materialism, and is considered in chapters 2 and 4.

object is also a subject, and objects do not need to be subjects in the same way that subjects need to be objects.

The primacy of the object is also a matter of considering the relationship between conceptual thought and objects, or in other words how subject and object interact. If the primacy of the object is not considered, then one outcome is conceptual, system-building thought, which is for Adorno (as we have seen) a form of idealism. Idealism ultimately reduces the object to the concept, and thereby to subjectivity. Adorno illustrates this using examples from Hegel and Kant, which are discussed further in the next chapter. Hegel sought to develop concepts until they reached a point where there was an absolute correspondence between the concepts and their object. Adorno argues that this is really to abolish the object: it is a perfected idealism, one which (in Simon Jarvis' words) makes objects 'merely illustrative, of interest only as examples of the concept' (*Adorno: A Critical Introduction* 166). This places the actual object outside the bounds of knowledge, referred to only through representations in conceptual thought. Likewise, Kant's transcendental subjectivity is presented, Adorno argues, as the 'Archimedean fixed point from which the world can be lifted out of its hinges' (*ND* 181). The transcendental subject becomes a constitutive subject, one which creates its objects, which carried through reduces the object to an 'idol', ultimately irrelevant (181). Under both models, the subject is made into the absolute, and the object loses its relevance; under both models, therefore, what exceeds the concept in the object is excluded.

While these are subjective forms of identity thinking, it is also important to note that in the current situation identity thought more often appears as a 'seemingly anti-subjectivist, scientifically objective' model, 'what is called reductionism' (*SO* 252). This self-identified materialist or naturalistic form of thinking appears as though it bypasses the subject entirely, in favour of an idea of objectivity. But this has more in common with a subjectivist reduction than it may appear: it holds to a 'latent and therefore all the more fatal subjectivism' because it reproduces 'subjective reason's ordering principles' (252-3). This form of objectivity takes objectivity to be whatever is left over after all that is subjective is subtracted away. By doing so, however, it assumes that the 'reified consciousness' that produced the rational order in which these objects are presented is in fact natural (253). Because it assumes that this subjective reason is a natural order, and arrogates to itself the privilege of taking

what is left over as if it were the truth, the reductionist model is for Adorno ‘the model of the profit that remains on the balance sheet after all production costs have been deducted’ (253). That is to say, it presents as immediate and available what has in fact been mediated by historical and social processes, giving a distorted understanding of what is the case. Just as profit cannot be separated from the process of its production, so objectivity cannot be separated from its formation in the relationship between subject and object. By attempting to remove this relationship in the name of the object, reductionism confirms its adherence to a subjective form of ordered reason as if it were natural.

This subjective moment is part of the primacy of the object, which is a ‘corrective’ to ‘the subjective reduction’, rather than the ‘denial of a subjective share’ (250). What identity thought ultimately misses is this dialectical relationship between subject and object, in which the subject can never wholly capture the object in thought. Dialectics, according to Adorno, ‘says no more, to begin with, than that objects do not go into their concepts without leaving a remainder’ (*ND* 5). The presence of this ‘remainder’ gives shape to his negative dialectics: it is founded on the ‘consistent sense of non-identity’ (5). And yet the object is also determined by subject, i.e. it is picked out as an object with qualities. This is also part of the relationship between subject and object, and will be considered in detail in chapter 4.

The primacy of the object, then, shows that the dominant forms of identity thinking both exclude something from their system-building. This something is referred to by Adorno both as non-identity, as in the fact that objects are not reducible to their concepts, and as non-conceptuality, the content of what is excluded by identity thought. These elements are considered further in chapters 3 and 4. The sense of non-identity is a motivating force for critique, but the primacy of the object is also a potent form of critique. For Adorno, the relationship between subject and object is historically mediated, which is why he chooses to analyse these concepts as a ‘historical sediment’ of how they have been used over time (*SO* 246). A critical analysis of this historical sediment is, however, already a criticism of the society in which these forms arose: ‘critique of society is critique of knowledge and vice-versa’ (250). By revealing the falseness of prevailing forms of subjectivity and objectivity, we also undertake a critique of the society in which these forms arise. The importance of the primacy of the object lies not only in this, however: the basic

recognition that the object exceeds its concepts is one which Adorno draws on in a variety of different contexts, and will be seen to recur in this thesis. As a critical model that also intends to say something substantive about the actual relationship between subject and object, however, it also appears to challenge Adorno's view of critique as a negative reflection on society as it stands now. This speaks to a real tension in Adorno's work between a conception of critique that does not permit the expression of positive statements about something better, and Adorno's equally basic understanding of the role of philosophy as something which 'must strive, by way of the concept, to transcend the concept' (*ND* 15). This tension is expressed most clearly in his work on praxis, which will be discussed in chapter 5.

### **The structure and argument of the thesis**

By introducing these ideas, I have also been introducing some of the arguments that run through this work. In brief, I argue that Adorno's understanding of the spell leads him to understand critique as something which remains within the spell, but which nonetheless hopes to move beyond it. I argue that while utopia must remain imageless, there are nonetheless reasons to argue that Adorno does not see all as being hopeless: we can begin to create the conditions for moving beyond the current state of things toward something better, although what that something better would ultimately be is closed to us. I conclude by considering one way in which praxis, political action, might help contribute toward this end.

Chapter 1 considers Adorno in light of his relationship with his contemporaries and antecedents, in the form of his Frankfurt School colleagues and in relation to Hegel, Marx, Lukács, Kant, Heidegger and Freud. The purpose of this chapter is twofold: firstly, it allows the introduction of ideas that are significant for understanding Adorno's thought and its place within philosophy; secondly, it helps to elucidate some of the ideas which I have introduced in this chapter. Adorno's understanding of the role of critique, and his use of certain concepts, is explored through his relationship with Walter Benjamin and Max Horkheimer. Through Hegel, Marx and Lukács I will consider Adorno's relationship to dialectics, introducing his understanding of negative dialectics. Kant and Heidegger are used to illustrate further Adorno's critique of subjectivity, and how that relates to a critique of society. Freud, finally, is introduced as a key figure in Adorno's own understanding of subjectivity, with particular importance being placed on the

somatic, bodily element. This chapter, together with what has been elucidated in the introduction, forms the background for the remainder of the thesis.

The second chapter considers the spell [*der Bann*]. While I have mentioned the spell above, it is in this chapter that I argue for its role as a key analytical category in Adorno's thought, consisting not only of the social totality but also of the ideological impact of that totality, and how the social totality and identity thought reinforce one another and help to produce the wrong life. The spell is discussed through its relation to domination over nature, and the chapter includes an analysis of how 'first' nature is abolished under the spell in favour of an ideological 'second' nature which presents itself as natural. I then turn to discuss the prospect that the spell might break itself. I do this by using a reading of the 'Theses against Occultism' and Harvey Cox's essay on 'The Market as God' to illustrate how the breakdown of the spell might lead to a remythologised order in which a godlike ideological construct might appear, creating a despotism more terrible than the spell it replaces.

This presents one possible outcome of the breaking of the spell. Chapter 3 begins to consider how we might move beyond the spell in a liberatory manner. This question, in one way or another, occupies the remainder of the thesis. This chapter begins with the idea of the image ban, Adorno's rejection of any positive or concrete image of utopia. I articulate the argument that Adorno presents an 'inverse theology' through his deployment of the image ban, in which the ban on substantive depictions of utopia highlights the need to critically negate the wrong life so that the right one may appear in inverse form. Negative dialectics, I argue, is attempting to do just this. Adorno's deployment of a version of determinate negation shows how this takes place. Unlike its Hegelian usage, Adorno's determinate negation does not produce a sublation or affirmative moment of re-conceptualisation. Rather, it reveals the falsity of the concept to begin with by showing what is excluded from it. Negative dialectics reveals the inadequacy of conceptual thought, and by doing so I argue that it adopts an inverse idea of truth, which can only be seen through the demonstration of what is false. The model of the constellation reflects this, reconfiguring concepts so that we can capture as much of the object as we are able to through an interrelated and mediated set of concepts that revolve around the object, potentially rendering it accessible to us. The constellation highlights the non-identity of the concept with the object, but is also points toward the non-conceptual. I argue in this chapter that the

non-conceptual is something which can be experienced, representing the mediations between objects and concepts and the excess that remains in the object, and potentially allowing us to experience the truth.

This question of experience is the subject of chapter 4. This chapter considers the vexed nature of this question, and in particular what role experience is supposed to play within Adorno's critical theory, and how far it can contribute to breaking the spell. Relating this to the question of subject and object, I argue that it can appear as if Adorno is presenting either a transcendental argument or a metaphysical one. Neither would be particularly fertile for a philosophy such as Adorno's, which is supposed to be opposed to any attempt at *prima philosophia* and which rejects eternal metaphysical truths. Instead, I argue that Adorno's account of experience is normative: it is how we ought to relate our experience to the object. This normative account prioritises the somatic element in experience, and I argue that the somatic impulse presents itself as a challenge to our spellbound conception of subjectivity, and acts as a potent reminder of non-identity. Adorno ultimately guides us toward a mediated relationship between the mental and the physical within a normative framework. This is highlighted with the idea of a moral impulse, which is tied in Adorno's work to questions about culture and political praxis, and what morality means in a spellbound world. I explore the 'new categorical imperative', its relation to culture and the limitations of both theoretical morality and the moral impulse in attempting to resist the spell.

Chapter 5 therefore considers the question of how we might move beyond the spell by considering the question of praxis. I begin by noting the way in which critique is motivated, for Adorno, by guilt, and how this relates to the urge to move beyond the wrong life. I consider the role of art, addendum experiences and education as forms of resistance, all of which are at one time or another noted as possible forms of praxis by Adorno. What unites these forms of praxis is their limited scope. The artwork can only point us towards understanding the spell through revealing non-identity and non-conceptuality. Addendum experiences can guide us away from our self-understanding of subjectivity and promote better forms of action, but can only do so in the context of the spell, and in any event are not open to all. Education seems promising, but can only act in the subjective sphere, and even then may only be able to achieve limited results. Indeed, education is at least in



part an attempt to achieve an understanding of the spell, rather than an action against it. But Adorno also argues that we really do need radical change. To understand why he does not endorse more radical political action, the chapter considers Adorno's critique of 'actionism', and in particular the idea that any action we do take is liable to recreate the wrong life we are attempting to overthrow. It is in this context, I argue, that we should consider Adorno's relationship to praxis: both committed to moving beyond the spell and wary of any too-hasty attempt to do so through praxis. Yet there are grounds to believe that this rejection of (certain kinds of) praxis might not be a permanent and ahistorical feature of Adorno's thought. His own political engagement, and his account of what a good praxis might look like, are clues to this end. I argue that, fifty years after Adorno, the objective social conditions are such that we can sustain a radical political praxis that is faithful to Adorno's critical theory and capable of opening a space for real change. Indeed, in the context of climate breakdown, such a praxis is urgently required.

I argue, in conclusion, that Adorno must be understood in the context of his enmeshment with the spell and his recognition that we are all equally spellbound, even where we criticise it. But we should also acknowledge the possibility that we might be in a position to move towards something better, that opens the possibility of a right world even while it is inextricable from the spellbound one. This could allow us to reconcile Adorno's commitment to a critical theory that is dependent on the spellbound world with his desire for a utopia, and the way in which his critical theory attempts to realise the conditions for it.

### **Relationship to the existing literature**

A concern with the normative and methodological foundations of Adorno's work is not recent, and in some respects stems from Habermas's rejection of the first generation critical theorists in his own work. Habermas accuses Adorno and Horkheimer's work of being a 'total critique' that turns against the very use of reason, leaving critical theory in a 'performative contradiction' (Habermas, 'The Entwinement of Myth and Enlightenment' 119). Habermas argues that, by rejecting reason itself, critical theory is left groundless and incapable of justifying its own method. This has shaped much subsequent Adorno scholarship, which not unreasonably is concerned to establish that Habermas was wrong on this count by showing that there are reasons to adopt Adorno's methodology, and that it gives

credible and justifiable outcomes. This is, as Whyman notes in a recent paper, ‘particularly difficult’ with respect to Adorno’s work, due to Adorno’s ‘wrong life claim’ that all that currently is, is false (Whyman, ‘Forcing Materialism upon Metaphysics’ 485). This thesis sits, broadly, within this strand of Adorno scholarship in its concerns with how Adorno’s work justifies itself and how Adorno’s methodology is established, although my interpretative position sees this as being within the context of how we are to break out of the spell rather than being concerned with normative foundations as such.

The intention of this section is not, then, to give a general overview of Adorno scholarship, but rather to situate my work as a contribution to a certain set of ongoing discussions. It is therefore, and inevitably, selective, and biased towards more recent contributions. The Adorno literature is large and varied, and in focusing on these discussions I do not mean to downplay the significance of other work: rather, I am attempting to articulate what I see as a pressing concern of Adorno scholarship in light of the problem of the foundations of critical theory.

One of the earlier attempts to introduce Adorno’s thought and to situate it as a distinct methodological approach is Gillian Rose’s *The Melancholy Science*, first published in 1978. Rose explains Adorno’s work as a methodological attempt to make Marxism ‘a search for style’, by which she means ‘continual vigilance to the mode in which theory is presented, thereby recasting the relation between theory and praxis’ (180). For Rose, Adorno’s style is purposefully designed to demonstrate constellatory thought, and attempts to critique society and capture the object through a series of parallaxes, irony and exaggerations. Habermas’s critique misses the ‘dialectical play’ in Adorno’s statement that ‘the whole is the false’, and for Rose in general misses the complexities of Adorno’s methodological use of style (190). Rose’s argument makes the question of normative foundation irrelevant, because what is important is rather how critique should operate in the world as Adorno finds it. There is something to this claim, and I will argue that we must consider Adorno’s work not as an attempt to found an alternative system but as a response to, and a critique of, the spell. Rose is ambivalent on how successful Adorno is, and in part this may be because there ultimately is a need for some kind of foundation: a foundation which nonetheless must be justifiable by Adorno’s own methodology.

A rather more recent attempt to create this foundation is Brian O'Connor's *Adorno's Negative Dialectic*. This work argues that negative dialectic is the foundation of Adorno's social critique, and that this is established through a 'comprehensively rational account of experience, such that any alternative account can be shown to be incoherent' (15). O'Connor argues that Adorno is in this respect committed to viewing his understanding of experience as a 'transcendental necessity' (15) — a claim which O'Connor notes is surprising. This argument is advanced through a thorough articulation of Adorno's relationship to various strands in modern philosophy. As will become clear, I also argue that Adorno's understanding of experience motivates his negative dialectics. But this understanding cannot be articulated via transcendental argument, not least because Adorno himself rejects the very idea of any sort of 'downright "first"' that maintains a certain invariant structure (*ND* 136). I articulate this objection in more detail in chapter 4, where it is connected to my interpretation of Adorno as holding an inverse theory of truth.

Alternative approaches to the question of foundation have largely turned on the idea of the 'normative', which in part may be because a normative foundation involves significantly less commitment to substantive metaphysical or epistemological ideas that would fall foul of Adorno's opposition to first philosophy. This is an argument that this thesis upholds in part, and there is a clear normative dimension to Adorno's view of how we come to critique: '[m]y thought is driven to [dialectics] by its own inevitable insufficiency, by my guilt of what I am thinking' (*ND* 5). This 'guilt' is, as I will explore in the next chapter, partially guilt in the Freudian sense as the consequence of socialisation; it is in part a genuine moral awareness of exclusion. The question of how to articulate this normative foundation is one which has been addressed in a number of ways.

Fabian Freyenhagen is the major recent defender of a reading of Adorno emphasising his negativity. Freyenhagen argues that Adorno is a 'meta-ethical negativist', which is to say that he believes we cannot know the good, and only the bad (*Adorno's Practical Philosophy* 11). We do not need any substantive idea of what the good could be, on Freyenhagen's view, to be able to reject the bad. Adorno does not guide us to what could be better, but merely shows how the current world is bad, and his invocations of utopia are to be understood only in the sense that utopia would not be like this. We are left with a 'negative Aristoteleanism' in which good

and bad are indexed to humanity and inhumanity respectively (239). Because we do not know under what conditions we could achieve humanity, or the good, we cannot have a ‘positive’ Aristoteleanism, but we do know very well what is bad, because it is what obstructs or denies the realisation (or even the basic needs) of humanity. Freyenhagen offers a persuasive case for this position, and one which certainly accords with the form of critique Adorno offers. But, as has been noted by others, a mere avoidance of the bad does not seem to offer the normative foundations for getting to the position where things are no longer bad (see Cook, ‘Open Thinking’ 12; Whyman, ‘Forcing Materialism upon Metaphysics’ 492). Freyenhagen’s reading does not take seriously enough Adorno’s deep-rooted commitment to overcoming the spell, in the terminology I adopt in the thesis, in such a way that we become capable of realising the good. I return to this question in chapter 5.

The centrality of the possibility of a better world to Adorno’s thought is noted by Jay Bernstein, whose defence of Adorno’s ‘ethical modernism’ is articulated in his *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics*. Bernstein is distinctive in engaging thoroughly with the ‘Meditations on Metaphysics’, the final model in *Negative Dialectics*, and in relating Adorno’s social critique with his ethics. This emphasis on the ethical importance of Adorno’s work is important, and I follow this tradition in identifying negative dialectics strongly with the normative refusal of a wrong life. But Bernstein’s argument for a ‘complex concept’ as Adorno’s response to identity thought downplays the importance of the non-conceptual to Adorno, something which I argue is strongly present in negative dialectics and in experience. This is noted by Axel Honneth (‘Performing Justice’) and (in the form of a reflection on Adorno’s account of language) Rolf Tiedemann (‘Concept, Image, Name’). In the Anglophone tradition, Roger Foster has also emphasised non-conceptuality in the context of experience (*Adorno: The Recovery of Experience*). The importance of the non-conceptual, I will argue, is in its role both as revealing what is repressed in identity thought and thereby in restating the ideas of the primacy of the object and of mediation.

This connects, in my interpretation, with the idea of ‘inverse theology’, which I have mentioned above. The importance of an inverse theology to interpreting Adorno was emphasised by Elizabeth Pritchard in her ‘*Bilderverbot* Meets Body’, and has since been taken up by Deborah Cook in ‘Through a Glass Darkly’ and, with

a different set of emphases, Peter Gordon in *Adorno and Existence*. On Pritchard's account, taking the 'standpoint of redemption' (*MM* §153) means taking a "feign[ed]" ... divine or angelic standpoint in order to see the fallenness of the world' (Pritchard, 'Bilderverbot Meets Body', 309). When this is achieved, we look at the system precisely in terms of what is excluded from it, and by doing so reveal both its badness and, in an inverse form (compared by Pritchard to a photographic negative), can see what the good might look like. It is Pritchard's account that is taken up and extended in Cook's paper, which relates how an inverse theology connects to political action. Gordon, by contrast, approaches inverse theology differently: rather than in connection with the image ban, Gordon's inverse theology comes from a sustained engagement with Kierkegaard and the 'demythologisation of faith' (*Adorno and Existence* 197). While this leads him to some perceptive insights, Pritchard's formulation is to my eyes more convincing, relating Adorno's inverse theology directly to the image ban and to the operation of negative dialectics through determinate negation. It is this approach that I take, and extend, in chapter 3, to include the concept of truth as something which should be considered inversely in Adorno's work: this insight, I argue, helps to make sense of Adorno's emphasis on experience and non-conceptuality, and indeed of the 'wrong life claim' as a whole, and has to my knowledge not been articulated in this way in previous Adorno scholarship. This argument does, however, extend the recognition in some of the literature that truth is not expressible (Thompson, 'Nonidentity, Materialism and Truth in Adorno's *Negative Dialectics*') or that there exists 'non-propositional' truth content in Adorno (Richter, 'Aesthetic Theory and Nonpropositional Truth Content in Adorno'). Owen Hulatt has argued that Adorno sees truth as non-identical, including non-conceptuality under this, although his explication of this position takes a different route to my own (*Textualism and Performance: Adorno's Theory of Truth*). Experience is the foundation of critique, and how critique operates can be understood in part through inverse theology.

This work therefore owes much to the idea of an 'inverse theology'. This position has been recently criticised in Whyman's paper 'Forcing Materialism upon Metaphysics'. Whyman argues that Gordon's formulation of inverse theology 'fails to get the discerning force of badness — its *brute repulsiveness* — quite right' because it implies that, if knowledge of the good depends on the bad, then 'it must

be *good* to experience the bad' (495-6), because it is through the bad that we know the good. The extreme position that Whyman seems to have in mind is that we ought, on this view, to seek out the very worst possible situations so as to better know what good might be. But this seems to me to miss the mark. The point of the wrong life claim is that we already do experience the bad, in every aspect of our lives — we do not have to seek it out. Inverse theology is a critical model through which this experience of the bad can be shown to contain an image of the good in inverse, one which appears 'through a glass darkly' wherever we recognise that something is bad (Cook, 'Through a Glass Darkly' 76). It is bad to experience the bad, but badness is universal: inverse theology shows how that badness might yet contain a capacity for overcoming it.

In adopting an inverse theology as a way to read Adorno, I do not mean to universalise it. I think rather it is one of the critical models he uses to attempt to overcome the spell, and one which leads naturally to the deployment of constellations and indeed to reflecting on what praxis could be permissible. Deborah Cook has, over a series of papers and book-length studies, defended the position that Adorno has a real conception of the importance of political transformation. For instance, in 'Open Thinking', she argues that merely acquiring ideas about what is better is transparently not enough if we are to move beyond the wrong life: as she puts it in proverbial form, 'if wishes were horses, beggars would ride' (14). In *Adorno on Nature*, Cook moves beyond this to argue that there is an affinity between Adorno and radical ecology, and that Adorno offers some resources for praxis: in particular, 'consciousness-raising educational strategies' as a preparation for 'practical action' (154). Cook's emphasis on this point is a welcome rejoinder to the still-prevalent view that Adorno has nothing to offer in terms of praxis, although I go beyond her conclusions to argue that we may now be in a position that praxis in terms of practical action is possible. Cook's work, emphasising Adorno's understanding of nature and his use of determinate negation, has also contributed to the interpretation I advance.

The importance I place on the spell places as central what has been recognised, but not expounded on, in previous literature. Christopher Turner's paper 'Under Adorno's Spell' is the only piece, to my knowledge, to place it front-and-centre, and is correspondingly discussed in chapter 2, although others have discussed important

aspects of what I refer to as the spell. Most importantly, as argued for in chapter 3, Adorno's critique is a phenomenon of the spellbound world and cannot move beyond it (two good elucidations of this are in Bernstein, *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics* and Tiedemann's 'Concept, Image, Name'). This should, I argue, be centred in our understanding of Adorno's thought. By recognising the limitations of critique in this sense, Adorno's project — including its reluctance to make any positive claims, its refusal of being a 'standpoint', its opposition to systems — begins to make sense. Correspondingly, Adorno really does want to move beyond critique: the figure of the constellation is one important way in which this happens, and the emphasis on non-conceptuality and experience might open the door for the spell to be dissolved as a liberation. Indeed, the animus motivating Adorno's work is found in the tension between his belief that critique was the only means through which we might overcome the spell and his recognition of the methodological constraints to what critique can achieve. The aim of this work is to make this tension explicit, and in particular to show how it is operative in Adorno's account of experience and his account of praxis, and finally to argue how it may be managed in a situation (which may exist at the time of writing) where change is possible not only in theory but in reality. This interpretation should therefore be of value both to those interested in Adorno's work and those interested in how transformative political action might be possible. My work thus fits within the discussion of Adorno's methodology, but also within wider Adorno scholarship. While many of my readings sit within a particular branch of the literature, as I have indicated, presenting them explicitly in the context of Adorno's social thought allows us to read Adorno both as a philosopher of negativity and as a thoroughgoing utopian, and to begin to think through how these aspects may be understood in dialectical tension with each other.

This section has elucidated my interpretation of Adorno, and its distinctiveness, in the context of a particular branch of Adorno scholarship. Readers will note that I have not engaged to any great extent with accounts of Adorno's work in aesthetics and music, as indeed I do not focus on these elements of Adorno's thought; nor have I here referred here to some of the many excellent accounts outside this interpretative tradition. I remedy some of this exclusion in the text. In the main, however, I have preferred to advance my interpretation of Adorno's work rather than engage in

lengthy exchanges with alternative views, which can muddy rather than clarify the position I am trying to advance.

### **The use of translations and a note on the text**

This section, finally, presents some notes on my use of translated work and the presentation of the text. I have primarily relied upon translations of Adorno into English. In general, the ‘standard’ translations of each work do not offer a particular obstacle. While each translation has its own idiosyncrasies or particular stylistic choices, there is a general consensus on core vocabulary that many of these issues can be passed over in silence. There is, however, one translation which requires a more careful evaluation. This is *Negative Dialectics*. The translation of E.B. Ashton has been criticised from its publication to the present day. Gillian Rose’s 1976 review summarises some of the major complaints here. Ashton, according to her, ‘robs [Adorno’s] ideas of their *raison d’être* by assimilating them to the very idiom they are designed to resist [...] Ashton has made the text familiar where it should be unfamiliar and unfamiliar where it should be familiar’ (‘Negative Dialectics’ 599). Fredric Jameson, in *Late Marxism*, suggests merely that Ashton’s translation is ‘unfortunate’ before correcting a number of ‘howlers’ in the text (ix-x). It is certainly true that Ashton’s translation is at best uneven. There are a number of errors which distort either Adorno’s meaning or the intended reference: ‘transmission’ instead of ‘mediation’ for *Vermittlung* in particular misleads the unfamiliar reader from a key concept in Adorno’s work (see *Late Marxism* x). It is also questionable whether rendering Adorno’s thought into an English idiom, which Ashton explicitly attempted to do, is a suitable aim, given the specific criticisms Adorno had of translators who attempted this method. These translators, Adorno argues, ‘disfigured [the text] beyond recognition, the fundamental intentions could not be recovered’ (‘On the Question: “What is German?”’ 211).

The only alternative currently available in full is Dennis Redmond’s 2001 translation. This translation has a number of merits, with consistent and correct terminology used and retaining something of Adorno’s original style. Unfortunately, precisely because it is so literal, the text sometimes reads very poorly in English, which may have the effect of obscuring rather than clarifying Adorno’s sense.



One example to highlight the differences between the versions follows, with Redmond's rendering before Ashton's, followed by the original German:

So long as critique holds itself abstractly to its rules, the objective contradiction would be only a pretentious way of saying, that the subjective conceptual apparatus unavoidably maintains the truth of its judgement on the particular existents over which it judges, while this existent accords with the judgement only insofar as it is already preformed by the apophantic requirement in the definitions of concepts.

(‘Objectivity of the Contradiction’, Redmond)

As long as criticism sticks abstractly to the rules of logic, objective contradiction would be merely a pretentious way to put the fact that our subjective conceptual mechanism will inevitably claim truth for its judgment about the specific entity it judges, whereas this entity does coincide with the judgment only insofar as it is preformed in the definition of the concepts by the apophantic need.

(‘Objectivity of Contradiction’, Ashton, p151)

Solange Kritik an deren Regel abstrakt sich hält, wäre der objektive Widerspruch nur eine präventöse Wendung dafür, daß der subjektive Begriffsapparat unvermeidlich von besonderem Seienden, über das er urteilt, die Wahrheit seines Urteils behauptet, während dies Seiende nur so weit mit dem Urteil übereinstimmt, wie es durchs apophantische Bedürfnis in den Definitionen der Begriffe bereits präformiert ist.

(‘Objektivität des Widerspruchs’, GS6 154-5)

This is a difficult passage any way you slice it, but does highlight the difference between the two translators. Redmond's version appears more literal, but is so at the expense of readability in English. Ashton's appears more comprehensible but at the expense of exact precision. The difference between ‘entity’ and ‘existent’ for the translation of *Seiende*, for instance, is not negligible and carries ontological implications. An ‘entity’ in English is generally held to be much more concrete than something that is ‘existent’, although ‘entity’ highlights the idea of a particular being as compared the concept of being in general. Here, ‘entity’ seems the better choice, in the context of Adorno's attempt to refocus philosophical attention on the particular. Some of Ashton's interpolations (the ‘of logic’ he inserts into the first line, for instance) are, however, less than helpful; Redmond, here, has the upper hand. It should be clear from these two examples, however, that the question of which is the superior translation is by no means clear-cut, although I do not mean to minimise the oddity of some of Ashton's decisions.

I have therefore consulted the original German where it has seemed appropriate, in order to ensure an accurate rendition of Adorno's thought. I have chosen to take quotations, however, from Ashton's translation. This is ultimately because, while neither is perfect, Ashton's is the current 'standard edition' of *Negative Dialectics* and is the most easily accessible — particularly as Redmond's website containing his translation is, as of September 2019, no longer available except through archival servers. All page references are therefore to Ashton's translation. Where I have checked the translation, it is against the edition of *Negative Dialektik* in Band 6 of Adorno's *Gesammelte Schriften*. I have very rarely modified translations, and where it has seemed important to discuss the translation of individual words I have discussed this in the main body of text.

The referencing system used is MLA, Eighth Edition, in the author-title format. I have chosen this as it offers the reader the clearest way to see exactly what work is being referred to without needing to refer back to the bibliography: something which offers a particular advantage where, as in this thesis, the date of an edition is not normally immediately relevant. A number of frequently-cited works are referred to by abbreviations, a list of which is appended prior to the bibliography. Footnotes offer additional information or asides rather than bibliographical detail; endnotes are not used.

# 1. Situating Adorno

In the introduction, I introduced a number of central ideas within Adorno's thought, and argued for a certain way in which they should be understood. But it is also important to see where Adorno's thought sits in relation to others: his intellectual history as a member of the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt and the United States, and his engagement with other philosophers and intellectual figures. Through this, this chapter highlights certain key ideas within Adorno's work, providing a means to understand why Adorno thinks in the way he does. The first section gives a short biography of Adorno's intellectual development and key moments in his life. This sets the scene for a discussion of Adorno's relationship with others, particularly Max Horkheimer and Walter Benjamin, and his affiliation with the Institute for Social Research. These relationships helped to shape Adorno's intellectual trajectory, particularly in his conception of how a critical theory could operate, and are important to understanding his work. These factors all influenced Adorno's thought on what philosophy could and should be concerned with, and are particularly apparent in Adorno's work on praxis.

The chapter will then discuss Adorno's interpretation of those thinkers who influenced his thought and the tradition of critical theory. Some of these have been mentioned already: I have argued that Adorno sees identity thought, for instance, instantiated in the work of Kant or Hegel, and appreciating the influence of their work on Adorno can help to make sense of Adorno's arguments about the nature of conceptual thought or social totalities. This is particularly important given Adorno's ongoing engagement with (in particular) the German philosophical tradition throughout his work: *Negative Dialectics* contains two models discussing Kant and Hegel respectively, for instance. Adorno's Marxist heritage is equally well-established, as is his engagement with the work of Lukács, whose reification theory Adorno takes up — especially in his earlier work. Heidegger and Freud are two other figures whose work Adorno circles around, although in differing ways. Heidegger represents for Adorno the wrong response to the state of modernity. In particular, Heidegger stands for an 'authenticity' philosophy that Adorno argues is both incoherent and works in the service of capital. Freud, by contrast, remains an influence on Adorno's thought about the individual to the end, and many of

Adorno's assumptions about subjectivity can be traced back to psychoanalysis. Because of the importance of these figures in Adorno's work, this chapter presents some of the most salient of their ideas and Adorno's engagement with them. This furthers the discussion of some of the key elements of Adorno's critical theory that began in the introduction, and will give clarity to the arguments advanced in the following chapter. The discussion advanced here will clarify some of the 'moves' Adorno makes that will be analysed later in the thesis, and contribute to an understanding of why negative dialectics advances in the way that it does and how the idea of the spell becomes central to his thought.

It should be noted through this chapter that what Adorno does with these thinkers is not always traditional scholarship: the reconstruction of arguments, interpretation, and criticism. Rather, many of Adorno's critical targets are chosen precisely because he considers them 'the most developed expression of the self-understanding and attempted legitimation of bourgeois society' (Pippin, *The Persistence of Subjectivity* 100). This is a strategy which is obviously open to criticism, and indeed Robert Pippin expresses a level of incredulity when he suggests that Adorno argues that 'the right *explicans* for everything [that is wrong in the contemporary world] ... has much to do with discursive practices and normatively constrained conduct best codified and defended in German Idealism' (104). Yet, as Pippin also acknowledges, Adorno is not really arguing that Kant's philosophy (in this instance) is the animating force of every evil in the world. Adorno rather situates these ideas in their social and historical context, arguing that they are important precisely because they highlight the otherwise-implicit assumptions behind capitalist society.

### **Adorno's contemporaries: Benjamin, Horkheimer and the 'Frankfurt School'**

Adorno was born in Wilhelmine Germany, in a bourgeois home to a Jewish father and a Catholic mother; entered adolescence during the First World War; became an adult in Weimar Germany; witnessed the rise of Nazism; was in America during the New Deal period; and returned to a divided Germany during the Cold War. The impact of these events, which include world-historical moments, on Adorno's thought must be considered in understanding his work. Primary among these in Adorno's later work, as we will see, is the Holocaust, which profoundly shaped Adorno's thought after World War II but also — while its full extent was at the time unknown — during his period in the United States. This influence appears

throughout this work as a sign of the catastrophe which Europe had been through, and as something which must at all costs be prevented from reoccurring. But many of the other events can also be detected in Adorno's work, from the sense of nostalgia that animates his references to the bourgeois world that died with Franz Ferdinand to his contemporary positioning of praxis in the context of the social and political tumult of the 1960s. Some of these elements will be drawn out in the analysis that follows, particularly in chapter 5, where the shape of Adorno's thought on praxis and political action is dependent on his understanding of the contemporary social context. In this section, meanwhile, I consider more specifically how Adorno's life and times influenced his thought intellectually, beginning with a short intellectual biography before considering how his friendships with Walter Benjamin and Max Horkheimer influenced his work. This is by way of a brief introduction rather than a comprehensive account, although some themes will be returned to later in the work.

Adorno's intellectual upbringing began in his childhood, during which he read Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* with his friend Siegfried Kracauer (Claussen, *One Last Genius* 51).<sup>1</sup> He wrote his first doctoral dissertation under the influence of the neo-Kantian Hans Cornelius, on Husserl's phenomenology (Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School* 70). After a period in Vienna, where he studied with the composer Alban Berg and wrote on music, Adorno returned to Frankfurt. Here, he completed a *Habilitationsschrift* (a second doctoral dissertation conferring the right to teach) which was accepted by Paul Tillich, a theologian later much influenced by existentialism (Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics* 23).<sup>2</sup> Adorno's *Habilitationsschrift* was published as *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic* in 1933, on the day Hitler became Chancellor (Claussen, *One Last Genius* 273). Adorno had by this time become affiliated with the Institute for Social Research, which had been founded by Felix Weil in 1923 (Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination* 10). The Institute, the 'Frankfurt School' as it became known, was founded to advance Marxist thought and Max Horkheimer, who had known Adorno since 1922,

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<sup>1</sup> Kracauer himself was a significant thinker, and Adorno later in his life would arrange for the republication of some of Kracauer's work in Suhrkamp editions (Claussen, *One Last Genius* 280).

<sup>2</sup> Adorno had previously withdrawn an earlier *Habilitationsschrift*, 'The Concept of the Unconscious in the Transcendental Doctrine of the Soul', in 1927. It had been intended for Hans Cornelius to examine this (Claussen, *One Last Genius* 87).

was installed as its second director in 1930 (23-25). Adorno also continued a longstanding friendship with Walter Benjamin, the two having met in 1923, and continued until Benjamin's death while escaping from Occupied France in 1940. Following the rise to power of Hitler and the loss of his ability to teach in Germany in 1933, Adorno emigrated to England in 1934, where he spent some time at Merton College in Oxford (Claussen, *One Last Genius* 187). While he continued to associate with the Institute, he did not become a full member until 1938, when Horkheimer found him a position as part of Paul Lazarsfeld's Princeton Radio Project and he joined the majority of the Institute in the United States (Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination* 188). Moving to California, Adorno wrote *Dialectic of Enlightenment* with Horkheimer, most of *Philosophy of New Music*, and the aphorisms that would later become *Minima Moralia*. During this period he also worked on *The Authoritarian Personality*, an empirical study that became famous after World War II. After the defeat of Nazism, Adorno and the Institute remained in the United States until 1949 when Adorno returned to the new Federal Republic of Germany. Horkheimer and Adorno, with Pollock, re-established the Institute in Frankfurt, not without some reluctance at first. Adorno 'appeared in the firmament of the German Federal Republic of the 1950s like an intellectual meteor' (Claussen, *One Last Genius* 181). He engaged in public debates, was a frequent commentator (especially on the radio, with many of his talks collected in *Critical Models*) and became the Director of the Institute on Horkheimer's retirement in 1959 (Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics* ix). It was during this latter phase that Adorno published many of his more notable works, including the collection *Prisms*, the three volumes of *Notes to Literature*, several works of music criticism, the *Jargon of Authenticity* and *Negative Dialectics*. Adorno died in 1969 following a heart attack, and his last, unfinished work *Aesthetic Theory* was published in 1970, edited by his wife Gretel and Rolf Tiedemann, one of Adorno's students.

This potted biography highlights the ways in which Adorno's work appears in the context of strong personal and professional ties with others and in his long-term affiliation with the Institute for Social Research. Specifically, Adorno's work can be seen in relation to two of his closest collaborators: Max Horkheimer and Walter Benjamin. Benjamin was extremely close both to Theodor and Gretel Adorno. The influence of Benjamin's work on Adorno's conception of philosophy can be seen in

Adorno's appropriation of the term 'constellation' from Benjamin, who wrote that '[i]deas are to objects as constellations are to stars' and that by positing ideas in constellations 'phenomena are subdivided and at the same time redeemed' (Benjamin, *Origin of the Work of German Tragic Drama* 34). This idea, which in Adorno's work takes on a much greater significance, combines with several other Benjaminian inflections in Adorno's work. Adorno's engagement with Benjamin shaped his conception of philosophy, and his inaugural lecture in 1931 owes much to Benjamin's work (Claussen, *One Last Genius* 99). One area which will be touched on in this thesis is in the idea of an 'inverse theology' which Adorno claimed was present in both his and Benjamin's work (Pritchard, '*Bilderverbot* Meets Body' 306). This will be discussed further in chapter 3, in which the relationship between Adorno's account of inverse theology and Benjamin's 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' is discussed. It is important here, however, not to overstate the similarities between Adorno's and Benjamin's projects. While both found their engagement philosophically productive, Adorno took his thought in a different direction to Benjamin. Gershem Scholem, for instance, suggested that Adorno interpreted Benjamin's theology 'on a wholly secularised plane' (quoted in Claussen, *One Last Genius* 101). It is certainly true that Benjamin engaged with his Jewish theological heritage in a much more committed manner than Adorno did, although Adorno was not opposed to deploying theological language when he felt it necessary, as in his use of the *Bilderverbot* or ban on images.

Adorno's relationship with Max Horkheimer and the Institute as a whole had, likewise, a far-reaching effect on his thought. Horkheimer had introduced the idea of critical theory in his 1937 essay 'Traditional and Critical Theory' as a form of theorising that takes as its subject 'a definite individual in his real position to other individuals and groups, in his conflict with a particular class and, finally, in the resultant web of relationships with the social totality and with nature' (211). This contrasts with 'traditional' theory, which analyses phenomena in terms of 'universal concepts under which all facts in the field in question are to be subsumed', with the genesis, historical development or social context of these facts not considered (224). It takes a paradigmatically natural-scientific approach, in other words. Adorno's commitment to critical theory in Horkheimer's sense can be seen from his emphasis on critique of society as a false totality, and from his focus on the role of the

individual under the prevailing social order. Horkheimer's influence on Adorno (and Adorno's on Horkheimer) is also connected to the very close working relationship they forged during the American period, a closeness which is expressed in the 'Dedication' of *Minima Moralia*: 'there is not a motif in [this book] that does not belong as much to Horkheimer as to him who found the time to formulate it' (*MM* 18). In the next sentence, Adorno refers to 'our shared philosophy' (18). Even in 1965, Adorno writes to Horkheimer on his 70<sup>th</sup> birthday of the 'common life' they had shared, although Adorno does not in this letter identify his work so absolutely with Horkheimer's (in Claussen, *One Last Genius* 354). The relationship between the two had by this point evolved into a dialogue, and in a passage in this letter Adorno reflects on the mutual influence each of them exerted on the other:

Through you I have learned to appreciate the gravity of negativity in an undiluted form [...] In exchange, or so I conjecture, you have learned from me that without the transcendent element of utopia, utopia or even the truth of the slightest sentence would not exist.  
(358)

Horkheimer 'preserved [Adorno] from the life of an aesthete', away from his study of music and toward theoretical work in philosophy (357). The *Dialectic of Enlightenment* highlights this: as Martin Jay notes, the critique of Enlightenment and the relation of domination to technological development were early themes in Horkheimer's work (*The Dialectical Imagination* 257-8). The themes developed in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* exerted a remarkable influence on Adorno's subsequent work: to give three examples, the domination of nature, the role of identity thought, and the inability of concepts to adequately describe their objects can all be found in this work, as can the idea that Adorno later refers to as the spell. Horkheimer thus exerted a profound influence on Adorno's philosophical direction.

Indeed, while Horkheimer should not stand in for the 'Frankfurt School' more generally, it is true to say that the overall direction of Adorno's thought was always more in line with Horkheimer than with the wider Institute *per se*. The shared theoretical outlook stemming, as Jay has argued, from a commitment to the post-Hegelian and Marxist heritage, of the Institute nonetheless encompasses Horkheimer, who did much to put in in place, as well as Adorno (*The Dialectical Imagination* 41-4). This combined with an emphasis on Kant and other philosophies of the subject, as well as an exposure to psychoanalysis (44; 86ff). The remainder of



the chapter considers what each of these thinkers meant for Adorno's thought, as well as Adorno's relationship to the thought of Heidegger, who figured as a constant opponent in Adorno's work.

### **The dialectical philosophy: Hegel, Marx, Lukács**

The concept of dialectical thought, as introduced in Hegel and then developed by Marx and Lukács, represents a particularly important element in Adorno's philosophical work, and his use of the dialectic in a negative form is one of his distinctive philosophical contributions. Adorno's understanding of dialectic is strongly Hegelian in form, and in many respects he considers his negative dialectics to be the fulfilment of the internal logic of the dialectic, even against Hegel's system. Part of Adorno's understanding of 'totality' also springs from a Hegelian and Marxist background. This section gives a brief overview of Hegel's system, particularly as developed in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, and explaining the Marxist attempt to set Hegelian dialectic on a materialist course. I then present Lukács's work on reification, and in particular the influence it has on Adorno's understanding of late capitalist society. Throughout, I will indicate where Adorno engages with these ideas and how they influence his work. Some of Adorno's criticisms of Hegelian or Marxist ideas are presented later in the thesis, and are therefore only briefly sketched here: Adorno's deployment of determinate negation, for instance, is found in chapter 3, and his critique of Marxist teleology in chapters 2 and 5.

Hegelian dialectic represents, in Adorno's words, the effort to 'overcome all merely conceptual manipulation, to sustain at every level the tension between thought and what it would comprehend' (*An Introduction to Dialectics* 2). It is therefore concerned with the relationship between concepts and their object, what the concept is supposed to represent. It 'sustains the tension' rather than resolving it, because it sees this tension as revealing the deeper process in which both concepts and objects develop. The presentation of this tension in a dialectic means 'the permanent confrontation of the object with its concept' (Adorno, *Hegel: Three Studies* 9), and indeed, the motivating force of Hegelian dialectic comes at the point where concepts are 'convicted of [their] own inadequacy' — where it becomes clear that they do not, after all, correspond entirely to the object they seek to describe (*An Introduction to Dialectics* 8). This moment, in Hegelian thought, ultimately leads to a reconceptualisation that better captures the object. The means by which this

happens is through determinate negation, the ‘characteristic feature’ of Hegel’s thought, according to Michael Rosen (*Hegel’s Dialectic* 21), and a feature which Adorno would make his own in his negative dialectics. Determinate negation is a method of speculative thought which, according to Hegel, underlies the movement and development of concepts. It ties in with the progressive, positive aspect of Hegel’s system: the movement of the concept to identity with its object, and the unification of concepts in the Absolute, which is identified with truth. The account of truth that Hegel offers is therefore systematic: as Adorno says, ‘truth — which in Hegel means the system’ is not a principle, i.e. a point to derive knowledge from, ‘but is the dynamic totality of all the propositions that can be generated from one another by virtue of their contradictions’ (*Hegel: Three Studies* 12). Truth is the culmination of a dialectical process, not independent of it, and certainly not pre-empted at any one stage within it. Likewise, the Absolute cannot be posited prior to any dialectical process, just as the phrase ‘all animals’ cannot ‘pass for a zoology’ (*PhS* §20). It is the process, even more than the resulting proposition, that gives the Hegelian whole its truth, which comes only ‘at the point of completion of the system’ (Rosen, *Hegel’s Dialectic* 23) and is only partially realised beforehand. Hegel’s aim is to describe the movement towards truth, moving (in the *Phenomenology*) from simple sense perception to self-conscious reason and beyond to absolute knowledge.

The movement of dialectics traces the development of a concept from an original concept, to its self-reflection and contradiction, and then to its sublation and reconceptualisation. The triadic form popularly associated with Hegel is not to be construed in simple, formalistic terms, in which one chooses a thesis, plugs in an antithesis and then combines the two for a synthesis. This reduction to formalism is, in Hegel’s own terms, uncritical and ‘lifeless’ (*PhS* §50). Instead, the dialectic is a movement in which concepts develop through a relation to opposing concepts. The idea that dialectics progresses through fixed oppositions is an untrue abstraction, misled in language by the copula, the ‘is’ of predication (§780). ‘Picture thinking’ is just this view of dialectics which ‘clings to the “is” and forgets the thinking of the Notions [...] are only the movement which is Spirit’ (§780). This formalism misleads, that is to say, by suggesting that ideas like identity and difference are fixed

truths rather than moments of abstraction within the dialectical movement. Truth only comes from the comprehension of the whole.

Mediation is the self-reflection of the concept, which causes the dialectical movement (*PhS* §21). The concept, when used, becomes its own other or opposite and thus makes its original form impossible to sustain. We therefore have to move beyond the original concept and reconceptualise at a level which can account for this movement. Through mediation, we destroy our previous concepts only to then raise them up to a higher level of complexity and unity — we sublimate them (§226). So, for instance, the idea of the universal at first seems to be quite distinct from the idea of a particular: the universal, on the face of it, is a ‘general notion’ such as colour or shape; the particular is an object instantiating these qualities (*EL* 240). But the opposition of these two terms masks a mediated and interdependent relationship. The universal makes sense only where there are particular objects. More than this, however, the concepts develop each other. Through their opposition and their mediated relationship, our understanding of both deepens. Hegel defines the universal as ‘that which particularises itself’, for instance, meaning that it is universal precisely because it instantiates in particular objects (*EL* 240). The self-reflection of the concept in this case, Hegel argues, leads to an idea of individuality or singularity, something which encompasses both universal and particular.

This process of concept development is one of determinate negation. It is a negation because the development of the concept eventually reaches the point where it passes into its opposite, is ‘convicted of [its] own inadequacy’ (Adorno, *An Introduction to Dialectics* 8) and can no longer describe its object. It is determinate because it is a form of negation with content (i.e. the object and its mediated associations). This contrasts with an abstract negation, where the content is destroyed with the form (the concept). Abstract negation is annihilative: it removes both the concept and whatever meaning attaches to that concept. Determinate negation, because it results from the dialectical process, is not: rather, it negates concepts through an excess of content which does not go away. Hegel argues that this content necessarily gives rise to a new form, i.e. a new concept, because there can be no content without form: the two are absolutely correlated (*EL* §133). This is, then, the moment of sublation, and the process through which concepts develop to a greater and greater understanding. Adorno takes on a version of determinate negation

in his own work, and the operation of both Hegel's and Adorno's understanding of this movement is considered in more detail in chapter 3.

As the Hegelian system develops in the course of the *Phenomenology*, this process is accounted for in terms of kenosis and reconciliation. Kenosis, in theology the self-emptying of the individual so that God might flow into the gaps, is used to describe the 'transition into the opposite' which transforms and raises all parts of the dialectic (*PhS* §755). In other words, the one side empties *itself*, 'alienates itself from itself and gives itself the nature of a Thing', in its own failure to match up with its object (§755). It negates itself, but does so in such a way that its negation will also be negated. The opposition that had been formed dissolves into the unity of the dialectic. Spirit, once it appears on the scene, must 'bring itself to maturity' by enduring the movement from negation to sublation (§808). It must realise its own depth and, in doing so, reach towards absolute knowledge. This would consist of the knowledge of Spirit in its multifarious forms through history and in their organisation under one absolute Spirit. Kenosis is the sacrifice through which Spirit is able to become Spirit. Reconciliation is the recognition of sacrifice in the other and the emptying of the self (Farneth, 'Kenosis', 165). It is a mutual overcoming of the relation of domination which characterises earlier forms of consciousness such as the master-slave relationship. Because it requires active commitment, reconciliation is a special case of mediation. It is mediation which does not only rely on the self-emptying of the one side, but on the recognition of sacrifice by the other (*PhS* §670).

The dialectic itself, therefore, moves and develops just as its concepts do. Mediation becomes reconciliation through active agency and sacrifice; kenosis takes on its importance once self-consciousness has become aware of Spirit. Truth appears not because the concepts of dialectical thought are true but because the movement itself produces truth. Hegel's absolute idealism is the assertion that reality is part of reason, is in fact reason itself, and the dialectical movement is the coming to self-awareness of Spirit that it is all reality. The ultimate aim — the reconciliation of concept and object — is not supposed to be taken as meaning that there is an objective world 'out there' which can escape rationalisation. There is, for Hegel, nothing that is not, in principle, conceptualisable. Rather, the dialectical movement is an activity of reason perceiving itself as an object, making itself its own content, and confronting itself as an other in order to attain self-knowledge (*PhS* §548). Idealism

follows because reason is the activity of Spirit (*Geist*) and therefore a mental act. The world is wholly the mentation of Spirit, its unfolding and becoming. At the point of completion of the system, dialectics reaches its apogee and fulfilment.

One interesting consequence of Hegel's adoption of a dialectical system is what Rosen calls the *post festum* paradox (*Hegel's Dialectic* 24), and what Adorno, perhaps less charitably, accounts for as 'the dubious advantage of not having to allow for any criticism whatsoever' (*Hegel: Three Studies* 2). On Rosen's account, this occurs because we are unable, according to the Hegelian system, to account for the truth of the system unless we have reached its final point of unity. But criticism of the system must start from the idea that the final point of unity — the truth — is unattainable using its methods. For Rosen, this is a problem in philosophical rationality in general: if we accept that Hegel offers at least a plausible account of reason, then we already accept the idea that criticism of dialectics is invalid without completion of the system. Any criticism offered before then would, in fact, become part of that dialectical system itself. The only way out seems to be a wholesale rejection of reason itself.

One might therefore read, for instance, Karl Marx's inversion of Hegelian dialectic as an attempt to avoid the *post festum* paradox by criticising the results of the system while retaining the overall method and structure. Marx argued against the 'mystification' of Hegelian dialectics, arguing that rather than Spirit forming the reality of the world, it was in fact the 'material world reflected in the mind of man' which drives forward the dialectic (*Capital* 102-3). The material dialectic therefore proceeds through the development of objective forces in the material world. The subject does not construct a world through the development of concepts: rather, changes in the material world develop our concepts and categories of thought. For Marx, the universal and the particular do not develop in thought alone: rather, the abstract idea is 'the way in which thinking assimilates the concrete [i.e., the material world outside of the subject] and reproduces it as a concrete mental category' (Marx, 'Introduction to a Critique of Political Economy' 141). Concrete material objects have an independent existence which is comprehended through conceptualisation. Marx does not deny the subject the capacity of understanding — even of forming a 'mental totality' of concepts — but instead argues that it is not from the subject that these originate ('Introduction to a Critique of Political Economy' 141). Rather,

mental concepts are formed from experience and assimilation of real concrete objects and phenomena. The subject itself possesses concrete reality in the form of society. Rather than Spirit, which grasps and drives the development of history through its movement, it is, for Marx, *society* which interprets the (material) phenomena and forms social systems, philosophies, religion, science and all other artefacts of human culture. When the social interpretation of these material phenomena changes, then our thoughts will also change — and this is, ultimately, down to the change in the material world. So, for Marx, Greek mythology is the basis of Greek art because the myth is the way in which the Greek world assimilated the natural phenomena they observed. But such mythology would be impossible to sustain in an age when real control over natural phenomena is possible. The contradictions and class analyses that Marx is best known for are formed on the basis of this conception of the dialectic.

Such a move seeks to preserve what is seen as good in Hegel — the dialectical logic and the emphasis on process and development — from the bad — the ‘mystifications’ of Hegelian idealism. Marx’s attempt to remove the idealism from Hegel’s thought therefore argues for a material basis for thought, relating the movement of the dialectic firmly to questions of economic and social organisation. The question is whether it succeeds in escaping the logic of Hegel’s system. Rosen argues that the answer is no. The use of Hegelian method without Hegelian content either unsatisfactorily removes itself from Hegel, falling back in to his concepts and categories, or else is not Hegelian at all (Rosen, *Hegel’s Dialectic* 27). Any attempt, as in some versions of Marxist theory, to place Marxism ‘beyond’ philosophy and thus beyond Hegelian criticism only moves the problem to another domain of thought. Indeed, one of Adorno’s most cutting criticisms of Marx and Marxism is precisely that it is too ‘Hegelian’ in the sense of retaining a progressive, teleological view of history leading to the full realisation of truth in communism: this will be expanded upon in later chapters.

Adorno’s relationship to dialectics takes account of both the Hegelian and the Marxist conceptions of dialectic, although in the end he finds Hegel a richer source than Marx: the Marxist understanding of the dialectic is very rarely cited, unless to criticise it. One reason for this is that Adorno retains a strong emphasis on the necessity of individual thought that is much more attuned to Hegel than to Marx. For

Adorno, as we shall see, it is in individual experience that critical thought becomes possible. Adorno's approach to Hegel takes the form of an immanent critique of Hegel's method as a system (*Hegel: Three Studies* 2), in this way avoiding the recognised pitfall of the *post festum* paradox. Immanent critique is, in part, the attempt to show how the object of critique fails to live up to its own expressed standards. In relation to Hegel, Adorno argues that Hegel's dialectic is just not dialectical enough: the moment of sublation is an imposition with no justification in dialectical logic, 'borrowed' from mathematics (a minus times a minus is a plus) and leading to an 'abstract' and imposed positivity (*ND* 158-9).<sup>3</sup> As we have already seen, Adorno also opposes Hegel's view that the object can be fully captured in conceptual thought, which in part relates to the differing understanding of determinate negation employed by both thinkers. But the dialectic remains a source of inspiration to Adorno's thought even as he criticises its application in Hegel and Marx, and much of Adorno's philosophy can be understood in the context of the Hegelian system. Even the commitment to dialectics as the 'ontology of the wrong state of things' (*ND* 11), and its potential dissolution in the right world, speaks to a concern with an unreconciled and incomplete world that is in essence Hegelian.

Equally Hegelian is Adorno's understanding of the notion of totality. In the introduction, I introduced the concept of this totality as it is applied in relation to identity thought and under the current social order — under the spell, as I will argue in chapter 2. But Adorno's totality is equally Hegel's 'whole', the entire immanent context in which particular events and phenomena unfold. Adorno argues that 'in a basic sense we have more understanding of the system in which we live ... than we do of specific individual situations' that could combine to create an understanding of the whole (*An Introduction to Dialectics* 93). What Adorno means here is that we do not approach social phenomena (the context of these remarks) as individual moments that come together to create a social totality; rather, we interpret individual moments in light of a totality of which we are already aware. For Hegel, this whole is the development of Spirit, and for Marx it is the totality of the economic and superstructural (ideological) forces: both thinkers interpret the whole in light of the *telos* of their system. Adorno, however, argues against any such *telos*, as I will establish over the course of this work. This does not mean that we do not experience

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<sup>3</sup> This, again, is returned to in chapter 3.

any totality, but that this is a specifically social totality: and here, in addition to the Marxist-Lukácsian heritage of that term, and the sense in which Horkheimer used it above, we should bear in mind the Freudian inflection of socialisation which will be discussed below. Our experience of the whole and of the part are mutually-mediated, however: just as we do not experience a specific instance as being a building block of the whole, we do not experience an undifferentiated whole which divides into specific instances. Rather, for Adorno, neither the totality nor the individual part is logically prior (*An Introduction to Dialectics* 106). The totality is in this sense a dialectical pole, with the particular moment on the other side. In this sense, the false totality is also the false totalisation: the totality that seeks to make itself into a monopoly by absolutely integrating all particular moments into it. Totality informs how we interpret the individual events, and a social totality that is spellbound will seek to totalise those events: to homogenise them under a single ideological order. Adorno both takes over the idea of a totality, and through his application of the dialectical method advances it.

The other great influence on Adorno's understanding of the social totality is Lukács's theory of reification, developed from the Marxist theory of commodity fetishism. In discussing this, I should first point out, if it is not clear already, that Adorno's relationship to Marx is critical and not at all one of total adherence to a 'Western Marxism' or a rejection of Marxist ideas *tout court*. Adorno's critical view of Marx is in part due to deliberate self-censorship. The original 1944 text of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, for instance, was revised for its mass market publication to remove or substitute terms which could be associated with Marxism. In a 1960 note, Adorno refers to the 'political self-censorship' he felt in the Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany) due to the presence of an antagonistic, self-declared Marxist German Democratic Republic in the East (quoted in Claussen, *One Last Genius* 305). In these circumstances, open proclamations of Marxism would lead one to be 'destroyed, or at least rendered utterly impotent' (305). But there are also, and as I have indicated above, moments where Adorno genuinely does challenge Marxist thought or move away from some of Marx's key concepts. The replacement of Marxist terminology in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, for instance, is argued by Willem van Reijen and Jan Bransen to represent a deliberate distancing from economic forms of Marxism ('The Disappearance of Class History' 252). Adorno's later works



reject pure economic determinism, and challenge Marx and Engels' view of the course of history. In addition, Adorno argued against both the political realities in the Eastern bloc and the Marxist-Leninist '*diamat*' (dialectical materialism) that served as its ideological basis. Where Adorno retains a Marxian sensibility, therefore, it is not necessarily indicative of an adherence to any doctrinaire form of Marxist thought: as Martin Jay has argued, the Institute of which Adorno was a part 'presented a revision of Marxism so substantial that it forfeited the right to be included among its many offshoots' (*The Dialectical Imagination* 296).<sup>4</sup>

Notwithstanding this caveat, Marx's work remains a substantial influence on Adorno's thought. The idea of an exchange society, and the case of commodity fetishism, are clear links to Marxist analysis, and Adorno was deeply inspired by the theory of reification presented in Lukács' *History and Class Consciousness*, even though he later argued against the 'key position' awarded to reification as a result of Lukács' work (*ND* 374).

Marx's work on commodity fetishism is found in Volume One of *Capital*. Commodity fetishism is where the social relations involved in the production of commodities are instead taken as relations between things themselves (Marx, *Capital* 165). To explain this, the commodity is not only to be understood in terms of its use-value, i.e. the properties it has which 'satisf[y] human needs', or the process by which things are transformed into useful objects (163). A commodity does, to be clear, possess this element of use-value, but in its emergence as a commodity also 'changes into a thing which transcends sensuousness' (163) and which takes on a character quite apart from either its use-value or its labour value. This arises from the commodity form itself, which 'reflects the social relation of the producers to the sum total of labour as a social relation between objects' (165): in other words, the commodity nature has to do with the social relations that are formed between objects, that are placed into a social equivalence with one another. This does not have any necessary relation to the use of these objects, nor of the labour involved in their production, just as 'no chemist has ever discovered exchange-value either in a pearl or a diamond' (177); it is because of a set of social relations which fetishise a set of commodities as if they really held the values that are socially given to them.

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<sup>4</sup> The relationship of Adorno to his contemporary political situation is returned to in chapter 5.

These values are understood to adhere to the commodities themselves, which take on a phantom nature disguising their origins in socially useful value. This grants the operation of economics an objectivity which forgets its own origin in the social exchange of products for use between people.

Reification, for Lukács, is the commodity form operating as the ‘universal category of society as a whole’ (Lukács, *History* 86). It is what happens when the ‘objective’ laws of the market are taken to be fundamental aspects of reality, which should therefore also be the basis of all social organisation. The human being itself becomes a commodity, considered as a participant in these laws rather than as a person in a substantive sense (87). Labour is divested of all qualitative, individual and social features and rationalised into an iterable process. It is something quantifiable possessed by the worker as a commodity, which can be sold for a wage and then exchanged for other commodities. Labour becomes labour power, and relations between people are seen as relations between two bearers of commodities (Marx, *Capital* 179). Thus our social existence becomes distorted by the commodity, our social organisation is seen through the prism of the commodity and the economic laws of the exchange of commodities dominate all other relationships. This includes thought. Reification distorts our capacity to conceptualise. The dominant habits of thought become instrumental and calculated, and each individual becomes isolated from each other as an atomised consciousness. Relationships between people exist only as nodes in the market nexus, with each person judging others and being judged in terms of their status within an exchange society. But this preserves the individual from what would otherwise be their destruction. Becoming a ‘node’ is an existence, however bare, beyond our status as only a bearer of commodities or capital. Thus, reification is in some respects a ‘necessary illusion’, preserving the individual in the only way possible (Lukács, *History* 92).

While Adorno in his later works is critical of reification, it nonetheless exerts a considerable influence on his thought about the operation of contemporary society. Adorno’s critique of reification is that it is too subjective and even idealist a concept to be a central element of a critical theory: it focuses on the subjective consciousness rather than objective conditions (*ND* 190).<sup>5</sup> Because the objective conditions are

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<sup>5</sup> Whether this is a just critique or not is beyond the scope of this thesis.

what create reification, Adorno argues, reification itself is only an ‘epiphenomenon’ that, at best, signifies the real issue. Yet it is equally clear that Adorno takes over many of Marx’s and Lukács’ ideas about the commodity and exchange society in his own work. In his social critique, and particularly during the period of *Minima Moralia*, Adorno’s conception of society matches the Lukácsian diagnosis given above, and this remains the case even in *Negative Dialectics*. While he is wary of the idea of reification, then, he also clearly sees its value in critique — albeit it must be informed with reference to the objective order of society and its organisation.

One way in which Adorno takes on Lukács’s idea of reification is as part of his critique of identity thought and totality. Adorno sometimes refers to the hypostatisation of concepts, and even the dialectical movement itself, under the prevailing social order. A hypostasised concept is plucked from all context and development, considered as an eternal and universal truth. In other words, it removes from the dialectical process what is properly to be considered within it. The use of static concepts divorced from all aggregate historical use and social context leads us to instrumental thinking rather than creative, critical thought (*MM* §126). Hypostasised concepts present themselves as false immediacies, descriptions of the true state of things unmediated by any dialectical movement. But their function is, in fact, highly abstract and instrumental: they are ruled by the logic of the fetishized commodity. This hypostatisation refers to an objective social phenomenon in the social totality, as well as a moment in thought. Indeed, it is the development of a late capitalist society that prioritises this form of thought, and this form of thought that helps to provide the ideological justification for late capitalist society. This is one reason why Adorno criticises the false totality: it is not a dialectical totality, as I have indicated above, but a hypostasised and totalising one.

I have shown in this section how Adorno was influenced by Hegel, Marx and Lukács and where he challenged them. I have also indicated where and why Adorno criticises some of these ideas, and both these ideas and their critique will recur during the course of this work. But perhaps the most important aspect of Adorno’s rejection of Marxist philosophy is contained within the first section of *Negative Dialectics*: the thought that the dialectical movement that was supposed to culminate in the union of concept and object, instantiated (as per Marx) in a communist society, did not come to fruition. As it is put in *Negative Dialectics*, ‘Philosophy, which once

seemed obsolete, lives on because the moment to realise it was missed' (ND 3). The realisation of philosophy is, as the context makes clear, supposed to be the Marxist programme not only to interpret the world (to paraphrase) but to change it. The failure of this programme, in that the revolution never reached the advanced capitalist countries and fell into totalitarianism where it did achieve power, is one additional motivating factor behind negative dialectics.

It is in this context that the chapter considers other significant influences on Adorno's thought, in the philosophy of Kant, his opposition to Heideggerian thought and the adoption of Freudian psychoanalytic categories in his work. This will elucidate why Adorno's adoption of negative dialectics and resistance to Marxist teleology developed in the particular manner it did, and inform an understanding of the role these figures play in Adorno's thought that will assist in the remainder of this thesis.

### **Kant and transcendental subjectivity**

Kant was a constant point of reference for Adorno. As we have seen above, his philosophical education began by reading the *Critique of Pure Reason* with Kracauer, and Brian O'Connor emphasises that Adorno was, throughout his work, 'drawn to what we might call an unofficial Kant ... whose philosophy is characterised exclusively as a critique of subjective idealism' (*Adorno's Negative Dialectic* 99). Yet Adorno is also highly critical of aspects of Kant's philosophy, arguing in *Negative Dialectics* against Kant's conception of freedom, and most frequently against the idea of transcendental subjectivity. The critique of transcendental subjectivity clarifies and introduces one of Adorno's main philosophical positions: the primacy of the object. I have already introduced this idea, and I will articulate it in further detail in chapter 4. However, it will help matters considerably to clarify the Kantian view that Adorno critiques prior to this, and the extent to which the Kantian position is for Adorno brought over into a wider ideological perspective about the nature of subjectivity. Indeed, much of Adorno's critique is based on the social function of what he sees as Kantian positions on subjectivity, positions which emphasise the constitutive, creative and free transcendental subject. Whether this is always a fair reflection of Kant's own views might be considered. Robert Pippin argues in *The Persistence of Subjectivity* that Adorno's critique of Kant is mistaken, and Kant is (with particular reference to the

‘Freedom’ chapter in *Negative Dialectics*) a more subtle thinker than Adorno credits. Pippin makes a strong argument, with reference to how Adorno’s interpretation of Kant would have been coloured by his Neo-Kantian education, and it is worth considering Adorno’s Kant work in light of Pippin’s critique. Pippin’s critique is important, and serves as a health warning against accepting Adorno’s interpretation of Kant too uncritically. Nevertheless, the point of this section is to indicate how, for Adorno, the reading of Kant that Adorno advances has been socially influential in shaping a certain conception of subjectivity: one which relies on broadly Kantian assumptions about the role the subject plays.

Transcendental subjectivity refers to the Kantian view that there exists an experiencing subject which is constitutive of experience, which is to say, it plays some sort of ‘world-making’ role with regard to the objects of its experience. Kant’s transcendental aesthetic in the *Critique of Pure Reason* lays the foundations for this view. Most famously, Kant argues here that space and time are not mind-independent properties, but are in fact given *a priori* in our perception. Space and time, for Kant, are empirically real, but transcendently ideal: that is, they hold ‘objective validity with regard to any object that might come to our senses’ but do not ‘[adhere] to things absolutely’ (*Critique of Pure Reason* A35,36, B52). This is because they are functions of our sense impressions: it appears to be necessary for us to perceive objects as having a definite spatial and temporal location, hence the empirical reality of the phenomena. But they are transcendently ideal because, for Kant, sense data (including the conditions for sensation) do not grant us access to the objects themselves. Likewise, there is an empirical subject, but this is only accessed in experience. The capacity to experience, which is to say the experiencing subject, must be given before that experience: it is transcendental. This transcendental subject is only the condition of possibility for experience and the unity of that experience; any observed properties or characteristics belong to the empirical, because they are perceived. In this way, the transcendental subject is constitutive of the empirical subject: the capacity to experience allows the empirically real subject to go on in the world of appearances while nonetheless holding precedence over it.

Adorno argues that Kant here presupposes what he intends to establish. It is supposed to explain the existence of the empirical subject, but in fact an empirical subject (which is observed and observable) is required in order for there to be a

transcendental subjectivity in the first place. It is the empirical subject which is involved in the world and which perceives; it is the transcendental subject that is supposed to be the condition of possibility for this experience. Kant attempts to argue that there is, nonetheless, a logical priority to transcendental subjectivity: the empirical subject is not the 'First in itself' despite its appearing first in consciousness (SO 248). Adorno considers that this argument does not succeed, instead arguing that the empirical subject precedes any and all representations of it. This is because it is the empirical subject which, being in the world, is able to perceive and interact with objects. It in fact makes experience possible; the transcendental, meanwhile, is a derivative form. This is closely related to Adorno's argument about the materiality of experience, which will be outlined in chapter 4.

Kantian subjectivity is always, in Adorno, linked with the idea of a transcendental subject imbued with a sense of 'creative power, rule and spirit' (248). Because the transcendental subject is not in the empirical world, which operates according to the laws of nature, to it attaches the freedom and ability to shape that world as it pleases. Adorno argues that this exaltation of the power of the individual comes at a time when actual human beings are more and more 'degraded into functions within the social totality' (248). The belief in the freedom of the transcendental subject, for Adorno, serves an ideological function to reassure the individual that they are still free and still meaningfully individual even where they are 'degraded' according to the power of the social totality. Ironically, it is at this point that a Kantian version of subjectivity actually has a social reality: *homo oeconomicus*, the ideal type of the reified bourgeois system, is far closer to a transcendental subject than an empirical one. This is not to say that transcendental subjectivity is true, because the reified self is always a distortion. But the Kantian model captures vividly the function of the self in a commodity society, based on exchange relations, rationality and the allegedly free agent who participates in these. This is a social reality and not a metaphysical truth about individuals. Moreover, Adorno argues that constitutive subjectivity is ultimately a form of identifying the object with the subject. This is because a Kantian subject gives properties to the objects of experience, whether or not these properties really exist for the things in themselves. The thing in itself is unknowable, and, as its properties are given by

subjects, ultimately irrelevant: it is assimilated within the subject for all intents and purposes.

This connects Adorno's critique of constitutive subjectivity with his social critique. One way in which we can understand this is through the move to an exchange society, in which relations which were formerly socially mediated become reified, concretised and subjected to the logic of exchange. This movement was, of course, apparent to Marx and Engels:

The bourgeoisie, wherever it has got the upper hand, has put an end to all feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations. It has pitilessly torn asunder the motley feudal ties that bound man to his "natural superiors", and has left remaining no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous "cash payment". [...] It has resolved personal worth into exchange value, and in place of the numberless infeasible chartered freedoms, has set up that single, unconscionable freedom — Free Trade. (*Communist Manifesto*)

It is a moment both emancipatory and oppressive. Emancipatory, in that the oppressive relations which accompany the old order are dissolved. The obligations and servitude which accompanied everyday life in the feudal era are replaced with the charters of the free merchant cities, and the sumptuary laws and guild regulations of the merchant cities are themselves replaced with free and open market exchange. Oppressive, because it is through this emancipation that exchange value comes to dominate so absolutely. Adorno, especially in *Minima Moralia*, connects this movement to developments in our own time, when the bourgeois culture that sustained a constitutive doctrine of subjectivity is over: a section describing the bourgeois embrace of fascism is entitled '*Le bourgeois revenant*' (*MM* §14). A revenant was a reanimated corpse that haunted Western Europe during the medieval period, and Adorno's depiction throughout his work of how the formal doctrine of bourgeois society, including its constitutive subjectivity, remains while the content has vanished somehow fits this image. It is precisely because the individual has lost power to affect the world, Adorno argues, that the idea of the individual becomes exalted (§97).

Adorno therefore connects a Kantian view of transcendental subjectivity to damaging ideological trends. Firstly, he argues that it reinforces a form of identity thinking in that it contributes to a subjectivistic reduction, which allows the totalising

trend of identity thinking to realise itself. But, more than this, the ideal of constitutive subjectivity plays a deeply ideological role within the social totality. By exalting the idea of a free, self-mastering and creative subject, it legitimises the move toward a reified exchange society — an idea that Adorno never really drops, even as he challenges the primacy afforded reification in his later works. An alternative conception of the subject is never fully articulated in Adorno's work, although parts of it can perhaps be seen in his work on experience and the moral impulse, because of the negative critical methodology Adorno employs and his reluctance to impose something which could be considered a philosophical 'first'. Adorno in fact criticises attempts to create an alternative, and apparently more substantial, concept of subjectivity in the form of Heidegger and the 'authentic's'.

### **Heidegger and the 'jargon of authenticity'**

Adorno's critique of Heidegger is a consistent theme in his work, reflecting in part the seriousness with which he treated the latter philosopher. Adorno felt that Heidegger articulated a real 'need' in his work: indeed, his philosophy would not have been so successful 'if it did not meet an emphatic need, a sign of something missed, a longing that Kant's verdict on the Absolute should not be the end of the matter' (*ND* 61). But Adorno argues that this need is in fact criticisable, and that Heidegger's response is a 'substitute' which remains a form of idealism and distracts from addressing the real need to escape the wrong life (93). This section considers one aspect of Adorno's critique of Heidegger and his followers, what he refers to as the jargon of authenticity. This is because this authenticity jargon was for Adorno a salve to conscience that, while superficially criticising the social totality, in fact reinforces it. It shows that the question of critique, for Adorno, cannot be about restoring a supposedly right attitude from the perspective of personal wellbeing, but must analyse the objective social and ideological conditions that exist in society. Where Heidegger felt he was breaking free of the spell, he was in fact supporting it.

Heidegger's thought, at least in his early philosophy, is based on the idea that the 'question of being' has been forgotten and ought to be revived (*Being and Time* 1). *Being and Time* is an attempt to answer this question, establishing the situatedness of being and its temporal nature. The work turns on the idea that *Dasein*, being concerned with its own existence, existing as 'a relation of being to this being', must be interrogated and analysed to uncover its meaning (12-14). 'Authenticity' appears



here as a means of categorising *Dasein* which ‘belongs to itself’ (42). That is to say, it is a relation to being which is mine, not mediated through anything else. It is being which is neither distracted from the matter at hand nor absorbed in the machinations of the secular world. The authentic exists in a harmonious relation to their ‘inner’ self, a self whose essential nature has been hidden by the forces of modernity and exchange society. Heidegger, in other words, attempts to evade the transformation of humanity into nodes in an exchange nexus by retreating back into the self, finding an authentic core which can be held fast though the storm of the modern rages all around.

Heidegger, famously, later abandons the question of being, but his thought remains tied to the question of authenticity throughout his life. For Adorno, however, authenticity is a false solution. It attempts to solve reification through a reification of its own. This position is established most thoroughly in the *Jargon of Authenticity*. Here, Adorno targets not only Heidegger, but the ways in which ‘authenticity’ becomes a prism through which some sort of essential self can be preserved in the context of a modern administrative late capitalist society. ‘Authenticity’ grants a measure of depth and profundity to homey platitudes and apologetics for the *status quo*. It is in this latter sense — precisely authenticity as a jargon — that Adorno finds much to criticise, not only in Heidegger, but in Jaspers and the West German post-war cultural milieu. After the disaster of Nazism, one could expect German society to be shaken, self-doubting, and lost. Authenticity jargon provides an escape route, emphasising the pure relation to being, to the pastoral, images of a rosy-cheeked yeoman living a simple life in the quiet places which have still escaped destruction. Affirmation of existence, of rootedness, affirms identity without having to confront real events at all. We can sit by happily contemplating the sheer joy of living. For Adorno, the sheer brute repulsiveness of this is shown in a volume of poetry published in 1950. This closes by affirming the transience of pain and the permanence of joy in existence, and was published ‘only a few years closer to us than the time when Jews who had not been completely killed by the gas were thrown living into the fire, where they regained consciousness and screamed’ (JA 24). Romantic appeals to authentic life are on this view a metaphysics of consolation for those whose memories are too short to need much consoling.

The jargon, in fact, aids forgetfulness. It disregards all mediation, all context, and judges everything purely on its own terms: as authentic or inauthentic. In this way, it criticises modernity for being inauthentic, for alienating itself from its roots, and in doing so draws on real issues. Automation, fungibility, the possibility of mechanical reproduction are all legitimate concerns. Unemployment is the spectre hanging over these questions: a job, and thus the means of survival, taken by a machine, or a robot, or another person who will do it as well for less money. There is not much skill in work, and less still genuine craft; for most jobs, it is irrelevant whether one person does it or any other. In the factories that have migrated east as in the call centres of the West, production is micromanaged, scripted and the human labourer is needed only because the automated replacement is either insufficiently developed or too expensive. Anonymous, we work to feed ourselves and keep shelter above our heads, all the time wary that we could at any time be replaced. There is a ‘powerlessness’, a ‘nothingness’ to the human being in late capitalism (*JA* 65). The very system that we depend on for sustenance has, it sometimes seems, little need for us at all (35). In our time, more than ever, this seems grimly plausible. Peter Frase (*Four Futures*) argues that, if the physical separation of rich from poor continues, an ‘exterminist’ mindset could take hold in which the poor, already superfluous, are murdered en masse to prevent social unrest. The twin epidemics of mass incarceration and militarised police violence in America suggest for Frase one way in which this future may take hold.

The crisis of meaning which Heidegger and his followers diagnose in modernity is, for Adorno, in many respects a symptom of unfree economic conditions rather than of ‘inauthenticity’. Confronted with an economic system extolling unlimited choice and unlimited possibilities, what we are really confronted with is unlimited possibilities for exchange. If in the postwar period when Adorno wrote it was the ‘freeing from work’ which created anomie due to the relationship of leisure time to consumption (*JA* 35-6), in our time even this freedom is reversed. One contemporary example is in a recent ad campaign for Fiverr, an online ‘skills marketplace’, which celebrated the ‘doers’ who ‘eat a coffee for lunch [...] sleep deprivation is [their] drug of choice’ (Tolentino, *The Gig Economy Celebrates Working Yourself to Death*). Fiverr describes itself as a platform for ‘lean entrepreneurs’ who are ‘flexible’ and ‘bootstrapping’ (DCX, *Brand Campaign*). It is not a job platform,

Fiverr wants us to believe, but a lifestyle. The ‘gig economy’ promotes relentless work for its own sake, the constant monetising of housing, transport, relationships, hobbies, skills. Free time is made into an earning opportunity. Where once we aspired to a life of leisure, the ideal worker today is on call permanently for an opportunity to ‘share’ their labour or belongings for some small profit. Anomie is supplemented by exhaustion.

Little wonder, then, that a philosophy of authenticity which claims to represent humanity has never yet fallen out of fashion.<sup>6</sup> It proffers itself as a way out from the dehumanising mess of modernity, a return to authentic and proper values which we have forgotten. But in this it reveals its own reactionary core. It places the individual as responsible for their own predicament, as the ultimate arbiter of their fates (*MM* §97). Society has therefore gone wrong because we have gone wrong, but we can attain individual salvation if we only live more authentically. Where the jargon criticises objective social forces, it is largely on the basis that they have abandoned a supposedly concrete and meaningful set of past relationships. The seeming chaos of modernity is contrasted unfavourably with the certainty of the well-structured life in which meaning was possible and communal. Humanity fails to define itself, and so we ‘grope for determination through something else’ (*JA* 37) — which tends toward order, structure, and totality.

The jargon is therefore led toward authoritarianism. It is the desire for everything to be in its place. This includes meaning, which is supposed to be fixed, primitive. The ‘real meaning’ of words, claims Heidegger, is in the etymology, and we must dive deep to find them (*JA* 41). Authenticity jargon seeks a ground: it seeks to fix its concepts at the beginning of knowledge, and it does not want to move past them (*JA* 46-7). Finding its ground in authentic being, the jargon valorises humanity as the measure of all things. But this is abstract humanity, the authentic essence, and not particular people. To acknowledge the particular would be to acknowledge that an essence is not the person, which the jargon cannot countenance. Its concept of the essence of humanity is, furthermore, powerless. ‘Authentic’ being is, Adorno argues, inward and apart from the mundane world (*JA* 73). Dasein is ‘[lost] in the they’ (Heidegger, *Being and Time* 254) and is ‘called’ back to itself. The authentic self is

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<sup>6</sup> Here, of course, much more could be said about the ways in which the gig economy itself co-opts the jargon, claiming to cut through bureaucracies and restore immediate and joyful work.

quiescent, timid and stoic, accepting life's misfortunes without ever daring to criticise or attempt to change them. The only evil for the authentic is inauthenticity. A quiet and sheltered people who can be marshalled into something greater than themselves, who have no fear of death because it is life's purpose, its *terminus*, are susceptible to authoritarian rule. The jargon's co-option by administration which Adorno saw in postwar West Germany is because, in essence, it is administration (*JA* 91). The jargon seeks to put everything in its place. It fixes an idea of humanity and praises its impotence, while claiming that it is the most important thing of all. Administration and regulation of life are seen as distortable, true, but by moral failings — 'the deformations inflicted on men by the world of profit are explained by men's greed' (*JA* 96) as if the system itself is neutral and blameless.

In such a way, what is supposed to be a reaction against modernity becomes its fiercest defender. The deformations and erasures of the subject in modernity are perceived as belonging to the inauthentic individual, symptomatic of our forgetting the deeper question of being, rather than being due to social phenomena. It claims to represent the party of humanity, but its 'authentic being' is, Adorno argues, empty and highly abstracted. Authenticity mistakes a relation for a thing, reifying the 'authentic' as if it were an object one could participate in rather than a relationship signifying originality (*MM* §99). Adorno's criticism of this position, then, shows the need for critique to move beyond valorising 'authenticity' or other particular forms of being. This method, while seeming to oppose spellbound life, in fact ends up by reinforcing it: it allows for the administration and integration of people while failing to provide its adherents with the resources to resist these developments. Adorno's engagement with Heidegger therefore shows one putative breakout of the spell, but one which is doomed to fail.

### **Freud and the somatic**

The final thinker whose viewpoint will be discussed here is Sigmund Freud, and this section introduces some of Freud's key concepts and their place in Adorno's work. Freud is an important figure for Adorno's thought, although the relationship between the two is rather more straightforward than Adorno's relationship with his more purely philosophical influences. Simply put, Adorno was a Freudian about psychology. He defended Freud's work not only against rival psychological schools but also against 'revisionist' psychoanalysts. This does not mean that Adorno was

uncritical of Freud, but rather that he found Freud more convincing, on nearly every point, than he did Freud's critics. This section shows how Freudian thought shaped Adorno's conception of psychology. This will elucidate Adorno's idea of the role of the somatic, an area considered in detail in chapter 4. This later chapter considers in part the relationship between the somatic, i.e. the physical, bodily, element in experience and our conscious, rational mental life. This, in some ways, corresponds to the Freudian tripartite division between the ego, the super-ego and the id, and the relationship of Adorno's division to Freud's will now be considered.

On Freud's account, the human psyche is a largely unconscious construction consisting of 'a psychological id, unknown and unconscious, upon which surface rests the ego' (*The Ego and the Id* 362). The 'repressed' also sits within this system. Freud's id (*das Es*, 'the it', in German) is wholly unconscious, representing the pleasure principle — the direction of mental life so as to maximise pleasurable experiences and minimise unpleasurable ones. The ego (*das Ich*, 'the I') here represents the reality principle, which is to say, the ability to 'renounce immediate satisfaction' or defer gratification because of real-world constraints (this quotation and the definition of the pleasure principle from Freud, *Introductory Lectures*, pp. 401-403). The ego is not separated from the id, but 'merges into it' (*The Ego and the Id* 362). It is that part of the id which is 'modified by the direct influence of the external world' (363), that is to say, which is connected with perceptual experience and interacts with the world. The ego is therefore also bodily: it perceives, and is perceived, through sensation. Sensation, for Freud as for Adorno, is physical: it involves not only perceptual experience but also phenomena like touch or pain which speak to the physical body. The third aspect of the psyche is the super-ego, alternatively the 'ego ideal', which represents the idealised view of the ego in the form (according to Freud) of the internalisation of the father figure as an attempt to overcome the Oedipus complex. The super-ego then becomes a source of moral and cultural norms, a 'conscience' which 'exercises ... moral censorship' (377). The super-ego is not only a personal formation based on a relationship with a parent, but is also cultural: the formation of the ego ideal, what the ego should be like, also draws on the accumulated norms of a society. This means that there is also a cultural super-ego, drawn from the great figures and traditions of a society, and setting up its

own codes of ethics to govern behaviour according to the ego ideal (*Civilization and its Discontents* 100-102).

One element of Freud's work that connects very directly to Adorno's account of how he turns to critique is in the notion of guilt. Guilt, for Freud, is ultimately 'the expression of the conflict of ambivalence, the unending struggle between Eros and the destructive drive, the death drive' (*Civilization and its Discontents* 88). The 'erotic' impulse that unites human beings in a social setting can only succeed by reinforcing a sense of guilt in this sense. This is because Freud argues that guilt has its origins in the Oedipus complex, in the sense of aggression towards the father figure: the ambivalence in guilt is that 'the sons hated him, but they also loved him' (88). They satisfied their hate through aggression, and then felt their love through remorse. Suppressing the aggressive tendency, in the move toward civilisation, does not get rid of the guilt feeling, because it is rather transferred to the super-ego, which rules that 'an evil deed is on a par with an evil intention' and creates a need for punishment accordingly (82). Guilt, for Freud, is thus the bad conscience that is the price of civilisation: a (sometimes unconscious) malaise that is the inheritance of each individual. In Adorno's work, it is guilt 'of a life which purely as fact will strangle other life', that cannot ever 'be made fully, presently conscious' that 'compels us to philosophise' (*ND* 364). Adorno's understanding of guilt connects with the Freudian understanding in that in both cases it is a condition of a civilised and socialised life: only what for Freud is the outcome of a frequently-repressed aggressive tendency in the individual is for Adorno a result of an unrestrained aggression in society at large. It is in part, for Adorno, a survivor's guilt: 'the drastic guilt of him who was spared [death in Auschwitz]' that leads to the adoption of 'bourgeois coldness' (363). It is notable that in both Adorno and Freud, however, guilt is presented as a social phenomenon, even if the precise mechanism differs, and when I consider the relationship between guilt and praxis in chapter 5 this understanding of the relationship between guilt and socialisation will play a role.

Adorno therefore takes up Freud in his social critique as well as in his analysis of the individual, and I will now consider some ways in which this takes place. Socially, Adorno argues that 'the Freudian school' initially recognised the super-ego as 'blindly, unconsciously internalised social coercion' that must be criticised (*ND* 272). This is because the super-ego is 'something heteronomous and alien to the ego'

(272) and thus beyond the individual. A critique of the super-ego would, because of the social coercion implicit in its formation, thus turn to a critique of society. But Adorno expands this critique: not only the super-ego, but also the ego, is a social formation. This is most clearly seen in his ‘anti-revisionist’ critique of post-Freudian psychoanalysis. The ‘revisionists’, post-Freudian psychoanalysts such as (and in particular) Karen Horney, failed to live up to Freud’s own analysis in their work, on Adorno’s argument. This is because they substitute Freud’s account of the origins of the ego in the libido, the pleasure-seeking aspect of the id, for one claiming the ego to be based on ‘drives, impulses and passions’ which form intrinsic character traits (Lee, ‘Sublimated or castrated psychoanalysis?’ 316). These drives are not accounted for, and certainly not in terms of the libido which Horney rejects, and because they lack any connection to the libido and thence to the id Adorno argues they must be conceived of as coming directly from the ego. This has the undesirable effect of creating the ego as something self-sustaining outside the id, thus hypostasising it as a separate entity. In fact, however, the ego is a historical phenomenon: it ‘is a product of thinking in the bourgeois era’ (316). To conceive of it as something separate from id, with an independent existence, is to forget the social element in ego-formation. This social element is precisely that character is (‘almost’) ‘a system of scars’ formed during childhood, ‘integrated only under suffering, and never completely’ (Adorno, *Revisionist Psychoanalysis* 328). The infliction of these scars is, Adorno argues, society ‘assert[ing] itself in the individual’ (328), recreating its own rationality in the ego as it does in the ego-ideal. The structure of the psyche is not ‘organic’ but rather the result of ‘social mutilation’ (329). Adorno here feels he is returning to the spirit of Freud’s own analysis, in which the formation of the ego relates to the experiences of early childhood (see for instance Freud, *Introductory Lectures* 397-403). Indeed, he argues that he is doing so more in line with Freud’s analysis than Freud himself, who ultimately, on Adorno’s view ‘naively accepted the monadic social existence of human being’ (Lee 322) rather than attempting to criticise the society which produced such an existence.<sup>7</sup> This self-conception of Adorno’s, whether justified or not in terms of Freud’s project as a whole, certainly

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<sup>7</sup> Readers may remark on Adorno’s insistence, here and with Hegel above, that Adorno is more loyal to the implications of the thought of certain thinkers than those thinkers are themselves. These assertions are contestable.

informed the way in which he deployed psychoanalytic concepts to his own critical ends.

While Adorno upholds Freudian thought, then, he does so by way of taking on Freudian cultural critique as much as any internal psychology of the individual, although his reliance on Freudian accounts of the individual psyche will be apparent in discussing the somatic impulse in chapter 4. The Freudian influence shapes some of Adorno's categories, and particularly in the realm of affective or normative matters.

### **Adorno's constellation**

This chapter has built on the ideas expressed in the introduction in order to give a clearer picture of the philosophical context within which Adorno operates. In a sense, these thinkers represent Adorno's 'constellation', the set of thinkers and thought within which Adorno situates himself and which are important to understanding his philosophical work. Through engaging with a number of thinkers, I have shown how they have affected Adorno's work and given something of a flavour of Adorno's critique in action. The ideas expressed here will, as has been indicated, be considered throughout this thesis; the current chapter serves to introduce them within a comprehensible context, so as to make arguments later in the thesis more engaging. The next chapter now turns to consider the details of Adorno's substantive critique, and in particular will discuss the spell, its link with the philosophy of nature, and how it might break. This unites some threads around identity thought and social totality, and helps inform the overall argument of this thesis.



## 2. Blinded by the Spell: In and Beyond the Social Totality

This chapter takes its cue from the idea of the social totality, which has been discussed above. One way to understand the role of the social totality is as an iron cage which sets the parameters for thought and understanding. The identity thinking it promotes reduces objects to concepts, making these concepts the exclusive bearers of information about the objects they intend to describe. In practice, this means that particulars are subsumed under their universal categories. This can be observed in relation to society as well as in thought. A factory might produce 100 000 units of goods in a day. There is no need to think of each one as a particular unit; they are identical for all intents and purposes and, unless faulty, can be treated equally. As for individuals, reduced to bearers of labour power, they are no different — one call centre operative, lower-level office administrator, fast food worker or factory worker is much the same as any other. The identity thinking which subsumes individuals and particular objects to the form of their concepts is what Adorno wishes us to criticise with the primacy of the object thesis and his subsequent turn to non-identity. It is a totality which is false, because it does not accurately describe the world, but is nonetheless real. It is a false thing that is treated as real, or (in Adorno's phraseology) a socially necessary semblance: it is ideology. But this is not ideology in terms of reification or of simple reproduction. Reification cannot provide us with a complete account of the false life, because it is both too focused on the social and also distorts an account of what happens to society. Adorno argues that reification looks back on the 'wishful image of unbroken subjective immediacy' (*ND* 374), seeing the hypostatisation of things as part of a new social development. Rather, the problem is not with 'congealed society' but with the identity thinking that refuses to see both the 'surplus [i.e. the object] over the subject' in experience and the moment of 'truth in reity' (374-5). Reification is therefore only part of the answer to how the social totality works. Adorno's later work attempts to find a wider category that better articulates each of these moments.

A framing he returns to over several works in the period of composition of *Negative Dialectics* is that of the spell (*der Bann*), the idea that identity thought is both of greater vintage and wider scope than we may first imagine. The argument of

this chapter is that Adorno's social critique, and hence many aspects of his wider project, are best understood through the category of the spell. This evocative image is not only a metaphor, but (in the words of Christopher Turner) 'fundamental' to Adorno's work, with multiple meanings which illustrate important aspects of Adorno's project (*Under Adorno's Spell* 204). I argue that the spell is a fundamental analytical category for Adorno, representing not only the ideas of identity thought and the social totality but also the conditions which allow them to flourish. In this way I advance a core argument of this thesis: the inescapability of the spell, and its importance for critical theory.

While Adorno's use of the spell has been remarked on before, and Christopher Turner has expounded its centrality to Adorno's work, my intention is to develop this approach further and show how the spell informs not only Adorno's social critique but also his negative dialectics. In order to reach this point, this chapter considers the spell through the dialectic of nature and history, which exemplify the operation of the spell through the idea of the social totality. The point is to illustrate both the spell's assumption of total power, and the instability that accompanies such a totality. The chapter then turns to consider Adorno's 'Theses Against Occultism' in light of the spell. I argue that Adorno's analysis of occultism can be fruitfully combined with the dialectic between enlightenment and myth to show one way in which this instability manifests itself. The spell may, ultimately, break itself, and cause a reversion to barbarism through a dangerous remythologisation. This represents one possible end point of the current social order. The other possibility is an emancipatory breaking of the spell, the possibility of which — if not its reality — is one of the motivators for negative dialectics. This possibility is taken forward in the remaining chapters of the thesis.

### **The Spell**

One formulation of the spell is that it is that which creates the conditions for identity thought and the primacy of the subject, leading to and reinforcing their dominant position in thought today. As the 'subjective form of the world spirit' it expresses the demand of spirit to bring all that exists under a universal system (*ND* 345-6). There exists, then, something like the Hegelian *Geist* which attempts to bring all things under one concept. This spirit is the social totality: '...what society worships in the world spirit is itself, the omnipotence of its own coercion' (316). It is

a ‘transfiguration’ of the universal and its ideology into a subject, the representation of the movement of society which comes itself to rule society. Such a transfiguration is possible because of the division of labour, which separates the mental from the physical and so allows for the illusion of an autonomous world spirit (Rosen, *Hegel’s Dialectic* 157). Society as *Geist* therefore originates in labour, which further separates Adorno’s materialist position from a version of idealism: we will explore the question of Adorno’s materialism over the course of this chapter. Society aims at universalism because of its basic upholding and sublimation of the law of self-preservation: ‘[t]he system is the belly turned mind...’ (ND 23). *Geist*, when created, drives its own basis into the fundamental categories of subjective thought, making its limits absolute and giving rise to identity thought. This is the essence of the spell. It is more than ideology; or rather, it is both ideology and the fundamental disposition that makes ideology as it is possible (349). When unpacked, the spell offers to explain a range of phenomena in Adorno’s thought: the historical processes which have led to rationalisation and totality, the nature of the social totality (and the sociology of nature) and the importance of the non-conceptual element to Adorno’s thought. It is therefore surprising that there have been very few attempts to incorporate it as an important analytical category in Adorno’s methodology.

Turner’s *Under Adorno’s Spell* is the most recent (2016) attempt to articulate what the spell means for Adorno; indeed, the only attempt, to my knowledge, to treat it as a fundamental concept for interpreting Adorno’s work. Turner offers a nuanced reading of the spell, reading it as a polysemic term offering a range of interpretations, more than one of which may be in play at any one time. *Bann* has, Turner points out, at least five different meanings in German, each of which he argues relate to Adorno’s usage of the term (206-7). These meanings, taken from the Grimm edition of the *Deutsches Wörterbuch*, include:

1. The ‘power (legally, the jurisdiction)’ to banish or excommunicate;
2. The area to which the *Bann*, in its first definition, applies;
3. An edict of command or prohibition;
4. A ‘publicly declared penalty against a delinquent’, originally distinguished from the process of making someone an outlaw, but soon merged with this;

5. ‘A rather derivative usage — curse, spell, fetter, prohibition’ — but a prohibition not pronounced by a court. (All quotations Grimm paraphrased in Turner 206)

This range of definition is meant both to provide context to Adorno’s deployment of the term and to suggest the limitations involved in the translation of it as ‘spell’. In particular, the idea of banishment, exclusion, prohibition from a defined space captures the force of the spell quite well: Turner argues that it is this ‘taboo’ formed around ‘what belongs and what is to be excluded’ (208) that is its fundamental meaning. With this in mind, Turner suggests that if we are to understand the spell as *a* spell, it is as a ‘protective force field’ (208) cast against the non-identical, meant to banish the uncontrollable and threatening where it is deployed. But because the spell becomes enmeshed in the social totality, it, undergoes reversal and its caster becomes caught in what it has cast. The spell the subject casts is also cast over the subject (*ND* 139). In other words, the subject which attempts to capture objects under a concept or a definition finds that it must also then remove the subjective element from the object to preserve this definition as objective. But this causes the subject to ‘contract into a point of abstract reason’, to disappear (139). It is this element of the spell that Turner finds ‘most crucial’ because it highlights the way in which the attempt to preserve the subject in safety can end up shrinking it to an abstract form (*Under Adorno’s Spell* 208).

Turner’s taxonomy of the spell is a useful guide to the complexities involved in its deployment by Adorno. It is clear that the commitment of thought to identification can be read as a sort of edict, a prohibition over a zone of command (society, human knowledge) which includes only what can be subsumed under the identity principle and excludes that which eludes it. The operation of conceptual thought as a *Bann* in this sense is evocative. Here, and contrary to Turner, I suggest that it is better illustrated by taking the spell not only as a charm of protection but as a curse.<sup>1</sup> The spell seeks to doom the non-identical by first excluding it from cognition and then attempting its subsumption under identity: it is an attack, not a defensive measure. This matters because the concept or metaphor deployed has connotations. A protective field, however exclusionary, prevents danger from

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<sup>1</sup> Much as Cain’s punishment is not only a curse but also a protection — the mark of Cain makes sure that ‘no one who came upon him would kill him’ (Gen. 4:15).

coming to us; a banishing curse is quite another thing. For Adorno, it seems clear that the spell dominates and does not tolerate difference (*ND* 347). This is because the curse is not a local protection, but one which wants totality. Turner's argument, insofar as it encourages us to accept a 'defensive' interpretation of the spell, therefore does an injustice to the violence of identity thought: the idea of the spell is not (only) that sacrifices had to be made to ensure survival, but that self-preservation always seeks domination.

The end-result, on either interpretation, is the same: the protection of the community by the removal of what is supposed to threaten it. The banished non-identical elements are entirely excluded from the epistemological protection of the system of knowledge. Agamben's account of *homo sacer*, the person banished by sovereign power and made entirely outside the law, is a useful comparison here. *Homines sacri* are placed entirely outside the course of normal human affairs, and they may be killed with impunity (Agamben, *Homo Sacer* 83). They become non-persons, for all intents and purposes. A similar phenomenon is happening in Adorno's account of the exclusion of the non-identical, which is entirely excluded from knowledge, and this will have particular resonance where the spell becomes a social phenomenon and begins to integrate the individuals who form part of society.

Such a deployment of meaning, then, can help us to understand what Adorno's purpose is in using *Bann* and in his description of the social totality. Turner's work therefore provides a useful framework, although I develop his account by arguing that the spell can be used analytically to identify the vexed relationship between nature and society as well as the relation of the social totality to nonconceptual thinking. The difference between Turner's reference to the spell as a fundamental *concept* and my own of the spell as an analytical *category* should be spelled out (so to speak), as it bears on my approach. It is my intention that the spell should be understood as a category, i.e. that it operates at a higher level of critique than the analytical concepts that are deployed only within the framework of the spell. In other words, it is the background understanding which should inform a critique of society.

Self-preservation is at the heart of the spell. It is the application of this 'fundamental law of nature for all living things' (*ND* 349) that leads to identity thought and the casting of the spell. Adorno traces this back to certain animal

impulses. In particular, the primal ‘rage’ of the predator towards their prey, evolved to help the predator ‘dare’ to attack (22). This rage is entirely incommensurate to the prey but serves a function: firstly, it lowers the predator’s inhibition, and makes them more inclined to violence; and secondly, it frightens the victim hopefully into paralysis. Such an impulsive rage can ultimately be traced back to self-preservation in the form of natural selection. Human beings, then, also possess this capacity, but we are ‘fortunate enough to have a superego’ and therefore need a reason to rage (22). This is a piece of ironic observation from Adorno, for of course the rage of human beings is no different from that of the animal. The difference is that humanity has a bad conscience about it, which requires a justification.<sup>2</sup> Adorno argues that this justification comes by transforming the object of the rage into something that is to be devoured not for self-preservation, but because it is evil. It becomes something wholly other, entirely inferior, suitable only for death. There are, as so frequently in Adorno’s work, parallels with the Holocaust in this passage.<sup>3</sup>

What this has to do with identity thinking may not be immediately apparent. But it is the exclusionary act which defines the other as other that also produces the idea of the community as same. The transfigured rage is systematic, wanting either to make everything like itself or to destroy it. ‘Idealism as rage’ (22) is then an (ironic) indictment of the material and animal origins of systematic thought — but also indicates the longevity of the spell. This original spell, cast to turn what was to be eaten into an evil to be banished, must have come very early in the social evolution of humanity. The spell is, it almost seems to be, the original sin of society. Only the ever-greater organisation of society and the greater organisation of humanity permit it the power it now holds. Characteristic of this position is Adorno’s remark on the course of history: ‘No universal history leads from savagery to humanitarianism, but there is one leading from the slingshot to the megaton bomb.’ (ND 320). Capitalism is continuous with older economic systems, inasmuch as these rest on the division of labour, exchange and the identity principle, only it is more powerful. It is constructing a system in which the spell reigns triumphant: the exchange principle has brought ‘whatever it could identify with itself’ under its order, ‘with increasing,

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<sup>2</sup> This highlights Adorno’s debt to Nietzsche: compare this to the Second Essay of his *Genealogy of Morality*. I am grateful to Dr Peter Sedgwick for this point.

<sup>3</sup> I am indebted to Dr Andrew Edgar for suggesting this point.

if potentially homicidal, success' (23). We see here, as well, the hint that the spell growing ever stronger may break itself — an idea I cover in more detail below.

This idea complicates any philosophy of history which seeks to lay the blame, as it were, at a particular point in time. Adorno, in fact, suggests that the spell could be seen as 'the eternal sameness of the historical process' (*History and Freedom* 183). That is, history to this date has been the same process of exclusion of the other and identification with the same, only it takes different forms along the way. Rolf Tiedemann's Foreword to *History and Freedom* presents the spell operating in history as belonging in fact to prehistory, to 'myth' (xvii). Tiedemann's interpretation of the spell as belonging to the world of myth alludes to *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, and indeed there is a common thread which connects that work with Adorno's later use of the spell. This is domination over nature: the first application of the spell, a form of unreflective reason which asserts its control over nature by 'subsuming, classifying, subordinating and otherwise cutting [objects] short' (*History and Freedom* 13). If this description seems familiar, it is because it serves equally well as a description of concept formation. Adorno's thought displays a key interrelation between identity thinking and domination over nature, which is explicitly referred to by the idea of the spell. This relationship can be understood in terms of the the myth-enlightenment dialectic: enlightenment demythologises nature, making all for man, and thereby reverting into mythology. The demythologisation process, that is to say, leads to a transformation of nature into an object for human action and therefore privileges the subject above all else. One historical example of this is the words of St John Chryostom quoted in the Catechism of the Catholic Church:

What is it that is about to be created, that enjoys such honour? It is man that great and wonderful living creature, more precious in the eyes of God than all other creatures! For him the heavens and the earth, the sea and all the rest of creation exist. (no. 358)

Christianity denies the animism of Greco-Roman polytheism (especially, in later centuries, in the mystery religions) but this quotation shows that this denial of anthropomorphism in nature goes hand-in-hand with a remythologisation granting nature to humanity as a gift from God, to be manipulated to favour humanity's ends.

One consequence of this transformation is that social complexity is overlooked in favour of simpler and more systematic explanations. This can be seen with reference to causality. It is typically assumed that this takes the form of a chain, or a web, or in any case some sort of past-future relationship which can be more or less adequately traced back. For Adorno, this explanation simply does not work any more. Kant's attempt to defend 'unequivocal causal chains' (ND 266) ignores the 'infinity of the enmeshed and intersecting' that make it impossible, even in principle, to define any strict causal principle. The understanding of causality as a strict, generational hierarchy (Adorno refers to it as feudal) is a result of the strict application of identity thought that denies the 'positive infinities', or non-conceptualities, which interrelate all objects. Even these infinities, however, will be replicated in a totally integrated system under which all events will be, by virtue of their integration, related to and dependent on all other events. Causality then will become obsolete (267).<sup>4</sup> The spell which creates this integration cannot deal easily with the complexities integration causes: the redundancy of organised causal chains for instance, makes the explanations that the systematising spell offers no longer applicable. This has implications for social thought. Adorno singles out the Marxist doctrine of base and superstructure for criticism: seeking to reduce the complexity of social relations to a strict causal relation in this way is now 'wide of the mark' because 'in a total society all things are equidistant from the centre' (268). The economic base becomes identical with the superstructure. This can be seen in the rise of what Marc Augé refers to as 'non-places'. These are sites where the physical space is decoupled from a sense of 'place' or anthropological community. These non-places are defined by their function (to move, to shop, etcetera) rather than by their physical geography; they are largely identical the world over. The human being relates to them through 'solitary contractuality' (Augé, *Non-Places* 76), a non-community in which the primary relationship is mediated through words, and especially instructional words — motorway signage, for instance. In this sense, although Augé does not explicitly explore this, we can connect these non-places with Adorno's thought. For in the non-place, the shopping mall, for instance, we have an infrastructural element of the material base (a site for exchange) that also pushes a cultural and social ideology.

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<sup>4</sup> Scientific enquiry still gives results, although this may be because it (or at least, modern physics) 'implicitly respects the preponderance of the object' (Cook, *Adorno on Nature*, 73) and operates with a more complex idea of causation.



The shopping mall, globally indistinguishable, is also the site of ideological training about what one ought to do and believe: it endorses and encourages consumption so that one might look better, feel better, and ultimately be better. This is all the more effective for its setting void of actual community in which the appeal is made to the individual shopper (Augé, *Non-Places* 84-85). The rise of internet shopping, through Amazon and others, completes this shift to non-place. Now one can stay at home and enjoy the lure of advertising and consumption without leaving one's house, in a virtual reality whose ultimate aim is pure exchange. Witness Amazon's now-discontinued 'Dash buttons' which would order an item for you literally at the push of a button. In this way, the economic base is indistinguishable from the superstructure: the ideological structure that upholds the economic order is integrated into the economic order itself. Developments in the ideology already are developments in the base. 'Platform apps' like Uber are at the same time a movement towards a digital capitalism and an ideological exultation of precarious work; seeking to untangle a causal chain is a futile task.

The crisis in causality is symptomatic, then, of integration. It is the outcome of the spell, which itself conjured the strict causal relation into being: 'causality is the spell of dominated nature' (269). It is fundamentally based on the identity principle. As identity grows ever more powerful, however, causality disintegrates in the total system thereby created. This moment of breakdown will be explored further, but in order to more fully explain this process we first return to the idea of the spell as domination over nature.

### **Domination over nature**

Just as the myth / enlightenment dialectic is in a continual process of reversion to the other, so the relationship between nature and society involves their mutual entwinement and mediation. Nature by itself appears 'closest to myth' (Adorno, 'The Idea of Natural-History' 253). This supposedly undifferentiated and primal nature exists (we are told) as a 'fatefully arranged predetermined being' (253), which is the backdrop to history proper, the sphere of human action and change. It appears on the scene in order to provide basic situational facts and characteristics, but is otherwise seen as a 'separate sphere' from history (*History and Freedom* 116). Adorno is here alluding to Hegel's philosophy of nature; the Hegelian example, as it frequently does for Adorno, also stands in for a range of

thinkers in the Western tradition. One might amplify the point with reference to Hobbes and Locke, for whom the state of nature is something we are removed from at the beginning of history.

But nature also appears as something immediate, experienced as it were as brute fact (122). This first nature, however, is nowadays impossible to distinguish from second nature, which is ‘the negation of whatever might be thought of as a first nature’ (119, see also *ND* 357). This is because second nature is also, apparently, immediate: ‘semblance is the prophetic warning of an increasingly powerful spell’ (*History and Freedom* 122). It is this *apparent* immediacy, then, which gives second nature its ‘naturalness’ and therefore its power as ideology.

The separation of nature from history thus serves the ‘increasingly powerful spell’. There are two ways in which this happens. Firstly, the idea of a primitive and ahistorical substratum running through and behind history can lead to Heideggerian ‘historicity’, which reduces history to nature (see Hullo-Kentor, ‘Introduction’ 244). The problems with Heidegger’s approach have been summarised in the previous chapter, but it is important to note that the reduction of one side to the other is explicitly seen as undesirable for Adorno. Secondly, the idea of second nature relies on the power of ‘naturalness’ outside of history for its power. Social laws are imputed with an eternal, because ahistorical and ‘natural’, truth. The paradigmatic case is the idea that exchange value is in some sense a ‘law of nature’, that capitalism only reproduces a natural propensity to see all things as subject to exchange or acquisition for personal profit. But this idea is not wrong because it is untrue — in fact, insofar as capitalism and exchange are governed by objective laws which have developed historically, Adorno argues that it *is* natural. The ‘prevailing conditions of production’ make its laws objective (*ND* 354). This is because ideology is ‘inherent in’ society, rather than being a ‘detachable layer’ on top of it. Society becomes nature because it makes its laws objective things-in-themselves, and the high abstraction of the current social totality reinforces this through its relentless socialisation. We see second nature as the first because we transmute (some of) what is ‘trapped within’ into otherness, see it as immediate just because it is so highly mediated (357).

Second nature's naturalness is, then, both real and semblance. The 'necessity of social semblance' (355) is that these laws are valid and objective, but ultimately an illusion. The illusion is required because passing these laws off as 'natural processes over people's heads' is the most effective way to justify them in a time when they are evidently not working for the general benefit (*History and Freedom* 118). In neoliberalism's unopposed ascendancy, the common ideological justification was that neoliberal economics is simply what works, and thinking any differently is a sign that one has lost touch with how things are by nature. As opposition has grown in recent years, it is interesting to note that this defence is rarely trotted out, and instead we hear that capitalism is (in Theresa May's words from 2017) 'the greatest agent of collective human progress ever created' ('PM Speech'). The implicit shift here to capitalism as a system that was created, and can therefore be uncreated, is, perhaps, a sign that the old certainties no longer work.<sup>5</sup> Adorno's thoughts on the instability of total systems are hinted at in the idea of second nature — that this is a system so absolute that it eventually has to create its own other. This other is used for the system's benefit, for a time, but it also recreates a dialectic of nature which is, now, explicitly social.

The idea of 'natural history', through which Adorno conducts his philosophy of nature, is therefore to be taken literally. Nature has a history, and that history is mediated through society. But history is also mediated through nature. We have already come across the instinct of self-preservation, for instance, which is a motive for historical social change just as it itself has changed with history (Cook, *Adorno's Critical Materialism* 728-9). Self-preservation under the spell is raised to a universal law — the constitutive subject is presented as the 'spiritualised continuation of Darwin's struggle for existence' (*ND* 179), or, in other words, an attempt to salvage a form of existence against the world. In the same passage, domination over nature is referred to as a 'mere natural relationship', just because it results from self-preservation. The lion dominates the antelope, the bird dominates the worm and the human being dominates nature. Adorno's argument here is to dethrone the idealised supremacy of humanity's rational faculties, the idea that it is reason which sets

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<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, the same speech goes on to suggest that free market economics as government policy is not 'an abstract doctrine or ideological concept'. Old habits, after all, die hard, and ideology that recognises its own falsehood is still ideology.

humanity apart and gives it license to dominate inferior nature. This merely natural phenomenon, however, leads to domination and control in the social world. The claim that ‘Ironically, Marx was a Social Darwinist’ (355) highlights this connection. Just like ‘natural history’, this can be taken entirely literally: just as species respond to material conditions in their environment, either adapting or dying out, so do social systems respond to changes in the economic base or else go extinct (356). Marx, then, is a Darwinist about societies. Turner’s point above, about the polysemic deployment of language in Adorno, is relevant here. The natural assumption, when reading this claim, is to think of the eugenicist social Darwinists — that is what makes the statement ‘ironic’ and even astonishing — but another meaning is worth considering. The eugenicist social Darwinists sought to bring nature into history by replicating the survival of the fittest in society, in order, on their own terms, to better the human race. For Adorno, this doctrine represents an attempt to see society as a natural whole or totality, the quality of which can be improved by removing the weakest parts — a process which is supposed to appear natural. Hence the quotation Adorno takes from *The Foundations of Political Economy*: ‘the totality of the process does appear as an objective context arising by natural growth’ (Marx quoted in *ND* 355). But while the social Darwinists thought that a society that was, in appearance, natural was above all a good thing, Marx sees this apparent naturalness as ‘the negativity in which the chance of voiding it [i.e. the idea of a natural society] awakens’ (*ND* 355). The natural in history is precisely the medium in which surpassing the natural becomes possible. The ‘natural laws’ by which capitalism operates are evolved social laws: the realisation of that fact is at the same time the realisation that things could be otherwise. At the same time, social nature has an objective existence and follows objective laws. Even if these are ultimately socially-derived, their being socially-derived does not make them subjective. A large, sudden increase in the money supply will likely lead to inflation whether we believe it will or not. The point is that it is precisely this contradiction between the laws being objective and their being illusory is the point at which we can realise their social, contingent origin. The spell as ideology protects the system by preventing this realisation. The systematising logic of thought and the belief in the constitutive subjectivity might spring from self-preservation, the desire to protect oneself against the unknown, but they are, as we have seen above, turned against the individual as well (180).

This moment of reversal is particularly important. The destruction of the very possibility of an idea of first nature leads to the totalising system, which is irreducibly social. At this point, however, the system takes over. Ideology is turned against human beings, as the non-identical elements within them are suppressed and they are transformed into perceiving themselves and being perceived as bearers of commodities backed by a transcendental ego. The problem with the spell is not, then, that it is merely the wrong spell, the wrong system. If it were the case that it was this particular conceptual configuration that missed the mark, then we could just organise a better one. It would be difficult, but no more so than the shift from Newtonian to Einsteinian physics. It is, rather, that the very principle of a system based on identity thought will turn against those who implement it, reducing them from individuals to a bare existence.

The damaged psyche of the individual shows what, exactly, this involves. For Adorno, there exists a basically Freudian division between ego and id, in which the id is the site of the instincts and somatic impulses and the ego the historically later, rational part. When the spell's power takes hold over individuals, the impulses are 'banished to the zone of unfree bondage to nature' (222) — they are seen as reminders of an unseemly animal past that threatens the ego's power of self-mastery. In so doing, the ego rejects precisely that which gives it the properties it claims (in its transcendental form) to most value. Freedom, for instance, has its origin in the spontaneity found in impulses, but is now reclassified as a form of bondage to nature's whim (221-2). The ego, however, prefers a unitary self over which it has complete control. It creates a person, a subject, which is transparent to itself and controllable. In so doing, it fulfils the mandate of the spell to bring all things under a nexus of command. This 'abstract identity' (279), however, is challenged by the bodily fact of impulses. When the impulsivity of the body clashes with the beliefs of the ego about itself, you find Freudian neuroses. The feeling that these neurotic demands and compulsions somehow come from outside oneself is telling. It is a recognition, however slight, that the ego is not entirely in command of its own house. There is always the non-identical, that which breaks through the barriers set by the spell and occasionally asserts its presence. Adorno argues that this is entirely necessary. It is through these impulses that we are reminded of our own humanity, and through them that we *become* fully human. The impulsive and uncontrolled

‘illumination’ in the *Golden Gate* passage of *Minima Moralia*, for instance, gives a startling insight into the irreducible particularity of the particular person, even as it also shows the place of the universal (*MM* §104). These points will be considered in greater detail in chapter 4 below.

The case of the individual indicates a broader tendency that has been only referred to thus far. This is the inability of the spell to sustain itself. If in the individual neurosis is the result of the spell’s failure to contain the non-identical, and if in ideology we might see the foundational claims buckling, then this could be because the totality (which, after all, is not that total) requires its other. The non-conceptual and non-identical elements of thought remain necessarily foils even as the universal attempts to subsume them (*ND* 328). If the power of the spell attempts to deny this, then it produces its own others and its own antagonisms, because the universal cannot do without them. The triumphant spell is potentially its own downfall.

### **The occult and the Market**

This movement of the spell mirrors the enlightenment / myth dialectic. The enlightenment tendency that seeks the all-dominant identity principle can just as easily revert into mythology as its internal movement creates its own other. I argue that this movement can be clearly seen in Adorno’s analysis of occultism, in a rich set of reflections at the end of *Minima Moralia*. Adorno’s arguments on occultism are under-studied and underrepresented in the literature, given that he devoted a significant portion of *Minima Moralia* to analysing it and wrote a monograph on the ideology of popular astrology columns, ‘The Stars Down to Earth’.<sup>6</sup> Although this is presumably on the (mistaken) view that occultism is no longer relevant, this section argues that in fact Adorno’s analyses of the occult can illuminate the idea of the spell and, therefore, encapsulate the dangerous outcome he saw identity thought and its ideology leading to. The current section therefore examines the prospect that the spell could create its own other by considering Adorno’s remarks on the occult and interpreting them through an essay by Harvey Cox on ‘The Market as God’. I then conclude that, on this reading, the success of the spell will eventually lead to the re-

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<sup>6</sup> About the only study retrievable is Nederman and Golding’s ‘Popular Occultism and Critical Social Theory: Exploring Some Themes in Adorno’s Critique of Astrology and the Occult’, dating from 1981. This is a short, but rich, paper that explores Adorno’s idea in ‘The Stars Down to Earth’ that astrology legitimises and reproduces the ideology of society.

enactment of the original conditions of the spell, except this time mediated through the social totality to create a strict ideological blind. The resulting social barbarism offers one, albeit not very happy, route out of the spell.

The occult mirrors the spell in the form of re-enchantment which turns back to a form of animism. This return to the occult is, Adorno argues, a result of the ‘forgetting’ of the fact that the ‘world of products’ was made by human hands (*MM* §151, II), i.e. that the social world has a social origin. While in *Minima Moralia* this ‘second mythology’ is related to a cultural regression (§151, I), this same regression is also symptomatic of the spell. Adjustment to its assumptions and identitarian position leads to ‘pseudoactivity and potential idiocy’ as well as the suppression of spontaneity (*ND* 348). As this occurs at a time when nature is wholly transformed into ideology and seen as in principle controllable, a time when the spell’s actions produce their own antagonistic forces, then following the argument of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* re-mythologisation is a potential outcome. It is by this measure no surprise that the first stirrings of modern spiritualism should happen in the mid-Victorian period, when the world was increasingly brought under the aegis of the great powers through imperialism, exploration and categorisation (scientific or otherwise). The occult world comes to the scene both as one more land to be conquered (communicating with the dead and spirits to serve human ends) and simultaneously as something alien, in principle beyond human mastery.<sup>7</sup> It appears, in other words, much as first nature did, when its fury was controlled and expressed by shamans and priests.

While the old shamans used *mana* to control nature through tribute and submission (*Dialectic of Enlightenment* 20-21), the new shamans use the ritual of science to provide ‘proof’ of the existence of astral bodies (*MM* §151, VIII). Ghosts are supposed to be measurable by electromagnetic means, demons and angels become visitors from space and the dead will talk to the living if only they are asked

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<sup>7</sup> The greatest stories from the great period of ghost stories involve precisely this element of horror at something beyond all human capacity to control. M.R. James’ short fiction, for instance, is precisely about this wholly other (see *Ghost Stories*). A more explicit terror is found in the Old Ones of H.P. Lovecraft’s Cthulhu mythos, where the veneer of civilisation and control is disrupted by the appearance of primal and incomprehensible power, as in the stories collected in *The Whisperer in Darkness*. (This theme is not necessarily disconnected to Lovecraft’s extreme racist attitudes.) It is interesting, on these lines, to note that these stories date from a time where Victorian self-confidence was beginning to falter: the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, post-Boer War, for James, and the 1920s and 30s United States for Lovecraft.

in the right way. The ritual of scientific practice is supposed to act as a preventative against disbelief, all the while accepting that the phenomena are supernatural and therefore not party to our rules. But the new shamanism is not only involved in the world of spirits. The terror at nature replicated in the occult world is drawn from the alienation from the social world, in which the reified order seems to loom against the individual as something beyond and against humanity. In much the same way, the occultist faces death, and (putatively) overcomes it. The connection between the two is the hope of controlling the alien power that cannot be grasped — except when it seems it is, through the magical power of the medium. In this way, the regression to magical thinking is merely, Adorno suggests, ‘thought ... assimilated to late capitalist forms’ (III). Indeed, the occultist appears to recapture some of what the human being has lost through the reduction of subjectivity. Occult thinking reproduces the desire for spontaneity and meaning, even as its results so frequently are dull: the medium communicates only the most trivial things, and that is all the audience wants to know (VI). Occultism therefore plays an ideological role in creating an ‘other’ for a society which is becoming increasingly known and controllable, while at the same time reinforcing social conformity by providing an outlet for those subjective aspects that are denied under the spell. It presents itself both as within and without the dominant ideology, being both untrammelled first (super)nature and rational scientific investigation. And the illusion of danger in mediumship is from a position of safety: the departed spouse has a reassuring message, and even a demonic possession is a polite spectacle — especially if there is ectoplasm.

While this analysis holds for the occultist *milieu* of Adorno’s time, I argue that the same process of enlightenment that motivated the turn to the occult in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries has, with the totalisation of society, now returned to instantiate itself in the social world. The previous section ended with the idea that the spell might create its own other through its own process of integration. The individual, reduced to a monad within the ‘universal domination of mankind by the exchange value’ (ND 178), becomes demythologised (‘from a *reduction ad hominem* to a *reductio hominis*’, as Adorno puts it [186]). The fungibility of each individual in the total system finds its ultimate expression in the reduction of the individual to a specimen in the concentration camps (362). Advances in productive forces mean that



the preservation of life, for Adorno a basic drive of both the individual and society, can no longer be considered a matter of course; inside the doctrine of self-preservation as an end ‘something other is maturing’ (349). Confronted by the almighty power of the spell and the totality it has conjured into being, individual control is out of the picture alongside the individual. The social totality appears as a brute fact, something to which what remains of the individual is subjected. In this situation, it is the social structures that begin to take on an enchanted life, that become the necessary other to identity thought, as their origin in human action is forgotten.

Harvey Cox, in an influential theological essay, speaks of ‘the Market as God’. This is quite literal: he contends that ‘the Market’ (capitalised ‘to signify both the mystery that enshrouds it and the reverence it inspires in business folk’) has taken over the power and attributes of a god, has its priests and auguries, and is seen as an object of reverence and power rather than a human creation (‘The Market as God’). Cox argues that ‘there lies embedded in the business pages an entire theology ... It needed only to be systematised for a whole new Summa to take shape.’ The emerging sacred texts of this new religion take the form of oracles for divining its will, how to operate the world such that wealth is increased and exchange promoted. The Market seeks to commodify everything (indeed, and every thing), so that it might be exchanged for a profit. This includes those things that were previously seen as spiritualised and sanctified, or at least beyond ordinary commercial reckoning: so, progressively, one’s own life becomes open to commercial exploitation. Since Cox wrote his original essay, in 1999, this has become only more pronounced. One instructive example is the recent (at the time of writing) furore about a prominent Instagram ‘influencer’, whose supposedly surprise engagement was in fact meticulously planned with itineraries sent to a number of businesses in order to solicit marketing opportunities (Lorenz, ‘Welcome to the Era of Branded Engagements’). While this is an extreme example, if one that is largely confined in its harm to the couple themselves, it illustrates that in principle anything can become a commodity and be offered for sale and consumption on the open market — even if there were no sponsors, the entire proposal was meticulously documented in pursuit of the influencer’s brand, with the intention of increasing her followers and therefore earning potential in future. Yet one of the true markers, for Cox, of the Market’s

power is precisely that it is ‘the Market’: it is presented as having a singular will which determines what must be done to appease it so that growth might be sustained, or return, and it can punish those who deviate from its orthodoxy. Governments who act against the Market can be condemned.

What Cox presents, then, is a pregnant rhetorical equivalence of globalised capitalism with a deity beyond the control and knowledge of ordinary people. Post-2008, we might add that the Market is often beyond the ken of its self-appointed auguries, most of whom failed to distinguish themselves at any point before, during or in the aftermath of the crash. What is happening, beyond Cox’s prognoses, is that the Market becomes an inscrutable and occult phenomenon, its social origins long forgotten. Occultism was one way to deal with the ordered and identified world, and its practice — at times emphasising the comprehensibility of the spirit world, at times emphasising instead its unknown terror — represents a grasping for something to hold on to at a time when actual life is within the confines of a totalising system. The God-King of the Market is the second occult attempt, where meaning is held to be dictated by the Market and human activity subordinated absolutely to its needs. The first occultism sought the supernatural in its place beyond the veil, and found society; the second occultism shortcuts this by placing the supernatural in society as an immanent deity which remains fundamentally hidden and beyond all created things. The spell has succeeded in achieving a totalised society, at the price of re-enchanting a social phenomenon into a divine despotism. Rather than reinforcing its rule over society, as the first occultism managed, the spell now creates something that even it cannot contain, and which in its absolute power creates the ‘disjoint and embattled power machineries’ that are characteristic of fascism and may yet lie in our future (*ND* 346). In this way, the spell begins to break itself.

### **The broken spell?**

The events of the past few years, coinciding with the writing of this thesis, offer some evidence to this end and in themselves offer some vindication for Adorno’s arguments on this measure. The rise of right-wing populism combines both the faith in market economics and market solutions with a xenophobic demagoguery that openly rebukes the logic of globalisation without, in the end, challenging it. The result is a fragmented political situation matched with powerful transnational corporations able to force their will on subject populations. Authoritarian political

measures offer one way for governments to reassert themselves, either as official ambitions (Viktor Orbán's proclamations of 'illiberalism', for instance) or as reaction to the inability of government to control the course of events. This latter course can be seen in the extremely convoluted attempt by Prime Ministers Theresa May and Boris Johnson to successfully leave the European Union, which has at times included violations of constitutional and parliamentary norms in to attempt to stifle opposition.<sup>8</sup> Rival power bases in society offer not only differing politics but different epistemologies, as the sheer proliferation of ideology disguised as fact makes it impossible to maintain a coherent and agreed system of knowledge.

Adorno anticipates the way in which 'so-called pluralism', which under the spell merely 'falsely den[ies] the total structure of society', will in time disintegrate as 'total socialisation objectively hatches its opposite' (ND 346). The spell which succeeds not only creates its own other, but by doing so creates the possibility for its own downfall. The other that is created has an 'openly destructive drive' (346). This is an extrapolation of Freud's argument, in *Civilization and its Discontents*, that civilisation represses a natural aggression in human beings by turning it inward, transferring this aggression to an ever-more domineering super-ego that is compared to 'an internal authority to watch over [the individual], like a garrison in a conquered town' (Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents* 77). The super-ego corresponds with a sense of socially-constructed conscience, as we have seen, and in this way serves the purposes of social integration through the mechanism of guilt. The aggression, manifest in the so-called death drive, is thus redirected towards social ends, to a greater or lesser success. Adorno is arguing that this latent aggression might yet spill out into a complete destructiveness, particularly when the social super-ego which the spell sustains (for better or worse) breaks down. The rival power bases that arise where integration produces its own other, either in the shape of an ineffable and omnipotent God-market or in those human beings who are to be excluded from society entirely, open the opportunity for a festival of violence that could be entirely destructive of society.

The spell's universalism is at the root of these discussions. Being part of a general movement to homogenise things and people into one system, the spell also provides

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<sup>8</sup> This has been a heavily-revised sentence over various drafts of this work.

for a single source of authority. Once this universalism is broken, not by ‘so-called pluralism’ but by the setting up of a distinct power outside the system then the power of the spell to regulate society as a totality breaks and the totality fractures with it. While I have discussed this in terms of the Market in this chapter, there is another power which will come in to play later in this work: the failure of the spell to grasp the catastrophic effects of human intervention on global climate and ecological systems. This is a great other which has had, and will have, destabilising effects on the social totality, and which may yet cause the downfall of the spell. This possibility is analysed in more detail in chapter 5.

There is a certain degree of provisionality here. The spell ‘as the metaphysic governing all reality’ (349) lingers because the hegemony of self-preservation has not yet been broken. The ego drives which are the ‘instrument’ of self-preservation remain ‘all but irresistible’ even now (349). Technological advancement in production makes life superfluous and fungible, but nonetheless work and employment continue. We cling to life even in the face of absolute despair. Self-preservation was, after all, the force behind the spell — and, just as it cast the spell, self-preservation and identity thought can lead beyond it. This can be to the bleak ends suggested above. Self-preservation at the current moment is, after all, ‘irrational’ (349): it persists even though the state of productive forces makes providing for our needs easy in principle, and so this urge metastasises into fetishism. Moreover ‘we cannot help suspecting the life to which it attaches us of turning into something that makes us shudder’ (364).

But there is another possibility. Should the totality break, this could be either ‘a disaster or a liberation’ (*ND* 346). As a liberation, the spell may break and instead we may create a form of life which recognises that which the spell excludes and in which all differences are reconciled and forms of domination and power relations are neutralised. This is Adorno’s utopian vision, a utopia he does not ever make concrete but which animates and drives his critical thought. Negative dialectics, Adorno’s critical methodology, is a reaction to spellbound life — a critical reflection on the prevailing thought forms of society in order that space may be opened up to transcend it. The next chapter explores Adorno’s utopianism in this light, arguing that negative dialectics is best understood in the context of the spell. This leads to the question of the individual’s role, both as an experiencing agent and in terms of

political praxis. Through this, it will become clear that the central direction of Adorno's work is to recognise the likelihood of disaster and to try, instead, to open the possibility of liberation.

### 3. Negation, Truth and the Promise of Utopia

One reason why the catastrophic breaking of the spell seems so likely is because our capacity to imagine utopia has atrophied. We cannot imagine life without the spell: indeed, we are ‘prevented from attaining [utopian consciousness] by a wicked spell cast over the world’ (‘Something’s Missing’ 4). As the last chapter has argued, the spell allies itself with a historical determinism which suggests that things could not be other than they are, and that what exists exists because it must. Even the Marxist formulation of this determinism, which argues that a ‘happy end is immanent in history’ (ND 322), is part of the spell, as it identifies history with *telos* and so makes a necessary path out of what has been contingently attained.

Yet this does not have to be the case. In conversation with Ernst Bloch, Adorno refers to utopia as the ‘transformation of the totality’, and the very capacity to imagine that the totality might be changeable (‘Something’s Missing’, 3-4). The utopian impulse, for Adorno, says precisely that things are this way, *but they do not have to be*. ‘Only,’ Adorno writes, ‘if things might have gone differently,’ if we recognise that totality is ‘socially necessary semblance’ and not reality, as the universal that has been ‘pressed out of individual human beings’ rather than an absolute, will we be able to retain the ‘freedom’ to think things differently (ND 323). In other words, then, utopian consciousness not only needs to be able to think that things could be different in the future, but also that things could be different now. The fact that there remains a glimmer of the utopian consciousness, that it *is* nonetheless possible to recognise the contingent nature of the totality, suggests that we may still be able to fight against the ‘catastrophe’ that may come with the breaking of the spell for the purposes of creating something different (323).

This chapter begins to consider Adorno’s response to this prospective calamity in the form of negative dialectics. Negative dialectics is both the attempt to describe the falsity of the social totality and a normative attempt to clear the space for something better. This is what Max Blechman is gesturing towards when he speaks of the ‘utopian negativity that had always guided [Adorno’s] critical theory’ (“Not Yet”:

Adorno and the Utopia of Conscience’, 194).<sup>1</sup> At the same time, this attempt to clear space can go no further precisely because it, as a critical method, can only criticise: to attempt to use negative dialectics to do something positive would be to no longer be using negative dialectics. Revealing the contingency of history and the falsity of identity thinking can only take us so far. This is a difficult set of ideas to unpack, and there is at times — as later chapters argue — a real tension between Adorno’s utopian urge and his dialectical method. This chapter begins to explore these issues, exploring the substance of negative dialectics in light of Adorno’s ‘ban on images’ and his attempts to use negative dialectics to begin to overcome identity thought.

The following quotation from the conversation with Ernst Bloch throws light on some of the issues, while also conveying Adorno’s methodological approach:

ADORNO: [...]the true thing determines itself by the false thing, or via that which makes itself falsely known. And insofar as we are not allowed to cast the picture of utopia, insofar as we do not know what the correct thing would be, we know exactly, to be sure, what the false thing is.

That is actually the only form in which utopia is given to us at all.  
[...] (‘Something’s Missing’ 12)

‘Insofar as we are not allowed to cast the picture of utopia’ refers to Adorno’s use of the idea of the ‘image ban’, which will be discussed in the first part of this chapter. Adorno’s deployment of this central Jewish concept is of a piece with both his refusal to avow any positive truth and his insistence that, nonetheless, there is some way to resist and critique the social totality. Any truth that can be put into concepts, which is to say any truth that is spoken at all, immediately thereby becomes untrue in the same way that all conceptual thought is untrue.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the attempt to do so creates an idol of truth which distracts and distorts the real object, just as the idol image of God becomes the object of worship rather than God itself. Thus the possibility of utopia is ‘blocked off’ (*ND* 57) from our thought. Given our current enmeshment in identity thinking, any utopia we can imagine will be coloured and contoured by the fact that our current thought and conduct are ‘adapted to production as an end in itself’ (*MM* §100).

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<sup>1</sup> Blechman situates this in terms of a much more explicit opposition between Kant and Hegel’s influences on Adorno’s work than I do, although we share an interpretation of negative dialectics stressing its historically-situated nature and its intrinsic connection to theorising about utopia.

<sup>2</sup> Adorno takes this point from Hegel: see chapter 1, above.

The image ban represents what Elizabeth Pritchard refers to as Adorno's 'inverse theology'. This is not a positive theology allowing the depiction of utopia, but neither does it forbid speculation about utopia. It is in this sense that she recognises the importance of determinate negation to Adorno's critique, with the negation showing a sort of 'photographic negative' of utopian imagery. This is to say that through a programme of determinate negation we come to identify the falsity of the current totality, but this falsity is in inverse a gesture towards what the right society would be.

From the image ban, then, the chapter moves to an account of determinate negation ('we know exactly, to be sure, what the false thing is' ['Something's Missing' 12]). Determinate negation for Adorno is the contradiction within the concept which, per Hegel, abolishes that concept's adequacy, but without the Hegelian moment in which a new concept arises to deal with the contradiction. If for Hegel the issue is of the inseparability of content (i.e. the concept's object) and form (i.e. the concept), for Adorno it is precisely that there is no necessary connection, and what we are left with is content without form. There are two implications that follow from this. Firstly, truth is inverse: it is expressed through falsity, and cannot be conceptualised in itself. While this is, in some ways, an extrapolation of the argument for inverse theology made by Pritchard and by Deborah Cook, it is also a vital step in highlighting the distinctiveness of negative dialectics in both the normative realm (as inverse theology highlights) and the descriptive realm. It is connected with my reading, also argued for in this chapter, that negative dialectics is a critical methodology enmeshed with the spellbound world and ultimately inseparable from it. This is justifiable, but raises questions as to how we might use negative dialectics in an attempt to overcome the social world.

Here, the second implication of Adorno's use of determinate negation comes in. The inadequacy of concepts to describe their objects leads Adorno to the idea of the constellation, an attempt to reconfigure how we use concepts to account for the 'indissoluble something' that is left out of the concept and left over after negation. Because the negation is determinate, and not abstract, the content we are left with also points to something. This 'something' is non-identity: the fact that objects exceed concepts and that objects are related to other objects and other concepts and are thus incapable of being brought under a single classification. The constellation



affirms this non-identity by grouping concepts and objects into affinity groupings which reveal the social-historical construction of our concepts. For Adorno, the constellation is genuine step forward in the ‘self-criticism of thought’ and the initial cognitive outcome of negative dialectics.

The possibility of non-conceptuality, the content of the ‘something’, is both revealed by and reveals non-identity. The object, and the mediations and determinations which situate that object in a particular context, are non-conceptual. As dialectical relations, they cannot be hypostasised without abstracting them entirely from their content, and any attempt to do so is to falsify them. I argue that non-conceptuality is instead something that can be experienced, and in such a way opens up the possibility of reconciliation and moving beyond critique. The chapter therefore concludes by pointing towards the discussion of what Adorno means by experience, noting the difficulties inherent in Adorno’s attempt to combine the critique in negative dialectics with the urge to transcend it.

**‘Insofar as we are not allowed to cast the picture of utopia...’ The image ban.**

The prohibition of the positive depiction of utopia is done in the service of truth. In a well-known passage, Adorno declares that it is only in the ‘absence of images’ that the object as it is could be conceived (*ND* 207). This ‘concurrs’ with the theological prohibition of images, the *Bilderverbot*, which is of central importance in Judaism as one of the Ten Commandments (Exod. 20:4-5). For Adorno, materialism secularises the image ban in the prohibition of a positive image of utopia. Analysing Adorno’s use of the *Bilderverbot* will lead us to understand why we are unable to talk in positive terms about utopia, but will also lead us toward understanding the important role determinate negation plays for his thought and in particular the role played by the negativity of truth in Adorno’s methodology.

The image ban prohibits the making of any ‘idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the water below the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them’ (Exod. 20:4-5, NRSV). While subject to a range of interpretations, the image ban fundamentally condemns idolatry. The idol-worshipper, it is argued, turns the focus of their worship from God to a representation of God: they focus their attention and praise on the image instead of the thing itself. By suggesting that a secular form of the image ban prohibits

depicting utopia, Adorno is also arguing that the image formed of utopia comes to replace and supplant the real establishment of the right life. The model of a good society which is posited can too quickly become a rigid set of commands whose fulfilment is mandated at any cost, and, as we will see in chapter 5, this is a dangerous road to follow. Moreover, any image we could form of utopia would likely be false. As we are formed under the spell, deformed by damaged life, '[t]he chances are are that every citizen of the wrong world would find the right one unbearable; he would be too impaired for it' (*ND* 352). Our ideas about the right life cannot be right because we are 'too impaired' to even imagine what they could be, so any image we draw will necessarily be false.

As we have no access to the right life, the image must necessarily be drawn from this world, whose concepts are damaged by the wrongful identity thought of the spell. Here the connection of Adorno's thought with theology is apparent. The concepts of this world are taken to be corrupted and so imperfect that to even attempt to describe the right world with them is not only to fail, but actively to mislead. Just as an idol of God presents him in familiar terms (a kindly bearded man in the sky, perhaps) and by doing so obscures entirely the reality of God, so the idol of utopia does not only fail to capture the complexities of the right life but can stop us from getting there altogether. Adorno is not, here, forbidding the use of concepts in general. Instead, he repeats his criticism of identity thought: concepts are concepts, and they have their place. Thought is impossible without them. But we must not view them as the truth of the object, despite the logic of identity thought which insists we should, and the moment of genuine reference they possess which suggest we might. *Mutatis mutandis*, the image of utopia is to be banned precisely because even where it successfully points to a radically different state of affairs, these thoughts are still 'chained' to the thinkers and their times as 'static points of reference' (352). Even if they outline something genuinely better, they cannot be the whole truth, because their object is beyond the present state of affairs.

If, indeed, we try to use the current situation as a starting point, we might 'end up inadvertently justifying and reinforcing some of the existence we have already ... deemed to be bad' (Whyman, *Adorno's Wrong Life Claim* 7). Because images of utopia are tied to the current order, one risk is that our ideas about a better situation will reproduce the logic that led us to the current, wrong life. Adorno argues that

precisely this happens in the Marxist tradition. Marx and Engels failed because they drew back at crucial points which allowed the totality to continue. In order to promote revolution not only against a political structure but against the ‘basic stratum of [society’s] self-preservation’ in economics, they analysed the whole of history in terms of political economy (*ND* 322). But their ‘doctrinal intransigence’ was precisely political, aimed at ensuring the revolution could ‘come next day’ (322). Political repression of opposing movements is justified because, once the revolution comes and economic relations are transformed, dominion as such will be ended. It is the antagonism of economics towards ‘mere politics’ which is reproduced here, and, for Adorno, it is this antagonism which shows that dominion is not just economic in basis. In other words: because the revolution is supposed to dissolve economic hierarchy, and because economic hierarchy is supposed to be the root of all dominion, the revolution will end dominion. But economic relations do not, Adorno argues, account for all dominion. Political relationships can be equally oppressive. In the Eastern Bloc, dominion was indeed able to justify itself by the idea that there were still opposing forces out there preventing the realisation of utopia, and that the party’s discipline was needed to avoid individual error (46). Whether the USSR and its allies succeeded in abolishing economic exploitation or not, in their zeal they continued political repression and social antagonisms. Precisely by trying to change the course of the world, they end up continuing it by other means.

By over-confidently assuming that we have access to utopia, in other words, we can commit to a course which (as it is mistaken) ends up reasserting precisely the exploitation and domination we wish to avoid. The temptation to imagine oneself as able to imagine utopia and to guide the masses there must therefore be resisted. Not only does it lead to a dangerous dogmatism in which individual critical reason is disabled in favour of the wisdom of the party (*MTP* 276), but ‘even the sharpest critic would be a different person’ under utopia (*ND* 352). This is a quite troubling statement, pointing to a fundamental reshaping of affairs should the spell be overcome, and the implications of which will be discussed in chapter 5.

Guiding us away from wrong images, however, is only one function of the image ban. If this were it, we would simply dispense with all reference to utopia apart from in a negative sense. But Adorno does speak of utopia — in terms of reconciliation,

freedom, difference without domination. Indeed, the final passage of *Minima Moralia* mandates us to ‘contemplate all things as they would appear from the standpoint of redemption’ (§153). These references are too frequent and too seriously-meant to be easily dispensable. Moreover, an image ban strictly enforced in this sense would be a ban on all ‘peeking beyond the veil of “reality”’ (Pritchard 297) and entrapment within the spell. Adorno, then, is not demanding that we cease to be concerned with utopia, just as he does not want us to abandon all conceptual thought. Rather, the image ban prohibits positive depictions of utopia. What is Adorno’s alternative?

Elizabeth Pritchard argues that Adorno is engaged in what she refers to as an ‘inverse theology’, distinct from both traditional (positive) theology and negative theology, which prohibits the depiction of God except in terms of what God is not. Inverse theology is a ‘reversal of theology’, which ““feigns” the divine or angelic standpoint in order to see the fallenness of the world’ (Pritchard 309). It is therefore intended to uncover not the attributes of God (or utopia), but to provide an account of the brokenness of the world from *Minima Moralia*’s ‘standpoint of redemption’. Only from the standpoint of a world that is whole can the current situation be truly assessed. But this does not mean casting an optimistic light on things: rather, it means identifying with the victims of history. Pritchard simply asserts this point, but we can reconstruct the detail of Adorno’s argument here. In identifying with the victims, those ‘waste products and blind spots that have escaped the dialectic’ (*MM* §98) Adorno is challenging a central thesis of Hegel’s philosophy of history. Hegel declares history to be a ‘slaughter-bench’ which sacrifices ‘the happiness of nations, the wisdom of states and the virtue of individuals’ (*Introduction to the Philosophy of History* 24). But Hegel also argues that there is an ultimate goal to history: the realisation of spirit. All the sacrifices made to this end are vindicated as meaningful aspects of the progression of history. Adorno’s inversion of Hegel here takes on an ethical urgency: a doctrine that could justify all suffering in light of an ultimate end, after Auschwitz, is as horrifying as it is false. It has already failed the principal meaning of emancipatory politics: ‘to hold ultimate catastrophe in check’ (*MM* §149).

Real redemption cannot, then, be through sublating disaster until you hit upon a good society at the end of a ladder. It must come through understanding the suffering

of those who have been at the wrong end of the wrong life and acting accordingly. The standpoint of redemption, a ‘*logos* of the world’ (Pritchard 309), therefore requires us to attend to the particular suffering and particular experience of people rather than to subsume them under abstract notions of historical progress — or, conversely, of historical regress. To describe history as a charnel house of ever-increasing horror is as much an erasure of real suffering as the attempt to describe it as progress toward universal good. Some moments in history cannot be placed in comparison with others, as though they are of the same quality, so that ‘Auschwitz cannot be brought into analogy with the destruction of the Greek city-states as a mere gradual increase in horror’ (*MM* §149). Pritchard argues for Adorno’s affinity with Benjamin throughout her paper, and there is a clear connection between her reading of Adorno’s position and Benjamin’s account of ‘the angel of history’ who ‘sees one single catastrophe ... [he] would like to stay ... and make whole what has been smashed’ while he is instead ‘propel[led] into the future to which his back is turned’ (Benjamin, *Theses on the Philosophy of History* 257-8). Benjamin’s angel of history is compelled to witness the horror of the past and of the present. There are better possible futures, but this requires us to grasp the ‘Messianic’ potential in the present: the prospect that things might be different.

For Adorno, and perhaps for Benjamin too, this image of redemption and reconciliation means refusing to make any more victims. The standpoint of redemption allows us to look the suffering of the world in the eye, to witness injustice and victimhood: it is the view of the world from the perspective of God, the only way in which the world’s fallenness can be really highlighted (Pritchard 309). For Pritchard, it is precisely this suffering which in photographic negative points towards the possibility of redemption: ‘[i]f one is able to portray just how “damaged” life is, this fact intimates that one has caught a glimmer of the messianic light’ (Pritchard 306, referencing *MM* §153). The possibility of knowing how bad things are is already a gesture towards how they might be better, because in the knowledge of the false there is already a connection to the true. The dependency relationship here seems to work two ways. It is simultaneously the case that we need to know how bad things are before we can gain this understanding of the possibility of redemption, and that understanding the possibility of redemption gives us the critical ability to know how bad things are. In each case, the role of the image ban is

to highlight the necessity of proceeding in a negative and constrained fashion, as only then will truth appear.

The image ban thus plays several roles in Adorno's thought. Firstly, it is a warning against the falsity of any image of utopia which can be formulated positively. These will be connected to the current system in such a way as to prevent us from ever realising utopia, while legitimising domination in order to get there. Secondly, as inverse theology, the image ban is needed for any realisation of utopia — as only through the false can we gain knowledge of the true. The question is how we are to attain this understanding of falsity. Pritchard, and Deborah Cook in a related paper, both tie this to Adorno's deployment of determinate negation (Pritchard 301-6; Cook, *Through a Glass Darkly* 70-73). Through determinate negation, we see the engine room (as it were) of negative dialectics. While both Pritchard and Cook thus correctly connect determinate negation to Adorno's attempts to understand the wrongness of the world, and to show (in negative) how it may be overcome, I present a distinct understanding of how this operates through a strong reading of non-conceptuality and an inverse understanding of truth.

**'The true thing determines itself by the false thing...': determinate negation and truth**

While much has been written on the topic of determinate negation in Adorno's work, much of this aims at either defending or condemning Adorno's co-option of determinate negation from Hegel. In particular, much consideration has been given to the question of whether determinate negation makes sense outside of the framework of Hegel's system.<sup>3</sup> Pritchard and Cook, by contrast, argue for an account of determinate negation which is tied in with the image ban. It is therefore commonly held that determinate negation is a central aspect of negative dialectics, and this thesis has no intention of overturning this consensus. Indeed, determinate negation is in many ways *the* central operation of negative dialectics, the way in

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<sup>3</sup> Exemplary accounts include Michael Rosen's *Hegel's Dialectic and its Criticism*, which includes a critical analysis of Adorno's deployment of Hegelian concepts. Lauren Coyle, in 'The Spiritless Rose in the Cross of the Present', defends Hegel against what she argues are Adorno's misreadings, though interestingly suggests that Adorno adheres to Hegel's use of determinate negation. Natalia Baeza's PhD thesis, *Contradiction, Critique and Dialectic in Adorno*, presents both sides of the debate in a technical and thoughtful manner.

which it achieves its key critical insights and in which it attempts to overcome the spell.

I will also argue that negative dialectics is not intended to be a truth-revealing method, in a positive sense, but a reflection on and critique of the current social totality. In Rolf Tiedemann's words, negative dialectics is 'a reflection on the social limitation of knowledge, a reflection possible only through abstraction and conceptual language' ('Concept, Image, Name' 132). It is reflexively linked to the current state of things, and builds itself on the abstraction and identity thinking it intends to criticise. The truth it can access can only, then, take the form of revealing the falsity of the current social totality. A determinate negation of that totality, Tiedemann argues, is the only way Adorno is able to articulate the truth. (127). I go further than this: Adorno's arguments suggest a critique of a positive, i.e. substantive, understanding of truth in principle. Truth cannot be positive if we have no access to the vantage point from which it would be accessible, so all we are left with is an inverse version which operates through and depends on falsity.

A determinate negation is, in Hegelian terms, a negation which is not merely negative: it leaves behind a content, as opposed to 'abstract' negation which leaves only nothingness (*PhS* §79).<sup>4</sup> Hegel holds that because determinate negation has a content, it leads immediately to a 'new form' — that negation is in fact a transition from one form to another, leading eventually to the unity of object and concept 'where knowledge finds itself' (§79-80). The form (e.g. a concept) arises immediately once an old form has been abolished, because form and content have an 'absolute correlation' (*EL* §133). Content has form because form is intrinsic to content; during the process of negation the old (insufficient) concept or form is negated, but this negation is immediately negated by the arising of a new form from the content. The new concept contains and resolves the contradictions of the negated one, meaning that it is through determinate negation that the dialectic moves. Determinate negation is therefore the 'central operation of Hegelian dialectical rationality' (Rush, 'Diabolus in Dialectica' 227), and one which Adorno co-opts as part of his commitment to dialectical logic.<sup>5</sup> For Adorno, however, determinate

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<sup>4</sup> This expands on the discussion in chapter 1, above, which provides additional context.

<sup>5</sup> Rush in fact argues for three senses of determinate negation in Hegel, of which the negation of the negation is only one. But as they all 'operate in tandem' (Rush 227) and as Adorno largely critiques the negation of the negation, it is this most relevant sense that I take up.

negation operates without the formation of a new, better concept. It is, he argues, undialectical to assume that the negation of negation will result in the formation of a new concept (*ND* 160). Rather, this comes about due to Hegel's commitment to the identity of the concept with its object and to a 'necessary and univocal' conceptual system in which successor concepts arise automatically to take over the negated content in a moment of affirmation (Rush 228). Hegel can commit to this only at the cost of ignoring the constraints placed on thought by objects: if the next chain in a conceptual system can take on that which has been abolished, this suggests unbounded conceptual play (228). Adorno, furthermore, feels that this movement betrays the dialectical movement: to presuppose positivity, is pure mathematical logic which 'takes minus times minus for a plus' (*ND* 158). This is not, however, established dialectically, but postulated in the identity of form and content. There is no *dialectical* reason why this should be so, Adorno claims, just a commitment to positivity. In making the positivity of negation the cornerstone of his thought, Hegel opens the door to a totality which is beyond dialectics and returns to pre-dialectical concepts like eternity and the 'motionless' good of order (*ND* 331, 337). In removing this moment of positivity, Adorno is attempting to position himself as *plus royaliste que le roi*, having more faith in Hegel's system than Hegel himself.

Determinate negation, to remain dialectical, must therefore have no truck with a positive moment of reconceptualisation. Adorno does not just deny that content gives rise to form, however. Any new concept which is formed from this content would be itself subject to determinate negation, because there is always something in the object which will escape conceptualisation. To form a concept on the basis of the negated content would therefore not be to negate the negation, but to deny it. Determinate negation retains its negativity because, in other words, it is inescapable: the negated content cannot be wholly sublated into a new form just because there is always a point of reference to the object which cannot be conceptualised. The non-conceptual is always present in negation just as a non-conceptual element is always present in experience (Rush 231).<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> This point will be returned to in due course, but in brief is that (*per* Rush) as the object has primacy, and thought is mimetic at base (responsive to objects), then the object is present in thought as a mediator.



Crucially, the irreducibility of content to form means that determinate negation does not give us access to a positive truth about the world. This is an argument that is sometimes overlooked in the literature, although Terrence Thomson, in ‘Nonidentity, Materialism and Truth in Adorno’s *Negative Dialectics*’, discusses the idea of truth’s inexpressibility well. While the determinate negation ‘extinguishes the appearance of the object being directly as it is’ (*ND* 160), or the concept being identical with the object, this is not to be conceived of as a positive form of knowledge which itself ‘coincides’ with the object. That is because Hegelian positivity dissolves the idea that that knowledge is of the object at all. It is rather ‘the totality of an absolutized *noesis noeseos*’ (thought of thought) (160). Positive knowledge is conceptual knowledge; it is in the form ‘this thing falls under that concept’. To believe that we can find a new form of conceptual knowledge which better approximates the object is to fall into the trap of identity thinking and to restate the very system we are supposed to be breaking out of. Ultimately, ‘reconciliation bars its affirmation in a concept’ (160). A reconciled, true statement cannot be conceptualised, because of the non-conceptuality it is laden with; conversely, however, what is false can be known, because it can be negated.

The connection with Adorno’s wider critical project is thus to reinforce the negativity of negative dialectics. Negative dialectics is an ‘ontology of the wrong state of things’ (*ND* 11). It is connected inextricably with the social order which it seeks to critique, and, therefore, once its critique is realised it will no longer apply. Negative dialectics is, in other words, a temporary form of critical knowledge and not a universal or ahistorical guide to truth. Furthermore, negative dialectics is incapable of expressing a positive truth. This does not mean there is no truth (nor that that truth is in any sense non-objective), but that truth can only be expressed inversely in the form of critical negation. Truth is content without form, because it is precisely form which is untrue.

Here, I should pause to emphasise the centrality of these claims to Adorno’s project. Firstly, negative dialectics is directly addressed to the present state of affairs: it is, therefore, a phenomenon of the spellbound world, and intrinsically connected to it. This point is drawn out in the literature (in addition to Tiedemann, above, see also Bernstein, *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics* 417) but I believe it deserves a central place in any interpretation of Adorno. Dialectics, Adorno argues, is not a

‘standpoint’: it instead starts with the sense of non-identity and the primacy of the object, and takes its method by ‘break[ing] immanently ... through the appearance of total identity’ (ND 5). Or, to put it more baldly, ‘[d]ialectics is the self-consciousness of the objective context of delusion [*Verblendungszusammenhangs*]: it does not mean to have escaped that context’ (ND 406). This connects negative dialectics with Adorno’s adoption of immanent critique, a method which is best understood in the context of negative dialectic’s enmeshment in and under the spell. Immanent critique shows how ‘present conditions ... contradict the reigning ideology’ (Pickford, ‘The Dialectic of Theory and Praxis’ 321). One example of this method is in Adorno’s argument that we should critique the idea of free exchange in order to ‘realise the ideal of free and just exchange’, which would ‘transcend exchange’ (ND 147, translation modified). By showing that under a capitalist system, supposedly equal exchange is in reality no such thing, Adorno argues that we open the door to something better. This is a clearly tactical move, but entirely appropriate if Adorno’s methodology is precisely intended to work as a critique, and not as a free-standing system of thought. The ‘right state of things’ would no longer need negative dialectics and it would no longer apply (12). The fact that Adorno’s theory is a *critical* theory does not just mean, then, that it critiques from a certain standpoint: rather, it is a theory designed to critique and therefore dependent on the spellbound social order it criticises. This point is well-made later in *Negative Dialectics*, in which he explicitly includes culture’s ‘urgent critique’ as part of culture, and therefore ‘garbage’ just as post-Auschwitz culture is (367). (Adorno’s analysis of culture is discussed in more detail in chapter 4.)

The implications of this for our prospect of moving beyond the spellbound world can be seen throughout Adorno’s thought. This position connects with the second phenomenon, that of the inexpressibility of truth, something which is connected intimately to Adorno’s critical method and to the idea of the image ban. Indeed, it follows that if, firstly, a conceptual statement of truth cannot be made because identity thought always falsifies what it says; and secondly, that our reliance on identity thought means that we cannot adequately describe any better world to come without misleading ourselves, then we cannot have a conceptual grasp of the truth that is adequate to it. This is why I have referred to Adorno as having an ‘inverse’ idea of truth, in the same way that he has an inverse theology: we take the

perspective that there is a truth, just as we take the perspective that there is reconciliation, in order to better appraise what is false, although we do not know to begin with what either truth or reconciliation may be. Through our knowledge of what is false, we can come to know what is true in an inverse manner. I have not seen this specific form of argument represented in the literature, but if this reading is correct it will have consequences to how we read Adorno. This reading also requires us to distinguish, as I have suggested, the idea of truth from the idea of knowledge: we can have knowledge of something without possessing the truth as such.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, the idea that we can have knowledge of what is false even if we do not possess an understanding of the truth is a constant in Adorno's work (for a good overview, see Cook, 'Open Thinking' 5). The remainder of this chapter focuses on some of the methodological implications of these arguments. Firstly, we turn to the idea of the constellation, a critical model which aims to transcend the limits of identity thought. This section will elaborate further on the distinction between knowledge and truth I have drawn. I will then discuss the ideas of non-identity and non-conceptuality, leading to the question of experience in the next chapter.

### **Constellation**

Immanent critique and the inexpressibility of truth are not the end of the story for Adorno. The recognition, through determinate negation, that the object cannot be adequately described by a concept suggests for Adorno that we ought to register it 'in as many of its aspects and quality as [conceptual thinking] allows' (Honneth, 'Performing Justice' ch. 5). Objects ought to be comprehended in constellations of concepts, which allow us to pick out the widest possible range of properties and relations (*ND* 53, 163). In this way, aspects of the object that were closed to us will be opened up. This is a way to contextualise concepts, attempting to find a means to express the object without suppressing the negative truth determinate negation leaves us with.

A constellation 'unlocks' the object through a process of 'composition' analogous to the creation of a piece of music (*ND* 165). Composition is a subjective process which nonetheless 'submerges' the fact of its subjectivity into something with a more objective 'spiritual substance' (165). The resulting constellation therefore gives

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<sup>7</sup> This does imply a rather grandiose view of 'the truth' on Adorno's part, but it is equally compatible with a view of truth that simply argues for a correspondence with the object of the statement.

something more than the individual concepts which go into it, just as a piece of music is something more than just the individual notes and rests which make it up. The overall context of the whole is as important as the individual moments within it. But this also means that the constellation cannot be reduced to a single, hypostasised positive content. Adorno previously uses the analogy of composition to refer to a proper philosophical method, arguing that ‘the crux is what happens in [philosophy], not a thesis or position’ (33). In other words, what is important is not the results of philosophical activity, a particular system or outlook like nominalism or empiricism (for example), but the activity itself. To abstract something away from it is to deny that thing any truth value at all. Truth, then, is indeterminable in the strict sense: it cannot be fixed or given without destroying what is truthful in it. Rather, it is ‘suspended and frail’ (34), temporally-situated and always at risk of taking a ‘plunge into the abyss’. Alongside Adorno’s characterisation of truth as necessarily negative, this suggests that conceptual thought alone is insufficient to the task of recognising and preserving truth content.

Instead of concepts alone, then, the constellation must be preserved in its entirety if it is to have any truth, even though the truth of the constellation already points beyond it to the object itself. The individual elements of the constellation are false, because they are relics of identity thought which do not wholly capture their object. The aggregate of the concepts that make up the constellation is also false, because each of the individual concepts are inadequate in differing ways and their combination (however relational) still does not give adequacy. Rather, the constellation is the individual conceptual moments placed in a spatio-temporal relation whose focus is the undetermined object. The constellation can be analogised to another astronomical phenomenon: the detection of extrasolar planets. These can be found through a variety of indirect means, such as the minor perturbations they cause in the star’s velocity or in the emission of light when the planet eclipses its star. From this we are able to determine some of the features of the planet: its mass, orbital period, estimated diameter, composition and even atmospheric composition can all be observed in this indirect manner. But none of these properties, even all bundled together, are a complete or even remotely adequate description of the planet as a planet. In the end, we have determined some of its qualities, but the rest escapes us necessarily until we are in a position to observe the planet directly. Likewise, the

object at the heart of the constellation can be determined and even given properties in thought, but there is something that remains outside of these determinations and refuses to be reduced to them. Our knowledge of the object is incomplete and determined as much by our negative commitments as our positive attempts at identification. Thought draws lines which it cannot fill in.

Adorno's statement that 'the true thing determines itself by the false thing' ('Something's Missing' 12) can now therefore be spelled out. The question we set ourselves is how truth can be accessed through thought, or how thought can begin to transcend itself. The answer is that truth cannot be accessed positively. Conceptual thought is incapable of reaching a description of its objects that satisfies each object completely. There is always some content which will escape the form. Constellations are supposed to be used to remodel conceptual thought, making it a case of (negatively) determining the object through its conceptual context rather than determining the object through definition. This grants insight into our use of concepts, and in principle might lead us to the 'combination' which unlocks the safety-deposit box of the object (163). It is important to remember that this is not, and cannot be, a positive conceptual knowledge of the object. It is, as I have argued, not the case that for Adorno truth can be grasped in concepts at all. The limitation of constellatory thought is ultimately that of identity thought — the object remains beyond all conceptual determination in principle, as a particular which cannot be universalised. It is an important step, however. By thinking in constellations, we are able to push conceptual thought to its limits in an attempt to develop a negative determination of the object. This is necessary, because our thought is necessarily conceptual. The limitation this engenders can only be dealt with by attempting to think beyond thought, but this requires that truth is determined through what is false. This has consequences for any account of utopia that Adorno is prepared to gesture towards.

Truth and knowledge therefore are in a contested and complex relationship. For Adorno, it is not the case that conceptual thought gives no knowledge whatsoever. Definition — which is perhaps the key feature of conceptual thought — may not be 'the be-all and end-all of cognition', but it is not to be 'banished', either (165). It is productive and useful to have and use concepts, even and especially where they do not fulfil their objects; indeed, conceptual thinking is a *troas iasetai*, that which

wounds and heals (*ND* 53).<sup>8</sup> In shorthand concepts are capable of expressing relevant properties of objects and the categories into which they may be placed. The concept is also the means through which we can understand the non-conceptual, when placed in constellations. The object is, after all, not a passive recipient of conceptual identifications, but exists even under constrained identity thought as an active participant in proceedings. It leaves its mark on concepts just as concepts seek to mark objects (149). Conceptual thought is therefore capable of providing knowledge, in the sense that it can provide accounts which represent or determine some aspects of objects. Indeed, if it provided no knowledge whatsoever it would be toothless. What it cannot do is give a wholly true account, where ‘truth’ means something like absolute fidelity to objects without contradiction or remainder.<sup>9</sup>

This has consequences for epistemology. ‘Truth’ is something which transcends merely conceptual knowledge and is inaccessible to expression within it. At the same time, the untruth in concepts for Adorno stems from their wrong claim to complete description of the object rather than their complete lack of reference. Constellations are only possible, indeed, if concepts (to some extent) do refer to objects. Knowledge of a concept is not knowledge of the thing itself, but it contains something in it which is of the thing. The task of philosophy, which operates in conceptuality, is to ‘extinguish the autarky of the concept’ (12) by undermining its claim to complete description and, therefore, to total truth, thus restoring the concept to its rightful place. That is to say, the task of philosophy is precisely to account for the non-conceptual and non-identical moments in all conceptual thought, operating in the medium of concepts. So far, this seems to be a set of binary relationships — knowledge of objects and knowledge of concepts; truth and untruth; non-conceptuality and conceptuality. These are not oppositions, but dialectical relationships in which each depends on the other.

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<sup>8</sup> Compare this to Derrida on the *pharmakon*, which means both poison and cure (‘Plato’s Pharmacy’ 70). Derrida’s concern is to deconstruct any attempt to unambiguously identify writing in terms of a fixed binary opposition by way of pointing out the indeterminacy of this concept. Such an operation has parallels with Adorno’s attempt to decentre conceptual thinking by way of pushing it to its limits until it transcends itself.

<sup>9</sup> This is a characterisation of what an adequate conception of ‘truth’ might entail for Adorno rather than a categorical account of what it would mean for a statement to be ‘true’ for him. This is because no statement can be true for Adorno, but also because no (genuine) truth can be positively articulated.

The dependence of the true on the false is therefore a dialectical expression of the impossibility of understanding ‘truth’ only in the abstract. The negativity of truth lies in its non-conceptuality and resistance to being expounded as doctrine, rather than its radical inaccessibility. Just as an object may be gestured towards in constellation without ever being presented in concepts, the truth is a negative determinant of all false expressions. As Adorno puts it: ‘The false, once determinately known and precisely expressed, is already an index of what is right and better’ (‘Critique’ 288). What this means is that the act of criticism, of determinate negation, always also contains within it potential truth. By demonstrating the falsity of (for instance) identity thought or conceptual knowledge we are already pointing out what would be better: a form of knowledge which respects both non-identity and the primacy of the object. As far as practical prescriptions go, this can be fairly underwhelming: to answer the question of what a good society would look like with ‘well, not like this’ would be at best trite.<sup>10</sup> But the point is not to take lessons from one single judgement, but from a sustained and rigorous critique. Just as a constellation, by focusing on the relationships between groups of concepts, can lead us toward truth, not only this or that critique but the critique of the actually existing social totality as a whole will point out where the better future is to be found. This remains, however, something not to be expounded or stated as doctrine, but rather must be experienced. Adorno’s suggestion that the ‘cognitive utopia’ would involve ‘using concepts to unseal the non-conceptual’ (*ND* 10) points specifically toward this. Constellations do not unseal the non-*conceptual* but rather point towards the non-*identical*. The difference is that the non-conceptual is strictly that which cannot be rationally thought (this can be justified, ironically, by definition). What is non-conceptual must strictly be experienced to be known, or communicated in a means other than conceptual thought. The non-identical, by contrast, can be found through constellations which reveal in concepts the limitations of these concepts. Knowledge of non-identity is probably necessary for a proper grasp of the non-conceptual, but not sufficient.

### **Non-conceptuality and non-identity**

The move from non-identity to non-conceptuality through a specifically negative dialectics is the primary development of *Negative Dialectics* over Adorno’s

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<sup>10</sup> The question of practice will be addressed in chapter 5.

earlier work (particularly *Minima Moralia* and *Dialectic of Enlightenment*). That the two are distinct is appreciated within Adorno scholarship — for instance, Roger Foster’s *Adorno: The Recovery of Experience* presents an account of non-conceptuality which contains both the experience of the object *qua* object and the historical and social formations of objects which are betrayed in conceptual thought. These latter two are the ‘experiential conditions’ (22) of (philosophical) concepts. Non-identity is the ‘awareness of the insufficiency of what [the concept] is able to say’ (87) which is produced through critical conceptual thought (‘the appearance of transcendence within immanence’ [86]). Put in these terms, Foster’s account is broadly amenable to the interpretation I am proposing here. But we must guard against, as Foster to his credit does, seeing non-conceptuality as a condition of concepts or of experience: this transcendental interpretation makes the relationship between concept and the non-conceptual a one-way dependence relationship. To see it this way is to end up replacing one first philosophy with another, recreating the very problem non-conceptuality and non-identity are intended to dissolve. To assert ‘another downright “first”’ in ‘non-identity, facticity, entity’ is to ‘hypostasise the concept of non-conceptuality’, in Adorno’s words (*ND* 136) and therefore ultimately to return to the primacy of the concept. The difference between non-conceptuality and non-identity must be upheld, but we must do so without resorting to a reading which places non-conceptuality as a condition of experience.

On my reading, non-conceptuality instead plays a mediating role between object and concept: in other words, it both mediates and is mediated by both poles of the dialectical relationship. The constitutive role of the non-conceptual is thus no more or less than the constitutive role played by mediation in general. This interpretation is to a large extent novel: while non-conceptuality and mediation have been discussed together, there has been to my knowledge no attempt to understand the extent to which non-conceptuality is itself a mediating force, although there have been attempts to articulate the distinctiveness of Adorno’s account of mediation in general.<sup>11</sup> Understanding non-conceptuality through and as mediation allows us to

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<sup>11</sup> This is perhaps due to an assumption either that Adorno merely takes over Hegel’s use of mediation, or, per Rosen, that Adorno bastardises Hegel’s use of mediation into something resembling ‘connectedness’ (*Hegel’s Dialectic* 176-7). Recently, however, more focus has been placed on this central element, and O’Connor (*Adorno’s Negative Dialectic*), Nicholas Joll (‘Adorno’s Negative Dialectic: Theme, Point and Methodological Status’) and Margherita Tonon (‘Theory and



parse Adorno's project as the self-criticism of philosophy he sets out at the beginning of *Negative Dialectics*. It is important to note at the outset that this reading is textually under-determined: there is no explicit point where Adorno declares non-conceptuality to take the form of mediation. My argument is rather that the role non-conceptuality plays in Adorno's thought is best understood if it involves a mediating role, given the other commitments Adorno has with regard to concepts, subjects and objects. Whether there is anything more to the non-conceptual, or any other things which play mediating roles, is beyond the scope of this specific reading.

No concept exists without a non-conceptual moment, and identity thought goes wrong in trying to deny this. The concept refers beyond itself to the non-conceptual element (11) but does so both by undershooting its object and by overshooting it. It undershoots the object by being inadequate to it, by never completely describing it. It overshoots by forming itself as a universal, abstracting away from the particular to form a model which can be applied to multiple particulars (*MM* §82). What is targeted is entity (*Seiendes*), the term Adorno uses in opposition to 'concept' (see *ND* 69).<sup>12</sup> 'Entity' is a useful reconfiguration of the idea of an object, giving a certain tangibility to what can remain (unhelpfully) an abstract idea of objectivity. Moreover, this enables Adorno to speak of identity relationships in a concrete way he never quite manages when the discussion is in terms of subject and object. The copula (the is of predication) is a 'synthesis' between the subject of a statement and the predicate attached, which is therefore dependent on the relationship between the two (101). But the copula is not a redundant expression of what already is, nor an existential claim, but rather is 'that which both [subject and predicate] would be in themselves' if we could only decouple the 'would be' from the 'is' (101). The synthesising function of the copula is therefore a generalising statement which allows us to make particular judgements. By allowing for and establishing a two-way relationship of interdependence it functions as a mediator. Entity therefore 'points beyond itself' (102), and it does so in such a way as to establish two interrelated moments, neither of which can be reduced to the other. Adorno's argument here is

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the Object: Making Sense of Adorno's Concept of Mediation') among other have advanced interpretations of the role mediation plays in Adorno's work.

<sup>12</sup> 'Entity' is most commonly used in the chapter of *Negative Dialectics* on Heidegger, who famously distinguishes Being (*Sein*) from entity (*Seiendes*), arguing that Being must take precedence. Adorno's co-option of the language of entity is in part, then, a rhetorical move in the immanent critique of Heidegger's thought, attempting to show its incoherence on its own terms.

both to establish that neither moment is primary in the sense of being temporally first, and to point to the mechanism of non-identity. The entity / object that points beyond itself always does so to the other objects and concepts it is related to through its predicate relationships. But more importantly, the copula itself is not conceivable as separate from either pole except in the most abstract and general terms — only as a grammatical rule, in other words. This means that, in the case of any particular relationship, mediation cannot be conceived, only shown. In other words, it is non-conceptual.

This sheds further light on Adorno's philosophical methodology. We can now see why so many of his concepts are articulated in the most general of terms: because to do so in any specific instance would be to hypostasise a dynamic relationship in which each pole is to be considered in its relationship with the other pole through mediation. What is non-conceptual is therefore not the object considered in the abstract, but a particular object, a particular mediated relationship. If concepts are abstract and universal, the non-conceptual is concrete and particular. If concepts aim at identity, the non-conceptual reveals and is revealed by non-identity. Non-conceptuality is not an additional fact about an object, but is a shifted perspective by which the relationship between subject and object, between concept and entity, is shown to be entirely mediated and mutually dependent. To experience non-conceptuality would thus not be a special relationship to the object (or indeed to the subject) but would be the experience of universal mediation, of the interrelationship of all things. It would be, in other words, a glimpse of utopia comparable to the 'oceanic feeling' which Freud (who famously did not feel it) characterised as a feeling of 'being indissolubly bound up with and belonging to the whole of the world outside oneself' (*Civilization and its Discontents* 2). Whether, and how, this experience is possible is the question that must now be addressed.

**'...The only form in which utopia is given to us at all.'**

The question of experience is closely related to the emphasis Adorno places on the somatic, an element which will come to the fore in the next chapter. Before I discuss this, however, it is worth summarising where we have got to at this point. I have argued that, for Adorno, we are in a spellbound world: one dominated by identity thought and a false social totality. Because we are entirely enmeshed in this spellbound world, we are unable to articulate positively any utopia that might come

after. Yet Adorno's critical methodology offers one way in which we might begin to overcome the spell. Determinate negation, which draws on the social totality as it exists and shows what it excludes, gives us one alternative in the form of the constellation. The constellation reshapes our understanding of the relationship between concept and object by highlighting the mediatedness and interrelation of concepts and objects. What a concept captures is determined by the object (and so a concept, however incomplete, is not wholly false if it refers) due to the primacy of the object thesis, but there will always be an excess beyond this concept. In this way, we can come to a position where we can begin to recognise that the object is something which is both these concepts and the mediation between them, although ultimately it may exceed these together as well. I have argued for a separation of non-identity (the fact that an object is never identical to a concept, or conversely that a concept is never identical with what it purports to explain) from non-conceptuality, seeing non-conceptuality as representing the mediation between concept and object. This may not exhaust what non-conceptuality is — given that this is, effectively, a conceptual definition it would be at best paradoxical if it could — but it indicates the importance of Adorno's prioritisation of non-conceptuality.

As a critical method, this has several advantages. The dependence of critique on its own social determinant is, in Adorno's hands, transformed from a weakness (the inability to articulate concrete alternatives) into the source of its critical power. By relying on the false to gesture towards the true, in other words, Adorno justifies his own negativity without dismissing the products of the false totality as irredeemable and to be written off entirely. Thus his method retains a certain progressive structure which, supported by immanent critique, leads him not to seek the destruction of all that exists, but to sublimate it in the classical sense. While this sublation is not to be found in the current state of affairs, and cannot be reached only through a constellationary reconfiguration of conceptual thought, it remains the central animating force behind Adorno's project. '[T]he attempt to contemplate all things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption' (*MM* §153), the 'reconciliation' Adorno presents as utopia throughout *Negative Dialectics* and the dream of 'differentiation without domination' (*SO* 247) all speak to this potent utopian yearning. The negative dialectical approach, however, does not allow for such a sublation.

This is the central difficulty in Adorno's critique. On the one hand, we are given a critical method which relentlessly deconstructs the pretensions of identity thinking while operating within it; on the other, there is a clear desire to move beyond this state of affairs, the spell, to something that would be in some way better, which Adorno's method does not allow. This is perhaps why, toward the end of *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno speaks of the need for negative dialectics to 'turn even against itself', to dissolve the 'compulsion of identity' inherent even in identity's critique (ND 406). With this in mind, constellations might be seen as a first step toward a self-abolition of negative dialectics. If we can achieve constellatory thought, perhaps we can create the conditions to move beyond critique and the antagonistic social totality. The relationship of non-identity, revealed by the constellation, to the non-conceptual suggests that the non-identical may reveal (and be revealed by) these elements that escape or are excluded in traditional conceptual thought.

But this also suggests that there might be more to non-identity than just the fact of the primacy of the object. So far we have arrived at the non-identical through conceptual self-reflection, in the form of the constellation. To do so is legitimate: it is Adorno-approved, so to speak. But it is hard to match the cerebral experience of thinking in constellation with the urgency Adorno describes, the vividness with which he conjures up images of the wrong life, and the yearning towards utopia. The non-identical asserts itself, Adorno argues, even in the midst of the spell. The somatic impulse, which has been briefly discussed hitherto, comes to the fore as the means by which this aspect of non-identity can be considered. Peremptory, fleeting and impossible to conceptualise, these bodily and individual experiences are the physical side of the turn away from identity thinking, towards a recognition of non-identity through the non-conceptual. The turn to the individual represents something of a thematic shift from the social order as a whole (captured in the spell) towards the individual spellbound subject capable of resistance. Adorno's preference for 'micrological' analysis (ND 407) as being the best way to realise a critique of identity thought suggests such a move. Only in the particular relationship can we uncover a truth, however inversely it appears; only in the individual's experience of the non-conceptual might we be set on the pathway to reconciliation.

The next chapter explores the question of experience, therefore. This is a central concern of Adorno's, and yet his account of experience and the somatic raise more

questions than it answers. This is because, I will argue, the question of experience goes to the heart of both the negative dialectical method and the (im)possibility of going beyond the spell. In it, we see Adorno grappling with the attempt to say and not say what would be better while having to contend with the spellbound reality he finds himself in. This leads to the 'problem of praxis', where the questions of the spell, negative dialectics, the image ban and somatic experience are heightened in light of the question of political action.

## 4. Somatic Impulses and Experience: Adorno and the Individual

In the previous chapter I argued that the attempt to break through the spellbound world, and to break through into something better, leads us to an awareness of the non-conceptual, which can be experienced but cannot be described. Following from this, we turn to the question of how this is possible: how can we experience non-conceptuality? Adorno originally intended the introduction to *Negative Dialectics* to carry the title ‘Theory of Spiritual [*Geistige*] Experience’ (Foster, *Adorno* 2), and in his work highlighting the somatic impulse refers to its capacity to appear in the experience of the individual subject. Adorno was, as I have argued above, highly critical of the idea of constitutive subjectivity, and one reason for this was that, for Adorno, experience is a material phenomenon, one which happens in and through our bodies. These somatic elements are not epiphenomena separable from experience but rather are part of the experience itself (*ND* 193). This chapter begins by discussing Adorno’s account of experience, which raises considerable problems in the context of the methodology of negative dialectics. Adorno argues for an account of experience in which the subject is deeply involved in determining the properties of the object, as will be familiar from preceding discussions on the primacy of the object. The subject and the object are placed into a mediated relationship, in which perception involves a range of subjective determinations that are equally mediated through social assumptions. The issue, simply put, is that it is not immediately clear what Adorno intends his account of experience to be, particularly as it appears to be intrinsically connected to negative dialectics as a method. It could be that it is a transcendental account, i.e. intended to be a foundation for the relationship between subject and object, but this would conflict with his forthright opposition to any such idea of a ‘downright first’ (*ND* 136). It could be metaphysical, i.e. that the subject and object are ultimately physical, material things. But this would conflict with Adorno’s position that dialectics does not take a standpoint, transforming negative dialectics into a substantive philosophical system. This is not resolved if the primacy of the object and materialism are taken to be true statements about the world, postulates of negative dialectics before its operation. This, again, conflicts with Adorno’s opposition to

foundationalism but also with his inverse theory of truth: neither of these are postulated, but established through the dialectical method. I argue, instead, that Adorno's account of experience is based on the experience of non-identity, and that experience in itself cannot be conceptualised. His thought is in this sense an immanent critique of experience through experience, and therefore in that regard normative. For Adorno, an account of experience must firstly show the ways in which prevailing accounts are false, but must do so by pointing out what has been excluded and set aside from these accounts. From this point, we may be able to re-orient ourselves such that what is better becomes possible for us. I argue for this position through an account of what role the somatic impulses play, with a particular focus on their irruptive role in experience. The somatic breaks us from the spellbound world, however temporarily, and is therefore of vital importance to Adorno's account of experience. The focus on normativity and the somatic impulses brings in a further consideration: that of the moral impulse. The moral impulse highlights the role of the somatic in Adorno's thought, and the way in which this is expressed in experience, but Adorno's analysis of it also suggests the limits of the somatic. I consider what this means in light of Adorno's analysis of culture, arguing that the limits of concepts and the limits of the somatic bring to light a tension in Adorno's thought. This tension is just the distinction between Adorno's critical methodology and his utopian longing, expressed in his desire for reconciliation, and will be further explored in light of the question of political action in the next chapter.

### **The materiality of experience: Subject and object**

Adorno's understanding of experience has been recognised by recent commentators, and to set up some of the issues we will discuss I will first turn to consider one such example, which highlights some of the problems we face in interpreting Adorno's work. Brian O'Connor's *Adorno's Negative Dialectic* is a well-reasoned book that nonetheless, I argue, does not capture the entirety of what Adorno does with his account of experience. O'Connor rightly puts the case that experience is central to Adorno's critical engagement. Furthermore, he argues, negative dialectics as a method 'deals with experience in its general structure' in order to articulate 'a rationality that lies latent ... within experience itself' (*Adorno's Negative Dialectic* 173). O'Connor argues that Adorno founds experience on the primacy of the object, which he sees as functioning as a form of transcendental

argument for experience (47). I have, above, noted that transcendental interpretations can go against Adorno's resistance to putting anything as a 'downright "first"' (*ND* 136) which acts to hypostasise non-conceptuality. O'Connor's argument, however, attempts to avoid this pitfall by suggesting that Adorno is actually providing a transcendental argument for mediation itself (*Adorno's Negative Dialectic* 56). On his reading, a full account of experience is one which prioritises mediation and the non-conceptual aspects of objects. It remains nonetheless hard to reconcile a reading which suggests there are hard-and-fast preconditions for experience with Adorno's resistance to any form of *prima philosophia*. Perhaps the issue arises because O'Connor sets Adorno up as having a theory of true experience against which false experience can be measured and found wanting. As I have argued in the previous chapter, my reading is that there is no capital-t positively-articulated truth to be found in Adorno's work. This has the corollary that there can likewise be no true account of what experience could be: only gestures towards what might be the case. Negative dialectics is, explicitly, socially-situated and holds only in the 'wrong state of things' (*ND* 11). O'Connor does recognise the social character of experience (see for instance his *Adorno* 55-59) and offers a precise and subtle account of how our 'reified' experience offers a false picture of reality. His commitment to Adorno as being in possession of a full epistemology, however, requires a positive account of truth (or at least of what the truth would be) which I have argued is not present in Adorno's texts. Adorno's negative understanding of truth prohibits its positive articulation *tout court*; there is no articulable 'true' experience, according to this position. O'Connor's reading, however, correctly states the reliance of Adorno's account of experience on the relationship between subject and object expressed in the primacy of the object thesis. Any account of experience for Adorno must reckon with this, and I now turn to consider how we are to interpret this relationship, what it means for experience, and how it relates to the methodology of negative dialectics.

Much of this section reconsiders what has been introduced previously in relation to the primacy of the object. Although some of the lines of approach will be similar, any necessary repetition has been kept to a minimum. I therefore first present Adorno's argument in brief summary, in its relationship to experience. The relationship between subject and object is mediated between both poles, but the subject plays an important role in the determination of object. Indeed, despite



Adorno's argument that every subject is also an object (*ND* 183), Adorno argues that 'subject for its part is object in a qualitatively different, more radical sense than object, because object cannot be known except through consciousness, hence is also subject' (*SO* 249). Subject is the 'how' (i.e., through consciousness), object the 'what' (i.e., actual objects) of this relationship. The subject plays the role of determining objects, of picking them out as objects with qualities, and by doing so it displays its own determinate objectivity.

Real objectivity is therefore suffused with subjective determinations and qualities. These belong to the object and come from the object, contrary to the model of constitutive subjectivity. Unlike the Kantian noumenon, then, the object is determinable: it affects subjective consciousness and prompts its own determination by being reflected into the subject. Unreified subject and unreified object are mediated through each other, in the material world. There is no transcendental subject, because only a real, existing subject could possibly have experience to speak of (*SO* 257). As Kant establishes, the empirical subject exists in the empirical world as an object of experience, just as it is the subject that has experience. Object, meanwhile, can only be determined through experience, which only subject can have. The two poles are therefore mutually necessary and mutually reinforcing, though neither can exist of its own accord. Experience is never 'pure': one cannot separate sensory impressions of objects from the subject which generates them in experience. The 'irreducibly objective element' in subjectivity (*SO* 250) is that of determining, rather than constituting, the object. Experience is therefore the means by which objects come to be known, and the experiencing subject produces this knowledge.

Adorno's putative attempt to describe experience involves describing a true state of affairs (this really is how we experience things) despite his rejection of any expressible, 'capital-T' truth. This argument of Adorno's is difficult, and appears to conflict with some of his wider philosophical concerns. Firstly, this appears to be an attempt to create an alternative, non-Kantian account of how knowledge is possible. If this is what Adorno is doing, then it can be described as a form of transcendental argument, as O'Connor argues. However, this is inconsistent with Adorno's rejection of first philosophy. The second tension is between the materiality of experience and the dominance of the spell: how are we to reconcile a social world dominated by

identity thought with an account of experience which prioritises the object, and therefore the non-identical and non-conceptual? Adorno himself does not address these tensions. To consider them, I argue, we need to do so in light of Adorno's broader critical project. Among other things, we should take Adorno's rejection of capital-T truth seriously. But we should also interrogate the ways in which, at this point, Adorno's critical theory runs against Adorno's materialism. The tension involved in this runs through Adorno's late thought, as can be seen by the laconic nature of Adorno's materialist account of experience and subjectivity, with no thorough account of the body, somatic impulses or indeed experience.

The first step in addressing this is to develop Adorno's argument further. The core element here is the *determinative* role of subjectivity, in contrast to the *constitutive* role it is given in subject-centred epistemology. This represents Adorno's attempt to retain an important role for the subject without giving it the world-shaping force that constitutive subjectivity demands. In this way Adorno hopes to avoid also falling into the 'old *intentio recta*' of naïve realism (*SO* 249). *Intentio recta*, or cognition of the object as the object, contrasts with *intentio obliqua*, the image of the object in the mind.<sup>1</sup> Adorno suggests that the 'primacy of the object is the *intentio obliqua* of the *intentio obliqua*' (250): it is a second reflection on the indirect perception of *intentio obliqua* (the indirect perception that, that is, is found in Kant). This 'second Copernican turn' (249) would return to the object — not naively, as in direct realism, but reflected through the 'subjective reduction' (250). Adorno thereby presents the primacy of the object as a 'corrective' to transcendental subjectivity (250). This is because, despite its flaws, transcendental subjectivity nonetheless grasped the dialectic of subject and object (*ND* 174; 184-5). Its error lies in its hypostatisation of one side of the dialectical relationship at the expense of the other. Subject cannot be the sole *constituens* because both terms (subject and object) are mediated through the other, and thus both constitute and are constituted by the other term. The subject's determinative role is, in this case, part of this mutually constitutive relationship.

Determining objects or qualities is a subjective act which does not create the object but instead picks the pre-existing object out as an object. The object

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<sup>1</sup> For the explanation of these terms and their origin in the work of Nicolai Hartmann I credit Martin Eve, *Adorno terminology: intentio recta and intention [sic] obliqua*.

constituted by subjectivity in a Kantian manner is a reduction to its qualities: the thing-in-itself is unknown and unknowable, and all we have to go on is our understanding in the *intentio obliqua*. The determination of the object, by contrast, is an objective appraisal of objects and qualities which inhere in them, which happens through subjective reflection. The object ‘becomes something at all only through being determinate’, but the determinations that affix to it are ‘always required by what is to be determined’ (SO 250). In other words, it is not that the subject creates objects which may or may not correspond to how objects really are, but that the subject’s determinations are themselves formed from the object, even as they are also reflected and mediated in experience. This is why, for instance, Adorno can refer to ‘*ratio* peer[ing] over the wall it itself erects’ in modern science (251) as an argument for the primacy of the object: the baffling, counter-intuitive results of quantum physics certainly suggest a world that does not rely on our intuitive data about what that world should be like.<sup>2</sup> We do not therefore build a world in experience, but neither do we passively report on the given (per the *intentio recta*). Rather, objects are given to us, picked out by us and appear to us as mediated. This includes mediation by society, which is ‘immanent to experience’ (250). The way in which we perceive and structure the world socially can have real effects, in other words, on how we experience the world. This argument has some empirical support.<sup>3</sup> The materiality of the subject is present in its own objectivity, it is the ‘actual, living subject’ (248) that underlies any discussion of the transcendental subject.

The ‘*intentio obliqua* of the *intentio obliqua*’ thus reverses the traditional priority relation between the transcendental and the empirical subject. Rather than the

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<sup>2</sup> For instance, Leibniz’s law of the identity of indiscernibles essentially breaks down in the quantum realm. Elementary particles like electrons are identical in terms of their basic properties and cannot be differentiated by location either (per Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle). For all intents and purposes, these particles are identical, although we have reasons to believe there exists more than one electron — unless, per John Wheeler’s fanciful thought experiment, there is in fact only *one* electron in the universe, forever moving backwards and forwards through space and time (see Wong, ‘Remembering John Wheeler’). While Kant rejects the identity of indiscernibles (CPR A263-4/B319-20), the inability to discern both the location and velocity of fundamental particles suggests that the intuitions of space and time break down at this point, too.

<sup>3</sup> Takahiko Masuda (‘Cultural Effects on Visual Perception’), for instance, has demonstrated differences in attention to context between Western and East Asian subjects. While Westerners are more able to abstract particular objects from their surrounding environment (e.g. an animal from the background), East Asians focus more on contextual and background elements of perception. Even susceptibility to optical illusions (for instance, the Müller-Lyer ‘arrow’ illusion) is dependent on cultural background: those who do not grow up surrounded by perpendicular angles are less likely to see the arrows as different lengths.

transcendental being the condition of the empirical, it is in fact transcendental subjectivity which relies on the empirical subject. Neither does Adorno's formulation deny the subject any role in making determining judgements about objects, nor does it deny that these judgements can ever pertain to actually-existing real-world things. Rather, it is precisely *because* the subject is empirical, material, existing in relationship with the world that its determinations can refer to objects. But this does not automatically give us access to true statements about the world. The structure of our experience has both an objective moment of attachment to the object and a subjective moment of determination. This subjective moment is not only in the determinations themselves, but is in the very structure of the determining subject. Adorno refers to the 'conditionedness of what conditions the object' (251): as we have seen above, the determining subject is itself something constituted and not a primal phenomenon. To attain objectivity, it is not enough to only rely on subjective determinations, therefore. 'Reflection upon the subject' (251), that is, reflection on what shapes and determines our subjectivity, is equally as important. Ultimately, it is the '*societal* [my emphasis] self-reflection of knowledge' that reaches objectivity — 'so long as it obeys the societal coercions at work in it and does not think through them' (250). Only a critique of society can hope to arrive at something approaching objective truth.

From this, we can see that Adorno provides an account of experience that is connected with critique, and the realisation of truth through the inverse method. There is a clear normative component here: Adorno argues that, through experience, the subject ought not only reflect on the objects it experiences but also reflect on that experience itself, the biases and impositions that are wrought by social and other factors, and through this attempt to move towards objectivity. Just as Adorno wants thought to transcend the concept using the concept, experience must transcend its subjectivism by using, i.e. critically reflecting on, its subjectivism. Critical experience and critical thought combine into a wholesale critique of both the given and the giver, which is to say, of both *intentio recta* and *intentio obliqua*. I will discuss below what role this normative account plays, but there remains in the meantime a question about where this account of experience fits in to Adorno's thought, a question I will address in the next section.

### **Transcendental, metaphysical, or neither?**

Adorno's account of experience appears to posit certain aspects of experience as foundational. The primacy of the object is here presented as if it were an epistemological presupposition to move beyond the *intentio obliqua* — in other words, as a transcendental postulate — but simultaneously is supposed to be a statement about the ontological status of the object — which is to say, that it is material and not created in the minds of subjects (e.g. 'by passing to the object's preponderance ... dialectics is rendered materialistic' [ND 192]). These are not mutually-exclusive postulates. But both are potentially problematic within Adorno's philosophy as a whole, and neither represents a particularly fertile horn for Adorno to develop his critique. I will argue here that neither in fact reflects Adorno's intentions, but that this is not always clear in Adorno's work. The confusions, to some extent, reflect Adorno's own reluctance to expand on this area, and the tensions between negative dialectics as a purely critical method and the alternative that Adorno wants to provide through non-identity, constellations, somatic impulses and non-conceptuality. They show an Adorno who is straining to surpass the spell that he himself is under.

Adorno's opposition to first philosophy suggests that there should be neither transcendental postulates nor metaphysics outside of a critical context. Yet, in providing an account of experience which explicitly bases itself on a subject–object dialectic, Adorno appears to violate both of these. The transcendental argument that object can only be known through a subject is subject to a further reflection in Adorno's argument that subject itself is also object, but this radicalises rather than abolishes the transcendental form of the argument that he criticises. Instead of a constitutive subject which realises the conditions of possibility for experience, O'Connor argues that it is the subject-object mediation itself which is placed in this role (*Adorno's Negative Dialectic*, 134). This interpretation seems to follow the logic of the 'second Copernican turn', but it remains a transcendental argument. The issue is that, in placing this particular interplay at the foundation of knowledge in experience, Adorno effectively commits himself to the view that his particular account of experience is prior to the distortions of the social totality in the spell.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The relationship between experience and knowledge is highlighted in *SO* 250: 'For society is immanent to experience (...) Critique of society is critique of knowledge, and vice versa.'

However, negative dialectics, as the ‘ontology of the wrong state of things’, as a critical methodology, is supposed to depend on a pre-existing wrong state of things which inheres in the social totality. The primacy of the object as a transcendental postulate is therefore at the same time supposed to be an outcome of critical theory turned against prevailing forms of subjectivistic identity thought, transforming that thought against its own conclusions. But if the primacy of the object is in fact the ground of experience, it must both precede and permit the (de)formation of experience into identity thought under the spell. In other words, it must both result from identity thought and be its foundation. This results in an uncomfortably circular argument.

The alternative is that the primacy of the object is a metaphysical thesis. This is *prima facie* appealing: it provides a solid basis for materialism and for the non-conceptual, non-identical aspects of objects. Adorno argues as much: ‘dialectics is rendered materialistic’ in ‘passing to the object’s preponderance’ (ND 192). The non-identity of the object with its concepts leaves a non-conceptual remainder, which Adorno here characterises as ‘matter, or ... inseparably fused with material things’ (193) precisely because they are not contained within idealised or idealisable conceptual schemes. Materialism and non-identity represent the core theses of negative dialectics. As argued in the previous chapter, Adorno’s account of determinate negation bars the moment of reconceptualisation or sublation that, for Hegel, allows the concept to develop and become more attuned to its object. The ‘consistent sense of non-identity’ (5), that Adorno finds at the beginning of dialectics, is preserved in his thought by this prohibition. Dialectics, it is suggested, does not begin with metaphysical speculation (it is ‘not a standpoint’) but takes the world as it is and goes from there. Contradiction is the result of a drive for unity and totalising identity thought; negative dialectics, by contrast, instead preserves the contradiction in non-identity. Both materialism and the primacy of the object fit oddly in this milieu. If both are to be understood as metaphysical claims about the nature of reality (or the relation of reality to the subject in experience), then it looks very much as if dialectics is taking a standpoint. It is making a claim about reality based on its methods, and yet, again, these methods rely on these claims about reality. If it is an undialectical imposition to assume the ultimate adequacy of concept and object, is it not equally imposed to assume their ongoing non-identity?

Neither option seems particularly satisfactory. Either one relies on a circularity of argument that presumes what it is yet to establish, or one makes an unjustified (by Adorno's own standards) imposition on one's critique. Both options cause problems for Adorno's philosophy far beyond the scope of an account of experience. Adorno, who is a subtle thinker able to anticipate and absorb objections to this thought, cannot have been so naïve as to really argue for either of these positions, although it must be said that he often gives the impression that he is doing so.

How, then, are we to read this account of experience? Perhaps we should return to the idea of a 'consistent sense of non-identity' as the motivating force of (negative) dialectics. This may be able to address the issue. If negative dialectics is an outgrowth of identity thought, of both historical positive dialectics and of the spell, then a persistent, experienced sense of non-identity might be a justification for adopting the negative dialectical method. In this case, negative dialectics may not, after all, need postulate anything more initially than 'that objects do not go into their concepts without leaving a remainder' (5). Everything else might follow from this: the mismatch between universal and particular, non-conceptuality, dialectical mediation, and the materiality of the experiencing subject. Yet materialism, in this version, remains an inbuilt feature of negative dialectics, insofar as the persistence of the 'remainder' suggests that the world cannot be a purely perceptual or cognitive phenomenon. The same holds for the primacy of the object. This suggests that negative dialectics does, in fact, posit something at its beginning: it is not pure critique, but a countervailing critical model which has at its heart an account, or at least a presupposition, of how the world is. This minimalist metaphysical model, formulated in this way, holds some superficial attraction.

But epistemologically, the minimalist metaphysical model may cause a problem. Adorno is, I have argued, committed to an inverse account of truth, in which thought cannot grasp in concepts what objects are. Indeed, this is the thesis of the minimalist metaphysical model. The best we can reach in the present situation is constellatory thought, through which we may gain a glimpse of inexpressible truth in non-conceptuality. If the starting point of negative dialectics is a conceptual statement — that objects do not match their concepts — then the truth of this statement and the adequacy of negative dialectics as a critical method are both in question. Negative dialectics is supposed to highlight what is true negatively by critiquing what is false;

if it rests on false premises itself then there is no reason to trust its results. Appealing to non-identity as a provisional premise, or as a Wittgensteinian ladder to be discarded, is unconvincing given the prominent position it plays within Adorno's critique.<sup>5</sup> There is a question of real importance at stake here. Given Adorno's express commitment to negative dialectics as a critical model, one which takes its material and its cues from the pre-existing social world rather than attempting to construct an alternative and separate systematic account of the world, any putative foundational statement or doctrine must be interrogated to ensure that it fits with this model. At the same time, it is clear that negative dialectics must say something at its beginning, and be motivated by something, because otherwise it would just be abstract critique with neither direction nor, ultimately, critical acuity.

There is one further alternative, however, that returns us to the question of experience and may provide a sustainable solution. It is striking that Adorno, in the quotation above, talks about a 'consistent *sense* [*Bewusstsein*, my emphasis] of non-identity'; likewise, it is notable that his 'thought is driven to it by its own inevitable insufficiency, by my guilt [*Schuld*] of what I am thinking' (5). *Bewusstsein* is a calque of the Latin *conscientia*: it means consciousness, or conscious awareness.<sup>6</sup> Non-identity is, then, an experienced phenomenon. It is not an articulated truth, but something which one is 'driven' to by the failure of thought to comprehend its objects. The *awareness* of non-identity as the beginning of negative dialectics avoids trespassing on Adorno's prohibition of positively-articulated truth. It is the truth in consciousness, something to be experienced rather than expressed, and which motivates the thinker to further reflect on their presuppositions. At the same time, this awareness need not be metaphysical: it is a cognitive phenomenon, which says nothing as yet about the content of that experience. Adorno may in this way escape the dilemma I have set out.

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<sup>5</sup> The 'ladder' is, in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, an illustration of a philosophy as an 'elucidation' such that 'anyone who understands me [i.e. the *Tractatus*] eventually recognises them [the philosophical propositions] as nonsensical, when he has used them—as steps—to climb up beyond them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it)' (6.54).

<sup>6</sup> Entry in the *Deutsches Wörterbuch*: 'bewusstsein, n. conscientia, animus sui compos, selbstgefühl, erst im 18 jh. gebildet und häufig gebraucht: alles dieses nimmt ein jeder in dem unmittelbaren bewusstsein der begierde beständig wahr.' Note the synonymy given to both *conscientia* and *selbstgefühl* (lit. self-feeling).



The experience of the inadequacy of concepts is, on this reading, both the result of critique — critical self-reflection on their own experience — and the beginning of critique — leading to the adoption of a negative dialectical method. As the critic attempts to think thought beyond itself, attempts ‘to counter Wittgenstein by uttering the unutterable’ (9), the inadequacy of concepts is felt a second time and experience returns as the medium through which truth appears. In much the same way as Hegel’s *Phenomenology* begins with Spirit, passes through the entire movement that leads to Spirit, and so establishes Spirit more firmly, so the truth of experience is best established through reflection on that experience.<sup>7</sup> This is an oddly directed and positive movement for a philosophy of negativity. It may seem that this sort of story does not fit a philosophy which is supposed to be wholly critical. But if were wholly negative, Adorno’s critical theory would be groundless, a self-contained critique with no necessary reference to the real state of things. Through experience, Adorno not only motivates critique as the felt inadequacy of thought to its objects, but gives it an objective basis in the self-reflection of that experience.<sup>8</sup>

The truth in experience cannot itself be conceptualised: experience, in this regard, is non-conceptual. This has both a descriptive dimension — to conceptualise the truth would immediately be to falsify it, as concepts do not match their objects — and the normative dimension seen in the image ban. Experience is unavoidable as the starting point of dialectic, and is the motive force through which critique gains its power, but its truth can only be gestured at. At the same time, the truth of experience is revealed through the limitations of conceptual thought, which can be best seen by pushing that thought to its limits. The determining power of the subject operates in the relationship between experience and thought, and it is precisely because it is both material and intellectual that it is capable of embodying the relationship between the two without which neither would be understandable. To borrow a Kantian inflection, experience without reference to thought is empty; thought without reference to experience is blind.

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<sup>7</sup> Or as it has been put, in a remark I have not been able to track down, Nietzsche (unlike some later imitators) *could* reject the entire Western canon of philosophy, precisely because he knew it well enough to be able to do so legitimately.

<sup>8</sup> This position on objectivity has been formulated in the feminist tradition. For instance, Sandra Harding argues strongly that a subjective element is always present in issues of objective judgement — see her ‘After the Neutrality Ideal: Science, Politics and “Strong Objectivity”’.

This is one way in which we can formulate the question of the role of experience in Adorno's critical project. I have argued that this is a convincing way to conceive of experience: it fits both with Adorno's methodological model, and allows for there to be a normative motive force for critique. The difficulty of taking this approach is that Adorno really does not directly express these thoughts in his work. This may be because Adorno himself was sometimes equivocal: there are passages (particularly in *Subject and Object*) in which it can seem that his attempt to create a transcendental basis for knowledge in the primacy of the object actually is just a critical project intended to correct misapprehension. To develop my interpretation further, and to relate it specifically to the materiality of experience, I will now discuss the role of the somatic impulse in experience. Through this, I will show that the role of the somatic guides us towards a conception of Adorno's work in which this account of experience is intended as normative, capturing how we ought to perceive but also why we ought to turn toward a critical approach.

### **The somatic impulse in experience**

In order to get to what Adorno means by a 'somatic impulse', however, we must first return to the question of the materiality of experience. This refers not only to its brute physicality, but also the bodily element involved in any subjective perception or feeling. Apart from the subject-object relationship, as described above, Adorno highlights this materiality through sensation (*Empfindung*, generally implying inner perception). Sensation is 'a part of consciousness', that is, it is a cognitive event, but 'its phenomenology [...] would have to describe it equally as that which consciousness does not exhaust' (ND 193). It is not only a cognitive event but is a physical sensation, which cannot be fully captured or put into concepts by consciousness. All feeling is physical feeling. This, Adorno emphasises, is not to place the physical moment as an epiphenomenon or correlate of cognition; it is the more radical claim that cognition itself is irreducibly physical and therefore 'not purely cognitive' (193). Because in sensation the somatic moment and the cognitive moment are inseparable, this means that one cannot view the mental as wholly other than the physical. There is no 'primal state of facts' which divides subject from object into a duality of opposites. In fact, the tendency of pure subjectivism to deny or denigrate the body's status therefore undermines that subjectivism through denying the embodied, somatic aspect of cognition, as argued in Adorno's critique of

constitutive subjectivity. Because of these, even a purely mental subject requires the 'object' body.

In terms of our emotions, which are also experiential phenomena, this can be quite apparent. The sense of weight, pressure and vulnerability that accompanies sadness or the relief and lightness of happiness are not contingent parts of those emotions but are aspects of them, and even the most purely intellectual of joys or disasters will have some physical result. Indeed the sensory, somatic element is primal to the phenomena, just as something hurting is generally taken to be a necessary feature of pain. But, because the mental and the physical are mediated through each other and not separate, this does not mean a pure dominance of data either. The intellect's role in things is determinative and important, even though ultimately the material has priority. The relationship between the mental and the physical is *mutatis mutandis* that between subject and object.

In this case, this priority is sometimes meant highly literally, and in a slightly later passage, Adorno makes just this case: 'All mental things are modified physical impulses, and such modification is their qualitative recoil into what not merely "is"' (ND 202). Such a statement is an attempt to dissolve the question of which has (metaphysical) priority in an attempt to show that both body and mind are 'abstractions of their experience' which do not bear on reality. The radical separation of body and mind is false, but radically unifying them would also be wrong: like the separation of subject from object, their separateness represents the mediated relationship in which the two poles codetermine one another. The physical, somatic moment in sensation characterises this relationship; it is both the reassertion of the physical impulse in the mind and the subjective determination of the object in its perception.

Under the spell this mediated relationship can be distorted. The prevailing version of subjectivity, as we have seen, places a constituting, mental and free subject at the apex of its world, a vision which on Adorno's account leads to the attempt to muster all phenomena into an ordered, self-identical and complete system of homogeneity. But, unvarnished by the socially necessary delusion (i.e. ideology) of the free subject, the somatic still makes itself known. These appear in the form of somatic 'impulses', irruptive experiences in which the reality of non-identity and the

non-conceptual break through. One way in which this happens is through pathologies. Compulsive neuroses (which Adorno analyses in a Freudian manner) present themselves as an imposition on the will: a call to action despite our own judgement and in a manner which seems ‘alien to the I’ (222). The neurotic feels compelled to do something by a force that seems to come from without themselves, which imposes its own desires on the subject who is in thrall to them. Such cases *in extremis* represent the real unfreedom of the subject when it comes against the spell: neurosis is an exemplar case of the impotence of the individual ego. But this demonstration is not wholly in our favour, because the inertia of neurosis (and for Adorno the very idea of a ‘personal self-consciousness’ is a compulsion of sorts — 222) also contributes to the blocking force which prevents us from realising the extent of our unfreedom. Neurosis here becomes an energy-sapping series of compulsions or habits which ‘thwart the better potential of men’ (298). A compulsion which appears as a breach of the self can too-easily be turned into an aspect of it; a narcissistic self-regard which wants to preserve the self at all costs is here responsible. It is a form of denial which reasserts itself as the possibility of a free subject even as it is constantly reminded of its real subjection. The reminder in the neuroses, however, represents a possibility: the possibility that we might, after all, manage to relate to the physical aspect of ourselves — ‘the pure will, the addendum’ (298) — in such a way that a free subject becomes possible.

‘Golden Gate’, an especially gnomic section of *Minima Moralia*, illustrates this in another way. Here, Adorno describes the feeling of being wronged by a loved one as an ‘illumination as vivid as when agonising pain lights up one’s own body’ (*MM* §104).<sup>9</sup> This irreducibly somatic impulse represents a break with normal experience, in which one becomes aware that, in one’s feeling, one is demanding a right (that the beloved not wrong me) but at the same time is rejecting that right as knowingly incompatible with freedom. In other words, the experience is simultaneously the demand that by rights, someone should love me back and the recognition that love cannot be compelled in this way, that people are free. The general — represented by the autonomy of the other — clashes with the particular highlighted in the love for the particular other. The consciousness of both the legitimacy of this demand for the particular person and its illegitimacy due to the other’s autonomy and freedom to not

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<sup>9</sup> The following quotations in this paragraph are also from this section.

love you back causes distress in which the slighted person realises that what they really want is not something that can be legislated for but something which must be freely given. The loneliness which results comes from the feeling that one has been ‘deserted by all’, excluded from ‘the general’ because the beloved does not love one, even though it feels so strongly that they should. Adorno argues that this is a way in which ‘he who is rebuffed becomes human’. The physical sensation of injustice is matched by the recognition that justice does not apply here. With this recognition one is finally able to understand love as the ‘annulment of all rights’, an appeal to an ‘unknown court’ which ‘accords to him as grace what is his own and yet not his own’: that is, the right to have the love of the other, which is really no right at all. It is only by grace, not by justice (and there is a form of Lutheranism in this statement) that we can have love at all. This illustration represents the way in a disruptive shock can shake us out of our normal habits of thought and recognise finally the humanity of the other — and, therefore, our own humanity. It is not an operation of the intellect. The shock is physical, an ‘illumination’. It works in tandem with the intellect, which realises the emptiness of the claim of right, but the realisation depends ultimately on a somatic moment, a reorienting sensation in which the subject realises its own limitation and impotence.

In perception, this somatic moment sometimes appears as an ‘addendum’, particularly in the experience of the non-conceptual (*ND* 228). This is the experience of things and properties in the object which are ‘accessible only to differentiated experience’ and not to conceptual thought (Honneth, ‘Performing Justice’ ch. 5). The term ‘addendum’ is apt here because it denotes the exteriority and interruptedness of these experiences. Ordinarily, we pick out the object in perception; it is in that sense a given and immediate. Immediacy is, however, another form of abstraction: rather than an objective representation of reality, the immediate datum is a ‘borderline value’ given ‘in poor and blind form’ (*ND* 187). This is why empiricism, the philosophy in which the given holds the most value, nonetheless is able to lead to pure idealism in figures like Berkeley. The given alone is a ‘confiscation’ of the object on the subject’s behalf; in order for the full dialectical relationship the object will need to be restored. Addendum experiences do just this. They appear as ‘a material and somatic jolt’ (Jaffe, ‘Adorno’s “Addendum”’ 858) that in the case of non-conceptuality makes the whole object available for perception. It is the

experience which breaks us out of the reified concept and leads us (or those who are sensitive enough to perceive it) to real knowledge of the object. In this way, however, addendum experiences are not a ‘residue’ left over from the conceptual determinations that thought wreaks on the object (*ND* 187), but a core part of that object. For Honneth, this demonstrates the way in which the dethroning of constitutive subjectivity leads to ‘the revaluation of its subjective experience as a central medium of knowledge’ (ch. 5).

In this way, Adorno presents a vision of individual consciousness which sits apart from either a passive recipient of given facts or a creative and powerful intellect constituting its world before it. In Adorno’s view, it is the mediation between the physical and mental, between the reflexive power of consciousness to go beyond the physical state of affairs which delineates what and how the mental can order itself. The somatic impulse, as I have described it in these examples, offers an opportunity to break out of the prevailing understanding of perception contained in identity thought and to move towards this more mediated position. The somatic, however, is equally a part of our normal perception, being linked with sensation in general: it is only the spell which makes us forget this. In this sense, the somatic impulse, as a particularly strong moment of affective perception, plays a normative role in making this mediatedness come to our attention. In a similar way to how critique ‘can proceed by way of confronting realities with the norms to which these realities appeal’, which ‘would already be better’ (*‘Critique’* 287), presenting an analysis of perception which draws on the otherwise implicit or suppressed physical elements to carry its own suggestion that this is how we ought to perceive — or, at least, how we ought to perceive our own perception. Drawing on these norms would ‘already be better’ because the physicality of experience already challenges subjective, reductive identity thought. In this sense, the normative component of Adorno’s account of experience is an immanent critique: it is what experience, by its own norm or concept, ought to do but does not yet.

This position is similar to Roger Foster’s interpretation of Adorno’s account of experience as involving a ‘critical self-reflection’ which brings one to become aware of the social and historical conditions of one’s concepts and experience (Foster, *Adorno: The Recovery of Experience* 21). However, where Foster argues that his ‘spiritual experience’ is ‘not intended to denote a perspective on things that would be

beyond concepts' (*Adorno: The Recovery of Experience* 29), I argue instead that experience is precisely supposed to make us experience the non-conceptual as non-conceptual: as something that shows us what we are missing. This is because of the capacity to experience the non-conceptual which Honneth highlights. It is only because the somatic impulse and the non-conceptual appear to us in experience that we realise that our idea of what we experience is not complete, and thus experience the 'consistent sense of non-identity' (*ND* 5) that drives us to critique.

This normative model of experience is not without its problems. We still face the issue that Adorno argues that, in sensation, there is always a physical moment present; yet this is supposed to be distorted by the spell. This may return us to the problem of origins that I outlined above: how are we supposed to account for this dialectical relationship if it is pre-given, but lost, rather than just being a normative claim? But perhaps this account avoids that problem. The physicality of experience is argued for as an outcome of a dialectical critique, but it is one which is only argued for after its initial establishment in the sense of non-identity that comes with the somatic impulse. In the same way that some anomalous experimental results led physicists in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to suspect that there was something wrong with their model of physics, even though there was as yet no other developed model to explain them, so might the anomalous experience of the somatic lead us to suspect a problem with our understanding of the world. The development of the idea of the intrinsically somatic element in experience and sensation might thus come about as a result of this initial result, precisely the feeling that one's concepts do not match the objects they are supposed to.

The normative force of the somatic comes about through this immanent critique, on the one hand, but also drives us to critique on the other, in the case of the experience of the 'guilt' that comes with the 'insufficiency of what I am thinking' (5). The point of this critique is not to come down on one side or the other — either the physical or the mental — but to show that both are connected, that neither can do without the other, as Adorno's analysis of sensation shows.

One example of this, which also shows the normative power of such a critique, is in Adorno's chapter on Kant in *Negative Dialectics*. This chapter, which (among other things) attempts to interpret Kant in the light of Freudian psychoanalysis, deals

with the contradictions of the Kantian conception of freedom, not the least of which is its unusually coercive character. Kantian freedom goes hand-in-hand with constraints: the moral law, for instance, the inflexible doctrine of reasonable and right actions which all free people assent to by virtue of their reason. It builds an ego and a super-ego whose function is to restrain spontaneity rather than to promote it. Freedom as a concept in this sense becomes incoherent because it cannot do without the ideal of spontaneity, which is the concept that ‘does most to exalt freedom as a mode of conduct above empirical existence’ (*ND* 222), but neither is it able to mesh an ideal of spontaneity with the doctrine of self-mastery and self-causing reason-based activity. Thus the regulation of spontaneity is necessary to preserve the I, the transcendental, unified self which is supposed to be free but which must act in accordance with reason.

For Adorno, this account breaks down because spontaneity cannot be understood as a mental or transcendental process. Rather, the ‘sense of freedom feeds upon the memory of the archaic impulse not yet steered by any solid I’ (221): it echoes the pre-ego stage of impulsive and immediate action to satisfy drives. We have a half-remembered dream of freedom as immediacy and impulse which we attempt to transfer into the mental world in order to be instantiated by an I free from the animalistic urge of drive-fulfilment. But such a pure freedom of the will can only exist abstracted from all empirical considerations, which is to say it cannot exist at all. For Adorno, again, the point is not to come down on one side or the other: rather, by highlighting the physical origins of the idea of freedom, we might come to a better understanding of freedom itself. In particular, by understanding freedom as something with a somatic basis, we can understand how social forces can also shape (or distort) the possibilities for its realisation. Freedom thereby becomes a critique of its own possibility, a concept which when used takes on a normative power.

### **Affective Perception and the Moral Impulse**

This attempt to build a normative and critical force to perception through an emphasis on the physical can be best seen in Adorno’s analysis of affective and moral perception. Certain kinds of conscious sensation, Adorno argues, are tied inherently with physical moments. This ‘anti-spiritual side of spirit’ (202) represents the way in which a feeling can have a real and physical impact. Pain and happiness, for example, both involve a somatic element, taking the ‘sometimes unrecognisable



form of physical things'. The physical element is always present to the experience, however transformed or unexpected it may be. This cannot be captured by the epistemological 'copy' which the senses make of it. Adorno is suggesting here, as elsewhere, that the 'doctrine of immediate [sense] data' (194) is a false abstraction from the real, mediated relationships that occur: it is not, that is to say, that there are no sense data, but rather that they are not immediate. The somatic element that remains even in this abstraction is therefore a 'survival' of dialectical mediation in the midst of abstract identity thought (203). This survival shows itself as 'the unrest that makes knowledge move', the suffering which motivates us to go beyond the 'identitarian philosophy that would talk us out of that suffering' (203). Its preservation, in other words, is a nagging reminder, a feeling of guilt which reminds the totalising spell of its ultimate incompleteness.

Thus suffering, in particular, takes its place as a motive force in our understanding of the somatic. Pain's position of primacy — along with guilt — in Adorno's work can be accounted for by numerous reasons, including biographical and psychoanalytical, if we are so inclined. However, the importance of pain can also straightforwardly be seen as due to its inordinate physicality and practical consequences in our lives. Pain is one of the most intensely physical experiences there can be — even 'purely' mental pain is associated with physical sensations. It is not surprising that it breaks through the illusion of pure mentality which identity thought seeks to put up. This point is made in another way by Elaine Scarry, who talks about the 'resistance to language' and 'unshareability' of pain, the sense in which pain 'actively destroys' our capacity to express it — ultimately through the reversion to a prelinguistic scream (*The Body in Pain* 4). For Scarry the inexpressibility of pain leads the other to doubt: as a phenomenon which can never be fully confirmed and hence comprehended, it is easier to ignore it — particularly in the political arena, where those we inflict pain on may be distant from our perception. Nonetheless, pain's inexpressibility can be grappled with creatively, expressing itself in acts of artistic creation, signification and making visible. This highlights something important which Adorno, too, tries to grapple with: the practical consequences of visible suffering combined with the ease with which it can be rendered invisible. Language's inability to make comprehensible the extent of suffering, and the ways in which identity thinking reduces everything to its concept,

both end in the ease with which the human being can be acceptably subjected to every kind of torture as soon as this suffering is made abstract. It is, to put it bluntly, not then the human being who is being tortured or murdered under these circumstances, but an idea. This doctrine, which repeats itself in every ghetto, every genocide, litters history with its victims. While one might also call attention to this through language, or art, as Scarry suggests, Adorno's approach is to bring our attention back to the suffering itself. In the sight of the suffering body, we feel both 'naked physical fear and the sense of solidarity with what Brecht called "tormentable bodies"' (ND 286) as impulses. These impulses are felt as a direct bodily revulsion to the sight of suffering combined with the immediate urge to end the sufferer's pain.

Here the moral impulse is a clear call to action. But it cannot be rationalised: to do so would be to falsify it. The immediate response to urgent suffering appears to be action. To instead contemplate it, to attempt to rationalise what the right thing would be, would be a mockery of the urgency of the situation. To see a drowned refugee child wash up on the shore and respond by hand-wringing and deferral while one contemplates a politically-acceptable response would be to create an abstract, sick parody of the real suffering of the victims. Morality at the present moment, Adorno argues, is compromised in this way, preferring endless theoretical debate to the action that our moral impulses call for. The over-rationalisation of morality can act to create injustice, too. There is a sense in which, Adorno suggests, the immediate physical response is more just: it would have been more moral to shoot those responsible for the death camps immediately than to put them in a trial ending in either unjust acquittal or state-backed violence (ND 286). The reflective legal judgement that ends in the call for the perpetrator to be put to death (for instance) is a legitimisation of inhuman state violence, whereas to circumvent this rationalisation by immediate moral action may seem almost pure in contrast. Yet Adorno does not want to legitimise this impulsive desire, either: when he expresses this thought in *Minima Moralia*, he admits that his apparent embrace of immediate retribution is a 'thoroughly unsatisfactory, contradictory answer, one that makes a mockery of both principle and practice. But perhaps the fault lies in the question and not only in me' (MM §33).

In one sense, the question is wrong because the situation is wrong: there should rightly never have been death camps to guard in the first place. Answering a moral

question in this situation illustrates the argument that there can be no right life in the false one. But it also points to a dynamic between the immediate, impulsive act and a formal, abstract morality, neither of which give us an adequate understanding of morality. At the same time, the impulse illustrates something important about how we are to think about normativity and morality.

The place of the moral impulse is a question which is of great relevance to Adorno's thought on impulses, morality, critique and action. To see why this is, it will help to look at the famous dictum found in the 'Meditations on Metaphysics':

A new categorical imperative has been imposed by Hitler upon unfree mankind: to arrange their thoughts and actions so that Auschwitz will not repeat itself, so that nothing similar will happen. (ND 365)

This oft-quoted statement is evocative and forceful. But what is more interesting for our immediate purposes is the passage that follows:

When we want to find reasons for it, this imperative is as refractory as the given one of Kant was once upon a time. Dealing discursively with it would be an outrage, for the new imperative gives us a bodily sensation of the moral addendum — bodily, because it is now the practical abhorrence of the unbearable physical agony to which individuals are exposed even with individuality about to vanish as a form of mental reflection. It is in the unvarnished materialistic motive only that morality survives. (365)

This is a corporeal (*leiblich*) feeling, not a worked-out conclusion of discursive rationality. Its moral force is felt, not reasoned. This matters, because it is a statement whose assent is derived from experience and practice and not conceptual thought, which as captured by the spell is incapable of access to the truth. Moreover, to try and find grounds in reason alone is to go against the 'refractory' (*widerspenstig*: stubborn, fractious) imperative. This is because treating it as an abstract and rationalisable principle leads to the 'bad infinities of derivation and validity' (285). In the Hegelian sense, infinity is the 'negation of the negation', ultimately the sublation of both the finite and the infinite into the 'true infinite' (Hegel, *Science of Logic* 109). A bad infinity is an infinity reached only by reference to the finite, and this infinity is ultimately itself finite: it is a progressive series which progresses without ever reaching a point of conclusion or being able to transcend its own connection to finitude (111-3). Adorno is suggesting here that the search for

derivation and validity will be never-ending, because there is no secure foundation in epistemic knowledge. The stubbornness of this categorical imperative is that despite its unjustifiability in this sense, the ‘practical abhorrence of ... unbearable physical agony’ means that its force is felt anyway. More than this, it is all the stronger for being justified in this manner. The ‘unvarnished materialistic motive’ is that which returns this physical, somatic, affective element to experience and refuses to compromise it by formalism.

Here, it is clear that Adorno intends for the moral impulse to be understood as also the right impulse. But how is it that he can, on the one hand, justify this and, on the other, maintain his opposition to both immediate moral reactivity and formal ethical systems? The clue is in the first sentence, where he explicitly states to whom he refers the ‘new categorical imperative’. It is for ‘unfree mankind’, that is, it is not a general statement of moral facts but a specific intervention designed to operate in the social world as it exists today. In this spellbound situation, what is important is to return this affective, somatic moment to its prominence. This is why the same section of Adorno’s text which begins with the new categorical imperative progresses to a discussion of culture and materialism. For us, in this world, it is only possible to proceed to morality through suffering, because ‘Auschwitz demonstrated irrefutably that culture has failed’ (366). In its attempt to transcend the somatic realm of suffering it has succeeded only in tying itself ever deeper to it: another bad infinity. Or, in Adorno’s words, ‘[culture] abhors stench because it stinks — because, as Brecht put it in a magnificent line, its mansion is built of dogshit’ (366). Culture represents an attempt to abstract away from the ‘zone of the carcass and the knacker’ (*Metaphysics* 117), the places of death and decay, as if they did not exist. This is a ‘suppression of nature’ (118) in an attempt to avoid the ‘dark sphere’ of human existence. Its failure, then, is just that Auschwitz happened. Nazism took power in Germany, of all European countries one which placed a high value on the power of culture, demonstrating for Adorno ‘irrefutably’ that this culture has no real power. The ‘zone of the carcass and the knacker’ not only returned, but on an industrial scale. The slaughter that followed demonstrates the failure of culture to restrain the ‘dark sphere’. That, after the war, culture ‘restor[ed] itself’ with barely a second thought shows furthermore that it is now ‘garbage’, ‘radically culpable and shabby’ (*ND* 367). The idea, then, of culture’s autonomy, of its capacity for tutelage

and civilisation, which led to the development of philosophical moralities, has to be discarded. Because a culture which, after the greatest catastrophe, can reassert itself on the ruins without a second glance is really no longer attached to humanity at all. But there is no unsullied culture to turn to: the choice is either to become an ‘accomplice’ by demanding that culture maintains itself (which one does ‘even in [culture’s] urgent critique’) or to reject culture altogether and ‘further the barbarism which our culture showed itself to be’ (367). This directly correlates to the question of morality. In our case, Adorno argues that either to turn to theorising or to blindly follow one’s impulsive response would be wrong. The truth is that there is no right answer because the individual has no power before the social totality. Society (or ‘the species’ as in 202) is the subject which by rights ought to abolish suffering.<sup>10</sup> Social self-preservation, which can so easily lead to ruin, ultimately demands nothing less than the collective relief of all members of society. The inability to choose is a result not just of the undesirability of the choices but of the literal incapacity to act. And yet even despite this, the third alternative, not to react at all, is equally unpalatable. This is to ‘rationalise our subjective incapacity, once more degrading truth into a lie’ (367). In other words, it is to excuse our inaction based on our inability to act, despite the fact that action is urgent. This betrays our moral instinct and it also betrays the whole act of critique to the apathy of a bourgeois civilisation that prefers ‘total destruction’ over ‘ris[ing] to reflections that would threaten its basic stratum’ (398).

Adorno is here recognising the failure of critique to move us beyond the spellbound world that is so compromised by the horror it has wrought. At the same time, he recognises it in the context of the fact that nobody can do anything to move beyond this world. Recognising that he is complicit in the culture, and that there are no good alternatives to complicity, Adorno suggests that despite critique’s limitations the need for critique remains ‘urgent’ (367). This self-consciousness of the limitations of, and the urgent need for, critique is what drives Adorno to the utopian urge, and is also behind his claim that negative dialectics must, eventually, ‘turn against itself’ (406). In this situation, two things appear. Firstly, the moral

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<sup>10</sup> And indeed has failed to do so. ‘Philosophy, which seemed obsolete, lives on because the moment to realise it was missed’ (3). The failure of Marxism to change the world, the failure of the proletariat to act as the revolutionary subject, colour this aspect of Adorno’s thought even as he maintains the necessity of collective social action.

impulse feels more certain because it is more certain: 'even with individuality about to vanish' it maintains a link to the individual's bodily sensation (365). The experience of the individual represents a way in which resistance might be possible. Secondly, we are faced with a question of praxis. Given the crisis in morality and culture, and given the limitation of critique, how are we to move beyond the spell and toward something better? The next chapter considers how Adorno deals with this question, and how he grapples with fidelity to his critical method and the urgency of change.

## 5. Problems of Praxis: Adorno and Political Action

The preceding discussion of the moral impulse, then, has highlighted Adorno's ambiguous relationship between critique and the ability of critique to move beyond what it criticises. More than this, however, the implementation of the 'new categorical imperative' has shown that there is still something that we ought to do in this world to make things better — or, at least, to prevent them from getting worse. These raise questions about how we ought to act politically and socially, and whether (and to what extent) our action can be confined to ameliorative action in a spellbound world, or if we genuinely are able to open the space through which utopia may arrive. For Adorno, the experience of non-conceptuality shows that this space might be opened: there could yet be a way that critique might succeed in overcoming the spell and moving on to something better. But this something better cannot be conceptualised. The ban on images prevents us from visualising utopia, and Adorno's critical methodology prevents us from articulating a better system. Despite this, the figure of the constellation stands in as precisely a better way of understanding concepts, one which is linked to the non-conceptual and to non-identity thought. The constellation is a first step towards overcoming the spell, but crucially it is left ambiguous whether this really represents an overcoming or if it only opens the possibility of something better within a spellbound world. The question of praxis, I argue, is one way in which these questions can be considered.

Adorno is by no means a political quietist. He was deeply concerned by and involved in the political questions of his day. What he does not do is claim that these questions can be resolved by a final appeal to revolutionary change or historical inevitability, both of which he characterises as legitimising totalitarianism. As we have seen, the power of the spell is such that revolutionary change may not even be possible today. In a letter to Marcuse written at the height of their disagreement over the student protest movement, Adorno states: 'You think that praxis—in its emphatic sense—is not blocked today; I think differently.' ('Correspondence on the German Student Movement' 131). Adorno was highly critical of 'actionism', which he characterised as an adherence to praxis at the expense of theory, a tendency which was (in his eyes) conformist and oppressive. The question, however, is to what

extent Adorno means this to rule out any change. The answer is not as straightforward as either those who argue for Adorno as a thinker genuinely possessed of an emancipatory praxis or those who argue for a politically negativist Adorno may like.

This chapter argues that the difficulties in Adorno's account of praxis inhere in his commitment to the social fact of the spell and his twin hope of a utopia, that this world does not have to be as it is. I will first consider Adorno's emphasis on critique and theoretical reflection in light of his comments, which have already been mentioned, on guilt as the motive force behind critical theory. This gives us a classically Adornian account of immanent critique leading to the desire for change. Drawing on Adorno's commitment to art as a means of resistance in his aesthetics, the second section considers one way in which Adorno understands the possibility of praxis. A second way is given in Adorno's discussion of the addendum, which opens up the possibility of transformative action through critical experience of the sort discussed in the previous chapter. One issue with addendum experiences is that they are not open to all, and this section therefore considers the ways in which education may act to counteract this elitist tendency. My argument throughout is that the forms of praxis Adorno discusses here are ameliorative, rather than transformational (i.e. leading to utopia). But the question of art, and the utopian urge in general, both suggest that Adorno really wants a transformational praxis as well. To understand why Adorno feels that this possibility is 'blocked', the chapter will then elaborate Adorno's critique of 'actionism' and the prospect for a better form of praxis. It is important to put this in context, however. Adorno wrote this critique in a particular historical moment which feed into his considerations on the possibility of praxis as much as theoretical considerations. Indeed, on any reading of negative dialectics, the contemporary state of society is already a theoretical consideration. We are then led to consider whether, despite all this, there are still grounds for transformational praxis in Adorno's work. My argument here returns to critique as the means by which the possibility of transformational praxis might be opened up: only if we achieve a change in our relationship to the world, typified by our relationship to thought and to objects, might such a praxis be achievable. Otherwise we will remain trapped within the spellbound world, even as we attempt to escape it. This is one way in which the question of praxis might be answered.



But this is not the only way. The chapter concludes by discussing whether, fifty years after Adorno, there are other grounds to look again at the prospects for, and the necessity of, transformational praxis. In particular, here, the civilizational crisis of climate breakdown is considered, insofar as it both urges immediate action and requires a reconfiguration of dominant ideas of how our societies ought to be organised. I argue in conclusion that the dominance of the spell may at last be breaking, as the urgent need for change becomes apparent. In these circumstances, an urgent response *must* also break with the spell and be programmatically a critique of ideology as well as a practical movement. In these circumstances, fidelity to Adorno's critical thought means breaking with Adorno's political recommendations.

It will be noted that this chapter therefore historicises to a far greater extent than the thesis to date. Political and social context, and even biographical considerations, will be considered where previously they have largely been omitted: indeed, where I have used current examples for some of Adorno's critical models, I have possibly even denied these considerations in practice. There is a reason for this. Adorno's critique applies where the conditions of late capitalism apply, and to this extent can be readily generalised to the world in which we find ourselves today. The direction of travel since Adorno's death in 1969 has tended only in the direction of further integration, further commodification and a more spellbound world. This is why 21<sup>st</sup>-century examples can highlight Adorno's critique so well. When it comes to the question of praxis, however, the context of Adorno's own time is less easily ignored. While the shape of society remains superficially similar to that of Adorno's time, this superficial resemblance can obscure dynamics and movements that make possible some things at some times and not at others. If we are to understand why Adorno takes so vehement a stance against praxis, then, it must be considered in light of the social situation of his time. If we are to apply his thought to today, we must consider the extent to which our own social situation is different.

### **The 'universal guilt context' and critique**

First, then, we return to what motivates critique. In the previous chapter, I argued that one motivation was guilt, and in particular the guilt felt by the insufficiency of thought to capture its objects. But this guilt is, for Adorno, part of a 'universal guilt context':

The secret paralogism is that despair of the world, a despair that is true, based on facts, and neither aesthetic *weltschmerz* nor a wrong, reprehensible consciousness, guarantees to us that the hopelessly missed things exist, though existence at large has become a universal guilt context. (*ND* 372)

This passage forms part of a sustained reflection on the idea that Auschwitz, which took apart culture's claim to legitimacy, also hollows out traditional meaning-imputing metaphysics. The 'hopelessly missed things' are traditional, metaphysical sources of meaning: positive religion and philosophical systems. Adorno is highly critical of the attempt to 'restore' a traditional metaphysics, as even if such a thing really exists it could not be borne in the world today. For all this, however, he recognises the reality of despair — even as he calls it 'the final ideology' (373), he recognises its objective basis in the deterioration of things under the spell. The guilt that feeds despair, however, is for Adorno really a reflection on the mass destruction caused by our urge to self-preservation: 'purely as fact,' Adorno writes, we 'strangle other life' (364) just by living. Under modern economic conditions, even our private, daily activities contribute to the ongoing devastation of the earth's ecology. Human activity structured by rapacious economic forces destroy ecosystems and oppress people. The outsourcing of manufacturing to developing countries has seen gross labour abuses and working conditions bad enough that action has to be taken to prevent worker suicide. The very activity of modern agriculture, an industrial and chemically-assisted process that has been dominant for less than half a century, threatens to destroy the capacity of the soil to sustain food production. But to be aware of this fact, and to internalise this awareness fully, would be paralysing and a route to endless despair. It is, as Adorno puts it, 'irreconcilable with living' (364).

Guilt, then, is a phenomenon arising from existing under the social totality. It is simply the awareness both that one's own actions largely cause and reinforce harmful and rapacious economic systems and that one is, alone, unable to act effectively to prevent it. It is a guilt which we cannot come to terms with because we can provide no good reason why we should not feel guilty.

This sense of guilt 'compels us to philosophise' (364). It is the mismatch between a sense of moral culpability — that one *ought not* do or think as one does — and a sense of impotence in practice — that one *can only* do or think as one does — that leads us to question, to think. It is, then, in philosophy that we want to discover a

truth about the world, and it is in philosophy that we realise that this truth can come only from a thinking which ‘thinks against itself’ (365). It is the same phenomenon as the sense of non-identity, arrived at through the ‘guilt of what I am thinking’ (5) and the consequent critique. This connection is made explicit in a shocking metaphor:

If thought is not measured by the extremity that eludes the concept, it is from the outset in the nature of the musical accompaniment with which the SS liked to drown out the screams of its victims.  
(365)

A thought that is not critical, that is not aware of the non-conceptual and of what is excluded from the system of thought, is nothing more than a veneer of civility over an abyss of horror. Compare this to Adorno’s appalled reaction to the volume of poetry praising the beauty of the world so soon after the events of the Holocaust, which was discussed in chapter one. This is a guilt that is wider, then, than I have previously argued for: not only a guilt at the fact of exclusion, of the inability of thought to approach its object, but guilt at what that implies: the exclusion of something from the system of thought, and what, exactly, that something might be.

This, then, motivates critique. It is the normative revulsion in the face of what is that leads us to consider what could be better, and what a better way of thought could be. The question of how we might attain that better thought, and the better society that may yet exist, is a natural accompaniment to this thought. As we have seen, the utopian urge is a clear presence in Adorno’s writings, but one which he denied in favour of critique. In an interview with *Der Spiegel* published three months before his death, Adorno is asked about his relationship to the student movement and to praxis in general. The interviewer for *Spiegel* asks directly: ‘But how would one go about changing societal totality without individual action?’ Adorno replies: ‘This is asking too much of me ... I can only analyse relentlessly what is’ (‘A Conversation with Theodor W. Adorno’).

Indeed, Adorno’s later works, especially the essays ‘Marginalia to Theory and Practice’, ‘Critique’, and ‘Resignation’, all offer justifications for the necessity of theoretical reflection. One of these is, indeed, repeated in Adorno’s answer to the question posed by the *Spiegel* interviewer: he rejects the ‘bourgeois prejudice’ that critique must be matched with prescriptions on how to do better. On the other hand,

Adorno does not disown all action: the *Spiegel* interview gives perhaps the clearest public statement of where he specifically endorses it, such as in non-violent movements with transparent aims, or against fascist government where ‘one can only react with violence’ (‘A Conversation’). It is, furthermore, clear that some forms of praxis are always permissible. In ‘Critique’, Adorno argues that immanent critique can make society comply to its professed norms, and that this is already better than the alternative. But this immanent critique can lead, as we have seen, to a wider reconfiguration (constellations, for instance), and to a broader urge towards action.

### **The artwork and resistance**

The place of art offers one understanding of praxis that promises to go beyond immanent critique and reveal prospects for genuine change. In particular, art shows how a phenomenon may be shaped by the spell and the social totality and the may yet still go beyond it. A key consideration is the apparent autonomy of the artwork that still persists under contemporary society, and it is this apparently autonomous position which allows it to speak the truth despite its manifest untruth. The artwork is, simply, not identical to that which it claims to represent. The fact that it is all really semblance (*Schein*) is that which allows it to have a basis in, and reveal, a nonsemblance (*ND* 404-5). That is to say, it is able to show that our understanding of both truth and autonomy are untrue. Or, as Adorno earlier puts it, ‘Art is magic delivered from the lie of being truth,’ (*MM* §143). ‘Art is magic’ — it has an effect incongruous with its physical basis. ‘Delivered from the lie of being truth’ — it is not ‘true’ in the sense that it corresponds with the facts, slotted into a system of one-to-one correspondences which itself is untrue. It is an appearance of truth, which allows it to convey the really non-conceptual and inverse nature of ‘truth’ so much the better. Art, which is not what it is, reveals the non-identity behind identity thought.

It is for this reason that Max Paddison describes musical works, in Adorno’s analysis, as a ‘form of conceptless cognition’ that ‘point beyond themselves to tell us something about the world and our relationship to it’ (‘Immanent Critique or Musical Stocktaking?’ 209). In the artwork there is, therefore, a special capacity to reveal truth. Moreover, it is in the very renunciation of the artwork’s identity to what it represents, of the ‘semblance of reconciliation’, that art is able to ‘hold fast to the promise of reconciliation’ (*Aesthetic Theory* 41). Precisely because it is not what

it says it is, art can point to the truth. This operates through autonomy: a society which sees artists as having a special freedom from ordinary social demands (or which at least grants them their ‘idiosyncratic compulsions’) allows the artist to move beyond the spell and express themselves freely (53). This is supported by art’s mimetic function, in which a ‘nonconceptual affinity of the subjectivity produced with its unposited other’ (70) demonstrates that what is excluded from knowledge (i.e. non-conceptuality) in fact is a kind of knowledge. Because the non-conceptual is experienced in the artwork, we are able to perceive it despite its exclusion from identity thought. Affinity — mimetic affinity with the artwork — is a secularisation of magic, happening beyond our ordinary understanding, and as such in revealing non-conceptuality as a kind of knowledge it fails to reconceptualise it. Magic itself resists any attempt to account for it, instead being either ignored or transformed into mythology. Art cannot then succeed in presenting itself as a unified whole. But it is this very impossibility that sets art free to engage in the dialectic of knowledge.

Art is capable of resistance because it already operates, in some ways, beyond the social totality: it already carries some of the tensions and re-imaginings that thought would need before it could act. In this way, it is already capable of a better praxis. Art, however, is described as such at least in part because it already manages to ‘escape the spell’ (53). It is in a special situation thanks, in part, to inherited ideas about art’s and artists’ autonomy from other spheres of existence which do not have a parallel in everyday life. Indeed, where artistic praxis does take place it risks ‘confus[ing] itself with reality’ (*MTP* 275) through its muddling the boundaries between ‘aesthetic semblance’ and social reality. Thus the ‘happenings’ that took place through the 1960s mistake an artistic representation of reality for a true understanding of it. There is, in other words, no getting around the fact that to truly be able to intervene one must know what it is you are intervening in.

Art permits resistance, but it is also socially permitted to resist — so long as it does not actually resist. Charlie Brooker’s TV series *Black Mirror* features an episode, ‘Fifteen Million Merits’, in which a dystopian society allows only one way out: to win a TV talent show. The protagonist attempts to resist by publicly, and shockingly, revealing the injustices of his society live on air... only to be rewarded with a lavish broadcasting contract to vent, knowing full well that his anger and outrage have now been co-opted and can never threaten the existing order. One

might compare the public patronage provided to Banksy, or, in an earlier time, the court jesters who could alone speak truth to the King because they did so in jest and were not to be taken seriously.

But even if its social impact as praxis might be contested, we might still argue that it plays a valuable role in allowing us the possibility of experiencing the non-conceptual. Gerhard Richter, for instance, argues that Adorno's aesthetics has

[...]a certain oppositional spirit that allows aesthetic form to provide an elusive space in which the potential of the concept is no longer hampered by its rigid attachment to a purely logical system of reason that polices the legality and admissibility of a concept's movements and qualities. ('Aesthetic Theory and Nonpropositional Truth Content in Adorno' 135)

Art, then, offers a space in which non-identical and non-conceptual content can be shown. It is not that simple, of course: art needs to be interpreted, and the meaning of art is not open to all equally. Richter compares this to the model of allegory, which is open to interpretation, but the best interpretation is by those who have the ability to interpret it according to its 'key' (122-3). If this is the case, however, how can the artwork be a model for any form of praxis — transformational or otherwise — that, in a democratic society, requires a mass movement? One answer lies in reconsidering the addendum experience, and how this type of experience of non-conceptuality can promote action. The next section argues that Adorno's account of the addendum provides a clear instance of the connection between experience of non-conceptuality and praxis, which we might generalise to the work of art. More than that, however, it discusses this question of how we are to generalise these experiences in order to form a social praxis that is capable of effecting change in reality. This, I argue, can be understood through education, although this, too, is ultimately limited in its effects.

### **Addendum experiences and education as praxis**

I have already discussed the addendum experience in the previous chapter, where I used it as an example of the experience of non-conceptuality. This present section turns more specifically to a moral addendum experience, of the sort discussed in the previous chapter. The specific focus here is on how these types of experience can motivate action, which I analyse through the work of Martin Shuster and then through my own interpretation. Shuster argues that Adorno views actions as

being ‘*drawn out of us*, that is, as environmentally situated’ (*Autonomy After Auschwitz* 77). To move beyond the social totality would therefore require a social situation in which such a moving-beyond was already possible.<sup>1</sup> On Shuster’s account, this is complicated by the moral addendum. The addendum, as we have seen above, is a felt, somatic moment which is not to be construed as an addition but as a context-altering part of experience. Shuster interprets the addendum as referring to action and specifically builds an account resting on agent intention and action, in which the addendum appears as a variant form of activity which, over time, can modify our actions (91-2). Addendum actions appear to be ‘irrational’ in part because they are felt as somatic impulses, yet they are also transformative in that they change how we account for our own actions. These addenda are also socially shaped and mediated. Shuster’s account is generally persuasive, and in particular highlights the problem that society as it stands strongly closes off certain possibilities. His account of the addendum, however, overlooks somewhat the irruptive nature of the addendum experience.

The active power of the addendum comes precisely from its unexpectedness. Decisions, Adorno argues, ‘do not roll off in a causal chain, but what occurs is a jolt, rather’ (*ND* 226-7). The specific force of the addendum is its being an ‘impulse’ beyond, because before, the ‘dualism of extramental and intramental’ (228), and therefore both beyond and belonging to consciousness. Shuster is right to argue for the addendum’s power to reshape our thoughts, but the way in which this happens is as a surprising phenomenon which seems to be both inside and outside the subject. Adorno explicitly connects the addendum to the will, arguing that the will corresponds to the addendum’s somatic feeling as a sort of motive force (230, *History and Freedom* 228). The will and consciousness are connected through mutual dependency, in which consciousness requires a will (*ND* 230) and willing requires consciousness (*History and Freedom* 230). The physical substrate or addendum, in other words, is a necessary part of cognition just as the feeling of the addendum requires a cognitive subject who can feel it. The addendum’s call to action can, therefore, feel irrational precisely because it appears outside of cognition and

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<sup>1</sup> This is another reason why art is able to do so: the social situation of the artist is unique in contemporary society precisely because, under the heading of ‘artistic freedom’, they are already perceived to be autonomous.

consciousness, and yet can still guide and direct rational decisions. It is, in other words, a demonstration of the non-identity of thought with its objects which comes from inside the subject. On Jaffe's reading, this 'reveals the falsity of an increasingly determined world' and shows that this falsity is, in part, that the social totality is 'never as ossified as the reified thinking it engenders is given to assume' ('Adorno's "Addendum"', 857). Addendum experiences therefore provide a basis for praxis beyond 'full theoretical consciousness': as 'something physical which consciousness does not exhaust, something conveyed to reason and qualitatively different from it' (*ND* 229), the addendum also restores the physical and embodied act of willing to praxis, and the corresponding awareness of non-identity.

As a motivating force for praxis, then, the addendum seems to offer a means of acting that is not fully prevented by the social totality. Its relation to non-identity and physical embodiment give the addendum a critical force as well as an action-motivating one: it is not just a means of doing, but because it relies on something excluded by the spell, it also calls the spell itself into question. This means that through addendum experiences, combined with the right reflection on them, we may be able to realise the conditions for a real alternative. Addendum experiences are not only experiences of the non-conceptual, but actions which result directly from outside the spell. But this action cannot be entirely separated from its present context in a spellbound world, in which we ourselves are damaged. Our addendum actions are direct, yes, but they are not necessarily directed: they are irruptions of a somatic force that is beyond our conscious control. As we have seen with the discussion of the moral impulse, above, Adorno does not necessarily see this as an improvement, and it cannot be seen as a solution in its own right.

The addendum, like the artwork, problematises our spellbound existence but does not necessarily provide a means to move beyond. At best, they open up the possibility of reconciliation between subject and object in the experience of non-conceptuality. Addendum experiences, especially, seem to offer the possibility that we might be able to find some way to act that is not under the spell, if we are able to draw on the irruptive force of the addendum to reconfigure our self-understanding in a constellatory manner.



These experiences are, however, not open to everybody. Adorno argues that these forms of experience are at present accessible only to those who are, ‘by a stroke of undeserved luck’, not entirely ‘adjusted’ to the norms of society (*ND* 41). But this is not a natural phenomenon; rather, the social norms of the contemporary age ‘prune and often cripple’ the capacities for critical thought necessary in order to have experience of the non-conceptual (41), as I have indicated in previous chapters. Honneth notes (‘Performing Justice’) that this might seem elitist or even anti-democratic, but it is a dialectical irony, rather than a formal elitism, which makes the criticism of privilege a privilege itself. Those who are able to undergo these experiences must, however, make the ‘moral and ... representative effort’ to attempt to communicate the understanding they reach through them. This is an evangelical, even prophetic, call to action in the spellbound world: indeed, one might read *Negative Dialectics* as precisely the attempt to communicate these experiences more widely.

Communicating these experiences and this understanding would best take the form of education. Although truth is not equally accessible to all, nonetheless the method and results can be shared, which may assist more people to become the critical, self-reflective subjects Adorno would like us to become (c.f. ‘Education After Auschwitz’ 193). Education’s strength is precisely that it limits itself to changing the ‘subjective dimension’ (192): this is a form of praxis which does not attempt to change the ‘objective’ political, economic or social conditions and which, as such, may still be possible under these conditions. This distinction is important to understanding Adorno’s view on permissible praxis. ‘Education After Auschwitz’ and the above extracts from *Negative Dialectics* both suggest that where truth can still be observed and where change is still possible is at the subjective, individual level. This means that it is only through the action of individuals and the achievement and exercise of autonomy that we are able to set things on a different path. This ties in with Adorno’s emphasis on experiential awareness over conceptual knowledge: the subjective form is still less regimented, less reified than the objective; it is only at the subjective level that individuals can change things; yet even this subjective level cannot by itself affect the objective whole.

This does not mean that all education (for instance) must be carried out by individuals independent of institutions, but that all education must be aimed at

changing the minds of individuals and not institutions. There are two primary reasons for this. Firstly, the already-established argument that the social totality now holds power over and greater than any individual or collection of individuals. Secondly, Adorno's opposition to collectivist group-identification, in which 'the collective inflicts [suffering] upon all the individuals it accepts' ('Education After Auschwitz' 197). Members of the collective are required to undergo ritualised initiations which circumscribe the individual's autonomy and create a complicity within the group above other ties. Hazing and other physically violent initiations, for instance, can create a sense of group fusion in which the traumatic experience becomes pivotal to one's interpretation of one's purpose and place in life (Whitehouse and Lanman, 'The Ties That Bind Us'). This reinforces, for Adorno, an authoritarianism in which the group becomes the most important unit of meaning, and the individual's interests apart from the group are not considered at all. A policy which creates a new group *qua* group would therefore reproduce this form of authoritarian compliance, even if only by accident. Thus, education that seeks to avoid reproducing authoritarianism must also avoid creating forms of group identification into which individuals can easily slot themselves. This education will take the form of, for instance, the 'debarbarisation' of the countryside, the reorientation of education away from traditional pedagogy to a sociologically-informed and critical model, and the need to foster a 'general enlightenment' toward autonomy.

These topics are dealt with in a way that suggests Adorno feels this is a real and achievable policy goal even under the spell, and this essay represents a direct political intervention that is rare in Adorno's published philosophical work. But Adorno is equally aware of the limitations of this project. Adorno argues, at the end of the essay, that 'education and enlightenment can still manage a little something' ('Education After Auschwitz' 204). This is a startling qualification for such a radical programme of action, and shows that Adorno is aware that action in the subjective dimension is limited in its effectiveness. The overbearing objective conditions cannot be swept away. Such a fate may, even, accompany any effort to communicate a picture of non-conceptuality or foster critical theory: it is possible that the world is too deformed for these thoughts to take.

The artwork and the addendum experience both seem to offer the possibility of escape from the spellbound world, but both ultimately seem to falter before the spell. The desire, and even the ability, to step beyond the spell are not in themselves enough to move beyond it. What Adorno argues for more than anything is the attempt to communicate this reality, although at least in the case of his educational programme he is pessimistic about how effective this might be. This shows that, in a spellbound world, even the experience of truth may not be enough to motivate an effective praxis. The first, and hardest, step is to change our habits of thought. Art and the addendum can help in this sense, and indeed are invaluable, but in terms of real efficacy are strictly limited. Here we see strongly both Adorno's willingness to countenance the possibility of transformational change and his understanding of the challenges that any transformational programme would face.

The question may arise, given this, why more radical action should not be followed. I indicated in the introduction to this chapter Adorno's opposition to 'actionism', and in order to account for his refusal to countenance more radical programmes the next section will develop this opposition further, and contrast it to remarks he makes on what a 'good' praxis would look like. We will then be in a position to understand Adorno's position on praxis, and to consider further how far it still applies today.

### **The critique of actionism**

Actionism is the prioritising of activism and mobilisation over theoretical reflection and long-term organisation, justified by the idea that the cause in question is too urgent to wait for and that change must be sought now, at this moment in time. This tendency, Adorno suggests, ultimately results from the real impotence of the individual subject in the face of social totality. It reacts to the 'objective impotence of theory' (*MTP* 266), the inability of purely theoretical reflection to make any impact on the world as a whole, through a desperate reversal into pseudo-spontaneous praxis. It is pseudo-spontaneous because of the impossibility of real spontaneity under the spell: as with subjectivity in general, the idea of spontaneity becomes more and more a fetish as the real capacity of subjects to act spontaneously is diminished (266). The emphasis of actionism on such phenomena as the spontaneous uprising, or the immediate overturning of the social order, is therefore a

chimera. Instead, the immediate praxis of the actionists can end up reproducing the ‘administered world’ it is supposed to overcome.<sup>2</sup>

Actionism meets urgent situations with immediate praxis, emphasising tactics and results over theoretical or procedural robustness. But this can result in an authoritarian, disciplinarian organisation in which to dissent is to be ostracised for the good of the cause. Particularly when groups profess ‘leaderless’ and non-hierarchical structure, these can conceal group dynamics in which certain individuals rise to prominence. The formation of a group identity — assisted by a siege mentality caused by marginalisation and the sense of importance and urgency to the group’s activities — can also lead to punitive measures against those who are felt to be insufficiently committed. Ironically, the anti-authoritarianism the actionists profess is often matched only by the real authoritarianism they practice.

Moreover, actionism is politically impotent. As Adorno remarks, ‘barricades are ridiculous against those who administer the bomb’ (269). Some actionists recognise that such protest is unlikely to succeed, and argue that even if it is hopeless there is still a point in doing something — to bear witness, for instance. For Adorno, this ‘appeal to heroism’ is just another form of distance from a genuine solidarity, and is more attributable to a ‘narcissistic gain’ of moral superiority in the actionist than out of real empathy with those who are suffering (274-5). It is a salve to any nascent pangs of conscience; in reality, our exposure to the world makes us of necessity cold, and, ‘without exception’, our ability to empathise with the suffering of the other is ‘slight’ (274).

### **A real praxis?**

Adorno’s critique of actionism also leads to the idea that there may be something that lies beyond actionism. It also contains hints of what a better praxis might look like. ‘World history’, Adorno writes, ‘produces in parody the kind of people whom it in fact needs’ (270). That is to say, we in fact need activity, just not pseudo-activity; we need praxis, just not for narcissistic self-gratification; we need to change the world — just not in such a way as to create a bizarre world in which all

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<sup>2</sup> This point is not unique to Adorno. Eugen Weber, in ‘Revolution, Counter-Revolution, What Revolution?’, argues that in any revolutionary situation, the time comes when the revolution moves from being ‘generous, self-indulgent’ to ‘a stern disciplinarian, sterner than the tyrant it displaced’ (10). This is because, if successful, it must set up institutions of government — institutions which are by necessity designed to protect the revolutionary gains.

contemporary phenomena are reinforced by reference to a different ideology. Good praxis should rather ‘put all energies toward working our way out of barbarism’ (268), it should aim at ‘its own abolition’ (267) and, most importantly, should operate through theory (277). This is because critical thought and engagement is the only way to avoid the pseudo-praxis of actionism, which can only react to events and not provide an alternative. To think, and to think critically, is the means through which resistance may be possible, because in thinking one can recognise the potential that things might be different. Actionism, by contrast, has no time for reflection and indeed can ‘defame theory itself as a form of oppression’ (‘Resignation’ 290). Adorno argues that the actionist perspective comes ultimately from Marx, who believed that real revolutionary action was possible in his time and that everything should be done to encourage it (*ND* 322, ‘Resignation’ 290). The mistake of subsequent thinkers was to believe that this was still the case and that a revolution was around the corner.<sup>3</sup> Critical thought is thus the praxis left open to us, and it is still, after all, practical as a means of resistance, offering an immanent critique which can force certain reforms. Adorno in fact argues that theory which does not endorse a practical line might ultimately be the most fruitful, drawing a provocative comparison with the pathway from relatively pure atomic theory to the development of the atom bomb (*MTP* 277).

Adorno’s critique of actionism therefore also contains some hints of what ‘real praxis’ might look like. This real praxis would be reflective, measured and transparent. For Adorno, it would proceed through critique and, as we have seen above, through the transcendence of that critique. It would not be practical from the outset, and any practical consequences would be derived later. It would be anti-authoritarian and seek to reconcile the individual with organised movements to create a ‘nonrepressive praxis’ (274). This is not a programmatic statement, however, of how praxis should proceed, but guidance for navigating how one should act.

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<sup>3</sup> Hanif Kareishi in *The Buddha of Suburbia* has a Trotskyist character proclaim, following the vote of no confidence in Callaghan’s government “‘...England’s had it. It’s coming apart. Resistance has brought it to a standstill. The Government were defeated in the vote last night. There’ll be an election. The chickens are coming home to die. It’s either us or the rise of the Right’” (chapter 18). Kareishi’s narrator goes on to explain: ‘Terry had predicted the last forty crises out of twenty’. This sort of excited, even gleeful reaction to chaos among certain activists, and their boundless optimism that this, at last, is the time for revolution, is one of the less fictional elements of Kareishi’s novel.

This is consistent with Adorno's methodology. As I have argued, for Adorno the image ban forbids the positive image of utopia, and the dependence of critical theory on the spell means that we are unable to know what the right life would look like. But we must also bear this account of a good praxis in light of the momentary glimpses of utopia that Adorno also offers, such as the momentary freshness and newness of the home after a childhood holiday, a change in perspective caused by the temporary abeyance of the everyday duties and chores associated with the home. In *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno refers to the 'theologumenon that in the redeemed world everything would be as it is and yet wholly other' (7), and this 'sabbath peace' is once such image of how the world will appear, 'almost unchanged, in its constant feast-day light, when it stands no longer under the law of labour' (*MM* §73). This vision of a world that is free from labour, at peace and reconciled is, Adorno appears to be saying, available for us to experience right now, under certain fleeting circumstances.

In a separate aphorism in the same section of *Minima Moralia* Adorno claims of both truth and happiness 'one does not have it, but is in it' (§73). We might likewise say for Adorno that what really counts as utopia is these fleeting images of reconciliation that no merely political state of affairs could ever capture. Critique, by showing how the predominant order disdains peace and reconciliation, thus shows its goal inversely: the absence of conflict, of hunger, of want. The actionists, however, with their emphasis on the action at all costs, also in fact disdain peace: they desire conflict to assuage their sense of calamity at a world deformed, and this is what leads them to recreate the logic of the old world in the ovum of their new.

It is important, particularly given the discussion that will follow, not to ahistorically assume our own time is necessarily more in need of intervention than Adorno's was. Even ignoring the Cold War, the complicated implications of which are discussed in more detail below, the incomplete denazification of West Germany was a core concern of his, and one which he felt required intervention — hence, many of his specific interventions relate to putting the 'new categorical imperative' into practice.<sup>4</sup> These efforts are largely attempts to stop further deterioration than to

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<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, the broadcasts and essays collected in *Critical Models* and addressed, on the whole, to the German public. 'The Meaning of Working Through the Past' is an especially vivid example.

change the world as a whole, are carefully measured and thought out. Adorno draws a distinction between this sort of activity and the pseudo-activity he condemns in the actionists:

I participated in demonstrations against Emergency Laws [*Notstandsgesetze*], and I have done what I could in the area of criminal law reform. But there is a decisive difference between doing something like that and taking part in the half-crazed activity of throwing rocks at university institutes. ('A Conversation')

These activities are 'half-crazed' not only because of their hot-headed anti-theoretical standpoint but also because the possibility for radical change has been reduced to that of 'averting catastrophe in spite of everything' (*ND* 323). Limited and careful intervention to avoid the worst is the appropriate response for an age where the risk of catastrophe is all-too-real and the promise of utopia is closed off by the dominance of the spell. This is why Adorno can justify anti-catastrophic intervention while emphasising the need for critique: it is only through a thoroughgoing attempt to dismantle the system that real change can happen that does not revert to tyranny or disintegration. For Adorno, the situation's urgency is precisely why hot-headed intervention cannot prevail, and why a critical, theoretical, reflective attitude is needed.

Adorno's apparent rejection of praxis is thus tied up with its relation to theory. It is not the case, as I have argued above, that all praxis is bad praxis, and nor is it the case that one must occupy oneself purely with theory. But there remains bad praxis, and there remains the need for theory. The Adorno who sanctions 'any kind of action' when faced with a genuine fascism or military dictatorship is responding to the need for urgency just as the Adorno who (and in the same interview) rejects violence in principle is emphasising the need for humanity and reflection ('A Conversation'). More than this, it is clear that there are ways to improve things even under the spell, and, mindful though we must be of the limitations of this approach, we should also be mindful of their benefits. Immanent critique is powerful because it speaks to the norms that inhere in the system, and which are always better than the actual instantiations of it. The new categorical imperative is strictly for 'unfree humanity', who live in the administered world, under the social totality, caught under its Spell. These are defensive moves, to be sure, aimed as much at avoiding barbarism as they are at permitting utopia, yet they are moves all the same.

Despite the possibilities of immanent critique, there are situations (as Adorno recognises in the *Spiegel* interview) where action, in the form of a more radical political intervention in the world, is necessary. To avoid another Auschwitz, or to prevent the rise of barbarism, may require more resources than immanent critique alone can offer. Given the need for radical change that Adorno expresses in the course of his critique, the question is how we move from a reorientation of thought to a reorientation of action towards this good form of praxis.

One consistent theme in Adorno's work is that it is only through the actions of the critical and reflective individual that we might overcome the social totality. Only through the exercise of critical reason, uncovering the non-identical and non-conceptual moments in experience, might a better world be possible. Yet action in the subjective sphere cannot by itself change the objective order. There remains a gap between the subjective transformation and the work of the educationalist and the transition to a more utopian state of affairs Adorno so keenly wants. This gap may be insurmountable.

Horkheimer, in a letter to Adorno concerning an early work of Habermas, certainly feels that this is the case. He argues that any revolution in social affairs cannot help but re-establish domination under a more total society. This work of Habermas's, on the (then) recently rediscovered writings on the young Marx, expressed what Horkheimer felt was a naïve commitment to a vague idea of 'revolution' as the ultimate good.<sup>5</sup> Horkheimer argues that revolution will lead to domination rather than emancipation, and in particular under the current situation (he is writing in 1958). 'There are epochs in which it is more important to prevent change than to make history,' he argues, and one must not attempt to overthrow the bourgeois order but to defend 'the vestiges of bourgeois civilisation' with its ideas of the rule of law and individual rights (Horkheimer, in Claussen, *One Last Genius* 349). Echoing Adorno's invocation of the 'tenderness ... in the coarsest demand: that no-one should go hungry anymore' (*MM* §100), Horkheimer argues that hunger, poverty and unfreedom can be alleviated by a 'barely perceptible amount' by 'sensitising people to the presence, incursion and return of barbarism within and without' (Horkheimer in Claussen 350). According to Horkheimer, this represents

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<sup>5</sup> The work in question is, per Claussen's notes: Jürgen Habermas, "Zur philosophischen Diskussion um Marx und den Marxismus," *Philosophische Rundschau* vol. 5, no. 3/4, 1957, pp. 165ff.



‘the “practice” of what you [i.e, Adorno] write and what we teach’ (350). This letter, then, argues that in the prevailing circumstances critical theory must avoid revolution and wholesale efforts at change, instead ‘sensitising’ people to barbarism in order to make small-scale and limited interventions. While maintaining a position that critique must be radical, Horkheimer’s letter argues that praxis must emphasise the defence of the best of bourgeois civilisation before it attempts to change things for the sake of change. More importantly, Horkheimer argues that this conception of praxis is shared between himself and Adorno. In explicitly political terms, and notwithstanding the ambiguity of all such terms, this is not a communist manifesto — indeed, it is scarcely a social democratic one. Adorno, in his turn, writes in a celebratory letter to Horkheimer on his 70<sup>th</sup> birthday (in 1965) that Horkheimer had ‘contradicted’ Adorno’s ideas of the sufficiency of a worker-run state to bring about positive change ‘by arguing that only if the entire system were to change could change be approved of,’ that otherwise tyranny would merely reassert itself in a new guise (in Claussen, *One Last Genius* 357). Horkheimer, he adds, had been proven right by ‘the course of events’. While these events are not specified, it is not particularly hard to find candidates in the history of the Soviet Union and its satellite states. Adorno did, at times, dissent from Horkheimer’s cautious approach: for instance, he attempted to stop the emergency laws in Germany by provoking a general strike (Claussen 337). Nonetheless, on the whole (and as pointed out by Horkheimer) this conception of the undesirability of a revolution and the block against other forms of radical change does animate Adorno’s writing on praxis.

It is simultaneously the necessity of the total change, the danger of too-hasty and too authoritarian actionism and the near impossibility of achieving change through subjective means alone that make Adorno’s account of praxis both so insightful in its critique and so apparently deflationary as a method. For each moment where political action seems possible, there is a moment where it is revoked or qualified. The possibility held out of change through individual action and awareness is mitigated by the recognition that this alone means little against a spell whose falseness does not matter to its totalising power. Even direct resistance becomes a game that ultimately reinforces the prevailing order: the barricades and ‘pseudo-activity’ of protest movements ‘reproduce [the administered world] in itself’, creating new conformities which do not ever quite manage to challenge actually

existing power relations (*MTP* 270).<sup>6</sup> Adorno, moreover, clearly recognises that the praxis he feels able to offer is not enough to make the change he feels is needed: it is a ‘little something’ (‘Education After Auschwitz’ 204) against a false world.

In this sense, we might be tempted to sympathise with commentators such as Fabian Freyenhagen, who argue that, while Adorno certainly did give practical advice on resisting the spell, this advice is ‘*negativist* and *minimalist* in nature’ (*Adorno’s Practical Philosophy* 184; emphasis in original). On Freyenhagen’s reading, Adorno is a total negativist, which is to say that (amongst other things) he holds to an ethics with no conception of the good and which is instead based on aversion to the bad. While there is an overlap between Freyenhagen’s reading of Adorno and the one which I have presented in this work, I nonetheless feel that we must not fall into the trap of believing Adorno to be as negative as a (correct) reading of Adorno as a negativist might suggest. Critique itself opens up the possibility of a better world, and as Deborah Cook has argued this may well ‘give rise to emphatic concepts that provide glimpses of a better world than this one’ (‘Open Thinking’ 14). Whether this knowledge, gained through critique (or art, or the addendum) can move into reality has been the question under discussion in this chapter. While the balance of argument favours a negative answer at this stage, there is one final consideration that may make us re-evaluate our answer.

The clue to this is in Adorno’s late reflections on the German student movement. While famously rejecting some of their methods, Adorno also held that the existence of the movement in general was a good thing. A projected preface by Adorno for the reissue of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (written in February 1969) emphasises this: ‘young people have at least set out to resist the totally administered world which is not being accomplished seamlessly’ and thus ‘wholesale integration does not necessarily proceed smoothly’ (quoted in Claussen 338). In this case, Adorno felt his role and that of his work to be to provide guidance, in order that the protest

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<sup>6</sup> Examples of this are myriad, though a particularly pertinent case is the 2018 co-option of Colin Kaepernick’s stance against police brutality to sell trainers in a widely-welcomed ad campaign. This endorsement of Kaepernick and, by extension, the wider Black Lives Matter campaign has not been accompanied by any active attempts by Nike to challenge police brutality or racial injustice in the US, but by symbolically taking a stand has boosted its reputation and its sales among its core demographic. This then is pseudo-activity as displacement activity, in which the desired outcome (police reform, racial justice) is sought through boosting and replicating symbolic authority (wearing Nike products, sharing the advertisement). Whether this has any practical effect beyond putatively boosting Nike’s profits remains to be seen.

movement might ‘achieve a consciousness that illuminates and prevents people from submitting to blind practice out of despair’ (338). This testifies to his belief that real change and real resistance might, after all, be possible in the right conditions. These were not always met in the student movement: Adorno wrote, in his last letter to Marcuse, that while ‘I am the last to underestimate the student movement’ it is nonetheless ‘mixed with a dram of madness, in which the totalitarian resides teleologically’ (‘Correspondence on the German Student Movement’ 136). This is not an outright condemnation, as we find in some of the published works (e.g. ‘Marginalia to Theory and Praxis’), but it does provide a new perspective on those works. If the student movement has the potential to be transformative, at least in resistance, and if Adorno wants to provide guidance to avoid ‘submitting to blind praxis out of despair’, then what he is doing is not outlawing attempts at transformative praxis, but criticising them in order that they might actually fulfil their potential: in other words, submitting an attempt at transformative praxis to an immanent critique, without disbaring such praxis as a method.

One aspect of this immanent critique is and must be an evaluation of the social and historical situation in which the praxis is proposed. Adorno qualifies his rejection of most forms of praxis by reference to the ‘objective tendency’ (‘Correspondence on the German Student Movement’ 131) or the ‘concrete situation’ (‘A Conversation’), i.e. the spell or the overwhelming social context. It is ultimately these social factors which will determine whether a particular course of action has the chance of succeeding, and this is one way to make sense of Adorno’s readiness to counter ‘any kind of action’ under the Greek military dictatorship: ‘the situation that prevails there is totally different [from West Germany]’ (‘A Conversation’). There are other norms, of course, that must also be considered, in particular violence and the risk of backsliding into totalitarianism, but it is apparent that the social situation plays a role in Adorno’s rejection of praxis. If we are to be ‘Adornians’ today, then the question that we must ask is whether that social situation is now different, and whether following this different forms of praxis might now be possible. While many commentators might assume that the basic situation is no different (and for many, including myself, the basic correctness of Adorno’s diagnoses are part of his appeal), and do not address this question, I argue that there are reasons to believe that there are possibilities open to us now that were not open

fifty years ago. The next, concluding, section shows some reasons why this may be so.

### **The current situation and its prospects**

This section therefore considers the application of Adorno's ideas to some key aspects of the contemporary political situation. While a comprehensive overview of current affairs is far beyond the scope of what I am able to do, there are nevertheless areas where we can draw significant differences between Adorno's time and our own, including some where more radical solutions than Adorno could endorse might be possible within the framework of Adorno's critical theory.

One key difference between our time and 1969 is the collapse of the Soviet Union and its satellites. This is something of direct relevance to Adorno's thought, in both his opposition to the closed societies of the Eastern Bloc and his situation in a divided post-war Germany. The presence of the GDR, according to Claussen, had a chilling effect on calls for comprehensive change in the West, in which the 'standard riposte' to social reformers — "if you don't like it here, try over there!" — shut down calls for change by associating them with Soviet or Communist Party politics (Claussen 331). Horkheimer, too, felt that the presence of the Eastern bloc's 'doubly totalitarian society' (Horkheimer 350) endowed all calls for revolutionary change with a threat of barbarism, the consequences of which 'can only serve the interests of the masters in the East' (348). Any such revolution would either need to rely on the support of the Soviet bloc or else (and perhaps also) embolden 'potential fascists' within their own society (348). This criticism, in the context of the work of Habermas mentioned above, is clearly political as much as philosophical: for Horkheimer, the reality is that any attempt at a revolution in West Germany would be bound to fall under the influence of the GDR, modelling itself as a post-revolutionary socialist society. It is a reasonable, and probably accurate, concern, and the holding position in favour of bourgeois legal structures that Horkheimer took must be considered in this context. Adorno, likewise, clearly felt this danger, though rarely (in his published works) refers to it so baldly. The threat of replacing capitalist domination with Soviet domination must have been one reason behind Adorno's suspicion of actionism and the totalitarianism of groups. Yet the USSR collapsed nearly three decades ago, and is already receding into historical memory in the West. China, the largest nominally socialist country remaining, reserves its Marxist rhetoric

for domestic consumption, with its foreign policy linked more to a development-based model of capitalist globalisation than to sponsorship of foreign Communist Parties.<sup>7</sup> In these situations, space has in fact opened for a revival of the idea of a democratic socialism — a movement which accelerated since the economic crash of 2008 and the sluggish pace of recovery since.

It is not only this that has changed since 1969. While the world is no longer as clearly divided between two armed camps on the brink of nuclear apocalypse, the more total integration of the post-Cold War world comes with its own risks. The interdependency of a globalised world both limits the scope for truly radical action and makes the risks of systems failure more and more catastrophic. In this sense the difficult lessons of Brexit are instructive. The difficulties faced in extricating a nation from an integrated, international, interdependent system are shown in the highly disruptive and potentially very undesirable consequences a ‘no-deal’ Brexit would have for life in the UK.<sup>8</sup> A radical change in economic or social arrangements may, unless adopted on sufficiently global scale, lead to similar difficulties.

Yet, as Adorno is aware, the more total the system, the less stable it is. The spell which overreaches threatens to break itself. And in our future we do not only risk annihilation from nuclear war, nor from the ‘total integration’ of organised genocide, but from a climate that is changing more rapidly than at any point in the geological record. This threat goes hand-in-hand with political and economic crisis, including the global rise in authoritarianism, an upsurge in nativist sentiments combined with (and partially in response to) a refugee influx from combat zones, and an economic system in which growing numbers of people can no longer sustain a good standard of living. These problems, to be clear, are intertwined: climate breakdown may have had a hand in the Arab Spring; cultural anxiety spills into anti-migrant sentiments; economic disadvantage can lead to a feeling of general dispossession which can be exploited by right-wing demagogues; and so on.<sup>9</sup> Whereas previous catastrophic

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<sup>7</sup> It is a question well outside the bounds of this work whether China remains in any sense committed to international Marxism, but its current actions — what is currently known as the Belt and Road initiative, for instance — suggest that it intends to pursue international hegemony through more recognisably capitalist mechanisms.

<sup>8</sup> By the time of publication, this may be empirically verifiable.

<sup>9</sup> Mohamed Abdallah Youness, for instance, contributed a synoptic blog post for the World Bank detailing how drought and desertification caused by climate change were among the factors leading to popular protest and uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa, and particularly in Syria. A PRRI report, *Beyond Economics*, highlights that fear of cultural displacement and economic fatalism

risks required some human input at decisive moments (for instance, the decision to launch or not launch nuclear missiles), those of today may be beyond human control after a certain point. To take climate breakdown, for instance, it may be that crossing a specific threshold of greenhouse gas concentrations and overall warming puts in motion feedback mechanisms that will result in significantly greater warming as well as largely irreversible climatic changes (see Steffan et al, ‘Trajectories of the Earth System in the Anthropocene’). These feedback mechanisms operate on long timescales and are poorly-understood, and it is likely to be significantly more difficult if not impossible to address them once underway before widespread devastation takes place.

While some elements of the current situation might invite the response that this is merely the return to substantive politics after the period at the ‘end of history’ where neoliberal globalisation reigned triumphant, it should also be clear that others represent a clear break with the past. The ongoing shift away from the relatively stable climatic conditions that allowed human civilisation to develop and grow represents both the failure and the success of the attempt to dominate nature. Human beings have collectively altered the climatic conditions of this planet: what better way to illustrate Adorno’s argument that we have abolished the very idea of a first, ‘natural’ nature? At the same time, this very domination has resulted in natural phenomena more dangerous and less controllable than before. Massive wildfires, including fire tornados, the thaw of permafrost, the melting of glaciers, heatwaves, floods, droughts — all damaging and unstoppable consequences of the ongoing breakdown in the climate of the Holocene. We might, following Adorno, argue that climate breakdown is in itself the breakdown of the idea that we can dominate nature: a breaking of the spell caused by the very totalisation that that spell engendered.<sup>10</sup> At the same time, the prevailing social order is fracturing under the

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(assessed with regard to whether respondents felt higher education was a ‘risky gamble’ versus a ‘smart investment’) were both significant predictive factors behind support for Donald Trump in the 2016 US election. Similarly, a feeling of being ‘left behind’ economically combined with a general anxiety about cultural and demographic shifts appears to have been strongly indicative of a vote in favour of Brexit in 2016, per Clarke, Goodwin and Whiteley’s research on ‘Why Britain voted to leave’.

<sup>10</sup> There are similarities to be drawn with the idea of the ‘Promethean gap’ in the work of Günther Anders. Anders argued that we cannot imagine the negative consequences of the technology we use, and so we discount them; when they result in catastrophic consequences, particularly in modernity, we simply cannot process the tragedy as a result (Fuchs, ‘Günther Anders’ Undiscovered Critical

weight of the authoritarian illiberal movements produced in part by the failure of the neoliberal order which epitomises the spell. These movements also represent the potential for a catastrophic breaking of that spell. While they claim, in the rhetoric historically favoured by the far right, to stand for the mass of ordinary people, these movements nevertheless offer to save salient features of the despised social order: capitalist economic relations, political domination and the logic of identity thought. These catastrophes are, on any reading of Adorno, worth averting. But in the case of climate breakdown, there are also substantive reasons to believe that averting catastrophe requires the sort of systematic change that Adorno was, for good reasons, cautious about endorsing.

This was highlighted in October 2018 by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), which stated that reaching a minimum-damage 1.5°C of warming by 2100 requires ‘rapid and far-reaching transitions in energy, land, urban and infrastructure (including transport and buildings, and industrial systems’ (‘Headline Statements’ 2). Such a transition is urgent, requiring (on most pathways) overall emissions decline of 45% by 2030 compared to 2010. It requires enormous collective effort, including rapid and widespread action to actively remove greenhouse gases from the atmosphere, either from ecological restoration (e.g. afforestation) or through the development and use of ‘negative-emissions technologies’. And it requires global co-ordinated action beyond anything we see at present: current pledges under the Paris Agreement, which aims to keep climate change under 2°C, are instead ‘consistent with a global average temperature increase of 3.2°C’ according to the UN *Emissions Gap Report 2017* (18). These ‘transitions’ are in fact nothing less than a radical shift in the nature of the economic base away from fossil fuels towards a more sustainable economic model. Since the publication of this report, much thought has been devoted to concrete possibilities for making this transition. This has largely faced up to the idea that the prevailing way of doing things has failed and that alternatives are necessary. By way of example, the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR), previously associated with New Labour, recently issued a discussion paper which argued that ‘[e]nvironmental breakdown is partly the result of the prevailing political-economic paradigm and the ideas and policies it

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Theory of Technology in the Age of Big Data Capitalism’ 584). I am grateful to Prof Christine Hauskeller for drawing my attention to this parallel.

perpetuates' (Laybourn-Langton and Hill, *Facing the Crisis* 6). That this idea can be credibly mentioned in respectable circles is, I am arguing, a sign that the magnitude of this crisis should suggest that praxis (and public policy is a very effective form of praxis) is no longer 'blocked' in the same way that it may have been during Adorno's time.

What is worth noting is that the arguments being advanced largely conform to Adorno's vision of a good praxis. These arguments state the urgency of change, they connect it to the need to disentangle ourselves from (at least elements of) the spell and they proceed in an anti-authoritarian and non-repressive manner. Extinction Rebellion, a direct action group opposing climate breakdown and insufficient action to mitigate against it, specifically demands a 'citizens' assembly' in which a representative body made up of the general public would formulate how to address the climate crisis (Extinction Rebellion, 'Our Demands'). The embrace of deliberative democracy shows an attitude to political power that seems to coincide with Adorno's critique of hierarchical actionist groups, calling for more democracy and more critical reflection as an essential part of any solution. Democratic, deliberative bodies can also act against the rise of authoritarian and nationalist groups, who (if nothing else) prioritise decisionist states and exclusive polities. This is by no means to say that these strategies are perfect, nor that they will succeed, and there are criticisms to be made about either option. Not the least of these is the risk that these strategies become co-opted by the spell. In this situation there would need to be an emphasis on what are sometimes called 'non-reformist reforms', pursuing reforms to the prevailing order which call that order into question (see Gorz, 'Reform and Revolution'). It is these sorts of reforms that do not posit outright what a post-capitalist society would look like, but which nonetheless clearly challenge the capitalist order, which are among those being suggested as a response to climate crisis. 'Economic democracy', alternative measures of wealth and development, and a radical extension of political democracy all have the potential to open the way beyond the spell. For those who, like Adorno, recognise the urge towards utopia while recognising the pervasiveness of the forces arrayed against it, this alone should be enough to suggest that praxis is possible.



## Conclusion: breaking the spell

Adorno, under the spell, showed how a critique of that spell might be possible. This is, I have argued, something which should be foremost in how we understand Adorno's work. It is this that explains the necessity of immanent critique, and this that explains both the utopian urge in Adorno's writings and the reluctance to expand on how we might move beyond the spell and towards utopia. I will here retrace the arguments I have made to this end, and I will close by expanding on the conclusion drawn in the previous chapter that there may there may be forms of praxis available to us today that may not have been open to Adorno. I stress that it is the particular combination of realisable alternatives with radical implications and the current crisis that make these options open, and that it is this that may allow us to turn our attention to breaking out of the spell that we are all equally caught under and implicated in. This form of praxis would, I argue, offer the possibility of a role for critical theory beyond negativity, and a way in which Adorno's thought might speak again to the present situation.

This thesis has outlined some of the major elements in Adorno's critical theory. In the introduction, I gave an overview of Adorno's thought, beginning with how we ought to understand Adorno's attitude to the idea of a 'system' and the importance Adorno places on the idea of a 'philosophy in fragment form' (*ND* 28). This highlighted by interpretative approach to Adorno's work. To further understand how Adorno addressed the idea of the system, I also introduced some of the key terms Adorno uses, which are central to understanding the interrelation of his social critique with his philosophical project: the social totality, identity thinking and the idea of the wrong life. The introduction also introduced the primacy of the object, which is of vast importance to Adorno's critical project, as well as situating this work in an ongoing dialogue about Adorno's philosophical method. Chapter 1 continued to introduce Adorno's thought by detailing the context in which it arose, historically and intellectually, and by engaging with some of the thinkers whose work exerted an influence on Adorno and on his wider tradition of thought. Engaging with these thinkers, I argued, enhances our understanding of Adorno's work and allows us to situate Adorno's work. In chapter 2, I considered the idea of the spell. I argued that Adorno's use of the idea of the spell is deliberate and crucial

to interpreting his work. Tracing it to the domination of nature, I showed that this highlights the ways in which identity thought contributes to the instantiation of a false social totality and helps to shape our thought as well as our social conditions. I then considered, through an analysis of the occult, one way in which this spell might break even as it reaches towards a successful totalisation of all phenomena, in particular through the need of the spell to have something which is outside it. I related this to Harvey Cox's understanding of the Market as a God, arguing that this remythologisation process can create a world which is more totally dominated. But resignation to this tendency is not, I argued, what Adorno's critical theory intends to do. Chapter 3 begins to consider an alternative possibility: how we might break the spell as a liberation. This chapter therefore focused on how Adorno's critical theory develops in relation to the possibility of utopia, considering the image ban and its relation to Adorno's concept of determinate negation. In this way, I argued, a view of negative dialectics becomes apparent in which the purpose of critical theory is to guide the re-orientation of our thought towards understanding non-identity and non-conceptuality. The constellation is one way in which non-identity can be shown using concepts, and can help point towards non-conceptuality. I argued that one way of understanding non-conceptuality is through a type of experience, made accessible through the constellation, in which one becomes aware of both the object and the mediatedness which characterises all its conceptual relations. This requires an account of experience, and this is the subject of chapter 4. This is difficult terrain, and potentially misleading, and I argue against grounding Adorno's account of experience in either transcendental or metaphysical postulates. Rather, we ought to consider this as a normative account in which Adorno is arguing for a way to perceive objects which presents their non-conceptual and non-identical moments without reducing them to identity thinking. I developed this in light of a reading of Adorno's account of the somatic in which the somatic impulse is experienced as precisely this irruption of non-identity into our spellbound habits of thought. In this way, the somatic can assist us in becoming aware of the non-conceptual. I connected this to a more directly normative concern with a discussion of the moral impulse, arguing that this shows both Adorno's urge to transcend identity thought and the limitations he recognises critical theory places on being able to attain this end. This thread of discussion is elaborated in chapter 5. This chapter offered an account of the ways in which Adorno's account of praxis is conditioned by the spell and the

methodological requirements of negative dialectics. While some forms of resistance are possible, and while immanent critique might play a useful practical role, we are blocked from more transformative praxis by the state of the world. Adorno argues that attempts to realise utopia that do not account for the image ban and the spell will tend towards authoritarianism and ultimately reinforce the spellbound world they attempt to transcend. Yet, I argued, there may be reasons to assume that such transformational praxis is no longer as blocked to us as it was in Adorno's time. The challenge of catastrophic climate breakdown and the opening up of radical options for addressing it seem to suggest that, even accepting Adorno's concerns about praxis, there may be more of an opening for us to transcend the spell in a liberatory manner than during his own time.

Although I have justified why we might look again at what the objective conditions allow us to do, there are legitimate grounds to challenge the proposition that climate breakdown offers us a genuine chance to transcend the spell. These interventions, as radical as they might appear in the current political climate, nevertheless often maintain some of the economic and ideological structures that correspond to the spellbound thinking that, as I have shown, is the central target of Adorno's critical reflections. They are explicitly reformist, not revolutionary. Proponents of a more radical structural transformation might justly argue that, compared to the scale of the challenge, policy ambitions such as 'green investment' by central banks can seem inadequate to the challenge, and furthermore an insufficient challenge to a financialised social order. A further challenge might also include the risk of ideological capture that comes from willingness to work within the social totality, as the history of the social democratic parties can demonstrate.<sup>1</sup> The concern is that what was meant to transcend the spell might ultimately reproduce it, redirecting potentially radical energies to the development of capitalist social relations rather than providing an alternative to them. These two criticisms represent firstly a challenge to the content of specific proposals, and secondly an uneasiness with reformist (in the Marxist sense of the word) projects in general. If I

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<sup>1</sup> This can best be seen in the embrace of the neoliberal consensus by centre-left politicians in the 1980s and 1990s, notably New Labour in the UK, the SPD of Gerhard Schröder and (although outside the social democratic tradition) Bill Clinton's 'new' Democrats in the USA.

am to argue that Adorno could endorse this sort of action, and that it would represent a real opportunity to transcend the spell, these will need to be addressed.

I have argued, above, that some of Adorno's criticism of the German student movement can be read as an immanent critique of that movement, rather than an attempt to reject its features completely. This argument was based on the more ambivalent, and even positive, comments he made about it towards the end of his life. In a similar vein, an Adornian response to the first criticism might be to subject the proposals in question to a similar critical reflection, assessing them against Adorno's norms for praxis and the extent to which they either resist the spell (or, in this case, the consequences thereof) or open a space for a concrete alternative. An outline of what this might look like is as follows. The IPPR report quoted in the previous chapter deploys radical rhetoric: '[climate breakdown] demands a response that fundamentally alters the underlying economic structures and dynamics that drive degradation and seeks to recognise and repair injustice' (Laybourn-Langton and Hill, *Facing the Crisis* 10). Many of its policy recommendations are, however, a mixture of radical potential and radical continuation. While the authors argue for '[a] new political-economic paradigm' (11), this is to be instantiated through traditional parliamentary and legislative means, changes in investment, the use of alternative metrics for economic development and shared ownership of economic actors within a market economy. Here, however, is the space through which an articulable alternative is possible. The proposals that are given clearly exist within capitalist social relations, and in this sense are still enmeshed within the spell — as one might expect. Yet despite the apparent wonkishness, there really is something to be said for the use of alternative development metrics, for a greater accounting of resource use and for a focus on poverty alleviation and democracy in economic strategy. These are destabilising to an understanding of capitalism predicated on the acquisition of wealth and economic growth at all costs (an understanding shared between capitalism's fiercest defenders and harshest critics), because they change the basis on which wealth and growth are to be conceived of: in this sense, they represent a tangible step forward. Moving beyond this, we might criticise the proposals for failing to live up to what they profess: because they do not abolish capitalist relations, it is not a fundamental reshaping of the economic system. A fundamental reshaping would be better. These two responses are mutually-reinforcing: it can both

be the case that they do not offer a fundamental change in social relations and that they do offer to open up the space where such a change becomes possible. Indeed, I would argue that these sorts of proposals do precisely that. They address the urgency of the situation by deploying the tools available to public policymakers, but they do so in a way that openly questions the logic on which the system rests. In this way there is a difference between this sort of proposal and a cap-and-trade emissions market or a carbon tax, which largely leaves the logic of the system intact. This questioning is done in the name of the crisis, as a defence against catastrophe, but it emphasises the importance of democratic norms and co-operation over radical actionism. Even if these policies are not implemented, they show a way in which the norms of the spell might be challenged (if perhaps not transcended) while also corresponding with what Adorno felt good praxis might look like. It is hard to argue that redirecting the aims of the economic system in this way does not also emphasise the contingency of the existing order in general, and in this sense these are reforms that open the possibility for transcending that system entirely. One might even argue that by forcing capitalism to confront what it excludes from its calculations ('the relationship between human and natural systems' [11]), it opens the opportunity to show what else is being excluded under the spell in a way which is more accessible to a wider range of people. More than this, such a reconfiguration of the economic order away from the domination of nature would be a fundamental challenge to systems of thought which take this as a given: if the spell springs, as I have argued, from the attempt to dominate nature, surrendering the attempt to dominate nature would need to change the spell, perhaps to the point where it is broken. Recognising that this outline is incomplete, there do appear to be grounds to undertake an immanent critique of the content of specific proposals that shows their value as praxis while highlighting tendencies towards the expression of the non-identity thought that Adorno hopes to instantiate.

A response to the second criticism, that of the ideological capture of these aims by the spell, would proceed along similar lines. Given the acknowledgement that we exist under the spell, it is likely that many proposals to address the climate crisis will be redirected towards that spell's preservation. In these circumstances, however, the immanent critique of this praxis takes on more importance, not less: to show how that praxis, by resigning itself to the prevailing social order, in fact misses the chance

to obtain its ends. This may not convince the critic. Some will argue that all reformist projects must end in failure, in the sense that they become co-opted by the spell: the spell is too powerful, and the reformist too willing to compromise with it. This objection can be answered with a view of what an alternative effort at transformational praxis would look like. In the *Spiegel* interview, Adorno argues that ‘[t]he only meaningfully transformative praxis that I could imagine would be a non-violent one’ (‘A Conversation’).<sup>2</sup> At the same time, in the previous chapter we saw that Adorno argues that revolution is violent, tending to reimpose hierarchical, dominance-based societies and to tend toward totalitarianism. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that reform is the only means open to us, even if, as Adorno does, we recognise its limitations. Here, however, we can appeal to the urgency and the extremity of the challenge we face. The scale of the climate crisis demands a proportionate response, even from reformists, and that response must therefore be prepared to advocate major departures from the current order. More than this, the rise of reactionary alternatives shows the danger of the spell metastasising into something openly authoritarian, and the threat to human civilisation shows that the spell itself is fragile. It may be that a challenge to the spell now has a better chance of success, precisely because the objective tendency shows it at a weak point. The task of the critical theorist would then be to ensure that praxis can challenge the spell in a way that genuinely advances liberation.

What this shows is that there are opportunities to endorse potentially transformative praxis within an Adornian framework. I do not mean this in the sense that, were Adorno transported to the present day, he would have approved of x policy or y group. Rather, I have attempted to show that one might still be able to endorse certain kinds of radical, and even transformational, action while adhering to Adorno’s critical project. Adorno was, as we all remain, caught under a spell; but we are not wholly determined by it, and perhaps we now have the opportunity to open the space for a viable alternative. Such an alternative would be realised in fragments, incremental advances that (if followed through) would have a cumulatively transformative effect. This follows Adorno’s emphasis on the anti-system, advancing without forming a totality, and would attempt to use the prevailing order to move

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<sup>2</sup> With the exception of ‘real fascism’ — but we have by no means returned to that, yet, today.

beyond it. This movement would be piecemeal, and open to immanent critique in order to move in forward.

In this work, then, I have hoped to demonstrate the tension in Adorno between his commitment to a negative dialectics that has no access to the truth except inversely and his utopian urge, which explicitly motivates negative dialectics although for this very reason cannot be expressed through it. Adorno recognises the power of the spell, and his own entanglement in it, even though he felt himself sufficiently ill-adjusted to society to be able to take to critique. But to transcend the spell entirely would be impossible for a negative dialectics: as Bernstein notes, 'it is [a] premise of Adorno's enterprise ... that there are no actual possibilities in contemporary experience that point toward a future structurally discontinuous with it' (*Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics* 418). But, for all this, critique can still open the possibility of a future in which those possibilities are open to us. The constellation presents a viable form of non-identity thought and offers the prospect of experiencing the non-conceptual, in a strong form. And, as I have argued above, current circumstances may allow for a praxis to proactively allow for challenges to the spell which point toward something better without jettisoning Adorno's critical methodology. It is in this action that critique might yet move past itself, and in doing so allow us to move beyond both the spellbound world and, therefore, beyond the critique of that world. Whether this becomes possible or not can only be realised through the operation of critical thought and through the critically-informed praxis that might make a better world a reality.

## Abbreviations Used

The following abbreviations are used for commonly-cited works. Full bibliographical information is available in the 'Works Cited'.

Works by Adorno:

*JA* = *Jargon of Authenticity*

*MM* = *Minima Moralia*

*MTP* = 'Marginalia to Theory and Praxis'

*ND* = *Negative Dialectics*

*SO* = 'On Subject and Object'

Works by Hegel:

*PhS* = *Phenomenology of Spirit*

*EL* = *Encyclopaedia Logic*



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