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The ironical motto of *Aesthetic Theory* provides an indirect epitaph for its author: "What is called philosophy of art usually lacks one of two things: either the philosophy or the art." The epitaph is indirect, for it indicates a challenge that Adorno met throughout his life: neither philosophy nor art was lacking. This helps explain the paradoxical character of his philosophy of discourse.

He was born Theodor Ludwig Wiesengrund on September 11, 1903, in Frankfurt am Main. Frankfurt was to be home for the first three and last two decades of his life. The intervening years, from 1934 to 1949, he resided in Oxford, New York City, and southern California. During this exile from Nazi Germany he adopted the name by which he is best known: Theodor W. Adorno. The middle initial stands for the surname of his father, Oskar Wiesengrund, a wealthy assimilated Jewish wine merchant. Adorno is the surname of his mother, Maria Calvelli-Adorno, a Catholic of Corsican and Genoese descent. The other member of the family was Maria’s sister Agathe. Maria and Agathe gave young “Teddie” the love for music that would motivate much of his scholarly work.

Philosophy fed a voracious intellectual appetite during Adorno’s formative years in the Weimar Republic. Weekly sessions on Kant’s first *Critique* with Siegfried Kracauer began when Adorno was fifteen. Close readings of philosophical texts became a lifelong passion. Adorno earned his doctorate in philosophy in 1924 with a dissertation on the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl. By this time he had already made
the acquaintance of two older men who were to be his closest collaborators—Max Horkheimer, whom he met in a seminar on Husserl in 1922, and Walter Benjamin, to whom Kracauer introduced Adorno in 1923.

During his university years Adorno read such unorthodox works as Lukács's *The Theory of the Novel* and Ernst Bloch's *Geist der Utopie*. These were to inspire his own radical approach to philosophical aesthetics. Just as important for the development of Adorno's thought, however, was his intense involvement with "new music," in particular that of Arnold Schönberg. Adorno spent two of these years in Vienna as the composition student of Alban Berg and the piano student of Eduard Steuermann. From the 1920s come Schönbergian impulses that become conceptual tone rows, as it were, in Adorno's subsequent writings. Commenting on a manuscript eventually published as *Against Epistemology*, Susan Buck-Morss writes:

> It seems clear that Schönberg's revolution in music provided the inspiration for Adorno's own efforts in philosophy, the model for his major work on Husserl during the thirties. For just as Schönberg had overthrown tonality, the decaying form of bourgeois music, so Adorno's Husserl study attempted to overthrow idealism, the decaying form of bourgeois philosophy.

Adorno took from his Vienna days a model for an "atonal philosophy" whose style and concerns prefigure the antifoundational and deconstructive themes in more recent philosophies of discourse.

It would be a mistake, however, to read Adorno's writings as no more than a peculiar fusion of antiidealist philosophy and expressionist art. The catalyst for this fusion is a social critique derived from Georg Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness*, a seminal text of Western Marxism. Although there has been considerable discussion in recent years about the label "Western Marxism," it is a useful term to indicate a political and academic tradition animated by a set of shared concerns and arising in central Europe during the 1920s. Motivated in part by loyal opposition to the Leninist model of party politics, and in part by the apparent failure of proletarian revolution and the rise of fascism, Marxists such as Lukács, Karl Korsch, and Antonio Gramsci attempted to reformulate the intellectual legacy of Karl Marx in order to understand dramatically new conditions. A key factor, which gradually became thematic, was a structural shift in capitalism that forestalled indefinitely its expected collapse and rendered Marx's theory of revolution partially obsolete. At the philosophical-historical level, the scientism and determinism of prominent theorists after Marx had to be confronted, and the importance of philosophy and other cultural forms had to be reexamined. For Western Marxists the "failure of the socialist revolution to spread outside Russia" was not simply what Anderson
describes as the "cause and consequence of its corruption inside Russia." The failure was also an indication of theoretical deficiencies in the classical tradition of Marxism.

Adorno's social critique shares such concerns with the writings of other Western Marxists. He gradually elaborated his critique in dialogue with members of the Frankfurt Institute of Social Research, of which Horkheimer became director in 1930. Its earliest stirrings appear in Adorno's first Habilitationsschrift, which defends Freudian psychoanalysis as a rational theory of the unconscious, while attacking irrationalist accounts of the unconscious as ideological supports for the status quo. Additional incentives came from Adorno's frequent trips to Berlin in the late 1920s to visit his future wife, Gretel Karplus, and a circle of politically leftist writers and artists including Bloch, Benjamin, Moholy-Nagy, Bertolt Brecht, Hanns Eisler, Lotte Lenya, and Kurt Weill. The role of art in transforming social consciousness was uppermost in their discussions.

Even more decisive, according to Buck-Morss, was a methodology Adorno derived from the introductory chapter of Walter Benjamin's The Origin of German Tragic Drama. Adorno's methodology emphasizes a close, imaginative reading that exposes social conflicts by uncovering problems inherent in works of art, philosophical texts, or the phenomena of daily life. The critic elicits a sociohistorical truth that might not have been intended by the artist, philosopher, or agent. Such critical interpretation has political significance, even when it is not directly useful for political purposes.

Although Adorno's actual method differs from Benjamin's, a Benjaminian inspiration clearly surfaces in his writings in the early 1930s. These include two lectures given during Adorno's first, brief career on the Frankfurt philosophy faculty, a programmatic essay on music sociology, and Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic, Adorno's first book. The latter was published on the day Hitler came to power in 1933. Soon afterwards Adorno, Horkheimer, and many other Jewish professors were dismissed from German universities. The Institute of Social Research moved to New York, where it became loosely affiliated with Columbia University. Adorno enrolled as an "advanced student" at Oxford University but frequently returned to Germany to visit Gretel Karplus, whom he married in 1937. Benjamin had already moved to Paris, where he lived until 1940, when he committed suicide at the Spanish border while fleeing the Nazis.

The social-critical program forged in the early 1930s would remain central to Adorno's work until his death in 1969. So would his passionate interest in philosophy and modern art, especially music. One can trace gradual shifts in the topics and tone of his writings, however, shifts that are connected to his social circumstances and his collaboration on
various projects. For convenience we may speak of three phases in his mature writings.

The first phase (approximately 1933—1949) is marked by interdisciplinary critiques of popular culture. In this phase Adorno published several pathbreaking essays on the music industry, most notably "On the Fetish-Character in Music and the Regression of Listening." He also coauthored *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, with its crucial chapter on "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception." These writings display an increasingly Hegelian style, a self-conscious importing of Freudian categories, and a complex appropriation of Nietzsche and of conservative culture critics such as Oswald Spengler. Closely connected with these writings is Adorno's work on *The Authoritarian Personality* during his years in the United States Adorno was searching popular culture for the economic, political, psychological, and deeply historical sources of fascism, anti-Semitism, and the loss of a critical public consciousness.

The second phase (approximately 1949—1958) is marked by essayistic interventions in high culture. It begins with Adorno's and Horkheimer's return to Frankfurt in 1949 and the reopening of the Institute of Social Research in 1951. It ends around the time Adorno replaced Horkheimer as director of the Institute in 1958. Although written earlier, Adorno's first major publications in this phase can be read as attempts to provoke the superintendents of German high culture during postwar reconstruction. *Philosophy of Modern Music* challenges the official music scene; *Minima Moralia* expresses the bitter experiences of German exiles; *In Search of Wagner* decodes the ambiguous work of the Nazi's favorite composer.

The clue to such a reading comes from "Cultural Criticism and Society," an article written in 1949 and published in 1951. Republished in 1955 as the lead essay in *Prisms*, the article claims that "cultural criticism must become social physiognomy" because cultural phenomena have become increasingly integrated into the structure of capitalist society. Such integration does not spare the culture critic:

The more total society becomes, the greater the reification of the mind and the more paradoxical its effort to escape reification on its own. Even the most extreme consciousness of doom threatens to degenerate into idle chatter. Cultural criticism finds itself faced with the final stage of the dialectic of culture and barbarism. To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric. And this corrodes even the knowledge of why it has become impossible to write poetry today.

Many of Adorno's writings on the arts in the 1950s share this provocative combination of agonizing self-criticism and polemical exaggeration. The combination seems intended to interrupt "business as usual" and to recall the horrors that consumers of high culture would like to forget.
Two programmatic essays announce the concerns occupying the last decade of Adorno's life. The first is the Introduction to *Against Epistemology* (1956), in which Adorno insists on the need to historicize ontology and epistemology.\textsuperscript{21} The second is "The Essay as Form," a self-conscious reflection on philosophical style that opens Adorno's first volume of literary criticism.\textsuperscript{22} Together the two essays announce a turn toward philosophical consolidation. Although by this time Adorno was becoming a well-known radio guest and public lecturer, the focus of his scholarly work shifted toward sustained treatments of topics that had been central to his earlier writings. Besides numerous volumes of essays on music\textsuperscript{23} and literature,\textsuperscript{24} Adorno published monographs on Mahler and Berg,\textsuperscript{25} a book on Hegel,\textsuperscript{26} and collections of essays in sociology and aesthetics.\textsuperscript{27}

He also entered numerous academic debates about education, university politics, and sociological methods, the most famous of which was the "positivism dispute" with Karl Popper.\textsuperscript{28} Whereas Popper continued to cling to a modified version of the ideal of value-neutrality in academic work, Adorno clearly insisted on the claim that no social theory is politically neutral. His central claim is this:

The idea of scientific truth cannot be split off from that of a true society. Only such a society would be free from contradiction and lack of contradiction. In a resigned manner, scientism commits such an idea to the mere forms of knowledge alone.

By stressing its societal neutrality, scientism defends itself against the critique of the object and replaces it with the critique merely of logical inconsistencies.\textsuperscript{29}

Despite miscommunication on both sides, the debate led to a clearer understanding of an issue that has since come to dominate university politics in English-speaking countries. It also provided considerable impetus for followers of Adorno such as Jürgen Habermas, Karl-Otto Apel, and Albrecht Wellmer, all of whom have worked to diminish miscommunication while sharing with Adorno the quest for a politically committed social theory. Adorno's central claim continues to have effect in their work.

Adorno's major writings of this decade were *Negative Dialectics*\textsuperscript{30} and *Aesthetic Theory*. *Negative Dialectics* can be called a work of metaphilosophy: it presents philosophical reflections on philosophy, and it elaborates the categories and procedures employed in Adorno's previous writings about other philosophers. In a similar fashion *Aesthetic Theory* is a work of metaaesthetics. It presents philosophical reflections on philosophical aesthetics, and it elaborates the categories and procedures employed in Adorno's previous writings on the arts. Each book provides a summation, not only of Adorno's own writings but also of the philosophy of the Frankfurt School.

In light of Adorno's life and work, in view of his passion for art
and philosophy and his uncompromising criticisms of contemporary society, it is nearly impossible to read *Aesthetic Theory* without a sense of tragedy. Caught up in the endless wranglings of university politics, and under attack from some of his own militant students, Adorno died of a heart attack in August 1969, one month short of his sixty-sixth birthday, and one rewriting away from completing his *summa aesthetica*. The incomplete manuscript was published in 1970, the first of twenty-three volumes in Adorno's *Gesammelte Schriften*. *Aesthetic Theory* has become the last testament, as it were, of a truly remarkable man: a Hegelian Marxist who took distance from both Hegel and Marx; an assimilated German Jew who wrote some of his most seminal works in American exile; a polished modern musician who subjected music to ideology critique; an imaginative and rigorous philosopher who was better known for his work in the social sciences.

Recent conferences on Adorno attest to the continuing importance of his work. It is not clear, however, exactly how Adorno's life and work are to be located in the traditions to which they belong. His writings occupy a historical "force field," according to Martin Jay. The field includes "Western Marxism, aesthetic modernism, mandarin cultural despair, and Jewish self-identification, as well as the more anticipatory pull of deconstructionism." No one force dominates Adorno's work. The forces exist in creative tension. In *Aesthetic Theory* they become explosive.

Indeed, a survey of the secondary literature would bring to mind Habermas's remark that "Adorno has left philosophy with a chaotic landscape." Adorno's writings lend themselves to divergent appropriations. Yet it is precisely the unresolved tensions in Adorno's thought that make it interesting for philosophers of discourse. Our interest is not only what Adorno says about discourse but also how he says it. The most important topics to be considered are ones of style, logic, and method.

**Parataxis**

Commentators often describe the difficulties of Adorno's writings. Martin Jay begins by frankly admitting that Adorno "would have been appalled" at an attempt "to render his thought painlessly accessible to a wide audience." In a similar vein, Fredric Jameson asks:

What serious justification can be made for an attempt to summarize, simplify, make more accessible a work which insists relentlessly on the need for modern art and thought to be difficult, to guard their truth and freshness by the austere demands they make on the powers of concentration of their participants, by their refusal of all habitual response in their attempt to reawaken numb thinking and deadened perception to a raw, wholly unfamiliar real world?
Such descriptions help introduce readers to the subject matter at hand, which can hardly be considered easily comprehensible. There is no ready detour around the peculiar style of Adorno’s most important writings.

The most obvious obstacles for an English-language reader are matters of translation. Such obstacles are reported in the first of Adorno’s German books to appear in English. The title of the translator’s preface tells the story: “Translating the Untranslatable.” Samuel Weber says the concreteness of Adorno’s style has little in common with the immediacy expected of contemporary English. Instead Adorno’s concreteness has to do with “the density with which thought and articulation permeate each other.” This “density” comes from pregnant words such as Geist, Sache, Erkenntnis, Begriff, and Aufhebung for which English lacks equally meaningful terms. Also, in contrast to the dynamic potential of German sentence structure, contemporary English grammar “tabs long sentences as clumsy” and seeks “brevity and simplicity at all costs.”

Yet there may be a special reason why only two translators have tackled more than one work by Adorno. Apart from frequent allusions to various authors and events, the main reason for hesitation probably lies in Adorno’s unusual stylistic strategies. Adorno himself discusses these strategies and his reasons for employing them. Indeed, Gillian Rose asserts that “Adorno discussed his method and style in everything he wrote, often at the expense of discussing the ostensible subject of the piece.” Among the devices described by Rose are impersonal and passive constructions, parallactic formulations, chiasmatic structures, and ironic inversion. She suggests that all of these stylistic strategies reflect a concern “to achieve a style which will best intervene in society.”

According to a frequently quoted passage from Negative Dialectics, true philosophy resists paraphrasing (ND 44/33–34). By itself, this statement is less striking than some commentators have thought. Its point is borne out whenever one tries to summarize Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason or Heidegger’s Being and Time. Adorno’s next claim is more controversial. He says the fact that most philosophy can be paraphrased speaks against it. Whether most philosophy can be paraphrased is a moot point. The claim itself suggests something about Adorno’s own writing, however. His writing deliberately resists easy consumption. The need for powerful expression weighs heavier on Adorno than the desire for direct communication. Martin Jay is probably right; Adorno would have been appalled at attempts to render his
thought painlessly accessible.

No less important than resisting easy consumption, however, is Adorno's desire to achieve a fit between the form and content of his philosophy. This desire helps explain why his unusual strategies culminate in the thoroughly paratactical style of *Aesthetic Theory*. The editors quote Adorno as follows:

> My theorem that there is no philosophical "first thing" is coming back to haunt me. ... I cannot now proceed to construct a universe of reasoning in the usual orderly fashion. Instead I have to put together a whole from a series of partial complexes which are concentrically arranged and have the same weight and relevance. It is the constellation ... of these partial complexes which has to make sense. (AT 541/496)

The resulting text is neither a systematic treatise nor a collection of essays. At the same time it is neither haphazard nor disjointed. The text employs parataxis throughout: sentences, paragraphs, and entire chapters lie side by side without explicit coordination or subordination. Although this paratactical style defies traditional patterns of philosophical discourse, the movement from one sentence or paragraph or chapter to another seems carefully planned, and the topics of one chapter intersect those of other chapters. The text resembles a continually shifting kaleidoscope of topics and themes.

Adorno had definite philosophical reasons for writing in this manner, despite the problems it poses for both author and reader. His reasons are closely tied to his logic and method, which will be discussed later. The main reason has to do with the theorem he himself mentions. This theorem says that there is no first principle, no origin, no *arche* nor Archimedean point from which philosophy may proceed. Although the theorem operates in all Adorno's writings on philosophy after 1930, its first sustained elaboration occurs in his book on Husserl (1956). Thereafter one finds it continually reformulated, whether in programmatic articles such as "The Essay as Form" (1958), "Ohne Leitbild" (1960), "Why Philosophy?" (1962), and "Parataxis" (1964), or in his books on Hegel (1963) and *Negative Dialectics* (1966). In addition to being a clue to understanding Adorno's own writing, his opposition to first principles gives an early announcement of the opposition to logocentrism and foundationalism that unites many pragmatist, poststructuralist, and feminist philosophies of discourse.

Adorno's book on Husserl makes clear that his theorem serves a metacritique of "idealist" epistemology. The ultimate target of this metacritique is Heideggerian ontology. By "idealism" Adorno means the affirmation of an identity between subject and object. This affirmation assigns constitutive priority to the epistemic subject. In Adorno's
Contra-Diction

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judgment, idealism has been the dominant philosophy in capitalist society since Descartes. It continues in Husserl's struggle against idealism and in Heidegger's attempt to return to a Being prior to the split between subject and object. Idealism is the modern form of "first philosophy," of philosophy that assigns primacy to one original principle, whether this be the epistemic subject or primordial Being.

Adorno makes two claims against first philosophy. The first, derived from Kant and Hegel, is that anything taken as first or original is already second or derivative simply by virtue of its being taken that way in a humanly constructed philosophy. We cannot jump out of our epistemological skin. The second claim, derived from Nietzsche and Marx, is that every principle or structure elevated above the flux of appearances is inescapably historical. It is inescapably historical both because the principle comes to be elevated within the push and pull of ongoing philosophical debate and because the act of elevating occurs within the social conflicts informing the philosophy in question. Both claims can be summarized as follows: "The first and immediate is always, as a concept, mediated and thus not the first."

Because no first principle is first, and because every supposedly first principle is inescapably historical, Adorno refuses to proceed from any first principle. Because he insists that a philosophy's presentation must match its claims, Adorno continually searches for a style that does not suggest a hierarchical derivation from first principles. The paratactical style of Aesthetic Theory stands at the end of this search. The consistent employment of parataxis represents not only a deliberate attempt to jar and challenge the reader but also a stylistic strategy to oppose and avoid "first philosophy." Just as Schönberg undermined the tonal center without embracing chance as an organizational principle, so Adorno has found a way to defy traditional philosophical styles without becoming merely rhapsodic. Just as Schönberg's compositions call for new ways of listening, so Adornian texts demand a new way of reading, one which continually circles back upon itself.

Negative Dialectic

Adorno's opposition to first philosophy also affects the logic of his writings. By "logic" is meant not simply the patterns, principles, or categories of Adorno's arguments but rather all of these matters together with the substantive considerations behind them. "Negative dialectic," Adorno's own term, best indicates what we have in mind. Adorno's arguments are dialectical in the sense that they concentrate on unavoidable tensions between polar opposites whose opposition constitutes their unity and generates historical change. The dialectic is negative
in the sense that it refuses to affirm any underlying identity or final synthesis of polar opposites, even though Adorno continually points to the possibility of reconciliation. The main oppositions occur between the particular and the universal and between culture in a narrow sense and society as a whole.

For Adorno, the tension between the universal and the particular occurs both in philosophy and in the phenomena that philosophers interpret. Within philosophy a tension occurs between the need to employ universal concepts, on the one hand, and the desire to honor particular facts, on the other. The traditional ways to ease this tension have been through deduction or induction. Adorno thinks that neither approach does justice to conflicts among concepts, and that each overlooks important details. He sees dialectic as "an endeavour to overcome the rift between deduction and induction so prevalent in reified thought" (AT 510/471). Adorno's description of the essay as a genre summarizes the intentions of his dialectical discourse:

It is not unlogical; rather it obeys logical criteria in so far as the totality of its sentences must fit together coherently. ... The essay neither makes deductions from a principle nor does it draw conclusions from coherent individual observations. It co-ordinates elements, rather than subordinating them; and only the essence of its content, not the manner of its presentation, is commensurable with logical criteria. Adorno's writings try to maintain a circular movement between universal concepts and particular facts without turning concepts into mere generalities, without treating facts as mere examples, and without covering up tensions between concepts and facts. Substantive justification for a dialectical approach comes from the tension between universality and particularity within the phenomena to be interpreted. This is especially clear in Aesthetic Theory. According to Adorno, modern art has taken a "radically nominalistic position" (AT 521/480) that involves a widespread rejection of traditional forms and genres. The rejection touches even fundamental categories such as "art" and "the work of art." At the same time, however, modern art retains elements of universality. Anton Webern's compositions transform the traditional sonata form into miniature "nodal progressions" (AT 270/259-60). Indeed, "wherever art on its way to concreteness tries to eliminate the universal ... this negation preserves what it ostensibly eliminates" (AT 522/481). Artists and art critics cannot avoid using universal concepts such as "form" and "material," even though their meaning for modern art is far from clear (AT 507/468). Thus modern art calls for a philosophy that respects the particularity of artistic phenomena but illuminates the universal elements within art itself. Dialectical aesthetics tries to raise art's "unconscious interaction"
between universality and particularity "to the level of consciousness" (AT 270/259). It "deals with reciprocal relations between universal and particular where the universal is not imposed on the particular . . . but emerges from the dynamic of particularities themselves" (AT 521/481). If the refusal to impose prescriptive universals places Adorno in opposition to deduction, the emphasis on reciprocal relations places him in opposition to inductive approaches. Dialectical logic is his alternative.

Adorno's dialectical approach calls into play the opposition between culture and society mentioned earlier. According to Adorno, quantitative exchange is the dominant principle in contemporary society. Deductivist and inductivist approaches tend to ratify this principle, whether by subsuming qualitatively different phenomena under a universal norm or by treating them as unrelated atoms. Like modern art, Adorno's aesthetics pursues a "utopia of the particular" (AT 521/480) that places both of them in conflict with traditional logic and "exchange society." Yet Adorno also insists that modern art and his own philosophy belong to the social totality against which they struggle. It would be utopian in a bad sense to act as if the utopia of the particular has already arrived. A major task for Adorno's aesthetics is to show exactly how modern art and his own philosophy participate in the very society they oppose.

The key to this demonstration is the claim that the dialectic is not simply a cultural matter. The ongoing opposition between the universal and the particular is not simply a matter of philosophical argument. Nor is it simply a tension within art. Instead it permeates all of advanced capitalist society. In the words of _Negative Dialectics_, the dialectic is neither a purely conceptual method nor simply a real process nor a mere mishmash of argument and subject matter:

> To proceed dialectically means to think in contradictions, for the sake of the contradiction once experienced in the thing [Sache], and against that contradiction. A contradiction in reality, [the dialectic] is a contradiction against reality. (ND 148/144–45)

When Adorno speaks of "contradictions," he is not simply referring to logical incongruities that could be cleared up by more careful thought. Instead the reference is to unavoidable conflicts occurring in a historical society and being brought to consciousness by philosophy and art. The latter oppose the society to which they belong. Indeed, within culture itself an unavoidable conflict occurs between Adorno's own philosophy and modern art. This conflict is supposed to make us conscious of sociohistorical contradictions.

There are two obvious objections to such a construal of the dialectic. One is that by applying the same category of "contradiction" to so many distinct matters, Adorno has emptied it of any precise meaning.
The other objection is that he is subsuming qualitatively different phenomena under a universal norm, contrary to his own intent. After all, is not dialectical philosophy supposed to be “the consistent consciousness of nonidentity”? (ND 17/5)

Such objections take us one step further into his understanding of negative dialectic. He does not deny that “contradiction” postulates an underlying identity between philosophical concepts and sociohistorical reality. These “are of the same contradictory essence” (ND 58/48). Yet he insists that such identity must not be considered complete and irrevocable. Instead all “contradictions” are to be thought of in view of their possible resolution. Philosophical concepts, sociohistorical reality, and their common “essence” are all revocable. Dialectical logic is not the final word: “In view of the concrete possibility of utopia, dialectics is the ontology of the wrong state of things. A right state of things would be free of dialectics: neither a system nor a contradiction” (ND 22/11).

The emphasis on possible resolution sometimes prompts Adorno to suspend dialectical logic. These temporary suspensions are philosophical attempts to acknowledge the presence and possibility of what escapes the net of logic. Adorno attributes such attempts to the impact of Walter Benjamin, who has bequeathed “the obligation to think dialectically and undialectically at the same time” (MM, sec. 98, 171/152). Dialectical logic must sometimes be suspended on behalf of the “nonidentical.” There is a need to unite spontaneous experience and critical argumentation, even when experience threatens the consistency of an argument (ND 39–42/28–31).

Adorno’s models for such thinking come from certain works of art. Their unification of spontaneity and rigor seems to refract the light of possible reconciliation upon a contradictory world. When Adorno says “the paradoxes of aesthetics are those of its subject matter” (AT 113/107), however, he is telling only half the story. The other half is Adorno’s own “utopia of knowledge.” Adorno’s philosophy seeks to give thoughtful expression to the particular without subsuming it under rigid categories. Unlike Wittgenstein, Adorno wants to say what cannot be said (ND 21/9–10 and 114–16/108–10). Unlike Heidegger, Adorno does not want this attempt to slide into nonphilosophical sayings. Despite artistic models, Adorno’s thought does not purport to be artistic. It aims for the conceptual rigor of dialectical logic even while it suspends dialectical logic in order better to express what things would be like if freed of dialectic.

To think both dialectically and undialectically is a highly paradoxical endeavor. As a result, Adorno’s “contradictions” come across as ones that may or may not turn out to be contradictory. The central paradox of texts such as Aesthetic Theory is that their argumentation seems to
be both fundamentally contradictory and fundamentally paradoxical. Adorno's texts try to give shape to an overriding tension between real contradictions and possible reconciliation.

This central paradox puts critical interpreters in an awkward position. Normally a dialectical argument leaves one with two options. Either one can reject the formal and substantive premises of dialectical logic and determine which insights are worthwhile despite the rejected premises. Or one can accept the premises of dialectical logic and determine whether the argument is consistent with these premises and correct in its substance. Adorno pulls the rug from under either stance. To the hostile critic, Adorno can always say that his writings do not fully accept the premises of dialectical logic. To the sympathetic critic, Adorno can say that his arguments need not always be consistent with such premises. There is no graceful way to enter or leave Adorno's negative dialectic. Perhaps the best one can do is to grasp its substantive concerns, ask whether Adorno develops these concerns in a convincing manner, and consider what the central paradox does to Adorno's construal of his subject matter.

**Critical Phenomenology**

The methods of this construal can best be described as those of a "critical phenomenology" inspired by Hegel, Marx, and Nietzsche. By "methods" are meant the characteristic procedures of Adorno's research and of its presentation. In this sense Adorno's methods must be distinguished from his "methodology," his own reflections on proper procedures.

Some of these reflections suggest the absence of characteristic procedures in his philosophy. The essay on essays, for example, hints that Adorno's own work proceeds "methodically unmethodically." Similarly, the "Draft Introduction" in Aesthetic Theory questions the legitimacy of stating a general methodology for work in aesthetics:

A methodology in the ordinary sense of the term ... would fail to do justice to the relation between the aesthetic object and aesthetic thought. The only sound methodological imperative seems to be Goethe's: enter into works of art as you would into a chapel. ... Method is ... legitimated in its actual use, which is why it cannot be presupposed. (AT 530/489)

Yet such passages must be taken with a grain of salt. Not only might there be some characteristic procedures for "methodically unmethodical" work, but also Adorno himself recognizes that refusing to outline a general methodology "is to state some kind of methodology of one's
own" (AT 530/489). Besides, to claim that methods are legitimated in their actual use is philosophically insufficient. The "legitimate" use of a method does not in itself provide a philosophical rationale for that method. One still must determine what makes for legitimacy or illegitimacy in the use of methods.

The primary reason for Adorno's qualified "antimethodism" is also the primary reason for describing his methods as phenomenological, namely his devotion to the object as an object of investigation. The "Draft Introduction" rejects abstract methodologies because they emphasize methods at the expense of the objects for which methods are devised. Adorno's own methodological reflections usually occur within specific investigations of particular objects. Whereas Edmund Husserl called philosophy "back to the things themselves" only to write general studies on how to get there, Adorno takes the call so seriously that his methods seem embedded in the things themselves.

This embeddedness renders problematic an attempt such as Susan Buck-Morss's to isolate "negative dialectic" as a "method" and then present it "in action." Negative dialectic was never a mere method for Adorno, nor were his methods ones which could simply be "applied" as if they were indifferent to the subject matter at hand. He would have objected to the claim that his originality "lay not in the ... substance of his theoretical arguments, but in the way he put them together." He would have found puzzling an approach that depicts his philosophy as primarily a method and then objects because his "method ... became total."45

Nevertheless there are good reasons for trying, as Buck-Morss does, to abstract Adorno's methods from his texts. Otherwise Adorno's own "methodological imperative" could force one to suppress methodological questions until a specific investigation has proved unconvincing. It would be hard to raise general questions about his methods. This difficulty is compounded in Aesthetic Theory, as it is in Negative Dialectics. Neither book is simply about specific objects of investigation. Each book also addresses pertinent categories and criteria for philosophical inquiry, especially ones that are prominent in Adorno's own previous writings. At the same time Adorno engages in substantive analyses, whether of Heidegger, Kant, and Hegel in Negative Dialectics or of selected philosophical positions and artistic phenomena in Aesthetic Theory. The text continually shifts across various levels of inquiry. Without some general understanding of Adorno's methods, readers quickly lose their way.

Some clues for orientation come from Adorno's own methodological comments. These help one reconstruct the intentions of his phenomenology. Whether his texts fulfill his intentions is another question. Aesthetic Theory is particularly instructive in this regard. Adorno en-
visions an aesthetics that combines "production-oriented experience and philosophical reflection" (AT 498/460). Contemporary aesthetics must be as close to the phenomena as the working artist is, but it must have the conceptual energy to go beyond them without relying on a preconceived system. How can such an aesthetics be achieved? Adorno points to three methodological principles: to interpret art from a contemporary perspective, to historicize aesthetic norms, and to construct conceptual constellations. All three principles provide guidelines for a program of "determinate negation" in aesthetics.

Adorno's program of determinate negation comes from the Introduction to Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Adorno wants to carry out this program even more consistently than Hegel (Cf. MM 14–15/16; ME 12–15/3–6). Whether Adorno does is debatable. Less debatable, however, is the fact that he regards the "phenomenology of anti-spirit" (ND 349/356)—Marx's critique of capitalism—as a correction to Hegel's program. Moreover, Adorno thinks ideology has become all-pervasive and systemic in advanced capitalist society. Thus the context for Hegelian phenomenology has reversed itself. For Hegel, the true is the whole. Philosophy comprehends truth through determinate negation of partial truths. For Adorno, the current sociohistorical totality is the untrue. Philosophy criticizes society through determinate negation of cultural phenomena as partial untruths. Every part of contemporary society, even philosophy, becomes an untrue part of the whole.

Determinate negation à la Adorno uncovers the untruth of various cultural phenomena, shows this untruth to be that of society as a whole, and helps the phenomena refer beyond themselves to their possible truth in a transformed society. As part of an untrue totality, philosophy cannot presume to have an absolute knowledge of the truth. Because all parts can refer to their possible truth, however, neither philosophy nor any other part is wholly untrue. Determinate negation is not simply negative criticism. Determinate negation remains what it was for Hegel, namely a process of disclosing truth. Truth itself is seen as a historical process rather than a fixed criterion for the correctness of propositions.

Besides the shift in context, Adorno's program evidences another departure from Hegel. Whereas various epistemological positions undergo immanent criticism in Hegel's *Phenomenology*, Adorno suggests that art history proceeds in a similar fashion. The history of art is a process of determinate negation, with one work "criticizing" another and thereby suggesting larger issues of truth and falsity (AT 59–60/52).

This view of art history gives rise to Adorno's first methodological principle, the only one explicitly labeled in this way:
One methodological principle . . . is to try to shed light on all art from the perspective of the most recent artistic phenomena. . . . Just as, according to Valéry, the best features of the new correspond to an old need, so authentic modern works are criticisms of past ones. Aesthetics becomes normative by articulating these criticisms. . . . This kind of aesthetics would be able to deliver what aesthetics so far has only promised. (AT 533/492)

The principle of interpreting art from a contemporary perspective suggests both a retrospective and a prospective aesthetics. On the one hand, Adorno’s aesthetics has a retrospective character. The best way to understand extant phenomena, whether recent or not, is from the needs articulated when the best modern works establish themselves in an objective “context of problems” (AT 532/491). On the other hand, Adorno’s aesthetics has a prospective edge. Because the old needs remain, aesthetics must go beyond recent phenomena to consider what art could become in a society where those needs would be met (AT 533/491). Aesthetics becomes normative by articulating the process of determinate negation from a contemporary perspective, but authentic modern works are not completely normative for Adorno’s aesthetics. They themselves fall under a prospective light when he asks what the future holds for art, for society, and for currently definitive relationships between art and society.

To concentrate on modern art is in effect to question the norms of traditional aesthetics. From this comes Adorno’s second principle, namely to historicize aesthetic norms. Adorno says traditional norms have become outdated and irrelevant. More appropriate norms cannot be invented de novo, however: previous philosophies make possible the very project of writing a contemporary philosophical aesthetics. Instead we need to recapitulate in philosophy the sort of determinate negation that characterizes the history of art:

In an age of conflict between contemporary art and traditional aesthetics, a pertinent philosophical theory of art is compelled to conceptualize categories of perdition as categories of transition in determinate negation—to paraphrase a remark by Nietzsche. Modern aesthetics can take only one form, which is to foster the rational [motivierte] and concrete dissolution of conventional aesthetic categories. In so doing it releases a new truth content in these categories. (AT 507/468)

Much of Aesthetic Theory can be read as an attempt to release new and relevant meanings from traditional norms such as “beauty,” “expression,” and “meaning.”

Adorno’s historicizing does not assume that traditional norms never
had genuine validity. Nor does it imply that their validity is limited to the historical situations in which they arose. In both these negative ways Adorno differs from many historical relativists. He assumes that the norms of traditional aesthetics had genuine validity in their own day and can receive a new validity today. The principle of historicizing requires that traditional norms be tested and reformulated with an eye to the historical process that comes together in the current situation.

Adorno has three procedures, all closely related, for historicizing aesthetic norms: demonstrating their historical character, reconstructing philosophical debates, and confronting traditional concepts with the current situation. The first procedure is to show the transience and variability of traditional norms, especially ones such as Plato's "beauty" that have been regarded as timeless universals. Adorno's second historicizing procedure is to pit various philosophical positions against each other in such a way that they exercise mutual correction. From these reconstructed debates emerges a new understanding of central notions within each position. Adorno employs such notions in their newly emergent meanings. The third procedure, already implicit in the first two, is to confront traditional norms with an "historicophilosophical analysis" (geschichtsphilosophischen Analyse) of the situation of modern art. This confrontation "relates the dynamics of art and [of] conceptualization to each other" (AT 530/489).

These three procedures result in a complex reading of modern art. Adorno is not simply trying to interpret modern art from within, even though closeness to the phenomena is a programmatic concern. He is also building a conceptual environment with materials taken from various disciplines and prepared by his own previous writings in philosophy and the social sciences. Indeed, the third methodological principle at work in *Aesthetic Theory* is to construct conceptual constellations.

As Buck-Morss shows, Adorno's inspiration for constructing constellations probably came from Walter Benjamin. Yet Adorno's principle can also be considered a deliberate rewriting of a "central teaching" in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. According to Adorno, Hegel saw that the phenomena to be interpreted are mobile and internally mediated. When interpreting the phenomena, philosophers must keep their own concepts mobile and mediated. Adorno does not want to attribute the mobility and mediation of the phenomena to the conceptual work carried out by the philosopher. There is more to the phenomena than even the most flexible concepts can grasp. Against Hegel's glorification of the concept, Adorno has some sympathy with Husserlian phenomenology, which seeks to "intuit" the essence within particular phenomena.

Unlike Husserl, however, Adorno thinks of essences as intrinsically social and historical. They characterize a certain society at a certain
time, and they undergo development within society. In this respect Adorno's meaning is closer to Marx's concepts of "modes of production" and "objective tendencies" than either Hegel's or Husserl's concept of "essence." Adorno thinks of the essence within specific phenomena as a sedimented social prehistory and a possible social posthistory. Social history dwells both inside and outside a particular object. The object has become what it is within a larger sociohistorical process and in relationship to other objects, but this process and these relationships are intrinsic to the object's own identity.

The problem for such a conception is that historical phenomena resist conceptual definition, and that the concepts of specialized disciplines tend to suppress what is unique about particular objects. The constructing of conceptual constellations is a way of solving this problem. Adorno describes conceptual constellations as attempts to unlock the sociohistorical essence of particular phenomena without simply subsuming these under universal concepts. Conceptual constellations are also attempts to disclose what the phenomena could still become if the current direction of society were transformed, a disclosure that exceeds the scope of current concepts (ND 62–63/52–53 and 163–66/161–63). Only in relation to other concepts can a concept begin to approximate particular phenomena and their implicit social history. Constellations let concepts interrelate in such a way that both the sociohistorical essence of phenomena and their unique identities can emerge. A philosophical constellation provides conceptual mediations for mediations within the phenomena, but it refuses to equate conceptual and phenomenal mediations.

The conceptual constellations in Aesthetic Theory reflect Adorno's ambivalent attitudes toward Hegelian and Husserlian phenomenology. Hegel is praised for proposing the "programmatic idea" that "knowing is giving oneself over to a phenomenon rather than thinking about it from above" (AT 494/475), but his Lectures on Fine Art are criticized for imposing a "deductive system" on artistic phenomena (AT 524/484). Husserl is credited with proposing a fruitful method that is neither inductive nor deductive, but phenomenological aesthetics is criticized for coming up with an "essence of art" that "has little interpretive power" (AT 522/482). Instead of setting out on a wild goose chase for the original essence of art, Adorno proposes to think of artistic phenomena in "historical constellations": "No single isolated category captures the idea of art. Art is a syndrome in motion. Highly mediated in itself, art calls for intellectual mediation terminating in a concrete concept" (AT 523/482). Traditional attempts at defining art must be transformed into a dialectical phenomenology that delimits what art has come to be and suggests what art could become (AT 11–12/3).
In *Aesthetic Theory* concepts once used to define art, such as imitation, semblance, and form, become part of a complex net in which Adorno tries to catch the dynamic structure of art without killing it. At the same time the sociohistorical content of these concepts becomes evident, and each concept takes on new meaning in the context of the others. Similar observations could be made about Adorno’s approach to what analytic aestheticians might call “metacriticism”: the discussion of concepts of art criticism such as intention and meaning in Chapter 8, the “thoughts on a theory of the art work” in Chapter 9, and the examination of art historiographical terms such as genre and style in Chapter 11.

Just as Adorno’s paratactical style demands a circular reading, and just as negative dialectical logic requires a grasp of Adorno’s substantive concerns, so too his phenomenological methods force readers to consult their own experience of phenomena in contemporary society. There is hardly any other way to check the results of his modernist, historicizing, and constructive approach. Given the methodological intentions of *Aesthetic Theory*, for example, it will not do simply to attack Adorno’s apparent blindness toward non-Western art or even toward Western art from before the eighteenth century. Nor will it suffice to object that Adorno’s own norms are not timeless universals or that his concepts are not clearly defined. One must test the fruitfulness of Adorno’s methods for interpreting the phenomena in question.

The need to consult our own experience does not excuse arbitrary judgments, however. To function as a proving ground, our experience must be informed by philosophical reflections on contemporary phenomena, as Adorno himself recognizes (AT 513–20/473–79). At stake in our reading is neither simply the acceptability of Adorno’s approach nor merely the correctness of specific assertions. At stake is what Adorno would call the “truth-content” of his texts and, by implication, the truth-content of our own reading.

Perhaps a frustration with this interplay of experience and reflection helped prompt Habermas’s remark that Adorno offers only “ad hoc determinate negation.” To a system builder, Adorno’s negative dialectic and critical phenomenology can seem long on brilliant aphorisms and short on substantive theories. Even more telling, however, is Habermas’s claim that Adorno’s critique of modern rationality entangles itself in a “performativ contradiction.” Habermas describes Adorno’s critique of rationality as a “totalizing” critique: it is a critique of ideology that questions the basis of all ideology critique. According to Habermas, ideology critique normally tries to show that the theory being criticized conceals an inadmissible mixture of power and validity. In Horkheimer and Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, however, “reason itself is suspected of the baneful confusion of power and
validity claims, but still with the intent of enlightening.” The authors try to show that the pervasive instrumentalizing of reason in modern society assimilates reason to power and destroys its critical force. This demonstration is paradoxical, however, because “it still has to make use of the critique that has been declared dead.” Hence the critique of rationality does what it says cannot be done. Inherent in such a “totalizing critique” is a “performative contradiction,” one that Adorno consistently tries to carry out in Negative Dialectics and Aesthetic Theory.53

According to the canons of logic, Habermas’s objections are surely valid. There is an air of spontaneity and inconsistency about Adorno’s writings even when they are most carefully crafted. But this is not merely due to failures in logic. Adorno acknowledges the age-old claims of rhetoric, and he puts these claims into practice in a way that few philosophers have matched. Because of the unusual persuasive power of his writing, even obvious contradictions can force one to ask whether they are more than logical inconsistencies. Given Adorno’s suspicions about ordinary discourse and scientific language, one must admire the care with which he tries to avoid a different kind of performative contradiction: that between the saying and what gets said. The following passage illustrates such care, and it makes the central point:

Rhetoric represents what philosophy cannot conceive except in language. Rhetoric lives on in the postulates of presentation, by which philosophy distinguishes itself from mere communication of matters already established and known. ... Dialectic—literally, language as the organon of thought—would be an attempt to rescue the rhetorical moment in a critical fashion: to bring about a mutual approximation between subject matter and expression, to the point where the difference fades. ... Mediating the rhetorical with the formal logical moment, dialectic tries to master the dilemma of either arbitrary opinion or unimportant accuracy. But dialectic leans toward content as something open, not predetermined by some framework. ... Knowledge that wants content wants utopia. ... The inextinguishable color comes from what does not exist. This is what thought serves, a piece of existence that, no matter how negative, extends to what does not exist. Only what is utterly distant would finally be near; philosophy is the prism that catches its colors. (ND 65–66/55–57; my translation)

To understand Adorno’s philosophy of discourse, one must heed to the discourse of Adorno’s philosophy. In his writings, as in his life, neither philosophy nor art is lacking.
Notes


7. The most important books in this regard include Perry Anderson, *Considerations on Western Marxism* (London: NLB, 1976; Verso Edition, 1979), and *In the Tracks of Historical Materialism* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago, 1984); Alvin W. Gouldner, *The Two Marxisms: Contradictions and Anomalies in the Development of Theory* (New York: Seabury, 1980); Russell Jacoby,

8. Anderson, Considerations, p. 42. This assessment of the failure is partially corrected in Anderson’s Afterword (pp. 109–21), which points to some weaknesses in classical Marxism.


28. The main documents in this dispute are collected in Der Positivismusstreit in der deutschen Soziologie (Neuwied and Berlin: Hermann Luchterhand, 1969); trans. Glyn Adey and David Frisby as The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology (London: Heinemann, 1976). David Frisby’s “Introduction to the English Translation” (pp. ix–xlv) gives a helpful survey of the debate.


30. Negative Dialektik (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1966), 2d ed. (Suhrkamp,

31. Perhaps one should speak of a conference and a counterconference. The proceedings of the first, which was held in Frankfurt, are collected in Adorno-Konferenz 1983, ed. Ludwig von Friedebug and Jürgen Habermas (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1983). The proceedings of the second, which was held in Hamburg, are collected in Hamburger Adorno-Symposion, ed. Michael Löbig and Gerhard Schweppenhäuser (Lüneburg: Dietrich zu Klampen, 1984). Of particular interest in this second collection is the "Kritik der Frankfurter 'Adorno-Konferenz 1983'" (pp. 148— 69) coauthored by Christoph Türcke, Claudia Kálnasz, and Hans-Ernst Schiller.


34. Jay, Adorno, p. 11.


37. Rose, p. 12.

38. Ibid., p. 25.

39. "Ohne Leitbild" originated as a radio address and was first published in Neue Deutsche Hefte (1960); it was republished as the lead essay in the collection Ohne Leitbild. Parva Aesthetica (1967, 1968); it is now in GS 10.1: 291— 301. "Wozu noch Philosophie" also originated as a radio address; it was first published in Merkur in 1962; after being revised it became the lead essay in Eingriffe. Neun kritische Modelle (1963); now in GS 10.2: 459— 73. "Parataxis. Zur späten Lyrik Hölderlins" was presented to the annual conference of the Hölderlin-Gesellschaft in June 1963; an expanded version was published in Neue Rundschau (1964); it was reprinted in Noten zur Literatur, III (1965), and is now in GS 11: 447— 91.

40. ME 15— 16/7. Similar formulations occur throughout the writings of Adorno's last decade.

41. In this connection see Matthias Tichy, Theodor W. Adorno: Das Verhält nis von Allgemeinem und Besonderem in seiner Philosophie (Bonn: Bouvier Verlag Herbert Grundmann, 1977).


45. Buck-Morss, pp. 186, 190. For similar reasons Adorno would have questioned Gillian Rose's claim that "the philosophical and sociological principles which structure his criticism of philosophy, sociology, music and literature are always the same" (The Melancholy Science, p. 10).

46. MM, sec. 29, 55/50: "The whole is the untrue." Hegel's dictum was "The True is the whole."

47. The translation "to conceptualize categories of perdition as categories of transition" does not capture the sense of Adorno's "die untergehenden Kategorien als ubergehende zu denken." Perhaps a better translation would be "to conceptualize irrelevant categories as transitional categories"—i.e., as categories that participate in a necessary historical development and that can take on new meanings in the current situation.


