

# **Adorno's *Negative Dialectics* – or: The alliance of rationalism and empiricism against mysticism<sup>1</sup>**

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Adorno's *ND*<sup>2</sup>, especially in its Anglophone reception, has had a remarkably chequered history. If the old Latin proverb *habent sua fata libelli* – books have their fate – has not become hopelessly antiquated in this digitised world of ours, then surely it fits here. As a philosophical text steeped in a Continental tradition foreign to just about all of its English-speaking readers, unabashedly dismissive of the 'analytic' bent of the philosophical mainstream, hampered by a bad translation, the *ND* was, for many years, for the most part, unceremoniously shoved aside. Opaque, obscure, pessimistic, convoluted, hidebound, 'Germanic' – there was a great deal in this vein. If the enemies of the 'open society' wrote pretentious and obscure nonsense designed to rob good liberals of their good intentions, then here was proof for all the world to see – that was already the tenor of much coming from the Popper camp at the time of the Positivist Dispute.<sup>3</sup>

- 1 24 April 2007. For the subtitle I'm indebted to my respected friend Rolf Tiedemann: „Postscript“ in: *Theodor W. Adorno Vorlesung über Negative Dialektik*, Frankfurt 2003.
- 2 abbreviations used: *ND*: Negative Dialectics; *DA*: Dialectic of Enlightenment; *CT*: Critical Theory;
- 3 "... some of the famous leaders of German sociology ... are ... simply talking trivialities in high-sounding language ... „ Popper, quoted in Ernest Gellner (1983): "review of The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology", in *British J. for the Philosophy of Science*, 34, nr. 2, p. 173. Compared to what he was capable of in *The Open Society* that was remarkably tame: „... flat-headed, insipid, nauseating, illiterate charlatan, [Hegel] reached the pinnacle of audacity in scribbling together and dishing up the craziest mystifying nonsense. This nonsense has been noisily proclaimed as immortal wisdom by mercenary followers and readily accepted as such by all fools, who thus joined into as perfect a chorus of admiration as had ever been heard before. The extensive field of spiritual influence with which Hegel was furnished by those in power has enabled him to achieve the intellectual corruption of a whole generation.“ (p. 33) The quote is from

Such polemical tones were not just a spill-over from the Cold War. Even professional philosophers perfectly capable of studying the original were less than enamoured of a notion of a philosophical critique of philosophy – it must have seemed to many, as it still does today, as the sawing off of the very branch that we are sitting on. Leszek Kolakowsky, whose influential three-volume *Main Currents of Marxism* appeared in 1978, made short shift of this ‘anti-philosophical’ philosophy, this nascent ‘cultural Marxism’ as he saw it, and this seemed merely to confirm what Karl Popper had been warning about all along. The kindest thing that Kolakowsky could find to say about the book was that it had „an extremely intricate syntax“, but immediately spoiled this by adding darkly that this was „evidently intentional“, warning that it was in any case so brimful with „Hegelian and neo-Hegelian jargon“ as to make it unfit, so to speak, for human consumption. „The pretentious obscurity of style and the contempt that it shows for the reader might be endurable if the book were not also totally devoid of literary form.“<sup>4</sup> This did not augur well.

The role of Adorno’s erstwhile assistant in all of this did not help matters either. Habermas’ much more digestible twin publications *Knowledge and Human Interests* (1971) and *Theory and Practice* (1973) followed exactly that conventional dualism between ‘theory’ (in the sense of epistemology) and ‘practice’ (in the sense of a journalistic theorising about politics) which both the DA and the ND had sought with so much effort to overcome. If Habermas’ critique of the ND was based on premises that were entirely antithetical to those of Popper (not so much its putative Marxism being the bone of contention as the exact opposite: its supposed paucity in this department) it was, for all that, one more voice in that coalition of the indifferent and the hostile that would seal the book’s fate for decades to come.<sup>5</sup> The

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Schopenhauer, but the gusto and acclamation with which Popper brings to it are all his own.

- 4 Kolakowsky, op. cit., vol. 3, p. 357. „It is no more possible to summarize Adorno’s work than to describe the plot of an ‘anti-novel’ or the theme of an action painting.“
- 5 This tacit coalition of (not only Anglo-Saxon) scepticism („Most British philosophers had dismissed the dialectic as Teutonic-mystery-mongering...“ John Passmore, 1957, *A Hundred Years of Philosophy*, p. 76) and SDS agitation cast a shadow over Adorno’s last years – from a letter to Herbert Marcuse: „Ich müßte alles, was ich über die objektive Tendenz gedacht habe und weiß, verleugnen, wenn ich glauben wollte, daß die Protestbewegung der Studenten in Deutschland auch nur die geringste Aussicht hat, gesellschaftlich eingreifend zu wirken. Weil sie das aber nicht kann, ist ihre Wirkung fragwürdig in doppelter Hinsicht. Einmal in der, daß sie das in Deutschland ungeminderte faschistische Potential anheizt, ohne sich auch nur darum zu scheren; dann aber insofern, als sie in sich selbst Tendenzen ausbrütet, die – und auch darin

baton had been passed onto the ‘second’ generation – at least in the view of those who edited the journals and the sociology readers – and in that process the ‘first’ generation had quietly been consigned to ‘history’. The usual periodisation that one encounters in the literature – Habermas as both the ‘second-generation’ of and rightful heir to the Frankfurt School tradition, heroically overcoming the pessimism and bourgeois idealism of his predecessors – dates from this period.<sup>6</sup>

If one adds to all of this Adorno’s early death, the fragmentary and incomplete nature of the *Aesthetic Theory* – the companion volume to the *ND* which saw the light of (English-speaking) day only in 1997 – then it becomes explicable why, even now, more than 40 years after the German original of 1966, there is still no adequate translation of the *ND*. History, and especially the English-speaking philosophy departments, has passed it by.

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That’s more by way of introduction, and I don’t want to spend much more time on the reception of the *ND* – Wiggershaus, Claussen, Müller-Doohm cover this much more exhaustively than is possible here<sup>7</sup> – other than to point to the long-term effects this has had. To this day his

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dürften wir differieren – mit dem Faschismus unmittelbar konvergieren.“ (S. 440) (quoted in Kraushaar 1998: *Frankfurter Schule und Studentenbewegung*, vol. 2, p. 440.)

- 6 It culminated in an odd Adorno congress in 1983, in which the organisers, Habermas and Friedeburg, excluded the Adorno scholars from the program (including the editor of the collected works) with the peculiar argument that this had become necessary in order „to maintain the required distance“. („um den notwendigen Abstand zu gewährleisten.“) The indignantly ostracised had to hold their own congress in Hamburg a year later, not at all impressed by the „quarantine“ imposed upon them, as they pointedly complained, by the „arbitri elegantiae academicae“, the self-appointed arbiters of „open discourse free of domination“. „In the current climate of desperate and not so desperate opposition to Adorno his thought is like an exile that knows, come what may, that there is reason enough to trust in his own strength. The more the circumstances and its opponents seek to belittle it, the more this grows.“ (Hermann Schweppenhäuser, „Über einige Muster der Kritik an Adorno“ in: *Hamburger Adorno-Symposion*, 1984, Lüneburg.) One only needs to read, as parallel texts, the editor’s postscript to the new *Lectures on the Negative Dialectics* (in press) to the director of the IfS’ contribution to the *Cambridge Companion to Critical Theory* to see that this tension within the Frankfurt School between the followers, respectively, of Adorno and Habermas holds unabated in the one area in which it really matters: in the theory.
- 7 Rolf Wiggershaus 1994): *The Frankfurt School: its history, theories, and political significance*; Detlev Claussen: *Adorno* (in press); Stefan Müller-Doohm (2004): *Adorno: An Intellectual Biography*.

work has had a much greater impact in the arts and the social sciences than it has in philosophy.

But all is not lost, even now: a new translation of the *ND* is in preparation, the lecture-course accompanying the book has been published and is being translated, and the same holds for his lectures on *Metaphysics*, on *Kant*, on *Ontology and Dialectics*, and on *History and Freedom*<sup>8</sup>, and a lot else besides. From the spate of monographs over the last years one could even surmise that the reception of his work within philosophy itself, so very belated, has only now begun in earnest.<sup>9</sup> As the world darkens, we're going to be in need of someone capable of lighting up the gloom.<sup>10</sup>

Let me turn now to the book itself.

Non-identity, totality, reflection, negativity – the 'dialectic' between universality and particularity. These are the terms we need to address, containing so much that is foreign to mainstream philosophy to this day<sup>11</sup>. Since the whole question of 'dialectics' is one of the very few issues that is still capable of seriously dividing philosophers, anyone entering this area must know that this is mined territory. We must pick our way gingerly.

Let me cluster my comments under the three headings which Adorno himself jotted down for one of the lectures in the course which accompanied the writing of the book, namely the lecture of 11th November 1965:

„The dialectic becomes, as a result, essentially critical. In several senses:

- a) as critique of the claim which holds to the identity of concept and object
- b) as critique of the hypostatization of the intellect [Geist] contained therein. (Critique of Ideology) The strength of this thesis demands the most strenuous effort.
- c) as critique of the antagonistic reality and its inherent tendency towards self-destruction. This critique is directed also at dia[lectical] mat[erialism] inasmuch as

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- 8 T.W. Adorno (2000): *Metaphysics: concepts and problems*, Stanford U.P., Ed. Rolf Tiedemann; T.W. Adorno (2006): *History and Freedom: Lectures 1964-1965*. Ed. Rolf Tiedemann; T.W. Adorno: *Lectures on Negative dialectics* (in press).
  - 9 Yvonne Sheratt (2002): *Adorno's Positive Dialectic*; Deborah Cook (2004): *Adorno, Habermas, and the search for a Rational Society*; Brian O'Connor (2004): *Adorno's Negative Dialectic*, MIT Press.
  - 10 For some he's even become the „conscience of our political and aesthetic crisis“: Martin Morris (2001): *Rethinking the Communicative Turn – Adorno, Habermas, and the Problem of Communicative Freedom*, p. 5.
  - 11 Why this should be a 'cognitive utopia' (Deborah Cook, 2005, „From the Actual to the Possible: Nonidentity Thinking“ in: *Constellations*, 12, nr. 1.) or why the heavily pedantic tone („In contrast to both Sherratt and Bernstein, my view is based on a Marxist reading of *ND*.“ „... I shall argue that recent interpreters have largely ignored the speculative dimension of his [Adorno's] critical theory.“) is puzzling.

this presents itself in the guise of a positive science. Hence nega[tive] Dial[ectic] = relentless critique of everything existing.“<sup>12</sup>

Or, if one translates these themes into the kind of topics that are to be found in any modern Philosophy library: epistemology, logic metalogic and psychology, history and politics.<sup>13</sup>

## 1. Epistemology

Within the history of Western philosophy, or at least within the discipline which studies this, it has long been obvious that Kant and Hegel conceptualise truth, freedom and autonomy in ways that differ fundamentally from the route taken by Newton, Locke and Hume – that’s the real-world core to the otherwise not very illuminating ‘continental/analytic’ distinction.<sup>14</sup> Though both traditions take their point of departure from the Cartesian ‘cogito’ and its explicit dualism (*res cogitans*, *res extensa*) the way that each tradition carries this through, the details of the respective epistemologies differ radically – at least on this point there is agreement.

In the Newton-Locke-Hume tradition Cartesian dualism takes the form that scientific truth, the objectivity of knowledge, the enormous advances within the natural sciences, are treated as the proper and only realm in which questions of objectivity are to be meaningfully raised, dividing the world up into objective theories on the one hand, subjective values, tastes and opinions on the other. If it focuses increasingly, in the course of the 18th and 19th centuries, on the reconstruction of scientific theories, on the ‘logic of scientific discovery’, its model remained, in many ways, what it had been from Galileo through to Descartes: advances in knowledge and the mathematisation of nature, the subsumption of objects and processes under ever more general laws, the extension of the old hypothetico-deductive logic to ever newer fields, are regarded as going hand in hand.<sup>15</sup> To this day the idea of a ‘unified science’ of everything under the sun – and a cou-

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12 T.W. Adorno: preparatory notes for the lecture of 11.11.1965. translated from *Vorlesung über Negative Dialektik – Nachgelassene Schriften* Bd. 16, 2003.

13 There’s a post-modernist approach to the *ND*; there’s an analytic approach to the *ND*; there’s a Marxist approach to the *ND*; there is a philosophical (or purely epistemological) approach to the *ND*; there’s a historicising (or ‘history of ideas’) approach to the *ND*; there’s a psychological or psychoanalytical approach to the *ND*.

14 analytic/continental distinction.

15 Jonathan Israel (2001): *Radical Enlightenment – philosophy and the making of modernity, 1650-1750*.

ple of other places besides – exerts a powerful fascination, and not just in the natural sciences.<sup>16</sup>

From Hume’s analysis of the process of induction to Russell’s influential „On denotation“ 200 years later, epistemology in the ‘analytic’ mode not only concentrates on the cognitive aspect of the relationship between concepts and objects, but the very word itself – ‘analytic’ – invokes some very ancient habits of thought. For it implies that, for all the obvious problems that we get into by simply saying what we think, that there’s a ‘tie-up’ somewhere between concepts and objects that is sufficiently firm for us to be able to speak of an ‘adequacy’<sup>17</sup> or a ‘reflection’ between the two – an ‘adequacy’ that is substantial enough to give weight to our assertion when we claim that sentence ‘p’ is ‘true’. This truth of ‘p’ („the cat sat on the mat“) depends on one’s ability to substantiate that this is an adequately accurate description of a state of affairs that did indeed transpire, at a certain time, as claimed, and not just a figment of the imagination. No court of law could function without the confidence that, when the chips are down, the cognitive-descriptive aspect of many such sentences can be made plausible enough to convince even the most sceptical of juries. (Where it may be worth pointing out, as an anticipation of themes to be covered in a later paper, that even in examples as basic as this, our use of the predicate ‘true’ already presupposes two quite separate moments: not only the original sensory perception, but also: the intersubjective communicability, to at least one other subject, of what has now become a first-person report, to an uninvolved interlocutor – who now has this, quite literally, ‘on hearsay’.)

But the term ‘analytic’ has a second set of connotations, in addition to the strictly cognitive-sensory aspect just touched upon. The name of the school that once dwelt on this side of things – ‘logical atomism’ – says it explicitly: sense perception, in this tradition, is invoked not only as a basis for the ‘truth content’ of sentences that report objects and processes, but also, just as fundamentally, for the truth of logical-mathematical operations<sup>18</sup>. The

16 c.f.: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Unified\\_Science](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Unified_Science)

17 *adaequatio rei et intellectus*

18 In the famous *Tractatus* formulations, the statements themselves were meant as logical premises:

1 Die Welt ist alles, was der Fall ist.

1.1 Die Welt ist die Gesamtheit der Tatsachen, nicht der Dinge.

1.11 Die Welt ist durch die Tatsachen bestimmt, und dadurch, dass es alle Tatsachen sind.

1.12 Denn, die Gesamtheit der Tatsachen bestimmt, was der Fall ist und auch, was alles nicht der Fall ist.

intense research into the way that children learn to make logical, arithmetic, mathematical judgements, starting with the work of Jean Piaget in the fifties, confirms what every parent of a two-year-old will know: that there's something sensory about learning that 'two plus two equal four'. The 'Wesensschau' of Husserlian phenomenology and the latest findings concerning the cognitive operations of infants and young children<sup>19</sup> – however far removed in their respective 'frames of reference' they may be – have in common that they lend support to some rather basic intuitions that we all seem to have, probably going back to childhood, namely that 'two-ness' 'three-ness' is a quality of things, of what it is that we perceive, and not at all mental constructs that we merely project.

The tension between these two poles within epistemology, the empiricist and the rationalist, is very ancient, going all the way back to a well-known ambiguity in the Aristotelian notion of 'substance' – expressing, as it does, both sensory perception in the empiricist meaning and 'ideas' on the Platonic model, all at once. Not so different from our own notion of 'fact' today, for that matter.

It means, in other words, that we're dealing, in epistemology, not only with dualism in the Cartesian sense, in the sense of valorising the rationalist/empiricist aspects of knowledge at the expense of all other modes, but with an even older set of problems arising from difficulties in reconciling, within analytic philosophy, the rationalist/empiricist poles themselves<sup>20</sup> – what it was that had given Wittgenstein so much trouble in the *Tractatus*.

1.13 Die Tatsachen im logischen Raum sind die Welt.

1.2 Die Welt zerfällt in Tatsachen.

19 "the competent infant" – Spitz, Stone, Smith & Murphy, Dornes.

20 "There are two predominant conceptions arche, or proton, running through the whole history of philosophy. On one side is the idea that what is directly given, the immediate facts of consciousness, should be posited as primary; from the connections between them the subjectively orientated form of epistemology sought to construct the quintessence of that which is. On the other side, however, primary status is given to the pure concept, which always stands at the origin of rationalistic versions of epistemology. Epistemology has worn itself out trying to reconcile these two notions of the primary, which exclude each other, so that you might have reason to doubt the validity of the whole approach which posits some absolutely primary thing." Adorno: „lecture seven, 15 June 1965", *Metaphysics – Concepts and Problems*. This is much closer, at least as far as the recognition of what it is that needs to be explained is concerned, to Russell than the usual heavy emphasis on Adorno being a Hegelian would lead us to suspect: "It is ... important to discover whether there is any answer to Hume within the framework of a philosophy that is wholly or mainly empirical. If not, there is no intellectual difference between sanity and insanity. The lunatic who believes that he is a poached egg is to be condemned solely on the ground that he is in a minority, or rather – since we must not assume democracy – on the ground that the government does not agree with him"

Here then we have a first sense in which we could speak, with Adorno, of the „non-identity“ of ‘thought’ with its object, and also an alternate way of explaining the basic issues – this time not by recourse to Hegel, but to Russell and Wittgenstein. That gap that opens up between ‘subject’ and ‘object’ at any rate, between the empirical-cognitive and the logical-symbolic aspects of our notion of ‘facts’<sup>21</sup>, that Hegel had been the first to have thematised explicitly, is not quite that Teutonic conspiracy that so many of his detractors claim to have made out – it turns out to go all the way to ambiguities in Aristotle’s notion of ‘substance’. „Its name [dialectics – fvg] says to begin with nothing more than that objects do not vanish into their concept, that these end up in contradiction with the received norm of the *adaequatio*.“<sup>22</sup> This far, one could imagine both Russell and Wittgenstein nodding their agreement, that there is nothing unintelligible about this statement – or even unexceptional. That’s what epistemology is about: the problematic relationship of concepts and objects.

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(Russell 1946: 646). „The problem of induction by simple enumeration remains unsolved to this day...This situation is profoundly unsatisfactory“ (ibid: 529-530) To say that Adorno is coming from Hegel, Marx and Freud is not sufficient. Nor does it help all that much, the way that Martin Jay does, to concentrate on the relationship between Marxism and totality. One gets a lot further if one examines these separate, distinctly *different* conceptions of totality: within analytic philosophy, within Darwin and Darwinism, within Hegel, and within Freud.

- 21 Once the ‘objectiveness’ of the catness or matness of my perceptions are no longer tied to the postulate of the old Aristotelian identity of the concept-cat with the object-cat ( $A = A$ ), a chasm opens up between my concept-cat and the reality-cat, between ‘subject’ and ‘object’. From Kant onwards three-dimensionality, time and causality are no longer treated, as they are in Aristotelianism, as attributes of the object, but instead as a priori-conditions for the possibility of perception in general. Induction and denotation presuppose three-dimensionality, time and causality – in this sense, although it is not yet what Adorno means by this, from Kant onwards all thought is ‘non-identical with its object’. It is a typically Kantian argument to point out that in an ontological sense, ‘ultimately’, we can never know what a cat or a mat ‘really’ is, since both are dependent on categories, on cognitive structures, all the way to the neurophysiology of the brain, which lay down the conditions for the possibility of empirical observations altogether, without themselves ‘being’ empirical observations. If the concepts I use to describe the objects I see belong to the realm of a shared symbolic universe – as opposed to reflecting ‘idea-thing’-composites (‘substances’) on the Aristotelian model – then a gap opens up between subject and object, between the ‘für uns’ and the ‘an sich’, between the ‘in itself’ and the ‘for us’. From Hegel onwards the subjective world and the objective world as it were part company, each acquiring a history, and epistemology nudges into ‘universalgeschichte’. *The Phenomenology of Mind* is not just a description of individual mind moving towards consciousness and universality but also a recapitulation of the history of the species, of social evolution – at least in one sense of the term.

22 *ND*, 16.



So much for the first sense of ‘non-identity’, for the first of those sentences that Adorno jotted down for his lecture of 11.11.1965: „critique of the claim which holds to the identity of concept and object“.

What about the other two? ‘Non-identity’ in the sense of a „critique of the hypostatization of the intellect“, and ‘non-identity’ in the sense of a „critique of the antagonistic reality...“?

## 2. Logic and Psychology

To discuss this second and third meaning of ‘non-identity’ it is necessary to disentangle the term ‘identity’ itself.<sup>23</sup> In the history of Western Philosophy ‘identity’ has had three different meanings, and they are not always kept analytically distinct.<sup>24</sup>

- Identity in the *logical* sense:  $A=A$ . Tertium non datur, the law of the excluded middle. Logic, and a great deal of science, is hardly possible without a clear consensus on ‘what is what’, on definitions.  $A=A$ ; it stays that way, and is not the same as B. If modern physics has famously demonstrated that, at least at the sub-atomic level, in some very circumscribed situations, the laws of logic no longer hold, it merely underscores the general principle: no science without formal logic and clear definitions.
- Identity in the *psychological* sense. The shock of simultaneous recognition and estrangement that one feels when confronted by old family photographs – to invoke one of those experiences from everyday life that are the basis for so much in psychology – seem to go back to the kind of violations of the ego that first motivated Freud to postulate a structural model for the psyche. The ‘I’ looking at the photograph knows itself to be both ‘identical’ and

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23 "Das Wort Identität war in der Geschichte der neueren Philosophie mehrsinnig. Einmal designierte es die Einheit persönlichen Bewußtseins: daß ein Ich in all seinen Erfahrungen als dasselbe sich erhalte. Das meinte das Kantische ‘Ich denke, das alle meine Vorstellungen soll begleiten können’. Dann wieder sollte Identität das in allen vernunftbegabten Wesen gesetzlich Gleiche sein, Denken als logische Allgemeinheit; weiter die Sichselbstgleichheit eines jeglichen Denkgegenstandes, das einfache  $A = A$ . Schließlich, erkenntnistheoretisch: daß Subjekt und Objekt, wie immer auch vermittelt, zusammenfallen. Die beiden ersten Bedeutungsschichten werden auch von Kant keineswegs strikt auseinander gehalten. Das ist nicht Schuld eines laxen Sprachgebrauchs. Vielmehr bezeichnet Identität den Indifferenzpunkt des psychologischen und logischen Moments im Idealismus." (ND 145)

24 Habermas husserl quote: in the history of thought this confusion was not a confusion at all; it was constitutive for the emergence of ‘thought’. Inaugural lecture: x

‘non-identical’ with that child peering into a long-forgotten camera-lens; is forced to concede, for one vertiginous moment, what it is the very function of the ego to deny and obscure: its own contingency, its own temporality, its own mortality.<sup>25</sup> Under conditions of post-modernity – if by this term one means that thoroughly dissociating barrage of apocalyptic news, unassimilable information, impossible workplace demands that so many people are faced with in their daily lives – it becomes increasingly difficult to find convincing answers to the old Kantian questions: „who am I? where do I come from, where are we going? How am I to know what to do?“<sup>26</sup>

- Identity in the sense of Hegel’s *Universalgeschichte*; the history of the (our) species, the ‘real’ dialectic of subject and object in history, together with its putative ‘identity’ in modern, market-driven, capitalist society.<sup>27</sup>

If we look at these three meanings of identity, we see that Analytic Philosophy really only deals with the first: with the logical-semantic side of things.<sup>28</sup>

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25 Heidegger’s central theme in *Being and Time*.

26 Identity politics, the quest for ‘recognition’. i.e. this has both an individual component (thematized e.g. by Stephen Frosh, 1991, *Identity Crisis: modernity, psychoanalysis, and the Self*) as well as a collective aspect, as thematized in the ‘identity politics’ and the ‘quest for recognition’ literature: c.f. Fred Dallmayr (1997): „The Politics of Non-identity: Adorno, Postmodernism – and Edward Said“ in: *Political Theory*, 25, nr. 1, p. 33-56.

27 Bernstein: from Hegel’s causality of fate to the *DA*.

28 In Wittgenstein it would be worth probing why this is a matter of such pride: „Das Buch behandelt die philosophischen Probleme und zeigt – wie ich glaube – dass die Fragestellung dieser Probleme auf dem Missverständnis der Logik unserer Sprache beruht. Man könnte den ganzen Sinn des Buches etwa in die Worte fassen: Was sich überhaupt sagen lässt, lässt sich klar sagen; und wovon man nicht reden kann, darüber muss man schweigen.

Das Buch will also dem Denken eine Grenze ziehen, oder vielmehr – nicht dem Denken, sondern dem Ausdruck der Gedanken: Denn um dem Denken eine Grenze zu ziehen, müssten wir beide Seiten dieser Grenze denken können (wir müssten also denken können, was sich nicht denken lässt). Die Grenze wird also nur in der Sprache gezogen werden können und was jenseits der Grenze liegt, wird einfach Unsinn sein.“ (Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, introduction.) It may just have been this almost schoolbook paraphrase of Hegel’s critique of Kant that inspired Wellmer’s „Ludwig Wittgenstein: On the difficulties of receiving his philosophy and its relation to the Philosophy of Adorno“ in (ibid. 1998): *Endgames*.

Where then does this heavy insistence come from, in the *ND*, that philosophy should also be extended to psychology and history?<sup>29</sup>

Let me start by saying something about the first of these: the relation of Logic to ‘psycho’-logic, i.e. psychology. This too has a very venerable history in Epistemology. If the Kantian ‘answer’ to Hume’s scepticism had been to focus on the ‘a priori’ or innate aspects of cognition and the mind, then whence the skittishness, on the part of philosophers in general (and not just Adorno and the Frankfurt School) in the face of empirical psychology, right down to today’s cognitive science, with its penchant for turning epistemology into experimental psychology?<sup>30</sup> Is it just the prestige of being housed in the Old Quad that keeps the Philosophy Department from vacating the premises in favour of Neurophysiology and the brain-scan people?

In pondering these issues one could return to the critique of the ‘adaequatio’ in the *ND*. Critical Theory’s rejection of the ‘copy’ theory of truth is not just a polemic against ‘instrumental reason’, or again Science and Technology as Ideology, to use a book-title of Habermas. It is also a probing of the collective psychology involved in the original emergence, in classical Greece, of ‘theoria’, of the theoretical frame of mind itself. This is the distinction Kolakowsky is getting at when he says: „Hegel is not writing about the Mind, he is writing the Mind’s autobiography.“<sup>31</sup>

On reflecting on this aspect of the meaning the ‘non-identity of thought with its object’ we are approaching what in the *DA* is dealt with in the excursus on Odysseus (or Ulysses), and then in the *ND* is dealt with, in a much more condensed form, in the notion of mimesis.

The mind, the human psyche, has, as its most basic impulse – long before there is speech, rational thought, reason or a clearly demarcated sense of individuality – an intense drive to ‘identify’ with the ‘other’: during child-

29 One could surmise that it is this insistence, the reasons for it, that many of those socialised on the analytic side of the analytic/continental divide, even those sympathetic to ‘continental’ themes, find so hard to swallow: „Traditional logical positivism was committed to atomism – the view that reality can be fully depicted by a set of distinct facts, each separate from the others – to certain standards of clarity of linguistic usage, to the use of formal logic as a basic tool of philosophic analysis, and to the final grounding of all empirical knowledge in direct perception. The dialectical approach developed originally by Hegel and adopted by the members of the Frankfurt School rejects all of these commitments. They reject atomism and the view that all knowledge could be grounded in immediate sense perception because they believe that society is a historically constituted totality. What, however, about positivist standards of clarity and the role of logic?“ Raymond Geuss (2004): „Dialectics and the revolutionary impulse“, *Cambridge Companion to Critical Theory*, p. 122.

30 M.R. Bennett and P.M.S. Hacker (2003): *Philosophical Foundations of Neuroscience*.

31 Op. cit, vol. 1, p. 60.

hood with what the G.H. Mead called the ‘significant other’, later on with the latter’s derivatives, the ‘cosmos’, the ‘universe’, the totality of things. From the Freudian ‘oedipal triad’, the Lacanian ‘mirror phase’, the empirical psychologists’ ‘attachment theory’, to anthropology’s attempt to ‘place’ these species-specific ‘mimetic’ peculiarities that we have in a Darwinian-functionalist framework, there can be no doubt that the origin of ‘Mind’, the human psyche – the very basis for our thinking – has a real history that is a lot older than the origins of philosophy itself. This is the reason why, in the *ND*, ‘mimesis’ is treated as a constant – as a species-specific anthropological ‘universal’ – that underlies all forms of thought, even the most primitive and the chronologically most distant<sup>32</sup>, and even those forms of thought (art, music) that are quite antithetical to logical-discursive thought.

Mimesis and logic. The one an anthropological-emotional-psychological universal, the other a ‘thinking’, a mode of thought operating on the basis of symbols, of abstractions, and the rules that govern their interrelationship. The sentence „ $2+2=4$ ” represents a rule that needs to be learnt, and not a description of a state of affairs, not a ‘fact’, says the later Wittgenstein, the chastened one who had left that ‘ontology of the factual’ behind him on which the *Tractatus* had been premised.<sup>33</sup>

The idea that logic, thinking, thought itself should be, can be, based in its turn on something else, is of course thoroughly paradoxical. Thinking about thinking is after all also a thinking, whether we then call it meta-logic, speech-act theory, or dialectics.

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32 Bruffeaut... Benjamin...

33 From Wittgenstein’s extension of logic and mathematics into the area of language, to Quine’s attack on the distinction between analytic and empirical knowledge, to Austin, Searle’s and Pearce’s thematisation of the pragmatics of logic and language use – the theme they have in common is the rejection of ‘sense certainty’ as some kind of ‘ultimate’ foundation of knowledge. Quine’s rejection of the analytic/synthetic distinction (and hence the idea that there’s some special dignity about logic and analysis as opposed to moral/practical commitment) mirrors the Fichtean ‘das apriori ist das aposteriori’; i.e. it is the beginning of historicisation as a specific method of dealing with what was thought to be so problematic about Kantian dualism. The genetic element is added; or rather: ‘reflection’ enters upon the scene. Cats and mats are no longer, in the ancient Aristotelian manner, regarded as ‘essences’, ‘ideas’, as timeless universals which both ‘reflect’ the real world but are at the same time ‘beyond’ it. ‘Being’ – with the ambiguity of lying somewhere between ‘subject’ and ‘object’, partaking of both without a sharp divide. The word ‘cat’ is split off from the furry/purry animal thus denoted; the word becomes part of our (species-specific) penchant for communicating about everything.

Here, I can do no more than to name a few headings under which this has been discussed in the literature, and say a few words on each.

i) If the word ‘mimesis’ captures something so fundamental about human nature that it permeates everything we’ve ever thought and done, then it must have left traces in the historical record. Language, and especially the formal structure of language, would be the place to look for such possible traces of the various stages that societies, and hence also thought, have passed through at some point, on its – their – way to the present. Our psyche after all bears not only the imprint of our childhood experiences, (that’s how psychoanalysis after all works: by making these explicit) but also a much more ancient history, the basis for a kind of ‘phylogeny of the mind’. In the words of the DA:

„Men had to do fearful things to themselves before the self, the identical, purposive, and virile nature of man, was formed, and something of that recurs in every childhood. The strain of holding the I together adheres to the I in all stages; and the temptation to lose it has always been there with the blind determination to maintain it. The narcotic intoxication which permits the atonement of deathlike sleep for the euphoria in which the self is suspended, is one of the oldest social arrangements which mediate between self“preservation and selfdestruction „, an attempt of the self to survive itself. The dread of losing the self and of abrogating together with the self the barrier between oneself and other life, the fear of death and destruction, is intimately associated with a promise of happiness which threatened civilization in every moment.“

There is here, in other words, a theory of language which seeks, within the interstices of language itself, traces of that ‘other’ of reason that could lay bare elements of a non-violent, non-exploitative relationship towards nature and ourselves.<sup>34</sup>

That there are aspects here, in this ‘parallax view’ encompassing both anthropology and language, that anticipate the later, so-called ‘linguistic turn’ in CT, goes without saying.<sup>35</sup>

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34 alienation, Tiedemann: ‘constellative’ thinking.

35 The literature on the term mimesis in Adorno’s work is growing: c.f. Josef Früchtel (1986): *Mimesis: Konstellationen eines Zentralbegriffs bei Adorno*; „Mimesis als Lebensform und Theorieverhalten. Veröffentlichungen zum 100. Geburtstag von T.W. Adorno“ in: *Zeitschrift für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte*, 2004, vol. 56, nr. 4, p. 366-373. For the older literature c.f.: Erich Auerbach (1953): *Mimesis – The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*. (transl. W.R. Trask.) Princeton UP.

### 3. *History and Politics*

Let me now, before launching into the last part of this paper return to those lecture cues that Adorno had jotted down for his own use, on the occasion of that lecture of 11.11.1965. This time I'll read these sentences in the context in which they appear:

„With the dissolution of everything which is given, substantial, all ideologies become increasingly threadbare and abstract; observed amongst emigrants under pressure.

What is positive ... is in itself already true, i.e. the movement of the concept is arbitrarily arrested. Positivity as fetish i.e. what it is that is affirmed is not enquired after. For that very reason however it is the negative, i.e. that which is subject to critique.

It is this which in the end brought me to the conception and the terminology of a negative dialectic.

It is this now which holds for the society in its entirety: the totality of all negations becomes the positivity. 'Everything real is reasonable'<sup>36</sup>.

This no longer valid. Just as the positive presupposition of meaning is no longer possible without becoming mendacious (- who's prepared to venture, after Auschwitz, that life is meaningful!) so the theoretical construction of a positivity from the concrete embodiment of the negations is no longer possible.

2) The dialectic becomes, as a result, essentially critical. In several senses:

a) as critique of the claim which holds to the identity of concept and object

b) as critique of the hypostatization of the intellect contained therein. (Critique of Ideology) ...

c) as critique of the antagonistic reality and its inherent tendency towards self-destruction.

This critique is directed also at dia[lectical] mat[erialisms] inasmuch as this presents itself in the guise of a positive science. Hence negat[ive] Dial[ectic] = relentless critique of everything existing."

What I've done up until now is to explore, along the associative chain provided by the term 'non-identity', how this term could be made plausible with regard to points 'a' and 'b' in the above:

- firstly, within epistemology in the sense of a 'non-identity of concept and object', and secondly:

- within the critique of 'instrumental reason' as a 'mimetic' relationship with that which is lifeless and inhuman in 'outer nature'. (The 'non-identity' of instrumental reason with an unpacified outer and inner nature.)

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36 [Rolf Tiedemann:] Hegel's notorious sentence from the "Philosophy of Right".

What about the last of those points that Adorno had jotted down, the bit about the ‘non-identity’ of humanity and its own survival? Human history seems to be conceived here, at one and the same time, as objectively disastrous, and the ultimate ‘ground’ of a Critical Theory that has taken to heart, has ‘raised to consciousness’, what it was that was as inadequate in the idealism of ‘traditional theory’ as it was in the materialism of Marx.

There’s no doubt that this is the section that is the most contentious, that has been both the basis for Adorno’s growing reputation within Literature and the Arts (what, after all, would be left over of aesthetics without that mainstay of all reflection about the *conditio humana*: our mortality, the transitoriness of all earthly things?) and the basis for Habermas’ later rebellion, right through to his re-grounding CT on an entirely different set of assumptions.

In Adorno’s lecture cues this last point reads:

„dialectic ... as a critique of the antagonistic reality and its inherent tendency towards self-destruction“.

In the *ND* this is elaborated upon in the last section of the book: „World-Spirit and Natural History“, and the „Meditations on Metaphysics“. But let’s listen in for a few minutes to that lecture held by Adorno on 11th November 1965:

„Today, – in a situation which people experience, in their heart of hearts, as deeply ambivalent, a situation which at the same time is so overwhelming that they believe there’s nothing to be done about it (or perhaps because they really are, de facto, powerless against it) – there predominates, in the spirit of our epoch, something akin to the ideal of abstract positivity – in contradistinction to that abstract subjectivity or abstract negation which Hegel once criticized. An abstract positivity which will be familiar to all of you through the now rather dated but nevertheless still telling joke of [Erich] Kästner, who wrote in a poem: “Herr Kästner, what’s happened to the positive [side of things]? [In the sense of: whatever happened to your sunny and cheerful disposition?] I don’t want to deny that that which is really questionable about this notion of positivity is something I stumbled upon during the emigration, where people who were forced to conform under the most extreme situations of social duress, then – to be able to carry through this adaptation at all, to do what was coercively demanded of them – [tended to] say, encouragingly (and one really feels then, how much they need to identify with the aggressor<sup>37</sup>), yes, such-and-such, he or she, he’s really so positive ... When in fact what is really meant here is that an educated, discerning kind of person is required to roll up his/her sleeves and go and wash dishes – or carry out whatever other form of ostensibly useful societal labor was demanded there.

The more of that substance upon which consciousness itself depends disintegrates – the less there is, as it were, from which the ideologies can draw their sustenance –, the more abstract do all ideologies necessarily become. Amongst the Nazis it was still race, which nowadays not even the dumbest still takes seriously. It seems to me that at the next stage of regressive ideology it then simply becomes the positive in which people are supposed to believe – in the sense for instance in which one finds it expressed in the formulation, [to be found] in the marriage advertisements, of a „positive orientation to life“, where this is held up as something most especially praiseworthy.

... This is what the notion of positivity has turned into. Behind this is the belief that positivity is as such already something positive, without the question being raised at any point at all as to what it is that is being accepted there as the positive; and whether doing so is not simply based on the fallacy that that which exists (and which is positive in the sense of being staidly settled, extant) that this is clothed because of its ineluctability in the garb of the good, the lofty, the affirmative – all those attributes which are invoked by the word ‘positive’. There is here – if you will allow me to engage in a bit of extemporaneous metaphysics of language for a moment – something most significant and most interesting, in that in the notion of the positive itself there is contained this ambivalence. For positive means on the one hand that which is given, established, existent – in the sense for instance in which one speaks of Positivism as that philosophy which sticks to the facts. On the other hand positive is also supposed to be the affirmative, the good, in a certain sense: the ideal. And I would think that this semantic constellation of the word expresses something to be found in the minds of countless people in an extraordinarily precise way.

...

When I speak of negative dialectic then, it is not the least of what I have in mind that I want to distantiate myself in the clearest possible way from this fetishization of the positive as such – on the subject of which I am for that matter of the opinion that it has ideological consequences, which are related also to the progress of certain philosophical currents, which hardly anyone even dreams of. It must simply be asked what it is that is being affirmed – what is supposed to be affirmed and what is not to be affirmed – instead of the ‘yes’ in itself being elevated to a value, in the way in which this is already anticipated unfortunately in Nietzsche’s pathos of the affirmation of life.

... And for this reason then one could say, to put it dialectically, that it is exactly this positive demeanor which is essentially negative, which is subject to critique. That is the central idea, the essential motif, for the conception and the terminology of a negative dialectic.

...

It is precisely this point, i.e. this positivity of the dialectic as the totality of things (this idea that the rationality of the totality is discernable right down to the irrationality of its individual moments, and that for this reason the totality is supposed to be meaningful) that seems to me indeed now to have become untenable.

...

I don’t know if it is still defensible to say that after Auschwitz it is no longer pos-



sible to write poetry.<sup>38</sup> But that after Auschwitz one cannot seriously speak of a world in which that was possible, and in which the threat of a repetition in some other way looms daily, and in some comparable guise – I remind of Vietnam – is probably happening this very second, as being meaningful; i.e. to maintain that this world in which we live is supposed to be meaningful, that seems to me to express a cynicism and a frivolity which is, simply, in terms of pre-philosophical experience, no longer justifiable." [translation fvg]

Here then a core thesis, a last meaning of ‘non-identity’: the ‘non-identity’ of humanity’s ‘idea’ (what the word itself suggests, a humane world without war) and the empirical reality of the same. As long as the market mechanism, right through to its effects, via the mass media, on popular opinion, is not domesticated in some way, – its destructive results in so many areas of modern life tamed – then the disasters of the past will in one guise or other come to haunt us in future.

Let’s compare the above lecture version of this point to the form that it will take in the published book:

„Universal history is to be construed and denied. The assertion that an all“encompassing world“plan for the better manifests itself in history would be, after past catastrophes and in view of future ones, cynical. This however is not a reason to deny the unity which welds together the discontinuous, chaotically fragmented moments and phases of history, that of the control of nature, progressing into domination over human beings and ultimately over internalized nature. No universal history leads from savagery to humanity, but one indeed from the slingshot to the H“bomb. It culminates in the total threat of organized humanity against organized human beings, in the epitome of discontinuity. Hegel is thereby verified by the horror and stood on his head. If he transfigured the totality of historical suffering into the positivity of the self“realizing absolute, then the One and the whole, which to this day, with breathing“spells, keep rolling on, would teleologically be absolute suffering. History is the unity of continuity and discontinuity. Society preserves itself not in spite of its antagonism but through it; the profit“motive, and thereby the class relationship, are objectively the motor of the

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38 [Footnote by Rolf Tiedemann, from the original German version:] Adorno is referring here to what is probably the most well-known, if also the least understood, of the lines he ever wrote: „Even the most extreme awareness of impending 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.“ (*Prisms*, London, 1967, p. 34, translated by Samuel and Shierry Weber). On an interpretation of what Adorno meant with this dictum c.f. Rolf Tiedemann: „Nicht die Erste Philosophie sondern eine letzte“. Anmerkungen zum Denken Adorno’s, in: *Theodor W. Adorno, Ob nach Auschwitz noch sich leben lasse. Ein philosophisches Lesebuch*, Frankfurt am Main, 1997, p. 11 f.

process of production on which everyone's life depends and whose primacy has its vanishing"point in the death of all. This implies also what is reconciling in the irreconcilable; because it alone allows human beings to live, without it there would not even be the possibility of a different life. What historically created that possibility, can destroy it just as easily. The world"spirit, a worthy object of definition, could be defined as permanent catastrophe."<sup>39</sup>

Let me try to come to some kind of conclusion. The *ND* is becoming something of a monument in contemporary philosophy (and this will only increase in the years ahead, as the English-speaking world catches up with themes and experiences that were common currency in continental Europe after WWI) because it renews, with the most modern of sociological methods, the most ancient of the themes upon which the Western, Judeo-Christian tradition is based: that of demythologisation. Or to use the Kantian term for the same: 'critique'.

Doubtlessly the oldest of the strata available to us in the West in which one can document this – the Socratic dialogues in Classical Greece, the description of the destruction of the 'Golden Calf', the ban on 'graven images' in the Old Testament – already contained much of what Max Weber would one day seek to cover with his term 'rationalisation'<sup>40</sup>: greater control over 'outer nature', over 'inner nature', and a different, namely a law-based form of social integration. A step in the direction of that most momentous transformation of all that humanity has ever gone through – from a society under the spell of magic, ritual and superstition, to one that is governed by reason, law and ethics.

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39 *ND*, p. 315. (Redmond trans.) There are doubtlessly echoes here of Benjamin's Theses on History: x

40 For a detailed discussion of the theme of 'bilderverbot' – ban on 'graven images' – in the Jewish tradition and its influence especially on Horkheimer's conception of CT, c.f. Zvi Rosen (1996): „Max Horkheimer: Über die gesellschaftliche Rolle des Judentums“ in: *Mitteilungen*, vol 8, Institut für Sozialforschung. „In der jüdischen Religion, in der die Idee ... zur Vernichtung des Mythos sich steigert, bleibt das Band zwischen Namen und Sein anerkannt durch das Verbot, den Gottesnamen auszusprechen. Die jüdische Religion duldet kein Wort, das der Verzweiflung alles Sterblichen Trost gewährte. Hoffnung knüpft sie einzig ans Verbot, das Falsche als Gott anzurufen, das Endliche als Unendliche, die Lüge als Wahrheit ... Die bestimmte Negation verwirft die unvollkommenen Vorstellungen des Absoluten, die Götzen, nicht wie der Rigorismus, indem sie ihnen die Idee entgegenhält, der sie nicht genügen können. Dialektik offenbart vielmehr jedes Bild als Schrift. Sie lehrt aus seinen Zügen das Eingeständnis seiner Falschheit lesen, das ihm seine Macht entreißt und sie de Wahrheit zueignet.“ (p. 23)

But to understand the myths of today, according to Adorno and Horkheimer, to understand their dangerous effects, we need, above all, to understand how myths are produced.

What was foreshadowed in the culture industry chapter of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, written sixty-five years ago, has become reality – as has the prediction of the fusion of violence, obscenity, commercialisation and advertising. On the one hand the tendency towards dumbing down, the de-sublimation of libido and aggression, which, if the political conditions are appropriate, are always transformable into „the quality of organised brutality“. Something which one notices if one analyses how the media reporting about mega-events such as the terrorist attacks on 9/11 unfolded. Pictures such as these, which circle the globe within minutes, seen in ‘real-time’ by countless numbers of people, multiplying millionfold the raw, traumatising shock which soldiers had always been exposed to – but which had always been carefully shielded from the rest of the population. The rage and fear released by such images in the minds of billions within hours is historically unprecedented. It means that rational thought about political and economic relations is made impossible by that panic of the moment which, since time immemorial, it has been the very function of ‘theoria’ itself to deflect and detoxify. If the *ND* has done no more than make us ware of how these processes work, how ‘thought’ reacts to ‘reality’, then it will have done the only think that Philosophy today can, it seems, still usefully do: provide insight into the ‘objective’ contradictions that govern our lives.