

#### D. NEGATIVE DIALECTICS : ADORNO'S CRITICAL THEORY.

In his text Negative Dialectics Adorno points out that the self-determining identity of man and history, which Sartre defends against the one-sided abstraction of Engels' determinist concept of nature, has an immediate political function - to reinstate the project of individual freedom in the universal process of historical development. Sartre's position nevertheless results in an equally one-sided abstraction, since this historical process, which the later Marx had shown to be outside the control of any individual or social group, is reduced to the self-determining projects of other individuals. While it may appear that Sartre's historical anthropology does take account of an objective historical essence outside the individual project, evident in his notion of 'counter-finality', this determining universal is at once explained as a 'confrontation of projects', the inter-determining multiplicity of other groups or individuals each pursuing their own ends. In this way such objective historical conditions are themselves no more than the existential freedom exercised by other individual subjects. The individual subject and the determining universal which is history are thus identical in the one anthropological condition of freedom. The objective historical world, as Sartre presents it, is hence nothing but a facade, a mere 'stageprop' as Adorno calls it, for the individual project. By transposing objective historical conditions into the confrontation of individual projects, by isolating individuality as the sole substantial being, Sartre sets up a nominalist absolutism as equally one-sided as that absolutism which he otherwise denounces in the theories of orthodox Marxism.

Philosophically...the answer was too narrow; the thesis that individuality and individuals alone are the true reality was incompatible with Marx's Hegelian-trained theory of the law of value, which capitalism raises over the heads of men.

The dialectical transmission of the universal and the particular does not permit a theory that opts for the particular to overzealously treat the universal as a soap bubble. Such treatment would let the theory grasp neither the universal's pernicious supremacy in the status quo nor the idea of conditions which in giving individuals their due

would rid the universal of its wretched particularity.<sup>1</sup>

Adorno's argument is simply this: in upholding the idea of freedom inherent in individual existence as an ontological essence, Sartre attempts to preserve an identity whose very humanity has been shattered by the objective process of exchange prevalent in twentieth century capitalist society. In the contemporary world of monopoly capitalism, Adorno maintains, such freedom is a myth; an ideology nevertheless sustained within a process which otherwise denies the very possibility of its realisation. There is thus a certain irony in Sartre's position. In presenting the case for existential freedom as essential to the process of historical development, Sartre merely reinforces the illusion which helps this process maintain its mystifying determination of the individual social subject.

This irony is reflected in the very nature of Sartre's thinking. For the materialist philosophy which Sartre wishes to uphold is decisively undercut by the idealism inherent in the tautological freedom to choose an existence which is otherwise unavoidable. The ontical moment of individual existence has been transformed into an ontological essence - 'man' is hypostatized in the invariant historicity of need and its projected overcoming. Like Kant we are left with notion of individuality which cannot be explicated other than in terms of the universal conditions of individual experience. As a result of this ontological fixation thought remains locked in the subjective prison of its own constitutive absolutism. The existential principle of identity to which Sartre adheres is no more than the undisclosed identity of thought with what is otherwise supposed as heterogeneous to it. The antithesis between substance and method, between the notions of 'comprehension' and 'intellection', is no more than an immanent contradiction within thought itself. While Sartre nevertheless defends the irreducible difference between the concept and what the concept designates, this difference is radically undermined by thought's implicit refusal to critically reflect on its own constitutive role as an historically conditioned moment through which the otherwise apparent immediacy of existence has been posited. In other words, Sartre inadvertently cuts short the possibility, Adorno maintains, of any self-reflection on his ontological concept of existence.

The antithesis between Engels' determinist view of 'nature' and Sartre's self-determining state of 'existential freedom' is equally apparent

<sup>1</sup> T.W. Adorno, Negative Dialectics, trans. E. Ashton, New York, 1990, p.199.

in the relations between Sartre's nominalism and Heidegger's 'fundamental ontology'. Despite their obvious differences, the parallel we draw between Engels and Heidegger is evident in their common refusal to accept the conceptual mediation of what they assert to be an absolute Being.<sup>2</sup> Like Engels' 'Weltanschauung', Adorno argues, Heidegger's

...philosophy of Being fails as soon as it claims a sense in Being, a sense which its own testimony shows to have been dissolved by the thought to which Being itself, since its conception, is still attached as a conceptual reflection.<sup>3</sup>

In attempting to go beyond the subject-object dialectic of idealism, Heidegger's philosophy nevertheless remains dependent on what Heidegger refers to as the ontological difference between ontic entities and Being. What this difference amounts to, however, remains altogether indefinite; to specify this would mean a return to dialectical thought. Hence Being is what it is only in the indetermined exclusion of the ontical from itself. The tautology we are left with hypostatizes Being in the ontological form of its own indeterminate absoluteness. As Adorno puts it,

The ontological difference is removed by means of a conceptualisation of the nonconceptual into nonconceptuality.<sup>4</sup>

The otherwise dialectical relationship between the concept and the nonconceptual other are, with Heidegger, merely attributed to 'Dasein' as two aspects of its being. Their undisclosed contradiction, Adorno continues, is now covered over in the higher dignity accorded that positive Being which ironically takes on the same ontic qualities of those existent entities otherwise excluded from it. In other words, the transcendent concept of Being suppresses contradiction in the conclusive totality which deifies the noumenal moment of Kant's empiricism.

The doctrine of Being turns ideological as it imperceptibly spiritualizes the materialist moment in thought by transposing it into pure functionality beyond all entity....The word that was to name

<sup>2</sup> While Adorno notes the 'distant reverberation' of Marx's materialism in Heidegger's notion of Being (Negative Dialectics, p.200), the explicit denial of conceptual mediation in this ontological entity would seem more appropriately related to Engels' view of Nature.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, p.98.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, p.117.

truth against ideology comes to be the most untrue:  
the denial of ideality becomes the proclamation  
of an ideal sphere.<sup>5</sup>

Like Engels, Heidegger's attempt to demythologize the Hegelian Idea results in nothing but the reassertion of a mythical cult of Being; or what is no different, a glorification of the blind fatality of nature.

What is philosophically at stake in Adorno's concept of negative dialectics is how thought may think the difference between itself and the indissoluble 'something' on which thought's very presence depends, without falling prey to the idealist suppression of the one or the other in an ontological absolute. Idealism, whatever its form, Adorno argues, invariably supports the principle of identity; an identity which either openly or implicitly raises the concept to the status of an absolute. Hence a critique of idealism is no less a critique of the spiritualized coercion of the nonidentical other through the primacy of the concept and its formal principle of identity. In the social sphere such coercion is evident in the universal law of value revealed by Marx. Here, as we remember, the concept of abstract labour is that mechanism through which the different commodities produced by different individuals are exchanged as equal. The alienating inequality which persists in the relations of production, arising from the capitalists' appropriation of the workers' surplus labour time, nevertheless demonstrates the difference underlying the apparent equality of exchange; and hence the contradiction inherent in this identity. The principle of equality upheld in the relations of exchange nevertheless serves as an ideological formula for social domination through individual self-adjustment to the demands of the universal market economy. In concurring with Marx's critique of the fetish of identity manifest in the exchange of commodities, Adorno does not advocate an outright rejection of identity. He does not advocate thereby a return to indiscriminate difference, where the irrational practices of privilege and power would continue in even more barbaric fashion. Like Marx, the critique which Adorno proposes is more precisely an attempt '...to realise the ideal of free and just barter'<sup>6</sup>. Only by demonstrating the contradiction inherent in the principle of identity, he contends, will there be a release from the ideological coercion pertaining to it. In other words, only by exposing the mystifying form of the concept's predilection for identity will the possibility of social

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*, p.200.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*, p.147.

reconciliation and freedom be sustained.

Hegel too had recognized the contradictory nature of thought's relation to its nonidentical object, and made it the dynamic principle of his system of knowledge.

As the concept is experienced as nonidentical, as inwardly in motion, it is no longer purely itself; in Hegel's terminology it leads to its otherness without absorbing that otherness. It is defined by that which is outside it, because on its own, it does not exhaust itself. As itself it is not itself alone.<sup>7</sup>

Nevertheless it is the resolution of this contradiction which Hegel sets out to substantiate. He does this by exploiting the precedence of the conceiving subject which defines the particularity of the nonidentical object in the universal form of the concept. What is not the concept is transformed through this mediation into that which it is not, namely the concept of its otherness. In other words, the qualitative difference of the nonidentical other is subsumed in the very conceptualisation of its otherness. The ontical is ontologized in the formal predication of its particularity.

This is precisely what reduces the dialectics of nonidentity and identity to a mere semblance: identity wins over nonidentity.<sup>8</sup>

What is nonidentical has been raised to the status of a concept; the particular has been universalized and thereby made identical with the concept. In this way knowledge of the nonidentical other, with Hegel, is nothing but thought's self-confirming concept of itself as thought. By way of illustration Adorno refers to the dialectic of Being and Nothing with which Hegel opens his Logic. Here, as we remember, the indetermined immediacy of Being goes over, as a consequence of this very indeterminedness, into what it is not, namely Nothing. The indeterminedness of Being, now Nothing, is nevertheless the thought of Nothing, and for this reason, Hegel argues, it too becomes what it is not, namely Being. What vanishes in the indeterminedness of Being, in the concept of Nothing which returns into Being, Adorno maintains, is that nonconceptual other of which Being is the concept. While Hegel is only too aware of the difference between the concept and what it is not, nevertheless through an ontological sleight-of-hand, Adorno contends, Hegel disguises

<sup>7</sup> ibid., p.157.

<sup>8</sup> ibid., p.173.

this other in a conceptual cloak for the sake of absolute identity. The synthesis which Hegel achieves, Adorno argues, is but the tautological circularity of a movement which never leaves its point of origin. Hegel's purported Becoming is more properly the still point of what already is, namely the concept of Being. The closed totality of Hegel's system, already reflected in this opening development, reduces Becoming to a timeless eternity. The difference between the concept and its nonidentical other is voided, Adorno continues, in Hegel's mystified subjection to the synthetic principle of positive unity. His presupposition of affirmative identity hypostatizes the function of conceptual mediation as the only possible mediation of subject and object. Hence, Adorno insists,

...Hegel fails to do justice to his own insight. The insight says that even though the nonidentical is identical - as self-transmitted - it is nonetheless nonidentical: it is otherness to all its identifications. Hegel does not carry the dialectics of nonidentity to the end...<sup>9</sup>

The logical primacy of the conceiving subject, which characterizes idealism, prevents Hegel from doing otherwise.

In order to break through what Adorno calls the conceptual spell, the fetish of synthetic affirmation, it will be necessary to show, by way of that very conceptual immanence, how the concept is itself mediated by the nonidentical other. It will be necessary, that is, to reverse the 'subjective reduction' of the nonidentical object. The possibility of such a reversal, Adorno argues, is evident in Hegel's sublation of the empirical subject in the absolute Subject which transcends it. For in this sublation the absolute Subject appropriates that very immediacy or being-in-itself of the object presupposed by the empirical subject. The positive identity which characterizes Hegel's constituting Absolute is hence no more than the tautological reflection of that apparent being-in-itself, the nonidentical other otherwise ontologically negated. Similarly the spontaneity which characterizes the empirical subject, while suppressed by the absolute determinism of universal Spirit, reappears as the qualitative ground of Spirit's own self-determining character. Furthermore, with the external manifestation of Spirit in the constitutional legality of the Prussian monarch, Spirit takes on the contingent character of the individual monarch's will; a contingency which in principle has otherwise been

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<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*, p.120.

negated. Not only is the particular universalized by the constituting subject, but the universal is particularized in its own supposed immediacy and spontaneity. In this way Hegel's Absolute reveals an immanent, yet unacknowledged determination by that nonidentical other, otherwise thought to be integrated within it. Hence, maintains Adorno,

The inherent reversibility of the identity thesis counteracts the principle of its spirit. If entity can be totally derived from that spirit, the spirit is doomed to resemble the mere entity it means to contradict; otherwise, spirit and entity would not go together.<sup>10</sup>

There is further evidence of this reversibility in Hegel's qualification of the world Spirit as a 'second nature'<sup>11</sup>. Having negated the accidental, contingent form of nature as the inessential moment in the self-determining history of the world as Spirit, Hegel reinstates this inessentiality as the very necessary character of Spirit's 'natural growth'. The absolute form of Hegel's concept of Spirit, Adorno argues, indicates an inability to reflect upon its own transmission or mediation by that entity which constitutes its very condition of possibility. Indeed, continues Adorno, the universal functional nature of Hegel's Absolute, characterized by the Aristotelian category of 'pure activity', is nothing but the reflection of a society which remains unconscious of its determination by the functional context of the universal law of commodity exchange.

...insofar as the unity of consciousness is modelled after objectivity - that is to say, insofar as it is measured by the possibility of constituting objects - it is the conceptual reflex of the total, seamless juncture of the productive acts in society which the objectivity of goods, their 'object character', requires if it is to come about at all.<sup>12</sup>

The predominance of the constituting subject revered by the Hegelian Spirit is but the unconscious imitation of its very negation, the determining force of the socio-historic process. In styling itself after the social substance of historical necessity and truth, the Hegelian world Spirit thereby makes an abstract legal claim to self-preservation in face of the species otherwise

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*, p.142.

<sup>11</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, trans. T. Knox, Oxford, 1969, p.20.

<sup>12</sup> Adorno, *op.cit.*, p.179.

continued subjection to the natural forces outside it. In other words, the self-determining omnipotence exercised by the Hegelian Subject is nothing short of an ideological disguise for humanity's very real powerlessness over the historical process which determines it. The positive identity of nature and history which Hegel defends is more precisely the inverted reflection of their still persistent antithesis.

In the midst of history, Hegel sides with its  
immutable element, with the ever-same identity  
of the process whose totality is said to bring  
salvation. Quite unmetaphorically, he can be  
charged with mythologizing history.<sup>13</sup>

The more Spirit glorifies its own omnipotence the more it attests to the truth of its own subreption. For Spirit is merely a moment in that which it otherwise claims to control.

The purpose of reversing the 'subjective reduction', of unveiling the implicit mediation of Hegel's concept of Spirit by that which Spirit itself claims to master, Adorno points out, is not to raise the nonidentical object or facticity to the all determining status previously held by the concept. This would simply perpetuate the fetish of identity evident in the work of Engels, Heidegger, and Sartre. Moreover, as Adorno has already indicated, in transferring the constituting principle to an absolute natural or ontological form, such matter is itself implicitly determined by that thought which posits its otherwise supposedly unmediated existence. In nevertheless defending what he calls the 'preponderance' of the object, the indissolubility of that something in thought, Adorno does not thereby assert that the object remains unmediated by a conceiving subject. On the contrary, it is just this mediation which indicates something beyond the subject's phenomenological grasp; something radically other which, despite the subject's mediating role, remains nonidentical to this subject. Furthermore, what is subjective implies a relation to itself as object, as something other than thought, something upon which thinking depends and which cannot be transcended by the mere act of thought. In the same way, Adorno argues, the indirect transmission or mediation of what is directly given retains its significance only in respect of what it is not, the immediate something.

...the concept of immediacy, points to that which  
cannot be removed by its own concept. Mediation

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<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*, p.357.

makes no claim whatever to exhaust all things; it postulates, rather, that what it transmits is not thereby exhausted.<sup>14</sup>

Hume too had attempted to give expression to the object's preponderance in his critique of the self-sufficient Cartesian 'cogito'. In attempting to present empirical data devoid of the mediating form of subjective reflection, empiricism and the epistemological tradition to which it gave rise, nevertheless impose a subjective form upon such being. For what is given to thought as immediate does not involve a direct revelation of truth, where the subject mistakenly supposes its role to be that of a passive mirror reflection. The object of cognition, generally referred to by epistemology as the fact of bodily sensations, immediately reduces the somatic moment, which it otherwise claims to reveal, to its own conceptual presentation. The expression of what is physically other than thought is but a reconstruction within thought of its own conceptual presuppositions.

Sensation, the crux of epistemology, needs epistemology to reinterpret it into a fact of consciousness, in contradiction to its own full character - which, after all, is to serve as authority for its cognition.<sup>15</sup>

Kant, having understood this, continues to insist on the object's preponderance, for without the 'thing-in-itself', he argues, thought would be nothing but tautological reflection. Nevertheless, as Adorno points out, the mediation of phenomena by noumenal objects is finally explained through the subject's own constituting category of causality. In order to avoid the seemingly inescapable conceptual reduction of the object, what is needed is not so much an even greater passivity on the part of the observing subject, Adorno argues, but a more searching reflection by thought on its own mediating role. Neither will this involve an ideological correction of reified consciousness with the implicit restitution of thought's absolute predominance over matter. For the hostility to the object's irreducible otherness, inherent in this instrumental functionalism, also fails, by its very antagonism, to realise the unalienated identity of subject and object which is its goal.

What is in question here is the very notion of rationality. The

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<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*, p.172.

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*, p.193.

traditionally accepted form of rationality since Plato, although Plato, Adorno notes, cautions against this in certain passages from the *Phaedrus*, has been one based on the model of mathematics. A model which measures the object exclusively in terms of pre-defined units of conceptual meaning. The claim to rational objectivity has been made altogether dependent on the 'scientific method', on the primacy given to conceptual quantification and its hierarchic, deductive function. With this propensity for conceptual definition as its point of departure, the conceiving subject has itself been reduced to a repository of logical categories through which the object is made to measure. While Hegel recognizes the qualitative moment underlying conceptual quantification, the dialectic he propounds, despite his claims to the contrary, Adorno argues, reveals an ultimate dependence on formal mathematical principles. For the identity of identity and difference is no more than the mathematical formula which realises a positive result from the multiplication of two negatives. Adorno points out, however, that the very capacity for conceptual synthesis is rendered inoperable if such synthesis does not already exclude from its particular moments that which it will then inconsistently attribute to its result. In abstracting thus from the qualitative aspects of the subject/object relation Hegel does violence not only to the particularity of the individual subject and object, but thereby undermines Spirit's claim to absolute truth and rational reason. For the lack of self-reflection on its own conclusive finality demonstrates the method's qualitative unreason. The truth of philosophical reflection, Adorno argues, has been maligned with its mystified devotion to the 'quantification' of meaning so evident in the culture of scientific rationalism.

The principles of Adorno's materialist critique, which seeks to undo the explicit or otherwise implicit supremacy of the constituting concept, nevertheless remain inextricably bound to those of idealist philosophy. For as Adorno indicates,

A basic philosophy...necessarily carries with it the  
primacy of the concept; whatever withholds itself  
from the concept is departing from the form of  
allegedly basic philosophizing.<sup>16</sup>

From the more orthodox materialist or existentialist perspective, Adorno's critique of idealism appears flawed by the primacy accorded the concept, by the apparent contradiction in its own conception. Equally the

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<sup>16</sup> *ibid.*, p.136.

presentation in thought of what is claimed to determine thought from a position outside thought will be persistently accused by idealism as transcendent dogma. Adorno, however, draws a distinction between the necessary mediation by the concept of what it is not, and the untenable hierarchy, established on these grounds, of the concept over the nonidentical other. Adorno states,

It is one thing for our thought to close itself under compulsion of the form which nothing can escape from, to comply in principle, so as immanently to deny the conclusive structure claimed by traditional philosophy; and it is quite another thing for thought to urge that conclusive structure on its own, with the intent of making itself 'the first'.<sup>17</sup>

In this way the limit of Adorno's critique is revealed as that very conceptual form whose dominance he otherwise seeks to undermine. The concept, however, is no longer considered to be that which determines its own meaning through an act of pure self-reflection. The concept's meaning is conveyed more essentially, Adorno argues, through its determination by the nonidentical other. For without the object's determining otherness, the subject would have no basis on which to postulate its own subjective form as that which thinks the object. In other words, neither the concept nor the nonidentical object may be ontologically construed as an 'absolute first', for they both act as the negative constituting principle of the other. Neither is this dualism, Adorno insists, to be maintained as some sort of ultimate principle, in which case, like Hegel, it devolves into a transcendental identity.

Mediation of the object means that it must not be statically, dogmatically hypostatized but can be known only as it entwines with subjectivity; mediation of the subject means that without the moment of objectivity it would be totally nil.<sup>18</sup>

In refusing to acknowledge this determination of the concept, the concept becomes reified as ideological dogma. Only through critical self-reflection on its own meaning, Adorno maintains, will the concept escape the tautological vacuum of its apparent being-in-itself.

Insight into the constitutive character of the non-

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<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*, p.147.

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.*, p.186.

conceptual in the concept would end the compulsive identification which the concept brings unless halted by such reflection. Reflection upon its own meaning is the way out of the concept's seeming being-in-itself as a unit of meaning.<sup>19</sup>

Such insight implies the possibility of presenting the subject's experience of the object in an altogether new configuration beyond the magic circle of subjectively constituted identity, beyond a rationality unable to reflect upon its own conclusive absoluteness. Instead of the object being made to conform to certain a priori conceptual categories, as idealism and the scientific tradition would have it, where the subject too is reduced to '...a purely logical universal without qualities'<sup>20</sup>, the undistorted experience of the object is revealed, Adorno argues, only in the subject's ability to discriminate between the conceptual form of an object and that object as it exists outside this phenomenological representation.

This discriminating experience is made up of two mutually exclusive and yet inseparable moments. Adorno refers to the first aspect of this experience as the subject's mimetic reaction towards an object with which it forms a certain affinity. Within the medium of discursive practice this spontaneous impulse consists in an imitative linguistic response determined by the sensuous qualities of the object itself. Within the context of non-discursive practices, this response may take expression through shapes and images, instrumental sound, or rhythmic body movements. The mimetic impulse, however, is not simply imitative, it does not present a mirror image, an exact representation of the object, for the latter is also transformed in that very medium which gives it expression. A translation, for example, while imitating the original, at once transforms that text into something other; just as the performance of a musical composition, while copying that score, nevertheless transforms it into a composition of sound. Hence the mimetic reaction does not achieve identity with the object which the empirical and rationalist subjects otherwise suppose in the represented phenomenological appearance of that object. The mimetic subject, while assimilating the object through its own spontaneous expression, does not thereby reduce the object to a simple being-for-consciousness. While implicating the hope of identity, of a non-alienated relation to the object, the mimetic impulse is at once indicative of the nonidentity between itself

<sup>19</sup> *ibid.*, p.12.

<sup>20</sup> *ibid.*, p.44.

and that which determines it. Mimesis is hence nothing short of a qualitative leap beyond and yet within the principle of identity. A leap, which in relinquishing the mock supremacy of the conceiving subject, at once revives the expressive spontaneity of this same subject from within the repressive enclosure of its former presuppositions. In Adorno's words, the notion of mimetic reaction thus '...use(s) the strength of the subject to break through the fallacy of constitutive subjectivity.'<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless Adorno warns against hypostatizing the subjective leap itself for which he admonishes both Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. The critical force of their spontaneity is thereby absorbed in the dominant ideology as further support for the contemporary myth of individual freedom. For this reason, argues Adorno,

...the modes of subjective reaction which the object needs require ceaseless objective correction in their turn. This occurs in self-reflection, in the ferment of mental experience.<sup>22</sup>

In other words, within discursive practice, the subjective act of mimetically naming the object through linguistic expression is objectively mediated by conceptual self-reflection upon this experience. Conceptual mediation, which forms the second aspect of the subject's discriminating procedure, gives mimetic experience an objective unity, a unity, however, which is nothing more than a continuity in respect of the subject's previous knowledge of itself and the object; a continuity which saves the subject from insanity, which preserves its ever-changing self-identity in the face of an otherwise indeterminate chaos.

This becoming of the subject is not transfixed in the traditional hierarchical procedure of formal deduction resulting in a total system of knowledge, in a transcendental 'third' which mediates the subject/object relations within its own conceptual absoluteness. For the concept is itself only a word, a linguistic expression which, as we have pointed out regarding mimetic reaction, leaves a gap between such expression and the object to which it responds. When the concept in traditional philosophy coercively synthesizes the object within its own 'categorical' precision, it performs an act of self-substitution, and so abstracts from the nonidentical other determining its very expression. The irrevocable difference between the concept and what it designates nevertheless forces the concept to make

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<sup>21</sup> *ibid.*, p.xx.

<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*, p.47.

reference to further concepts in an attempt to bridge the gap.

The determinable flaw in every concept makes it necessary to cite others; this is the font of the only constellations which inherited some of the hope of the name.<sup>23</sup>

The ultimate impossibility of achieving a final identity between concept and object, despite the fact that this utopian possibility continually governs conceptual expression, results in what Adorno calls a fragmented, discontinuous constellation of concepts whose organising principle is no longer a general cover concept from which all other relations may be deduced, but rather the rhetorical emphasis given to conceptual expression. Rhetoric, however, as a principle of unity would seem to subvert the very idea of unity and its implicit notion of necessity with an apparent arbitrary choice of words, and relativity in the presentation of conceptual discourse generally. Deplored by the scientific tradition for this very reason, rhetoric is now revived as that very element in which, Adorno maintains, identity is most nearly achieved.

Dialectics - literally: language as the organon of thought - would mean to attempt a critical rescue of the rhetorical element, a mutual approximation of thing and expression, to the point where the difference fades. Dialectics appropriates for the power of thought what historically seemed to be a flaw in thinking: its link with language, which nothing can wholly break.<sup>24</sup>

Language is no longer considered an instrument of thought, a mere system of cognitive signs whereby an object is said to be known according to conceptual definition. Here the rhetorical quality of language is suppressed in the subject's intention to produce a desired result according to already given conceptual classifications; a result whose truth is but the reflection of the subject's delusion concerning its mastery of the object. The rhetorical organisation of the constellation of concepts, while certainly retaining an element of subjective intention in the 'telos' of a desired identity, nevertheless presents the concepts according to the object's, as well as the subject's insistent demand that its nonidentity with the concept of the other be communicated. It is this demand which gives rhetorical emphasis its

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<sup>23</sup> *ibid.*, p.53.

<sup>24</sup> *ibid.*, p.56.

necessary role as the unifying principle of discursive practice. As Adorno puts it,

Language thus serves the intention of the concept to express completely what it means. By themselves, constellations represent from without what the concept has cut away within: the 'more' which the concept is equally desirous and incapable of being. By gathering around the object of cognition, the concepts potentially determine the object's interior. They attain, in thinking, what was necessarily excised from thinking.<sup>25</sup>

That is to say, the rhetorical organisation of the constellation of concepts has the capacity to reveal the inner history of the object's relations to other objects; to reveal the 'more', the nonidentical essence of conceptual reflection which has been forced out of contention by the very supposition of the concept's functional supremacy.

Hegel too had argued that the nonidentical other is more than just its phenomenal appearance in thought, that it is not simply identical in itself. Unlike Hegel, however, this determining essence is no longer construed as the immanent reconciling force of an absolute Concept.

Essence can no longer be hypostatized as the pure, spiritual being-in-itself. Rather, essence passes into that which lies concealed beneath the facade of immediacy, of the supposed facts, and which makes the facts what are. It comes to be the law of doom thus far obeyed by history, a law the more irresistible the more it will hide beneath the facts, only to be comfortably denied by them.<sup>26</sup>

Now this reversal in the traditional relations of essence and appearance, where the history of the object's becoming is the essential determination of that object's appearance in the constellation of concepts, nevertheless depends on that object's submission to conceptual mediation in order that its becoming may be made known. In other words, the history of the object, the essence of its conceptual appearance, is at once transmitted, paradoxically enough, by the concept's own self-reflected mediation in the history and tradition of knowledge. The history of the object is thus both

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<sup>25</sup> *ibid.*, p.162.

<sup>26</sup> *ibid.*, p.167.

within and without the constellation which communicates it, just as the constellation is determined by this history and determines it in the rhetorical emphasis which organizes its discursive presentation.

The history locked in the object can only be delivered by a knowledge mindful of the historic positional value of the object in its relation to other objects - by the actualisation and concentration of something which is already known and is transformed by that knowledge.<sup>27</sup>

Any suggestion which may be gleaned from this concerning an implicit return to the concept as the determining essence of the object's becoming is quickly countered by Adorno's reference to Husserl's notion of 'essence perception'. Despite Husserl's idealism, Adorno argues, there is a sense here in which essence is recognized as determining the conceiving subject from a position altogether external or alien to it. Essence, the inner history of the object, which determines both it and the concept, can only be communicated by the concept. Moreover, for Adorno, this perception of the universal essence in the particular object thereby recognizes the nonidentity between the concept and what it designates as the determining source of the inherent aporia, the self-contradiction evident in every concept which supposes its own constituting positivity. In other words, the identity of the object may be determined only negatively over and against its conceptual identifications. As Adorno puts it, '...the nonidentical would be the thing's own identity against its identifications.'<sup>28</sup>

This perception of radical nonidentity within the concept's determining universality constitutes the crux of Adorno's concept of negative dialectics; a perception which is possible, he argues, only to a consciousness mindful of the alienating socio-historic context to which it is subject, and which thereby demands a critical response to those ideologies which assert an already attained reconciliation.

The reconciled condition would not be the philosophical imperialism of annexing the alien. Instead, its happiness would lie in the fact that the alien, in the proximity it is granted, remains what is distant and different, beyond the heterogeneous and beyond

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<sup>27</sup> *ibid.*, p.163.

<sup>28</sup> *ibid.*, p.161.

that which is one's own.<sup>29</sup>

Critical of Hegel's assertion in the Philosophy of Right concerning the positive identity of what is real and rational, Marx too had given an indication of their essential nonidentity in his discussion of commodity fetishism. This nonidentity is nevertheless disguised by the reification of consciousness, the ideological reflection of the 'natural' law of value governing the universal social process of commodity exchange. The individual subject is preserved only as the necessary pawn of a social process which demands submission to the universal administration of social relations. While Marx presents this process as one of natural growth, unlike Hegel, the natural laws which preside over it are not hypostatized as an ontological apology for what is essentially the universal suppression of difference and individual freedom.

That the assumption of natural laws is not to be taken 'a la lettre' - that least of all is it to be ontologized in the sense of a design, whatever its kind, of so-called 'man' - this is confirmed by the strongest motive behind all Marxist theory: that those laws can be abolished. The realm of freedom would no sooner begin than they would cease to apply.<sup>30</sup>

In other words the natural laws of history are themselves historically mediated. For at work within this natural process, as Marx points out, is the self-determining 'telos' of individual freedom; a constant methexis of nature and history whose unceasing antagonism cannot be reconciled in the spiritual transcendence of conceptual universality.

Now Adorno's concept of negative dialectics, by virtue of the very nature of immanent critique and its unavoidable dependence on the conceptual form, itself appears to assume that very absolute and conclusive character which it otherwise seeks to undermine. For the negative identity of subject and object, which results from an immanent critique of their ideological affirmation as a fully realised positive absolute, nevertheless remains conditioned by that very thinking; and so bound, under a more secular or material rubric, to reproduce an absolute, albeit negative identity. In order to avoid hypostatizing the negative identity itself, thereby reverting to the mystifying form of a constituting universal, it is necessary

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<sup>29</sup> ibid., p.191.

<sup>30</sup> ibid., p.355.

finally, Adorno argues, to turn the concept of negative dialectics against itself. This is the necessary moment of critical self-reflection upon a dialectics which, despite itself, takes a conclusive and thereby absolute form. In Adorno's words,

The critique of every self-absolutizing particular is a critique of the shadow which absoluteness casts upon the critique; it is a critique of the fact that critique itself, contrary to its own tendency, must remain within the medium of the concept. It destroys the claim of identity by testing and knowing it; therefore it can reach no further than that claim. The claim is a magic circle that stamps critique with the appearance of absolute knowledge. It is up to the self-reflection of critique to extinguish that claim, to extinguish it in the very negation of negation that will not become a positing.<sup>31</sup>

The critical task is not only to subvert those philosophies which give credence to some implicit or explicit form of absolute identity, that is, to make the concept see reason against its own seemingly indomitable reason, but to make transparent the absolute form which such critique also inevitably assumes. Hence only through the immanent critique of identity, whatever its form, and persistent self-reflection upon critique itself, Adorno argues, will the hope of freedom be preserved.

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<sup>31</sup> *ibid.*, p.406.

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