



Theodor W.

ADORNO

AN INTRODUCTION
TO DIALECTICS

AN INTRODUCTION TO DIALECTICS

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Theodor W. Adorno

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AN INTRODUCTION TO DIALECTICS

EDITOR'S FOREWORD

The series of lectures which Adorno delivered at the Johann Wolfgang Goethe University in Frankfurt in the summer semester of 1958 can still be said to provide what the original announcement in the official lecture lists promised: it offers an introduction to dialectics. Presented in a free and improvised style, Adorno's theoretical reflections here are generally more accessible than comparable discussions in his writings on Hegel or in *Negative Dialectics*. The lecture course can thus certainly be regarded as a kind of propaedeutic to these texts. In reading out specific passages from Hegel and interpreting them in some detail, Adorno clarifies central motifs of dialectical thought such as the 'movement of the concept' or the meaning of determinate negation and dialectical contradiction. But he also makes it easier to approach this tradition of thought for those who already entertain sceptical or downright hostile attitudes towards it insofar as he systematically explores the difficulties it involves, addresses the resistance and the prejudices which it typically encounters, and discusses the specific challenges which dialectical thought presents. The only readers likely to be disappointed by Adorno's treatment of these questions are those who expect to be offered an instant recipe for such thinking. But, as Adorno insists, 'it belongs to the essence of dialectic that it is no recipe, but an attempt to let truth reveal itself' (Lecture 3, p. 25).

In terms of Adorno's own development, these lectures document a moment of some significance, since this is the first time that the issue of dialectics is expressly addressed. A couple of years before the plan for a work on dialectics as such assumed definite shape in

Adorno's mind, what we have here is a kind of methodological self-reflection on his previous substantive contributions, one where he explores for the first time that idea of 'an open or fractured dialectic' (Lecture 10, p. 95) which he will finally go on to develop at length in *Negative Dialectics*. This is evident, above all, from Adorno's original general plan for the lectures (pp. 221–53), which, in its almost symphonic layout, affords some insight into how his philosophy, in express relation to and with a constant eye upon the work of Hegel and Marx, attempts to situate and articulate itself. But the actual execution of the lectures, which differs significantly from the original plan in several respects, also explicates the central motifs of Adorno's own conception of dialectic: its definition as 'an attempt to do justice in thought itself to the non-identical, that is, precisely to those moments which are not exhausted in our thought' (Lecture 9, p. 82); the emphasis upon its originally critical function; its specific opposition to ontology and positivism alike; its complementary relationship to the idea of a negative metaphysics; and, finally, the question, so important to Adorno, of that individual motivation for engaging with dialectics which today – when the inner, namely dialectical, contradictions of capitalism are rousing us from a sort of post-modern somnolence – actually seems to have lost none of its relevance: namely the experience of 'diremption or alienation' (Lecture 8, p. 74) which makes us realize how 'dialectical thought itself responds to a negative condition of the world and, indeed, calls this negative condition by its proper name' (Lecture 8, p. 72), but without thereby relinquishing the hope that what strives for reconciliation is 'something itself harboured within the diremption, the negative, the suffering of the world' (Lecture 8, pp. 73–4).

Adorno delivered these one-hour lectures twice a week and presented them, as was usual with him, in a fairly free form that was based loosely on the notes and jottings he had set down beforehand. The lectures were recorded on tape as they were delivered – not specifically for subsequent publication but primarily for Adorno's own use – and were then transcribed. This transcription of the tape recordings forms the basis of the present edition and is preserved in the Theodor W. Adorno Archiv under Vo 3023–3249. On account of a one-week break after Easter, Adorno actually delivered twenty lectures rather than the twenty-two that were originally planned. No transcription has survived of the opening lecture, so that in this case the text is based on a stenograph by someone who can no longer be identified.

The presentation of the text follows the general editorial principles established for the posthumously published lectures of Adorno. This

means that the primary intention here was not to produce a critical edition of the text but one that would be as immediately accessible as possible, especially since, with all the 'lectures', we are not dealing with texts which Adorno composed in written form or even authorized as such. In order to preserve the immediate oral character of the lectures the syntax of the original as recorded in the transcription was left unaltered as far as this was possible. The punctuation of the text here has been limited to clarifying the often rather involved sentences and periods and thus making the line of thought as clear as possible. This rule has not been observed in a small number of cases where intelligibility would otherwise be severely compromised. A number of tacit changes have also been introduced in the case of obvious verbal slips on Adorno's part or obvious mistakes in the transcription arising from typing errors or mishearing of the tape recording. All of the relevant substantive changes in relation to the transcription, which must be regarded as additions of the editor, have been identified by the use of square brackets in the text. All conjectural emendations where the editor felt obliged to deviate from the transcription and suggest a different reading have been specifically identified in the notes. The editor has deviated from the otherwise standard editorial practice with regard to Adorno's lectures only in two respects: firstly, the ancient Greek words and expressions which Adorno sometimes introduces into the lectures have been supplemented with a corresponding transliteration of the Greek script in square brackets; secondly, while the German quotations from Hegel in the lectures are cited from the modern Suhrkamp edition of Hegel's writings edited by Karl Marcus Michel and Eva Moldenhauer, the editor also decided in the notes to cite the numerous quotations from Hegel's works in accordance with the editions which Adorno himself obviously used to read from in the course of his lectures. This decision was motivated not by any desire to create a supposed aura in this regard but simply to clarify certain observations on Adorno's part which are intelligible only in relation to these older editions (with regard to the older orthography of *seyn* [being] for *sein* [being], for example). For ease of reference, details of the corresponding volume and pagination of the Suhrkamp edition have also been provided, along with details of the relevant English translations of Hegel's writings.

The editor's notes, insofar as they touch on substantive issues, are intended to assist the reader's understanding of the lectures and to clarify, as far as seemed possible for the editor, certain particularly obscure passages in the text. Given the length of the lecture series itself, comparable passages from Adorno's published writings have

been cited in detail only rarely. The 'table of contents' which has been provided for the text, though based on Adorno's general practice, is not designed to offer an articulated account of the lectures after the event but merely intended, along with the index, to furnish a general orientation for the reader.

The editor would like to thank the publisher for permission to make available to the reader the extensive notes and sketches which Adorno produced in connection with this series of lectures. Careful attention to these materials shows that we must distinguish four levels of preparation for the lectures: 1) the general plan; 2) the detailed planning of the first two lectures of 8 and 13 May which exists as a typescript (point 1 and point 2 in the general plan); 3) the first phase of the lectures (8 May to 24 June), in which Adorno began by developing his outline for the first two lectures; because he could not keep within the allotted time he henceforth supplemented his sketches for the coming lecture with handwritten notes and jottings (either in the margin or between the lines of his existing typescript); and 4) the second phase of the lectures, in which he produced new and very detailed notes for three occasions (26 June, 3 July, and the rest of the semester from 15 July until 31 July). There is also a) a further loose sheet related to the first phase of the lectures (for 12 July); b) a sheet related to the second phase (on 'definition'); and c) a gloss which Adorno had prepared in relation to Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. The insertions subsequently added by Adorno are represented here by smaller print. Question marks in square brackets indicate words which are no longer legible. The purpose of the editor's notes provided for Adorno's own notes and sketches is limited to clarifying their specific relationship to the individual lectures where this is not evident from the dates which Adorno himself supplies.

Finally, it gives me great pleasure to thank all those who have assisted me in one way or another with the preparation of this edition: Andreas Arndt, Jelena Hahl-Fontaine, Hans-Joachim Neubauer, Wim Platvoet, Michael Schwarz and Matthias Thiel. The transcription of Adorno's notes and sketches was prepared by Henri Lonitz.

CONTENTS

Editor's Foreword	xi
-------------------	----

LECTURE 1	1
-----------	---

Prejudices against the dialectic • The double character of the dialectic • The dialectic as method of articulating the Ideas (Plato) • The order of concepts expresses the order of things • The vital nerve of the dialectic • The dialectic as necessary 'exaggeration' • The positivist element of the dialectic

LECTURE 2	4
-----------	---

'The movement of the concept' (Hegel) • The dialectic hypostasizes the identity of thought and being • Hegel's dialectic as the union of identity and non-identity • Non-identity in the process, identity in the result • Introduction to the dialectic as a model of dialectic • The movement of the concept is not sophistical • The movement of the concept as the path of philosophical science • The object of knowledge is internally dynamic • The movement of the object is not arbitrary • The metaphysical concept of truth • The inevitable reification of truth • Historical movement is not the movement of being but is concrete • The dialectic is not a philosophy of foundations • The temporal core of dialectic

LECTURE 3	15
<p>Critique of <i>prima philosophia</i> • Matter no first principle either • Hegel's dialectic also a preservation of first philosophy • All determination implies mediation • The movement of the concept is no external contribution of thought • A sophistical displacement of meaning in Gehlen • The whole is the true solely as the result of all mediations • The idea of an open dialectic • The whole is neither a pantheistic totality of nature nor a seamless unity • 'The truth is essentially result' • Individual phenomena intelligible only in terms of the whole • Recourse to the whole is mediated through the self-movement of the individual • The concept of the whole as already given</p>	
LECTURE 4	26
<p>The traditional concept of system: derivation of the whole from one fundamental principle • The dialectical concept of system • Determinate negation • Contradiction in Kant • Contradiction in Hegel • Antithesis arises from thesis • The measure of the absolute lies in objectivity • Dialectical criticism is necessarily immanent • Refutation of a thought as development of the thought • The emergent absolute is essentially temporal • The interaction of theory and practice • The truth as result is concrete</p>	
LECTURE 5	37
<p>The charge of universal rationalization • Dialectical thought is not rationalistic thought • The dispute over rationalism • Conceptual thought is indispensable • The truth moment of irrationalism • The irrational as a moment of <i>ratio</i> • Suffering and happiness are immanent to thought • Being in itself, being for itself, being in and for itself • Relationship of thesis, antithesis, synthesis • Dialectical method concerns the contradictory life of the object • The dialectic not immune to ideological abuse</p>	
LECTURE 6	49
<p>Dialectical method not a formal conceptual schema • The objectivation of truth • Every true thought becomes untrue once it is isolated • The triadic schema irrelevant in Hegel • The charge of universalizing contradiction • Contradiction is</p>	

not a first principle • Hegel's critique of Kant's
transcendental dialectic

LECTURE 7 60

Hegel's dialectical principle of development is a principle of real being • Dialectic in Kant is only the negative side of the critique of reason • The positive moment of the critique of reason • Reflection as the principle of the speculative self-knowledge of reason • Knowledge of knowledge also the principle of substantive knowledge • Dialectic and formal logic • The 'example' in Hegel • Logical form of the judgement and the 'emphatic concept' • Dialectical contradiction expresses the disparity of thought and world

LECTURE 8 71

Dialectic names the negative state of the world by its proper name • Contradiction not only in thought, but is objective • Contradiction as principle of diremption is also the principle of unity • Dialectic as union of the a priori and experience • The objective order of the world also conceptual in character • Coercive character of dialectic • The systematic claim of dialectic • Dialectical contradiction in Hegel's political philosophy • Dialectical system not a seamless deductive structure • The concept of experience in Hegel

LECTURE 9 82

The paradoxical task of knowledge: identifying the non-identical • Identity of thought and being (Hegel) • Non-identity and contradiction not resolvable in thought (Marx) • The materialist priority of being over consciousness is problematic • The whole and the parts presuppose one another • The materialist critique of literature cannot proceed from unmediated instances of particular experience (Benjamin) • Dialectical materialism is not vulgar materialism • The charge of metaphysically hypostasizing the totality (Weber)

LECTURE 10 92

Knowledge of the social whole precedes individual experience • Prior awareness of the whole not unique to human beings • Rejection of Hegel's attempted restoration

of immediate experience • The congruence of whole and parts as result of a process • Intuition • Theory neither static nor complete • The danger of a dogmatic ossification of dialectic (Lukács) • Tracing knowledge back to origins is undialectical • Survival of obsolete philosophical notions in the individual sciences

LECTURE 11

104

Terminological remarks on the concept of role • Neither whole nor part enjoys priority over the other • Metaphysics as science of the ultimate ground • Origin as mere beginning (Hegel) • The ontological appropriation of Hegel • 'Abstract' in Hegel • The dialectic not a dynamic ontology • 'Being' in Hegel • Philosophy of immediacy as regress to mythology • Dialectic and positivism • The 'natural' appearance of a reified world

LECTURE 12

116

Affinity between dialectic and positivism • The constitutive distinction of essence and appearance • Dialectic exposes the apparent immediacy of ultimate givens • The Darmstadt investigation • Motivational analysis in industrial sociology • Opinion research, empirical and critical • Transition from positivism to dialectic • Contradiction in the given as the principle of dialectical movement

LECTURE 13

128

Scientific method in Descartes • Rationalism as the will to control nature • The postulate of self-evidence (Descartes) • A hermeneutic intervention • Self-evidence as a form of ultimate metaphysical grounding • Evidence of sense-perception already mediated • The order of knowing, the order of the known • Experience and conceptuality • Emphasis on analysis destroys the crucial interest of knowing • Philosophy of nature and natural science • Philosophy always bound to the material knowledge of the sciences

LECTURE 14

140

Analysis alone yields no knowledge • The universal concretized through the particular • Attitude of dialectic to the concept of development • The family not merely a

remnant • Society not an organism but antagonistic in character • Knowledge as a continuity of steps • The unity of society constituted by discontinuity • The presumption of continuity is merely affirmative • 'Enthusiasm' a necessary moment of knowledge • The positive aspect of continuity

LECTURE 15 152

The coercive character of logic • Immanent and transcendent critique • Mobility of thought is not an evasion • Contradictions are constitutive • Against relativism • Dialectical cognition of the particular object requires explicit self-reflection • The charge of groundlessness • A sociological excursus on the mobility of thought • The substance of philosophy lies in the vital source of its concepts • Arrested movement in Heraclitus and Hegel

LECTURE 16 163

The dogmatic character of the axiom of completeness • The fulfilment of this demand in German idealism • Dialectical clarification of the objective by recourse to models • 'Ideal types' in Weber • 'Intuition of essences' in Husserl • Thinking in models • Labyrinthine communication in literary works (Kafka, Balzac, von Doderer) • Historical transformations in the concept of system

LECTURE 17 174

Consciousness as unifying principle in the modern conception of system • Critique and renewal of the concept of system in the nineteenth century • Contemporary appeal of the concept of system • The spectral afterlife of the concept of system • The need for system and the closed experience of the world • No categorical continuum among the particular sciences (Talcott Parsons) • Apologetic character of the functionalist concept of system • 'Frame of reference' • The logic of science and debased metaphysics complement one another today • Dialectic a beneficent anachronism

LECTURE 18 185

Dichotomous consciousness • Dialectical mediation not a matter of both-and • Mediation as the critical self-reflection of extremes • Role of either/or in the social sciences •

Dialectic and the negative concept of truth • Values are neither transcendent nor merely relative • The criterion of truth is immanent to the object • The dialectic is not a matter of 'standpoints' • Dialectic offers no recipes • Definition as logical form

LECTURE 19

196

The limits of *deixis* and definition with respect to the concept • The concept is not a *tabula rasa* • Concept and constellation • Life and fluidity of the concept as the object of dialectic • Verbal definitions and philosophical definitions • Philosophical definition requires prior knowledge of the matter in question • It extends concepts into force fields • Abbreviation as a specific feature of philosophical definition • Operational definitions in the particular sciences • Forfeiting the synthetic moment of knowledge • Operational definitions and their field of application • Dialectic as a critical mediation of realism and nominalism • Truth moment of the phenomenological analysis of meaning

LECTURE 20

208

Dialectical articulation of concepts as constellation and configuration • The order of ideas in Plato as an expression of the social division of labour • The exposition of the matter in question not external • Exposition guarantees the objectivity of knowledge • Contradiction in the identifying judgement as starting point of dialectic • Truth and untruth of the logical judgement form • Subjective synthesis and objective reference in the judgement • An immanent critique of logic • The phenomenological critique of inference • Surrender of logical subordination as index of dialectical thought • Is knowledge possible without assuming the identity of subject and object?

Adorno's Notes for the Lectures

221

Editor's Notes

254

Index

314

LECTURE 1

8 May 1958¹

The concept of dialectic which we shall explore here has nothing to do with the widespread conception of a kind of thinking which is remote from the things themselves and revels merely in its own conceptual devices. Indeed, at the point in philosophy where the concept of dialectic first emerges, in the thought of Plato, it already implies the opposite, namely a disciplined form of thought which is meant to protect us from all sophistic manipulation. Plato claims that we can say something rational about things only when we understand something about the matter itself (*Gorgias* and *Phaedrus*).² In its origin, the dialectic is an attempt to overcome all merely conceptual devices of spurious argumentation, and precisely by articulating conceptual thinking in a truly rigorous fashion. Plato attempts to counter his opponents, the Sophists, by use of their own means.

All the same, the concept of dialectic as it has come down to us from classical thought is very different from what I mean by the term. For the ancient concept of dialectic is the concept of a philosophical method. And to a certain extent this is what it has always remained. Dialectic is both – it is a method of thought, but it is also more than this, namely a specific structure which belongs to the things themselves, and which for quite fundamental philosophical reasons must also become the measure of philosophical reflection itself.

What dialectic means for Plato is that a philosophical thought does not simply live there where it stands, as it were, but continues to live when it informs our consciousness without our realizing it. Platonic dialectic is a doctrine which enables us to order our concepts

correctly, to ascend from the concrete to the level of the highest and most universal. In the first place, the 'ideas' are simply the highest general concepts to which thought can rise.³ On the other hand, dialectic also implies that we can subdivide these concepts correctly.⁴ This question regarding the correct division of our concepts brings Plato to the problem of how to articulate concepts in such a way that they are appropriate to the things which they encompass. On the one hand, what is required is the logical formation of concepts, but this must not be achieved in a coercive way in accordance with some schema; rather, the concepts must be formed in a way that is appropriate to the thing in question. This may be compared to the botanical system of Linnaeus⁵ and the natural system based upon the structure of plants. The old traditional concept of dialectic was essentially a method for organizing concepts.

On the other hand, Plato was already well aware that we do not simply know, without more ado, whether the conceptual order we bestow upon things is also the order which the objects themselves possess. Plato and Aristotle emphasized the importance of framing our concepts in accordance with nature, so that these concepts might properly express what it is they grasp. But how can we know anything about the non-conceptual being that lies beyond these concepts? We realize that our particular concepts become entangled in difficulties; then, on the basis of these problems, we are obliged to develop a more adequate body of concepts. This is the fundamental experience of dialectic: the way our concepts are driven on in the encounter with what they express. We must try and compare whether what is given corresponds to the relevant concepts or not.

The dialectic is indeed a method which refers to the process of thinking, but it also differs from other methods insofar as it constantly strives not to stand still, constantly corrects itself in the presence of the things themselves. We could define dialectic as a kind of thinking which does not content itself merely with the order of concepts but, rather, undertakes to correct the conceptual order by reference to the being of the objects themselves. The vital nerve of dialectical thinking lies here, in this moment of opposition. Dialectic is the reverse of what it is generally taken to be: rather than being simply an elaborate conceptual technique, it is the attempt to overcome all merely conceptual manipulation, to sustain at every level the tension between thought and what it would comprehend. Dialectic is the method of thinking which is not merely a method, but the attempt to overcome the merely arbitrary character of method and to admit into the concept that which is not itself concept.

On the issue of 'exaggeration':⁶ it is claimed that truth must always represent the simpler or primitive level, while what is more remote can only be a further arbitrary addition. This view assumes that the world is the same as the façade it presents. Philosophy should fundamentally contest this idea. The kind of thinking which shuns the effort to overcome inveterate ideas is nothing but the mere reproduction of what we say and think without more ado. Philosophy should help us to avoid becoming stupid. In a conversation with Goethe, Hegel once described dialectic as 'the organized spirit of contradiction'.⁷ Every thought which breaches the façade, or the necessary illusion which is ideology, is an exaggeration. The tendency of dialectic to move to extremes serves today precisely to resist the enormous pressure which is exerted upon us from without.

The dialectic realizes that it furnishes thought, on the one hand, and that which thought strives to grasp, on the other. Dialectical thought is not merely intellectualist in character, since it is precisely thought's attempt to recognize its limitations by recourse to the matter itself. How does thought succeed within its own thought-determinations in doing justice to the matter? In the *Phenomenology*,⁸ Hegel claims that immediacy returns at every level of the movement which thought undergoes. Again and again thought encounters a certain opposition, encounters what can be called nature. An introduction to the dialectic can only be pursued in constant confrontation with the problem of positivism. Such an introduction cannot proceed as if the criteria of positivism had not been developed. On the contrary, we must attempt to measure them against themselves and thereby move beyond their own concept. Positivism is not a 'worldview' but, rather, an element of dialectic.