



*Theodor W.*

# ADORNO

AN INTRODUCTION  
TO DIALECTICS

**'DESPITE ADORNO'S ABIDING SUSPICION** of easy communicability, he was fully capable of explaining complex ideas lucidly and accessibly, never more so than in the lecture hall. There can be few concepts that demand as much careful exposition as "dialectics", whose multiple uses and frequent abuses have frustrated countless attempts to render it comprehensible. Still fewer exponents of dialectical thought have been as skilled in unpacking its meaning, while at the same time performatively demonstrating its virtues, as Adorno.'

— Martin Jay, *University of California, Berkeley*

**'THE TWENTY LECTURES** that Adorno gave in 1958 constitute the first comprehensive articulation of his thinking. The challenge to which he responded is that of wresting conceptual thinking from its narcissistic tendencies, as outlined in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. "Suffering and happiness", he insists, must be recognized as "the immanent substance of dialectics". Adorno's effort to turn thinking inside out by revealing the affective origin of its transformative potential remains his most enduring legacy.'

— Samuel Weber, *Northwestern University*

This volume comprises Adorno's first lectures specifically dedicated to the subject of the dialectic, a concept which has been key to philosophical debate since classical times. While discussing connections with Plato and Kant, Adorno concentrates on the systematic development of the dialectic in Hegel's philosophy and its relationship to Marx, as well as elaborating his own conception of dialectical thinking as a critical response to this tradition.

Delivered in the summer semester of 1958, these lectures allow Adorno to explore and probe the difficulties and challenges this way of thinking posed within the cultural and intellectual context of the post-war period. While providing an illuminating account of Hegelian thought, he also discusses a range of other philosophical, literary and artistic figures of central importance to his conception of critical theory, notably Walter Benjamin.

These lectures are seasoned with lively anecdotes and personal recollections which allow the reader to glimpse what has been described as the 'workshop' of Adorno's thought. They provide an ideal introduction to Adorno's work for all students and scholars in the humanities and social sciences as well as anyone interested in modern philosophy and critical theory.

THEODOR ADORNO (1903–1969), a prominent member of the Frankfurt School, was one of the most influential thinkers of the twentieth century in the areas of social theory, philosophy and aesthetics.



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# ADORNÖ

## AN INTRODUCTION TO DIALECTICS

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*(1958)*

**Theodor W. Adorno**

*Edited by Christoph Ziermann*

*Translated by Nicholas Walker*

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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.

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