

Theodor Adorno

Negative Dialectics

Prologue

The formulation “negative dialectics” transgresses against tradition. Already in Plato dialectics intended to establish something positive through the thought-means of the negation; the figure of a negation of the negation named this precisely. The book would like to emancipate dialectics from these types of affirmative essence, without relinquishing anything in terms of determinacy. The development of its paradoxical title is one of its intentions.

What in accordance with the conception of philosophy would be the foundation, the author develops only after a great deal of explication of what that conception presumes would be raised on a foundation. This implies the critique of the concept of the foundation, as well as of the primacy of substantive thought. Its self-consciousness achieves its movement solely in its consummation. It requires what, according to the ground rules of the Spirit which always remain in effect, is secondary.

What is given herein is not solely a methodology of material labor of the author; according to the theory of negative dialectics, no continuum exists between the former and the latter. However such a discontinuity, and what instructions may be read out of it for thinking, will indeed be dealt with. The procedure is not grounded, but justified. The author lays, so far as he can, his cards on the table; this is by no means the same thing as the game.

When Benjamin in 1937 read the part of the *Metacritique of Epistemology* which the author had finished at that time – the last chapter

of the published work – he commented, one had to journey through the icy wasteland of abstraction in order to definitively arrive at concrete philosophizing. Negative dialectics now indicates such a path, retrospectively. Concretion was for the most part smuggled into contemporary philosophy. By contrast the largely abstract text wishes to vouch for its authenticity no less than for the explanation of the author's concrete mode of procedure. If one speaks in the newest aesthetic debates of anti-drama and anti-heroes, then *Negative Dialectics*, which holds itself distant from all aesthetic themes, could be called an anti-system. With logically consistent means, it attempts to put, in place of the principle of unity and of the hegemony of the supra-ordinated concept, that which would be outside of the bane of such unity. Since the author has trusted himself to follow his own intellectual impulses, he felt it to be his task to break through the delusion of constitutive subjectivity by means of the power of the subject; he no longer wished to put off this task. To reach stringently across the official division of pure philosophy and what is relevant to the matter [*Sachhaltigem*] or what is formally scientific, was one of the determining motives therein.

The introduction expounds the concept of philosophical experience. The first section starts out from the state of the ontology which dominates today in Germany. It is not judged from above, but is comprehended out of its need, which is no less problematic for its part, and criticized immanently. The second section proceeds from the results to the idea of a negative dialectics and its position in relation to several categories, which it preserves as well as qualitatively transforms. The third section then carries out models of negative dialectics. They are not examples; they do not simply illuminate general considerations. By leading towards what is relevant to the matter, they would like to simultaneously do justice to the substantive intention of what is at first dealt with generally, out of necessity, in contrast to the usage of examples as something indifferent in

themselves, which Plato introduced and which philosophy has ever since merely repeated. While the models are supposed to clarify what negative dialectics would be, and to drive this latter, according to its own concept, into the realm of reality, they elucidate, not dissimilar to the so-called exemplary models, key concepts of philosophical disciplines, in order to centrally intervene in these. A dialectics of freedom will do this for the philosophy of ethics; “World-Spirit and Natural History” for that of history; the last chapter circles, feeling its way, around metaphysical questions, in the sense of the axial revolution of the Copernican turn, by means of critical self-reflection.

Ulrich Sonneman is working on a book which is supposed to be entitled *Negative Anthropology*. Neither he nor the author knew beforehand about the coincidence. It refers to a compulsion in the thing itself.

The author is prepared for the resistance, which *Negative Dialectics* will provoke. Without rancor, he does not begrudge the joy of all those, both hither and yonder [i.e. on both sides of the Berlin Wall], who will proclaim that they had always said it and now the author would be confessing it.

Frankfurt, Summer 1966