HISTORY AND TRANSCENDENCE IN ADORNO’S IDEA OF TRUTH

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It can no longer be maintained that the immutable is truth and … the transient is illusion [Schein].
—Theodor W. Adorno (ND 361/355)

Theodor W. Adorno’s Negative Dialectics appeared in 1966, when he was at the height of his intellectual presence as a professor, author, cultural critic, and administrator. A second edition was published one year later. Along with Adorno’s unfinished Aesthetic Theory, which appeared one year after his death in 1969, Negative Dialectics marks the brilliant culmination to his philosophical work. It also gives an uncompromising summation of Critical Theory in its first generation. As Adorno states upfront, he wants to “lay his cards on the table” (ND xix/9), and he stands ready for the attacks this book will invite in both the west and the east [“hüben und drüben” (ND xxi/11)—a Cold War phrase used to indicate both sides of the “Iron Curtain”]. Aside from some of Adorno’s students and close colleagues, however, few critics at the time engaged thoroughly enough with his Hauptwerk to figure out exactly why and how to attack it. Serious reception in the wider philosophical world has experienced a fifty-year delay.¹

Nevertheless, Negative Dialectics provides a virtual compendium of everything Adorno has to offer contemporary philosophy and social critique. The long Introduction (ND 1–57/13–66), nearly a small book in itself, reveals the inner dynamics of what Adorno calls negative dialectics and positions it in the history of Western thought. Next, in Part One of the book (ND 59–131/67–136), Adorno explains how his negative-dialectical philosophy relates to existential ontology, launching an immanent critique of Heidegger’s Being and Time that complements Adorno’s more overtly polemical The Jargon of Authenticity (1964). Part Two, titled “Negative Dialectics: Concept and Categories” (ND 133–207/137–207), explicates the most important ideas and arguments of Adorno’s philosophy, with an emphasis on questions of epistemology and social philosophy. There is no better statement of how Adorno both continues and challenges the legacies of Kant, Hegel, and Marx, with an eye to the problems posed by both existentialism and logical positivism.

The three models Adorno constructs seek to illuminate contested ideas by engaging critically with their most important philosophical articulations. In effect, each is a metacritique, reminiscent, in this regard, of Hegel: *Three Studies* (1963) and Adorno's earlier book on Husserl titled *Toward a Metacritique of Epistemology* (1956) (inaccurately translated as Against Epistemology: A Metacritique). The first model, "Freedom: On the Metacritique of Practical Reason," takes up central issues raised by Kant's moral philosophy. The second, "World Spirit and Natural History: An Excursus on Hegel" deals with questions concerning the ideas of progress and rationality in Hegel and Marx. The third model, which also concludes the book, offers twelve "Meditations on Metaphysics."

Given the ambitions and complexity of Negative Dialectics, there are many ways to enter it for the first time. Yet I think no one should exit it without grappling with these concluding meditations and especially with the idea of truth that they disclose.

**Truth and Metaphysics**

Truth, Adorno writes, is "the highest" (*die oberste*) among metaphysical ideas (ND 401/394). His "Meditations on Metaphysics," where this description occurs, can be read as Adorno's attempt to articulate a defensible idea of truth, despite and amid the collapse of metaphysics (Wellmer 1998; Zuidervaart 2007: 48–76). Moreover, as Adorno wrote in a letter to Gershom Scholem dated March 14, 1967, "the wish to salvage metaphysics is in fact central to Negative Dialectics" (quoted in Gordon 2016: 159). This wish to rescue metaphysics is closely connected to Adorno's "inverse theology," which some have linked to his "allegiance" to Kierkegaard and "the philosophy of existence" (Gordon 2016: 160), and others have anchored in his Hegelian Marxist emphasis on "determinate negation" (Cook 2017). To the extent that the key to Adorno's negative dialectics lies in his "Meditations on Metaphysics," the attempt there to spell out what truth is and why truth matters is crucial for his contributions to contemporary philosophy.

Many readers of Adorno, attentive to his insisting in Part Two of *Negative Dialectics* on the preponderance or priority of the object (Vorrang des Objekts, ND 183–6/184–7), regard the mediation between subject and object as central to his negative-dialectical conception of truth. One sees this, for example, in Brian O'Connor's focus on "the priority of the object" and "the role of subjectivity" in Adorno's epistemology (O'Connor 2004: 45–98) and in Andrew Bowie's discussion of Adorno's critical appropriation of Kant and Hegel (Bowie 2013: 38–74). At strategic spots Bowie refers to Axel Honneth's critical retrieval of the notion of reification from the subject/object dialectic established by Georg Lukács and partially retained by Adorno (Honneth 2008). Honneth proposes to redescribe reification as a forgetting of the intersubjective recognition that ontogenetically and conceptually precedes object-oriented cognition—a redescription he derives, in part, from Adorno. Although Honneth does not spell out here the implications of an emphasis on intersubjective recognition for a conception of truth, it points to one in which subject/object mediation is secondary rather than primary. Honneth's own interpretation of Negative Dialectics (Honneth 2009) implies this shift in priority, it seems to me.

I have sympathies both with an emphasis on subject/object mediation in interpreting Adorno's approach to truth and with attempts to expand his approach to include intersubjective recognition. For example, I have portrayed Adorno's appeal to empathic experience as a dialectical counterpart to Heidegger's emphasis on authenticity in *Being and Time*, arguing that both Adorno and Heidegger provide problematic accounts for what I call the authentication of truth (Zuidervaart 2007: 77–106). I have also examined selected passages from Part One in *Negative Dialectics*, where Adorno tries to extract a viable conception of propositional truth from Husserlian phenomenology and Heideggerian ontology (Zuidervaart 2018). I consider this extraction only partially successful because Adorno fails to
explain how predication contributes to knowledge, a failure that stems, ironically, from his giving insufficient priority to the object of cognition.

In the current essay, I want to explore how Adorno’s inadequate account of propositional truth relates to his larger project in *Negative Dialectics*. I focus on passages from the concluding “Meditations on Metaphysics” (ND 361–408/354–400) where Adorno tries to rescue the idea of truth from the collapse of metaphysics. Of primary importance in Adorno’s rescue effort is not the mediation between subject and object, but rather the polarity between history and transcendence. First, commenting on Meditations 1–4, I consider the issues raised by Adorno’s insistence on the historical necessity of certain ideas and their demise. Next, reviewing portions of Meditations 6–9, I show how Adorno addresses these issues via a critical retrieval of Kant’s transcendental ideas of immortality, freedom, and God’s existence. Then, focusing on Meditations 11–12, I propose a social transformationalist interpretation of the idea of truth that, via this critical retrieval, Adorno tries to rescue from the collapse of metaphysics. I conclude by demonstrating an unavoidable tension between the idea Adorno has rescued and what a viable conception of propositional truth would require.

**Historical Necessity and Possibility**

From the outset, in the Meditation titled “After Auschwitz” (ND 361–5/354–8), Adorno’s meditations on metaphysics insist that philosophy needs a different conception (Begriff) of truth in order to be true to what life after Auschwitz demands. With this different conception, metaphysics might succeed by becoming materialist and by thinking against thought. Central to the change Adorno envisions lies the claim that truth, like other crucial metaphysical ideas, would not simply transcend what is transient. Rather, truth would also be temporal and historical through and through. On Adorno’s conception, the historical character of truth has two dimensions. One is the necessity of historical development. The other is the historical possibility of transcendence. Let me discuss historical necessity first.

As is well known, Adorno is sharply critical of Hegelian speculations about the universal history of spirit, and he takes distance from Marxian constructions of a progressive dialectic between forces and relations of production. Yet he does not hesitate to claim that history, as it has unfolded, requires certain ideas and undermines others. In this sense, historical development necessarily makes certain ideas true and others false.

For example, when Adorno announces a new categorical imperative in the Meditation titled “Metaphysics and Culture” (ND 365–8/358–61), he suggests this imperative is imposed by what happened under Hitler’s regime. He also says that the “course of history” compels metaphysical reflections to embrace, as the true basis of morality, the “unvarnished materialist motive” of corporeally abhorring the infliction of “unbearable physical pain” on any individual (ND 365/358). In at least one sense, then, he claims that his materialist turn is true insofar as it is historically required. This suggests that if, as Adorno says in the Introduction to *Negative Dialectics*, the need to let suffering speak is a condition of all truth (ND 17–18/29), then the historical conditions under which suffering occurs and is voiced govern the truth of such expression. Moreover, this historical necessity, as Adorno recognizes, governs the truth of his own philosophy.

Adorno’s insistence on historical necessity exposes his truth conception to two worries. One is that his conception—indeed, his entire philosophy—relies so heavily on a historical metanarrative—i.e., the dialectic of enlightenment—that the truth of particular assertions and claims cannot be tested. Instead, every particular assertion or claim is so thoroughly embedded in the historical metanarrative that the only way to either confirm or challenge it would be to accept or reject Adorno’s entire philosophy of history. The other worry is that, despite Adorno’s repeated warnings against collapsing validity and genesis—against judging
the validity of an idea solely on the basis of how and where it originated—he may have turned historical forces (origins) into guarantees for the truth (validity) of his own ideas. Here the worry is that Adorno regards his philosophical responses to his historical context as true just by virtue of being products of that context—and, more generally, that he regards the truth of all philosophical ideas as similarly tied to the historical contexts in which they arise. The first worry pertains to a kind of historical absolutism and the second to a kind of historical relativism. I shall return to these worries in a moment.

The dialectical counterpart to historical necessity in Adorno's conception of truth lies in the possibility of transcendence. He introduces this possibility in the very next Meditation, titled “Dying Today” (ND 368–73/361–6). The issue here is whether contemporary experience provides any basis for hope in life after death of the sort seemingly attached to traditional metaphysical ideas about the immortality of the soul. Although Adorno thinks capitalist society after Auschwitz severely impedes the requisite metaphysical experience, he also asserts it is philosophically impossible to regard death as “simply and purely ultimate [das schlechthin Letzte].” The reason he gives for this impossibility is that to regard death as absolute would undermine any and every truth claim. Amid truth's temporality, truth must endure, he says; if truth did not endure, its final trace would be swallowed up in the victory of death (ND 371/364). Here Adorno employs the same verb—verschlingen—used by Martin Luther to translate two biblical passages about death being “swallowed up”: swallowed up by “the Lord of hosts” in Isaiah 25:7, and swallowed up “in victory” in 1 Corinthians 15:54. I do not believe Adorno's usage is a coincidence: the text in 1 Corinthians punctuates a passage about the perishable body's putting on immortality—the body, not the soul—and this resonates with Adorno's subsequent claim that “hope means corporeal resurrection,” something he says Christian dogmatic theology understood better than speculative metaphysics did (ND 401/393).

Similarly, in the following Meditation, titled “Happiness and Waiting in Vain” (ND 373–5/366–8), Adorno suggests that the anticipation of unique and irreplaceable happiness (Glück), even while one waits in vain for the happiness promised, is intrinsic to the experience of truth. Truth has to do with the possibility that there is something more to life than the death that surrounds us. Just as every trace of truth would vanish if death were absolute, so anything we could experience “as truly living [als wahrhaft Lebendiges]” would also promise “something that transcends life [ein dem Leben Transzendentes]” (ND 375/368).

This possibility is not simply a logical possibility; rather, it is both historical and anthropological. The promised transcendent both “is and is not,” Adorno says (ND 375/368): the very course of history that points toward it also blocks its arrival, and our experience of what's promised, although real, is fragile. The mixture of historical and anthropological possibility is especially striking in Adorno's lectures on metaphysics where, in the lecture “Dying Today” (a precursor and parallel to Meditation 3, ND 368–73/361–6), Adorno suggests that “only if the infinite possibility … radically contained in every human life … were reached … might we have the possibility of being reconciled to death.” The context makes clear that Adorno regards this “infinite possibility” as not only historically enabled and blocked but also anthropologically universal: it is a potential that, if actualized, would mean we are “really identical to that which we are not but which we deeply know we could become, though we may want to believe the contrary” (MCP 132–3).

The manner in which this possibility is historical differs from a Hegelian understanding that subordinates possibility to actuality. As Iain Macdonald shows, the historical possibility that carries most weight for Adorno is one that historical actuality has blocked but that nevertheless remains both possible and preferable to the “real possibilities” afforded by “real historical actuality” (Macdonald 2017). Yet it remains crucial that historical actuality points toward the possibility it also blocks. This is why Adorno claims happiness simultaneously inhabits objects and is remote from them. It is also why he says “objective” theological and
metaphysical categories simultaneously encapsulate a “hardened society” and the “priority of the object” (ND 374/367).

Consequently, as a parallel passage in Adorno’s lectures on metaphysics states, metaphysical experience, to the extent it is still possible, occurs in a nearly instantaneous configuration between “flashes of fallible consciousness” and “the primacy of the object” (MCP 142). Negative Dialectics translates this depiction of metaphysical experience into the following description of truth:

The surplus beyond the subject, however, which subjective metaphysical experience does not want to surrender, and the truth-moment in what is thing-like \( \text{Wahrheitsmoment am Dinghaften} \) are extremes that touch in the idea of truth. For [truth] could not exist without the subject that wrestles free from illusion \( \text{Schein} \) any more than [it could exist] without that which is not the subject and in which truth has its prototype \( \text{Urbild} \).

\( \text{(ND 375/368)} \)

To wrestle free from societally imposed illusion, and to be touched by the nonidentical, are the key to metaphysical experience. Together, they are what the experience of truth comes to for Adorno, and their conjoint occurrence is a historically and anthropologically real possibility.

Adorno’s pointing to the possibility of transcendence goes some distance to allay the worries about absolutism and relativism raised by his emphasis on the necessity of historical development. Despite and amid the pervasiveness of his historical metanarrative, he emphasizes the openness and fallibility of philosophical experience. This emphasis raises the possibility that the truth of particular assertions and claims can be tested in experience and not simply deferred along an endless chain of interlinked assertions. Although, as I have argued elsewhere, Adorno problematically makes philosophical experience self-authenticating (Zuidervaart 2007: 66–9, 98–101), nevertheless the appeal to experience provides an important counterweight to his historical metanarrative—one that Habermasian critics, who charge Adorno with having an “esoteric” idea of truth, have been reluctant to acknowledge.

So, too, by indicating that historico-anthropological transcendence is not impossible—that the sociohistorically comprehensive context of illusion \( \text{Verblendungszusammenhang} \) does not have the final word—Adorno alleviates the worry that historical forces would be thought to guarantee the truth of his ideas. Given his own conception of truth, whether or not his ideas are true depends, in the end, on the extent to which they align with the possibility of something else and something more than the historical forces that require him to articulate these ideas. These forces might necessitate the articulation, but they do not guarantee the truth of his ideas.

Now, however, other concerns arise. For to test truth claims in experience requires that the right sort of experience be historically available and not simply historically possible. Moreover, to appeal to the possibility of historico-anthropological transcendence presupposes that this possibility actually obtains and is not simply the figment of a historically desperate imagination. Is the right sort of experience historically available? Does the possibility of transcendence actually obtain? To address these concerns, we need to look at Adorno’s critical retrieval of Immanuel Kant’s transcendental ideas in Meditations 6–9.

**Critical Self-Negation and Mimetic Self-Disclosure**

Like Hegel, Adorno criticizes Kant for having an unduly restricted conception of truth, one that makes a certain model of scientific rationality the standard for all knowledge. This
scientistic and restricted conception of knowledge is at odds, however, with what Adorno calls the “pathos of the infinite” (ND 384/377) in Kant’s account of practical reason, which is supposed to have primacy over theoretical reason. As a result, the (infinite) truth toward which Kant aspires in his practical philosophy cannot be assigned to what he regards as finite knowledge. Unlike Hegel, who resolves this tension in an absolute knowledge of the absolute, Adorno reconfigures it via a novel reconstruction of Kant’s transcendental ideas. As Martin Shuster suggests, this reconstruction of transcendental ideas belongs to the effort in Adorno’s late work to negotiate between the dialectic of enlightenment, which threatens to dissolve agency, and the “rational theology” Kant articulates in order to support rational autonomy (Shuster 2014).

There are three such ideas in Kant’s Critiques. Kant construes all three as pointing to matters that can be thought but cannot be known: the immortal soul, an intelligible world in which humans can be free moral agents, and God as the Supreme Being. In the Second Critique, Kant treats the soul’s immortality, human freedom, and God’s existence as “postulates of pure practical reason”; these ideas are subjectively necessary in order for people to be moral and to pursue the highest good (Kant 1996: 228–58; AK 5: 110–48). In this way, as Adorno says, Kant retains traditional metaphysical ideas and even gives them a crucial role. Yet Kant refuses to conclude from the practical necessity of our having these ideas that therefore their objects must exist—for such we cannot know, given Kant’s restricted conception of knowledge (ND 385/378).

What Kant attributes to the inherent limitations of human knowledge, Adorno ascribes instead to the barriers imposed by the societal (and historically changeable) preformation of knowledge. Capitalist society privileges science over other modes of experience, Adorno claims, and it imprisons people in the pursuit of self-preservation and production for its own sake; Kantian restrictions on knowledge both ratify and arise from such societal preformation (ND 386–90/379–82). As an alternative, Adorno once again points to the historical possibility of wrestling free from illusion and giving priority to the object:

The moment of independence, of irreducibility in spirit [Geist] might very well accord with the priority of the object. Where spirit becomes autonomous [selbständig] here and now, as soon as it names the fetters in which it lands by fettering others, it, not entangled praxis, anticipates freedom.

(ND 390/382)

This independence in spirit, this wrestling free from illusion, is precisely what Adorno finds in Kant’s transcendental ideas. Taken collectively as what Adorno calls “the concept of the intelligible” (der Begriff des Intelligibeln), they must be thought in a negative fashion, he says, as the “self-negation of finite spirit” (ND 392/384). In this self-negation is registered not only the insufficiency of spirit—caught, as it is, in the partially self-spun webs of societally truncated life—but also the insufficiency of finite existence itself. At the same time, however, the finite existence that spirit tries to comprehend and, in comprehending, tries to dominate, receives an opportunity to show itself as being more than what it is under the distorting conditions of societal domination. Accordingly, the object of the transcendental ideas—what the concept of the intelligible is about—is, in Adorno’s memorable formulation, that which what is concealed to finite spirit discloses [zukehrt] to finite spirit and which finite spirit is compelled to think—but which finite spirit also deforms, due to its own finitude, its own societal preformation (“was das dem endlichen Geist Verborgene diesem zukehrt, was er zu denken gezwungen ist und vermöge der eigenen Endlichkeit deformiert,” ND 392/384). In other words, the transcendental ideas—immortality, freedom, God—are about the nonidentical, and they are a “moment of transcendent objectivity” in spirit. They are about “something
that does not exist and yet is not simply nonexistent [etwas, was nicht ist und doch nicht nur nicht ist]” (ND 392–3/385).

As responses to the concerns I raised earlier, these formulations seem to suggest that the right sort of experience for testing truth claims is indeed historically available and that the possibility of historico-anthropological transcendence actually obtains. On the one hand, what Adorno calls the “self-negation of finite spirit” is itself made possible by the historical dialectic of enlightenment. On the other hand, the self-disclosure of that which resists and exceeds the grasp of finite spirit does not completely depend on the operations of finite spirit: spirit’s self-negation helps create the opportunity for the nonidentical’s self-disclosure, but this self-disclosure is not constituted by the operations of finite spirit. There is, one could say, a precarious yet historically rooted oscillation between finite spirit’s self-negation and the nonidentical’s self-disclosure.

Because this oscillation is both precarious and historical, Adorno describes the transcendental ideas as a necessary illusion or necessary semblance (Schein). Their objects are neither real nor imaginary (ND 391/384) yet, as a historically rooted semblance of transcendence, the transcendental ideas are necessary. That is why the redemption of illusion, which Adorno makes central to aesthetics, has “incomparable metaphysical relevance,” he says (ND 393/386).

Here still other questions arise. It is one thing to claim that the experience needed to test truth claims is historically available and that the possibility of historico-anthropological transcendence actually obtains. It is something different, however, to suggest that the historically necessary illusion that epitomizes such experience and such transcendence can be redeemed. What makes the redemption of illusion possible, and in what does it consist? In other words, what is truth?

**Convergence and Hope**

At this point readers of Adorno face a fork in the hermeneutical road. Some interpreters, such as Habermas, read Adorno as having become so entrapped in his own historical metanarrative that only (modern) art and aesthetic theory could provide the escape hatch he both seeks and needs: only in aesthetics could he rescue the semblance of transcendence. Habermas’s interpretation presupposes that Adorno and Horkheimer regard reason as being only instrumental both in modernity and throughout human history. Part of the difficulty here is that Adorno and Horkheimer might or might not have different views of reason in history. Espen Hammer has given good reasons to regard Habermas’s presupposition as incorrect with respect to Adorno (Hammer 2015: 32–44); Martin Jay has given equally good reasons to consider Habermas’s presupposition more or less correct with respect to Horkheimer, especially in Horkheimer’s *Eclipse of Reason* (Jay 2016); and I have taken issue with Habermas’s *The Theory of Communicative Action* and *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* for giving reductionist readings of both Horkheimer and Adorno’s critique of reason (Zuidervaart 2007: 107–31).

Unlike Habermas’s influential interpretation, others read the occasional references to art and aesthetics in Adorno’s “Meditations on Metaphysics” as emblematic, not definitive, of the semblance of transcendence and its rescue. For such interpreters, the most fundamental redemption of illusion would not occur in art and aesthetics but in a structural transformation of society as a whole. Let me distinguish these two lines of interpretation as the aestheticist and the social transformationalist readings of Adorno’s metacritique of metaphysics. I count myself among the social transformationalist interpreters, also in my book on Adorno’s aesthetics, where the subtitle does not intend to restrict “the redemption of illusion” to art and the philosophical interpretation of art (Zuidervaart 1991).
Meditation 11, titled “Semblance of the Other [Schein des Anderen]” (ND 402–5/394–7), bears out a social transformationalist interpretation. One could call this meditation Adorno’s negative eschatology. Not surprisingly, it begins with Hegel, whose metaphysical construction of world history is the antipode to Adorno’s historical construction of metaphysical experience. According to Adorno, Hegel problematically resurrects ontological proofs for God’s existence when he makes the concept the guarantor of the nonconceptual, thereby abolishing transcendence. After that, transcendence crumbled at the hands of societal and cultural enlightenment and became increasingly arcane [zum Verborgenen wird—das Verborgene being the same term used in Meditation 8 (ND 392/384) to talk about the object of the transcendental ideas]. This arcанization was registered, Adorno suggests, in dialectical theologies of the “wholly other” (e.g., Karl Barth and Rudolf Bultmann) (ND 402/394). So questions about the historical possibility and availability of transcendence have intensified.

In response, Adorno appeals to something that resists being demythologized. What resists being demythologized, he says, is a metaphysical experience, namely, the experience that thought that “does not decapitate itself” flows into transcendence. It flows all the way into the idea of a world where “not only extant suffering would be abolished but also suffering that is irrevocably past would be revoked.” It is the experience of having all thoughts converge in the concept of “something that would be different” from the current unspeakable world (ND 403/395). It is, one could say, the thought expressed by Max Horkheimer in “The Longing for the Wholly Other,” his remarkable interview in Der Spiegel magazine one year after Adorno’s death. There, Horkheimer suggests that in the end, despite all the injustice and violence both experienced in the past and continuing today, injustice will not prevail—a thought Horkheimer describes as a “theology,” a “hope,” and a “longing”:

Theologie ist … die Hoffnung, dass es bei diesem Unrecht, durch das die Welt gekennzeichnet ist, nicht bleibe, dass das Unrecht nicht das letzte Wort sein möge. … [Theologie ist] Ausdruck einer Sehnsucht, einer Sehnsucht danach, dass der Mörder nicht über das unschuldige Opfer triumphieren möge.

(Horkheimer 1970: 61–2)

Adorno calls this the “concept” (Begriff) and the “experience” of convergence (Erfahrung von Konvergenz) (ND 403–4/395–6). The experience of convergence does not ignore socio-historical reality. Yet it resists any claim that this reality is all there is, that no better future is possible. The basis for such resistance lies in the traces we experience of something other within the “disturbed and damaged” course of the world, the broken promises of something other within the breeches to total identity, the fragments of happiness (Glück) that people have while they both deny and are denied complete happiness (ND 403–4/395–6). Adorno calls such convergence “the humanly promised other of history” (ND 404/396), and he says it points to that transcendence which (Heideggerian) ontology illegitimately locates before or outside history. The humanly promised other of history points to a historically possible society in which violence and suffering have ended.

Unlike ontological proofs for God’s existence, Adorno’s negative eschatology does not claim that this utopian condition is real or actual (wirklich) just because certain sociohistorical traces and fragments point to it. Yet he does claim that the concept of convergence could not be conceived if something actual (in der Sache) did not press toward it (ND 404/396). Just as he had said earlier that the object of the transcendental ideas discloses itself to finite spirit and compels finite spirit to think it, so now he claims that something within the sociohistorical world elicits and compels the thought of convergence.

Here we have answers to the questions posed earlier about the redemption of illusion. The redemption of illusion is made possible by the convergence of experience on the humanly
promised other of history, and such redemption consists in the persistent refusal to give up
on what is humanly and historically promised. In other words, truth is the undying and crit-
ically articulable hope for complete social transformation. Art is emblematic in this regard,
not because it is the only bastion left where truth can occur, but because it amplifies both
the refusal and the promise.
This, it seems to me, is how we should read the eloquent passage that concludes Medita-
tion 11. Let me quote parts of it before I comment on it:

Thought that does not capitulate before wretched existence comes to naught before
its criteria, truth becomes untruth, philosophy becomes folly. And yet philosophy
cannot give up, lest idiocy triumph in actualized unreason [Widervernunft] … Folly
is truth in the shape that human beings must accept whenever, amid the untrue,
they do not give up truth. Art, even at its highest peaks, is semblance [Schein]; but
art receives the semblance … from nonsemblance [vom Scheinlosen]. By refrain-
ing from judgment, [art] says … everything would not be just nothing. Otherwise
everything that is would be pale, colorless, indifferent. No light falls on people and
things in which transcendence would not appear [widerschienen]. Indelible in resis-
tance to the fungible world of exchange is the resistance of the eye that does not
want the world’s colors to be destroyed. In semblance nonsemblance is promised.
(ND 404–5/396–7)

In this passage, art is emblematic of anything in society and experience that resists the
“fungible world of exchange,” but art is not exhaustive in this regard. Adorno also mentions
“philosophy” and “human beings” as being capable of not capitulating “before wretched
existence” and not giving up truth. Moreover, he does not restrict the light falling on people
and things to either art or philosophy. As Adorno suggests earlier in this Medita-
tion, transcendence can appear wherever people experience fragments of happiness or, as he says in
the passage just quoted, whenever the eye “does not want the world’s colors to be destroyed.”
Truth is a persistent hope for complete social transformation; in principle, access to it cannot
be limited.

Looking back, we can see more clearly why Adorno regards truth as the “highest” among
“metaphysical” ideas. It is highest because no resistance to “wretched existence,” including
the resistance within Adorno’s own negative dialectics, would have a purpose or a point if
there were no hope that existence could be otherwise. Further, the idea of truth is metaphys-
cal because, in the end, the only way for this hope to show up is by breaking through the
finitude and fallibility of necessary illusion. If there were no hope for complete social trans-
formation, then “actualized unreason” would have the final word, and Adorno would have
to surrender his claims to speak truth about “wretched existence.” It is by rescuing a nega-
tively eschatological idea of truth from Kant’s critique of metaphysics that Adorno shows
“solidarity with metaphysics in the moment of its collapse” (ND 408/400). The entire point
of what Adorno calls the migration of metaphysics into “micrology” is to assemble existence
into a “legible constellation” (ND 407/399) where, despite and within the wretchedness, the
historically actual possibility of social transformation shines through.

Predicative Self-Disclosure and Hopeful Critique
The unprecedented mixture of history and transcendence in Adorno’s idea of truth makes
it susceptible to criticisms from many different angles. I have raised some of these criticisms
myself, arguing, for example, that Adorno fails to find an adequate basis for transformative
hope (Zuidervaart 2007: 70–6). Here, however, I want to explore what is right about Adorno’s
idea of truth as a whole and then consider how it relates to a conception of propositional truth. Paradoxically, as I shall show, Adorno’s most important contributions on the topic of truth as a whole undermine his potential contributions to a conception of propositional truth. Conversely, what Adorno’s Negative Dialectics could offer a theory of propositional truth conflicts with his conception of truth as a whole.

Like Adorno, and unlike most contemporary truth theorists, I regard propositional truth as only one dimension of truth as a whole—an important dimension, to be sure, but not all-important. Once one distinguishes propositional truth from truth as a whole, however, one also needs to account for their relation. Like Heidegger, albeit in strikingly different ways, Adorno fails to give an adequate account of this relation. Soon I shall explain why. But first let me say what Adorno has contributed to our understanding of truth as a whole. Two contributions stand out: the nexus of hope and critique, and a negative epistemic relation.

To begin, Adorno’s idea of truth calls attention to a nexus of social hope and social critique that receives short shrift in most philosophical conceptions of truth. Moreover, Adorno accomplishes this without turning the object of hope into an ahistorical unknown. We might not know precisely what a wholly transformed society would be like, but we can know it would be one where violence and suffering do not prevail. Further, we have sufficient indications in our experience—ciphers of promise, as it were—to believe hope for such a society need not be misplaced. At the same time, precisely because social hope need not be misplaced, it makes sense to undertake a thoroughgoing critique of the historical societal formation we inhabit. It makes sense, as Adorno famously put it at the end of Minima Moralia, to try “to contemplate all things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption” (MM 247/283). Truth is the idea in which social hope and social critique interlink. If Adorno is right, we cannot have one without the other, and without truth as a whole we would not have either hope or critique.

So, too, Adorno’s idea of truth calls attention to the negative side of a cognitive relation that most truth theorists either dismiss or treat in an exclusively positive manner. The relation in question holds between the subject and the object of knowledge: between what I label the epistemic subject and the epistemic object. Contemporary truth theorists primarily discuss this as the relation (if any) between “truth bearers” and “truth makers” (if any), a discussion that is central to debates between alethic realists and alethic antirealists. Alethic realists and antirealists share an underlying assumption, however, namely, that if there is a truth-making relation between, say, propositions and facts, then this would be a positive relation: a correspondence or correlation or congruence, for example.

Adorno explodes this assumption. He introduces the notion of a precarious, historically rooted oscillation between critical self-negation on the part of the epistemic subject (“finite spirit”) and mimetic self-disclosure on the part of the epistemic object in its nonidentity. According to this notion, the truth of knowledge would primarily consist not in a positive relation between epistemic subject and object (e.g., correspondence) but in a negative relation. It would consist in the epistemic subject’s not imposing conceptual identity on the object and in the epistemic object’s not aligning with the subject’s identifications. Moreover, such nonalignment would occur when the epistemic subject criticizes its own identifications and thereby allows the epistemic object to show itself to be more than it is thought to be. Unlike most contemporary truth theorists, then, Adorno makes subjective self-critique and objective otherness central to the truth of knowledge. This, in turn, implies that social critique and social hope are intrinsic to the acquisition and confirmation of true knowledge—yet another insight one seeks in vain among most contemporary truth theorists.

Nevertheless, both of Adorno’s contributions concerning truth as a whole—truth as a nexus of hope and critique, and negativity as central to the truth of knowledge—make it difficult for him to give an adequate account of propositional truth—the truth that accrues
to beliefs, assertions, propositions, and the like. I believe Adorno recognized this difficulty. Moreover, precisely because he recognized it, he labored mightily to distinguish his negative dialectics from Heideggerian ontology, where a similar disconnection occurs between propositional truth and truth as a whole, but for different reasons. Whereas Heidegger's disconnection occurs because his account of Dasein's disclosedness (Erschlossenheit) leaves too few ways to distinguish true assertions from false ones (Zuidervaart 2017: 47–73), Adorno's disconnection occurs because his emphasis on the nonidentical prevents him from giving an adequate account of the epistemic object's predicative self-disclosure. Let me explain.

Adorno's idea of the nonidentical is a protean notion, and it can be applied to many different matters. Insofar as it pertains to the epistemic object, however, the “nonidentical” indicates something more to the object than the identity it has under existing (societally preformed) predications. In order for this “something moreness” to become available for predication, two things must happen on the epistemic subject’s side. First, existing ways of predication that miss—indeed, suppress—the object in its nonidentity must be overturned. That is the role of self-negation and self-critique. Second, other ways of relating to the object, ways that are open to the object’s being something more, must come into play. That is what Adorno indicates with the concept of mimesis: an archaic mode of conduct that can persist even in the outer reaches of abstract thought. What I discussed earlier as the nonidentical’s self-disclosure takes place via mimesis.

Predication, however, occurs in ordinary language usage and, as Adorno himself recognizes, language usage is highly variable. For the requisite self-critique to be at all on target, there must be a way to specify which predications concerning an object are better or worse with respect to the object’s identity. Further, in order for there to be better and worse predications in this respect, the object’s own identity must offer itself for predication in better and worse ways. But the object can offer itself in better and worse ways only if it already has an identity that exceeds any that the subject asserts about it. This implies, in turn, that objects must be capable of self-disclosure not only in their nonidentity vis-à-vis the subject’s existing predications but also—and importantly—in their identity prior to the subject’s predicating and in openness to being predicated. In addition to mimetic self-disclosure, then, the epistemic object must be capable of predicative self-disclosure.

Adorno cannot countenance predicative self-disclosure, however, because, as Espen Hammer has argued, his conception of propositional truth rests on a fundamental failure “to distinguish properly between predication and identification” (Hammer 2015: 106). Adorno tightly associates the ordinary use of predicates to identify something in a certain respect with the (dominating) imposition of identity on something as such. Because of this, he cannot see that ordinary predication neither attempts nor accomplishes an imposition of identity. When I say, “This house is green,” for example, I do not violently subsume a particular house under universal greenness. Nor do I thereby violate either the full-blown object (a particular house) or my robust experience of it. I simply call attention to one specific aspect of the object’s identity, an aspect it shares with other objects but displays in its own unique way, and an aspect that is only one among many aspects it displays. Because Adorno tends to equate predication with impositional identification, he needs, as an alternative, to appeal to a Benjaminian notion of non-intentional truth—accessible via mimetic conduct, artworks, and dialectical self-critique—as what allows the particular “to identify itself as what it is independently of all human strategies or procedures for identification” (Hammer 2015: 112). For Adorno, the only self-disclosure available from the epistemic object is mimetic, not predicative. In this position Adorno shows what Hammer describes as an indebtedness to “two radically diverging philosophical visions,” a Kant/Hegel idealist emphasis on the conceptual mediation of experience, which Adorno takes in a primarily negative direction, and a
Schelling/Benjamin metaphysically realist emphasis on non-discursive access to “transcendent objecthood” (Hammer 2015: 115, 117).

Hence, Adorno cannot really account for what I call predicative self-disclosure. He cannot account for this because he ties predication so closely to the societally preformed and conceptual imposition of identity upon the epistemic object. Indeed, as Owen Hulatt shows in his detailed account of “the interpenetration of concepts and society” in Adorno’s conception of truth, this results in a type of “negativism” with respect to propositional truth (Hulatt 2016: 27–104). In an odd way, the deception of constitutive subjectivity, which Adorno’s Negative Dialectics rightly aims to shatter (ND xx/10), returns in his failure to recognize the object’s availability for predication. Now one could try to defend Adorno by arguing, as Philip Hogh suggests, that Adorno does not conflate predication and identification. For Adorno, one could say, there is always more to the concept than its being a “unit of properties” (Merkmalseinheit): it has both an ethical and an aesthetic “surplus” (Hogh 2017: 98–101). Similarly, there is always more to predicative judgments than their being conceptual identifications for they always also give expression to subjective experiences and sociohistorical contexts (Hogh 2017: 101–3). The problem with such a defense, however, is that it accepts Adorno’s claim that, under current sociohistorical conditions, the primary usage of concepts—as units of properties—and predicative judgments—as conceptual identifications—is to impose a universal identity on objects and thereby to do an injustice to particular objects in their particularity. Adorno’s mistake, in my view, lies precisely here, in his thinking that ordinary predications “only determine that moment of an object that marks it as a specimen of a universal concept” and that therefore we need other means—negation, conceptual constellations, and the like—to redirect concepts “towards the nonidentical by their ethical surplus” (Hogh 2017: 109). It may be so that, for Adorno, “the relationship between the concept as a unit of properties and its ethical surplus … is the leading concern in approaching predicative judgments” (Hogh 2017: 113). The reason why this would be his leading concern, however, is because Adorno has misconstrued concepts and predications as impositions of universal identity in the first place.

Contra Adorno, it is because epistemic objects are always already available for linguistic reference and predication that we can make assertions about them. And it is because such predicative availability on the part of objects can align with their other, nonlinguistic modes of availability that our assertions can be more or less correct. In other words, so-called propositional truth requires not only that the object of knowledge have its own prior identity, as Adorno rightly insists, but also that this identity can disclose itself when predication occurs and that it is not imposed by the epistemic subject’s predication.

In the context of propositional truth, this prior identity of the object vis-à-vis predication is the true priority of the object, it seems to me, and it is one that Adorno’s worries about the societal preformation of knowledge prevent him from spelling out. Because of this, Adorno fails to offer an adequate account of predicative self-disclosure, as I have tried to show at greater length in a separate paper on his critique of Husserl and Heidegger (Zuidervaart 2018). Adorno thereby also fails to provide an adequate account of propositional truth within his conception of truth as a whole.

At this point, the loyal defender of Adorno’s negative dialectics might be tempted to retort, “So much the worse for propositional truth.” I am not such a defender. Yet, in expecting Adorno to give an adequate account of propositional truth, I believe I remain faithful to the spirit of his philosophy. And here I agree with Peter Gordon who, while demonstrating “the hidden and not-so-hidden points of contact between Adorno and existentialism,” nevertheless distinguishes Adorno from irrationalist critics of modernity: Adorno’s negativity “still glows, however faintly, with a rationalist’s hope for a better world” (Gordon 2016: 11). To distort the facts, embrace the lie, and spout destructive ideology cannot be in line with
a world without violence and suffering. To say why this is so, philosophers need to account for propositional truth. Yet, as Adorno understood, their account also needs to align with a vision of hopeful critique.

Note

1 “Adorno’s Negative Dialectics at Fifty,” a conference organized by Peter E. Gordon and Max Pensky and held at Harvard University on November 18–19, 2016, where I first presented this chapter, was a truly historic occasion. I thank the conference organizers for their invitation and the conference participants for their lively and inspiring conversation. Later versions were presented to the Sixth Annual Meeting of the Association for Adorno Studies at Duke University, March 24–25, 2017 and to the Philosophy Colloquium at Grand Valley State University on November 3, 2017. Again, my thanks go to the event organizers and participants for their instructive comments and questions.

References


Further Reading


Bernstein, J. M. (2001) Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (Argues that Adorno’s “ethical modernism” explains how a wholly secular form of life can be both rationally compelling and intrinsically motivating.)

Cook, D. (2011) Adorno on Nature, Durham, UK: Acumen. (Shows how Adorno’s conception of nature informs his entire philosophy and is relevant for addressing the environmental crisis.)


