

Roger Foster

Adorno

The Recovery of Experience

Adorno

SUNY series in Contemporary Continental Philosophy

Dennis J. Schmidt, editor

Adorno

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Roger Foster

State University of New York Press

Published by
State University of New York Press, Albany

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For information, contact State University of New York Press, Albany, NY
www.sunypress.edu

Production by Michael Haggett and Kelli W. LeRoux
Marketing by Michael Campochiaro

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Foster, Roger, 1971–

Adorno : the recovery of experience / Roger Foster.

p. cm. — (SUNY series in contemporary continental philosophy)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-7914-7209-5 (hardcover : alk. paper)

1. Adorno, Theodor W., 1903–1969. I. Title.

B3199.A34F67 2007

193—dc22

2006036599

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For Hildy

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Acknowledgments

My engagement with Adorno began a decade ago under the auspices of Doug Moggach in the PhD program of the University of Ottawa. My ambition at the time was to rescue Adorno's contribution to critical social theory from under the weight of its Habermasian critique. That project first crystallized during a stay at Frankfurt in 1997–1998 which, in large part because of Axel Honneth's encouragement, proved to be an incomparable intellectual experience. This book began from a sense that the completion of that project did not really touch the core of what Adorno was all about. In trying to make sense of why that was so, I have benefited in the interim from conversations with Jay Bernstein, whose work on Adorno has been a continual point of intellectual reference. Brian O'Connor and Tom Huhn have supported this project from the beginning. I hope it is a better work for their advice and encouragement. I couldn't have completed a project like this without an outlet from the wastes of Adornian abstraction. I am grateful in particular to two of my colleagues at BMCC, Matthew Ally and Jack Estes, for their disinclination to take Adorno too seriously. The professional insight of Ron Hayduk was also invaluable.

It would not have been possible to realize this work without the support of the Philosophy Committee of PSC-Cuny. Two Research Awards in 2004–2005 and 2005–2006 made it possible for me to do all the substantial writing in a reasonable space of time. Release Time won for junior faculty at the City University of New York by the Professional Staff Congress also proved to be vital in giving me breathing room to think and write.

This project began life around the same time as the birth of my son, Holden, three years ago. Its completion coincided (almost to the day) with the birth of my daughter, Eden. A number of people (Sue, Chuck, Lauren, and Mindy, and, in a cameo appearance, Alan and Rose) came through with babysitting assistance at just the right times to allow me to concentrate on Adorno. Finally, Hildy made this work possible in more ways than I know how to express. This book is dedicated to her.

NOTE ON TRANSLATION

All the translations from German and French original sources in this work are my own.

INTRODUCTION

The Theory of Spiritual Experience

The truths seized directly by the intelligence in the full light of the world have something that is less profound, less necessary than those which life has communicated to us in spite of ourselves, in an impression that is material because it entered by way of the senses, but of which we can discern the spirit. In sum . . . sensations must be interpreted as the signs of so many laws and ideas, in order to think, or to draw out of the shadows what I had experienced, to convert it in to a spiritual equivalent.

—Marcel Proust, *Time Regained*

Literature ought only to depict a woman as bearing, as if she were a mirror, the colors of the tree or the river near which we typically represent her to ourselves.

—Marcel Proust, *The Guermantes Way*

The gaze that in interpreting a phenomenon becomes aware of more than what it merely is, and solely thereby, of what it is, secularizes metaphysics.

—Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectic*

The quotes from Proust above articulate both what is involved in the idea of spiritual experience, the interpretation of what strikes the senses as something that is at the same time “spiritual,” and also provide in miniature a depiction of the literary technique that is supposed to recover the idea of spiritual experience. The experiential item, Proust suggests, is to be read as a surface on which is inscribed a contextual whole, the immanent universal or “essence” of that item. The main idea behind the notion of spiritual experience can be

understood as a type of interpretation that saturates the object with meanings derived from how it appears as significant or meaningful for a subject. The project of a recovery of spiritual experience, and the construction of a type of philosophical writing that would be able to put this in to practice, is the unifying core to Adorno's strikingly multidisciplinary oeuvre.¹ The introduction to *Negative Dialectic*, which perhaps more than any other of Adorno's writings contains the methodological key to his work, had originally carried the title of a "theory of spiritual experience." The introduction, Adorno writes, is intended to expound the "concept of philosophical experience" (1966, 10). Adorno's understanding of dialectic must be seen in terms of this project. It was in the form of a highly original version of dialectic that Adorno found the solution to the philosophical recovery of spiritual experience. From the time of the 1931 *Antrittsvorlesung*, Adorno had sought to elucidate a type of reading in which particular items (whether philosophical concepts, musical pieces, artworks, social objects, etc.) would be interpreted as the locus of an immanent universal. Each particular thereby becomes a microcosm, where every element of that particular is a cipher that, when appropriately interpreted, can be made to reveal an aspect of that particular's spiritual significance. The reference to this type of experience as "spiritual," *geistig*, is intended to distinguish it from the empiricist notion of experience. What is distinctive about spiritual experience is that the multilayered relations of a thing with other things outside it, and eventually the entirety of its context, are allowed to inform the cognitive significance of that thing. Rather than moving from the particular to the general by the abstraction of a common property from the object in question, spiritual experience moves from the particular to the universal by reweaving the threads of significance that link the object to its context. The universal is not brought to bear as a classification of the particular (where this implies the abstraction of a common property), it is rather constructed; the universal is simply the totality formed by the different chains of relational significance that make the object intelligible as the kind of object that it is. And these chains themselves are constructed by the interpretation of the elements that form the particular's surface. In the case of a philosophical text, the elements in question will be comprised of particular examples, turns of phrase, transition points of an argument, definitions, and elucidations. In the case of musical works, these elements will include phrases, melodic arrangements, and the technical structure. In sociological analysis, the elements will be present as the behaviors and characteristics of a thing, and the history of its interactions.

Whatever it is that is made the object of spiritual experience (and a guiding theme of Adorno's thinking is that anything can potentially become such an object), the important thing is that this item is interpreted as the bearer of an immanent universal. Adorno developed this idea in opposition to the type

of universal that figures in the classifying function of concepts. The classificatory operation of concepts is essentially the procedure that Kant (1974) describes as “determinate” judgment. Classification involves the subsumption of a particular under a pre-given concept, by treating that particular as an instance of a universal property. The particular is recognized (classified) as exhibiting an ideally detachable characteristic that it potentially shares with other things. Kant contrasts this structure with “reflective” or aesthetic judgment, in which judgment has to go in search of the concept, or perhaps even construct a new one, starting from the particular.² The concept, in this case, is dependent on its object in a new and radical sense, because it emerges only through the interrogation of the material qualities of that particular object. This idea provides a useful frame for understanding the structure of spiritual experience. In spiritual experience, the particular is directly the *expression* of a universal, not an instantiation of a universal property. In other words, the universal is not detachable from the particular as a repeatable property because it is the figure formed by the deciphering of the contextual significance of its elements. Adorno develops and employs the idea of spiritual experience in the context of a radical critique of the model of philosophical cognition as classification under concepts. The point is not to dispense with classificatory knowing. Adorno’s intention is rather to circumscribe it. Rather than constituting the whole of philosophical cognition, Adorno wants to demarcate classification as part of a far broader notion of philosophical understanding that encompasses a richer view of cognitively significant experience. In this richer view, the particular does not figure solely as a replaceable item, an instance of something it has in common with other things. Each thing, rather, forms a legible surface, from which a universal uniquely and materially tied to that thing is constructed. The universal is reflected in it, as the unique configuration formed by its manifold relations to other things.

It has long been established in Adorno scholarship that experience plays a crucial role in Adorno’s critique of modern philosophy and is also central to his social-critical writings.³ The modern world, for Adorno, is marked primarily by a transformation in the structure of experience, a structure that is reflected in the theoretical self-understandings of that world produced by philosophy. Adorno tends to describe this structure in terms such as “withered” or “restricted” experience. It is the legacy of that historical process that Max Weber famously described as one of disenchantment.⁴ This much may be readily accepted, but my claim that Adorno’s key counterconcept to the disenchanting structure of experience is spiritual experience deserves a fuller explanation since, as far as I am aware, there exists no extended treatment of this idea in the existing secondary literature on Adorno. First, then, a note on translation. The usual translation of *geistige Erfahrung* into English in Adorno’s works has been “intellectual experience.”⁵ My dissatisfaction with

this translation is that it seems to reinforce precisely that model of the role of the subject in experience that Adorno wants to oppose with the idea of *geistige Erfahrung*. In other words, it does not convey the idea of using the subject to disclose the truth about the object. To call an experience “intellectual” suggests, perhaps, that it is disembodied, more a reflection of who does the thinking than a disclosure of the world. To call it “spiritual” experience, of course, also risks significant misunderstandings. But the risks, I believe, are outweighed by the need to maintain the perceptible link with the Hegelian notion of *Geist* and *geistig*, as well as the Proustian understanding of *expérience spirituelle*.

Adorno began to use the term *geistige Erfahrung* while working on a series of lectures on Hegel in the late fifties and early sixties, work that Adorno described as “preparation for a revised conception of the dialectic” (1993b, xxxvi). Adorno here speaks of *geistige Erfahrung* in terms of the “experiential substance of Hegel’s philosophy,” as opposed to the “experiential content in Hegel’s philosophy” (1993b, 54). Whereas the latter would comprise the operation of concepts as the tools of determinate judgment, the former is defined in terms of “the compelling force of the objective phenomena that have been reflected in [Hegel’s] philosophy and are sedimented in it.” These phenomena are not present *in* concepts as their content. Instead they represent the embeddedness of the philosophical concept in a network of extraphilosophical relations that are reflected in it. Therefore, the experiential substance of a concept cannot be revealed in terms of how that concept determines a specific content (its functioning as subsumption); it relies on the possibility of the concept functioning within language as expression. I will argue in this work that Adorno understands the expressive force of the concept in terms of its potential to disclose (or show) more than it says. The constellational form that Adorno endorses for philosophy then becomes intelligible as the attempt to coax concepts toward the disclosure of what they express in language. The goal of philosophical writing (stated in the baldest terms) is to arrange words around a concept, so that the experiential substance of that concept becomes visible in it. When this process succeeds, the result is what Adorno calls spiritual experience.

The determining role of concepts can be understood as the subsumption of sensuous content under rules that insert that content into a structured set of rational relations.⁶ Concepts, as forms of determinate judgment, determine the inferential relations between conceptual contents, that is, the connectives that link one conceptual content with another. What it means for something to be a conceptual content is therefore for it to be capable of serving in a series of inferential roles.⁷ Adorno does not want to criticize determinate judgment *per se*; what he is criticizing is the identification of determinate judgment with cognitively significant experience. Presupposed in the working of determinate

judgment, Adorno believes, is a conception of experiential items as repeatable exemplars.⁸ To “determine” a particular content is to constitute it as fit to serve in a particular inferential role, a role that could just as well be played by any other item with the same set of inferential licenses. Now what Adorno means by the moment of expression in concepts implies a broader notion of how concepts can function in cognition. The expression of experiential substance in concepts is concerned with the intrinsically historical meanings that are picked up by the concept via relations of contiguity and proximity. This point foregrounds two centrally important features: (1) the experiential substance of concepts must be understood as the *historical* world; and (2) what a concept expresses is not reducible to the inferential relations it licenses (since what it expresses depends on the concept’s proximity to a historical context). In its character as expression, the concept enters into relations with other meanings by virtue of sharing a historical world. These relations are eliminated in the reduction of the cognitive significance of the concept to *purely* inferential relations or (what I am claiming is the same thing) determinate judgment. Adorno, I will argue, believes that this insight into the dependence of the concept on historical experience provides the basis for a second Copernican turn that reverses the Kantian turn to the constituting subject.

Adorno’s reflections on *geistige Erfahrung* find their culmination in the introduction to *Negative Dialectic* (1966), which Adorno intended to be an exposition of spiritual experience. By my count, the phrase *geistige Erfahrung* occurs a total of nine times in the introduction.⁹ It recurs on a further two occasions in the rest of the entire book.¹⁰ It is easy to lose sight of the importance of this term in the text as a whole, as the range of the qualifiers attached to the term experience in this work is truly staggering. The introduction alone contains references to “philosophical experience” (p. 50), “political experience” (p. 60), “bodily experience” (p. 60), “temporal experience” (p. 62), and, of course, “full, unreduced experience” (p. 25). This is not to mention the rest of the work, which includes references to “living experience” (p. 380), “genuine experience” (p. 114), “unregimented experience” (p. 129), “unleashed [*ungegänzelt*] experience” (p. 295), and in part III, numerous references to “metaphysical” experience.

However, Adorno’s lectures on negative dialectic delivered in the 1965/1966 winter semester at Frankfurt University, lectures delivered very shortly before the publication of *Negative Dialectic*, provide substantial support for the thesis that this work as a whole can be understood as an elucidation of the idea of spiritual experience. While retaining the basic idea of the earlier Hegel lectures that spiritual experience involves the interpretation of “any and every existing thing as something that is at the same time spiritual [*geistig*]” (1993b, 57), the lectures on negative dialectic make clear the pivotal role of spiritual experience as a counterconcept to the withering of experience,

and provide more explicit details on how it is supposed to work. Adorno describes spiritual experience as a “spiritualization [*Spiritualisierung*] of the world” that goes beyond “mere, immediate sensuous experience” (2003a, 132). Elsewhere in the lectures, spiritual experience is described as the counterconcept to “all that which, since it can be described as the so called regulated process [*geregelter Fortgang*] of abstraction or as mere subsumption under concepts, is in the broadest sense mere technique” (p. 126). The clearest answer as to how spiritualization is supposed to be achieved, in opposition to the dry work of abstraction and the dull logic of conceptual subsumption, is given in Adorno’s notes for lecture eighteen. The first comment on Adorno’s (as always) sparse notes for this lecture runs: “*Why* the complete (*voll*) subject is necessary for the experience of objectivity” (p. 185). Adorno then remarks that “[t]he elimination of subjective qualities always corresponds to a reduction of the object.” Thus the more that reactions are eliminated as “merely subjective,” the more one loses the “qualitative determinations of the thing.” The central condition for the recovery of spiritual experience, Adorno is suggesting, is the rediscovery of the cognitive role of the experiencing subject. The 1965/1966 lectures also provide a clear indication of where to look for an understanding of the formative encounters through which Adorno developed this idea of spiritual experience. This would be among the generation that Adorno refers to as *meine geistige Eltern* (literally, “my spiritual parents” [p. 106]). In particular, Adorno singles out Husserl, Bergson, and Proust.

This study will attempt to show that the idea of spiritual experience is indispensable for understanding Adorno’s concept of philosophy as a type of negative dialectic. In the process, I will try to substantiate Adorno’s claim that spiritual experience requires a changed view of the role of the subject in cognition. I will do so, centrally, by developing the idea of spiritual experience through an investigation of Adorno’s relationship to Husserl, Bergson, and Proust. This, however, is only half the story. For Adorno’s idea of philosophy as a negative dialectic will be incomprehensible unless we can make sense of Adorno’s reflections on philosophical language, and in particular his repeated reference to philosophy as a struggle to “say the unsayable.” What is centrally important to this understanding of philosophy, I will argue, is a distinction between what language expresses or shows, as opposed to what it “says.” Our cognitive concepts have, to a large extent, become inoculated against the type of discursive presentation that would present objects as “at the same time something spiritual.” This is why, for Adorno, the recovery of spiritual experience must take the form of a struggle to say something that cannot be said in the language we have in which to say it. I will try to show in the course of this work that this idea is anything but a resigning of philosophy to an empty circularity. The chapters on Adorno’s relation to Wittgenstein and Benjamin (chapters 2–3) are

intended to expound on this important aspect of the theory of spiritual experience as a form of negative dialectic.

The method of elucidation of Adorno's idea of a recovery of experience in this book will be primarily indirect, in the sense that I will try to excavate the sense of this idea by reflecting it through surrounding texts and theoretical contributions, namely, those texts and contributions that either directly influenced or otherwise illuminate important elements of it. Spiritual experience, I will argue, derives its sense from the problematic around which these texts are configured. In the first chapter, I attempt to provide an overview of Adorno's philosophical project as a response to the contemporary conditions of experience, conditions that can be described under the term "disenchantment." My intention is to show how Adorno conceives the goal of philosophy as a recovery of experience, and to clear up some possible misconceptions about what this actually means. The discussion of Wittgenstein, in chapter 2, will clarify the sense of two ideas that are central to spiritual experience. These are (1) the notion of thought as a "process," and (2) a conception of the task of philosophy as that of "saying the unsayable." While I am not claiming that Wittgenstein is a formative influence on Adorno, I am suggesting that major elements of Adorno's understanding of philosophy are made intelligible in their relation to Wittgenstein's early thought. I then proceed to a discussion of Adorno's relation to Walter Benjamin in chapter 3. Benjamin, I will argue, is indispensable for understanding how Adorno develops his idea of philosophical interpretation. The discussion then moves to a more explicit discussion of Adorno's philosophy in terms of the idea of an "outbreak attempt." Spiritual experience, I will suggest, is conceived in the encounter with thinkers whose work Adorno interprets as systematic attempts to "break out" of constituting subjectivity. In the case of Husserl, I argue in chapter 4 that Adorno senses a strong affinity with Husserl's resistance to natural-scientific reductionism (which Adorno takes to be a direct consequence of disenchantment). However, Adorno will argue that Husserl does not think through the presuppositions of constituting subjectivity in a sufficiently radical way, and as a result his outbreak attempts fails. Chapter 5 examines Bergson, whose resistance to the reductivism of scientific rationalism is theorized in terms of the qualitative heterogeneity of *durée*, in opposition to the model of cognition as static classification through the intelligence. The fact that there are no existing treatments of Adorno's relation to Bergson in Adorno scholarship is, I believe, one of the main reasons why the idea of spiritual experience has remained undiscovered. The understanding of conceptual thinking as a form of domination or mastery over the nonconceptual is, I will suggest, an idea that Adorno traces to Bergson (and not Nietzsche). Although Adorno rejects the Bergsonian solution to the constricted cognitive experience in the concept, namely intuition, Bergson is indispensable for understanding the problematic

to which spiritual experience answers. Equally important, I shall suggest, is the recovery of the subject in Marcel Proust's literary project, as this is realized in *À la recherche du temps perdu*. This is the subject of chapter 6. The idea of using the subject to reverse the process of abstraction behind the formation of the constituting subject is, I will argue, realized in a masterful way in Proust's *magnum opus*. The final chapter, chapter 7, on John McDowell's reading of disenchantment in his *Mind and World* is intended to be a test case for the pertinence and critical force of Adorno's idea of spiritual experience. I will argue that, like Husserl's outbreak attempt, McDowell's attempt to reconcile mind and world fails because it does not truly get beyond constituting subjectivity. McDowell's understanding of experience reflects disenchantment, rather than being genuinely able to overcome it. The argument as a whole will therefore comprise a defense of Adorno's claim that the only way successfully to execute the outbreak is as the movement of thought that he calls *Selbstbesinnung*, or "self-awareness."

1

The Consequences of Disenchantment

DISENCHANTMENT AND EXPERIENCE

Understanding the critical role that spiritual experience plays in Adorno's philosophy will require coming to grips with his view of the present as characterized by the atrophy of experience. At the root of this idea is a thesis about disenchantment that encompasses both a social history and a critique of modern philosophy in so far as it is unable to reflect critically on that history. Disenchantment is essentially describable in terms of a specific type of distortion within reason produced by a process of rationalization. Kontos describes this quite succinctly.

The force behind disenchantment is rationality, or, more precisely, rationalization. Rationality, unlike reason, is concerned with means, not ends; it is the human ability to calculate, to effectively reach desired goals. It emanates from purposive practical human activity. It is this-worldly in origin. It has infinite applicability and an extraordinary expansiveness under certain circumstances. Indeed, it can be quite imperial. It transforms what it touches and, finally, it destroys the means-ends nexus. (1994, 230)

What lies behind this, as Weber puts it, is the notion that "one could in principle master everything through *calculation*" (1989, 13). It is important to see here (and it is something I shall continually emphasize) that there is nothing malign in itself about the purposive-practical attitude that is affiliated with

disenchantment. Following from the way that Adorno reads the disenchantment thesis, the distortion that leads to the harmful consequences of disenchantment occurs when the calculative thinking associated with the purposive-practical attitude begins exclusively to usurp the authority to determine when experience can count as cognitively significant. This is when the practical human interest in control over nature takes on the encompassing form of instrumental reason. The disenchantment thesis is therefore guided by a sense that rationalization pushed to the limit has as a consequence the dissolution of the cognitive worth of forms of experience that do not fit the typical means-end schema of calculative thinking. In a passage strongly suggesting the influence of Simmel, Weber himself had made this point in his remark on the feelings of young people about science, namely that it is an “unreal world of artificial abstractions, which with their lean hands seek to capture the blood and sap of real life without ever being able to grasp it” (1989, 15). Something important about experience slips through the fingers of scientific cognition, Weber is suggesting.¹

What drives disenchantment, as Bernstein has argued, is the “extirpation of what is subjective” (2001, 88). He takes this to be equivalent to the anthropomorphic quality attaching to our everyday empirical concepts, and the way in which they make objects available in terms of their subjective effects. Order is gathered from “how things affect and appear to embodied, sensuous subjects.” Bernstein asserts that the extirpation of the subjective is equivalent to what he calls the “self-undermining dialectic of scientific rationalism” (p. 10). While I think this formulation is essentially right, I am going to give it a somewhat different emphasis in what follows.² I believe it is entirely right to describe the rationalization process that leads to disenchantment as a form of abstraction. And this abstraction, as Bernstein has demonstrated, is essentially a denial of dependence.³ However, what I want to suggest is that the rescue of philosophy’s dependence is, for Adorno, primarily a move in the cognitive self-reflection of scientific rationalism, rather than an ethical imperative. What I mean by this (and it is a central thesis of this work) is that the revelation of dependence is scientific rationalism’s recognition of itself *as* a distorted, constricted form of cognition, and that its being this way is due to nonrational causes (hence its dependence). The recovery of the subjective is the route to the revelation of dependence, but it is not by itself a reconciled reason in waiting. In this sense, my interpretation of Adorno’s model of philosophical critique will be resolutely negative. Spiritual experience, I will argue, is the awareness of scientific rationalism about itself in its self-reflection. Or, in other words, it is the revelation of scientific rationalism *as* a form of experience (and this means: as a form of experience premised on the mutilation of experience). Any hints of a reconciled reason that appear within it are nothing but the inverse image of its disclosure of the mutilated character of experience in the present.

To understand Adorno's view of the process of abstraction that underlies disenchantment, it must be borne in mind that this process is at one and the same time the elimination of the cognitive significance of the subjective, *and* the formation of the constituting subject. In fact, for Adorno, these two are one and the same development seen from different points of view. The constituting subject is, obviously, that very understanding of the role of the subject in cognition that receives paradigmatic philosophical articulation in Kant. However we must be aware that for Adorno the Kantian thesis (and its developments in post-Kantian idealism) is a philosophical expression of the historical process of disenchantment.⁴ In fact, we could well say that the Kantian thesis concerning the transcendental subject reveals the truth about *what has happened to cognition* in the course of disenchantment. In very general terms, the constituting subject portrays knowledge according to a scheme characterized by a sharp division between the passive or receptive moment of sense, and the active moment of synthesis through the application of concepts.⁵ An important feature of this model is that experiential items available to sense are, in themselves, blind.⁶ That is to say, they do not "count" in cognitive terms until they have been synthesized, or "constituted" in some way by a subject. The constituting subject establishes as a norm a very particular way in which experiential items are entitled to count as cognitively significant. Those items must be subsumable under rules that articulate them as exemplars of a general class. Particular items, that is to say, are cognitively important in so far as they instantiate a generalizable characteristic or property. There are two fundamentally important claims that Adorno makes about this model of the constituting subject. First, it is *historically true*. The constituting subject captures that type of cognitive engagement with the world that is pervasive in the social practices and institutions of the modern world. Second, what lies behind the constituting subject is a process of *cognitive subtraction*. That is to say, the subject *becomes* the constituting subject through that process in which it learns to eliminate from its cognitive engagement with the world all features that depend on its own role as a situated subjectivity. This is why disenchantment, for Adorno, is describable in terms of the subject's own self-mutilation in the course of its history.⁷ Now while it is clear that the type of cognitive engagement with the world made possible through the constituting subject increases the extent of human control over nature, because it is organized primarily in terms of its regularity and predictability, Adorno wants to argue that it comes at the cost of a fateful cognitive deficit. Bringing the subject to an awareness of that cognitive deficit—showing *us* as the inheritors of this history what our own cognitive schemes cannot *say*—is the major task of philosophy as negative dialectic.⁸

The interpretation I have sketched here of Adorno's idea of the constituting subject as formed by the repression of subjectivity does seem to show a

clear debt to the Nietzschean and Freudian accounts of the history of culture. While this debt is most evident in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the basic scheme continues to inform the later writings, including *Negative Dialectic*.⁹ However, I want to suggest that Adorno's own formulation of the problem and its philosophical solution does not in fact draw directly on these accounts.¹⁰ The more immediate source for Adorno's understanding of the repression of subjectivity can be found in the works of Husserl and Bergson. In the 1965/1966 lectures on negative dialectic, the notes for a passage addressing the nature of subsumption under concepts as mere "technique" are followed by the phrase, in parentheses, "Bergson knew this" (2003a, 115). It is primarily from the critiques of the neo-Kantian model of cognition as a constriction of experience in this generation of thinkers (primarily, I shall suggest, Bergson, Husserl, and Proust) that Adorno develops his own account of philosophical critique. The notion of culture as repression in the Nietzschean and Freudian accounts survives in this generation of thinkers as a thesis about the stultifying force of everyday schemes for organizing and classifying experience according to the dictates of practical usefulness. Bergson (and subsequently, in literary form, Proust) give this the name of *habitude*.¹¹ Bergson's account, in *Matter and Memory*, of the origin of general ideas in the habitual reactions preserved in motor memory rewrites the repression thesis as a general account of the operation of the understanding.¹² The emphasis therefore shifts from philosophy of history to the analysis of how to resist, or work against the tendency of the habitual operation of concepts to cut short experience. It is from this generation that Adorno develops his understanding of critical philosophy as an *Ausbruchsvor-such* (outbreak attempt), that is, an attempt to "break out" of the experiential confines of constitutive subjectivity. *Negative Dialectic*, the task of which Adorno defines as "to break through the delusion of constitutive subjectivity with the force of the subject" (1966, 10), is the elucidation of this project.

A particular type of abstraction, I suggested, defines the constitutive subject, and it is this abstraction that, Adorno believes, underlies the process of disenchantment. Essentially, the argument concerns the way in which particulars derive their meaning, and it rests on what Adorno takes to be a subtle shift in the operation of concepts. Within this scheme, particulars are meaningful in so far as they exemplify (or instantiate) a property or value that can be repeated over an indefinite number of other particulars. In experience as it is organized by this process of abstraction, what determines the cognitive significance of particulars, whether they are allowed to "count" in cognitive terms, depends on whether they embody a property or value that is detachable from those particulars themselves. In saying that it is "detachable," I mean that this property or value might be realized in any number of other interchangeable particulars. According to this scheme of abstraction, therefore, experiential particulars become (indifferent) means to realize a (cognitive) value. It is

this conception that sets up the layout of experience as seen from the perspective of the constitutive subject: reality as composed of discrete, fungible exemplars.

In describing abstraction in this way, I am of course drawing an explicit parallel with a Marxian account of the abstraction at the heart of exchange value.¹³ Like the replacement of use value for exchange value, the organizing of experience through abstraction replaces a purely qualitative with a quantifiable characteristic, where the latter can be instantiated in units that are identical and distinct. Adorno finds this process of abstraction at work, not only in philosophical theories and the social practice of commodity exchange, but also in the products of popular culture. The key idea behind Adorno's critique of the culture industry is that, rather than forming a coherent development, the elements of a product (whether it be a film, piece of music, or whatever) are isolated and then deployed for their ability to engender effects. Their "value," that is to say, now becomes determined as their ability to produce an effect that is repeatable over a series of discrete particulars. Whatever the sphere in question, the upshot of abstraction is that particulars are subordinated to an instrumental logic that constitutes them as means to realize or instantiate a value.

It is important to reiterate here that Adorno is *not* claiming that there is something harmful in itself about the presentation of particulars as possessing repeatable properties. The abstraction in question underlies the harmful effects of disenchantment, but it is not itself identical with it. To understand this, it will be necessary to delve into Adorno's all-important reflections on language. On Adorno's view, the abstraction in question is an indispensable, but dependent, element in the capacity of language to reveal experience as meaningful. But what happens when disenchantment takes hold is that this dependence is reversed. The cognitive value of what is said in language is now entirely determined by the results of the process of abstraction. It is at this point that reason gets reduced to instrumental reason. The part has twisted free, and now stands in judgment on language as a whole. It is precisely this inflation of the process of abstraction to a position of sole authority that Adorno conceives to be the driving force behind our confinement within the constituting subject. Hence it is this process that is responsible for the estrangement of mind and world.¹⁴

The process of abstraction that Adorno identifies with disenchantment must ultimately be understood in terms of the expressive possibilities of language. Before moving on to this, however, it is worthwhile dwelling for a moment on what this claim about abstraction amounts to. The claim I am making about a shift in how particulars can be conceptualized as cognitively significant is quite close to Cora Diamond's (1988) account of a transformation of philosophical language that results in the reduction of conceptual

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