

## Adorno's Conception of Truth

The idea of the truth . . . probably can be grasped only in a fragmentary manner.

—Theodor W. Adorno<sup>1</sup>

The idea of truth is central to Theodor Adorno's philosophy, aesthetics, and social critique. *Negative Dialectics* describes it as the most important (*die oberste*) metaphysical idea (ND 394/401); arguably, rescuing the idea of truth is the entire point of Adorno's attempt to show "solidarity with metaphysics in the moment of its collapse" (ND 400/408). So too, his discussion of artistic truth content in *Aesthetic Theory* lies at both the textual and the conceptual heart of this unfinished magnum opus (ÄT 179–205/118–36). Moreover, his wide-ranging contributions to social and cultural criticism revolve around the claim that contemporary society as a whole is false: as his pointed parody of G. W. F. Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* puts it, "The whole is the false" (MM §29, 55/50).

Nowhere, however, does Adorno spell out in detail how he understands the idea of truth. Even in his debate with Lucien Goldmann about the sociology of literature, where their differences revolve around how Adorno understands artistic truth content, he says very little about his general conception of truth. Instead, he suggests one can have only a fragmentary grasp of the idea of truth. This, despite the fact that, when the debate occurred—two years after *Negative Dialektik* appeared and two before the posthumous publication of *Ästhetische Theorie*—Adorno had already arrived at his mature positions about truth in philosophy, art, and society.<sup>2</sup>

Consequently, readers of Adorno face a continual challenge. On the one hand, he emphasizes the idea of truth and repeatedly appeals to it throughout his writings. On the other hand, Adorno never systematically lays out his conception of truth. Nor does he provide thorough criticisms of other conceptions. His conception of truth and its critical implications lie scattered across his many writings. It seems then that, like the idea of truth, Adorno's own conception of truth can be grasped only in a fragmentary way.

Yet this suggests the idea of truth, and Adorno's conception of it, can in fact be grasped. And it leaves open the possibility that from the fragments something like a coherent account can emerge. That is the wager of this book. Concentrating on Adorno's mature writings, I aim to piece together the most prominent patterns that make up his conception of truth and test their viability. I plan to ask how such patterns sustain Adorno's aesthetics and social philosophy, inform his critique of Martin Heidegger's work, and raise issues like those that confront Foucaultian and feminist critiques of power. Throughout the book, I also explore the adequacy of Adorno's conception and, where appropriate, suggest ways to address its flaws. The book attempts a systematic reconstruction for the sake of critical retrieval.

As I explain at greater length elsewhere,<sup>3</sup> critical retrieval is the project of recovering insights on issues of contemporary relevance through a careful and critical reading of another philosopher's work. As pursued in this book and closely related publications,<sup>4</sup> critical retrieval examines the most significant texts within an author's oeuvre for the issues in question, and it places them in dialogue with significant texts by other philosophers that have a contrary position. Sometimes the dialogue is explicit in the texts under consideration. At other times, however, it must be reconstructed in the process of critical retrieval. Adorno's differences with Heidegger concerning the idea of truth, for example, lie near the surface of Adorno's writings. But a dialectical dialogue between Adorno and Michel Foucault on the politics of truth can only be reconstructed from their respective writings, for neither one said anything of substance about the other's position.

Because I focus on recovering insights of contemporary relevance from the most significant texts, this book's attempt at critically retrieving Adorno's insights into truth does not aim for the comprehensiveness one might expect from a different sort of book. It does not seek to address the entire array of secondary literature germane to the topic, even though I do selectively engage with this literature. I also do not try to fill in the complex historical background to Adorno's conception of truth. That would require more detailed discussions of Kant, Hegel, Kierkegaard, Marx, Nietzsche,

and Freud, not to mention the various twentieth-century figures with whom Adorno interacted. Instead, I concentrate on Adorno's own writings, especially *Negative Dialectics* and *Aesthetic Theory*, and try, in the manner already described, to recover his insights into truth. And I pay special attention to his long-standing critique of Heidegger's conception of Being (*Sein*) and his apparent proximity to Foucault's politics of truth. In this way, I hope to uncover issues and insights of relevance not only to Adorno scholars but also to anyone concerned about the philosophical idea of truth.

To lay the groundwork for such a critical retrieval, this chapter introduces Adorno's conception of truth as a dynamic constellation. Then it considers three possible objections to my emphasis on systematic reconstruction and critical retrieval. And it concludes with a preview of the chapters that follow.

### Dynamic Constellation

In an essay dedicated to Herbert Marcuse on his seventieth birthday, Adorno describes truth as "a constantly evolving constellation [*werdende Konstellation*]."<sup>5</sup> Similar descriptions occur in *Negative Dialectics* and in Adorno's books on Edmund Husserl and Hegel. With this single phrase—*werdende Konstellation*—Adorno captures the Walter Benjamin-inspired revision of Hegel's conception of truth that permeates his philosophy.

Benjamin's "Epistemo-Critical Foreword" to his book on the German *Trauerspiel* describes ideas as "eternal constellations" in which the phenomena are saved: "Ideas are eternal constellations, and inasmuch as the elements are grasped as points in such constellations, the phenomena are simultaneously divided out and saved."<sup>6</sup> Like Benjamin, Adorno says the idea of truth is a constellation. It is an arrangement of elements that illuminates them by virtue of their interrelations. Unlike Benjamin, however, Adorno does not think the idea of truth (or any idea, for that matter) is a *timeless* or *eternal* constellation. Rather, the idea of truth is temporal and historical: it is a dynamic or processual (*werdende*) constellation. So too, unlike Benjamin, Adorno does not separate ideas from concepts.<sup>7</sup> Instead, he regards ideas as intrinsically conceptual. Accordingly, Adorno regards the idea of truth as a dynamic constellation of concepts.

In both of these respects—the emphasis on temporality and the embrace of conceptuality—Adorno shows his indebtedness to Hegel, with whom Benjamin never seriously engaged. Like Hegel, Adorno regards truth

as an idea in which dialectical relations between concepts play out and the limits of each concept are overcome. Unlike Hegel, however, Adorno does not think we can currently have a conceptual grasp of truth as a whole. Nor does he think that the limits to existing concepts can be overcome by conceptual thought alone. The reason for this, which subsequent chapters explain, is that Adorno thinks concepts typically *impose* a universal identity on objects and thereby fail to do justice to the objects' unique individuality.

For Adorno, placing concepts in constellations relaxes their imposition and helps attune them to the unique individuality of intrinsically nonconceptual matters. This attunement can happen because objects themselves, in their individual identity, exist in historical constellations. As Alison Stone puts it, "Adorno suggests that each object is itself a constellation of different past relations with other objects, all of which have shaped it. On this account, an object is a constellation of historical processes, and a constellation of concepts is a range of concepts, each of which grasps one of the various historical relations that has left its mark on the object. Taken together, these concepts 'gather around' the unique history of the object where this history makes the object the unique thing that it is."<sup>8</sup> Moreover, each object has a possible future toward which a constellation of concepts can point. In David Kaufmann's words, for Adorno "the truth of an object . . . is not only what it has become, but also what it should be."<sup>9</sup>

Accordingly, the dynamic character of a conceptual constellation is supposed to mime the historical interrelatedness of things, while leaving open what both the object and an appropriate understanding might look like in the future. It thereby counteracts the tendency of concepts to freeze-frame objects under an imposed identity: "Only constellations represent from outside what the concept has cut away inside, the 'more' that the concept wants to be just as much as it cannot be. By gathering around the matter [*Sache*] to be known, the concepts potentially determine its inner core, thoughtfully attaining what thought itself necessarily cut out" (ND 164–65/162). In this way, Adorno partially reclaims Benjamin's notion of the (ideational) constellation as a way to "save the phenomena."

At the same time, however, Adorno follows what he takes to be Hegel's lead: an emphasis on the truth of philosophical thought in relation to its subject matter;<sup>10</sup> the conception of truth as "process and result in one";<sup>11</sup> the understanding of truth as an "emphatic idea" that far exceeds "a mere relationship between judgment [*Urteil*] and object [*Gegenstand*]" or, in the parlance of more recent philosophy, between propositions and facts (H 281/36); the insistence that thought's critical self-reflection is intrinsic to truth

as such (H 282/37); the transposition of the concept of truth from “predicative logic,” with its notion of truth as an *adaequatio rei atque cogitationis* (Latin: making the thing equal with what is thought), into “the dialectic as a whole” (H 283/38); the emphasis on a mutual mediation between epistemic subject and epistemic object, between “thoughtful synthesis [*denkende Synthesis*]” and the “judged states of affairs [*Urteilssachverhalten*],” that goes beyond both (H 284/39); and the assumption that, at bottom, there is an affinity (but, for Adorno, not an identity) between subject and object, one that thought’s critical self-reflection can uncover. As Adorno concludes in a long paragraph that defends Hegel’s conception of truth against Heidegger’s ontological critique of idealism: “The speculative Hegelian concept [of truth] rescues mimesis through spirit’s self-reflection: truth is not *adaequatio* but affinity, and in the decline of idealism reason’s mindfulness [*Eingedenken*] of its mimetic nature is revealed by Hegel to be its human right” (H 285/41). Conceptual constellations are Adorno’s Benjamin-inspired way to appropriate Hegel’s conception of truth.

Yet the idea of truth is unlike other conceptual constellations in two respects. First, strictly speaking there is no “thing” (*Sache*) or “object” (*Gegenstand*) around which the concepts in this truth-constellation must gather. For the idea of truth pertains to relations among all concepts as well as between every concept and object. It cannot be reduced to specific relations between certain concepts and objects. Second, as Adorno’s own usages indicate, the idea of truth pertains in the first instance to the mediation of philosophically decisive pairs of concepts that historically have become opposed to each other: universal and particular, for example, or subject and object. Hence the “phenomenon” around which truth as a constellation must gather is not a thing or object. Rather, it is the historically unfolding field of tension among decisive concepts—a force field (*Kraftfeld*), to use a term from Adorno’s critique of Husserl (ME 79/72). Here, too, Adorno is deeply indebted to Hegel, especially Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*, with its dialectical unfolding of the forms of conscious experience, and his *Science of Logic*, with its dialectical exposition of the categories of thought.

Indeed, certain conceptual polarities have special prominence in Adorno’s conception of truth. In this book, I single out three: subject (*Subjekt*) and object (*Objekt*); concept (*Begriff*) and thing or subject matter (*Sache*); and historical immanence and futural transcendence. Each of these polarities intersects the other two. Moreover, as I shall argue, the polarity between history and transcendence sets a decisive direction for the other two. For Adorno, then, the idea of truth is a dynamic constellation of intersecting

polarities between subject and object, concept and thing, and history and transcendence.

Of course, other polarities also play a role, and conceivably any one of these could provide an entry into Adorno's conception of truth: identity and nonidentity, for example, or universal and particular, or society and individual. Yet I believe the three I have singled out play a special role, not only in Adorno's social and philosophical critiques but also in his attempts to say what a different idea of truth would be like. They also point to both the insights and the blind spots that I consider most important for sorting out Adorno's contributions to a transformative conception of truth. Before summarizing how I plan to trace these polarities in the chapters that follow, however, I need to take up potential objections to my approach.

### Hermeneutic Force Field

Other Adorno scholars might well object to my proposing a systematic reconstruction aimed at critically retrieving insights into truth as such, and their objections could have ample support in Adorno's writings. Three potential objections strike me as the most telling. They help constitute the interpretive force field within which my own approach occurs.

The first potential objection is that my approach violates the antisystematic character of Adorno's thought. The second is that it ignores Adorno's insistence on the negativity of true thought. The third potential objection is that my approach does an injustice to Adorno's emphasis on how minimal our grasp of truth is. Let me call them the antisystematic, negativist, and minimalist objections. In so labeling them, I do not suggest that the scholars who might raise these objections are themselves antisystematic thinkers or alethic negativists or alethic minimalists. Rather, I am saying that they could point to antisystematic, negativist, or minimalist features of Adorno's philosophy to question the suitability or legitimacy of my own critical hermeneutics. Each objection involves a plausible interpretation of Adorno, and each deserves a preliminary response.

#### ANTISYSTEM?

I have claimed that for Adorno the idea of truth is a constellation in which three conceptual polarities stand out. This suggests, contrary to the chapter's epigraph, that one can grasp both the idea of truth and Adorno's conception of it in a more than fragmentary way, in fact, that one can systematically

reconstruct them. Yet Adorno prominently portrays negative dialectics as antisystematic, and his notion of a constellation resists systematization. "Constellation is not system," he writes, contrasting his dialectical method with Hegel's. When philosophy configures elements into a constellation, their configuration cannot be reduced to either the meaning of these elements or their inferential connections: "Everything does not become resolved, everything does not come out even; rather, one moment sheds light on the other, and the figures that the individual moments form together are specific signs and a legible script" (H 342/109). To narrow truth down to a nexus of three intersecting polarities would seem both to resolve what cannot be resolved and to prevent the many moments of truth from becoming a "legible script," thereby violating the antisystematic character of Adorno's thought. Wouldn't it be better to leave Adorno's conception of truth unreconstructed than to force it into a systematic straitjacket?

In response, let me say more about the sort of reconstruction I envision. It is not an attempt to show how everything Adorno has to say about truth can be derived from a few fundamental premises. One reason why Adorno describes truth as a constellation is that it is a complex idea. As a complex idea, it is not readily reduced to either a real definition or a simple summary. The reconstruction I pursue aims to retain the internal complexity of Adorno's own conception of truth. Yet such complexity should not be confused with endless variety. There are definite patterns to how Adorno's mature writings speak about truth, and one can uncover, describe, and evaluate these patterns. To do this, however, one needs to connect passages that either textually or topically lie far apart and, in this way, piece out a constellation like what Adorno claims the idea of truth to be. In that sense, what I call systematic reconstruction could be considered the mapping of a conceptual and textual constellation.

As will become apparent, my singling out three polarities is less an attempt at analytic reduction than at hermeneutic illumination. I am less interested in saying precisely what these polarities consist in than in showing how they permeate and inform Adorno's conception of truth. I also wish to understand how each polarity intersects the other two and how together, in their crosscutting tensions, they configure his conception. For the most part, I stick close to the texts of Adorno's mature writings, even as I select certain passages for special scrutiny. My reconstruction tries to preserve the textuality of Adorno's thought.

If one wants to do justice to Adorno's conception of truth, however, it is crucial not to misinterpret the antisystematic character of his thought. Although he opposes traditional attempts to derive the truth from first

principles just as much as he rejects Hegelian claims to have achieved absolute knowledge of the absolute truth, that does not mean Adorno opposes logical stringency or conceptual consistency. Instead, he advocates and tries to exemplify a different sort of stringency and consistency, a way of thinking that can do justice to both the individuality and the historical interrelatedness of things. If Adorno's conception of truth also displays such individuality and interrelatedness, and if one wants to respect his way of thinking, then a hermeneutically attuned and yet systematic reconstruction of his conception does not seem inappropriate.

#### ALETHIC NEGATIVISM?

Even if one grants legitimacy to this project of reconstruction, however, another powerful objection awaits, namely, the worry that my approach ignores Adorno's insistence on the negativity of true thought. For by aiming to critically retrieve insights into truth as such from Adorno's conception, the proposed project seems to assume a positive and even holistic conception of truth. Yet Adorno seems dramatically opposed to any such conception, especially as it comes to expression in Hegel's philosophy. "The whole is the untrue," Adorno famously wrote, not only because contemporary society as it has developed is false but also because the philosophical attempt to comprehend truth as a whole both echoes and reinforces such societal falsity: "The whole is the untrue,' not merely because the thesis of totality is itself untruth, being the principle of domination inflated to the absolute. The idea of a positivity that can master everything that opposes it through the superior power of a comprehending spirit is the mirror image of the experience of the superior coercive force inhering in everything that exists by virtue of its consolidation under domination. This is the truth in Hegel's untruth" (H 324/87). Accordingly, it would seem perverse to try to extract positive insights into truth as such via a systematic reconstruction of Adorno's conception. For Adorno seems to say that only in rejecting falsehood, not in grasping truth as such, can thought be true.

One way to support this objection would be to argue that Adorno subscribes to a position of negativism with respect to truth itself. As described by Owen Hulatt in his fascinating book on Adorno's theory of truth, Adorno's alethic negativism would be the position "that the truth cannot be positively expressed—rather we can only outline and describe falsehoods." Adorno subscribes to such alethic negativism, Hulatt claims, because Adorno thinks society as a whole is internally contradictory, and this



societal totality so thoroughly “mediates” concepts that these “are incapable of truthfully grasping their objects.”<sup>12</sup> On Hulatt’s interpretation of Adorno, even a simple predication such as “this grass is green” is necessarily false, insofar as the apparent “truth of an isolated proposition” is “made possible by a mediating holistic whole that, taken as a whole, is completely untrue.”<sup>13</sup> At the same time, however, what Hulatt calls Adorno’s “holistic theory of falsity” appears inconsistent with the many positive truth claims Adorno actually makes. Adorno thereby threatens to generate a “two-tier account of truth” that pits a momentary flash of true nondiscursive cognition against unavoidably false discursive attempts to express such truth. Hulatt tries to address these issues by arguing that Adorno resolves them in the cognitive agent’s *performance* of critical reflection.<sup>14</sup>

Clearly an understanding of Adorno’s conception of truth along such negativist lines would put in question an attempt like mine to critically retrieve Adorno’s insights into truth itself. Such alethic negativism would restrict truth proper to those *nonconceptual* flashes of insight that *conceptually mediated* propositional claims and *conceptually infused* critical reflection cannot provide. Accordingly, if there were true insights to be gleaned from Adorno’s writings, they too would need to be nonconceptual, and attempts to articulate them conceptually would likely run afoul of Adorno’s restricting true thought to the critique of falsehood. For *conceptually* articulated insight into truth would itself be unavoidably false, and the entire project of systematic reconstruction for the sake of critical retrieval would lose its point. Indeed, it would seem to be precluded by Adorno’s own writings.

Nevertheless, I am far from convinced that Adorno was an alethic negativist, nor do I think he subscribed to a holistic theory of falsity. There are enough elements of both Benjamin and Hegel in Adorno’s negative dialectics to generate an internally richer conception of truth. Indeed, his comprehensive social critique necessarily appeals to the idea of truth as a whole. Here, for example, is how the passage quoted earlier about the “truth in Hegel’s untruth” concludes: “By specifying, in opposition to Hegel, the negativity of the whole, philosophy satisfies, for the last time, the postulate of determinate negation that is supposed to be affirmation [*das Postulat der bestimmten Negation, welche die Position sei*]. The ray of light that reveals the whole to be untrue in all its moments is none other than utopia, the utopia of the whole truth, which is still to be realized” (H 324–25/87–88). Far from rejecting the Hegelian aspiration toward truth as a whole, Adorno claims to fulfill this aspiration more consistently than Hegel himself, by showing how society as a whole is untrue. And far from denying the possibility of there

being truth as a whole, Adorno says it is this very possibility, and with it the possibility of a society that is no longer false, that “reveals” (*offenbart*) the untruth of contemporary society as a whole.

Moreover, although Adorno does not explicitly say this here, the notion of determinate negation, so decisive in his appropriation of Hegel’s dialectic, would make little sense if one could not show specifically how the various “moments” (*Momenten*) of the whole are false. And to do that, Adorno implies, one needs some inkling, some “ray of light” (*Strahl*) concerning how they could be true both discretely and in combination. In other words, the untrue whole is not wholly false, and the utopian idea of truth as a whole helps reveal why and how this is so.

I have more to say about Adorno’s appeal to the utopia of the whole truth in subsequent chapters. For now, however, let me highlight one dimension that too few commentators give sufficient emphasis. It is what Kaufmann calls the “redemptive” version of truth in Adorno’s work. Unlike the closely interrelated version that “derives truth from the determinate negation of falsehood,” the redemptive one “demands that we see what has become as a distorted version of what should be and asks us to judge the existent in terms of its distortions. Redemption—and to use its political name, Utopia—is the index of knowledge.”<sup>15</sup> For Adorno, truth would not be possible if there were no hope for fundamental transformation of the untrue whole. As he writes in a passage from *Minima Moralia* directed against Nietzsche’s *amor fati* (love your fate), “In the end hope, wrested from reality by negating it, is the only form in which truth appears. Without hope, the idea of truth would be scarcely even thinkable” (MM §61, 110/98). Moreover, as is clear from the passage already quoted from Adorno’s Hegel book, the idea of truth that the hope for redemption makes thinkable is the idea of truth as a whole.

None of this resolves complex issues about how to put together the two interrelated concepts of truth that Kaufmann mentions, namely, the determinate negation of falsehood and the utopian hope for redemption. Yet it does show why Adorno should not be regarded as merely an alethic negativist. It also indicates, at least in a preliminary way, why trying to recover insights into truth as such via systematic reconstruction is not as “untrue” to Adorno’s work as a negativist objection to my approach might suggest.

#### ALETHIC MINIMALISM?

By citing Adorno’s appeal to the not-yet-realized “utopia of the whole truth,” however, my response to the negativist objection might prompt a

closely related worry, namely, that my approach does an injustice to how minimal Adorno thinks our grasp of truth is. I call this the *alethic* minimalist objection. One way to pose it would be along the lines of Fabian Freyenhagen's vigorous and plausible defense of what he takes to be Adorno's *ethical* minimalism.

According to Freyenhagen, Adorno holds that "there is no right life within our modern social world," yet the wrong life everyone leads *can* be lived "less wrongly."<sup>16</sup> This position involves a negativism about both the knowability and the actuality of the good. According to Freyenhagen, Adorno thinks "we cannot know what human potential and good is *because* this world realizes the bad and suppresses this potential."<sup>17</sup> And that appears to land Adorno in what Freyenhagen labels the "Problem of Normativity": because Adorno cannot appeal to the good that his normative claims unavoidably assume, it seems he "is not entitled to make the normative claims his philosophy contains."<sup>18</sup>

Freyenhagen rescues Adorno from this apparent dilemma by arguing that the normative claims Adorno makes are "minimalist." They are minimalist in the sense that they pertain only to what is bad, not what is good, and one does not need to "appeal to or know the good" in order for the bad to be recognized and have "normative force."<sup>19</sup> Understood along these lines, the utopian elements in Adorno's ethics and social critique would simply be reminders that "our radically evil social world" might not be so permanent and unchangeable as it seems. They help us recognize how bad things are, and they "make it possible for us to see that things ought to be different." But they do not "provide us with conceptions or images of the good."<sup>20</sup>

In a similar fashion, an *alethic* minimalist interpretation of Adorno could say his radical claim that "the whole is the untrue" does not permit a robust reading of Adorno's equally radical claim that "the utopia of the whole truth" is what "reveals the whole to be untrue" (H 325/88). Instead, a minimalist interpretation is required: Adorno simply says that the idea of truth as a whole can help us recognize how fragmentary and unsatisfactory our grasp of truth is—it does not give us access to truth as such. To the extent that a systematic reconstruction aimed at critical retrieval suggests otherwise, it fundamentally misconstrues Adorno's conception of truth.

There is something to be said in favor of such an *alethic* minimalist objection. No more than Kaufmann would I want to miscast Adorno in "the tub-thumping role of a utopian optimist." The regulative role of his redemptive concept of truth is critical, not straightforwardly affirmative: "The truth that the light of redemption casts reveals pained fragments, not triumphant totalities."<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, what a minimalist interpretation misses

is that the revelation of pained fragments occurs via a *conceptual* constellation that points *beyond* the untrue whole. It points beyond the historically developed society where our fragmentary grasp of truth occurs and where life, according to an ethically minimalist interpretation of Adorno, can only be lived less wrongly. The conceptual constellation is, as Kaufmann says, “an image of a whole that is the truth.” It is “the outline of Redemption, of differences conjoined without domination.”<sup>22</sup>

If that’s right as an interpretation of Adorno’s writings, then there would be more to pursuing truth and living aright under current conditions than simply criticizing falsehood and living less wrongly. Also required is an orientation toward what would be completely different, even if we cannot fully grasp under current conditions either “truth as a whole” or “the good.” Contra minimalist interpretations of Adorno, one can at least ask what such an orientation looks like under current conditions and consider how this orientation should inform both truth theory and social critique. To avoid such questions would be to overlook the radical political potential of Adorno’s conception of truth.

Like the antisystematic and negativist objections, the worries raised by alethic minimalism are good reminders of the anti-Hegelian side to Adorno’s conception of truth. But all three sorts of objections miss just how Hegelian Adorno’s critique of Hegel is, even as they soft-pedal the redemptive Benjaminian inspiration for that critique. My reconstruction aims to do justice to both sides, while asking what we can learn about truth from Adorno’s unique conception.

Both as a systematic reconstruction and as a critical retrieval, then, this book aims to be true to Adorno’s conception of truth. Yet no more than Adorno in his books on Husserl and Hegel do I think such an interpretation permits either slavish imitation or rigid rejection. Rather, as Adorno lucidly explains in his lectures on Immanuel Kant’s First Critique, one must delve into the inner tensions that propel a philosopher’s conception and thereby uncover what significant insights it has to offer. In Adorno’s own words, the point is to explore what a philosopher’s thought objectively expresses “of the internal history of truth, on the sundial of truth.” Tellingly, Adorno uses both *constellation* and *force field* in this context to indicate what he aims to uncover in Kant. The decisive point, he says, is “the constellation of truth—and this constellation is the same as the force field I have talked about so often—that has crystallized in such a philosophy” (K 122/78).<sup>23</sup> In trying to reconstruct and evaluate Adorno’s conception of truth, I share his

concerns about how to read a philosopher's work. What I seek, and what I hope to present, is the truth content of Adorno's conception of truth.

### Conceptual Polarities

As already indicated, the three most prominent conceptual polarities in Adorno's conception of truth are woven through each other. Not only does that make it difficult to disentangle them but also it reinforces the need to see how they intertwine. And it raises the question whether one of them is more crucial than the others for understanding the constellation that Adorno configures.

In my judgment, the polarity of history and transcendence is the most crucial, in three respects. First, it constitutes the most innovative departure in Adorno's truth conception from the German philosophical tradition that he reworks, especially Kant, Hegel, and Husserl. Second, it marks his most dramatic difference from the two philosophers with whom his conception of truth especially invites comparison, namely, Heidegger and Foucault. Third, the polarity of history and transcendence provides the decisive orientation for how Adorno understands the polarities of subject and object and of concept and thing.

Accordingly, my discussion begins with the history/transcendence dialectic in chapter 2, then moves to the subject/object dialectic in chapter 3 and the concept/thing dialectic in chapter 4. Yet chapter 4 also shows how differences concerning history and transcendence not only motivate Adorno's critique of Heidegger over concept and thing but also help explain Adorno's hidden affinities with Heidegger's ontological conception of truth. Then I explore how Adorno's constellation provides a counterpart to a Foucaultian politics of truth (chapter 5), show how the three polarities play out in Adorno's aesthetics (chapter 6), and consider what Adorno contributes to a transformative conception of truth (chapter 7).

To explore the history/transcendence dialectic in Adorno's conception of truth, chapter 2 focuses on the "Meditations on Metaphysics" that conclude *Negative Dialectics*. There, I argue, this dialectic propels Adorno's attempt to articulate a defensible idea of truth, despite and amid the collapse of metaphysics. First I consider the issues of absolutism and relativism raised by Adorno's insistence on the historical necessity of certain ideas and their demise. Next I show how he addresses these issues by reworking Kant's

transcendental ideas of immortality, freedom, and God's existence. Then I propose a social transformationalist interpretation of the idea of truth that Adorno tries to rescue from Kant. Central to this idea is the convergence of thought and experience on what Adorno calls "the humanly promised other of history" (ND 396/404)—a society, historically not impossible, in which violence and societally induced suffering have ended.

In emphasizing such convergence, Adorno cannot be an alethic minimalist. Nevertheless, as the chapter tries to demonstrate, there is an unavoidable tension between the idea of truth Adorno has rescued and a viable account of propositional truth—the truth of propositions, assertions, and beliefs. Like Adorno, I consider propositional truth to be only part of what truth includes. Yet I question whether Adorno can actually provide an adequate account of propositional truth within his conception of truth as a whole.

Contrary to an alethic negativist interpretation, however, I believe Adorno rightly insists on the importance of propositional truth, and he defends it against both positivist trivialization and existentialist dismissal. Although it is not always clear how Adorno understands propositional truth, the polarity between epistemic subject and object plays a central role. Chapter 3 shows that, in emphasizing a dialectic between epistemic subject and object, Adorno's notion of propositional truth derives in part from his critique of Husserlian phenomenology and Heideggerian ontology for misconstruing what Adorno calls "the surplus beyond the subject" (ND 368/375).

The chapter examines three passages from Adorno's Husserl book and *Negative Dialectics* where Adorno appears intent on wresting a viable conception of propositional truth from Husserl's account of categorial intuition and Heidegger's idea of Being. While agreeing in part with Adorno's criticisms of Husserl and Heidegger, I argue that Adorno does not adequately account for the role of predication in cognition. Specifically, he cannot account for the object's predicative self-disclosure, on which correct assertions and discursive criticism depend. Consequently, he fails to offer the viable conception of propositional truth that both his critique of Heidegger and his broader idea of truth require.

Yet there is much more to Adorno's critique than a struggle over the subject/object dialectic. Chapter 4 examines the critique of Heidegger in Adorno's *Ontology and Dialectics* lectures and in part 1 ("Relation to Ontology") of *Negative Dialectics*. After reviewing relevant secondary literature, the chapter interprets Adorno's critique as a contest over the idea of truth. Here the polarity between concept and thing comes to the fore. Drawing on both Kant and Hegel, Adorno charges Heidegger with "ontologizing the ontic"

(ND 125–28/119–22; OD 109–38/73–94), in three ways: by melding the concept of Being (*Sein*) and concrete things, by absolutizing the mediation of subject and object, and by freezing actual history into an unchanging “historicity.” The first of these—treating the thing as a concept—is especially significant, for it connects the critique of Heidegger with Adorno’s critique of Hegel. Both of them, he says, fail to grasp how “what is, is more than it is” (ND 164/161). Instead, they try to reduce thing to concept, what is nonconceptual to the conceptual, the nonidentical (*das Nichtidentische*) to conceptual identity.

Underlying this criticism, however, is a concern Adorno dialectically shares with Heidegger over what Iain Macdonald calls “blocked possibility.”<sup>24</sup> Adorno rejects Heidegger’s blocked possibility—*beyng* (*Seyn*) beyond Being (*Sein*), another beginning before the metaphysical beginning—for the sake of a different blocked possibility—a future society in which needless suffering would end. In linking truth with a blocked possibility, Heidegger and Adorno share the claim that truth is temporal, but they disagree about how it is temporal. In this way, the history/transcendence dialectic traced in chapter 2 turns out to be a key to Adorno’s debate with Heidegger as well. The chapter concludes with brief suggestions about how this debate could yield a better understanding of the temporality of truth.

Just as Adorno regarded Heidegger’s ontology as an ideological response to a false “ontological need,” so the dialectic between history and transcendence in Adorno’s conception of truth responds to a society that, as a whole, he considered false. What makes late capitalist society false is how it allows domination to occur through the process of economic exchange. That diagnosis, going back to Max Horkheimer and Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, raises issues like ones that arise in the genealogical writings of Michel Foucault, issues much debated in feminist critical theory. One way to sort out such issues is to examine the ideas of power and truth that figure prominently in Foucault and Adorno’s critiques of Western society.

Chapter 5 focuses on the *relation* between power and truth, for here, I claim, lie both crucial insights and notable lacunae in their critiques. After introducing feminist debates about what I label interactional and macrostructural forms of power, I summarize Foucault’s genealogical account of what he calls disciplinary power and state biopower. Next I contrast his account with Adorno’s negative dialectical critique of domination. Based on this contrast, I then compare their understandings of how truth and power interrelate.

From this comparison two challenges of relevance to feminist critical theory emerge. One is to articulate the normative implications of how truth

and power interrelate. The other is to envision genuine prospects for the transformation of society as a whole. The chapter concludes with suggestions along these lines, indicating why, in a political environment where powerful authoritarian populists not only attack the accomplishments of the feminist movement but also dismiss the importance of truth, feminist critical theory needs a new conception of truth.

The interrelation between truth and power in Adorno's social critique also helps explain the enduring relevance of his *Aesthetic Theory*. His unfinished magnum opus, which appeared in 1970, remains timely in an oddly untimely way. Chapter 6 attributes this untimely timeliness to the combination of academic askesis and modernist engagement in Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*. Behind this combination lies a dialectical autonomism about art that is at odds with both pre- and post-1970 scholarship and that leads to an equally provocative and problematic position about art and politics: the politically important truth of art, made possible by art's societally constituted autonomy, is also politically impotent.

To sort out this position, one needs to take up the complex conception of artistic truth at the heart of Adorno's aesthetics. Chapter 6 does this in two stages. First I examine a debate between Albrecht Wellmer and J. M. Bernstein over how to interpret Adorno's autonomist conception of artistic truth. Then I reconstruct this conception in terms of the polarities traced in previous chapters. Focusing on three chapters midway through *Aesthetic Theory*, I show how these polarities surface in the dialectics of semblance and expression, of form and content, and of historical possibility that constitute Adorno's conception of artistic truth. On the basis of this reconstruction, I then reexamine Adorno's oblique approach to the politics of art, contrasting it with both politically engaged and apolitical approaches, and I propose a new way to think about how artistic truth contributes to political struggles for justice and freedom.

Weaving together the threads of the previous chapters, chapter 7 asks what remains important and valid in Adorno's conception of truth. It argues that Adorno offers a crucial alternative to the mainstreams of both analytic and continental philosophy. At the same time, however, significant blockages occur in his conception of truth, and these need to be addressed. They have to do with the nature of propositional truth, its relation to truth as a whole, and the tasks of a truth-oriented social critique.

Addressing such issues is not simply a matter of concern to professional philosophers. Truth, as Adorno understood, lies at the center of politics, art, and scholarship. That is why this book reconstructs and critically examines



his conception, teasing out hidden affinities with both Heidegger and Foucault. Despite the cynicism of post-truth politics and the skepticism of many scholars, truth continues to be one of the most important philosophical ideas. And Adorno's conception of truth remains highly relevant for both philosophy and public life.