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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 *Ausbruchversuch* (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

description to a certain narrow kind of classification.¹⁵ This, she argues, has resulted in an impoverished understanding of conceptual life. Diamond illustrates this in terms of a contrast between grasping a concept in the sense of “knowing how to group things under that concept,” and in the sense of “being able to participate in life-with-the-concept” (1988, 266). Conceptual cognition becomes pure classification (knowing how to group things under a concept) when it is pulled out of the context of human life and interests that gives the word its experiential significance. Diamond uses the concept of a human being to illustrate this difference (1988, 263–66).¹⁶ An understanding of this concept in terms of the “concept of a member of a particular biological species,” she suggests, is a classification that is entirely incongruous with the experiential significance of the term. That significance becomes accessible in our experiences of instances where the recognition of another as a human being is granted and where it is withheld. To have the concept of a human being is therefore “to know how thoughts and deeds and happenings, and how happenings are met, give shape to a human story; it is a knowledge of possibilities, their weight and their mysteriousness.”¹⁷

Diamond’s discussion points to a transformation (in fact, a distortion) in how experience is conceptualized, or in how experience is able to enter concepts as cognitively significant. Diamond wants to maintain that there is a sense in which we may lack, or struggle to find the words appropriate to an experience, and that this constitutes an impoverishment. It is exactly this sort of distortion that Adorno is pointing to in the transformation of words from “substantial vehicles of meaning” into “signs devoid of quality.” Instead of “bringing the object to experience,” disenchanting language treats it as the “exemplar of an abstract moment” (1972a, 173 [translation altered]). Elsewhere, Adorno describes this in terms of the extraction of the meanings of concepts from “living language” (1973, 67). What is essential to Adorno’s view, however, is that this is not simply a result of a philosophical misunderstanding concerning the cognitive significance of experience; the linguistic or philosophic distortion tracks what Adorno takes to be a transformation of experience within social practices.¹⁸ It is not merely that we are in the grip of a misleading theoretical picture of what experience is. The narrowing of experience in philosophic terms is ultimately intelligible, Adorno believes, in terms of the general *social* inaccessibility of (non-disenchanted) experience. Once the consequences of this thesis are understood, it becomes clear why spiritual experience must be seen as the disenchanted world in its self-reflection. If it is accepted (1) that the meaning of concepts are dependent on “living language” within social practice, and (2) disenchantment is a process that comprises the hollowing out of meaning from social practice, then spiritual experience cannot be understood as replacing disenchanted concepts with substantial, fully meaningful ones. Because those concepts are not socially

available, philosophy cannot simply conjure them into being.¹⁹ The task of philosophy as spiritual experience is to reveal the experiential substance of these hollowed out concepts. This means bringing concepts to express the loss of experience that makes them work *as* disenchanted concepts. Through a certain type of philosophical interpretation (which Adorno will characterize as a “negative” dialectic), it is in fact possible to surmount the reduction of the concept to a narrow kind of classification. But what comes to expression thereby in concepts is the experience of loss. It is, as Adorno puts it, nothing else than suffering raised into the concept.

I will discuss this idea more fully in the analyses to follow,²⁰ but the general idea is illustrated in exemplary fashion in a passage in Proust. The passage occurs in *Du côté de chez Swann*, where Swann hears the “little phrase” of the music of Vinteuil at the Sainte-Euverte *soirée*. Swann has come to associate this phrase with his love for Odette. What is striking about this passage is the way that Proust’s narrator describes the *petite phrase* as recovering an experiential significance that is inaccessible to the abstract language that Swann possesses to talk about this experience. It is through the *petite phrase* that language is revealed in its estrangement from experience. Here is the passage:

In place of the abstract expressions “the time where I was happy,” “the time when I was loved,” that [Swann] had often pronounced up until then without suffering too much, because his intelligence had only put into them supposed extracts of the past which conserved nothing of it, he found again all that which had formed the specific and volatile essence of this lost happiness; he saw again the snowy and curled petals of the chrysanthemum that she tossed to him in the carriage, that he held against his lips—the embossed address of the “Maison Dorée” on the letter where he had read “my hand trembles heavily in writing to you” . . . (1999a, 277)

Proust’s narrator is here providing an exemplary presentation of the experience of loss. It is something like this experience, I am suggesting, that is the goal of negative dialectic. What characterizes the experience is the distance between language and the experience that searches for expression. Swann does not suffer when he utters the phrases “the time when I was happy,” “the time when I was loved,” because these phrases are disenchanted: they have become severed from their experiential substance. When, through the *petite phrase* of Vinteuil, Swann is able to recover the experiential substance of these phrases, the result is not the restoration of a fulfilled meaning, but the disclosure of suffering as the experiential substance of disenchanted concepts. Happiness (in the form of Odette’s love) is revealed in this experience, but as what is past, thus inaccessible and unsayable in the present. What is essential to the success

of a negative dialectic, I am suggesting, is that it leads concepts to disclose their own dependence on a form of experience that makes it impossible for them to put experience into words. It is simply the concept's self-reflection on its own inadequacy.

LANGUAGE AND EXPRESSION

Adorno is one of a select group of twentieth-century philosophers who sought to show that the systematic narrowing of the possibilities for cognitive experience is, in the modern world, ultimately related to a specific distortion within language. Adorno describes this distortion as the loss of language's expressive element. Other twentieth-century thinkers in this group include Walter Benjamin, Merleau-Ponty, and also, I would argue, Bergson and Proust.²¹ All of Adorno's major works are littered with phrases that describe the task of philosophy in precisely these terms: as bringing something to language (*zum Sprechen bringen*), "giving voice" to something (*zum Laut helfen*) or "helping something to expression" (*zum Ausdruck helfen*), or even as the "objectification" (*Objektivierung*) of experience. Adorno conceives philosophy as a discourse the goal of which is the recovery of language's expressive element. The overriding importance that Adorno gives to this idea becomes understandable once it is seen that the inflated cognitive role of abstraction, which is what drives disenchantment, is first and foremost a distortion of language and the way that it relates to experience. Within language, this distortion appears in the form of a wholly arbitrary relation between the sign and what is signified. This is an insight that is common to all of the thinkers I mentioned above, and it explains why every one of them sought to challenge the thesis of the wholly arbitrary nature of signification with an idea of language as a form of "translation."²²

The point in speaking about translation is to capture the sense in which language does not so much constitute or structure experience, but rather reflects or expresses a meaningful order of experience. Adorno's questioning of the arbitrary nature of signification is not attributable to a belief in some sort of magical tie between word and thing.²³ What he is getting at is the potential for the linguistic sign to become laden with the sense of *how* something is experienced, that is, the particular qualities of that experience for a subject. Thus the point at which the sign becomes *entirely* arbitrary (which exists only in hypothesis) would be that stage where the content of a given sign would be completely severed from the meaningfulness of that content *as* experienced by a historically situated subject. Adorno often refers to these two elements as if they were two diverging tendencies of signification. In the lectures on Hegel, Adorno refers to the "expressive" and the "argumentative" or "communicative"

aspects of language that are in tension with one another (1993b, 105, 137).²⁴ Language is “expressive” to the extent that the contextual meaningfulness of experience for a subject can be transmitted in the words used. When, in his *Antrittsvorlesung* at the University of Frankfurt, Adorno (1971a) lays out a conception of philosophy as “interpretation” (*Deutung*), he is foregrounding the nature of language as expression. What Adorno means by this idea is simply that more is said in a philosophical work than is communicated by its explicit content, and this “more” is none other than the moment of expression that is accessible to interpretation. It is not something “in addition” to that content, but rather (as Adorno will claim) the full, social-historical significance of that content.²⁵

In linguistic terms, the purpose of philosophical interpretation is to recover the meanings that attach to the sign understood as an attempt to put into words the experience of a subject in a particular historical context. Interpretation is therefore, for Adorno, a linguistic practice that seeks to reverse the severing of communication from expression, a process that is at the root of the narrowing of cognitively significant experience. This is why Adorno can describe negative dialectic as saving what is “oppressed, disparaged, thrown away” by concepts (1966, 21), or as “healing the wounds” that are the mark of the laceration of experience in the concept (1973, 55). In *Negative Dialectic*, Adorno also describes the goal of interpretation as the recovery of the “rhetorical” moment, that which rescues the element in language where it relates to the thing “other than in a merely signifying way [*anders sich verhält als bloß signifikativ*]” (1966, 65). It is imperative for any attempt to grapple with Adorno’s texts that the implications of this philosophical strategy are understood. The most important point stems from Adorno’s description of philosophical interpretation as a practice of resistance within language to the tendency of communication to pull free of expression. This means that an Adornian text is more like a process than a set of explicit theses. Or, in other words, the focus is on what the author is able to show *in* the arrangement of specific theses, rather than the explicit communicable content.²⁶ Adorno understands that process itself to be one involving the constant self-correction of concepts. Any defense of the notorious obscurity of Adorno’s style would have to begin with this insight.

The disappearance of the expressive element of language, I suggested, is equivalent to the representation of experiential items as cognitively significant in so far as (as discrete particulars) they function as exemplars of a generalizable value. In the first place, therefore, working against this abstraction must take the form of re-creating, reweaving the webs of significance that link elements to one another as they figure in subjectively saturated experience. Adorno describes this interpretive practice in terms of a “force field.” Rather than constituting the experiential item as a discrete and repeatable exemplar,

the subject makes interpretive connections between the experiential item and all the elements surrounding it in its historical context, “attracting” those elements toward it by demonstrating how the positioning of those elements illuminates the intrinsic features of this experiential item. An important aspect of this interpretive practice, Adorno believes, is that it recovers the meaning of the thing as a historically situated item. Robert Witkin has described Adorno’s idea of interpretation as a formulation of part-whole relations where the whole structure “develops out of the interactions among its elements” (2002, 7). The type of interpretation in question is in fact crucial to the idea of spiritual experience, because it outlines a way of moving from the particular to the universal in a form that is different from the abstraction process that drives disenchantment. Rather than fixing the particular as the exemplar of a repeatable property, the type of universal that follows from this interpretive practice is simply the fully developed contextual significance of the particular in question. Rather than a detachable property, it is an immanent universal, because it is dependent on the interpretation of the features of the thing in its historical context. Adorno usually expressed this idea in Hegelian terms as mediation. What was most important about this idea, for Adorno, was that it represented a way of connecting elements internally rather than externally. That is to say, what relates the two elements is not to be conceived as a connector, as a separable “third thing” that they both have in common. The elements illuminate one another by the interactions they maintain with each other, rather than figuring as exemplars of a generalizable characteristic. As Adorno liked to put this, mediation exists *in* the thing; it is not a relation *between* things (1974d, 562).

As the self-reflection of classificatory thinking, spiritual experience draws the concept toward an insight into its dependence on a context outside of it. The concept therefore expresses the historical experience that is the condition of possibility of its operation as *this* concept. Adorno is making a similar point in the following important passage in *Negative Dialectic*:

The object opens itself to a monadological insistence that is the consciousness of the constellation in which it stands: the possibility of immersion in the interior needs what is outside. But such immanent universality of the individual is objective as sedimented history. This is in it and outside of it, something surrounding it, where it has its place. To become aware of the constellation in which the thing stands means to decipher the one that it carries within itself as something that became what it is. (1966, 165)

The “immanent universality” of the individual item to which Adorno refers here involves uncovering the context of social-historical meaning that has

pressed itself into it, making it the kind of item it is. Again, the central idea in this picture is that classification presupposes the work of abstraction, the isolation of the thing from the network of mediations that make it intelligible as an historical item. The goal is not to produce a more exact classification of the object, but to retrace the steps of the extinguishing of contextual meaning that makes the object accessible in the terms of static classification. Hence the sedimented history in the object is the history of what has happened to the object as a result of this process.²⁷

The type of interpretive practice that Adorno sees as essential to the recovery of the expressive element of language is nicely illustrated in "Handle, Pitcher, and Early Experience," where Adorno describes his early encounter with Ernst Bloch's *Spirit and Utopia*. The book itself, Adorno claims, constitutes a "singular revolt against the renunciation" that has come to infect thinking (1974d, 557). The first segment of *Spirit of Utopia* puts this into practice in exemplary fashion in the case of an "old pitcher," the "clumsy brown implement, with almost no neck, a wild man's bearded face, and a significant, snail-shaped solar emblem" (Bloch 2000, 8). Adorno's essay focuses on the changed relationship to the object that Bloch manages to put into effect. The subject, in Bloch's description, ceases to be a static, fixed point of observation, as if it were a screen that passively records the imprint of events as they pass by. Adorno speaks of the "shaking to the core [*Erschütterung*] of the relation of the subject to that which it wants to say" (1974d, 562). Significantly, this is not the work of any specific theses articulated by Bloch in his description of the pitcher. It is the form of presentation that achieves the transformed relation to the object. In particular, Adorno lays stress on the tempo of the text, which seems to cross in rapid succession between concrete description and the heights of philosophical speculation. Bloch interrogates the object from many different directions, adopting the visual perspective of a moving camera. The social history that has impressed itself into the object, leaving its traces on the lines and crevices on its surface, is now brought to life, spiritualized by the animated but fully controlled immersion in the object that is the key to Bloch's interpretive practice. The point about it being a controlled process, one that exhibits an "unyielding theoretical force," situates it firmly within the rational concept. But it is the manner in which the concept is put to work to illuminate the object from many different angles, treating its features as the emblems of living relations, that is the focus of Adorno's interest. The pitcher becomes intelligible only out of the reading of what these relations have made of it. Hence tracing the threads of significance out towards its context is the same as the route to the very interior of the pitcher. Exactly as a musical theme is understood through the different contexts in which it becomes embedded in the work as a whole. The central point becomes apparent in this passage:

In Hegelian fashion, Bloch's experience carries the content along with it. What counts for him as beautiful are no longer the relations of proportion of his pitcher, but that which, as its becoming and history, has conserved itself in it, what disappeared in it, what the gaze of the thinker, as tender as it is aggressive, brings to life. (1974d, 563)

Bloch finds a way to penetrate the solidified exterior of the object through a form of controlled immersion. To refer to this as tender/aggressive means that it brings to bear in equal measure the desire to identify with the object and the demand that the object conform to the dictates of a rational articulation of its meaning. The desire to identify with the object is the same as the striving to make language work expressively, by trying to capture the richness of the subject's situated experience of the object in language. At the same time, the "aggressive" component of interpretation forces the expressive element to articulate itself in conceptual structures, giving a rational and communicable form to its desire to identify with the object. The dependence of expression on the moment of rational articulation is the reason why Adorno claims that it is only the unyielding theoretical force that can truly yield to the object (1974d, 561).

It is the same practice of controlled immersion that Adorno finds at work in Proust.²⁸ It works by way of the rational articulation of experience in concepts, but as the transformation of concepts in the course of the striving to identify with the object. What is essential to spiritual experience, Adorno claims, is an idea of the activity of the subject as playing a more substantial role in cognition than the constituting subject (1966, 189). Whereas, on the latter view, the activity of the subject becomes a kind of "automatism," Adorno calls for a type of interpretive practice in which the experiencing subject attempts to "disappear" in the object (1966, 190). Spiritual experience does not step outside the concept, but uses the claim to know the object implicit in conceptual classification against that cognition itself. Adorno describes this process as a "rational process of correction against rationality" (1973, 87). The disappearance or immersion in the object drives the subject to correct its identification of the object in terms of static and general properties. Spiritual experience is nothing else than the way in which the concept illuminates the object in its self-corrective course. At no point does negative dialectic reach down outside the concept, but its movement expresses a truth about the object that is not present as a conceptual content. To use Wittgensteinian terms, it "shows" something about the object that cannot be directly said within the concept.²⁹

SELBSTBESINNUNG (SELF-AWARENESS)

It is this potential for language to show something that cannot be directly said with concepts that determines Adorno's philosophical writing as more like a

process rather than the ordering of a set of theses. The most important thing, as Adorno puts it, is “what takes place within it [*was in ihr sich zuträgt*],” not a specific thesis or position (1966, 44). The claim that I will develop fully in later chapters of this work is that the model of philosophical interpretation developed by Adorno leads to a conception of philosophy as the practice of a type of critical self-reflection; Adorno calls this *Selbstbesinnung*, or “self-awareness.”³⁰ The essential component of this interpretive practice is the recovery of the expressive element of language. Getting a grip on how *Selbstbesinnung* works will require a fuller explication of this connection.

Selbstbesinnung is, in the simplest terms, philosophy’s awareness of its own dependence.³¹ It is the process in which philosophy brings to expression the historical experience that is the condition of possibility of its concepts. The claim, to be clear, is not that philosophical concepts are *caused* by specific historical conditions (this, of course, would be the type of reductionist sociology of knowledge that Adorno continually opposed). It concerns rather the exhaustive cognitive significance of the concept, recovered in opposition to its role as a subsuming or classifying device under the authority of the constituting subject. Concepts are not *causally* constituted by a particular structure of historical experience. Rather, Adorno’s claim is that they express that experience. Adorno puts this point about the cognitive-expressive potential of concepts in terms of the need to bring back concepts “into the spiritual experience that motivates them” (1993b, 139 [translation altered]). This is why, for Adorno, philosophical truth exceeds authorial intention.³² The way to understand this claim is as asserting that what concepts express in language exceeds what they say when they are *put to use* as concepts that synthesize experience.

In the Greater Logic, Hegel differentiates the elucidation of concepts in (speculative) logic from the everyday operation of concepts as tools of the understanding. In life, Hegel suggests, “the categories are *used*” (1969, 24). This use or employment of the categories is “unconscious” in that it does not concern itself with the meaning of concepts *as* concepts. Hegel identifies two functions of concepts as items of use. First, they serve as “abbreviations” for a collection of particulars; second, they serve the exact determination of what Hegel calls “objective relations,” where concepts are applied to a content perceived as simply given. In contrast to this role of concepts as classifying devices, speculative logic, which Hegel characterizes as “self-knowing,” is the self-articulation of concepts in their truth (1969, 27). What Hegel means by this is, quite simply, the elucidation of what concepts mean in and through language. Speculative logic is simply *logos*, the interpretation of what language reveals about concepts.³³ It is something very similar to this idea that Adorno has in mind with the translation of concepts into spiritual experience. Adorno refers to this as the attempt to “bring logic to language” or to make it speak (*zum Sprechen zu bringen*) which is the opposite of the process in which language is “translated into

logic" (1970a, 47). However, there is of course a decisive difference from Hegel in that, for Adorno, its dialectical interpretation dissolves the concept into historical experience, bringing to awareness the dependence of the concept on what cannot be assimilated within its categories as a conceptual concept.

It is important to clarify this last point, as it will help to guard against a misunderstanding of what Adorno means by the dependence of the concept on the "nonconceptual." The nonconceptual does not refer to a property, nor is it another part of the thing (as, for example, the scent or the silken quality of the rose is another property opposed to, say, its redness). As Rolf Tiedemann has pointed out, the nonconceptual is not something "already given" and as something ready to hand (1993, 100). It is instead solely attainable in the unfolding of the social, historical and human significance of an experiential item. The essential idea is that the object is to be understood as a site that accumulates meanings in its movement through historical time.³⁴ Those meanings are not accessible in it as though they were static properties. Hence one cannot look for them as one might look for a watermark on a bank note. They are rather the features of the thing as reflected through its relationship to its social and temporal context, features that require the concrete elucidation of the way they are subjectively experienced in order to be brought to the surface. In order to be present before the subject as a static (detemporalized) thing with fixed properties, the thing must already have been subjected to the logic of disenchantment.³⁵ The reason, therefore, that the nonconceptual cannot be assimilated as a conceptual content, the reason that Adorno will refer to it as a "blind spot" in cognition, is that it encapsulates those experiential meanings that had to be subtracted in the restriction of cognitive experience under the sway of the constituting subject. It is nothing less than the experiential conditions of philosophical concepts and, as such, the disclosure of their full historical truth. To be able to disclose that experience, philosophy has to take the form of a process that *shows* that dependence through the articulation of what concepts say.

This is where the notion of philosophy's dependence links up directly with the project of negative dialectic as a form of critical self-reflection. The recognition of dependence is the moment when concepts are brought to self-awareness about the way that they are structured under the conditions of disenchantment.³⁶ In calling this *Selbstbesinnung* or self-awareness, Adorno is emphasizing the point that it is an awareness reached *through* the interpretation of concepts, as the point where they reveal their own experiential conditions *in* what they say. Adorno describes this as a "second Copernican turn" that reverses the process of abstraction at the root of constituting subjectivity (1969, 155). The awareness of dependence is therefore equivalent to the full, unreduced experience of the concept. The concept is treated as an experiential surface that, in interpretation, expands outward to reveal the points of contact between its own innermost structure and historical experience.

Adorno's claim that the "outbreak" from constituting subjectivity must be executed with the power of the subject presupposes that the route to the truth about the world's structure goes through the subject. But this requires, *contra* the presupposition of constituting subjectivity, that "the key position of the subject in cognition is experience, not form" (1969, 162). What makes this possible is, first, the realization that the notion of experience as it appears within the constituting subject is itself the result of a prior series of interactions that prestructures the subject's cognitive relation to the world. The appearance of the object as a blind particular is mediated by those interactions. This is what Adorno means when he claims that the subject is "also object, only in its objectification into the moment of form does it forget how and whereby it is itself constituted" (p. 163).³⁷ For Adorno, this "forgetting" is not restricted to idealist philosophies, it occurs to an extent in all representations of cognition that are organized according to a separation of form from content, and where the relation between those two elements is conceived along the lines of Kantian determinate judgment. It is in the separation of form from content, Adorno believes, that the pre-preparation of experience as the synthesis of blind particulars finds its way into philosophical representations of cognition. The role of the subject as the experiential (*not* constituting) moment in cognition is supposed to recall the diminishing of experience that had to take place in order for the subject to install itself as the forming moment in the cognitive encounter. It works backward to the historical experience that is the historical condition of possibility of this relation.

NATURAL HISTORY AND SUFFERING

Spiritual experience, I have argued, is the transformation of our concepts into the experiential substance that motivates them. Since our concepts operate according to the type of abstraction that defines the constituting subject, Adorno will argue, that experiential substance is characterized in terms of suffering. Adorno's understanding of the idea of natural history is central to his understanding of how concepts can be made to work as the expression of suffering. Natural history works in two directions at once. It follows the Hegelian (Lukácsian) dissolution of reification in the transformation of rigidified forms into historical processes. But at the same time, it resolves that process back into the "suffering" of the items that become prey to the logic of disenchantment. Again, we can see that Adorno's dialectic insists on being relentlessly negative. Spiritual experience is the disclosure of suffering as the truth about experience (that is, as the truth about the "nonspiritual" experience that is the staple of our everyday cognitive activity). This is what Adorno means when he refers to negative dialectic as the "pain of the world raised to a concept" (1966,

18). It is the “mindfulness of suffering” that became sedimented in the concept, the violence wrought on the object through disenchantment (1970a, 43). The concept does not grasp suffering as a conceptual content. It is not accessible as another isolable fact on the surface of experience. The concept *expresses* suffering: it is already at work in the mechanism that dirempts subject and object as form and content. Thus it would be better to say that suffering is a consequence of the very structure of the concept, yet not something that is directly sayable (because not another conceptualizable content) within it. This is why philosophy must take the form of the “expression of suffering,” the attempt to “bring the suffering of the world to language” (2003a, 158). The idea of natural history allows Adorno to read the process of formation of the object as a result of its disfigurement at the hands of the universal. Negative dialectic resists the reconciliation in the unity of the concept by using the concept to express the violence done to the particular at the hands of the whole. It makes visible the suffering behind the coercive unification of particulars. A similar insight lies behind all of Adorno’s writings on art, music, and sociology. Hence Adorno’s claim that “authentic suffering” has implanted “scars” in the work of art that give the lie to the work’s autonomy, and refute the reconciliation of universal and particular in the work (2003c, 39). Natural history makes the historical process accessible as an experience. The diremption of subject and object that drives that process becomes visible as the face of suffering worn by the things that are subject to it.

“The need to give voice to suffering,” Adorno states in *Negative Dialectic*, “is the condition of all truth” (1966, 29). It is important to take this assertion seriously, since it is central to the critical task of Adorno’s conception of negative dialectic as the striving for *Selbstbesinnung* or self-awareness. Suffering is not a fact that exists independently of the subject, but neither is it to be dismissed (*contra* Adorno’s detractors) as the private preoccupation of a melancholy subjectivity. Adorno’s assertion that suffering is a *condition* of truth, I suggest, must be understood as claiming that truth appears as the inverted reflection of the disclosure of the distortions of the present in critical self-reflection. As Adorno puts this in *Minima Moralia*, the “light of redemption” appears only in its revelation of the present as alienated, with its “cracks and crevices” fully disclosed (1951, 333–34). To state this in more secular terms: Adorno is saying that the revelation of the present as not fully rational is what opens up a distance between our concepts and an unconstrained, unmutated knowledge of the thing. We can think of the idea of giving voice to suffering in terms of a destruction of the illusory, ideological claim of unity of thought and thing. The claim of such a unity is ideological, Adorno believes, because it stipulates that the subject is able to reconcile its experience with the conventions of language (i.e., language as under the sway of disenchantment and its pulling away from expression). It assumes, that is, that the subject is able to

use linguistic conventions so as to express itself fully within them. Again, it is important to bear in mind that Adorno is not just criticizing the excesses of idealism and its attempts to derive the object from out of the subject. He is claiming that this illusory unity is projected in any structure that reduces the subject to the moment of form, as representing things in terms of repeatable properties. Any model of knowing that embodies the reduction of the subject to subsumptive form (rather than historically situated experience) will recapitulate this illusory unity. The ideological assertion of identity implies that things have no possibilities or tendencies, visible through their historical situatedness, that point beyond their appearance in the present. The destruction of the illusory unity of thought and being, or language and world, is what leads to suffering because it discloses the present and its language in the form of a ruin.³⁸ It is the *distance* between language and world, which finds expression in the failure of language to say what it must try to say.³⁹ Thus the disclosure of suffering and the maintaining of truth as transcending the present are one and the same. It is this same destruction of an illusory unity between convention and the expressive subject that Adorno finds compelling about Beethoven's "late" style. Here too, art is closest to truth in the moment where it brings to the surface the failure of reconciliation of the subject and the forms in which it finds its expression. Thus for both art and philosophy, their worth as reflective practices will be determined by whether they are able to reveal as illusory the identification of the present with "truth," and in the process, express the present in the form of suffering through its distance from what would be a reconciled or true world. Adorno undoubtedly came to the idea of natural history through a reading of Walter Benjamin's *Origin of the German Mourning Play*. Benjamin's description of the allegorical perspective as the exposition of history as the "passion (*Leidensgeschichte*, literally: the history of suffering) of the world" would have an important influence on Adorno's interpretive strategy (1974b, 343).⁴⁰

Minima Moralia is an exemplary demonstration of how this interpretive practice is supposed to work. *Minima Moralia* manages to express the disfigurement of the object through tracing on its surface its entwinement with a universal that is under the spell of blind nature. It tells the story of the World Spirit from the perspective of the individual that (as Adorno puts it in his meditations on the *Weltgeist*) has been "buried underneath the universal" (1966, 312). The private sphere, the alienated condition that is all that remains of the realm of the particular vis-à-vis the universal, becomes the object of an interpretation that intends to bring the to the surface "the objective powers that determine the individual existence even in its most hidden interior" (1951, 7). If Hegel had "transfigured the totality of suffering in history into the positivity of the self-realizing absolute," *Minima Moralia* uncovers from the perspective of the individual that the teleological truth of *Weltgeist* would

be “absolute suffering” (1966, 314). This is achieved by registering the disintegration of the individual in late capitalism in the form of spiritual experience. The individual, in the “age of its disintegration,” becomes visible through the interpretation of the micro-transformations of private life (1951, 11). The consequences of the “dying of experience” (1951, 43) are read off the surface of the thing as their contextual meaning, ascending to the general truth about society by treating each thing as a reflection of the whole.

Cognition can be extended only where it remains with the individual such that, through its persistence, the individual’s isolation disintegrates. That certainly presupposes a relation to the universal, but not that of subsumption, but rather almost its opposite. Dialectical mediation is not the recourse to what is more abstract, but rather the process of dissolution of the concrete in itself. (1951, 90–91)

The nonsubsumptive relation to the universal that is at work in *Minima Moralia* is precisely the revelation of the universal as the context that is read off the features of the particular. It disintegrates or “dissolves” the particular by showing its dependence on that context, as the narrative of its particularity. This is spiritual experience, but it is far removed from a Hegelian spiritualization of the world. Spiritual experience in Adorno works within the interpretive frame of natural history. Thus what becomes accessible in spiritual experience is the truth about the historical process as the withering of experience (1951, 64). This is visible in *Minima Moralia* as the decay of the individual—its “passing away” as the transition of history into nature. The suffering of the individual gives the lie to the teleology of the self-realizing absolute.

THE LIMITS OF LANGUAGE OR HOW IS SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE POSSIBLE?

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the philosopher Wilhelm Windelband spoke of a “renewal” of Hegel in philosophical circles (1911, 265). Windelband attributed this to the dissatisfaction of a new generation with “positivistic impoverishment and materialistic desolation,” that is to say, the scientism and formalism of the dominant neo-Kantian model of philosophy. The efforts of nineteenth-century positivism to model philosophy on the natural sciences had been accompanied by a growing specialization of philosophy as a separate *Fachdisziplin*. At the turn of the century, as Windelband tells it, this new scientific respectability of philosophy had been achieved at the cost of a loss of philosophy’s ability to address the pressing spiritual questions of a new generation. What typifies this generation, Windelband suggests, is a

“hunger” for a worldview or *Weltanschauung* that has “gripped our younger generation and which finds its satisfaction in Hegel.”

As Rüdiger Bubner has argued, the twentieth century began with an enthusiastic sense of new beginnings in many fields of intellectual life, including philosophy (1981, 11). There was a pervasive sense of the need to distance thought from the previous age. To the new generation of which Windelband speaks, it appeared as though the concerted attempted to disengage the subject from the process of cognition had created a rift between subject and world, effectively confining the role of subjectivity to that of passively registering a process in which it plays no part.⁴¹ Hegel had described this situation as one of diremption—*Entzweiung* (1970, 20).⁴² Hegel takes diremption to be a result of the general social and cultural consequences of the dominance of the understanding, which severs “reason and sensuousness, intelligence and nature” and “absolute subjectivity and absolute objectivity” (p. 21). The “need for philosophy,” Hegel claims, arises when the “power of unification” has vanished from life, and the oppositions have lost their “living relation and reciprocal action” (p. 22). In the social theory of Georg Simmel, around the beginning of the twentieth century, this experience of diremption is registered as the growing cleavage between the contents of objective culture, and the possibility of interiorizing these contents in the subjective life of the individual. Simmel refers to a “paradox” of culture, which consists in the fact that “subjective life” can become truly cultivated only through “forms which have become completely alien and crystallized into self-sufficient independence” (1968, 30). The subject, Simmel claims, no longer recognizes itself in these forms, hence they are encountered as self-standing creations driven by their own imperatives, divorced from the life of the subject.

Simmel’s social theory had an important influence on Georg Lukács, whose theory of the structure of reification in capitalism in *History and Class Consciousness* (published in 1923) had a formative effect on “first generation” critical theorists, including Adorno. In this work, Lukács argues that the cognitive limitations of Kantian philosophy derive from the way that, within it, knowledge is structured as “contemplation.” When things become accessible solely in “contemplation,” objects become amenable to purely quantitative and formal forms of categorization. This rational objectification, Lukács claims, “conceals above all the immediate—qualitative and material—character of things as things” (1971, 92). The “original and authentic substantiality” of things is shrouded by the ghostly objectivity of the commodity. Lukács’s description of this “authentic substantiality” evinces a large debt to the critique of the intellect in Bergson and Simmel. Lukács speaks of the loss of the “qualitative, variable, flowing nature” of time (p. 93), and the dismantling of the “organically unified process of work and life” (p. 103). Lukács famously refers to that point of view from which contemplation is overcome as the standpoint

of praxis. Praxis does not represent action or practice as opposed to theory; it is rather the self-consciousness of the historical process. The proletariat, Lukács wants to claim, recognizes itself as the *subject* of history, which through its practical activity produces commodified objects.

Simplifying somewhat, it is possible to say that there are two central features of the Lukácsian, Hegelian-Marxist solution to reification that render it unpalatable to Adorno. By positing the “identical subject-object” of history as the key to overcoming reification, Lukács both (1) identifies reification with objectification, and (2) adopts a standard teleological conception of history, the “road along which the dialectic of history is objectively impelled” toward self-consciousness (1971, 197). It is the idealist implications of both of these assumptions that would make Lukács’s solution unacceptable to Adorno. With regard to the first point, Adorno believes that this assumption is simply a replication of the same pathology that drives disenchantment. It intensifies rather than resolves the blindness of the constituting subject that, for Adorno, is the origin of the structure of contemplation in the first place. Adorno believes that the Lukácsian solution to reification does not get beyond the idealist version of the constituting subject because it understands self-reflection as the unification of subject and object from the standpoint of history. It therefore repeats the idealist error of assuming that the self-reflection of reification is immediately its elimination. This is why Adorno claims that reconciliation would look more like the “communication of what is differentiated” than the “undifferentiated unity of subject and object” (1969, 153). Reification, therefore, must be resisted without bringing about the collapse into the unity of subjectivity typical of the idealist solution. As for the second point, one of the main intentions of the idea of natural history is to resist the teleological reading of history.

What makes Adorno’s own critique of the reduced, neo-Kantian conception of cognitive experience different from those of Lukács, Bergson, and others, is that it consistently refuses the temptation to present what exceeds that conception as an accessible standpoint. When thought succumbs to that temptation (as, Adorno believes, happens in Lukács’s invocation of praxis, and Bergsonian intuition as a standpoint accessible outside the concept) it risks either (1) collapsing into a form of irrationalism that postulates a deeper thought that is beyond the capacity of rational thought to grasp, or (2) attempting to make that standpoint accessible *within* the concepts of reduced experience, which, if successful, would only confirm that there *is* nothing beyond the capacity of our concepts to grasp after all. Adorno saw that the only way out of this oscillation between irrationalism, and a reduction to what is already known, lay in a rigorous, immanent critique of our concepts. For Adorno, this meant an immanent critique that would delimit, from the inside as it were, the structure of experience as it is circumscribed by our conceptual language.

Adorno is emphasizing the deeply Kantian nature of this enterprise when he states that, as for Kant, philosophy today must consist in the “critique of reason through reason itself, not its banishment or abolition” (1966, 92). Although Kant wants to establish what he takes to be the legitimate bounds of our use of concepts, their confinement to experience, he also argues in the first Critique that we are driven by something like an intrinsic requirement of our thinking to try to transgress these limits, to apply our concepts independently of the conditions of experience. It is impossible for us to know what would be beyond the conditions of experience, yet we inescapably try to grasp it. Like Kant, Adorno will argue that it is impossible for us to grasp with concepts what it is that exceeds the limits of the structure of experience (as it is constituted by our concepts). However, he will also argue that it is possible for us to experience those limits *as* limits. For Adorno, the essential idea behind the Kantian critique of reason can be phrased as “how we can experience the failure of our concepts to express experience?” Adorno argues that the Kantian “block,” the claim that it is impossible for us to know things in themselves, as they are outside of our experience, is an experience of this kind. This experience that there is something we want to say, something we wish to express but which cannot be said with our concepts, is what philosophy as negative dialectic strives continually to reproduce. For Adorno, this is in fact equivalent to the very idea of “critical” thought, and this becomes clear if we reflect on the two errors noted above. If it is claimed that we can in fact think of a dimension of experience beyond the limits of our concepts, either that dimension is incommensurable with concepts (in which case we can *say* nothing about it), or, if it can be stated, then, once again, it is integrated into conceptual experience. In neither case is there the potential for a critique of our conceptual experience. That critique, Adorno believes, must take the form of an immanent demonstration of the failure of our concepts, the disclosure of the excess of what strives for expression over what concepts are able to say.

It is precisely these moments, experiences of the failure of concepts, I suggest, that Adorno is attempting to describe with the term “spiritual experience.” It is not intended to denote the availability of a perspective on things that would be beyond concepts. It is rather the moment when we become aware of the need for a transfiguration of our concepts, when, that is, such a transfiguration is demanded by the need to give voice to experience. Adorno interprets Kant’s notion of a subjective necessity of our thinking to transgress its limits, as a “longing” (he talks of a *Sehnsucht*) that is inseparable from how we use concepts. In a concise summary of what negative dialectic sets out to achieve, Adorno argues that “in the accusation that the concept is not identical to the thing, there lives also the longing of the concept, that it would like to be so” (1966, 152). We must understand this comment as follows: the revelation of the insufficiency of our concepts in relation to experience, the excess

of what we want to say over what they bring to language, is made possible by a longing *intrinsic to the concept*, by its yearning to put experience into words. This is why Adorno claims that “no concept would be thinkable, none would be possible without the more which makes language into language” (p. 112). The “more” that Adorno refers to here is the excess of what calls for expression over what is sayable. To become aware of that “more” in using a concept, Adorno wants to say, is to be aware of the distance that separates *our* experience from the experience prefigured in the longing that animates thinking. By experiencing the failure of our concepts in this way, we can measure the distance between current experience and a nonreduced experienced. And the process of measuring that distance would be equivalent to raising suffering into the concept.

It is also possible to think of this longing, or what Adorno sometimes calls a “striving” (*Anstrengung*) intrinsic to thinking as being evoked in Adorno’s use of the notion of “mimesis.” Adorno tends to describe mimesis in a way that contrasts it with conceptual cognition. It is said to represent an archaic mode of likening oneself to an object in order to know it, as opposed to subsuming it under concepts, that is, establishing that object as a possessor of qualities that it shares with other things. However, Adorno does not mean to suggest that mimesis constitutes a wholly separate method for knowing experience. If it were that, of course, then it would be another example of the irrationalist position that Adorno consistently refuses. This is why Adorno describes it as something that inhabits our conceptual ways of knowing, almost as a demand on our concepts to measure themselves by what in the object searches for expression. I take it that this is the point of Adorno’s claim that the “groping [or grasping—*Tasten*] for that concordance,” the affinity of knower and known, “lives on” in the “conception of rational cognition” (1966, 55). If this moment were “wholly extirpated,” Adorno goes on to say, then the very possibility that the subject could know the object would be “unintelligible.” Rather than a separate type of knowing, then, mimesis is to be understood as something like a demand, raised (perpetually) within the concept, and which pushes it to measure what it says against what in the object wants to be expressed. Thus when Adorno claims that “the mimetic moment blends in with the rational in the course of its secularization,” I take it he is referring to its transformation into a call for our concepts to render themselves open to possibilities of experience that exceed what our concepts are currently able to say. What matters in living up to this demand, Adorno believes, has to do with how we use concepts. And this means using language in such a way that one can coax concepts to express the “more” that they say *as* concepts. In the next two chapters, I want to explore this idea of how concepts can express more than they say as concepts in considerably more depth.