

Negative Dialectics

Theodor W. Adorno

PREFACE

Negative Dialectics is a phrase that flouts tradition. As early as Plato, dialectics meant to achieve something positive by means of negation; the thought figure of a "negation of negation" later became the succinct term. This book seeks to free dialectics from such affirmative traits without reducing its determinacy. The unfoldment of the paradoxical title is one of its aims.

What would be the foundation, according to the dominant view of philosophy, will here be developed long after the author has discussed things of which that view assumes that they grow out of a foundation. This implies a critique of the foundation concept as well as the primacy of substantive thought—a thought of whose movement the thinker becomes aware only as he performs it. What it needs is secondary under the rules of the intellectual game, which always remain applicable.

A methodology of the author's material works is not all there is to this book; no continuum exists between those works and it, according to the theory of negative dialectics. The discontinuity will be dealt with, however, and so will the directions for thought to be read in it. The procedure will be justified, not based on reasons. To the best of his ability the author means to put his cards on the table—which is by no means the same as playing the game.

In 1937, when the author had completed his *Metakritik der Erkenntnistheorie*, the last chapter of that publication moved Walter Benjamin to remark that one had to "cross the frozen waste of abstraction to arrive at concise, concrete philosophizing." *Negative Dialectics* now charts such a crossing in retrospect. In contemporary philosophy, concretion would mostly be obtained on the sly. By contrast, this largely abstract text seeks no less to serve authentic concretion than to explain the author's concrete procedure. As the latest esthetic discussions feature the

INTRODUCTION

THE POSSIBILITY OF PHILOSOPHY

Philosophy, which once seemed obsolete, lives on because the moment to realize it was missed. The summary judgment that it had merely interpreted the world, that resignation in the face of reality had crippled it in itself, becomes a defeatism of reason after the attempt to change the world miscarried. Philosophy offers no place from which theory as such might be concretely convicted of the anachronisms it is suspected of, now as before. Perhaps it was an inadequate interpretation which promised that it would be put into practice. Theory cannot prolong the moment its critique depended on. A practice indefinitely delayed is no longer the forum for appeals against self-satisfied speculation; it is mostly the pretext used by executive authorities to choke, as vain, whatever critical thoughts the practical change would require.

Having broken its pledge to be as one with reality or at the point of realization, philosophy is obliged ruthlessly to criticize itself. Once upon a time, compared with sense perception and every kind of external experience, it was felt to be the very opposite of naïveté; now it has objectively grown as naïve in its turn as the seedy scholars feasting on subjective speculation seemed to Goethe, one hundred and fifty years ago. The introverted thought architect dwells behind the moon that is taken over by extroverted technicians. The conceptual shells that were to house the whole, according to philosophical custom, have in view of the immense expansion of society and of the strides made by positive natural science come to seem like relics of a simple barter economy amidst the late stage of industrial capitalism. The discrepancy (since decayed into a commonplace) between power and any sort of spirit has grown so vast as to foil whatever attempts to understand the preponderance might be inspired by

NEGATIVE DIALECTICS

the spirit's own concept. The will to this understanding bespeaks a power claim denied by that which is to be understood.

The most patent expression of philosophy's historical fate is the way the special sciences compelled it to turn back into a special science. If Kant had, as he put it, "freed himself from the school concept of philosophy for its world concept,"¹ it has now, perforce, regressed to its school concept. Whenever philosophers mistake that for the world concept, their pretensions grow ridiculous. Hegel, despite his doctrine of the absolute spirit in which he included philosophy, knew philosophy as a mere element of reality, an activity in the division of labor, and thus restricted it. This has since led to the narrowness of philosophy, to a disproportionateness to reality that became the more marked the more thoroughly philosophers forgot about the restriction—the more they disdained, as alien, any thought of their position in a whole which they monopolized as their object, instead of recognizing how much they depended on it all the way to the internal composition of their philosophy, to its immanent truth.

To be worth another thought, philosophy must rid itself of such naïveté. But its critical self-reflection must not halt before the highest peaks of its history. Its task would be to inquire whether and how there can still be a philosophy at all, now that Hegel's has fallen, just as Kant inquired into the possibility of metaphysics after the critique of rationalism. If Hegel's dialectics constituted the unsuccessful attempt to use philosophical concepts for coping with all that is heterogeneous to those concepts, the relationship to dialectics is due for an accounting insofar as his attempt failed.

DIALECTICS NOT A STANDPOINT

No theory today escapes the marketplace. Each one is offered as a possibility among competing opinions; all are put up for choice; all are swallowed. There are no blinders for thought to don against this, and the self-righteous conviction that my own theory is spared that fate will surely deteriorate into self-advertising. But neither need dialectics be muted by such rebuke, or by the con-

INTRODUCTION

comitant charge of its superfluity, of being a method slapped on outwardly, at random. The name of dialectics says no more, to begin with, than that objects do not go into their concepts without leaving a remainder, that they come to contradict the traditional norm of adequacy. Contradiction is not what Hegel's absolute idealism was bound to transfigure it into: it is not of the essence in a Heraclitean sense. It indicates the untruth of identity, the fact that the concept does not exhaust the thing conceived.

Yet the appearance of identity is inherent in thought itself, in its pure form. To think is to identify. Conceptual order is content to screen what thinking seeks to comprehend. The semblance and the truth of thought entwine. The semblance cannot be decreed away, as by avowal of a being-in-itself outside the totality of cogitative definitions. It is a thesis secretly implied by Kant—and mobilized against him by Hegel—that the transconceptual "in itself" is void, being wholly indefinite. Aware that the conceptual totality is mere appearance, I have no way but to break immanently, in its own measure, through the appearance of total identity. Since that totality is structured to accord with logic, however, whose core is the principle of the excluded middle, whatever will not fit this principle, whatever differs in quality, comes to be designated as a contradiction. Contradiction is nonidentity under the aspect of identity; the dialectical primary of the principle of contradiction makes the thought of unity the measure of heterogeneity. As the heterogeneous collides with its limit it exceeds itself.

Dialectics is the consistent sense of nonidentity. It does not begin by taking a standpoint. My thought is driven to it by its own inevitable insufficiency, by my guilt of what I am thinking. We are blaming the method for the fault of the matter when we object to dialectics on the ground (repeated from Hegel's Aristotelian critics on²) that whatever happens to come into the dialectical mill will be reduced to the merely logical form of contradiction, and that (an argument still advanced by Croce³) the full diversity of the noncontradictory, of that which is simply differentiated, will be ignored. What we differentiate will appear divergent, dissonant, negative for just as long as the structure of our consciousness obliges it to strive for unity: as long as its demand for totality

NEGATIVE DIALECTICS

will be its measure for whatever is not identical with it. This is what dialectics holds up to our consciousness as a contradiction. Because of the immanent nature of consciousness, contradictoriness itself has an inescapably and fatefully legal character. Identity and contradiction of thought are welded together. Total contradiction is nothing but the manifested untruth of total identification. Contradiction is nonidentity under the rule of a law that affects the nonidentical as well.

REALITY AND DIALECTICS

This law is not a cogitative law, however. It is real. Unquestionably, one who submits to the dialectical discipline has to pay dearly in the qualitative variety of experience. Still, in the administered world the impoverishment of experience by dialectics, which outrages healthy opinion, proves appropriate to the abstract monotony of that world. Its agony is the world's agony raised to a concept. Cognition must bow to it, unless concretion is once more to be debased into the ideology it starts becoming in fact.

Another version of dialectics contented itself with a debilitated renaissance: with its intellectual-historical derivation from Kant's *aporias* and from that which the systems of his successors projected but failed to achieve. It can be achieved only negatively. Dialectics unfolds the difference between the particular and the universal, dictated by the universal. As the subject-object dichotomy is brought to mind it becomes inescapable for the subject, furrowing whatever the subject thinks, even objectively—but it would come to an end in reconciliation. Reconciliation would release the nonidentical, would rid it of coercion, including spiritualized coercion; it would open the road to the multiplicity of different things and strip dialectics of its power over them. Reconciliation would be the thought of the many as no longer inimical, a thought that is anathema to subjective reason.

Dialectics serves the end of reconciliation. It dismantles the coercive logical character of its own course; that is why it is denounced as "panlogism." As idealistic dialectics, it was bracketed with the absolute subject's predominance as the negative impulse

INTRODUCTION

of each single move of the concept and of its course as a whole. Historically, such primacy of the subject has been condemned even in the Hegelian conception that eclipsed the individual human consciousness as well as the transcendental one of Kant and Fichte. Subjective primacy was not only supplanted by the impotence of the weakening thought, which the world's overpowering course deters from construing it; but none of the reconcilements claimed by absolute idealism—and no other kind remained consistent—has stood up, whether in logic or in politics and history. The inability of consistent idealism to constitute itself as anything but the epitome of contradiction is as much the logical consequence of its truth as it is the punishment incurred by its logicity *qua* logicity; it is appearance as much as necessity.

Yet reopening the case of dialectics, whose non-idealistic form has since degenerated into a dogma as its idealistic one did into a cultural asset, will not decide solely about the actuality of a traditional mode of philosophizing, nor about the actuality of the philosophical structure of cognitive objects. Through Hegel, philosophy had regained the right and the capacity to think substantively instead of being put off with the analysis of cognitive forms that were empty and, in an emphatic sense, null and void. Where present philosophy deals with anything substantive at all, it lapses either into the randomness of a *weltanschauung* or into that formalism, that "matter of indifference," against which Hegel had risen. There is historical evidence of this in the evolution of phenomenology, which once was animated by the need for contents and became an invocation of being, a repudiation of any content as unclean.

The fundament and result of Hegel's substantive philosophizing was the primacy of the subject, or—in the famous phrase from the Introduction to his *Logic*—the "identity of identity and non-identity."⁴ He held the definite particular to be definable by the mind because its immanent definition was to be nothing but the mind. Without this supposition, according to Hegel, philosophy would be incapable of knowing anything substantive or essential. Unless the idealistically acquired concept of dialectics harbors experiences contrary to the Hegelian emphasis, experiences independent of the idealistic machinery, philosophy must inevitably do

without substantive insight, confine itself to the methodology of science, call that philosophy, and virtually cross itself out.

THE CONCERN OF PHILOSOPHY

The matters of true philosophical interest at this point in history are those in which Hegel, agreeing with tradition, expressed his disinterest. They are nonconceptuality, individuality, and particularity—things which ever since Plato used to be dismissed as transitory and insignificant, and which Hegel labeled “lazy Existenz.” Philosophy’s theme would consist of the qualities it downgrades as contingent, as a *quantité négligeable*. A matter of urgency to the concept would be what it fails to cover, what its abstractionist mechanism eliminates, what is not already a case of the concept.

Bergson and Husserl, carriers of philosophical modernism, both have innervated this idea but withdrawn from it to traditional metaphysics. Bergson, in a tour de force, created another type of cognition for nonconceptuality’s sake. The dialectical salt was washed away in an undifferentiated tide of life; solidified reality was disposed of as subaltern, not comprehended along with its subalternity. The hater of the rigid general concept established a cult of irrational immediacy, of sovereign freedom in the midst of unfreedom. He drafted his two cognitive modes in as dualistic an opposition as that of the Cartesian and Kantian doctrines he fought had ever been; the causal-mechanical mode, as pragmatistic knowledge, was no more affected by the intuitive one than the bourgeois establishment was by the relaxed unself-consciousness of those who owe their privileges to that establishment.

The celebrated intuitions themselves seem rather abstract in Bergson’s philosophy; they scarcely go beyond the phenomenal time consciousness which even Kant had underlying chronological-physical time—spatial time, according to Bergson’s insight. Although it takes an effort to develop, the intuitive mode of mental conduct does continue to exist in fact as an archaic rudiment of mimetic reactions. What preceded its past holds a promise beyond the ossified present. Intuitions succeed only desultorily, however.

INTRODUCTION

Every cognition including Bergson's own needs the rationality he scorns, and needs it precisely at the moment of concretion. Absolutized duration, pure becoming, the pure act—these would recoil into the same timelessness which Bergson chides in metaphysics since Plato and Aristotle. He did not mind that the thing he groped for, if it is not to remain a mirage, is visible solely with the equipment of cognition, by reflection upon its own means, and that it grows arbitrary in a procedure unrelated, from the start, to that of cognition.

Husserl the logician, on the other hand, would indeed sharply distinguish the mode of apprehending the essence from generalizing abstraction—what he had in mind was a specific mental experience capable of perceiving the essence in the particular—but the essence to which this experience referred did not differ in any respect from the familiar general concepts. There is a glaring discrepancy between the arrangements of essence perception and its *terminus ad quem*. Neither attempt to break out of idealism was successful: Bergson's bearings, like those of his positivistic arch-enemies, came from the *données immédiates de la conscience*; Husserl's came in similar fashion from phenomena of the stream of consciousness. Both men stay within range of immanent subjectivity.⁵ To be insisted upon, against both, would be the goal they pursue in vain: to counter Wittgenstein by uttering the unutterable.

The plain contradictoriness of this challenge is that of philosophy itself, which is thereby qualified as dialectics before getting entangled in its individual contradictions. The work of philosophical self-reflection consists in unraveling that paradox. Everything else is signification, secondhand construction, pre-philosophical activity, today as in Hegel's time. Though doubtful as ever, a confidence that philosophy can make it after all—that the concept can transcend the concept, the preparatory and concluding element, and can thus reach the nonconceptual—is one of philosophy's inalienable features and part of the naïveté that ails it. Otherwise it must capitulate, and the human mind with it. We could not conceive the simplest operation; there would be no truth; emphatically, everything would be just nothing. But whatever truth the

NEGATIVE DIALECTICS

concepts cover beyond their abstract range can have no other stage than what the concepts suppress, disparage, and discard. The cognitive utopia would be to use concepts to unseal the non-conceptual with concepts, without making it their equal.

THE ANTAGONISTIC ENTIRETY

Such a concept of dialectics makes us doubt its possibility. However varied, the anticipation of moving in contradictions throughout seems to teach a mental totality—the very identity thesis we have just rendered inoperative. The mind which ceaselessly reflects on contradiction in the thing itself, we hear, must be the thing itself if it is to be organized in the form of contradiction; the truth which in idealistic dialectics drives beyond every particular, as onesided and wrong, is the truth of the whole, and if that were not preconceived, the dialectical steps would lack motivation and direction. We have to answer that the object of a mental experience is an antagonistic system in itself—antagonistic in reality, not just in its conveyance to the knowing subject that rediscovers itself therein. The coercive state of reality, which idealism had projected into the region of the subject and the mind, must be retranslated from that region. What remains of idealism is that society, the objective determinant of the mind, is as much an epitome of subjects as it is their negation. In society the subjects are unknowable and incapacitated; hence its desperate objectivity and conceptuality, which idealism mistakes for something positive.

The system is not one of the absolute spirit; it is one of the most conditioned spirit of those who have it and cannot even know how much it is their own. The subjective preconception of the material production process in society—basically different from its theoretical constitution—is the unresolved part, the part unreconciled with the subjects. Their own reason, unconscious like the transcendental subject and establishing identity by barter, remains incommensurable with the subjects it reduces to the same denominator: the subject as the subject's foe. The preceding generality is both true and untrue: true, because it forms that "ether" which Hegel calls spirit; untrue, because its reason is no reason yet,

INTRODUCTION

because its universality is the product of particular interests. This is why a philosophical critique of identity transcends philosophy. But the ineffable part of the utopia is that what defies subsumption under identity—the “use value,” in Marxist terminology—is necessary anyway if life is to go on at all, even under the prevailing circumstances of production. The utopia extends to the sworn enemies of its realization. Regarding the concrete utopian possibility, dialectics is the ontology of the wrong state of things. The right state of things would be free of it: neither a system nor a contradiction.

DISENCHANTMENT OF THE CONCEPT

Philosophy, Hegel's included, invites the general objection that by inevitably having concepts for its material it anticipates an idealistic decision. In fact no philosophy, not even extreme empiricism, can drag in the *facta bruta* and present them like cases in anatomy or experiments in physics; no philosophy can paste the particulars into the text, as seductive paintings would hoodwink it into believing. But the argument in its formality and generality takes as fetishistic a view of the concept as the concept does in interpreting itself naïvely in its own domain: in either case it is regarded as a self-sufficient totality over which philosophical thought has no power. In truth, all concepts, even the philosophical ones, refer to nonconceptualities, because concepts on their part are moments of the reality that requires their formation, primarily for the control of nature. What conceptualization appears to be from within, to one engaged in it—the predominance of its sphere, without which nothing is known—must not be mistaken for what it is in itself. Such a semblance of being-in-itself is conferred upon it by the motion that exempts it from reality, to which it is harnessed in turn.

Necessity compels philosophy to operate with concepts, but this necessity must not be turned into the virtue of their priority—no more than, conversely, criticism of that virtue can be turned into a summary verdict against philosophy. On the other hand, the insight that philosophy's conceptual knowledge is not the absolute

NEGATIVE DIALECTICS

of philosophy—this insight, for all its inescapability, is again due to the nature of the concept. It is not a dogmatic thesis, much less a naïvely realistic one. Initially, such concepts as that of “being” at the start of Hegel’s *Logic* emphatically mean nonconceptualities; as Lask put it, they “mean beyond themselves.” Dissatisfaction with their own conceptuality is part of their meaning, although the inclusion of nonconceptuality in their meaning makes it tendentially their equal and thus keeps them trapped within themselves. The substance of concepts is to them both immanent, as far as the mind is concerned, and transcendent as far as being is concerned. To be aware of this is to be able to get rid of concept fetishism. Philosophical reflection makes sure of the nonconceptual in the concept. It would be empty otherwise, according to Kant’s dictum; in the end, having ceased to be a concept of anything at all, it would be nothing.

A philosophy that lets us know this, that extinguishes the autarky of the concept, strips the blindfold from our eyes. That the concept is a concept even when dealing with things in being does not change the fact that on its part it is entwined with a nonconceptual whole. Its only insulation from that whole is its reification—that which establishes it as a concept. The concept is an element in dialectical logic, like any other. What survives in it is the fact that nonconceptuality has conveyed it by way of its meaning, which in turn establishes its conceptuality. To refer to nonconceptualities—as ultimately, according to traditional epistemology, every definition of concepts requires nonconceptual, deictic elements—is characteristic of the concept, and so is the contrary: that as the abstract unit of the noumena subsumed thereunder it will depart from the noumenal. To change this direction of conceptuality, to give it a turn toward nonidentity, is the hinge of negative dialectics. Insight into the constitutive character of the nonconceptual in the concept would end the compulsive identification which the concept brings unless halted by such reflection. Reflection upon its own meaning is the way out of the concept’s seeming being-in-itself as a unit of meaning.

"INFINITY"

Disenchantment of the concept is the antidote of philosophy. It keeps it from growing rampant and becoming an absolute to itself. An idea bequeathed to us by idealism—and corrupted by it, more than any other—needs a change in its function: the idea of the infinite. It is not up to philosophy to exhaust things according to scientific usage, to reduce the phenomena to a minimum of propositions; there are hints of that in Hegel's polemic against Fichte, whom he accused of starting out with a "dictum." Instead, in philosophy we literally seek to immerse ourselves in things that are heterogeneous to it, without placing those things in prefabricated categories. We want to adhere as closely to the heterogeneous as the programs of phenomenology and of Simmel tried in vain to do; our aim is total self-relinquishment. Philosophical contents can only be grasped where philosophy does not impose them. The illusion that it might confine the essence in its finite definitions will have to be given up.

The fatal ease with which the word "infinite" rolled off the idealistic philosophers' tongues may have been due only to a wish to allay gnawing doubts about the meager finiteness of their conceptual machinery—including Hegel's, his intentions notwithstanding. Traditional philosophy thinks of itself as possessing an infinite object, and in that belief it becomes a finite, conclusive philosophy. A changed philosophy would have to cancel that claim, to cease persuading others and itself that it has the infinite at its disposal. Instead, if it were delicately understood, the changed philosophy itself would be infinite in the sense of scorning solidification in a body of enumerable theorems. Its substance would lie in the diversity of objects that impinge upon it and of the objects it seeks, a diversity not wrought by any schema; to those objects, philosophy would truly give itself rather than use them as a mirror in which to reread itself, mistaking its own image for concretion. It would be nothing but full, unreduced experience in the medium of conceptual reflection, whereas even the "science of empirical consciousness" reduced the contents of such experience to cases of categories. What makes philosophy risk the strain of

its own infinity is the unwarranted expectation that each individual and particular puzzle it solves will be like Leibniz's monad, the ever-elusive entirety in itself—although, of course, in line with a pre-established disharmony rather than a pre-established harmony. The metacritical turn against the *prima philosophia* is at the same time a turn against the finiteness of a philosophy that prates about infinity without respecting it.

No object is wholly known; knowledge is not supposed to prepare the phantasm of a whole. Thus the goal of a philosophical interpretation of works of art cannot be their identification with the concept, their absorption in the concept; yet it is through such interpretation that the truth of the work unfolds. What can be envisioned, however—whether as the regularly continued abstraction or as an application of the concepts to whatever comes under their definition—may be useful as technology in the broadest sense of the word; but to philosophy, which refuses to fit in, it is irrelevant. In principle, philosophy can always go astray, which is the sole reason why it can go forward. This has been recognized in skepticism and in pragmatism, most recently in Dewey's wholly humane version of the latter; but we ought to add it as a ferment to an emphatic philosophy instead of renouncing philosophy, from the outset, in favor of the test it has to stand.

As a corrective to the total rule of method, philosophy contains a playful element which the traditional view of it as a science would like to exorcise. For Hegel, too, this was a sensitive point; he rejects "types and distinctions determined by external chance and by play, not by reason."⁶ The un-naïve thinker knows how far he remains from the object of his thinking, and yet he must always talk as if he had it entirely. This brings him to the point of clowning. He must not deny his clownish traits, least of all since they alone can give him hope for what is denied him. Philosophy is the most serious of things, but then again it is not all that serious. A thing that aims at what it is not a priori and is not authorized to control—such a thing, according to its own concept, is simultaneously part of a sphere beyond control, a sphere tabooed by conceptuality. To represent the mimesis it supplanted, the concept has no other way than to adopt something mimetic in its own conduct, without abandoning itself.

INTRODUCTION

The esthetic moment is thus not accidental to philosophy, though on grounds quite different from Schelling's; but it is no less incumbent upon philosophy to void its estheticism, to sublimate the esthetic into the real, by cogent insights. Cogency and play are the two poles of philosophy. Its affinity to art does not entitle it to borrow from art, least of all by virtue of the intuitions which barbarians take for the prerogatives of art. Intuitions hardly ever strike in isolation, as lightning from above; they do not strike the artist's work like that either. They hang together with the formal law of the work; if one tried to extract and preserve them, they would dissolve. Finally, thought is no protector of springs whose freshness might deliver us from thinking. We have no type of cognition at our disposal that differs absolutely from the disposing type, the type which intuitionism flees in panic and in vain.

A philosophy that tried to imitate art, that would turn itself into a work of art, would be expunging itself. It would be postulating the demand for identity, claiming to exhaust its object by endowing its procedure with a supremacy to which the heterogeneous bows a priori, as material—whereas to genuine philosophy its relation to the heterogeneous is virtually thematic. Common to art and philosophy is not the form, not the forming process, but a mode of conduct that forbids pseudomorphosis. Both keep faith with their own substance through their opposites: art by making itself resistant to its meanings; philosophy, by refusing to clutch at any immediate thing. What the philosophical concept will not abandon is the yearning that animates the nonconceptual side of art, and whose fulfillment shuns the immediate side of art as mere appearance. The concept—the organon of thinking, and yet the wall between thinking and the thought—negates that yearning. Philosophy can neither circumvent such negation nor submit to it. It must strive, by way of the concept, to transcend the concept.

THE SPECULATIVE MOMENT

Even after breaking with idealism, philosophy cannot do without speculation, which was exalted by idealism and tabooed with it—meaning speculation, of course, in a sense broader than the overly

THREE

MEDITATIONS ON METAPHYSICS

1

AFTER AUSCHWITZ

We cannot say any more that the immutable is truth, and that the mobile, transitory is appearance. The mutual indifference of temporality and eternal ideas is no longer tenable even with the bold Hegelian explanation that temporal existence, by virtue of the destruction inherent in its concept, serves the eternal represented by the eternity of destruction. One of the mystical impulses secularized in dialectics was the doctrine that the intramundane and historic is relevant to what traditional metaphysics distinguished as transcendence—or at least, less gnostically and radically put, that it is relevant to the position taken by human consciousness on the questions which the canon of philosophy assigned to metaphysics. After Auschwitz, our feelings resist any claim of the positivity of existence as sanctimonious, as wronging the victims; they balk at squeezing any kind of sense, however bleached, out of the victims' fate. And these feelings do have an objective side after events that make a mockery of the construction of immanence as endowed with a meaning radiated by an affirmatively posited transcendence.

Such a construction would affirm absolute negativity and would assist its ideological survival—as in reality that negativity survives anyway, in the principle of society as it exists until its self-destruction. The earthquake of Lisbon sufficed to cure Voltaire of the theodicy of Leibniz, and the visible disaster of the first nature was insignificant in comparison with the second, social one, which defies human imagination as it distills a real hell from human evil.

Our metaphysical faculty is paralyzed because actual events have shattered the basis on which speculative metaphysical thought could be reconciled with experience. Once again, the dialectical motif of quantity recoiling into quality scores an unspeakable triumph. The administrative murder of millions made of death a thing one had never yet to fear in just this fashion. There is no chance any more for death to come into the individuals' empirical life as somehow conformable with the course of that life. The last, the poorest possession left to the individual is expropriated. That in the concentration camps it was no longer an individual who died, but a specimen—this is a fact bound to affect the dying of those who escaped the administrative measure.

Genocide is the absolute integration. It is on its way wherever men are leveled off—"polished off," as the German military called it—until one exterminates them literally, as deviations from the concept of their total nullity. Auschwitz confirmed the philosophy of pure identity as death. The most far out dictum from Beckett's *End Game*, that there really is not so much to be feared any more, reacts to a practice whose first sample was given in the concentration camps, and in whose concept—venerable once upon a time—the destruction of nonidentity is ideologically lurking. Absolute negativity is in plain sight and has ceased to surprise anyone. Fear used to be tied to the *principium individuationis* of self-preservation, and that principle, by its own consistency, abolishes itself. What the sadists in the camps foretold their victims, "Tomorrow you'll be wiggling skyward as smoke from this chimney," bespeaks the indifference of each individual life that is the direction of history. Even in his formal freedom, the individual is as fungible and replaceable as he will be under the liquidators' boots.

But since, in a world whose law is universal individual profit, the individual has nothing but this self that has become indifferent, the performance of the old, familiar tendency is at the same time the most dreadful of things. There is no getting out of this, no more than out of the electrified barbed wire around the camps. Perennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream; hence it may have been wrong to say that after Auschwitz you could no longer write poems. But it is not wrong

to raise the less cultural question whether after Auschwitz you can go on living—especially whether one who escaped by accident, one who by rights should have been killed, may go on living. His mere survival calls for the coldness, the basic principle of bourgeois subjectivity, without which there could have been no Auschwitz; this is the drastic guilt of him who was spared. By way of atonement he will be plagued by dreams such as that he is no longer living at all, that he was sent to the ovens in 1944 and his whole existence since has been imaginary, an emanation of the insane wish of a man killed twenty years earlier.

Thinking men and artists have not infrequently described a sense of being not quite there, of not playing along, a feeling as if they were not themselves at all, but a kind of spectator. Others often find this repulsive; it was the basis of Kierkegaard's polemic against what he called the esthetic sphere. A critique of philosophical personalism indicates, however, that this attitude toward immediacy, this disavowal of every existential posture, has a moment of objective truth that goes beyond the appearance of the self-preserving motive. "What does it really matter?" is a line we like to associate with bourgeois callousness, but it is the line most likely to make the individual aware, without dread, of the insignificance of his existence. The inhuman part of it, the ability to keep one's distance as a spectator and to rise above things, is in the final analysis the human part, the very part resisted by its ideologists.

It is not altogether implausible that the immortal part is the one that acts in this fashion. The scene of Shaw on his way to the theater, showing a beggar his identification with the hurried remark, "Press," hides a sense of that beneath the cynicism. It would help to explain the fact that startled Schopenhauer: that affections in the face of death, not only other people's but our own, are frequently so feeble. People, of course, are spellbound without exception, and none of them are capable of love, which is why everyone feels loved too little. But the spectator's posture simultaneously expresses doubt that this could be all—when the individual, so relevant to himself in his delusion, still has nothing but that poor and emotionally animal-like ephemerality.

Spellbound, the living have a choice between involuntary ataraxy—an esthetic life due to weakness—and the bestiality of the involved. Both are wrong ways of living. But some of both would be required for the right *désinvolture* and sympathy. Once overcome, the culpable self-preservation urge has been confirmed, confirmed precisely, perhaps, by the threat that has come to be ceaselessly present. The only trouble with self-preservation is that we cannot help suspecting the life to which it attaches us of turning into something that makes us shudder: into a specter, a piece of the world of ghosts, which our waking consciousness perceives to be nonexistent. The guilt of a life which purely as a fact will strangle other life, according to statistics that eke out an overwhelming number of killed with a minimal number of rescued, as if this were provided in the theory of probabilities—this guilt is irreconcilable with living. And the guilt does not cease to reproduce itself, because not for an instant can it be made fully, presently conscious.

This, nothing else, is what compels us to philosophize. And in philosophy we experience a shock: the deeper, the more vigorous its penetration, the greater our suspicion that philosophy removes us from things as they are—that an unveiling of the essence might enable the most superficial and trivial views to prevail over the views that aim at the essence. This throws a glaring light on truth itself. In speculation we feel a certain duty to grant the position of a corrective to common sense, the opponent of speculation. Life feeds the horror of a premonition: what must come to be known may resemble the down-to-earth more than it resembles the sublime; it might be that this premonition will be confirmed even beyond the pedestrian realm, although the happiness of thought, the promise of its truth, lies in sublimity alone.

If the pedestrian had the last word, if it were the truth, truth would be degraded. The trivial consciousness, as it is theoretically expressed in positivism and unreflected nominalism, may be closer than the sublime consciousness to an *adaequatio rei atque cogitationis*; its sneering mockery of truth may be truer than a superior consciousness, unless the formation of a truth concept other than that of *adaequatio* should succeed. The innervation that metaphysics might win only by discarding itself applies to such other truth, and

it is not the last among the motivations for the passage to materialism. We can trace the leaning to it from the Hegelian Marx to Benjamin's rescue of induction; Kafka's work may be the apotheosis of the trend. If negative dialectics calls for the self-reflection of thinking, the tangible implication is that if thinking is to be true—if it is to be true today, in any case—it must also be a thinking against itself. If thought is not measured by the extremity that eludes the concept, it is from the outset in the nature of the musical accompaniment with which the SS liked to drown out the screams of its victims.

2

METAPHYSICS AND CULTURE

A new categorical imperative has been imposed by Hitler upon unfree mankind: to arrange their thoughts and actions so that Auschwitz will not repeat itself, so that nothing similar will happen. When we want to find reasons for it, this imperative is as refractory as the given one of Kant was once upon a time. Dealing discursively with it would be an outrage, for the new imperative gives us a bodily sensation of the moral addendum—bodily, because it is now the practical abhorrence of the unbearable physical agony to which individuals are exposed even with individuality about to vanish as a form of mental reflection. It is in the unvarnished materialistic motive only that morality survives.

The course of history forces materialism upon metaphysics, traditionally the direct antithesis of materialism. What the mind once boasted of defining or construing as its like moves in the direction of what is unlike the mind, in the direction of that which eludes the rule of the mind and yet manifests that rule as absolute evil. The somatic, unmeaningful stratum of life is the stage of suffering, of the suffering which in the camps, without any consolation, burned every soothing feature out of the mind, and out of culture, the mind's objectification. The point of no return has been reached in the process which irresistibly forced metaphysics to join what it was once conceived against. Not since the youthful Hegel has phi-