



Theodor W.

ADORNO

AN INTRODUCTION
TO DIALECTICS

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(1958)

Theodor W. Adorno

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EDITOR'S FOREWORD

The series of lectures which Adorno delivered at the Johann Wolfgang Goethe University in Frankfurt in the summer semester of 1958 can still be said to provide what the original announcement in the official lecture lists promised: it offers an introduction to dialectics. Presented in a free and improvised style, Adorno's theoretical reflections here are generally more accessible than comparable discussions in his writings on Hegel or in *Negative Dialectics*. The lecture course can thus certainly be regarded as a kind of propaedeutic to these texts. In reading out specific passages from Hegel and interpreting them in some detail, Adorno clarifies central motifs of dialectical thought such as the 'movement of the concept' or the meaning of determinate negation and dialectical contradiction. But he also makes it easier to approach this tradition of thought for those who already entertain sceptical or downright hostile attitudes towards it insofar as he systematically explores the difficulties it involves, addresses the resistance and the prejudices which it typically encounters, and discusses the specific challenges which dialectical thought presents. The only readers likely to be disappointed by Adorno's treatment of these questions are those who expect to be offered an instant recipe for such thinking. But, as Adorno insists, 'it belongs to the essence of dialectic that it is no recipe, but an attempt to let truth reveal itself' (Lecture 3, p. 25).

In terms of Adorno's own development, these lectures document a moment of some significance, since this is the first time that the issue of dialectics is expressly addressed. A couple of years before the plan for a work on dialectics as such assumed definite shape in

Adorno's mind, what we have here is a kind of methodological self-reflection on his previous substantive contributions, one where he explores for the first time that idea of 'an open or fractured dialectic' (Lecture 10, p. 95) which he will finally go on to develop at length in *Negative Dialectics*. This is evident, above all, from Adorno's original general plan for the lectures (pp. 221–53), which, in its almost symphonic layout, affords some insight into how his philosophy, in express relation to and with a constant eye upon the work of Hegel and Marx, attempts to situate and articulate itself. But the actual execution of the lectures, which differs significantly from the original plan in several respects, also explicates the central motifs of Adorno's own conception of dialectic: its definition as 'an attempt to do justice in thought itself to the non-identical, that is, precisely to those moments which are not exhausted in our thought' (Lecture 9, p. 82); the emphasis upon its originally critical function; its specific opposition to ontology and positivism alike; its complementary relationship to the idea of a negative metaphysics; and, finally, the question, so important to Adorno, of that individual motivation for engaging with dialectics which today – when the inner, namely dialectical, contradictions of capitalism are rousing us from a sort of post-modern somnolence – actually seems to have lost none of its relevance: namely the experience of 'diremption or alienation' (Lecture 8, p. 74) which makes us realize how 'dialectical thought itself responds to a negative condition of the world and, indeed, calls this negative condition by its proper name' (Lecture 8, p. 72), but without thereby relinquishing the hope that what strives for reconciliation is 'something itself harboured within the diremption, the negative, the suffering of the world' (Lecture 8, pp. 73–4).

Adorno delivered these one-hour lectures twice a week and presented them, as was usual with him, in a fairly free form that was based loosely on the notes and jottings he had set down beforehand. The lectures were recorded on tape as they were delivered – not specifically for subsequent publication but primarily for Adorno's own use – and were then transcribed. This transcription of the tape recordings forms the basis of the present edition and is preserved in the Theodor W. Adorno Archiv under Vo 3023–3249. On account of a one-week break after Easter, Adorno actually delivered twenty lectures rather than the twenty-two that were originally planned. No transcription has survived of the opening lecture, so that in this case the text is based on a stenograph by someone who can no longer be identified.

The presentation of the text follows the general editorial principles established for the posthumously published lectures of Adorno. This

means that the primary intention here was not to produce a critical edition of the text but one that would be as immediately accessible as possible, especially since, with all the 'lectures', we are not dealing with texts which Adorno composed in written form or even authorized as such. In order to preserve the immediate oral character of the lectures the syntax of the original as recorded in the transcription was left unaltered as far as this was possible. The punctuation of the text here has been limited to clarifying the often rather involved sentences and periods and thus making the line of thought as clear as possible. This rule has not been observed in a small number of cases where intelligibility would otherwise be severely compromised. A number of tacit changes have also been introduced in the case of obvious verbal slips on Adorno's part or obvious mistakes in the transcription arising from typing errors or mishearing of the tape recording. All of the relevant substantive changes in relation to the transcription, which must be regarded as additions of the editor, have been identified by the use of square brackets in the text. All conjectural emendations where the editor felt obliged to deviate from the transcription and suggest a different reading have been specifically identified in the notes. The editor has deviated from the otherwise standard editorial practice with regard to Adorno's lectures only in two respects: firstly, the ancient Greek words and expressions which Adorno sometimes introduces into the lectures have been supplemented with a corresponding transliteration of the Greek script in square brackets; secondly, while the German quotations from Hegel in the lectures are cited from the modern Suhrkamp edition of Hegel's writings edited by Karl Marcus Michel and Eva Moldenhauer, the editor also decided in the notes to cite the numerous quotations from Hegel's works in accordance with the editions which Adorno himself obviously used to read from in the course of his lectures. This decision was motivated not by any desire to create a supposed aura in this regard but simply to clarify certain observations on Adorno's part which are intelligible only in relation to these older editions (with regard to the older orthography of *seyn* [being] for *sein* [being], for example). For ease of reference, details of the corresponding volume and pagination of the Suhrkamp edition have also been provided, along with details of the relevant English translations of Hegel's writings.

The editor's notes, insofar as they touch on substantive issues, are intended to assist the reader's understanding of the lectures and to clarify, as far as seemed possible for the editor, certain particularly obscure passages in the text. Given the length of the lecture series itself, comparable passages from Adorno's published writings have

been cited in detail only rarely. The 'table of contents' which has been provided for the text, though based on Adorno's general practice, is not designed to offer an articulated account of the lectures after the event but merely intended, along with the index, to furnish a general orientation for the reader.

The editor would like to thank the publisher for permission to make available to the reader the extensive notes and sketches which Adorno produced in connection with this series of lectures. Careful attention to these materials shows that we must distinguish four levels of preparation for the lectures: 1) the general plan; 2) the detailed planning of the first two lectures of 8 and 13 May which exists as a typescript (point 1 and point 2 in the general plan); 3) the first phase of the lectures (8 May to 24 June), in which Adorno began by developing his outline for the first two lectures; because he could not keep within the allotted time he henceforth supplemented his sketches for the coming lecture with handwritten notes and jottings (either in the margin or between the lines of his existing typescript); and 4) the second phase of the lectures, in which he produced new and very detailed notes for three occasions (26 June, 3 July, and the rest of the semester from 15 July until 31 July). There is also a) a further loose sheet related to the first phase of the lectures (for 12 July); b) a sheet related to the second phase (on 'definition'); and c) a gloss which Adorno had prepared in relation to Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. The insertions subsequently added by Adorno are represented here by smaller print. Question marks in square brackets indicate words which are no longer legible. The purpose of the editor's notes provided for Adorno's own notes and sketches is limited to clarifying their specific relationship to the individual lectures where this is not evident from the dates which Adorno himself supplies.

Finally, it gives me great pleasure to thank all those who have assisted me in one way or another with the preparation of this edition: Andreas Arndt, Jelena Hahl-Fontaine, Hans-Joachim Neubauer, Wim Platvoet, Michael Schwarz and Matthias Thiel. The transcription of Adorno's notes and sketches was prepared by Henri Lonitz.

LECTURE 1

8 May 1958¹

The concept of dialectic which we shall explore here has nothing to do with the widespread conception of a kind of thinking which is remote from the things themselves and revels merely in its own conceptual devices. Indeed, at the point in philosophy where the concept of dialectic first emerges, in the thought of Plato, it already implies the opposite, namely a disciplined form of thought which is meant to protect us from all sophistic manipulation. Plato claims that we can say something rational about things only when we understand something about the matter itself (*Gorgias* and *Phaedrus*).² In its origin, the dialectic is an attempt to overcome all merely conceptual devices of spurious argumentation, and precisely by articulating conceptual thinking in a truly rigorous fashion. Plato attempts to counter his opponents, the Sophists, by use of their own means.

All the same, the concept of dialectic as it has come down to us from classical thought is very different from what I mean by the term. For the ancient concept of dialectic is the concept of a philosophical method. And to a certain extent this is what it has always remained. Dialectic is both – it is a method of thought, but it is also more than this, namely a specific structure which belongs to the things themselves, and which for quite fundamental philosophical reasons must also become the measure of philosophical reflection itself.

What dialectic means for Plato is that a philosophical thought does not simply live there where it stands, as it were, but continues to live when it informs our consciousness without our realizing it. Platonic dialectic is a doctrine which enables us to order our concepts

correctly, to ascend from the concrete to the level of the highest and most universal. In the first place, the 'ideas' are simply the highest general concepts to which thought can rise.³ On the other hand, dialectic also implies that we can subdivide these concepts correctly.⁴ This question regarding the correct division of our concepts brings Plato to the problem of how to articulate concepts in such a way that they are appropriate to the things which they encompass. On the one hand, what is required is the logical formation of concepts, but this must not be achieved in a coercive way in accordance with some schema; rather, the concepts must be formed in a way that is appropriate to the thing in question. This may be compared to the botanical system of Linnaeus⁵ and the natural system based upon the structure of plants. The old traditional concept of dialectic was essentially a method for organizing concepts.

On the other hand, Plato was already well aware that we do not simply know, without more ado, whether the conceptual order we bestow upon things is also the order which the objects themselves possess. Plato and Aristotle emphasized the importance of framing our concepts in accordance with nature, so that these concepts might properly express what it is they grasp. But how can we know anything about the non-conceptual being that lies beyond these concepts? We realize that our particular concepts become entangled in difficulties; then, on the basis of these problems, we are obliged to develop a more adequate body of concepts. This is the fundamental experience of dialectic: the way our concepts are driven on in the encounter with what they express. We must try and compare whether what is given corresponds to the relevant concepts or not.

The dialectic is indeed a method which refers to the process of thinking, but it also differs from other methods insofar as it constantly strives not to stand still, constantly corrects itself in the presence of the things themselves. We could define dialectic as a kind of thinking which does not content itself merely with the order of concepts but, rather, undertakes to correct the conceptual order by reference to the being of the objects themselves. The vital nerve of dialectical thinking lies here, in this moment of opposition. Dialectic is the reverse of what it is generally taken to be: rather than being simply an elaborate conceptual technique, it is the attempt to overcome all merely conceptual manipulation, to sustain at every level the tension between thought and what it would comprehend. Dialectic is the method of thinking which is not merely a method, but the attempt to overcome the merely arbitrary character of method and to admit into the concept that which is not itself concept.

On the issue of 'exaggeration':⁶ it is claimed that truth must always represent the simpler or primitive level, while what is more remote can only be a further arbitrary addition. This view assumes that the world is the same as the façade it presents. Philosophy should fundamentally contest this idea. The kind of thinking which shuns the effort to overcome inveterate ideas is nothing but the mere reproduction of what we say and think without more ado. Philosophy should help us to avoid becoming stupid. In a conversation with Goethe, Hegel once described dialectic as 'the organized spirit of contradiction'.⁷ Every thought which breaches the façade, or the necessary illusion which is ideology, is an exaggeration. The tendency of dialectic to move to extremes serves today precisely to resist the enormous pressure which is exerted upon us from without.

The dialectic realizes that it furnishes thought, on the one hand, and that which thought strives to grasp, on the other. Dialectical thought is not merely intellectualist in character, since it is precisely thought's attempt to recognize its limitations by recourse to the matter itself. How does thought succeed within its own thought-determinations in doing justice to the matter? In the *Phenomenology*,⁸ Hegel claims that immediacy returns at every level of the movement which thought undergoes. Again and again thought encounters a certain opposition, encounters what can be called nature. An introduction to the dialectic can only be pursued in constant confrontation with the problem of positivism. Such an introduction cannot proceed as if the criteria of positivism had not been developed. On the contrary, we must attempt to measure them against themselves and thereby move beyond their own concept. Positivism is not a 'worldview' but, rather, an element of dialectic.

LECTURE 2

13 May 1958

Ladies and gentlemen,¹

Last time, I attempted to introduce you to a problem or difficulty which it is important to grasp right at the beginning if we wish to work our way towards the concept of the dialectic. And the difficulty is this: on the one hand, the dialectic is a method of thinking; on the other hand, it is an attempt to do justice to some determination, quality, or feature of the matter in question. Hegel captured this in the Preface to his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, when he spoke expressly of ‘the movement of the concept’,² where ‘concept’ has just this double sense: on the one hand, it is the concept which we bring to things – that is to say, the methodically practised manner in which we grasp the relevant conceptual ‘moments’ – yet, on the other hand, it is also the life of the matter itself; for in Hegel, as you will discover, the concept of a thing is not something which has merely been abstracted from things. Rather, it is that which constitutes the essence of the thing itself. The difficulty of approaching the concept of dialectic in the first place, the difficulty, especially for those unfamiliar with this field, of framing any idea or conception of what this is supposed to mean, lies at the very point which I have already indicated to you: in the fact that it looks as though, on the one hand, we are talking about a procedure of thought which can be learned while, on the other hand, we are also talking about something which unfolds in the thing itself.

Thus you will hear talk of the dialectical method as a procedure for explicating an object in accordance with the necessary movement

of its contradictions. But then you will also hear talk of a 'real dialectic', to use an expression which has become rather popular, especially since Hermann Wein,³ namely a dialectic which unfolds in the thing itself, which is supposed to move in contradictions in accordance with its own concept. When you hear it expressed in this way, you will probably immediately think, as an inevitable logical consequence, that a kind of identity between thought and being must be assumed if we are to grasp this concept of dialectic in that double sense which I have attempted to point out to you. That is to say, it is only if thought (as represented by the method) and the object of thought (the thing itself which is supposedly expressed by the dialectic) are ultimately and properly speaking the same that we can meaningfully speak of dialectic in this double sense – at least if we are not simply to court confusion by using the same word to describe two quite different things. We might really be dealing with a case of simple equivocation here – that is, with the possibility that the word 'dialectic' is being used now to describe a particular method of thought, a particular way of presenting something (just as Marx, in what is perhaps a rather unfortunate passage, once characterized the dialectic simply as a particular 'form of presentation'),⁴ and now to imagine something quite different, namely the kind of oppositions which unfold within the thing itself. I believe it is most important, if we are to develop any serious concept of dialectic, that you should be very clear from the outset that the latter cannot be regarded either merely as a method – for then it would be nothing but what we described in the preceding session as the older dialectic of ancient philosophy, simply a theory regarding the procedure of thought – or merely as a way of identifying oppositions which are empirically discovered in things themselves – for then the dialectic would fail to reveal that compulsion, that power of the whole, which is what actually enables dialectic to be a form of philosophy in the first place, and to furnish something like basic explanatory principles for the great questions of reality and of metaphysics alike. Both these aspects can certainly only be united if we concede that a dialectical philosophy must be one which posits thought and being as identical. And indeed this is quite true for the dialectic in its most fully developed philosophical form, namely for the Hegelian dialectic, which ultimately is a philosophy of identity, a philosophy which in the last instance teaches that being itself or, as Hegel puts it in the Preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, that truth is subject.⁵

Now I have already introduced you to a really serious problem which lies at the heart of dialectical philosophy itself. For you will remember, if you followed the previous lecture, how I claimed that

dialectic is precisely the attempt to develop a philosophical understanding of what is not itself 'subject', that is, to ensure that the two determinations here – the matter itself, on the one hand, the process of thought, on the other – do not merely collapse into one another. Yet it suddenly seems, at least as far as Hegel's conception of philosophy is concerned, that these determinations are identical with one another after all. The supreme contradiction with which you are confronted here – on the one hand, that dialectic is the attempt to think non-identity – i.e., the attempt to acknowledge in thought the opposed moments which are not simply exhausted in thought – and, on the other hand, that dialectic is only possible as a philosophy of identity – i.e., a philosophy which posits thought and being in a radical sense as one – [this contradiction] already perfectly expresses the programme which the dialectic in its idealist version, namely the Hegelian version, specifically posed for itself. For this form of thought expressly declared its programme to be precisely that of uniting identity with non-identity, as this is expressed in its own language.⁶ Thus, while everything is indeed to be taken up into thought, thought must also be acknowledged as something which nonetheless differs from its object in every instant. Here you will surely be tempted at first to say that this is at once nothing but press freedom *and* censorship, a manifest contradiction which makes wholly excessive demands on thought: on the one hand, the dialectic is precisely what endeavours to express the opposition between subject and object, the opposition of matter and method, the opposition of cognition and the infinite Absolute; on the other hand, the dialectic is supposed to posit all this as one after all, and thereby expunge this opposition from the world. How is all of this to be understood?

Now the Hegelian response here – at present I speak only of the Hegelian and thus of the idealist version of dialectic; later on we shall hear about the materialist version of dialectic, which is structured quite differently – the Hegelian conception here (which furnishes you with the very programme of a dialectical philosophy in a nutshell) is this: it is quite true that non-identity emerges in every individual determination that thought can articulate, and true therefore that thought and its object do not simply coincide with one another, but the entire range of the determinations to which thought can rise, or the totality of all the determinations articulated by philosophy, does produce this absolute identity within itself; or, to put this in a perhaps more cautious and strictly Hegelian way: it produces and is this identity precisely as the totality, as the entire range of all of the developed individual contradictions. And this is to say that, in the whole, which philosophy for Hegel claims to be, these contradictions are

living moments which are 'sublated' [*aufgehoben*], at once superseded and preserved, in philosophy as a whole.

In short, this is the programme which the idealist dialectic specifically set for itself, and which finds expression in Hegel's claim that the true is the whole.⁷ But before we start to consider some of the questions which arise in connection with this conception of truth, I should like at least to read out the passage which I have already mentioned to you, namely the one which refers specifically to the so-called movement of the concept. For here too you will immediately encounter a certain difficulty. And if in these lectures I am to introduce you to the dialectic rather than, say, offering you a dialectical philosophy in its entirety, then, for the reasons indicated in our last session, I can only begin by trying to dispel some of the difficulties which obstruct our approach to the dialectic, and which we are already aware of everywhere in our experience, irrespective of whether this has been influenced or directly shaped by theoretical disciplines of one kind or another. And since our attempt to counter these difficulties will actually serve, in each case, to express something of the dialectical concept itself, this propaedeutic can also provide a sort of model of how you can actually think in a dialectical way.

When we speak of the concept, the idea of something like the 'movement of the concept', which I have already cited from Hegel and perhaps introduced a little recklessly here, will once again present quite a challenge. For in the context of your ordinary thinking, or – and indeed even more, I would suggest – in the context of the academic or theoretical studies which you have already pursued to some degree or other, you will all be familiar, as a matter of intellectual discipline, with the idea of pinning down your concepts – i.e., of defining the relevant concepts 'cleanly' by means of a certain number of specific features; and one is expected to demonstrate this theoretical cleanliness by not confusing these concepts through the introduction of other differently defined concepts – in other words, by not allowing our concepts to move. When I pointed out last time that the dialectic is widely suspected as a form of sophistry, suspected of depriving us of every stable definition or determination, you may already recognize the source of this resistance to dialectic. For it is believed that there is nothing to hold on to in the face of dialectic, that our concepts are barely framed before they are immediately snatched away from us, that we are thereby simply abandoned to the arbitrary whims or perhaps to the suggestive rhetoric of the thinker. Before I read you a passage from Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* which relates directly to this problem, and the first of several such texts, I would just like to say this: the task of dialectical thinking is

not to juggle with concepts, or surreptitiously to replace certain determinations which belong to a concept with quite different determinations of the same concept. That would indeed be a road to sophisticated thought rather than to the dialectical concept. Rather, what is actually required of dialectical thought in the ideal case – and I am the last to claim that this is also always realized in every dialectical operation – is to deploy the concepts themselves, to pursue the matter itself, above all to confront the concept with what it intends to the point where certain difficulties come to light between this concept and the matter which it intends. And these difficulties compel us to alter the concept in a certain way as we continue with the process of thought, but without thereby relinquishing the determinations which the concept originally possessed. Rather, this alteration comes about precisely through criticism of the original concept – that is, by showing how the original concept does not correspond to the matter it seeks to grasp, however well defined the latter may seem to be – and it thereby does justice to the original concept by insisting that the latter should correspond after all with the matter it sought to grasp. The fact that dialectical thought refuses to provide a definition is not an arbitrary decision, produced merely by toying with different possible definitions; rather, according to the idea behind dialectical thought, this refusal springs from the need to express precisely the moment of non-identity here, the fact that concept and thing are not simply equivalent. Thus the concept, in constant confrontation with the thing or matter in question, in a process we may describe as immanent critique, is convicted of its own inadequacy; and the change which the concept thereby undergoes must at the same time, at least according to Hegel's conception, be seen as a change in the thing or matter in question.

That is therefore the response which I would have to give you, in an initial and provisional way, to the question as to how the dialectic specifically relates to the concepts and their definitions with which it deals. And now I should like to read you the passage from Hegel:

This movement of pure essences constitutes the nature of scientific method in general. Regarded as the connectedness of their content, it is the necessary expansion of that content into an *organic whole*. Through this movement, the path by which the concept of knowledge [that is, of philosophical or fully developed knowledge] is reached becomes likewise a necessary and complete process of becoming; so that this preparatory path ceases to be a casual philosophizing [that is, ceases to be an arbitrary presentation of more concepts, as I pointed out earlier] that fastens on to this or that object, relationship,

or thought that happens to pop up in the imperfect consciousness, or tries to base the truth on the pros and cons, the inferences and consequences, of rigidly defined thoughts. Instead, this pathway, through the movement of the concept, will encompass the entire sphere of worldly consciousness in its *necessary development*.⁸

This then is the programme of 'the movement of the concept'. I have started by explicating this idea of the movement of the concept or, to put it more modestly, by suggesting that it describes what happens with our concepts when we think. If you recall for a moment what I said at the beginning (that the dialectic also always shows a double character, related as it is both to how we think and to the matter itself), you may find it easier to approach this idea of 'the movement of the concept', which strikes me as central to the notion of dialectic itself, if you can form some idea of the underlying object or matter of dialectical philosophy. And this, I would emphasize, is also something which underlies dialectical philosophy in both of its principal forms, the idealist Hegelian dialectic and the materialist Marxian dialectic. To put this somewhat dogmatically to begin with, and I hope that the dogmatic and simply categorical appearance of this claim will subsequently be dispelled, this is the idea of something which is objective, something which is to be unfolded through the concept, of something which is dynamic in itself, and is thus not simply the same as itself, of something which is not identical with itself once and for all, but rather of something which is actually a process. If we are to grasp the essential point from this particular perspective, we must remember that the fundamental experience here must be approached from the side of the matter itself, from the theory of the object rather than the theory of the subject, from the thing which inspired the dialectic itself, from the experience of the fundamentally dynamic character of the matter; in other words, from the fundamentally historical character of the world itself, from the fundamental experience that there is actually nothing between heaven or on earth which simply is as it is; from the recognition that everything that is must actually be comprehended as something in movement, as something that becomes.⁹ And it is already implicit in Kant's doctrine, incidentally, that time is not only a necessary form of our intuition; it also provides the ultimate condition for the capacity to connect our thoughts at all, so that nothing can be thought by us unless it can be thought as something essentially temporal.

This idea of the fundamentally historical and dynamic character of experience thus leads dialectical thought to maintain that particular 'essences' cannot in fact be grasped in rigid terms but must be

conceived, in their objective interconnection and in their objective determinacy, as something which changes through history. But this approach also involves a further essential moment, one which is characteristic of Hegel and derives originally from his conception of philosophical system – i.e., from the thought of an overall and unified presentation of reality. It is the thought that this historical dynamism of the matter itself – this primacy of history over being, as we might even put it – is not merely an arbitrary process of change which befalls things which are in time, but that the necessity, the orderly development, the all-embracing process to which we are exposed is this very process of historical change. Traditional thought, pre-dialectical thought, had identified the order of necessity, or that which claims ultimate validity, with the essentially permanent and immutable, with that which once and for all just is as it is. The discovery of the historical dimension, which effectively began with Montesquieu¹⁰ and Vico,¹¹ developed through Condorcet¹² in the eighteenth century, and culminated in the work of Fichte¹³ and Hegel, actually represents a Copernican Turn in this respect, the significance of which can certainly be compared with the Copernican Turn which is explicitly associated with the Kantian philosophy. For it signifies that the necessity we have been talking about is not properly to be sought where things remain identical with themselves and one another. Rather, this necessity resides in the great laws of development through which the self-identical becomes something other or different from itself, and finally something which is internally self-contradictory. Thus we may consider an experience which is very close to all of us, namely that our individual fate depends fundamentally and decisively upon the major historical and dynamic tendencies in which as individual human subjects we constantly and repeatedly find ourselves caught up. And it is this experience – that the law of our existence should be understood as the historical movement of our epoch and of all epochs rather than as some so-called fundamental determinacy of Being – which is the impulse that actually springs from the matter itself, and which belongs from the start to something like the concept of dialectic itself. And if you really try and make the dialectic your own, as I strongly encourage you to do – that is, if you try to reproduce, and produce afresh, out of your own experience the motivations which ultimately give rise to dialectical thought – then it is precisely here, I believe, that you will discover what the law, what the objectivity we have been talking about, actually means, and how what actually determines our acting and thinking over and beyond our mere individuality, how what is historical is far

more than what we merely are, more than what we conceive ourselves once and for all to be.

At this point Hegel has reversed everything, as it were – and this is a characteristic moment we find in his dialectic, and even more perhaps in the materialist dialectic: what appeared to traditional thought to be absolutely stable and secure, to be a fixed and ahistorical self-identical truth, now itself appears as a distorted historical image, namely as an expression of petrified relations which seek to perpetuate themselves, the very nature of which is to perpetuate themselves, and which have now basically lost a living relationship to the subject, which are ‘reified’, to use a crucial term from this philosophy. Thus the fixed and immutable character which strikes ordinary or undialectical thought as the very mark of truth already appears to this philosophy – and this holds for both forms of the dialectic – as a phenomenon of petrification, so to speak, as something which philosophy is expressly called upon to dissolve. For this is a hypostasis, where some finite finished thing is made into an absolute and falsely posited as the ultimate ground, as if it were the truth in itself. The struggle against the reification of the world, against the conventionalization of the world, where what is ossified or frozen, where something which has arisen historically now appears as if it were something simply given ‘in itself’, something binding on us once and for all – this is what furnishes the polemical starting point for all dialectical thinking.

It is also characteristic of dialectical thinking that it does not try and counter this reification by appeal to some principle or other, to another abstract or, if you like, equally reified principle, such as ‘life’ for example. Rather, it seeks to overcome reification by grasping reification itself in its necessity – that is, by deriving the phenomena of petrification, of ossified institutional structures, of the alienation encountered in what confronts us as an alien and dominating power, from the historical concept – historical understood here in the emphatic sense of necessity which was captured by that expression I have tried to interpret for you, namely ‘the movement of the concept’, which seeks to unite historical necessity with insight into the matter itself. For to grasp a thing should really mean to grasp the historical necessity of a thing in all its stages. That is what you should have in mind when Hegel says that ‘the movement of the concept’ allows us to renounce the sort of casual or arbitrary philosophizing which simply happens to fasten on these or those particular objects, relationships, or thoughts as the case may be. Such philosophy is not arbitrary precisely because it does not just leave the objects in question as they arbitrarily present themselves but, rather, attempts to

derive them in their necessity, or, we could say, attempts to derive even this contingent and arbitrary appearance itself in its necessity.

I think I have thus basically already indicated that the dialectic, insofar as it is a method, cannot be a way of securing one's own position in a discussion with others, although of course this is just what it is suspected of being. On the contrary, it is an attempt to bring out objective contradictions which lie in reality itself. If you recall for a moment the point about the historical character of objectivity, we can see that this historicity of objectivity means that the objects in question are not inert in themselves but rather dynamic; and where real history is concerned, this dynamic character signifies that history is broken or dieremted, that it unfolds through contradictions, and that we must explore these contradictions. But it is just on this account – and I think it is not without importance to draw your attention to the point – that the dialectic stands from the first in the sharpest possible contrast to those philosophies of being which appear to be on the rise today, philosophies which effectively adopt an undialectical approach from the start. And I would warn you not to lose sight of this sharp and emphatic contrast just because some of the contemporary defenders of ontological thought believe that they can also somehow draw Hegel into their own sphere.¹⁴ But this generally amounts to nothing but a sort of ontologization of Hegel. In other words, they attempt to interpret that extremely radical conception of the historical character of truth itself as though we were dealing here with a specific interpretation of being. Yet dialectical philosophies, in both of the versions we have mentioned, share the conviction that they are not concerned simply with historicity, and do not rest content with the bare claim that being or truth are historical in character, but conclude from this that the task is precisely to pursue this historical character into all the concrete characteristics of objects. Thus the dialectic does not and cannot amount to some abstract assurance or 'worldview' regarding the historicity of being or the historicity of truth. If dialectic wishes to grasp the philosophical concept from which it lives, then it must concretely attempt to reveal the historical meanings of the objects which it addresses. This also implies, we note in passing, that the usual distinction between philosophy on the one side – oriented to the universal, the eternal, and the permanent – and the particular positive sciences on the other is something that dialectical thought cannot accept. For philosophy discovers its own substance in the determinations of the concrete sciences which it undertakes to interpret, while the determinations of the sciences must appear a matter of indifference to philosophy unless they are illuminated by the concept and thus begin to speak.

Here you may be able to grasp one of the most essential motivations for such dialectical thinking. In the division of labour between philosophy and the sciences which currently prevails, it really does effectively look as if, in spite of all assurances to the contrary, everything in which knowledge has its substance, everything with which it is really concerned, has been more or less abandoned to the individual sciences. The task of knowledge is thus constantly exposed to the danger of collapsing into the merely positive, of merely registering what is the case, without the question regarding the meaning of what has been registered, or indeed regarding the justification of what exists, even being raised. And then all that is left for philosophy really is the stalest and emptiest content of all, like the concept of being as such;¹⁵ and while philosophy can produce as many manikins as it likes,¹⁶ can struggle as much as it likes to spin something truly concrete out of this abstract concept of being, it cannot actually succeed, since all of the determinations which philosophy introduces in order to develop a higher and superior conception of this supposedly enchanted word 'being' still derive from that domain of beings, and thus of the historical, which is disdained by ontological philosophies with such pathos and misplaced arrogance. Dialectic is at once more and less modest in this regard. Dialectical thought does not claim that truth is eternal, or remains identical to itself, but endorses a concept of truth which has taken historical determinations up into itself. But, being more modest in this regard, it is in turn more immodest insofar as it fulfils itself in these material determinations and believes it can derive truly philosophical determinations precisely from such concrete objects. While the philosophies of being merely smuggle in these concrete determinations, taking them up from the whole domain of the empirical and the historical, they must at the same time deny them, proclaiming pure being instead. But dialectical philosophy, which cannot accept the opposition between pure being and merely historical existence, seeks to articulate its philosophical judgements precisely by reference to the determinations which derive from historical existence, seeks precisely to do justice to the latter.

I should emphasize that the programme which I have suggested to you here has one extremely far-reaching consequence which may well represent the most difficult of all the challenges posed by dialectical thought, challenges which I have been trying to unfold in our sessions. This is the challenge involved in the concept of truth itself. The standard conception sees truth as something essentially timeless,¹⁷ as that which remains absolutely self-identical. On the traditional view, truth does indeed stand in time, is marked by a certain temporal index, is somehow affected by time, and it is on account of this

temporal dimension that we are never really in a position to attain the full and absolute truth. But the idea of truth, from the time of Plato through to Kant, has always been identified with the idea of that which is eternally and absolutely binding. Think, for example, of the concept of the a priori in Kant, which signifies precisely that what is necessary and universal must be identified with what is utterly constant and unchangeable, which is the condition of any possible judgement whatsoever. Now the truly decisive challenge of dialectic lies not in the thought that truth must be sought within time or in opposition to time but, rather, in the idea that truth itself possesses a temporal core, or – as we might even say – that time exists in truth.¹⁸ I have already suggested to you that this concept too has simply fallen from the heavens and, above all, is one that it is implicit in Kant himself. But you may take it as a general guide for the understanding of the problem of dialectic that dialectic must, in an eminent sense, be regarded as Kantian philosophy which has come to self-consciousness and self-understanding. I have just pointed out that Kant still upholds the traditional conception of truth in the sense of the eternally immutable a priori. But, insofar as he also makes time into a constitutive condition of knowing as such, that traditional approach is already losing its meaning in Kant's philosophy, so that time itself – one could almost say – has now become the organon of truth. Yet Kant did not recognize the full consequences of this, and it fell to his successors, and especially to Hegel, to draw out these consequences. And this then also affects the traditional conception of truth as the concordance or adequate correspondence of thought with being, an idea which must be changed and modified in the light of such philosophy.