

David Sherman

Sartre and Adorno

The Dialectics of Subjectivity

Sartre and Adorno

SUNY series in Contemporary Continental Philosophy

Dennis J. Schmidt, editor

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David Sherman

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For Nancy

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Abbreviations Used in the Text and Notes

THEODOR W. ADORNO

- AE *Against Epistemology: A Metacritique: Studies in Husserl and the Phenomenological Antinomies*, tr. Willis Domingo (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1982).
- AP *The Authoritarian Personality* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1982).
- DOE *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (with Max Horkheimer), tr. John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 1991).
- JOA *Jargon of Authenticity*, tr. Knut Tarnowski and Frederic Will (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973).
- K *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*, tr. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989).
- MM *Minima Moralia*, tr. E. F. N. Jephcott (London: Verso Books, 1974).
- ND *Negative Dialectics*, tr. E. B. Ashton (New York: Continuum Publishing Co., 1992).

JEAN-PAUL SARTRE

- AS&J *Anti-Semite and Jew*, tr. George J. Becker (New York: Schocken Books, 1974).
- B&N *Being and Nothingness: An Essay in Phenomenological Ontology*, tr. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1956).

- SM *Search for a Method*, tr. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Random House, 1968).
- TE *Transcendence of the Ego*, tr. Forest Williams and Robert Kirkpatrick (New York: Hill and Wang, 1990).

Introduction

Since the late 1960s, during which time various strains of poststructuralism and critical theory's linguistic turn have largely demarcated the field in continental philosophy, there has really been only one point of agreement among the preponderance of continental philosophers—namely, that any philosophical approach beginning with “the subject” is utterly flawed. In *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, for instance, Habermas roundly attacks Heidegger, Bataille, Foucault, and Derrida on a variety of grounds, but not once does he attack their rejection of the subject, which he, too, simply takes for granted. Peter Dews thus rightly declares:

One of the least noted features of the strife between Habermas and his postmodern opponents over the “philosophical discourse of modernity” is the number of assumptions which both sides share in common, despite the energy of the arguments between them. Habermas and his critics coincide in the view—*ultimately derived from Heidegger*—that the history of philosophy is susceptible to an epochal analysis, and that the era of the philosophy of the subject, which is also the culminating era of metaphysical thinking, is currently drawing to a close. Indeed, it is remarkable that *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* gives the celebrated account of the “death of man” in Foucault's *The Order of Things*, viewed as a post-mortem on the monological subject, almost unqualified endorsement.¹

As early as the 1980s, however, there were indications, albeit not explicitly thematized, that continental philosophy could not purge itself of the subject quite so easily. The third volume of Foucault's series on human sexuality, *The Care of the Self*, raised more than a few eyebrows

because of its emphasis on aesthetic self-constitution, which, on the face of it, seems to sharply conflict not only with the “death of man” in *The Order of Things* but also with the conclusions of *The History of Sexuality*, the first volume of the series. It is by no means clear that Foucault’s rejection of the “repressive hypothesis” in *The History of Sexuality*—that is, Foucault’s rejection of the view that social power relations (however abhorrent their constitution) repress rather than productively constitute the subject—can be reconciled with his later turn toward what certain Foucault scholars call “practical subjectivity.”² So, too, in “Force of Law,” Derrida declares that “it goes without saying” that deconstruction has always been “through and through, at least obliquely [a] discourse on justice,” and he then proceeds to ground this discourse by speaking of “freedom,” “a sense of responsibility without limits,” “an epoché of the rule,” and the inexorable but hopelessly opaque nature of “the decision,”³ all of which are associated with the subject. This is a far cry from Derrida’s influential essay, “The Ends of Man,” in which such notions are, by all appearances, summarily rejected. Finally, even as he continued to reject “the philosophy of the subject” in its diverse incarnations, Habermas turned to Kierkegaard, whose philosophy is perhaps the epitome of the “monological” subjectivity that Habermas rejects, for the purpose of enlisting his existential recalcitrance in opposition to identity formations engendered by flawed forms of communicative interaction. It would seem, then, that if the subject is only the residuum of a washed out metaphysical tradition, it is nevertheless a residuum in which, at least in some sense, its detractors continue to believe.⁴

For good reason, then, in recent years the question of the subject has been explicitly raised anew. As Slavoj Žižek aptly puts it in the opening sentence of *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology*, “a specter is haunting Western Academia . . . the spectre of the Cartesian subject.”⁵ As the book’s subtitle appropriately suggests, the subject is an ineliminable component of all political projects, or at least, I would argue, political projects that are motivated by the aim of ameliorating the existing state of affairs for human beings. Without a commitment to efficacious subjects—a commitment whose very possibility is being progressively undermined by a polity that is ever more constructed in the circuits of contemporary “postmodern” capitalist globalization processes—there can be no basis for change, and this only plays into the hands of those groups that most profit from the prevailing order of things. Spurred by this insight, there have been, in addi-

tion to Žižek, a number of philosophers who have sought to revivify the notion of the subject, but while philosophically elegant, these various endeavors all share one fatal flaw: they theorize the notion of the subject by presupposing theoretical frameworks that cannot bear the weight of their endeavors.⁶ As Dews states, the poststructuralists and Habermas share a view of the subject “ultimately derived from Heidegger,” whose philosophy is virtually defined by its antipathy toward the notion of the subject. At the risk of being accused of confusing genesis and validity, I would argue that from such quintessentially antagonistic beginnings, there can be no basis for any project that would seek to revivify the subject.

Žižek’s book is itself a case in point. To be sure, as he uncontroversially declares, the aim in returning to the Cartesian subject “is not to return to the *cogito* in the guise in which this notion has dominated thought (the self-transparent thinking subject),” and, at least in some sense, he is also right to say that the aim is rather “to bring to light its forgotten obverse, the excessive, unacknowledged kernel of the *cogito*, which is far from the pacifying image of the transparent Self.”⁷ For Žižek, whose return to the subject also derives from Heidegger, albeit by way of Lacan, this unacknowledged kernel resides in “the pure negativity of the death drive prior to its reversal into the identification with some new Master-Signifier.”⁸ But this purely negative death drive, “the excessive moment of madness inherent to the *cogito*” that “stands in for the rational subject,” is not as opposed to (subjectless) *Dasein*’s wholesale collapse into a profane “being-in-the-world” as Žižek thinks.⁹ Hypostatized in its utter difference, the pure negativity of Žižek’s vaunted death drive, by virtue of its lack of determinacy, has a tendency to unwittingly manifest itself in terms of the very “reality principle” to which it is supposed to function as a counterpose. As is the case with Heidegger’s purportedly individuating insight that we are beings-unto-death, which is at the core of a theory that Kristeva rightly calls a “regressive mythological travesty,”¹⁰ Žižek’s variation on the poststructuralist preoccupation with death as wholly “other” ends up perpetuating the very sort of social madness that Žižek would have done with.

Even if there is, in principle, some unrecuperable other—indeed, even if the recognition of the unrecuperability of this other is the condition of the possibility for bringing about a state of affairs in which we might more modestly strive toward a genuine ethical comportment—

we must still try to mediate our relation to what substantively constitutes this unrecuperable other at any point in time lest we do violence to the motivating ethical impulse. It is for this reason that my own philosophical orientation remains largely Hegelian in nature. By rejecting all philosophical foundations, Hegel catapulted both reason and the subject into the movement of history, and thus he did no less to “deconstruct” the overblown subjectivity of Cartesianism than his contemporary critics. On Hegel’s dialectical account, in which subject and object interpenetrate one another, the historical movement of reason and subjectivity finally leads to the modest recognition that all thought is context-bound, but that as free, self-determining beings we are the ones who construct the historical context, and, therefore, the categories that mediate our relation to the world. So understood, Hegel’s “Absolute Spirit,” of which this modest recognition is emblematic, stands in sharp contrast to existing caricatures of it, many of which tend to see it either as an ontologically discrete entity altogether,¹¹ or, at least, some extraordinary human “macro-subject” that runs roughshod over human beings in a “monological self-positing” that “swallows up everything finite within itself.”¹²

Yet, by cryptically talking in terms of “Absolute Spirit,” which, I have just suggested, is much more modest for Hegel than the phrase actually implies, Hegel does invite such criticism. Indeed, when Hegel infamously declares in the concluding paragraph of the Preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit* that with the ascendance of Spirit “the individual must all the more forget himself, as the nature of Science implies and requires,”¹³ the criticism certainly seems that much more justified. An essential distinction needs to be made here, however. If there is an overemphasis on Spirit in Hegel’s philosophy, it pertains to Spirit as universal (human) subject, not as some ontologically discrete entity. Hegel is more than clear throughout his works that his phenomenological approach deals solely with the realm of human thought and action—indeed, according to its most basic tenets, it could deal with nothing else. But this is not inconsistent with the claim that Hegel gives short shrift to the individual (as opposed to universal) subject. Even if Hegel was just appeasing the censors when he made the *Prussian* state into the highest form of ethical life, it is clear that the political embodiment of Absolute Spirit is the state, and that “this final end has supreme right against the individual, whose supreme duty is to be a member of the state.”¹⁴ Thus, although he emphasizes the mediation

of universal and particular, Hegel ultimately privileges the universal, and although motivated by the desire to truly reconcile the individual to both himself and his social world, the contrived reconciliation that Hegel feels historically compelled to posit ultimately takes place at the expense of this individual. By failing to carry through his dialectic, which is grounded in the notion of determinate negativity,¹⁵ Hegel fails to give the existing individual subject its due, as both the spirit and letter of his dialectic otherwise requires. In this way, he “actualizes” the merely existing, which is the paradoxical element of truth in what is otherwise the opportunistic Right Hegelian reading of Hegel’s famous *Doppelsatz* (“What is rational is actual and what is actual is rational”).

Giving the existing individual subject its due does not, of course, augur a return to the transcendental subject, which for philosophers such as Kant, Fichte, and Husserl performs the epistemic task of constituting the world of our experience. The abstract, universal structures that compose this kind of individual subject are as incompatible with the notion of a vibrant individual subject as is Hegel’s domineering universal subject. And, of course, even from a strictly epistemological standpoint, such a move would be regressive, for it does not have the merit of Hegel’s dialectical rejoinder to classical epistemology. In this sense, I am in agreement with poststructuralists, hermeneuticists, and Habermas-inspired critical theorists. Conversely, the existing individual subject is also not to be collapsed into, or otherwise seen as coterminous with, “the self” (or what Anglo-American philosophers might refer to as the ordinary, common sense concept of “a person”), as many of these continental philosophers are inclined to do. Even Heidegger tried to make sense of authentic *Dasein*, but by virtue of its undialectical relation to the world of everyday social practices, which it awkwardly straddles, such a notion was easy enough for his successors to bury. The post-modern “self,” understood as wholly determined by the overarching structures of language or power, is still as “fallen” as Heidegger ambivalently understood inauthentic *Dasein* to be, but now without even so much as an impoverished concept against which the recognition of this phenomenon might arise. To use Žižek’s terms, but without confining the claim to “Western academia” and “political ontology,” the nature of the present individual’s experience of both himself and his world is increasingly becoming the absent center of the sociopolitical world.

In opposition to the various schools of thought that continue to hold sway in continental philosophy, most of which reject what Habermas

alternately calls “philosophies of the subject” or “philosophies of consciousness,” it is my view that it is a mistake to reduce the standpoint of embodied, intentional consciousness, which obliges us to recognize ourselves as free, efficacious agents in the world, to the sociohistorical standpoint. Although subjectivity is plainly mediated by the existing sociohistorical structures, it also has the capacity to affect these very structures in turn, and therefore the self-identities that they engender. Thus, subjectivity is not just passively mediated, which is how it invariably appears when one’s philosophical perspective is limited to the third-person standpoint. Due to the continuing historical existence of the subject—that is, the first-person standpoint, which, by virtue of its historical legacy, continues, however tenuously, to presuppose the freedom of its choices in the face of the political totality—subjectivity is also active or *mediating*. And, ethically speaking, the notion that we are mediating subjects is basic to our self-constitution, both collectively and individually. The notion of a mediating subject conceives of subjectivity formation as the product of a dialectical interplay between the first- and third-person standpoints. In contrast to Kant’s philosophy, it does not insulate these standpoints from one another, and, in contrast to Hegel’s philosophy, it does not collapse the difference in a higher-order synthesis. In sum, without the corrective of sociohistorical theories, consciousness mistakenly sees human social constructs in ontological terms when it reflects on its experience of the world, and without the idea of an embodied consciousness that freely strives to make the world its own, sociohistorical theories do not come to grips with the normative impulse that almost invariably lies at the heart of the critical stance they adopt. Or, to transfigure Kant’s well-known expression, critical social theory without the first-person, phenomenological standpoint is empty, while phenomenology without a third-person, critical social theoretic standpoint is blind.

In this book, I aim to mediate these two standpoints by way of the philosophies of Sartre and Adorno. Although beginning from these conflicting standpoints, Sartre’s phenomenology and Adorno’s critical theory are both committed to the subject-object paradigm, the dialectical privileging of the individual over the collective (or the particular over the universal), and, indeed, the notion of a mediating subjectivity itself. Moreover, by rejecting the idea of a transcendental subject, Sartre and Adorno were in no small part responsible for bringing about the shift that has taken place since the late 1960s in continental philoso-

phy. After all, it was Sartre who asserted that the self is not in consciousness but is “out in the world,” and it was Adorno who cautioned that inherent in the very process by which the self is formed is a regressive moment that tends to propel the self toward absolute self-identity—a self-identity that, by closing itself off to its other, makes itself absolutely coercive of both self and other. In contrast to most current philosophers, however, neither Sartre nor Adorno held that the subject is merely a harmful fiction, and both tenaciously defended the moment of agency inherent in the first-person standpoint. Adorno’s claim that we must “use the strength of the subject to break through the fallacy of constitutive subjectivity” equally applies to Sartre’s claim that we must break through that ubiquitous form of bad faith in which the subject freezes its self-identity into a thing (ND, p. xx). Finally, although Sartre’s philosophy starts from the standpoint of consciousness and Adorno’s sociohistorical approach starts from the standpoint of the historical dialectic, both implicitly incorporate not only the opposite standpoint into the very core of their thought but actually build toward that standpoint in their later works. In Sartre’s case, this is evidenced in the movement from *Being and Nothingness* through *Search for a Method*, the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, and, finally, *The Family Idiot* (in which he tries to discern the dialectical movement of the two standpoints within a particular life). And, in Adorno’s case, this is evidenced in the movement from his philosophical critiques to *Aesthetic Theory*, in which he seeks to unlock the modern promise of rich individual experience by way of the modern work of art. However, because I am interested in investigating the relation between Sartre’s first-person standpoint and Adorno’s third-person standpoint, I will not engage the latest works of each, and will remain content with identifying the potential of the later movement within the earlier works.

Accordingly, although Sartre’s primary focus is on the freedom of consciousness in his earlier works, he does not take this freedom to be historically unencumbered. Instead, because consciousness is nothing other than the objects of which it is “positionally” aware—that is, it is purely “intentional”—a person’s freedom is always-already embedded within a “situation.” (It is the “nonpositional” consciousness of this positional consciousness, which Sartre heuristically ascribes to the prereflective cogito, that provides the latitude for our phenomenological freedom, and thus the grounds for a mediating subject.) The situation not only limits the ways in which a person can act on his phenomenological

freedom, but also fundamentally circumscribes the very nature of his selfhood. This characterization of “the situation” comports with the description of Fredric Jameson, who declares: “It would not be doing violence to Sartre’s thought, meanwhile, to suggest that for him the situation (in the multidimensional class and psychoanalytic senses that he gave to that term) stood as the infrastructure to which the act of ‘free’ choice brought a superstructural response and solution.”¹⁶ When Sartre speaks of selfhood as being formed within the dynamic interaction between consciousness, other persons, and the natural world, therefore, he is already laying the foundation for his subsequent encounter with history. Indeed, Sartre’s early notion of the subject thrusts that subject into history, in which he seeks a world that would furnish a level of practical freedom that does justice to our intrinsic phenomenological freedom, which, for Sartre, can be constrained but never terminated:

For the idea which I have never ceased to develop is that in the end one is always responsible for what is made of one. Even if one can do nothing else besides assume this responsibility. For I believe that a man can always make something out of what is made of him. This is the limit I would today accord to freedom: the small movement which makes of a totally conditioned social being someone who does not render back completely what his conditioning has given him.¹⁷

Contrary to Sartre, Adorno refuses to consider the subject in abstraction from its concrete sociohistorical situation. Still, he unremittingly attacks those who would conceive of the free self-determining subject as merely a deceptive notion emanating from the metaphysical tradition. These attacks extend to his own mentor, Walter Benjamin, who, according to Adorno, calls into question not just the “over-inflated subjectivism” of the philosophical tradition, “but rather the notion of a subjective dimension itself,” which causes the subject to “evaporate,” and turns “man into the stage on which an objective process unfolds.”¹⁸ Thus, Adorno’s numerous attacks on the “Culture Industry,” which pointedly contrast with postmodernism’s sweeping celebration of pop culture, are spurred by his belief that contemporary capitalist culture manipulates consciousness for the very purpose of undermining the prospect of what I call a mediating subject, which, for Adorno, shares nothing in common with the overinflated, but critically

impotent, subjectivism that the Culture Industry fosters. Indeed, Adorno's "negative dialectic," which, crudely, differs from Hegel's dialectic in that it privileges the particular rather than the universal, is impelled by the desire to open up theoretical spaces for individual experience that is undistorted by prevailing concepts, much as phenomenology tries to do. Adorno thus asserts that consciousness and social history are irreducible elements of subjectivity, and that they mutually constitute one another:

The antinomy between the determination of the individual and the social responsibility that contradicts this determination is not due to a misuse of concepts. It is a reality, the moral indication that the universal and particular are unreconciled. . . . There is no available model of freedom save one: that consciousness, as it intervenes in the total social constitution, will through that constitution intervene in the complexion of the individual. (ND, pp. 264–265)

As these passages from "The Itinerary of a Thought" and *Negative Dialectics* suggest, although they theorize from different standpoints, Sartre and Adorno share similar underlying notions of the subject. What I propose to do in this book is bring about a dialectical movement between these two standpoints so as to highlight this similarity and enrich both in the process. I shall proceed as follows: In part I, I consider Adorno's critiques of three key influences on Sartre in the existential and phenomenological traditions—namely, Kierkegaard (chapter 1), Heidegger (chapter 2), and Husserl (chapter 3)—who reflect the different ways in which the subject-object paradigm can go astray. According to Adorno, Kierkegaard has a notion of subjectivity in which all meaning devolves onto the subject, thus causing the loss of the world; Heidegger devolves all meaning onto the being of the world, thus causing the loss of the subject; and, finally, Husserl seeks to preserve both the subject and the world, but in an unmediated way. Ultimately, Adorno contends, because Husserl seeks to preserve the integrity of both subject and object (although statically), his thought is the high point of the phenomenological and existential traditions.

Because Sartre seeks to preserve the integrity of both subject and object in an existential framework, it is my view that it is his thought

that is the high point of the phenomenological and existential traditions, and this is what I try to show in two of the three chapters that constitute part II, which deals with subjectivity in Sartre's early philosophy. Thus, in the initial chapter of this part (chapter 4), I consider Critical Theory's rather attenuated response to Sartre's thought. After looking at Adorno's brief comments on Sartre's notion of freedom, I consider Marcuse's "Existentialism: Remarks on Jean-Paul Sartre's *L'Être et le néant*," which was Critical Theory's most detailed response to Sartre. While sympathetic to some criticisms, I disagree with the basic one, which is that Sartre's emphasis on the ineluctability of freedom is an ugly parody of human beings in an unfree world, for the very concept of human liberation presupposes a free agent. In the following chapter (chapter 5), I deepen my analysis of the ways in which Sartre differs from his phenomenological and existential predecessors, emphasizing the mediated relation between subject and object in his thought. Moreover, I try to show how poststructuralists have seized on certain aspects of Sartre's philosophy, but that in attempting to go past it by rejecting the subject outright, they regress to pre-Sartrean thought, and thus fall prey to the antinomies that plague the philosophies of Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and Husserl. Finally, in the last chapter of part II (chapter 6), I amplify Sartre's notion of a mediating subject by considering such Sartrean staples as freedom, the situation, being-for-others, and the fundamental project. This chapter ends by pointing to the need to augment Sartre's phenomenological approach with a sociohistorical one.

This leads into part III, which considers Adorno's dialectic of subjectivity from diverse perspectives. In the initial chapter (chapter 7), I look at Adorno's notion of the subject in terms of both its formation and deformation. Focusing mostly on *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, I argue that Adorno's take on the enlightenment subject is not as incriminating as some poststructuralists contend, and that Habermas's contention that Adorno wholly abandons enlightenment rationality is wrong—in fact, Habermas himself falls prey to the very dialectic of enlightenment he rejects. I then compare Adorno's analysis of anti-Semitism with Sartre's *Anti-Semite and Jew*, seeking to support the claim in *The Authoritarian Personality* that there are "remarkable similarities" in their depictions of this deformed subject, and I end the chapter by probing Adorno's (qualified) appropriation of Freud's ego theory. In the final chapter (chapter 8), I investigate Adorno's own jux-

taposition of the first-person and third-person standpoints, which occurs in his analysis of the freedom (Kant) and history (Hegel) models in *Negative Dialectics*. I then wrap up by examining Adorno's model of "negative dialectics," which, I shall argue, presupposes a subject that can have the sorts of qualitative individual experiences that resonate with Sartre's early brand of phenomenology.

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PART I

Adorno's Relation to the Existential and Phenomenological Traditions

Adorno's engagement with the existential and phenomenological traditions was deep and long running. From his 1924 doctoral dissertation ("The Transcendence of the Material and Noematic in Husserl's Phenomenology") and 1931 *Habilitationsschrift* ("The Construction of the Aesthetic in Kierkegaard") through two major works published in the mid-1960s, *Jargon of Authenticity* and *Negative Dialectics* (which deal, in whole and part, respectively, with Heidegger), Adorno's criticisms of these intertwined traditions were as unremitting as they were trenchant. Unlike the so-called orthodox Marxists, who offhandedly dismissed existentialism and phenomenology as bourgeois ideology, however, Adorno was not unsympathetic to the concerns that motivated these philosophical movements. Kierkegaard's desire to preserve the integrity of the individual in the face of Hegel's *Geist*, Husserl's attempt to get back to "the things themselves," and Heidegger's opposition to scientism all resonated with Adorno's own philosophical agenda. Like Adorno himself, all three, in their distinctive ways, tried to break with idealism's penchant for crafting systems in which the concept of a constituting metasubject (either transcendental or historical) dominates

human beings and the objects of their experience.¹ Where Adorno does part company with these philosophers, however, is on the question of method, for he believes that each one, by virtue of an undialectical approach that privileges some “first,” inadvertently ends up “deconstructing” his philosophy from within:

Of those modern philosophies in which the self-imprisoned consciousness of idealism is aware of its own imprisonment and attempts to escape from immanence, each develops an exclusive category, an undeviating intention, a distinguishing trait that, under the rule of totality acknowledged by all these philosophies, is intended to mollify the imprisonment. Ultimately, however, this category dissolves the idealist construction itself, which then disintegrates into its antinomies. (K, p. 106)

In this complicated passage, Adorno is actually referring to two types of idealism—one type, made up of “those modern philosophies” that, through the use of an “exclusive category,” seek to “escape from immanence” (or, at least, “mollify their imprisonment”), and the other type, the idealism from which these modern philosophies are trying to “escape” (or, at least, whose imprisonment they are trying to “mollify”), but whose “rule of totality” each one endorses all the same. The second type of idealism is Hegel’s, while the first type, comprised of “those modern philosophies,” includes Kierkegaard’s existentialism, Heidegger’s fundamental ontology, and Husserl’s phenomenology. It is Adorno’s view that by trying to break out of Hegel’s totalizing system with the use of an exclusive category, which by its very nature is unmediated (and dimly is expected to accomplish the hard work of transcendence precisely because it is unmediated), the modern philosophy that engenders this exclusive category cannot reconcile it with its socially mediated remainder, and thus the philosophy collapses of its own weight: it “dissolves” and then “disintegrates into its antinomies.” Finally, contributing its own normative gloss, the philosophy tends to reproduce the very state of affairs that it was bent on superseding. Why is this so?

As an initial matter, because it is designed to act as a first principle or Archimedean point that grounds transcendence, an exclusive category abstracts from the sociohistorical conditions that are the impetus for its formulation, and therefore the philosophy of which it is a central part is, notwithstanding its own self-understanding, no less an

"idealist construction" than the idealist construction (Hegel's) that it seeks to supplant. More importantly, however, by abstracting from the existing sociohistorical context, this exclusive category, which purports to surmount the drive for identity (i.e., "the rule of totality") that exists in Hegel's idealism, ultimately reveals itself as an "identity theory" that is far more troubling. In sharp contrast to Hegel's dialectics, in which the subject's drive to conceptually identify the object once and for all occurs within the context of an evolving subject-object relation that is not predicated on transcendental first principles, an exclusive category is ultimately an undialectical positing of transcendence that circumvents the "negative" labor which drives Hegel's dialectic. And by striving for indeterminate truths beyond the profane mediations of the dialectic, this self-identical first principle unavoidably—although unwittingly—makes itself determinate by importing the empirical stuff of its own sociohistorical context. In this way, the profane existence from which the exclusive category seeks to extricate the philosophy uncritically becomes a part of the philosophy itself. Ironically, then, philosophers such as Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and Husserl, who use their first principles to pursue existential or epistemological truths that transcend the mere existing,² not only end up replicating idealism's drive toward identity at the very point at which they are intent on facilitating a break with it, but fall behind Hegel's idealism in the process:

Hegel, the most extreme exponent of the idea of totality and to all appearances anything but a critic of idealism, developed a dialectical process that employed the claim to totality so dynamically that particular phenomena never result from the systematic subordinating concept; instead the system—from which reality truly results—is to be synonymous with the quintessence of fulfilled actuality. (K, p. 106)

To avoid the antinomies that arise from using an "exclusive category" (i.e., "systematic subordinating concept"), which breaks off the subject-object dialectic and therefore leads to the assortment of false reconciliations that are the hallmark of what Adorno calls "identity thinking," one must work through Hegel's "idealist construction," and it is for this reason that Adorno largely conforms to Hegel's dialectical method, while simultaneously rejecting his assumption of an ultimate reconciliation. This is not to say, however, that Adorno believes that we

should stop trying to reconcile subject and object (or universal and particular).³ Although our concepts can never be up to the task of “identifying” objects once and for all, even (indeed, especially) if they were the product of a just society, since subject and object are truly non-identical, breaking off the subject-object dialectic in recognition of this fact would only hypostatize the terms in their present difference (i.e., as they differ in the present sociohistorical context). This would lead to the same sort of “identity” problem that results from false reconciliations, and would be no less troubling in its practical implications.⁴ Thus, Adorno thinks that subject and object must be kept in a dialectical tension, a dialectical tension from which Kierkegaard, Husserl, and Heidegger all philosophically flee.

In the three chapters that constitute part I, I shall critically recapitulate Adorno’s analyses of Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and Husserl in order to show that, notwithstanding their relentless nature, there are underlying concerns that link Adorno with each of these philosophers. I shall break with a chronological approach by considering Husserl last because Adorno took Husserl’s thought to be the high point of bourgeois idealism: “Husserl purified idealism from every excess of speculation and brought it up to the standard of the highest reality within its reach. But he didn’t burst it open.”⁵ More to the point, I shall begin this work with Adorno’s critique of these philosophers in the existential and phenomenological traditions in order to begin to lay the basis for my claim that Sartre’s brand of phenomenological existentialism is a necessary complement to Adorno’s thought.⁶ Unlike his predecessors in the tradition, Sartre’s philosophy is inherently dialectical, which means that he can engage the concrete phenomena of everyday existence in a way that does not violate Adorno’s methodological strictures. Indeed, Sartre’s *Transcendence of the Ego*, which will be considered in part II, is, in some sense, Adorno’s “burst[ing] open” of Husserl’s transcendental idealism.

1

Adorno and Kierkegaard

Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic, first published in 1933,¹ is a modified version of Adorno's *Habilitationsschrift*, which had been written a few years earlier. The book, which is critical of Kierkegaard, was at odds with the sentiment of the time, for Kierkegaard's thought was experiencing a renaissance in Germany due to the writings of Tillich, Barth, Jaspers, and Heidegger. Yet, as Susan Buck-Morss states, although he was nominally attacking Kierkegaard, Adorno actually had his sights on the entire existential tradition, and, at least with respect to Heidegger, who was his secondary target, Kierkegaard compared rather favorably:² "Heidegger 'falls behind' Kierkegaard, by Adorno's criteria, since the latter's critical perception of social reality led him at least to pose the ontological question negatively."³ Going one step further, I would argue that a good deal of Adorno's hostility toward existentialism arises from his distaste for its particular German manifestation, and that his "negative dialectics, [which] kept alive an insistence on undefined experience," has strong affinities with many elements of Kierkegaard's "negative" existential philosophy.⁴

After first examining *Kierkegaard*, which anticipates a good deal of Adorno's later work, I shall try to show that Buck-Morss actually tends to understate the allure that Kierkegaard holds for Adorno. Although Adorno uses Hegel's dialectic to expose the ways in which Kierkegaard's thought collapses into the kind of idealism that it purports to leave behind by rejecting Hegel, he is also extremely sympathetic to

Kierkegaard's attack on Hegel's "identity thinking." Of course, for Adorno, Kierkegaard's ultimately undialectical approach backfires, which leaves him open to attack on the precise grounds that he attacks Hegel: Kierkegaard, despite his intentions, makes individual existence abstract. Still, confronted with what he refers to as the "totally administered society," whose levelling drive progressively extirpates individual subjectivity, Adorno embraces certain aspects of Kierkegaard's philosophy, as well as a number of Kierkegaard's techniques for reviving individual subjectivity in mass society—albeit, of course, in a dialectical framework that is more mediative and materialistic.

ADORNO'S CRITIQUE OF KIERKEGAARD

After beginning *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic* with a crucial discussion of the need to avoid interpreting philosophy as poetry, which "tear[s] philosophy away from the standard of the real," and thus "deprives it of the possibility of adequate criticism" (K, p. 3),⁵ Adorno points out that Kierkegaard equivocates with respect to his own status. Although usually adopting the poet's stance of "speaking without authority," and often stating, in various ways, that he is "a kind of poet," Kierkegaard also sees himself as a philosopher, maintaining in *Fear and Trembling*, for example, that "I am no poet and I go at things only dialectically."⁶ Still, certain distinctive attributes of poetry do resonate within Kierkegaard's philosophy, and nowhere is this phenomenon in greater evidence than in his exposition of "the aesthetic," which, in addition to art and art theory, can refer to immediacy, or subjective communication. In all three of these cases, however, Kierkegaard "was not involved with giving form to the contents of experience," which, for Adorno, is the hallmark of aesthetics, "but [merely] with the reflection of the aesthetic process and of the artistic individual himself" (K, p. 8). This leads to what will be the essence of Adorno's attack: "He who as a philosopher steadfastly challenged the identity of thought and being, casually lets existence be governed by thought in the aesthetic object" (K, p. 6). Thus, in response to Kierkegaard's brand of dialectics, in which both the concrete subject and the concrete object are lost, Adorno contends that to understand Kierkegaard philosophically rather than poetically (as Kierkegaard himself demands), we must pierce his poetic pseudonyms, those "altogether abstract representa-

tional figures" through whom he presents his philosophy, which is only in keeping with his own requirements: "Kierkegaard the person cannot simply be banished from his work in the style of an objective philosophy, which Kierkegaard unrelentingly, and not without good cause, fought" (K, p. 13).

The intangibility of Kierkegaard's pseudonymous authors is symptomatic of his deeper perspective on the nature of subjectivity itself, which, Adorno states, can be correctly interpreted only by considering the relation between the flesh-and-blood Kierkegaard and the socio-historical conditions in which he lived, and from which he was largely estranged. As an early nineteenth-century *rentier* involved in neither economic production nor capital accumulation, Kierkegaard lived off a fixed sum of invested money, and was thus highly subject to the market fluctuations of his age (such as the economic downturn caused by the worker revolts of 1848). He was a member of a declining economic class, and, as such, was externally powerless. Under these circumstances, his philosophy "adapts":

In Kierkegaard the "I" is thrown back on itself by the superior power of otherness. He is not a philosopher of identity; nor does he recognize any positive being that transcends consciousness. The world of things is for him neither part of the subject nor independent of it. Rather, this world is omitted. It supplies the subject with the mere "occasion" for the deed, with mere resistance to the act of faith. In itself, this world remains random and totally indeterminate. (K, p. 29)⁷

As evidenced by the "immanent dialectic" that he proffers within the framework of his explication of the three "spheres of existence," Kierkegaard purports to operate in a dialectical way. Yet, this estrangement from the world leads him to take undialectical stances on the internal relations between subject and object, internal and external history, and history and nature. As to the subject-object relation, Adorno tells us:

What Kierkegaard describes as "being quit with everything fundamental to human existence" was called, in the philosophical language of his age, the alienation of subject and object. Any critical interpretation of Kierkegaard must take this alienation as

its starting point. Not that such interpretation would want to conceive the structure of existence as one of "subject" and "object" within the framework of an ontological "project." The categories of subject and object originate historically. . . . If subject and object are historical concepts, they constitute at the same time the concrete conditions of Kierkegaard's description of human existence. This description conceals an antinomy in his thought that becomes evident in the subject-object relation, to which "being quit" may be traced. This is an antinomy in the conception of the relation to ontological "meaning." Kierkegaard conceives of such meaning, contradictorily, as radically devolved upon the "I," as purely immanent to the subject and, at the same time, as renounced and unreachable transcendence.—Free, active subjectivity is for Kierkegaard the bearer of all reality. (K, p. 27)

By breaking off the subject-object dialectic, Kierkegaard hopes to open up spaces within which, come what may, one's personal "meaning" can be preserved. (Indeed, one's personal meaning does not even have to be "positive," as is the case with Kierkegaard's negative theology.) But this tactic—namely, the attempt to protectively isolate subjectivity by casting out everything that is not subjectivity—is fundamentally misguided: "The harder subjectivity rebounds back into itself from the heteronomous, indeterminate, or simply mean world, the more clearly the external world expresses itself, mediatedly, in subjectivity" (K, p. 38). When internalized, therefore, the melancholy that is engendered by an alienated existence becomes an "existential condition." Kierkegaard's melancholy "does not mourn vanished happiness. It knows that it is unreachable" (K, p. 126).

Just as Kierkegaard aims to exclude the external world from subjectivity, he aims to exclude external history from one's "personal" history, which is marked totally by interiority. Nevertheless, external history again comes crashing through the perimeter. Language, ostensibly the form of the communication of pure subjectivity, is itself sedimented by the historical dialectic that Kierkegaard refuses to recognize, and, therefore, drags external history's meanings into the core of inwardness (K, pp. 34–35), thus leading Kierkegaard all the more to fall prey to the objective historical situation that he would just as soon escape. For Adorno, Kierkegaard's objectless "I" and its immanent history is spa-

tiotemporally symbolized by the historical image of the *intérieur* of Kierkegaard's childhood apartment. Drawing on Kierkegaard's own works, Adorno recounts how father and son would stroll within the parlor, all the while pretending that they were passing exciting places. In this way, the external world is subordinated to the *intérieur*, but the very nature of existence in the *intérieur* is simultaneously delimited by the unseen world. (The only semblance of the external world that manages to work its way into the *intérieur* does so through the hall mirror, and what is reflected—the endless row of apartment buildings off which the *rentier* makes his living—is the very historical situation that imprisons its inhabitants.) The *intérieur* is thus analogous to the role of subjectivity in Kierkegaard's philosophy.

Finally, in characterizing the Kierkegaardian *intérieur*, which contains images of the sea, flowers, and other things from nature, Adorno maintains that Kierkegaard fails to differentiate history and nature. In attempting to hold onto a world that has already effectively receded into the past, the *intérieur*, which is designed to preserve that past, would make of it something that transcends the merely historical. It would make this bygone period into something eternal and natural—in other words, into a thing of unchanging nature. In the apartment, then, eternity and history merge together: "In semblance . . . the historical world presents itself as nature" (K, p. 44). Of course, this consolidation of history and nature in the *intérieur* is a counterfeit one, and the artificial representations of nature are symbolic of Kierkegaard's desire to dominate nature, which, according to Adorno, all but precludes an existentially meaningful reconciliation.

Adorno goes on to explicate this relation between history and nature in the penultimate section of the book ("Reason and Sacrifice") in a manner that clearly anticipates the themes of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.⁸ Accordingly, he states that objectless, self-identical consciousness, which is Kierkegaard's "exclusive category" for breaking out of systematic idealism, is actually "the archimedian point of systematic idealism itself: the prerogative of thought, as its own law, to found reality" (K, p. 107). But, paradoxically, while consciousness is posited as an empirically pure foundation on which self-liberation hinges, its sacrifice is ultimately the price of ontological reconciliation, for a meaningful personal existence demands a spiritually inspired leap of faith that requires consciousness to disavow itself in the process of submitting to God. Adorno thus asserts:

The category that dialectically unfolds here is that of paradoxical sacrifice. Nowhere is the prerogative of consciousness pushed further, nowhere more completely denied, than in the sacrifice of consciousness as the fulfillment of ontological reconciliation. With a truly Pascalian expanse, Kierkegaard's dialectic swings between the negation of consciousness and its unchallenged authority. . . . The category of sacrifice, by means of which the system transcends itself, at the same time and fully contrary to expectation, holds Kierkegaard's philosophy systematically together as its encompassing unity through the sacrificial abstraction of all encountered phenomena. (K, p. 107)

Kierkegaard's trumpeting of consciousness sacrificing itself in order to achieve reconciliation is mythical in character, as is the broader project of idealism itself, because the commitment to reconciliation cannot be immanently fulfilled. By placing nature out of bounds in favor of a spiritual comportment, Kierkegaard's brand of idealism more firmly entangles itself in the very nature that it attempts to escape: "By annihilating nature, hope enters the vicious circle of nature; originating in nature itself, hope is only able to truly overcome it by maintaining the trace of nature" (K, pp. 109–110).

According to Adorno, then, much like his nemesis Hegel, Kierkegaard relies on reason to bring about a mythic reconciliation. But in contrast to Hegel's use of reason, which "produces actuality out of itself" to bring about "universal sovereignty," Kierkegaard's use of reason, which results in "the negation of all finite knowledge," suggests "universal annihilation" (K, p. 119). Adorno contends that the mythic quality of these philosophers arises from a depreciation of aesthetic considerations, and, furthermore, that it is only by returning to "the aesthetic" as a methodological principle that the concrete social reality that is the driving force behind these conflicting philosophies can be revealed. These would seem to be the two impulses that hang behind Adorno's phrase "construction of the aesthetic," which is the book's subtitle, as well as the name of its final chapter.⁹

At the outset of Adorno's book, we saw that while Kierkegaard equivocates with respect to "the aesthetic," every one of its articulations failed to make contact with the concrete contents of experience. To the extent that the aesthetic deals with the nonspiritual—that is to say, the object, sensuous matter, or nature—Kierkegaard depreciates it. (While