

Giulia Zerbinati

## Adorno and Hegel

### Truth, experience, and the ‘workshop’ of dialectics

#### Abstract

*Aim of the paper is to highlight the influence of Hegelian dialectics on the elaboration of Adorno’s negative dialectics, focusing, in particular, on the fact that the latter must be read not so much or not only as an uncompromising critique of the first one. Rather, negative dialectics must be read as an immanent critique of the Hegelian model, i.e. as its rethinking from within and, at the same time, as an attempt for its continuation and reconfiguration, on the basis of an initial and profound understanding of it. This becomes clear in a series of Adornian materials dated between the late 1950s and the early 1960s, which constitute a sort of ‘constellative’ work, where Adorno puts dialectics under analysis in its structure and operativity. Starting from these studies, I reconstruct some moments of this process of elaboration, through which dialectics is put into motion, put to the test, revised from within and, eventually, reshaped according to a negative paradigm.*

#### Keywords

*Dialectics, Immanent critique, Adorno’s lectures*

Received: 03/06/2025

Approved: 30/07/2025

Editing by: Giulia Zerbinati

© 2026 The Author. Open Access published under the terms of the CC-BY-4.0.  
giulia.zerbinati4@unibo.it (Università di Bologna)

## *Introduction*

The relationship between Hegel and Adorno is as wide and complex as these two authors taken individually are already in themselves. Far from being able to go over all the intersections that constitute this relationship, in this essay I will rather disclose some of them with the aim of highlighting the vital influence of Hegelian dialectics on the elaboration of the heart of Adorno's thought, namely the idea of negative dialectics. In particular, my purpose will be to emphasise the fact that Adornian negative dialectics must be read not so much or not only as an uncompromising critique of Hegel. Rather, it must be read as its immanent critique, i.e. as its rethinking from within and, at the same time, as an attempt for its continuation, reworking, reconfiguration, on the basis of an initial and profound understanding of it.

On the one hand, the relationship between Hegel and Adorno could be synthesised, recurring to a very schematic – thus very reductive – formula, in the contraposition of Adornian 'negative' dialectics to Hegelian 'affirmative' or, more correctly, 'speculative' dialectics. Yet, I believe that contraposition is perhaps not the right term to describe the relationship between these two models of dialectics. In fact, as several scholars already noted, Adorno is a Hegelian, but one of a kind. One might say, as the very idea of immanent critique requires: a Hegelian critic of Hegel.

It is undeniable that, in the elaboration of his own model of dialectics, Adorno proves oftentimes to be very severe, almost *trenchant*, in his critique of the Hegelian system, as he cannot accept Hegel's ultimate commitment to the categories of totality and identity, which in the end seems to fail to properly account for the non-identical. This occurs not only in the strictly theoretical-conceptual realm, but also in reference to the contemporary social reality – an aspect to which Adorno is very attentive and which constitutes one of the fundamental cores of critical theory of society – and, not least, in the context of the reflection on aesthetics, in which Adorno remains engaged throughout his entire philosophical discourse, and most intensely in his last great (and unfortunately unfinished) work, namely *Aesthetic theory*. Nevertheless, the starting point of such a strenuous critique is somehow the attempt by Adorno to actually rehabilitate Hegel, that is, first and foremost to understand his merits, his legacy, his achievements to be maintained, which means to figure out where and why Hegel's systematic model of dialectics does not work and exactly there, then, to push it forward, so as to take Hegel beyond Hegel himself.

Even before than in Adorno's main philosophical works, this intent can be better grasped in a series of lectures he gave between the late 1950s and the early 1960s – as, for example, his 1958 lectures on the introduction to dialectics (Adorno 2017) – as well as in his *Three studies on Hegel*, published as a book in 1963 (Adorno 1993). In my contribution I will focus especially on these latter, which are indeed very instructive when trying to retrace the theoretical process that led Adorno to outline the coordinates of his own model of dialectics, because they constitute what one might describe as a 'laboratory' or 'workshop', in which dialectics itself is put under analysis in its structure and in its operativity.

Putting dialectics to work and observing its functioning means, so to speak, putting it to the test. Where the test is not passed, its limits are revealed. To critically question these limits is, then, to acknowledge them while striving for their dialectical overcoming. Bringing to light the unresolved fractures of dialectics, finally, raises the demand for its reworking in negative terms, which will eventually find a more organised – albeit still deliberately non-systematic and 'constellative' – form in 1966 with the publication of *Negative dialectics* (Adorno 1973).

In what follows, I will then take my cue from this 'groundwork' and reconstruct some moments of this process of elaboration, through which dialectics is put into motion (1), put to the test (2), revised from within (3) and, eventually, reshaped according to a properly negative paradigm (4). This analysis will bring to light three salient elements that I think can be identified as the three key aspects around which the 'constellation' that holds together Hegel and Adorno revolves: truth, experience, and dialectics itself, which in some way encompasses both.

### 1. *Contradiction: putting dialectics into motion*

If one were to reduce to an extreme synthesis the multifaceted nature of the relationship between two philosophies already remarkably multifaceted such as those of Hegel and Adorno, one of the first things that would come to mind is the often cited juxtaposition between the Hegelian sentence from the *Preface to Phenomenology of spirit*, stating that "The true is the whole" (*Das Wahre ist das Ganze*; Hegel 1977: 11), and Adorno's provocative verdict from *Minima moralia*, stating, on the contrary, that

“The whole is the untrue” (*Das Ganze ist das Unwahre*; Adorno 2005: 50, transl. mod.<sup>1</sup>).

With this sentence, as early as 1944 Adorno already condensed into an aphorism the focal point of a model of dialectics that wants to be negative, critical, non-systematic, centred on difference, on dissonance, on all that in the entire course of the dialectical process always persists as non-identical. This can be understood as a response to such a model of dialectics, as the Hegelian ultimately seems to be, which, instead, taking to the extreme its speculative intent and its claim to rigorous systematicity, runs the risk of eventually affirming itself as positive, that is, of focusing on the attainment of an absolute identity, and thus on the smoothing out of all differences and internal tensions. Such a model of dialectics, then, notwithstanding its promising premises, ends up operating to the detriment of negativity and tension, which, however, should constitute the vital core of dialectics itself, being exactly what makes it operative as such.

Nonetheless, Hegel was the very first to point out, as no other philosophy had done up to that moment, the “tremendous power of the negative” (Hegel 1977: 19) and the need, not merely formal but rather constitutively philosophical, to consider truth as a process. One can therefore easily understand the primary position that Hegel occupies in the general elaboration of Adornian thought. Absorption and polemical reaction are, in fact, two attitudes that, in the case of Adorno’s relation to Hegel, always prove to be intertwined and inseparable. This contributes, among other things, to make the relationship between the two philosophically interesting, as well as variously declinable within different realms, and interpretable at many different levels.

It can be said, as also emerges from the broader context in which this essay is collected, that this attitude of combining criticism and acquirement, of stressing the points that do not work in order to rehabilitate and emphasise those that do work very well, is quite a constant in Adorno’s confrontation with other thinkers. For Adorno, in other words, to criticise always also means to rescue (at least in the case of his critiques of thinkers that he nonetheless held in high esteem). Critique is almost never a

<sup>1</sup> The translator of the English edition E. F. N. Jephcott translates here “The whole is the false” (the same occurs in several translations of *Minima moralia* into other languages, where the equivalent of “false” is used). Note, however, the more than merely formal difference between “untrue” (corresponding to the German *unwahr*) and “false” (corresponding to the German *falsch*), where the former, unlike the latter, maintains a relation to truth in the very moment in which it denies it, so expressing through language an explicitly dialectical conceptual content.

matter of dismissing *in toto*, but instead it is almost always a process of putting back into motion the right intuitions through the problematisation of the problematic ones. Adorno himself, in one of his *Three studies*, argues that “rescuing Hegel – and only rescue [*Rettung*], not revival, is appropriate for him – means facing up to his philosophy where it is most painful and wresting truth [*Wahrheit*] from it where its untruth [*Unwahrheit*] is obvious” (Adorno 1963: 83).

The idea of a negative model of dialectics is thus of course an intense critique, but still an *immanent* critique, of the Hegelian model of dialectics. More specifically, the ‘workshop’ in which this model of dialectics is put to the test consists, for Adorno, in the problematisation of its identifying claims and its concept of reconciliation of the extremes, which, in the eyes of the critical thinker, gets transformed into the hypostasis of one of them, in which the other is simply dissolved, rather than truly preserved and sublated – *aufgehoben*, as Hegel would say.

In fact, everything hinges here on the dialectical relationship between the universal and the particular, the subject and the object, the totality and the fragment, the total society and the individual, the conceptualised idea and the non-conceptualisable experience. All these couples of terms refer to different contexts and different levels of reflection, but are all ultimately ascribable to the dialectical contradiction between identity and non-identity. Now, where Hegel’s dialectics aims at their reconciliation into unity, Adorno perceives instead the untruth and one-sidedness of this (falsely) conciliatory unity, and insists on the recognition of fractures and differences, that is, on remaining and operating *within* the contradiction, rather than resolving it, if resolving it means falsely overcoming it.

Accordingly, in Adorno’s view, a first great merit of Hegel, a first important aspect of the Hegelian legacy to be rescued, cannot but be to have thematised and underscored contradiction as the true driving force of philosophy. For Adorno, in fact, Hegel as well constructed his own model of dialectics employing the attitude of immanent critique, insofar as he dismissed the dogmatic and rationalistic philosophy of his time, by fluidifying and putting back into motion the very process of philosophising. As we read in the Adornian study on the experiential content (*Erfahrungsgehalt*) of Hegelian philosophy (Adorno 1993: 53-88), by undertaking a critique of logical forms from within logic itself, Hegel “demonstrated that concept, judgment, and conclusion, unavoidable instruments for ascertaining through consciousness something that exists, always end up contradicting that existing thing”. For this very reason, Hegel’s dialectics made clear that “all individual judgments, all individual concepts, all individual conclu-

sions, are false by the criterion of an emphatic idea of truth" (Adorno 1993: 76).

In this way, contradiction, which by classical logic was "proscribed" (*verpönt*) – namely, it represented what needed to be abolished, avoided, what in some way blocked thought until it was overcome or resolved –, in Hegel, on the contrary, "becomes an organ of thought". Contradiction is not what produces the impasse, but rather precisely what makes thought move, what triggers the process whereby "only through reflection can reflective thought get beyond itself". With Hegel, contradiction is properly recognised as the organ "of the truth of Logos" (Adorno 1993: 73), as the immanent force of dialectical thinking itself.

## 2. *Explosion: putting dialectics to the test*

Compared to Hegel, however, Adorno considers the immanent force of contradiction in an even more radical sense. At the root of negative dialectics lies, in fact, the idea that thought, in order to claim itself to be truly dialectical, cannot be satisfied with the whole (*das Ganze*) that Hegel holds to be the true (*das Wahre*). In other words, a critical observation of the dynamic operativity of dialectics, which Hegelian philosophy finally set in motion, shows, at the same time, that dialectics itself cannot rest in a final moment of synthesis and reconciliation of the contradictory elements, should this consist – as, according to Adorno, occurs in the Hegelian system, especially in its theorisation by the most mature Hegel – not in a true reconciliation, but in the hypertrophy of one of the two extremes, which, overstretched *ad libitum*, ends up absorbing the other, and thus deprives it of its features of otherness for the sake of a presumed identity.

To be sure, for Adorno neither the universal nor the particular, neither the subject nor the object, etc., are to be hypostatized to the detriment of their respective opposite poles. Hence, to rehabilitate the particular against its dissolution into the universal, or to state the "preponderance" or "primacy" of the object (*der Vorrang des Objekts*) over the subject, as he will do in a very well-known paragraph of *Negative dialectics*<sup>2</sup>, does not

<sup>2</sup> See Adorno 1973: 183-6. In this paragraph we read: "An object can be conceived only by a subject but always remains something other than the subject, whereas a subject by its very nature is from the outset an object as well. Not even as an idea can we conceive a subject that is not an object; but we can conceive an object that is not a

at any rate mean to hypostatise them. Otherwise, we would simply find ourselves in the situation of hypostatising one side rather than the other – so to say, the ‘weak’ side of the conflict rather than the ‘strong’ one –, while still falling back into hypostasis. Instead, the extremes of each contradiction must always be held together in their mutual dialectical mediation, i.e. always considered *within* the constant tension that they themselves generate.

Truth lies neither in the absolutisation of one extreme to the detriment of the other, nor in a peaceful ‘middle way’ between the two, but only finds its own complex configuration inside the force field generated by the absolute extremity of the energies that are involved in the very same dialectical relation. In his studies on Hegel, Adorno describes this process through a very powerful image, by saying that real productive dialectics “links the general concept and the aconceptual τόδε τι [...] each in itself, to its opposite, a kind of permanent explosion ignited by the contact of extremes” (Adorno 1993: 81-2)<sup>3</sup>. In Adorno’s view, Hegel’s dialectics certainly does so, insofar as “the Hegelian concept of the dialectic acquires its specific character [...] through its movement *in and through the extremes*: development as discontinuity” (Adorno 1993: 82; my emphasis). But, at the same time, while moving within the framework of its discontinuous development, “the idea, which becomes truth only by completely absorbing what opposes it, repeatedly succumbs to the temptation to explain that what resists it is itself idea, truth” (*ibid.*).

The problem that Adorno sees emerging, while putting to the test the Hegelian philosophy of the spirit, is that this latter apparently aspires to configure itself as an extensive totality, which subsumes everything with the aim of expelling from its own wholeness any element that could lead back to that fundamental tension, from which the very same movement of the dialectical process originated. Freely adopting Adorno’s metaphors and images, one can argue that Hegel would like to make sure that any

subject. To be an object also is part of the meaning of subjectivity; but it is not equally part of the meaning of objectivity to be a subject” (183).

<sup>3</sup> Adorno employs quite often metaphorical terms and images that refer to fire, light, heat and energy. For example, in the contact with otherness or in the encounter of extremes, a spark or a trigger can be produced, which gives rise to an enlightening or an igniting; some dialectical processes can be described as a burning or an exploding; dialectical tension can produce a release of energies, a permanent explosion or detonation, and generate a force field, a magnetic field or a firework; in the vibrations and magnetism that permeate experience, one can perceive something that seems constantly on the verge of shining or bursting.

spark that might risk igniting the explosion is eventually extinguished. Metaphors aside, the universal concept imposes its hypertrophic force and represses any residue of non-identical particularity coming from the contact with the real – from the “shudder”, as the late Adorno of *Aesthetic theory* would say<sup>4</sup> – in order to attempt to affirm the domination of the rational over it.

This is why the Hegelian system, if it remains governed by a sort of final triumph of Reason with the capital “R”, ends up considering only the whole to be true, i.e. the totality, whereas every partiality is downgraded to untrue precisely insofar as it is partial, namely condemned to being an instrument of affirmation of the whole, which preserves the negative moment only to overcome it (as the most classic definition of the *Aufhebung* would have it). Yet, in reality, and this is the point on which Adorno insists the most, such overcoming does not at all preserve what it overcomes, but rather liquidates it, represses it, forgets it, abolishes it – to return to the image of the explosion: it defuses it. With the affirmation of absolute identity, the non-identical is relegated to the sphere of the irrational and the accidental, thus losing any right to its own otherness.

### 3. *Experience: revising dialectics from within*

As we have seen so far, Adorno’s engagement with Hegel at the turn of the 1950s and 1960s is marked by philosophical rigour and critical depth, and his confrontation with the modern father of dialectics is very intense and direct. In his ‘workshop’ on dialectics, Adorno gathers and re-elaborates materials from some of his public lectures and talks, integrating them with the considerations he developed while teaching in Frankfurt. With his own words: “In accordance with a long-cherished plan, I set down my thoughts on questions of understanding Hegel. They spring from my work in the Philosophisches Seminar at the University of Frankfurt [...]; my intention was to use what I had observed in the teaching situation as a point of departure” (Adorno 1993: xxxv).

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Adorno 1997: 331: “What later came to be called subjectivity, freeing itself from the blind anxiety of the shudder, is at the same time the shudder’s own development; life in the subject is nothing but what shudders, the reaction to the total spell that transcends the spell. Consciousness without shudder is reified consciousness”.

What Adorno wants to do with this project, of which *Negative dialectics* will be the most comprehensive theoretical result, is, in fact, a thorough overall consideration of Hegelian philosophy, by both stressing its absolutely disruptive aspects and eventually evaluating its philosophical import. But what is exactly the purpose of this work? As Adorno himself explains in the *Preface* to the *Three studies*, all this “is intended as preparation for a revised conception of the dialectic” (Adorno 1993: xxxvi).

This means, on the one hand, sticking to the fact that Hegel, more than anyone else, philosophically spelled out the power and impact of dialectical thinking, and, on the other hand, trying to critically identify those points where dialectical thinking itself reveals its vulnerability. In this way, Hegel can be not superseded, but rescued, that is, taken beyond the limits of his own philosophy, so that the disruptive force that characterises it does not remain blocked – so to say, trapped in the dialectical tangles that it creates. These tangles must be rather disentangled, made fluid again, precisely because of their intrinsic theoretical strength.

In the first writing included in his *Three studies*, dedicated to the aspects (*Aspekte*) of Hegel’s philosophy in general (Adorno 1993: 1-51), Adorno writes that the “analysis of the absolute subject has to acknowledge the indissolubility of an empirical, nonidentical moment in it”. Nevertheless, all philosophies based on the principle of absolute identity – “doctrines of the absolute subject, idealist systems of identity” –, in order to remain consistent with this same principle, “are not permitted to acknowledge”, cannot afford to recognise, that one moment as *permanently* and *radically* “indissoluble [*unauflöslich*]”, finally having to proceed to its dissolution into the identical (Adorno 1993: 17).

It is specifically in relation to this problem that, according to Adorno, “Hegel’s philosophy is untrue [*unwahr*] when measured against its own concept”. To get to the heart of the truth – its limits, in fact, do not deny that it is “nevertheless true [*wahr*]” – one must, then, “elucidate something that dominates the whole of Hegel’s philosophy without ever being made tangible”. And, Adorno adds, “that is spirit”. To “elucidate” (*entziffern*, decipher) means here to try to give expression to those moments in which this universal, total, absolute spirit “is not placed in [a likewise] absolute contrast to something nonspiritual, something material” (*ibid.*).

In other words, what Adorno wants to achieve is to focus his attention on the development, and in a certain sense the redemption, of the non-identical, namely the sensuous, non-spiritual, non-conceptual particular, whereas – vice-versa – the identical, the universal, the conceptual seeks

to eliminate the indissoluble and permanent otherness of this empirical moment, which could also be called experiential.

A closer observation of the operativity of dialectics reveals, in fact, that it is precisely the empirical moment, which concerns the experiential aspect of our contact and interrelation with reality, that implies conceiving of this same reality – and, by consequence, the thought that attempts to penetrate and configure it rationally – as dialectical. This depends on the fact that it is in experience, in the course of *Erfahrung*, that we perceive something not yet configured, thus trigger new configurations and gradually unfold reality – where truth lies in nothing but this very process of unfolding.

From this perspective, Hegelian philosophy, wholly in favour of spiritual speculation, might seem abstract, theoretical, conceptual, even anti-aesthetic, in the sense that the spirit appears all the more perfect, all the more absolute, the further it moves away from *aísthesis* in its original meaning, that is, the more it frees itself from the sensible, material, natural aspects of things. But actually, according to Adorno, Hegel fully grasped the importance of the empirical moment and of experience in general for thought. In Hegel, in fact, as Adorno says, experience is even “embedded [*geschlagen*]” in thought. As one could show “in every sentence of the *Phenomenology of spirit*”, which is perhaps Hegel’s most significant text for Adorno, experience is precisely what, through tension, sets in motion and makes concretely vital what would otherwise be only a mere abstract thought: “The wealth of experience on which thought feeds in Hegel is incomparable; it is put into the ideas themselves, never appearing as mere ‘material’, to say nothing of example or evidence external to the ideas. Through what is experienced, the abstract idea is transformed back into something living, just as mere material is transformed through the path thought travels” (Adorno 1993: 50).

Here, then, is another great merit of Hegel, another aspect worth rescuing, that is, his rejection of the identification of philosophical content, of truth, with the abstractions of traditional metaphysics. In the second writing included in his *Three studies*, which, as mentioned above, is specifically focused on the experiential content of Hegelian philosophy, Adorno writes (quoting, at the end of the cited passage, from § 6 of Hegel’s *Introduction* to his *Encyclopaedia of the philosophical sciences*):

Because of his idealism, Hegel has been reproached for being abstract in comparison with the concreteness of the phenomenological, anthropological, and ontological schools. But he brought infinitely more concreteness into his philosophical

ideas than those approaches, and not because his speculative imagination was balanced by a sense of reality and historical perspective but by virtue of the approach his philosophy takes – by virtue, one might say, of the experiential character of his speculation. Philosophy, Hegel asserts, must come to understand that “its content is no other than actuality. At first we become aware of these contents in what we call Experience”. (Adorno 1993: 67)

Hegel criticised both the blind empiricism of mere sensory data and the static (and therefore non-dialectical) apriorism, because he understood that philosophical thought, through conceptual abstractions, must nevertheless account for the experiential concreteness of reality, since its object is actually nothing other than the real world as it presents itself in our interrelation with it. Furthermore, Hegel highlighted all this not only against the abstractions of dogmatism or the empty rationalism of non-dialectical metaphysics, but also and especially against the risk of thought – which is always at stake in philosophy, precisely because philosophy aspires by its very nature to the conceptual dimension – of constructing a separate world and withdraw into it, forgetting experiential contact with the actual, concrete, material reality. This, then, is another key point that we must learn from Hegelian philosophy: that thought, as we have seen above, “repeatedly succumbs to the temptation to explain that what resists it” is already conceptual in itself, i.e. a content coming from experience but rationally graspable and reducible to identity without any residue.

Hegel, according to Adorno, was well aware of this risk. In fact, Adorno believes that the most powerful and profound nature of Hegelian speculation derives precisely from Hegel’s awareness of the need to alienate ourselves in the world, to abandon ourselves to actuality (*Wirklichkeit*), to fall deeply into things in order to penetrate their meaning, to refer to an empirical basis and to strive for the ongoing (and mediated) confrontation/conflict with it. In other words, in his interpretation of Hegel, Adorno focuses on the awareness of the need for a kind of dynamic symbiosis of thought and experience<sup>5</sup>, in which thought draws on experience and is constantly fuelled by it in its processual-dialectical development.

<sup>5</sup> This kind of dynamic symbiosis is similar to what Adorno will refer to as “aesthetic comportment” (*ästhetische Verhalten*) in *Aesthetic theory*. See, for example – at the very end of the same passage already quoted in the previous note – Adorno 1997: 331: “That shudder in which subjectivity stirs without yet being subjectivity is the act of being touched by the other. Aesthetic comportment assimilates itself to that other rather than subordinating it. Such a constitutive relation of the subject to objectivity in aesthetic comportment joins eros and knowledge”.

This is, after all, what makes truth a dialectical experience – and therefore, in Adorno’s lexicon, a ‘constellation’ open to ever new and further configurations – rather than mere knowledge acquired once and for all, which amounts, in Adorno’s lexicon, to a conceptual content reduced to hypostasis. It is no coincidence that dialectics itself is defined by Adorno, again in his *Three studies*, as follows:

The dialectic is neither a mere method by which spirit might elude the cogency of its object – in Hegel the dialectic literally accomplishes the opposite, the permanent confrontation of the object with its concept – nor is it a *Weltanschauung* into whose schema one has to squeeze reality. Just as the dialectic does not favor individual definitions, so there is no definition that fits it. Dialectic is the unswerving effort to conjoin reason’s critical consciousness of itself and the critical experience of objects. (Adorno 1993: 9-10)

If viewed from this perspective, Adorno’s negative dialectics appears as a revision from within of Hegel’s dialectics, insofar as what he wants to critically draw attention to is the fact that, although it can be configured in rational forms and therefore transformed into thought, idea, concept, the experience of reality in its otherness, in its radical non-identity, always brings further elements that these logical-conceptual forms are unable to assimilate, to rationally absorb, unless they undergo a process of transfiguration.

These elements are precisely those that we experience in their materiality and in their dense, opaque, indeterminate existence, through a contact with things that could be described as aesthetic (again in the sense of the *aisthesis*), namely through a mimetic affinity that is by its very essence non-conceptual, beyond – or on this side of – any universal property that things themselves may embody. In a nutshell, Hegel insists on the need to reduce these elements of experiential otherness to the universal categories of thought, whereas Adorno, on the contrary, insists on their irreducibility.

For Adorno, the irreducibility of heterogeneity is, in the end, the price that thought must pay because of the inevitable equation that exists between thinking and identifying: the more we try to bring reality closer to our rational understanding, the more – paradoxically – we distance ourselves from it, because in order to understand it, we must repress it within those very rational categories that make it understandable to us.

As we will read in the *Introduction to Negative dialectics*, “[contradiction] indicates the untruth of identity, the fact that the concept does not exhaust the thing conceived. Yet the appearance of identity is inherent in

thought itself, in its pure form. *To think is to identify*. Conceptual order is content to screen what thinking seeks to comprehend" (Adorno 1966: 5; my emphasis). Upon reflection, the injustice that thought does to reality at the very moment it grasps it is both its condition of possibility and its seemingly unforgivable fault.

#### 4. *Towards a negative model of dialectics*

We can now see why the central notion for Adorno's elaboration of "a revised conception of the dialectic" is that of non-identity. Through its emphasis on the non-identical, Adorno's 'workshop' of dialectics brings to light, now in contrast rather than in continuity with Hegelian dialectics, that things are *de facto* never entirely comprehensible within the identifying schemes of thought. Every particular that identity thinking seeks to appropriate and overcome, actually continues to claim its otherness and to unceasingly manifest its resistance. Experience always exceeds thought, the non-conceptual always exceeds the concept by a minimal residual 'something'. Moreover, as we have already seen from the outset, this continuous re-emerging of the non-identical is what drives dialectics processually, preventing its resolution in a final positive moment. Thus, dialectics becomes (or return to be) properly negative. The revised conception of dialectics, which Adorno comes to develop, starts from the Hegelian paradigm and, at the same time, overturns it from within with an immanent critique.

According to Adorno, in conclusion, Hegel's philosophy draws its strength from having understood the intrinsic necessity of thought to force reality, but has its weakness in not having taken seriously enough the aspect of guilt involved in this forcing. However, Hegel is only responsible for this weakness to a certain extent. In fact, in the Adornian perspective of these ongoing theoretical reflections on dialectics, one must recognise that Hegel had to mobilise the force of the whole over the heterogeneous because the force of the whole is the force of the structure connecting subject and object. Although working by encapsulating the partial into the universal, this still remains the only way that actually allows us to think, to conceptualise, and therefore to comprehend reality through thought.

Indeed, for Adorno, philosophy is the effort, somewhat paradoxical but for this very reason dialectical, to help the non-identical to express

itself through rational processes of identification. In the third and final of Adorno's studies on Hegel (Adorno 1993: 89-148), we thus read:

Of course one cannot grossly neglect the demand for clarity; philosophy should not succumb to confusion and destroy the very possibility of its existence. What we should take from this is the urgent demand that the expression fit the matter expressed precisely, even where the matter at hand for its part does not conform to the customary notion of what can be indicated clearly. Here too philosophy is faced with a paradox: to say clearly something that is unclear, that has no firm outline, that does not accommodate to reification; to say it in such a way, that is, that the moments that elude the eye's fixating gaze, or that are not accessible at all, are indicated with the utmost distinctness. This, however, is not a merely formal demand but rather a part of the very substance philosophy is after. (Adorno 1993: 100)

The importance of Hegelian dialectics lies for Adorno in the fact that Hegel aimed to do exactly this: he recognised that the non-identical "can never be said directly" and therefore "he tirelessly says it in mediated form". And this is why he ultimately invokes totality, "however problematic that concept may be" (Adorno 1993: 102), because he is aware that this invocation responds not to a rhetorical expedient or to a formal motive, but rather to a constitutive philosophical and cognitive necessity, which as thinking beings we can never entirely renounce.

However, taking a step beyond Hegel starting from Hegel, Adorno points out that not only the non-identical cannot be immediately grasped as a positive, but neither can it be acquired through the negation of the negative. Quite on the contrary, considering the negation of negation equal to affirmation becomes, through the lens of immanent critique, the quintessence of identification. This, in fact, is for Adorno the anti-dialectical principle that, in the Hegelian system, finally takes over right at the heart of the dialectical process. If determinate negation is conceived of as the negation of the negation resulting in an affirmation, the negation of the negative as the positing of the positive, then it becomes exactly that moment of the dialectical process which, in Adorno's reading, denies the non-identical by declaring its untruth, in order to positively affirm the only truth of the whole (see Adorno 1973: 158 ff.).

To sum up, we can say that Adorno's idea is that, while Hegelian dialectics proceeds from the viewpoint of achieving a positive identity, negative dialectics, by contrast, recognises the fact that, as he will state in *Negative dialectics*, "to negate a negation does not bring about its reversal; it proves, rather, that the negation was not negative enough" (Adorno 1973:

159-60). Through the ‘workshop’ of reconsideration of dialectics over these years, Adorno comes to understand that determinate negation, as he already explicitly argues in his studies on Hegel, is “the central nerve of the dialectic” and happens to work in it “as a method” (Adorno 1993: 80) only if “the contradiction becomes absolute, and not through the contradiction becoming alleviated in *the* absolute” (Adorno 1993: 31; my emphasis).

Determinate negation, in fact, “is based on the experience of the impotence of a criticism that keeps to the general and polishes off the object being criticized by subsuming it from above under a concept as its representative”. Dialectical thinking must, therefore, keep on “dirtying itself with the specific”, because “only the critical idea that unleashes the force stored up in its own object is fruitful; fruitful both for the object, by helping it to come into its own, and against it, reminding it that it is not yet itself” (Adorno 1993: 80).

Dialectics taken in its deepest meaning – hence, philosophical knowledge that, although operating with concepts, also accounts for the non-conceptual aspects of reality – “begins only where it opens up things that traditional thought has considered opaque, impenetrable, and mere products of individuation” (Adorno 1993: 80-1). Therein lies, in fact, the truthful moment of the experience of the non-identical, to which Adorno’s revised conception of dialectics must now turn its gaze.

## Bibliography

Adorno, Th. W., *Negative dialectics* (1966), Engl. transl. E. B. Ashton, London, Routledge, 1973.

Adorno, Th. W., *Hegel. Three studies* (1963), Engl. transl. S. W. Nichol森, Cambridge (Mass.)- London, MIT, 1993.

Adorno, Th. W., *Aesthetic theory* (1970), ed. G. Adorno, R. Tiedemann, new Engl. transl. R. Hullot-Kentor, New York, Continuum, 1997.

Adorno, Th. W., *Minima moralia. Reflections on a damaged life* (1951), Engl. transl. E. F. N. Jephcott, London- New York, Verso, 2005.

Adorno, Th. W., *An introduction to dialectics* (1958), ed. C. Ziermann, Engl. transl. N. Walker, Cambridge (UK)- Malden (Mass.), Polity, 2017.

Baumann, C., *Adorno, Hegel and the concrete universal*, “Philosophy & Social Criticism”, n. 37/1 (2011), pp. 73-94.

Bernstein, J. M., *Negative dialectic as fate: Adorno and Hegel*, in T. Huhn (ed.), *The Cambridge companion to Adorno*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004, pp. 19-50.

- Bodei, R., *Introduzione. Strappare il vero dal falso*, in Th. W. Adorno, *Tre studi su Hegel*, It. transl. F. Serra, ed. G. Zanotti, Bologna, il Mulino, 2014, pp. 7-26.
- Bozzetti, M., *Kreis und Ellipse. Adornos Kritik an Hegel*, in S. Achella, F. Iannelli, G. Baptist, S. Feloj, F. Li Vigni, C. Melica (eds.), *The owl's flight. Hegel's legacy to contemporary philosophy*, Berlin- Boston, De Gruyter, 2021, pp. 431-8.
- Buck-Morss, S., *The origin of negative dialectics. Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and the Frankfurt Institute*, New York, The Free Press, 1977.
- Costantini, F., *Cosa mostra la dialettica? Contraddizione, negazione e non-identità in Hegel e Adorno*, in G. Matteucci, S. Marino (eds.), *Theodor W. Adorno. Truth and dialectical experience/Verità ed esperienza dialettica*, "Discipline filosofiche", n. 26/2 (2016), pp. 167-86.
- Finlayson, J. G., *Hegel, Adorno and the origins of immanent criticism*, "British Journal for the History of Philosophy", n. 22/6 (2014), pp. 1142-66.
- Foster, R., *Adorno. The recovery of experience*, Albany (NY), SUNY Press, 2007.
- Hegel, G. W. F., *Phenomenology of spirit*, Engl. transl. A. V. Miller, Oxford- New York - Toronto- Melbourne, Oxford University Press, 1977.
- Nebuloni, R., *Dialettica e trascendenza. "Excursus" su Hegel e Adorno*, in *Riflessività e coscienza simbolica*, Milano, Vita e Pensiero, 2006, pp. 3-52.
- Nicholsen, S. W., Shapiro, J. J., *Introduction*, in Th. W. Adorno, *Hegel. Three studies*, Engl. transl. S. W. Nicholsen, Cambridge (Mass.)- London, MIT, 1993, pp. ix-xxxiii.
- Nuzzo, A., *Dialettica negativa e dialettica speculativa. Adorno ed Hegel*, in L. Pastore, Th. Gebur (eds.), *Theodor W. Adorno. Il maestro ritrovato*, Roma, Manifestolibri, 2008, pp. 159-80.
- O'Connor, B., *Adorno's reconception of the dialectic*, in S. Houlgate, M. J. Baur (eds.), *A companion to Hegel*, Oxford, Blackwell, 2011, pp. 537-55.
- Richter, G., *Aesthetic theory and nonpropositional truth content in Adorno*, "New German Critique", n. 97 (Winter 2006), pp. 119-35.
- Rose, G., *From speculative to dialectical thinking: Hegel and Adorno*, in *Judaism and modernity. Philosophical Essays*, London, Blackwell, 1993, pp. 53-64.
- Rosen, M., *Hegel's dialectic and its criticism*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1985.
- Stone, A., *Adorno, Hegel, and dialectic*, "British Journal for the History of Philosophy", n. 22/6 (2014), pp. 1118-41.
- Zanotti, G., *Contingent antagonism. A key to Adorno's dialectic*, in G. Matteucci, S. Marino (eds.), *Theodor W. Adorno. Truth and dialectical experience/Verità ed esperienza dialettica*, "Discipline filosofiche", n. 26/2 (2016), pp. 139-50.