Lectures on Negative Dialectics
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The German word *Geist* (spirit, mind, intellect) and its adjective *geistig* have presented particular difficulties in this translation. Normally, the translator tries to achieve consistency, but that has proved hard in this instance. *Geist* is commonly translated as ‘spirit’ (as in Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*), and this was an important component of Adorno’s intellectual heritage. ‘Spirit’ has therefore been the translation of choice in some instances. But to translate the essay in the Appendix ‘Zur Theorie der geistigen Erfahrung’ as ‘The Theory of Spiritual Experience’ would convey entirely the wrong impression in English, because of the strong theological overtones that are quite absent from Adorno’s text. In the published version of *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno refers to *Geist* as ‘a semi-theological word’ (p. 38), but those overtones are too intrusive in English. Equally, mind in the sense of mind and matter is normally rendered in German by *Geist und Materie*. ‘Mind’ and ‘mental’ have proved to be possible renditions in a number of passages, but I have opted on the whole for ‘intellect’ and ‘intellectual’ in the example given above and elsewhere. However, no single term has proved viable in every case. The fact is that the term *Geist* falls somewhere between the available English words – spirit, mind, intellect – with all of which it also overlaps. Each of these terms seems to work in some instances, but not in all. For that reason I have felt constrained to sacrifice consistency to what seemed appropriate in the given context. Something of the word’s flavour can perhaps be gleaned from this passage from Lecture 9: ‘Admittedly, you must be very clear in your own minds
that this concept of intellectual [geistig] experience is infinitely far removed from the trivial concept of experience. This is because the concept of the fact, of data, that is canonical for empiricist philosophies and which is based on sense experience, that is, on sense data, has no validity for intellectual experience, which is the experience of something already intellectual and is an intellectually mediated experience’ (p. 89).
Between 1960 and 1966 Adorno accompanied the writing of Negative Dialectics with four courses of lectures. In the last of these he developed the themes that stand at the beginning of the book which finally appeared in 1966. They figure in what he called the Introduction, doubtless an echo of Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit. Hegel’s introduction, like his book as a whole, treats the ‘experience of consciousness’, or rather the ‘science’ of consciousness, and this appears to have been echoed in Adorno’s own terminology when he considered giving his introductory text the title ‘Theory of Intellectual [geistig] Experience’, adding that he wished ‘to expound the concept of philosophical experience’ (Negative Dialectics, p. xx). Adorno did not hesitate to use ‘intellectual experience’ as a synonym for ‘full, unreduced experience in the medium of conceptual reflection’ (ibid., p. 13; see also p. 82 below). A ‘theory of intellectual experience’ such as the one he sketched in the introduction to Negative Dialectics, and parallel to that in the lectures on the same topic, would amount to something like a methodology of his philosophy, if we could speak of such a thing. Adorno himself referred to Negative Dialectics as a whole as ‘a methodology of his material works’ only to contradict this in the very next breath: ‘No continuum exists between those works and it, according to the theory of negative dialectics. The dis-continuity will be dealt with, however, and so will the directions for thought to be gleaned from it. The procedure will be justified, not rationally grounded. To the best of his ability the author means to put his cards on the table – which is by no means the same as playing
the game’ (ibid., p. xix). These observations strikingly fail to do justice to the text of Negative Dialectics. Adorno repeatedly emphasized that his material works could not be subsumed under a fixed ‘method’, that they could not be separated from their objects, and that their contents could not simply be transferred to other topics. When we examine his texts, this becomes only too apparent. But what could Negative Dialectics be other than an ensemble of ‘material works’ – on ontology, on the philosophy of history and moral philosophy or on metaphysics; we might also say: on Heidegger, Hegel or Kant or the possibility of philosophy after Auschwitz? At best, the central section of the book, on the concept and categories of a negative dialectics, might be construed as belonging to what has traditionally been thought of as a doctrine of method. And as far as ineffectual ‘Instructions for Thinking’ are concerned – no opponent of Adorno’s could do him a greater injustice than to attempt to reduce his chef d’oeuvre to vague instructions of whatever sort. After all, what could the ‘game’ be if not the treatment of the discontinuity between material and methodological philosophizing? Only if we stick to the literal meaning of methodology, to the λόγος immanent in every method; only if we expect no method in particular, but the justification of a plurality of methods and, tendentially, of the various distinct methods of all Adorno’s writings, does the concept of method used in the ‘Preface’ of Negative Dialectics, and also in the present volume of lectures, make sense. It would be better, however, for us to follow Adorno’s example in his essay on ‘The Experiential Content of Hegel’s Philosophy’ and speak of the ‘models of intellectual experience’ that ‘motivate’ Adorno’s thinking and make up its ‘truth content’ (see Hegel: Three Studies, p. 53). The verse of Kästner’s cited in the present volume of lectures, ‘Herr Kästner, where’s the positive side?’ (see pp. 12 and 17 below), could be matched – and can still be matched today – by the equally insipid question ‘What method do you use, Herr Adorno?’ It appears as if on one occasion he wished to make a few concessions in this direction and force his thinking into the requisite methodological corset, only to end up by going against his own intentions and immersing himself once more in material philosophizing, be it only philosophizing about the antinomy of method and intellectual experience.

Adorno frequently attempted to formulate the deeply unsatisfactory nature of all traditional philosophy, its inappropriateness to its subject, its repudiation by the worldly wise. He hoped to lead thought along the ‘only critical path that remains open’, by identifying such fallacies as ‘thinking of a first philosophy’, ‘origin’ thinking, the primacy of subjectivity, the universal rule of domination – and also
as the constitution of method. ‘Method in the precise sense’ was for him ‘an intellectual approach which can be applied everywhere and at all times because it divests itself of any relation to things, i.e. to the object of knowledge’ (Against Epistemology, p. 11, translation modified). The approach in question is that of ubiquitous mathematicization, just as the ideal of every express method has always been mathematics, which soared above the lowlands of empirical reality like a Platonic heaven. Adorno claimed to discern this ‘triumph of mathematics and every such triumph’ in the Socrates of Plato’s Meno, who strove to ‘reduce virtue to its immutable and hence abstract features’ (ibid.). Abstraction is the procedure whose every method must start off by formulating concepts: it must ignore the particulars with which it is concerned at every turn; it must make its material manageable, that is to say, capable of being controlled. But the methodologists and logicians are mistaken in their belief that only by such means will they be able to gain a hold on the general as the other of the particular, the finite, the existent; just as mathematics is a gigantic tautology ‘which exerts a total dominance over what it has itself prepared and formed’ (ibid.; see also p. 27 below), so too methods are always concerned with themselves, with the flimsiest, most abstract vestige of what they have reduced the world to by treating anything and everything only in terms of general concepts, while declining to engage with the object itself. In this dire situation idealism has made a virtue of deducing every not-I from the I, of defining every object as a subject or, as they call it, of ‘postulating’ the former by means of the latter: each thing is like this and not otherwise and it is subject to the rule of subjectivity to which it has owed its very existence from the outset. Understood in this way, such methods come together in the societal model on which they are based: the principle of equivalence of the barter society in which use values appear only as quantities, as exchange values, as values comparable in money terms, not as distinct qualities. In the ‘Introduction’ to Against Epistemology, Adorno gave an account, one not yet adequately appreciated, of what, despite Kant and lasting well beyond his work, we must call the ‘uncritical’ path taken by both mind and reality. It is a truly philosophical account of the history of philosophy, and at the same time a literary feat in the linguistic desert that has prevailed in the world of German-language thought since Nietzsche’s death. Adorno’s ‘second introduction’, that to Negative Dialectics, is the continuation of that first one, since it progresses from a critical, negative methodology to a negative-dialectical one.

Adorno advanced the idea of philosophical or, more generally, intellectual experience as a weapon with which to oppose the