

# Adorno, Heidegger and the Critique of Epistemology

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## Abstract

Adorno and Heidegger are frequently aligned because of apparent similarities in their critiques of modern epistemology. This alignment fails, however, to appreciate the substantial differences in the philosophical presuppositions that inform those very critiques. I distinguish Adorno's negative dialectic from Heidegger's fundamental ontology under the respective designations of critical versus phenomenological forms of transcendental philosophy. I argue that only by understanding Adorno's negative dialectic as a revised version of epistemology (namely a dialectical epistemology, committed to subject-object and transcendental argument) can we make sense of, first, the profound differences between Adorno and Heidegger on the question of epistemology and, second, the philosophical motivations behind Adorno's trenchant rejection of Heidegger.

## Key words

being-in-the-world – dialectics – empiricism – epistemology – idealism – identity – immediacy – irrationalism – mediation – project – subject-object – transcendental

Theodor Adorno's position within recent history of philosophy is rather curious. Although he is an acknowledged figure of post-war German philosophy, recognition of his work is usually the result of perceived similarities with other philosophers. Lately, Adorno's negative dialectic has been 'recognized' as a precursor of deconstruction.<sup>1</sup> Martin Jay notes the tantalizing likenesses: 'Adorno's "negative dialectics" and Jacques Derrida's deconstruction have ... earned frequent comparisons because of their common rejection of totalizing philosophies of identity, distrust of first principles and origins, suspicion of idealist ideologies of sublation, and valorization of allegorical over symbolic modes of representation' (Jay, 1996: xviii).

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Dews (1986); Dews (1987: 38-44); and Helga Gripp's especially useful *Theodor W. Adorno: Erkenntnisdimensionen negativer Dialektik* (1986: 132-44).

These plausible comparisons have undoubtedly reawakened interest in Adorno's work. Prior to the comparison with Derrida various commentators detected similarities with Heidegger.<sup>2</sup> There are, however, serious difficulties in aligning Adorno with Heidegger, particularly given the weight that Adorno places on his critique of the latter's fundamental ontology. It can appear, at times, that Adorno uses Heidegger as nothing much more than a foil. Heidegger's role is that of subjectivist and irrationalist against Adorno's reconstructed subject-object theory. By casting Heidegger in that role Adorno might incline us to suppose significant if not diametrically opposed differences between his work and that of Heidegger. But despite that supposition interesting parallels remain. For instance, both philosophers criticize certain fundamental assumptions about the modern philosophy of the subject. Furthermore, both reject the claims of empiricist epistemology on the grounds that it fails to capture what they take to be a wider notion of the objectivity of experience. Not surprisingly, then, this leads to questions about the rational and systematic basis of the apparent parallels between Adorno and Heidegger. From the point of view of understanding Adorno's philosophy this really is a vital issue in that something of the subtlety of his position lies precisely in its opposition to Heidegger's version of anti-epistemological philosophy. This opposition might be fatally embarrassing were Adorno's position to seem ultimately indistinguishable from what he takes to be the failed categories of fundamental ontology.

So, what are we to make of the points of parallel? It is my view, as I shall argue here, that those points are coincidental. By examining Adorno's critique of Heidegger we can see that Adorno and Heidegger reach their respective conclusions about the limitations of traditional epistemology by very different means and out of concerns for very different philosophical problems. Broadly put, the difference between Adorno and Heidegger can be characterized as a difference between critical and phenomenological versions of transcendental philosophy. By this I mean that Adorno's philosophy tends to emphasize a particular rational structure of experience, a structure missed by traditional philosophy. This sense of 'transcendental' has its

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<sup>2</sup> Rüdiger Bubner is an important instance of a critic who is unconvinced by Adorno's efforts to differentiate himself from Heidegger. He writes: 'It has been shown ever more clearly, especially since the publication of Adorno's early writings, that he stood closer to his lifelong opponent, Heidegger, than he wanted to admit. The salvation of the nonidentical, which is suppressed by all identificatory system structures, bears striking parallels with being which, according to Heidegger, has been forgotten in the history of metaphysics, as well as in its modern continuity in technology' (Bubner, 1983: 36-7).

roots in Kant's critical philosophy. Heidegger, by contrast, constructs a different model by elaborating a phenomenological account of existing. In essence, this latter is a phenomenological description of the conditions of experience.

If we appreciate the particular sensitivity to philosophical concepts with which both Adorno and Heidegger operate then we have to separate the different routes through which they reach their respective conclusions, from the conclusions themselves. If we fail to acknowledge this then our interpretation will be guided by a fallacious hermeneutic which confuses a superficial lack of incompatibility with programmatic similarity. The hermeneutic which insists on similarity will have to conclude that the exceptional vehemence of Adorno's critique suggests merely that he is suspiciously anxious to distinguish himself from Heidegger. In my view, the difficulty with Adorno's critique of Heidegger is not that it obscures similarities, but rather that Heidegger is sometimes misrepresented beyond recognition. It is undoubtedly the case that the animus which Adorno feels towards Heidegger's philosophy leads him to act more like a prosecutor than a critic. That animus should not, however, confuse the real differences between both philosophers. In order to see what these differences are it is necessary to understand Adorno on his own terms.

I should note that my interpretation of Adorno is not uncontroversial. What I am proposing is that his negative dialectic – in those respects that are important in distinguishing him from Heidegger – should be understood as a certain extension of Kantian modes of philosophical argument. Although Adorno never says so explicitly, he is committed to a particular structure of experience which has transcendental application in two ways. First, this structure determines the possibility and limits of rational philosophy. For Adorno one of the important tasks of philosophy – understood as a rational reflexive enterprise – is to elaborate this structure. Second, perhaps more obscurely, failure to recognize this structure leads to a certain kind of incoherence. That is, that certain accounts of experience are not only mistaken but compellingly incoherent. In essence, as we shall see in more detail, Adorno's critique of modern philosophy in this respect takes the form of transcendental argument. This is the basis of my claim that Adorno's strategy is Kantian in – form. Ulrich Muller also recognizes the importance of Kant's critical philosophy for Adorno. He contends that Adorno, by means of a 'dynamicization of Kant's a priori forms of thought'

(Müller, 1988: 106), is attempting an ‘extension of the Copernican revolution’ (ibid.: 111). The interpretation I offer differs from Muller’s in that I see Adorno as a Kantian materialist. He follows Kant in the view that philosophy is limited by the conditions of experience. Muller, however, takes Adorno to be a modified idealist. By beginning an interpretation of Adorno, as Muller does, with the view that Adorno is proposing an extended, dynamic category theory we are precluded from properly understanding the explicit passages in which Adorno argues that our knowledge and experience are determined by objects: the materialist thesis of the negative dialectic. The force of my differences with Muller will become clearer in the course of this article.

By concentrating mainly on Adorno’s philosophy – because of the general lack of understanding it has received – I do not want to argue as such for the success or otherwise of Adorno’s critique of Heidegger, though there are distortions in Adorno’s presentation of Heidegger which will not be allowed without comment. The intention here is to reveal points of divergence and to explain those divergences as products of differing if not incommensurable philosophical principles. I shall begin my examination of this issue by outlining Adorno’s programme and then turn to those aspects of Heidegger’s philosophy that seem to parallel Adorno’s. The next step will be to examine Adorno’s criticisms of Heidegger. I shall analyse Adorno’s official differentiation of their respective philosophies, adding some further arguments which are consistent both with Adorno’s general philosophical standpoint and with the assumptions that lie behind his particular views of Heidegger’s philosophy. The result should be to show how the negative dialectic can be distinguished from fundamental ontology. That will enable us to go some way towards marking out the territory of Adorno’s distinctive contribution.

## I

So what is the transcendental structure already mentioned? Adorno argues for the necessity of a new philosophy, which he announces as ‘nothing but full, unreduced experience in the medium of conceptual reflection’ (ND 25 [13]).<sup>3</sup> Adorno’s efforts to produce this philosophy are notoriously complex. According to my interpretation, Adorno proposes, in essence, a particular relationship between subject and object

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<sup>3</sup> ND: *Negative Dialektik*. References for ND are given first to Adorno (1973a), then, afterwards, in parentheses, to Adorno (1973b).

which provides the structure of rational philosophy. There are two aspects of that relationship.

First, that relationship is dialectical: there is a relationship of codetermination between subject and object in that neither side is constituted independently of the other. Pre-reflective experience is, suggestively at least, concordant with this particular version of the subject-object relationship. Experience precedes conceptually dualized accounts of subject and object. For that reason, an account which at the reflective level posits a dialectical relationship – a relationship which is specifically anti-dualist – appears to be consistent with lived experience in a way that, say, idealist explanations intuitively are not. Adorno recasts some terms from Hegel's idealism to add sophistication to this basic structure. It is possible to understand either pole of a dialectical relationship as it is 'for itself' or 'for another' (as it is in the relationship). The subject 'for itself' experiences the object immediately: there is no reflective act of imagination or inference. As a relational pole, however, the subject 'mediates' (*vermittelt*) the object. In a typical Hegelian move, Adorno understands both of these explanations as simultaneously inherent in the very process of the subject-object relationship. Thus the prior object is brought to immediacy by mediation and, in Adorno's view, experienced as both immediate and mediated. This construction of the subject-object relationship attempts, then, to give rational substantiation to the complexity of lived experience – the apparently mediated immediacy of experience itself.

Second, the subject-object relationship constrains all rational descriptions of experience: thus idealism or empiricism, for example, by virtue of their failure to account properly for one of the elements of the transcendental structure in terms of its determinancy (the object and the subject respectively) will be incoherent. Adorno writes that subject and object 'constitute (*konstituieren*) one another as much as – by virtue of such constitution – they depart from one another' (ND 176 [174]). This can be paraphrased in trivial terms, though the implications which Adorno draws from it are the basis of his distinctive position. The terms 'subject' and 'object' are mutually dependent. The necessity of our understanding subject and object in that way is what I discern as Adorno's transcendental position: the terms of rational description constrain the rationality of philosophical analyses. That is to say, Adorno tries to

show that his account of subject-object is compelling on the basis that those whose accounts of experience are at odds with it cannot present a coherent system. This is the Kantian basis of his critique of modern philosophy : the rationality of philosophical descriptions is somehow grounded in the possibility and limits of experience. Heidegger, as we shall see, serves for Adorno as an example of the kind of philosophical incoherence that results from his use of ‘non-rational’ concepts.

Despite the interdependence of subject and object Adorno argues that it is not a relationship of equality: the object has priority in that it both facilitates and delimits the determining activity of the subject. In Adorno’s view, the structure of epistemology is coherent only if the thesis of the priority of the object is included. By this Adorno means that, to put it simply, subjectivity is incapable of self-generation – it is dependent upon objects as the datum of conscious acts and of knowledge. Outside the structure of this subject-object relation – as a ‘for itself’ – the subject could be intelligible as no more than a bare ‘I think’. But in that structure, from which the subject is actually inseparable, the subject is realized. That is to say, the subject as a reality which thinks and experiences is epistemologically defensible only within the subject-object relationship described by Adorno. The priority of the object means, then, that the subject is dependent: ‘the datum (*Gegebene*), the irremovable skandalon of idealism, will demonstrate time and again the failure of the hypostasis [of the subject]’ (Adorno, 1977: 746/Adorno, 1978: 501).

The term ‘object’ has at least three designations: (1) physical thing; (2) artefact, in the sense that an aesthetic object is more than just the physical material that composes it; and (3) a purely conceptual object, such as the concept of freedom. What all of these senses of object share is that they indicate that the object is somehow prior to the subject in that the object contains meanings to which the individual subject responds. This tells us that Adorno’s use of subject-object is not epistemology in the traditional sense of a consideration of the perceptual relation of mind and world. Rather it is, as Kant and his successors saw it, a question of the form of relation of subjectivity to meaning or ‘object’. For Adorno, as for hermeneutic philosophy, as Michael Rosen points out, the independence of the object undermines the sense of a detached subjectivity. Rosen writes: ‘for hermeneutics, although meanings are not independent and objective features of reality (in the way that objects in causal relations were for

Kant or “primary qualities” for Locke) neither are they something private and subjective, like seventeenth-century “ideas” (Rosen, 1982: 165). The totality of meanings which have this priority over the individual consciousness confronts consciousness as ‘second nature’. The independence of the object can be understood along the lines, then, that it is prior to the individual consciousness. As Adorno writes: ‘[The object’s priority] is the corrective of the subjective reduction, not the denial of a subjective share. The object, too, is mediated; but according to its own concept, it is not so thoroughly dependent on the subject as the subject is on objectivity’ (Adorno, 1977: 747/Adorno, 1978: 502).

The difficulty that Adorno faces in arguing for the object’s priority is that he must do so in a way which is not a form of naive realism. In naive realism the object’s relation to the subject is not explained in terms of mediation. The object and our idea of it are allegedly the same. In this relation the subject is apparently passive in its relation to ideas which are independent of (as opposed to prior to) the individual. But naive realism is, in effect, as mysterious as idealism in terms of how it accounts for the interaction between subject and object. Idealism places meaning on the side of the subject and the connection between our concepts and the object is simply unaccountable. Because meaning is exclusive to the subject the determinative capacities of the object – why each object confronts us as apparently independent – cannot be explained since the object in itself is supposed to be strictly meaningless. Naive realism operates conversely, in that it invests the object with independent meaning, and our apprehension of the object is passive to the point which nullifies our rational capacity of judgment. In essence, then, both positions are alike by virtue of their exclusion of a concept of mediation. Naive realism reduces to passivity what Adorno, in line with philosophical hermeneutics, sees as the activity of appropriating (prior) meaning. As such it is a form of immediacy exclusively since it does not and cannot include any idea of a non-identity between subject and object. In that respect, it fails to understand properly the role of the object.

Adorno’s arguments for the priority of the object all rely upon the same axiom; namely, the irreducible datum present in all experience. This datum is not, however, the sheer given of contemporary philosophy of mind. Rather it signifies, for Adorno, the meanings which are prior to the individual consciousness. From this it follows, for

Adorno, that any explanation of experience must acknowledge that the subject would be empty or incapable of experience without an object. In explaining this process Adorno identifies a correspondence between the subject as the how and the object as the what of the mediational process (ND 184 [183]).<sup>4</sup> Adorno's way of stating the reason for the object's priority is that the object must be given priority in mediation since it is mediated according to its own concept (Adorno, 1977: 747/Adorno, 1978: 502) – that is, its meanings objectively confront the individual consciousness – whilst the subject must 'adjust' and unfold according to the object (ND 142 [138]). In *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno writes:

Subjectivity changes its quality in a context which it is unable to evolve on its own. Due to the inequality inherent in the concept of mediation, the subject enters into the object altogether differently from the way the object enters into the subject. An object can be conceived only by a subject but always remains something other than the subject. (ND 142 [138]; my italics)

There are various problems with this 'dialectical epistemology', as I think Adorno's position might be termed. A thorough analysis of those problems would require a paper devoted exclusively to Adorno's epistemology. Broadly put, for present purposes, is the question of whether Adorno's transcendental philosophy can have anything other than an abstractive and negative relationship to lived experience: it is arguably abstractive in that it identifies subject and object as the basic concepts for discussion. It may also be merely negative in that it operates by primarily delimiting the potential of epistemological analysis. If these can be shown to be problems in Adorno's position then the possibility that Heidegger's phenomenological version of transcendental philosophy can analyse experience without abstraction or negation is a serious challenge. In this light, *Being and Time* may, in part, be understood as an attempt to establish a materialist yet anti-empiricist philosophy. Heidegger, in rejecting scientific thought and what he would understand as deforming epistemology, seems to go some considerable way towards presenting a model of experience which is neither abstractive nor reductive. This is the basic position from

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<sup>4</sup> Adorno's rejection of Kant's official transcendental idealism is based upon this principle. When Kant, in the *Aesthetic and Deduction*, argues that every act of knowledge involves subjective investment he fails to realize that these subjective acts must also, as Adorno puts it, 'adjust to a moment which they themselves are not' (ND 142 [138]).



which Adorno has to distinguish himself. Adorno, however, differentiates himself from Heidegger through critique. Before assessing the rationality of that differentiation it is necessary to understand the relevant terms of Heidegger's philosophy (even if this exposition might initially be somewhat familiar).

## II

Heidegger's starting point is crucial. His analysis of the form of being characteristic of human beings is taken, to a large extent, from the point of view of what he terms 'everydayness' (*Alltägllchkeit*). Even though, during the course of *Being and Time*, Heidegger's analyses extend into facets of human being which are by no means 'everyday' (for example, the feeling of Angst) the focus is always in opposition to the supposed special viewpoints of epistemology. Thus human 'existing' does not primarily take the form of rationalistic categorial performance – as seems to have been assumed by Enlightenment treatments of human nature – but is discovered, more fundamentally, in the pre-reflective hermeneutic practices of everyday existence. The idea of practices suggests a non-traditional picture of human existence. It deliberately contrasts with an epistemological model of the subject that takes the subject to be separate in some way from the epistemic situation in which it finds itself. Heidegger's 'concrete' enquiry argues that the subject is part of its practices and not external to them, as is suggested by the epistemological idea of an instrumental subject. In this connection Heidegger famously employs the term Dasein (being-there) for individual human existence as it captures the appropriate concrete or material sense of existence. Because of his radically different views about the relation of the subject to its practices Heidegger distinguishes his enquiry from what he sees as the available self-limiting alternatives. Heidegger's way of explaining this is as follows:

Philosophical psychology, anthropology, ethics, 'politics', poetry, biography, and historiography pursue in different ways and to varying extents the behavior, faculties, powers, possibilities, and destinies of Da-sein. But the question remains whether these interpretations were carried out in as original an existential manner as their existentiell originality perhaps merited. (BT 16)<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> BT: *Being and Time*. Heidegger (1996). References are to the pagination of the original German edition of *Sein und Zeit*, 16th edn (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1986) as indicated in the margins of the English translation.

For Heidegger, then, a 'new' philosophy will be a matter of outlining the fundamental structures of Dasein which are either superficially captured or entirely missed by other disciplines.

At this point an important difference with Adorno can be noted. Adorno does not set out to describe or reveal structures and essential features of the being of human being. Indeed Adorno expresses disagreement with the anthropological essentialism which, he suspects, might be the result of Heidegger's programme *malgré lui*. This possibility emerges, he thinks, from a philosophy based on the hypostatization of the historical entity, Dasein. He writes: 'The more concrete the form in which anthropology appears, the more deceptive will it come to be, and the more indifferent to whatever in man is not at all due to him, as the subject, but to the de-subjectifying process that has paralleled the historic subject formation since time immemorial' (ND 130 [124]). Adorno's interest is rather with the structure of epistemology by which we describe the determinative relation between subjects and objects. This marks a different question. The difference might be stated as follows: whilst Adorno and Heidegger are both engaged in philosophical regenerations, their respective fields are primarily epistemology and ontology. Respectively, they believe that these disciplines are problematic, but also capable of explaining fundamental conditions, given the appropriate development.

The question, however, goes some way further than this. Included within Heidegger's ontological analysis is a 'category' – what he terms an existential category or existential – the category of being-in-the-world. Even though this is an ontological term – it describes a mode of being of Dasein – it is also a term with significant epistemological implications. Traditional epistemology, as Adorno also argues, sets up a dualistic terminology which establishes a relationship of knower against the world. For Heidegger, the idea of being-in-the-world is intended to oppose this very claim and to underpin a completely different model of the subject-object relationship. It is intended, indeed, to bypass precisely the difficulties of idealism which are set up by subject-object dualism. This obviously involves a re-evaluation of the role of epistemology. For Heidegger it appears to be taken as given that epistemological and ontological conditions are different. Epistemological descriptions fail to capture the

reality of what happens in Dasein's being-in-the-world: 'subject and object are not the same as Dasein and world' (BT 60). In contrasting epistemology with concrete experience the programme offered by Heidegger, insofar as it is concerned with a critique of subjective immanence, seems quite close to Adorno. Both reject that model of subjectivity which sees subjectivity as self-constituted or independent of the world (Heidegger) or object (Adorno). Heidegger's consequent critique of subject-object dualism (presented in the form of an antinomy) could hardly be disputed by Adorno:

The more unequivocally we bear in mind that knowing is initially and really 'inside', and indeed has by no means the kind of being of physical and psychic beings, the more we believe that we are proceeding without presuppositions in the question of the essence of knowledge and of the clarification of the relation between subject and object. For only then can the problem arise of how this knowing subject comes out of its inner 'sphere' into one that is 'other and external', of how knowing can have an object at all, and of how the object is to be thought so that eventually the subject knows it without having to venture a leap into another sphere. (BT 60)

By contrast, the idea of being-in-the-world underwrites what Heidegger sees as a more unified, indeed holistic, relationship: 'The compound expression "being-in-the-world" indicates, in the very way we have coined it, that it stands for a unified phenomenon. This primary datum must be seen as a whole' (BT 53). This relationship is further characterized as one which underlies the conditions of the possibility of knowledge. It follows that knowledge cannot be explained as 'instrumentalism', a model founded on an inside-outside distinction; that is, the essential separation of subject and object. Typically, Heidegger finds another compound expression for this epistemological aspect of being-in-the-world: 'knowing itself is grounded beforehand in already-being-in-the-world (*Schon-sein-bei-der-Welt*)' (BT 61).

From the foregoing, then, we can see that Heidegger proposes an analysis of traditional epistemology which appears to be quite compatible with Adorno's conclusions. Clearly, fundamental ontology denies that traditional epistemology can give an accurate account of our relation to the world. Further, it grounds philosophy in

an existential concreteness – a materialism – which consciously contrasts itself with the dualizing structures of the modern representationalist tradition.

### III

There is no surprise in the tendency of the history of philosophy to produce similar philosophical positions from diverse sources. One could see how Heidegger's existential-pragmatist reading of phenomenology<sup>6</sup> and Adorno's materialization of Kantian philosophy<sup>7</sup> might coincidentally produce parallel lines. But it is important, nevertheless, to investigate their differences for the simple reason that, as I have said, Adorno criticizes and rejects Heidegger's proposed solution to the central problem of modern philosophy.

The critical issue separating Adorno from Heidegger is that of subject-object. The context of Adorno's critical employment of his conception of subject-object is often that of classical phenomenology.<sup>8</sup> But Heidegger is no Husserl. Fundamental ontology is intended to contain none of the categories of phenomenological reduction, epochi, or Cartesian introspection. Adorno argues, however, that Heidegger's philosophy retains the key features of immediacy so remarkably exploited by Husserl. In this regard there is a passage in *Being and Time* which proposes a particular way of dealing with the problem of subject-object. Importantly, it is a passage that reveals a very deep philosophical disagreement with Adorno. In relation to the philosophical value of dialectics Heidegger boldly announces: 'The possibility of a more radical conception of the problem of being grows with the continuing development of the ontological guideline itself, that is, with the "hermeneutics" of the logos. "Dialectic", which was a genuine philosophic embarrassment, becomes superfluous' (BT 25; my italics). This radical view is more than just rhetoric: it makes a programmatic announcement regarding the relationship of subject and object. Adorno contends that the dismissal of the 'dialectic', in the name of something 'more radical', must produce a fall back into a position of sheer immediacy. He writes that Heidegger 'pursues dialectics to the point of saying that neither the subject nor the object are immediate

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<sup>6</sup> As some see it – most famously, Hubert Dreyfus in his *Being-in-the-World* (1991).

<sup>7</sup> As I contend elsewhere (1994).

<sup>8</sup> Adorno devotes an entire book to that critique. Cf. his *Zur Metakritik der Erkenntnistheorie, Gesammelte Schriften* (1970). Translated by Willis Domingo as *Against Epistemology A Metacritique* (1982).

and ultimate; but he deserts dialectics in reaching for something immediate and primary beyond subject and object' (ND 112 [106]). Adorno's version of subject-object theory establishes a relation founded upon a 'dialectic' of immediacy (or identity) and mediation (or non-identity). But if that ambivalent structure is abandoned, as Heidegger seems to be implicitly suggesting, then we are left with the options of either immediacy or radical dualism. In other words, the transcendental necessity of subject-object dialectic will constrain our efforts at describing experience. Every effort must conform to that structure or find itself committed to an unsustainable alternative. Since Heidegger is attempting to overcome what he sees as the dualism of subject and object then it appears that the result of his rejection of the 'dialectic' of 'immediacy and mediation' must be immediacy. For Adorno, that leaves us with two options: either epistemology – including his own reconstructed version – is redundant (since dialectic is superfluous), or fundamental ontology is fatally idealist. A look at the lines of Adorno's argument is required.

In a way, Heidegger, in the above passage, regarding dialectic, has given the game to Adorno (though Adorno regrettably does not cite it). By attempting to step outside subject-object Heidegger will appear to Adorno to have committed the 'error' of immediacy. It is undoubtedly this stance which gives Adorno reason to place Heidegger's effort within the worst excesses of phenomenology.<sup>9</sup> In *Negative Dialectics* Adorno lays two main charges against Heidegger. First, Heidegger is accused of privileging a pre-reflective experience that leads him to irrationalism. Second, fundamental ontology is alleged not to contain the conceptual resources that would enable it to overcome idealism. Even without examining any particular philosophical position it is by no means obvious that both such critical claims can be sustained at the same time. Modern irrationalism, it is true, is subjectively immanent in that it gives authority to the subjectivity of experience. That authority is granted at the expense of what it sees as the inhibitions of reason. Epistemological idealism, on the other hand, is not a disposition but an explanation. As we shall see, Adorno's critique of Heidegger is challenging enough when concentrating on the latter's idealist elements. The case for irrationalism, however, falls short of its intended consequences.

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<sup>9</sup> Adorno writes: 'By the demand which Husserl set forth and Heidegger tacitly adopted, on the other hand, that mental facts be purely described - that they be accepted as what they claim to be, and as nothing else – by this demand such facts are so dogmatized as if reflecting on things of the mind, re-thinking them, did not turn them into something else' (ND 88 [81]).

Given that, as Adorno claims, the subject-object relation is the basis of thinking and thus the basis of any conceptual knowledge of the world it would seem, within these terms, that Heidegger has placed himself within irrationalism. That is, Heidegger short-circuits the categories of reflection and appeals, instead, to an immediacy that supersedes those categories:

One of the motives of dialectics is to cope with that which Heidegger evades by usurping a standpoint beyond the difference of subject and object – the difference that shows how inadequate the ratio is to thought. By means of reason, however, such a leap will fail. We cannot, by thinking, assume any position in which the separation of subject and object will directly vanish, for the separation is inherent in each thought ; it is inherent in thinking itself. This is why Heidegger's moment of truth levels off into an irrationalist *Weltanschauung*. (ND 92 [85]; my italics)

Adorno distinguishes himself from Heidegger in this way by a differing attitude to epistemology. They might both reject the subject-object divide of modern epistemology, but the conclusions of that rejection are quite different. An alternative account of experience does not have to be – as Heidegger is accused of proposing – a process of non-rational immediacy. Rather, experience, for Adorno, contains an irreducible subject-object relation. And it is the task of a new philosophy – constructed by Adorno as a new epistemology – to capture rationally without reduction. Without both aspects of that programme philosophy will either reduce (empiricism and idealism) or become irrational (Heidegger). As Adorno puts it:

When we believe we are, so to speak, subjectlessly clinging to the phenomenality of things, are original and neo-realistic and at the same time doing justice to the material, we are in fact eliminating all determinations from our thought, as Kant once eliminated them from the transcendental thing-in-itself. Determinations would be equally offensive to us as works of mere subjective reason and as descendants of a particular entity. (ND 86 [79 emended])

The pressing immediacy of the world eliminates, it seems, the need for rational reflection, a move that gives Adorno grounds for the charge of irrationalism.

How true is it that Heidegger's rejection of subject-object analysis aligns him with modern irrationalism? The passage from *Being and Time* cited above (regarding dialectic) certainly causes difficulties. Heidegger's proposal for something 'more radical' seems to make Adorno's case a relatively easy matter. Heidegger's *Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, however, gives us reason to think that 'radical' might be fairly construed in a way which does not demand what Adorno would see as irrationalist immediacy. Rather, indeed, it might indicate that level of experience which Adorno too is attempting to explain: concrete pre-reflective materialism. If this is so, then a defence of Heidegger might (sloganistically) be stated as follows: the pre-epistemological does not imply the anti-epistemological. *Basic Problems* should cause us to be cautious of suggesting that Heidegger has irrationally abandoned subject-object philosophy. It seems that Heidegger's critique of subject-object is not intended, contrary to the assumptions of Adorno's arguments, to bring thought back to a dogmatic pre-mediational stage. Were it intended to do so, then Heidegger would have to accept Adorno's division of philosophical territory and concede that he had given himself no option but irrationalism. But Heidegger's programme is quite independent of Adorno's ultimate choices.

Heidegger refers to the pre-epistemological attitude as the 'mode of primary self-disclosure' by which the self is known (Heidegger, 1982: 159). 'The self', he writes, 'is there for Dasein without reflection and without inner perception before all reflection' (Heidegger, 1982: 159). Clearly, Heidegger is attempting to capture the nature of pre-epistemological self-apprehension. This pre-epistemological self-apprehension is thus not opposed to epistemology – except perhaps for epistemologies which might claim to be the 'mode of primary self-disclosure' – simply because it is not epistemology as such. The object of criticism is the epistemological subject of both the empiricist and idealist varieties. Heidegger's claim is that the obvious but non-trivial order of self-apprehension – non-trivial from the point of view of philosophical history – is existentially more relevant than epistemological description:

The Dasein does not need a special kind of observation, nor does it need to conduct a sort of espionage on the ego in order to have the self; rather, as the Dasein gives itself over immediately and passionately to the world itself, its own

world is reflected to it from things. This is not mysticism and does not presuppose the assigning of souls to things. It is only a reference to an elementary phenomenological fact of existence, which must be seen prior to all talk, no matter how acute, about the subject-object relation. (Heidegger, 1982: 159)

This passage challenges Adorno's critique of Heidegger, for it suggests that Adorno's critique is a misconception of the project of fundamental ontology. In it we can see that Heidegger is contrasting the indubitable ordinary experience which we have of ourselves with epistemological explanations of self-consciousness. Importantly, Heidegger is not saying that we should (irrationally) abandon conceptual analysis in favour of the sheer immediacy of experience. Rather he is proposing – contrary to the assumptions of the epistemological tradition – that our ordinary experience has an authoritative priority, and that the 'in the world' reality of our subjective life is not reached by idealistic constructions. Thus Heidegger is not engaging in an anti-rational analysis of the kind that, in Adorno's view, leads him to step back from conceptual philosophy.

Adorno is just as opposed as Heidegger to explanations that presuppose pre-experiential entities as the ground of experience. But if some of the results of dialectical epistemology and fundamental ontology are occasionally similar it is also the case that the philosophical arguments which bring them there have to be radically distinguished. It is fair to say that Adorno, unlike Heidegger, adheres to a quite traditional idea that epistemology ought to be a matter of identifying the rational structure of experience, or at least of all talk about experience. Heidegger, by contrast, begins with experience, or rather 'being' itself, and tries to establish a mode of enquiry that is uniquely suited to the task of describing the different modes of being. Adorno, however, attempts to explain its rational structure so as to avoid making it what he would see as a simple 'dogmatic' claim.

#### IV

Having said all that, there are other aspects of Heidegger's ontology that cannot easily escape the transcendental argument of dialectical epistemology. There seems to be further evidence in support of Adorno's claim that Heidegger remains within the terms of idealism. The apparent conclusiveness of Adorno's epistemology means, in



his view, that if a philosophical position implicitly<sup>10</sup> rejects his construction of subject-object relations then it is necessarily committed to immediacy and identity. As explained above, the failure to work within dialectical epistemology means that it will be impossible to recognize the real role of the object as prior to the subject. Consequently, implicit rejection of Adorno's epistemology means reverting to a 'pre-dialectical' position. (Within the present terms of philosophy there cannot be a 'post-dialectical' philosophy.) For Adorno, quite simply, a pre-mediational position amounts to an unmediated subjectivity: a subject which is not explained by reference to objects. In view of this, Heidegger's radicalism must amount, as Adorno puts it, to 'an escape into the mirror' (ND 91 [84 emended]). This is a paradoxical conclusion; that is, that the escape from subjectivity by non-epistemological means finds itself enmeshed in subjectivity:

Heidegger's realism (*Sachhchkeit*) turns a somersault: his aim is to philosophize formlessly, so to speak, purely on the ground of things, with the result that things evaporate for him. Weary of the subjective jail of cognition, he becomes convinced that what is transcendent to subjectivity is immediate for subjectivity, without being conceptually stained by subjectivity. (ND 86 [79]; my italics)

The move to a sheer being-in-the-world, then, which attempts to be a move away from subjectivity, is incoherent in that it contains a commitment to immediacy: objects are immediate to the subject. But in that case the object is no longer explicable within those terms required by Adorno to affirm its priority. Problematically, Heidegger cannot thereby explain how there can be anything that transcends subjective experience. Adorno takes that to be an alignment with idealism.

Some of the implications of Heidegger's category of being-in-the-world can be usefully problematized by criticism drawn from Adorno's position. In this regard, Heidegger does not clarify the implications of the relationship between the concepts of 'being-in-the-world' and 'projecting a world'. The absence of explanation of how these categories work together leads to the possibility of a crippling immanentism. That I might be in the world which I myself project sounds like a psychological

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<sup>10</sup> I do not know of any philosopher who has explicitly done so.

transcription of Fichteanism. At this point we might suggest that Adorno's position is not subject to a similar problem as the object is established as necessarily transcending the subject. We have already seen the definition of being-in-the-world given in *Being and Time*. The anti-idealist intentions of this category have to be taken seriously. Even so, that category seems to sit uneasily with the idea that worldhood is a projection of subjectivity. How can Dasein both be 'in the world' and 'shape the world as its own project'? We might say that Dasein is always in the world of its own projects, or even that Dasein is not passive in its existence. But these hermeneutic constructions do not break a vicious circle. Perhaps the notion of 'world' is equivocal. Perhaps it means one thing when expressed in being-in-the-world and something else in the idea of projection, but if so this is not indicated to us by Heidegger. The conclusions of Heidegger's position seem to be idealistic, since worldhood is explained in terms of Dasein (unlike Adorno's formal dialectical explanation of experience in subjective and objective terms). In *Basic Problems* Heidegger writes:

The world is something 'subjective', presupposing that we correspondingly define subjectivity with regard to this phenomenon of world. To say that the world is subjective is to say that it belongs to the Dasein in so far as this being is in the mode of Being-in-the-world. The world is something which the 'subject' 'projects outward', as it were, from within itself. But are we permitted to speak here of an inner and outer? (Heidegger, 1982: 168)

The rather coy question with which Heidegger concludes is hardly enough to evade his debilitating problem. No: within the terms outlined by Heidegger inner and outer are strictly meaningless. But they are so not because idealism has been overcome, but because subject-object has been reduced to subjectivity in a way which appears close to the *Selbstsetzungslehre* of classical German idealism. It is therefore not by accident that Heidegger's attempt to account for the non-I resembles in character the Fichtean hypothesis that the object is objective only by virtue of subjectivity:

But even if we grant the legitimacy of starting not with an isolated subject but with the subject-object relation it must then be asked: Why does a subject 'require' an object, and conversely? For an extant entity does not of itself become an object so as then to require a subject; rather, it becomes an object only in being

objectified by a subject. A being is without a subject, but objects exist only for a subject that does the objectifying. Hence the existence of the subject-object relation depends on the mode of existence of the subject. But why? Is such a relation always posited with the existence of the Dasein? The subject could surely forgo the relation to objects. Or is it unable to? If not, then it is not the object's concern that there exists a relation of a subject to it, but instead the relating belongs to the ontological constitution of the subject itself. To relate itself is implicit in the concept of the subject. In its own self the subject is a being that relates-itself-to. (Heidegger, 1982: 157)

(And Heidegger then connects this to his concept of intentionality.) The important omission from this passage is a belief in the possibility that subjectivity might be in any way shaped, caused, or determined by its relation to objects; that is, that the world of Dasein is delimited by second nature. Heidegger claims that the subject-object relation is a mode of subjectivity.

In 'The Idea of Natural History' – one of his early works (dating from 1932) – Adorno was already suspicious of the idea of 'project' (*Entwurf*). He understood it to be Heidegger's thesis that history is a mode of human beings (Adorno, 1973c: 350/Adorno, 1984: 114). The basis of our historical dynamic lies in 'project', the horizon of our possibilities. What of nature though? As such, Heidegger's account of the world of second nature has to assume that as history is a mode of human beings then all facticity – the actual world – can be explained through 'project'. In this way there is no opposition between nature and history. It is this, however, which gives Adorno the grounds for the charge of idealism: if nature is nothing more than history – conceived through the idea of 'project' – then there is no way of designating the limits of the subject. If we conceive history as project we are precluded from explaining the complexity of the phenomenon, in that, as Adorno thinks, there are aspects of the phenomenon – accident and contingency – that cannot be explained by reference to project. That, at least, is Adorno's assertion. As a way out of this difficulty, ontology sets up the category of 'contingency', and in so doing it is attempting to demonstrate that what does not fit with the project is nevertheless a feature of the historical (Adorno, 1973c: 351/Adorno, 1984: 115). In a sense, then, the category of contingency is a category which attempts to master the contingent. The

resistance of the world to transparency is given ontological significance, and thereby schematized within the ontological project. History is reduced to ontology by Heidegger. The complex and contradictory character of history is given a role within the project of life. In that way ontology follows the classical ambition of encompassing all of reality.

What marks out Adorno from almost all of his contemporaries is the view that philosophical reason is inadequate to the task of understanding the world. The evidence of philosophical history supports his idea of non-identity in the relationship of reason and world. The Hegelian enterprise, for instance, is one of explaining the totality of possibility, but it failed precisely because the nature of its object, the world, is resistant to Hegelian narratives. Adorno therefore accuses Heidegger of continuing the idealist reduction of the world, one which threatens the quality of history itself. A defence of Heidegger might be that a philosophy which takes life as its material can hardly be idealistic in that it assumes that life is prior to the self. This indeed has been one of the principles which has made Heidegger such an influential critic of the Cartesian project. However, Adorno's counter is that regardless of the phenomenon of life – the irrational, something which is not reducible to Hegelian or Kantian categories – Heidegger assumes that an exhaustive structural ontological interpretation of the world is possible. In distinguishing himself from Heidegger he makes this clear: 'It makes ... an enormous difference whether irrational contents are inserted into a philosophy that is founded on the principle of autonomy, or if philosophy no longer assumes that reality is adequately accessible' (Adorno, 1973c: 352/Adorno, 1984: 116). It seems to me that identifying Heidegger's idealist construction of the world is a more effective way of criticizing his attitude to subject-object than the charge that construction of the pre-epistemological is somehow irrational.<sup>11</sup>

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The distinction between critical and phenomenological versions of transcendental philosophy can be seen from this confrontation: Adorno develops a rational

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<sup>11</sup> Jean-Luc Marion identifies unexpected connections between Dasein and the Cartesian ego cogito. Marion's reading, though perhaps forced at times, notes, as does Adorno, the similarities between Heidegger and the modern idealist project. Cf. his 'Heidegger and Descartes' (1996).

epistemology in an attempt to encapsulate the structure of experience, whereas Heidegger establishes ontological concepts whilst remaining firmly within phenomenological experience. Certainly, this distinction is achieved by exaggerating, to an extent, Heidegger's commitment to a form of phenomenological immediacy. And without doubt, there is more to Heidegger's position than Adorno is prepared to admit. For instance, Heidegger's account of readiness-to-hand (*Zuhandenheit*), with all its existential-pragmatic implications, provides an analysis of experience itself which, in terms of detail, is sorely missing from Adorno's account of dialectics. This concept, indeed, might serve Adorno's purpose very well in that it acknowledges the pragmatic role of a thing 'for me', without ever reducing the thing to a mere thought entity. Adorno is adept at situating isolated elements of fundamental ontology within the critical framework of his negative dialectic. Inevitably, that selectivity is not to Heidegger's advantage. For that reason it can be reasonably concluded that Adorno's criticisms of Heidegger are not always compelling. As I suggested, arguing that Heidegger fails to conform with the thesis of mediation presupposes the indubitability of that thesis. (Though I am inclined to be persuaded by much of Adorno's position and am prepared to offer a limited defence of it.) Problematically, Adorno makes the assumption that Heidegger is engaged in the same philosophical enterprise as he is, and thus that a comparison with the thesis of mediation is appropriate. Despite those objections – serious though they are – the important point is that we can see that Adorno's epistemology is sufficiently distinguishable from Heidegger's programme. My intention has been to make explicit what Adorno characteristically fails to spell out in clear theoretical terms. In this way the theoretical differences which Adorno wants to point to, and which are often obscured by his anxiety to find the defendant guilty, can now be more clearly seen.

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