

On the Possibility of Philosophy

Philosophy, which once seemed obsolete, lives on because the moment to realize it was missed. The summary judgment that philosophy has only interpreted the world, that it is crippled, even in itself, because resigned to reality—this becomes the defeatism of reason once the changing of the world has gone awry. It affords no place from which theory as such could be concretely convicted of the anachronism it is suspected of, now as before. Perhaps the interpretation that predicted philosophy would be put into practice just couldn't get the job done. The moment on which the critique of theory depended cannot be prolonged in theory. A practice that has been postponed indefinitely is no longer grounds for rejecting self-satisfied speculation; it is mostly a pretext used by the executive powers to stifle, as vain, the critical thought that a changing practice would require. Having broken its promise to be one with reality or on the cusp of realization, philosophy is obliged ruthlessly to criticize itself. Time was when, in the face of sensory appearance or any experience oriented to the outside world, it saw itself as the epitome of everything unnaïve; now it has become, in its own right, as naïve as the trifling dissertators described by Goethe a hundred and fifty years ago, who glutted their subjectivities on speculation. The introverted thought architect dwells on the dark side of a moon that the extroverted technicians have appropriated for their own uses. In the face of society's massive expansion and the progress of scientific knowledge, the conceptual shells in which, according to philosophical custom, the totality is supposed to be housed begin to look like remnants of simple commodity production in the middle of late-industrial capitalism. The disparity between power and any kind of spirit—itself now degenerated into a commonplace—has become so vast that it makes futile any attempt, inspired by the concept of spirit itself, to understand the all-powerful or that which is beyond power. The will to such understanding bespeaks a claim to power refuted by the very thing it seeks to understand. The individual disciplines have forcibly back-constructed philosophy into an individual discipline; this is the most obvious expression of its historical fate. If Kant, in his own words, escaped from the school concept of philosophy into its world concept, then philosophy now has, under duress, reverted back to its school concept. When it mistakes this last for the world concept, its pretensions become ridiculous. Hegel, despite the doctrine of absolute spirit to which he ascribed philosophy, took philosophy to be nothing more than one aspect of reality, just one line of work in the overall division of labor—and with that, he compartmentalized philosophy. This compartmentalization, in the meantime, has turned into philosophy's own dull-wittedness, the disproportion between it and reality, and all the more so the more it has ignored its compartmentalization, shrugging off, as something foreign to its purpose, any attempt to reflect on its own position in the

totality that it monopolizes as its object, when the alternative would be to recognize how entirely it depends on that totality, right down to its internal composition, its immanent truth. To be worth another thought, philosophy will have to wash its hands of such naïveté. But philosophy's critical self-reflection must not shrink from the highest points of its history. It is up to philosophy to ask whether, now that Hegel's has fallen, philosophy is even possible any more and if so then how, just as Kant investigated the possibility of metaphysics once rationalism had been subjected to critique. If the Hegelian dialectic was the unparalleled attempt to show that philosophical concepts were up to the task of comprehending everything that was heterogeneous to such concepts, then, if his attempt has foundered, it is time to reckon what kind of relationship to the dialectic has come due.

Dialectics Not a Standpoint

No theory escapes the marketplace any more; each one is put up for sale, just one possible opinion among competing opinions, all on display, all swallowed. A thought that would oppose this condition cannot strap on blinkers; the self-righteous conviction that one's own theory has been spared this fate is bound to sink into self-advertisement. But dialectics need not fall silent in the face of this accusation, or the concomitant accusation that it is superfluous, arbitrary. The name "dialectics" says nothing more, to begin with, than that objects do not disappear into their concept, that they are not exhausted by it, that they come into contradiction with the customary norm of adequation. Contradiction is not what Hegel's absolute idealism could not help but transfigure it into; it is not some Heraclitean essence. It is the index of the untruth of identity, of the vanishing of the conceptualized into the concept. The appearance of identity, however, is intrinsic to thought itself, according to its pure form. To think is to identify. Conceptual order smugly drapes itself across whatever thought seeks to comprehend. Its appearance and its truth are intertwined. Appearance cannot be willed away by decree, by, for instance, avowing some being-in-itself beyond the totality of cognitive determinations. Kant secretly says—and Hegel would later turn this against him—that the thing-in-itself that lies beyond the concept is completely indeterminate and thus void. An awareness of the conceptual totality's illusory character has no choice but to break immanently through the appearance of total identity: by totality's own measure. But the conceptual totality is constructed according to logic, whose core is the principle of the excluded middle, which means that anything that does not conform to this principle, anything that is qualitatively different, bears the mark of contradiction. Contradiction is the non-identical seen from the perspective of identity. The primacy of contradiction in dialectics takes the measure of heterogeneity in identity thought. Identity thought crashes into its own limits and thereby exceeds itself. Dialectics is the consistent and thorough consciousness of

non-identity. It does not begin by occupying a standpoint. Thought is driven to dialectics by its own inevitable insufficiency, the guilt it bears for what it thinks. You could level against dialectics a charge first made by Hegel's Aristotelian critics and repeated ever since—that it reduces everything that falls into its mill to the purely logical form of contradiction—and you could add, as Croce would still argue, that dialectics ignores the full multiplicity of the non-contradictory, of the merely diverse, but this would be blaming the method for the fault of the matter. Everything different will appear divergent, dissonant, negative, as long as consciousness is compelled, by its very formation, to press towards identity, as long, that is, as consciousness measures against its claim to totality anything not identical to it. Dialectics holds this up to consciousness as a contradiction. Contradictoriness, by dint of consciousness's immanent quality, itself has an inescapably and fatally lawlike character. Identity and contradiction are welded together in thought. The totality of contradiction is nothing more than the untruth of total identification manifesting itself in identification. Contradiction is non-identity under the spell of a law that affects the non-identical as well.

Reality and Dialectics

But this law is not cognitive; it is real. Anyone who submits to dialectical discipline will, no doubt, pay a bitter sacrifice in the qualitative variety of experience. The dialectical impoverishment of experience, however, so scandalous to hale and hearty opinion, is ultimately in keeping with the abstract monotony of the administered world. The agony of dialectics is agony over that world, raised to a concept. Cognition must bow to the administered world if it is not to degrade concreteness into the ideology that it is on its way to becoming in reality. An altered version of dialectics would be content to be reborn as impotent: to be derived from Kant's aporias and from the plans drawn up in the systems of his successors, but then never achieved. It can be achieved only by negation. Dialectics unfolds the difference between the particular and the universal, a difference itself dictated by the universal. The subject cannot escape this difference—the rift in consciousness between subject and object—which plows a rut through everything it thinks, even objectively, but this difference would have its end in reconciliation. This would set the non-identical free, release it from coercion and constraint, even of an intellectual kind, disclose, at last, the multiplicity of difference, over which dialectics would no longer have any power. Reconciliation would be the bearing-in-mind of the no longer hostile many, such as is anathema to subjective reason. Dialectics is in the service of reconciliation. It dismantles the coercive character of logic, which it also follows; that's why some condemn it as "panlogism." Idealist dialectics was linked with the supremacy of the absolute subject, the force that produces, by negation, every single one of the concept's movements as well as the course of the

whole. Historically, the primacy of the subject stands condemned, even in its Hegelian version, which had outstripped any notion of individual consciousness and even Kantian or Fichtean notions of transcendental consciousness. It is not just that the subject is pushed from the scene by the impotence of thought as it slackens, faced with the superior strength of world history and unsure that it will ever command it. None of the reconciliations maintained by absolute idealism—and they alone were consistent and thorough—ended up holding water, not the logical ones, not the politico-historical ones. A logically consistent idealism could only construe itself as the epitome of contradiction, and this is both its logical truth and the punishment doled out to its logicity as logicity; it is appearance and also necessary. The dialectic's non-idealist form has, in the meantime, been reduced to dogma and its idealist form to a badge of learning; to put dialectics back on trial is to decide about more than the currency of a traditional mode of philosophizing or the philosophical structure of the object of knowledge. Hegel had given philosophy the right and ability to think again about content, instead of making do with the analysis of empty and emphatically trivial cognitive forms. When contemporary philosophy has anything to say about content, it either falls back into the arbitrariness of a world-view or it embraces the formalism, the "indifference," against which Hegel once took his stand. This is evidenced, in historical terms, by phenomenology, which was once driven by a burning desire for content and developed into an invocation of Being that expels all content as a kind of pollution. Hegel's content-laden way of doing philosophy had as its foundation and result the primacy of the subject or, as the famous formulation in the opening remarks to the *Logic* has it: the identity of identity and non-identity. The determinate *individuum*, could, for Hegel, be determined by mind, because its immanent determination was meant to be nothing other than mind. Without this supposition, philosophy would, on Hegel's account, be incapable of recognizing content or essence. If the concept of dialectics produced by idealism does not retrieve experiences that are, *pace* the Hegelian emphasis, independent of the idealist apparatus, then philosophy is headed for a kind of renunciation; it will deny itself any insight into content, confine itself to the scientific method, declare this to be philosophy, and virtually cancel itself out.

The Interest of Philosophy

At this historical moment, philosophy's true interest lies with those things in which Hegel professed to be least interested: with the concept-less, the individual, and the particular; with everything that has, since Plato, been written off as ephemeral and insignificant and which Hegel festooned with the label of "lazy existence." Its theme would be the very qualities it deems contingent and thus downgrades to the status of *quantité négligeable*. The concept takes as it most

pressing business everything it cannot reach, everything that its mechanism of abstraction must banish, everything that is not itself already an instance of the concept. Bergson and Husserl, the standard-bearers of philosophical modernity, gave this endeavor its initial stimulus, but then withdrew into traditional metaphysics. Bergson created, by sheer force, a new kind of cognition on behalf of the non-conceptual. The salt of dialectics gets washed away in the undifferentiated flow of life. Everything thinglike and fixed is written off as logically subaltern instead of being comprehended, logical subalternity and all. Hatred for the rigidly general concept licenses a cult of irrational immediacy, of sovereign freedom smack in the middle of the unfree. Bergson took up cudgels against Descartes and Kant, but he pitches his two modes of cognition against one another as dualistically as their doctrines ever did; causal-mechanical cognition remains, as practical knowledge, undisturbed by intuitive cognition, just as the bourgeois establishment has nothing to fear from the lowered inhibitions and frank speech of those who owe their privilege to the establishment itself. The celebrated intuitions in Bergson's philosophy are themselves utterly abstract; they hardly extend beyond the phenomenal consciousness of time, which even in Kant is at the root of chronological-physical time, in Bergson of spatial time. No doubt the mind's intuitive behavior continues to exist in fact, although in a manner hard to develop—the vestige of mimetic ways of reacting to the world. Its earlier forms promise something beyond the hardened present day. But intuitions hit their mark at best haphazardly. All cognition, even Bergson's own, requires the rationality he so scorns, precisely if it is meant to make itself concrete. *Durée* elevated to an absolute, sheer becoming, the *actus purus*—these would all boomerang into the very timelessness with which Bergson taxes all metaphysics since Plato and Aristotle. It did not trouble him that the very thing for which he was groping, if it is not to remain a mirage, only comes into one's sights via the instruments of cognition, via cognition's reflection on its own means, and is reduced to something arbitrary in any procedure that is not mediated from the start by the procedures of cognition.

The logician Husserl, by contrast, offered a way of getting to know essences and wielded it like a sharp point against generalizing abstraction. He had in mind a specific intellectual experience supposedly able to isolate the essence from out of a mass of particulars. And yet the only essence this experience was good for turned out to be no different from the ordinary run of generalized concepts. There is a gross discrepancy between the public demonstrations of the *Wesenschau* and its endpoint. Neither of these attempted escapes managed to break free from idealism: Bergson was oriented, no less than his archenemies, the positivists, to the *donées immédiates de la conscience*, as Husserl was to phenomena in the stream of consciousness. They each hunker down in the circle of subjective immanence. It is a matter of insisting, against them, on what they try to think and cannot; and of saying, against Wittgenstein, what cannot be said. The simple contradiction contained in this demand is the contradiction of philosophy itself; this is what

qualifies philosophy as dialectics, well before it gets entangled in any of its particular contradictions. The task of philosophical self-reflection is to tease apart this paradox. Everything else is signification, back construction, pre-philosophical, now no less than in Hegel's day. That philosophy will pull it off after all; that the concept will transcend the concept, that it will get beyond all the preparations and blocked passages, and thereby succeed in reaching the concept-less—philosophy cannot do without this ever questionable confidence, which is thus part of the naïveté from which it suffers. Otherwise, all that's left for it, and all mind alongside it, is to capitulate. Not even the simplest operation could be thought, no truth would exist, everything would emphatically be nothing. But whatever one encounters by way of truth, via concepts but outside the circumference of their abstraction, can only appear on the scene of everything that concepts suppress, ignore, and discard. The utopia of cognition would be to use concepts to unlock the conceptless, without reducing the one to the other.

The Antagonistic Whole

This notion of the dialectic makes one doubt whether it is even possible. To anticipate non-stop motion within contradictions seems, however modified, to proclaim the totality of the Mind, precisely the now abrogated identity thesis. It is said that the mind that reflects assiduously on the contradiction in some thing or item could hardly be anything but the totality, provided the latter is organized into the form of a contradiction. All truth, which in the idealist dialectic rushes past each and every particular, because particulars are one-sided and so false, would have to be the truth of the whole; if this truth were not rehearsed in advance, the dialectical steps would lack all thrust and direction. To this one must respond that the object of the mind's experience is the antagonistic system, which is antagonistic in some intrinsic and exceedingly real way, and not only when it is mediated by the knowing subject that rediscovers itself therein. The constitution of reality is itself coercive; idealism projected this coercion into the region of subject and Mind; the task now is to translate it back. What remains of idealism is the idea that the Mind's objective determinant, which is society, is as much the quintessence or comprehensive concept of all subjects as it is their negation. In society, they are made unrecognizable and powerless; hence society's desperate objectivity, hence its status as Concept, which idealism mistakes for the positive term. The system does not belong to the absolute Mind; it belongs to the entirely conditional Mind of those who command it without even knowing how much it is theirs. The subjective preformation of the material and social process of production, fundamentally different from its theoretical constitution, is its unresolved term, the thing that cannot be reconciled with subjects. Its own rationality, which, unconscious like the

transcendental subject, generates identity via exchange, cannot be made commensurate with the subjects that it reduces to a common denominator: the subject is enemy to the subject. The preceding version of universality is true and untrue at once: true, because it is the “ether” that Hegel calls Mind or Spirit; untrue, because its rationality is not rational; its universality is the product of a particular interest. This is where the philosophical critique of identity overtakes philosophy. And yet something that cannot be subsumed into identity—use value, the Marxists call it—is equally necessary if life is to go on at all, even under the relations of production now dominant; this is the ineffable quality of utopia. Utopia intervenes into what is being plotted to prevent it from coming to pass. In the face of utopia’s concrete possibility, dialectics is the ontology of the wrong state of things. The right state of things would be set free from dialectics; neither system nor contradiction.

The Demystification of the Concept

All philosophy, even Hegel’s, is vulnerable to the general objection that it inevitably takes concepts as its material and so has prejudged any question in favor of idealism. No-one, not even an extreme empiricism, can drag the hard facts in by the hair and deliver them up like anatomical specimens or experiments in a physics lab; no-one can paste the individual things into a text, the way some kinds of painting entice us into thinking we might. But that argument, in its formal universality, takes a fetishistic view of the concept, much as the concept construes itself naively when on its home turf: as a self-sufficient totality over against which philosophy stands powerless. The truth is that all concepts, even philosophical ones, open up onto the non-conceptual, because they are themselves moments of reality, which requires their creation, mostly for purposes of mastering nature. However conceptual mediation appears to itself from the inside—the primacy it gives to its own sphere, without which, it is said, nothing can be known—this must not be confused with what such mediation is in itself. It gets this appearance of existing-in-itself from the movement that lifts it up out of reality, a reality into which it is all the same wedged. Philosophy has no choice but to operate with concepts: one can neither turn this into a virtue—the concept’s primacy—nor, conversely, critique this virtue and so issue a summary verdict on all philosophy. The insight, however, that philosophy’s conceptual character is, though inescapable, not absolute is communicated by the concept’s very texture and complexion; it is not a dogmatic, let alone a naïvely realistic proposition. Concepts like that of “being” at the beginning of Hegel’s *Logic* emphatically signify, in the first instance, the non-conceptual. In Emil Lask’s words, they mean beyond themselves. Their meaning includes the idea that they cannot make due with their own conceptuality, even

though they enclose the non-conceptual, as their meaning, and so tend to assimilate it, thereby getting trapped in themselves. Their content is at once immanent, or mental, and ontic, or transcendent. They can break free of their fetishism if they become self-conscious about this. Philosophical reflection assures itself of the non-conceptual in the concept. If it did not, the concept would be, as Kant has it, empty, finally not even the concept of anything at all and so void. Philosophy pulls the blindfold from its eyes when it recognizes as much and puts paid to the autarky of the concept. The concept is concept even when it refers to being, but this cannot change the fact that it is woven into a non-conceptual whole; a concept once reified does nothing but seal itself off from that whole, though reification is of course what produces the concept as concept. The concept is a moment like any other in dialectical logic. There survives in the concept its mediation by the non-conceptual, by virtue of its strict and literal meaning, which for its part is the concept's foundation. The concept has two characteristics at once: to refer to the non-conceptual, just as every definition of concepts in traditional epistemology ends up requiring non-conceptual, deictic moments; and, contrariwise, as an abstract unit, to distance from the ontic the ontia gathered under it. To change conceptuality's orientation, to turn it in the direction of the non-identical, is the hinge of negative dialectics. The non-conceptual helps constitute the concept; the identity compulsion that the concept carries with itself when undetained by such reflection should melt away in the face of this insight. The concept finds a way out of the appearance of self-identity as a unit of meaning when it takes stock of the meaning that is its own.

“Infinity”

The demystification of the concept is philosophy's antidote. It prevents philosophy from running wild, from anointing itself the Absolute. The task is to refunctionalize one of the ideas that idealism has bequeathed to us, the idea that, more than any other, it ruined: the idea of the infinite. It is not up to philosophy, in the usual manner of science, to exhaust the phenomena, to reduce them to a bare minimum of propositions. On the contrary, philosophy wants literally to lose itself in everything that is heterogeneous to it, without bringing it back to ready-made categories. It would like to nestle in close to what it isn't, the way that phenomenology's program and Simmel's wanted, in vain, to do. Its aim is undiminished kenosis, self-emptying. The content of philosophy can only be grasped when the latter does not impose itself. One will have to surrender the illusion that philosophy can capture the essence of something in the finitude of philosophical determinations. Perhaps the reason that the idealist philosophers bandied about the word “infinite” with such fatal ease was that they wanted to allay their nagging doubts about the stinting finitude of their conceptual apparatus, even,

despite his best intentions, of Hegel's. Traditional philosophy believes it can possess its object in infinite form, and that very belief renders philosophy finite, final. A transformed philosophy would have to do away with that claim, would have to stop trying to convince itself and others that infinity was at its command. Instead, philosophy would, unstrictly speaking, itself become infinite once it refrained from fixing itself in a corpus of countable theorems. It would find its content in the multiplicity of objects: a multiplicity not yet manhandled by some formula or model; objects that force themselves upon philosophy or that philosophy goes looking for. It would really and truly surrender itself to them, would not use them as a mirror in which to discern only its own features, mistaking its reflection for concretion. It would be nothing other than full and unreduced experience in the medium of conceptual reflection; even the "science of the experience of consciousness" reduced the contents of such experience to mere examples of its categories. What prompts philosophy to chance this straining towards its own infinity is the unconfirmed expectation that every individuum and particular that it deciphers will, like Leibniz's monads, represent in itself the totality that is, as totality, always giving philosophy the slip; under a pre-established disharmony, of course, and not a harmony. The meta-critical turn against *prima philosophia* is a turn, as well, against the finitude of a philosophy that blusters on about infinity but never heeds it. Knowledge does not fully possess any of its objects. It should stop cooking up phantom totalities. In this sense, the philosophical interpretation of an artwork cannot set out to manufacture the identity of artwork and concept, using the concept to sap the artwork dry; it is via interpretation, however, that the work will unfold in its truth. The foreseeable opposite of this procedure—call it the orderly progression of abstraction; call it the application of concepts to the objects aggregated under and defined by them—might be useful as technology in the broadest sense of the term. But philosophy that doesn't tow the line couldn't care less about any of that. It can always go astray, which is the only reason it stands to gain anything. Skepticism and pragmatism, right down to Dewey's utterly humane version of the latter, have admitted as much; the task, however, would be to serve as catalyst for something that is emphatically and urgently philosophy, and not to swear off philosophy in advance in favor of practical tests on thought. Against the tyranny of method, philosophy harbors, as a corrective, the moment of play, which a long history of philosophy-made-scientific has tried to purge. This was a sensitive point even for Hegel, who decries "types and distinctions that are determined by external accident and by play and not by reason." The un-naïve thought knows that it is nowhere near the objects of thought, and yet must always talk as though it had full possession of them. This makes thought seem like tomfoolery. It is all the more important that thought not deny having foolish features, since foolery is its only hope of ever reaching those denied objects. Philosophy is the most serious of all endeavors, but it isn't really all that serious. Anything that is geared towards something that *a priori* it is not and over which it has no documented authority belongs, by its very concept, to a wild and exuberant realm of just the kind that

conceptuality outlaws. This is the only way that the concept can champion the cause of the very thing it has dislodged, which is mimesis—by giving itself over, in part, to mimesis, without losing itself in it. The aesthetic moment is to that extent not accidental to philosophy, though for reasons completely unlike the one that Schelling gives. And yet philosophy's task is, all the same, to sublimate that moment into wholly binding insights about what is real. That and play are its two poles. Philosophy's affinity for art does not license the one to borrow from the other, least of all in the form of intuitions, which are what barbarians take to be the prerogative of art. Intuitions almost never come in isolation, like bolts from the blue, not even to the working artist. They are always intertwined with a given creation's formal laws; if you tried to extract them as though with a knife, they would melt away. Nowhere in thought is there a spring whose freshness would spare thought from having to think. There is no form of knowledge just waiting to be used that is completely distinct from its user; it is this latter that intuitionism is trying to escape, in panic and to no avail. A philosophy that tried to mimic art, that wished it could mutate spontaneously into art, would cancel itself out. It would postulate the identity claim, convinced that it can entirely absorb its object, thereby granting a primacy to its own procedures, to which a priori everything heterogeneous would, as material, have to conform, when in fact that relationship to the heterogeneous is philosophy's very theme or topic. Art and philosophy find their common term not in a shared form or figurative process, but in a mode of conduct that forbids pseudomorphosis. They each stay true to their contents by means of an opposition or antithesis: art, by remaining aloof from its own meanings; philosophy, by not clinging to immediacy. The philosophical concept never abandons the longing that, in its conceptless form, animates art; this desire can only be fulfilled if it flees the latter's sham immediacy. The concept, which is at once the organon of thought and the wall that separates thought from what it has to think, negates this longing. Philosophy can neither avoid this negation nor yield to it. It must make the constant effort to get past the concept by means of the concept.

The Speculative Moment

Even having rejected idealism, philosophy cannot dispense with speculation, which idealism taught us to cherish and which it has since brought into disrepute, though of course philosophy needs speculation in a sense broader than Hegel, all too positively, meant it. It is not hard for positivists to point out all the ways in which Marxist materialism is speculative; it takes as its starting point objective and essential laws, not raw data or basic statements. Over the last few years, if you have wanted someone to know you're not a pinko, it has been easier to call Marx "metaphysical" than to call him "subversive." But solid ground becomes a

phantasm at the point where truth claims instruct us to rise above it. Philosophy is not to be fobbed off with theorems that try to talk it out of its essential interest instead of satisfying that interest, if only with a “no.” From the nineteenth century on, the counter-movements against Kant have all felt this way, though these, it’s true, were invariably compromised by obscurantism. But philosophical resistance must be allowed to develop. Music, too, indeed art of any kind, discovers that the impulse animating its opening bars will be satisfied only via a certain articulated progression and so not all at once. In this sense, music, at once both appearance and totality, performs critique upon appearance by way of totality—critique, that is, upon the presence of its content in the here and now. Mediation of this kind befits philosophy no less than music. If it takes it upon itself to make rash pronouncements, it opens itself up to Hegel’s verdict on empty profundity. A person who utters profundities does not thereby become profound, any more than a novel becomes metaphysical by reporting on the metaphysical views of its characters. To demand of philosophy that it show an interest in the question of Being or the other central themes of western metaphysics amounts to a pious and primitive belief in matter and motifs. It cannot evade the dignity of these themes, but a person cannot sound off on the big issues and expect this to count as philosophy. Philosophy is so scared of the worn grooves of reflection that its emphatic interest seeks refuge in ephemeral objects, the ones that haven’t yet been overdetermined by intentions. The traditional philosophical problematic needs to be negated, definitely and determinately, though this negation will of course be chained to that problematic’s own questions. A world that has objectively gathered itself up into a totality will not set consciousness free. It relentlessly pins consciousness to the very place it was trying to get away from. Thought, on the other hand, that sets out on its merry way, mindless of the historical shape of its problems, falls prey to those problems with renewed force. Philosophy is able to partake of the idea of profundity only by means of its pneuma, its thinking breath. The model for this, in the modern era, is the Kantian deduction of pure reason, whose author apologized, in a fit of inscrutable irony, for its being “pitched rather deep.” Even profundity, as Hegel well knew, is a moment in the dialectic, and not an isolated quality. There is a vile German tradition that considers thoughts deep only once they’ve taken the oath of theodicy and so promised to justify evil and death. A theological endpoint is foisted, in secret, upon thought, as though its dignity were decided by its results, the ratification of transcendence or the immersion into interiority, mere being-for-itself; as though withdrawing from the world were the same, presto, as having insight into its principle and ground. Resistance would be the true measure of profundity, compared to the phantasms of the profound that, throughout the history of thought, have always looked kindly on the very status quo they condemn for being insufficiently deep. The power of the status quo has erected the walls against which consciousness bangs its head. It has no choice but smash through them. That alone would wrest away from ideology the notion of profundity. It is in resistance of this kind that the speculative moment

survives; whatever refuses to let the given facts dictate the law transcends those facts from a position of intimacy with the world's objects, and it does so by refusing transcendence in its sacrosanct versions. A thought is sometimes beyond the thing that it binds itself to in the course of resisting it, and that is its freedom. Freedom follows on from the subject's need to express itself. The need to let suffering speak is a condition of all truth. For suffering is objectivity impinging upon the subject. What the subject experiences as its most subjective thing, its self-expression, is mediated by objects.

Representation

This might help explain why philosophy has to care about how it is presented, why the style and form of philosophy are immanent in its idea and not external terms. Its intrinsic expressiveness, unconceptual and mimetic, can only be made objective if represented, which is to say, by language. Philosophy's version of freedom is nothing other than the capacity to give voice to its unfreedom. If its expressiveness sets itself up as something more than that, it will degenerate into just another worldview; but if philosophy relinquishes its expressiveness and the onus of presenting itself, it becomes indistinguishable from science. Expression and rigor are not, for philosophy, possibilities between which one must choose. They require one another; the one cannot exist without the other. As expression struggles with thought and thought struggles with it, thought relieves expression of its contingency. Thought never cinches anything until it has been expressed, until it has been represented in language; laxly spoken is poorly thought. It is the act of expression that commands rigor from what is being expressed. Expression is not an end in itself, at the expense of what it expresses; rather, it spirits the latter away from its monstrous thingliness, which is itself the object of philosophical critique. Speculative philosophy with no idealist undercarriage requires a loyalty to rigor in order to override rigor's authoritarian claim to power. Walter Benjamin's original *Arcades Project* combined, in a way never since matched, speculative capacity with a micro-proximity to its material contents; in a letter, he himself rendered a verdict on the earliest, intrinsically metaphysical stratum of that work, saying it was "impermissibly 'poetic'" and would have to be brought in line. This declaration of surrender designates both the difficulty of a philosophy that does not want to wander off course and the point on which the concept of philosophy will need to be pushed further. It was no doubt his blind acceptance of dialectical materialism—as, if you like, a worldview—that prompted this surrender. But the fact that Benjamin never got around to writing out his *Arcades* theory in finished form should serve as a warning; that philosophy becomes something more than a business only when, in response to the traditional way that thought cheats its way to absolute certainty, it

lays itself open to complete and irreversible failure. Benjamin's defeatism in the face of his own ideas was conditioned by a remnant of un-dialectical positivity that he brought with him, unchanged at the level of form, from his theological phase into his materialistic one. It is compared with this that Hegel's identifying thought as negativity—a negativity that safeguards philosophy against scientific positivity or against amateurish contingency—finds its roots in lived experience. Thought is, in itself and when presented with any particular content, negation; it resists whatever has been forced upon it. Thought has inherited this feature from the relationship of work to its material, which is its archetype. If ideology is, now more than ever, trying to whip thought up into a riot of positivity, then all this does is register cunningly that this is precisely contrary to thought and that it takes a friendly pep-talk from the authorities in order to habituate it thereunto. The effort that is implicit in the very concept of thought, as sworn enemy to passive sense-perception, is already negative, a rebellion against the unreasonable demand, made by all immediacy, that thought should bow to it. Judgments and conclusions, the thought-forms that even the critique of thought cannot dispense with, contain within themselves the seeds of critique. The certainty they evince is also the exclusion of anything that does not come within their compass, and the truth that they mean to organize denies, albeit on questionable authority, anything they haven't themselves already stamped. The judgment that something is such and such a way potentially staves off the possibility that the relation of its subject to its predicate could be expressed as anything but a judgment. The thought-forms want to go beyond the merely present, the "given." The sharp end that thought points against its materials isn't just the domination, in spiritual form, of nature. Thought might commit violence against the objects drawn up into its syntheses, but at the same time it is harkening to a potential that lies waiting in these objects, its counterparts, and it is obeying, unconsciously, the idea that it should make amends to the world's scraps and fragments for what it itself has wrought; philosophy becomes conscious of this unconscious program. Implacable thought is joined to the hope of reconciliation, because the resistance of thought to the merely existing, the imperious freedom of the subject, also intends those features of the object that were lost when it was made into an object, which is to say a specimen.

With regard to system

Traditional speculation devised the synthesis of the world's manifold, which, on strict Kantian grounds, it imagines as chaotic; when all is said and done, it aspired to pull its every content from out its own insides. Compared to this, the proper telos of philosophy—objects open and naked—is every bit as anti-systematic as philosophy's freedom in interpreting the phenomena with which it carries on an

unarmed rivalry. But philosophy must remain mindful of system to the extent that whatever is heterogeneous to it confronts it as system. System is where the administered world is heading. It is negative objectivity and not the positive subject. At a moment in history when any system that means to be substantive gets banished to the ominous realm of thought-poetry, so that all that remains of system is the pallid outline of its classificatory schemes, it becomes hard to call vividly to mind what it was that drove the philosophical spirit towards system in the first place. Anyone reflecting on the history of philosophy should not let their own virtuous partisanship prevent them from recognizing how superior the various systems were, rationalist or idealist, preferable to all their competitors for more than two hundred years; compared to system, these others seem inconsequential. Systems get it done; they interpret the world. All those others ever do is declare that *you can't do that*; they give up; they refuse and then they fail. If these ended up possessing a bigger portion of truth after all, then that merely demonstrates the impermanence of philosophy. It would fall to philosophy, at any rate, to wrest this truth from its subordinate position and to duke it out against the philosophies that call themselves higher, and not just because they're snooty, especially since, even today, some people consider it a blot against materialism that it was invented in Abdera. After Nietzsche's critique, system retained as its sole remaining feature a small-minded pedantry that tried to compensate for its political powerlessness by constructing, through concepts, an as it were administrative right to dispose over all beings. But the requirement of any system—not to make do with the *membra disjecta* or scattered pieces of knowledge, but rather to attain the absolute, whose claim is always asserted, involuntarily, in the binding quality of any particular judgment—this requirement was, at times, more than an act of pseudo-morphosis, shoehorning the mind into geometry or the scientific method, so successful as to be unopposable. In the history of philosophy, systems once had a compensatory purpose, especially in the seventeenth century. The same *ratio* that, in unison with the interests of the bourgeois class, smashed the feudal order and the scholastic ontology that was this order's intellectual reflection—this same *ratio* immediately, when faced with the rubble of its own making, developed a fear of chaos. It still quakes in the face of whatever it is that persists menacingly as the underside of its own dominion, growing stronger in proportion to reason's own power and violence. That fear shaped, at its very origins, a mode of acting that has been constitutive of bourgeois thought as a whole: Each step towards emancipation has to be neutralized, posthaste, by a strengthening of order. In the shadow of its own incomplete emancipation, bourgeois consciousness lives in constant fear that it will be sent packing by a more advanced alternative; it senses that, because its freedom is not complete, it begets only freedom's travesty; hence the expansion, at the level of theory, of its autonomy into a system, which ends up resembling bourgeois society's coercive mechanisms all over again. Bourgeois reason endeavored to produce from out of its own inner workings the order that it had already negated in the outside world. But this order is, because produced, no order at all—and so insatiable. It, the

offspring of reason and humbug, is what one calls system: something posited playing the part of being-in-itself. Philosophical system had to locate its origins in the wrong place, in formal thought, thought at a remove from its own contents; that's the only way it could exercise command over its materials. From the very beginning, philosophical system yielded antinomies. The approach undertaken by system was interwoven with its own impossibility; this latter condemned modern systems to a history in which each would be annihilated by its successor. The *ratio*, which, in order to prevail as system, wiped out virtually all of the qualitative determinations to which it referred, ended up in a position of irreconcilable contradiction to the object-world, against which it committed violence by purporting to comprehend it. The more completely *ratio* subordinated the object-world to its axioms, and ultimately to the axiom of identity, the further it drifted from objects. The pedantries of all systems, right up to the architectonic intricacies of Kant's—and not excepting Hegel's, its program notwithstanding—are marks of a failure determined *a priori*, one that is recorded, with incomparable honesty, by the breaks in the Kantian system; as early as Molière, pedantry had become, catechism-like, a chapter in the ontology of the bourgeois spirit. Whatever it is in the material one is trying to comprehend that shrinks back from identity with the concept forces the concept to put on some kind of over-the-top show, just so that no doubts arise about the ironclad gaplessness, the closed unity, the painstaking exactitude of the mind's intellectual products. Grand philosophy was always accompanied by a paranoid zeal not to tolerate anything but itself, and to persecute this other thing with all the guile and art of its reason, while that thing backed away, further and further, from its persecution. The smallest remnant of non-identity would be enough to countermand identity, which, according to its concept, is total or not at all. The excrescences of system, the Cartesian pineal gland or the axioms and definitions of Spinoza, into which all of rationalism has been pumped in advance so that it can then be deductively extracted—these excrescences proclaim, via their untruth, the untruth of systems themselves—their madness.

Idealism as rage

Philosophical system, in which the sovereign mind entertains delusions of its majesty, has its earliest history in the pre-intellectual realm, that is, in the animal life of the species. Beasts of prey are hungry; pouncing on a victim is hard, often dangerous. If the animal is to risk it, it will require not just the standard impulses, but an auxiliary set, as well. These fuse together with the un-pleasure of hunger to become a kind of rage against the victim, the expression of which, in turn—and expediently enough—terrifies that victim and stuns it. Along the pathway to humanity, this gets rationalized by means of a projection. The rational animal who

develops an appetite for his opponent has to, as happy owner of a super-ego, come up with a reason for attacking. The more completely his actions accord with the law of self-preservation, the less he is able to concede, to himself or others, its primacy; otherwise, the status of what in modern German is called the *zoon politikon*, achieved after so much effort, would come to seem implausible. Any creature marked out for eating had better be evil. This anthropological scheme has been sublimated all the way into epistemology. Idealism—and Fichte most emphatically—is governed unknowingly by an ideology which says that the not-I, *l'autrui*, anything, finally, that reminds one of nature, is worth almost nothing, so that the unity of the self-sustaining thought can devour it in good conscience. This vindicates the principle of thought and, equally, whets its appetite. Philosophical system is the belly turned mind, just as rage is the defining mark of idealism in all its forms; it disfigures even Kant's humanity, confutes the nimbus of elevation and nobility with which Kant's thinking has a way of investing itself. The view of the man in the center of the world is akin to contempt for humanity: to leave nothing uncontested or unchallenged. The sublime implacability of moral law was of the same cut as such rationalized rage against the non-identical, and even Hegel, liberally inclined, was no better, scolding, with the superiority of bad conscience, anything that rejects the speculative concept or hypostasis of the mind. What was so liberating about Nietzsche, who truly marked an about-face in the history of Western thought, a turn which later figures merely usurped, was that he spoke such mysteries out loud. The mind that breaks the spell of rationalization by dint of such stocktaking stops being the radical evil that, when rationalized, is the mind's goad and trigger.

The process, however, by which philosophical systems began, thanks to their own insufficiency, to decay serves as counterpoint to a second, social process. Bourgeois *ratio*, in the form of the exchange principle, took all the things that it wanted to make commensurable, to identify, and, with increasing though potentially murderous success, managed in reality to bring them into line with the philosophical systems; it left less and less outside. The very thing that condemned itself as vain at the level of theory found ironic confirmation at the level of practice. That's why everyone is talking about the crisis of the system, which is now an ideology in its own right, even the characters who, until recently and in allegiance to some already outdated ideal of system, couldn't get enough of themselves and their own booming, barrel-chested resentment at the rise of the philosophical aperçu. Reality is not to be construed any longer, because it could be construed all too thoroughly. Its irrationality, which intensifies under the pressure of a particular rationality—disintegration by way of integration—offers smokescreens enough. If one could see through society as a system closed and so unreconciled to its subjects, then it would become all too painful for those subjects, provided there are any left. Whatever it is the existentialists call *angst* is the claustrophobia of a society turned system. Its systematic character, which used to be a shibboleth of academic philosophy, is now studiously denied by that philosophy's adepts. In the process, they have managed to free themselves with impunity as speakers, licensed now to

play at primal and maybe even at unacademic thought. The critique of philosophical system has been abused, but is not thereby annulled. Any philosophy of urgency and emphasis—in contrast to skeptical philosophy, which disavowed emphasis of any kind—had in common the proposition that philosophy was possible only as a system. That idea crippled philosophy only slightly less than its empiricist tendencies did. Whatever it is that philosophy is called upon conclusively to judge—this just gets postulated before the philosophy in question even commences. System—the representational form of a totality that leaves nothing outside itself—makes thought, in the face of its every content, absolute and vaporizes content into thoughts: it becomes idealist before ever making the case for idealism.

The twofold character of the system

But critique doesn't simply liquidate system. At the height of Enlightenment, d'Alembert distinguished, and with good reason, between *esprit de système* and *esprit systématique*, and the method employed in the *Encyclopédie* took this distinction into account. The *esprit systématique* requires something more than a "connection"—a trivial motif that is if anything more likely to crystallize among unconnected terms; the *esprit systématique* does something more than satisfy the desire of bureaucrats to stuff everything into its proper category. The form of system is adequate to the world, which, at the level of content, eludes the hegemony of thought; but unity and unanimity are, at the same time, the skewed projection of a pacified, no longer antagonistic condition onto the coordinates of lordly and oppressive thought. The two senses of philosophical system leave one no choice but to transpose the intellectual power that has been released from systems into the open determination of individual moments. Such a procedure wasn't entirely alien to Hegel's logic. The micro-analysis of individual categories, which appears at the same time as the objective self-reflection of those categories, should allow each concept to pass into its other, irrespective of some final category clapped on from above. For Hegel, the totality of this movement amounted to the system. Between the concept of system—as something hermetic and arresting—and the concept of dynamism—as something produced out of the subject in an act of pure self-sufficiency, a production that in turn constitutes all philosophical systematicity—reign contradiction and affinity at once. Hegel only managed to balance out the tension between statics and dynamics by constructing a principle of identity—spirit or mind or *Geist*—understood simultaneously as a being-in-itself and as a pure becoming, thereby reviving the Aristotelian-scholastic *actus purus*. The absurdity of this construction, which syncopates upon the Archimedean point subjective creation *and* ontology, nominalism *and* realism, forestalls any resolution of that

tension, even in a manner immanent to the system. At the same time, a philosophical concept of system is head-and-shoulders above all merely scientific systematicity, which demands the ordered, well-organized presentation of thoughts, the careful and thorough laying out of the academic disciplines, without, however, insisting rigorously and from the object's perspective on the internal unity of its components. The postulates of scientific system may labor under the presupposition that all beings bear an identity with the principle of knowledge, but equally, that postulate of identity, once made to carry a certain weight, as in speculative idealism, reminds one, legitimately, of the affinity objects have for one another, an affinity prohibited by the requirements of scientific order and made to yield to the surrogate affinity of that order's schemes. Whatever it is that allows objects to commune, without their having to be the mere atoms that classificatory logic, scissors in hand, would have them be—this is the trace of the determinate qualities of objects in themselves, whose existence Kant denied and which Hegel, contra Kant, meant to restore by passing through the subject and out its other side. To comprehend the very thing, not to adapt it to one's understanding, not to offer it up to some system of reference—this is nothing more than to become aware of an individual moment as it hangs together immanently, as nexus or combination, with other individual moments. One can find anti-subjectivism of this kind stirring even under the crackling shell of absolute idealism, in its tendency to open up any new set of things by referring them back to how they came to be. The conception of system reminds one, in distorted form, of the coherence of the non-identical—precisely that which deductive systems infringe upon. Critique of system and anti-systematic thinking remain on the surface as long as they fail to release the power of coherence, the power that idealist systems have signed over to the transcendental subject.

System, Antinomically

The system-generating principle of the ego—pure method, pre-sorted and prescribed for each and every content—was, from the beginning, *ratio*. There is nothing outside of it that could set it a few boundaries, not even the so-called order of the mind. If idealism, in all its various stages, certifies that its principle is positive infinity, then it makes a metaphysics out of the condition of thought, which is to say, out of its historical autonomization. It eliminates any heterogeneous beings. This defines the system as pure **Becoming**, as pure process, ultimately as the absolute act of production that Fichte—to this extent philosophy's authentic system builder—declares thinking to be. Already in Kant, the only thing still holding back emancipated *ratio*, the *progressus ad infinitum*, was the at least formal

acknowledgement of the non-identical. There is an antinomy of totality and infinity, for the restless *ad infinitum* blows open any system that has come to rest in itself, even though system owes its very existence to that same infinity; this antinomy is of an entirely idealist nature. It mimics one of the central antinomies of bourgeois society. If it wants to preserve itself, to stay the same—if it wants “to be”—it, too, must perpetually expand, press forward, push its boundaries further and further back, respect no-one, not stay the same. It has been demonstrated to bourgeois society that as soon as it reaches its ceiling, as soon as it no longer disposes over non-capitalist regions outside its borders, it will have no choice, following its own concept, but to nullify itself. This helps explain why antiquity, Aristotle notwithstanding, did not comply with the modern concept of dynamics, no more than it did the concept of system. Even Plato, whose dialogues have bequeathed the aporetic form to so many later thinkers, could be said only in retrospect to deal with dynamism and system. The reproach that Kant doled out to the ancients on this score concerns something more than logic; it is historical and in that sense utterly modern. On the other side of the equation, systematicity is so deeply ingrained into modern consciousness that the anti-systemic efforts undertaken by Husserl under the name of ontology, of which Heidegger’s fundamental ontology was then the offshoot, inevitably regressed back into system, as the price of their formalization. Entangled with one another in this fashion, the static nature of the system is permanently in conflict with its dynamism. Should there actually exist a closed system, it would be, no matter how dynamically conceived, a positive infinity and thus finite, static. That system entertains such notions of itself—entertains what Hegel boasted of his own system—this stops system in its tracks. Crudely put, closed systems are exhausted, worn out. Scurrilities, like the one that critics are always attributing to Hegel—*world history culminates in the Prussian state*—aren’t just ideologically motivated aberrations, nor are they irrelevant to considerations of totality. They are a necessary nonsense, and it is around them that the unity of system and dynamism, under pressure from the start, begins to disintegrate. Dynamism negates the concept of the boundary or border and makes sure, at the level of theory, that there is always something on the outside, some external term, and so displays a tendency to disavow the system that is its product. It would be instructive to look again at the history of modern philosophy and ask how it has come to grips with the antagonism, in this or that system, between statics and dynamics. Hegelian thought only looked like a system in process or a becoming; its every individual determination was implicitly planned out in advance. It was rigged and so condemned to untruth. Consciousness would have to, as it were, lose consciousness, to swoon and thereby plunge itself into the phenomena on which it takes a position. A dialectic of this sort would of course undergo a qualitative change. The unanimity of the system would go to pieces. The phenomenon would no longer be what it remains in Hegel, all his declarations to the contrary notwithstanding; the example of its concept. This procedure would make matters even harder for thought, harder than what Hegel names, because a thought for him

only ever extracts from its objects something that is itself already thought. Despite the Hegelian program of *Entäußerung* or externalization, and as often as it seems to call for a counterpart or opposite number, thought still pleasures itself in itself, unwinds like thread off a spool. If it really were to externalize itself, if it were to relinquish itself to the thing, if it aimed at the latter and not at the latter's category, then under the lingering gaze of thought the object itself would begin to speak. Hegel wrote, in opposition to epistemology, that one only becomes a cobbler by cobbling, by implementing knowledge upon that which resists it, upon the atheoretical, as it were. He should be taken at his word; only this would give back to philosophy what Hegel called freedom towards the object, which philosophy forfeited, so transfixed has it been on the sense-making autonomy of the subject. But the speculative power to force open the indissoluble is the power of negation. In it alone does a certain streak of system live on. The categories of the critique of system are the very ones that comprehend the particular. Whatever it was about philosophical system that once legitimately exceeded the individuum has its proper place outside of system. The interpretive gaze that beholds in a phenomenon more than is there and only thereby beholds what is there—this is metaphysics made secular. Only a philosophy recast in the form of fragments could bring the monad, this illusory invention of idealism, into its fold. They would be representations in the particular of the totality that cannot be represented as such.

Argument and Experience

The thought that is not allowed, outside of its dialectical implementation, to hypostatize anything into a positivity shoots past its object, with which it no longer pretends to be one; it becomes more independent than thought conceived of as absolute, in which sovereignty and submission are jumbled together, each internally dependent on the other. Perhaps this is what Kant was after when he exempted the intelligible sphere from immanence of any kind. Immersion into the individual thing—dialectical immanence pushed to its extreme—requires as one of its elements the freedom to step outside of the object, a freedom that the identity claim cuts short. Hegel would not have approved; he was banking on complete mediation in the objects. In the practice of knowledge, which is the teasing apart of the insoluble, the element of thought's transcendence is visible in a certain discrepancy: that knowledge, as micrology, has only macrological devices at its disposal. To demand commitment without system is to demand thought models. These are of a more than monadological kind. The model fixes upon specificities—and upon more than specificities—without vaporizing them into some higher genus or master concept. To think philosophically is to think in models; negative dialectics is an ensemble of model analyses. Philosophy would debase itself all over again—lower itself to the status of some comforting affirmation—were it to deceive others and itself on one

important point: Whatever it is that philosophy uses to set its objects in motion from within, it has no choice but to administer that thing in part from without, like a drug. Something lies waiting in the objects themselves, but it requires an intervention if it is to speak, on the understanding that the force mobilized from without, indeed any theory that is brought to bear upon phenomena, will wind down in them and go quiet. In this sense, too, philosophical theory pursues its own termination: by being realized. History is full of such intentions. Formally considered, the French Enlightenment derives from its master concept, that of reason, a certain systematic character; but this idea of reason is constitutively entangled with the idea of society's objectively rational arrangement, depriving the system of the pathos that it regains only once reason, as an idea, has called off its realization and instead rendered itself absolute in the form of mind or spirit. Thought as encyclopedia—a rationally organized but nonetheless discontinuous thing, unsystematic and informal—gives expression to the self-critical spirit of reason. And that spirit of self-criticism represents something that will later drain away from it, as philosophy moves further and further away from practice and as it gets absorbed into the academic enterprise: namely, experience of the world, an eye for reality, which also has thought as one of its elements. The mind's freedom is nothing else. Of course, one cannot do without thinking—whatever it is that scientific philosophy regularly abuses: the concentrating of one's person in meditation; or argument itself, which has attracted so much skepticism—any more than one can do without the element of the *homme de lettres*, which the ethos of petty bourgeois science now eagerly defames. Philosophy only ever had substance when these two elements joined together. From a moderate distance, one could characterize the dialectic as the effort, raised to self-consciousness, to make philosophy penetrate itself. Without it, specialized argument will degenerate into a technology, the province of experts stranded conceptless in the middle of the concept, much as it is propagated today by so-called analytic philosophy, which even robots could learn and copy. Immanent argumentation is legitimate when, in order to mobilize argument's power against a reality that has been organized into a system, it plays host to that reality. Whatever is free in a thought, on the other hand, represents the agency that already knows all about the emphatic untruth of this context. Without this knowledge there could be no escape; but if it did not appropriate the violence of the system, the escape would fail. If the two aspects nonetheless fall short of fusing seamlessly together, then this is because of the real power of the system, which already incorporates anything that might surpass it. The untruth of the context disclosed by immanence, however, is also revealed to one's overwhelming experience of a world that has organized itself so systematically that it might as well be rationality made real, Hegel's very glory, even as that world, in its irrationality, perpetuates the powerlessness of the omnipotent-seeming mind. The immanent critique of idealism sets out to defend idealism to the extent that it shows how badly the latter is cheated out of itself; and shows, too, the complicity between what it takes to be foremost—always the mind or the spirit—and the blind supremacy

of what merely exists. The doctrine of absolute spirit directly advances this complicity.

The consensus among scholars will tend to admit that even experience implies theory. But experience, so one hears, is a “standpoint,” at best a hypothesis. Scientism’s more conciliatory representatives demand that what they know as reputable science—science on the up and up—give an account of all such presuppositions. It is this very demand that is incompatible with the mind’s experience. If you demand of experience a standpoint, it would be that of an eater with regards to the roast. The one lives off the other by consuming it: only once the latter is submerged into the former do you have philosophy. Up to this point, theory in the realm of intellectual experience embodies the discipline that Goethe found so painful when considering Kant. If experience abandoned itself to its own dynamic and fortune, there would be no stopping it. Ideology lurks in the mind that, rejoicing in itself in the manner of Nietzsche’s Zarathustra, irresistibly takes itself almost as absolute. Theory can prevent this. It rectifies the naïveté of the mind’s self-confidence, without however forcing it to relinquish its spontaneity, which theory in turn seeks to emulate. For on no account does the distinction between the object and the so-called subjectivity of the mind’s experience simply disappear; the necessary and painful exertions of the epistemological subject testify to the difference. In an unreconciled state, non-identity is experienced as something negative. The subject slinks away from it, back towards the comfort of itself and the plenitude of its own patterned reactions. Only critical self-reflection will safeguard it from the parochial narrowness of its plenitude and stop it from erecting a wall between itself and the object, taking its being-for-itself for the in-and-for-itself. The less one can assume the identity of subject and object, the more contradictory the boundless strength and broad-minded self-reflection that one expects from the subject as knower. Theory and the mind’s experience must mutually condition one another. Experience doesn’t hold all the answers; it reacts to a world that is false to its innermost core. Theory has no jurisdiction over anything that is to be removed out from under the false world’s spell. Mobility is one of consciousness’s essential features, not in the least incidental. The behavior it refers to is twofold: motion from the inside out, an immanent process, which is the authentically dialectical one; and also a free motion, unbound, as of one leaving dialectics behind. The two, however, aren’t only dissimilar. An unregulated thought enjoys an elective affinity with the dialectic, which, as critique of system, calls to mind everything that would lie outside of system; and the power that dialectical movement discharges in cognition is the power that revolts against the system. Consciousness’s two dispositions are intertwined via critique and not compromise.

Vertigo

A dialectic no longer “riveted” to identity prompts if not the objection, which ye shall know by its fascist fruits, that it is *bodenlos*—bottomless, without ground or soil—then the objection that it is dizzy-making. Vertigo is a feeling that has been central to great modern poetry from Baudelaire on. Philosophy is told anachronistically that it is to have no part in such things. You should say what’s on your mind: Karl Kraus discovered that the more precisely his every sentence evinced this idea, and the more he hectored reified consciousness for the sake of such precision, the more his head spun. One of prevailing opinion’s common practices sheds light on the meaning of this affliction. It loves to present alternatives among which one is meant to choose; one checks the box. An administration’s decisions are often reduced to saying *yes* or *no* to whatever plans have been submitted to it. Management thinking has secretly become the sought after model for the ostensibly free kind. It is the task of a philosophical thought in its most basic positions not to play this game. A predetermined alternative is already a chunk of heteronomy. The consciousness of which this decision is moralistically expected in advance would first have to come to a judgment about the legitimacy of alternative demands. The insistence that one confess a standpoint is the forcing of conscience extended into theory. This amounts to a coarsening. It might strip away certain embellishments, but not even from grand theories does it subtract anything of their truth. Marx and Engels, for instance, struggled against any attempt to water down the dynamic theory of classes and its pointed economic expression by replacing it with the simpler opposition between the rich and the poor. A summary of the essentials will always falsify the essence. Any philosophy that stooped to do what Hegel already made fun of, accommodating readers so inclined by explaining just what one is meant to think when one thinks, would get incorporated into the onward march of regression, although it will never be able to keep pace. Some people wonder how best to get a grip on philosophy, how to tackle it; most of the time, one will find nothing but aggression lying behind this worry, an eagerness to tackle it, the way the schools once sent each other toppling. The equivalence of guilt and atonement has spread to the succession of thoughts. It is precisely the assimilation of mind to the dominant principle that philosophical reflection is meant to see through. Traditional thought and the habits of common sense that such thought left behind once it had philosophically withered to nothing require a frame of reference in which each thing has its place. This doesn’t have to be especially perspicuous—it can even be laid down in dogmatic axioms—provided that each and every deliberation can be pinned down and unsecured thought kept out. If cognition is to bear fruit, it will throw itself away on the objects without expecting anything in return. The vertigo that this arouses is an index of truth; the shock of something open, of negativity, negativity being the form that openness necessarily takes amidst the locked-down and the ever-same, untruth only for what isn’t true.

