

Dialectics as Critical Practice (Hegel's Negative Dialectics)

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Introduction

[*Introduction A: Basic question I want to address in this paper*] What would an adequate conception of the negativity inherent to dialectics look like? What is the significance of a dialectics that does not end in synthesis?

[*Introduction B: Basic claim I want to defend in this paper*] The negativity inherent to dialectics consists in the self-reflective self-criticism that is realized in conflictual interactions between individuals. In the course of self-criticism, the norms that govern human practices are made vulnerable to those aspects of the world that resist conforming to them.

With regard to the conception of dialectics this implies that dialectics is, in general, always negative dialectics.

[*Introduction C: Hegel and Adorno*] Concerning the philosophical positions I treat here I make the following claim: The conception of dialectics I am defending was developed by Hegel. It is possible to understand this conception of dialectics by reconstructing important steps within the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. This will enable us to recognize that dialectics is generated through a practice of self-criticism and will help us overcome a certain one-sidedness that characterizes Adorno's *Negative Dialectics*.

First Part: Self-Consummating Scepticism

[*A: The negativity of experience*] Experience is generated if claims to knowledge are negated and thereby both the conception of objects and the claims to knowledge related to the respective conception of objects are determined anew.

[*B: Conflicts as sublating the structure of experience*] The negativity of experience is sublated if individuals confront each other with different claims to knowledge. If this does not happen in the form of a mere collision (in which the individuals do not realize that they hold different claims to knowledge), but in the form of conflict (which means that the individuals reflect on the fact that they hold different claims to knowledge and try to deal with their differences), then negativity is produced by the individuals themselves.

[C: *Practices of self-criticism as essential for the realization of conflict*] A conflict presupposes that a common order is established which allows individuals to articulate criteria that enables them to explore the differences between their perspectives. Practices of self-criticism are the basis for such a common order. They allow the conflicting parties to become self-conscious of the ways in which they negate one another's norms.

Second Part: Exposing Oneself to Resistances to Norms

[D: *Practices of reflection*] The realization of dialectics presupposes practices of reflection because practices of reflection are the medium through which practices of self-criticism are realized. It is important that we not limit our notion of what constitutes practices of reflection to conceptual practices, but that we include artistic and religious practices as well, to name just a few.

[E: *Resistances of the world*] Practices of self-criticism induce a distance from the norms that govern particular historical-cultural practices. In doing so, they direct the practitioners' attention to aspects of the world that resist the simple application of the norms in question.

[F: *Dialectics as criticism through the world*] The criticism realized through dialectics is not only produced by individuals and their practices. If self-criticism is realized in the full sense, it implies that the world itself "criticizes" the norms governing our historical-cultural practices.

Third Part: Negative Dialectics Reconsidered

[G: *Adorno's abstraction*] The understanding of "metaphysical experiences" implied by Adorno's conception of negative dialectics is abstract. With his understanding of metaphysical experiences, Adorno opens our conceptual activities to the ways in which the world resists our normative, conceptual structures. However, he remains limited to the extent that he only articulates the negativity of these resistances from a theoretical perspective. This is the only way Adorno can think of a negativity that is not sublated.

[H: *Overcoming Adorno's abstraction with Hegel*] Hegel's conception of self-consummating scepticism allows us to take a practical perspective on negativity and its productivity. According to Hegel, resistances of the world are an irreducible aspect of the realization of dialectics as critical practice. The negativity of the resistances in question is not sublated, because the practice of self-consummating scepticism continually turns back to the ways in which the world resists our norms.