

Living Dialectically: an Examination of Negative Subjectivity in Light of the Idea of Revolt in Theory and Praxis

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Abstract

Adorno, writing after the revolting catastrophe of the holocaust, acknowledged the failure of Marxist thinking and practice to achieve a successful revolution. In his meditation on the failure of the revolution and the disaster that occurred under the banner of fascism, Adorno implores that we philosophically reexamine the events that took place in the twentieth century. Adorno elaborated his methodology by reexamining Hegel and Marx and thereby completing the theoretical dialectical process as expounded and examined in *Negative Dialectics*. Adorno's idea of subjectivity relies on the conceptual notion of reflection and as a result requests that the peoples of this society live dialectically. In the wake of the specter of a revolution that may never be fully achieved, what hope is there for the dialectically lived subject? Is there a possibility of revolt and change in theory as well as practice? Adorno's critique of society and theory provide the theoretical framework to examine these questions in order to pave a road for the conception of Adorno's idea of subjectivity and what it is to live dialectically.

Rain falls from the sky. It washes over the waste of our age. However, the rain has become poisonous, it permeates our very being, and yet reminds us of the way things are and the way they are supposed to be. Its dreariness can help sway the brain to realize its melancholic content, yet when the clouds clear, we are again swept away by rays of sunshine, which restore to us our loss and in the end allow us to suffer silently.

As the tides of history continue to turn in the midst of far-capitalism and in the wake of one of the most devastating atrocities ever committed by society (the Holocaust), humanity has never been more subjected to its unfreedoms than at the dawn of the twenty-first century. What once seemed to be a world at the brink of revolution has instead

become a collection of societies so comfortable with the exploitation of their own people that they have rendered themselves utterly class unconscious. Modern day capitalism petrifies the proletariat in a stagnant enclosure, ensuring that they will now become defensive of the current modes of production if the infrastructure and ideological state apparatuses of society are challenged. The act of thinking *other* (which means negatively and reflexively) in society has become as foreign to its peoples as the idea of freedom from the nine to five workday. One of the most prominent members of the Frankfurt School for Social Research, Theodor W. Adorno, wrote in his magnum opus *Negative Dialectics*, "Philosophy, which once seemed obsolete, lives on because the moment to realize it was missed."¹ Adorno, writing after the revolting catastrophe of the Holocaust, acknowledged the failure of Marxist thinking and practice to achieve a successful revolution. In his meditation on the failure of the revolution and the disaster that occurred under the banner of fascism, Adorno implores that we philosophically reexamine the events that took place in the twentieth century. Adorno elaborated his methodology by reexamining Hegel and Marx and thereby completing the theoretical dialectical process as expounded and examined in *Negative Dialectics*. In Adorno's arguably greatest work (and the series of lectures leading up to *Negative Dialectics*) he challenges what it means to be an individual caught in between the contradictions and tensions of modern society. Adorno's idea of subjectivity relies on the conceptual notion of reflection and as a result requests that the peoples of this society *live dialectically*. In the wake of the specter of a revolution that may never be fully achieved, what hope is there for the dialectically lived subject? Is there a possibility of revolt and change in theory as well as practice? Adorno's critique of society and theory provide the theoretical framework to examine these questions in order to pave a road for the conception of Adorno's idea of subjectivity and what it is to live dialectically.

Adorno's conception and further evaluation of his idea of subjectivity relies on the relationship between the conception of theory versus practice in an individual's life and the dialectical relationship in history between the *time* for theory and for practice. In today's world, "No theory escapes the marketplace. Each one is offered as a possibility among

¹ Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (London: Routledge, 1973), 3.

competing opinions; all are put up for choice; all are swallowed.”² Adorno’s relationship to practical action relies heavily on his own historic existence in conjuncture with Marxist philosophical theories (i.e. the consumption of theory as a commodity in practical living). In his lecture series, *Problems of Moral Philosophy*,³ Adorno addresses the current historical situation and the relationship in his own theory to praxis:

The situation may well demand instead that we resist the call of practicality with all our might in order ruthlessly to follow through an idea and its logical implications so as to see where it may lead. I would even say that this ruthlessness, the power of resistance that is inherent in the idea itself and that prevents it from letting itself be directly manipulated for any instrumental purposes whatsoever, this theoretical ruthlessness contains – if you will allow me this paradox – a practical element within itself. Today, practice – and I do not hesitate to express this in an extreme way – has made great inroads into theory, in other words, into the realm of new thought in which right behavior can be reformulated.⁴

In the wake of the holocaust, here, Adorno is suggesting that we attempt to resist *unreflective* practical action. In this relationship, an individual is called forth to present, in arms, a theoretical elaboration of the process between theory and practice. Adorno is insisting that in the historical situation of his own time, much practical action has been taken (specifically keeping in mind the communist revolutions of Russia and Italy, as well as the fascist domination in his own country of Germany) and the consequences have been severe for the witnesses of these revolutions. Adorno’s main thesis in abstaining from direct practical action lies in a contradictory relationship (without resolution) between the time for theory and the time for action. As is obvious, when Marx was writing his theoretical works, the time for practical action was in the air shortly after his demise in 1883. However, witnessing the result of these practical actions, Adorno believes his historical situation is now a decisive time for acting through theory (what the quote above is suggesting).

² Ibid., 4.

³ Theodor W. Adorno, *Problems of Moral Philosophy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001).

⁴ Ibid., 4.

It may seem contradictory for a thinker heavily influenced by Marxist theory to simply rely on theory when it would seem every period of time is a time for action. However, a deeper suggestion inherent in Adorno's presentation of this call for theory, is the idea of the dialectical individual and reflexivity. Using moral philosophy as the judgment in practical action, Adorno is suggesting a *negative* morality:

Moral philosophy in this sense means making a sustained effort—without anxieties or reservations—to achieve a true, conscious understanding of the categories of morality and of the questions that relate to the good life and practice in that higher sense, instead of continuing to imagine that this entire complex of issues must be excluded from the realm of theory on the grounds that it is practical.⁵

Therefore, moral philosophy provides a mediating element in the relationship between practical action and theory. Adorno is suggesting a negative morality in the sense that every action that is taken by an individual allows the individual to mediate himself between theory and his own practical action. This happens in expression through the reflection and mediation of the dialectics the individual is caught up in through his everyday living. This subject is no longer the *pure* subject of Heideggarian thinking, but rather, a subject who is in midst of the flow of dialectics (freedom and unfreedom, society and the individual, etc.). The process of reflection in the individual is to be attained in order to prevent certain catastrophes and past suffering that were experienced by people; Adorno wants us to remember those who have suffered in the past in order to prevent the same type of suffering for individuals in the future. Thus,

anything that we can call morality today merges into the question of the organization of the world. We might even say that the quest for the good life is the quest for the right form of politics, if indeed such a right form of politics lay within the realm of what can be achieved today.⁶

The relationship between theory and practice in Adorno is to construct a reflexively mediated subjectivity that when given a certain prac-

⁵ Ibid., 5.

⁶ Ibid., 176.

tical situation, acknowledges his relationship to the universalities in concepts inherent in ideology and his own individualistic situation and the bound-ness of the relationship between both of them to mediate and navigate his own way through the dialectical world.

Adorno elaborates on his methodology of the dialectic throughout his entire work, *Negative Dialectics*. The relationship between the practical and theoretical is only the first step in understanding Adorno's dialectics. It is therefore useful to elaborate the whole of the conceptual methodology in order to further illuminate Adorno's theory of subjectivity and the possibility of revolt as well as dialectical subjectivity given these certain constraints. In order to clarify these themes, it must be noted that the methodology of negative dialectics begins first and foremost with one specific thinker: Hegel. Adorno's criticism of Hegel lies in his idea of identity thinking and the specific identity of the Hegelian concept of Geist (or Spirit). According to Adorno on Hegel:

The name of dialectics says no more, to begin with, than that objects do not go into their concepts without leaving a remainder, that they come to contradict the traditional norm of adequacy. Contradiction is not what Hegel's absolute idealism was bound to transfigure it into: it is not of the essence in a Heraclitean sense. *It indicates the untruth of identity, the fact that the concept does not exhaust the thing conceived.*⁷

Adorno is stating above that the Hegelian dialectic falls victim to the 'negation of the negation' and therefore all of the contradictions present in the Hegelian dialectic are subsumed under the ultimate concept of Geist (Spirit) to include every contradiction of history in a positive sense. In the Hegelian system, each contradiction and negative aspect of a concept (the concepts relation to its unidenticality in relation to the thing the concept is identifying), where the concept is always in relationship with the fleeting factor of its 'non-identity,' does not correctly perform the 'true' dialectical method. This relationship is the non-identity of the concept, which never fully grasps that concept (its object). The Hegelian principle of Geist posits these concepts under an overruling positive thinking (the negation is performed for the eventual

⁷ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 5. Italics mine.

realization of Geist in the subject [the negation of the negation]). Therefore dialectics, in Adorno's sense, becomes shaped to exclude this positive identity through contradiction:

Contradiction is nonidentity under the aspect of identity; the dialectical primary of the principle of contradiction makes the thought of unity the measure of heterogeneity. As the heterogeneous collides with its limit it exceeds itself. Dialectics is the consistent sense of nonidentity.⁸

Adorno's new *negative* dialectics carries through the first intention of dialectics from Hegel, however, consistently mediates the concepts between the universal and particular and never subsumes them under the banner of positivity and identity, "Dialectics serves the end of reconciliation. It dismantles the coercive logical character of its own course."⁹ It appreciates the aspect of non-identity as well as the negative aspect of every concept in its inability to ever fully reach the object the concept describes.

The methodology of negative dialectics is influenced extensively by Adorno's Marxist materialism: dialectics is mediated in a society and the history of the people (and economic relations between them). The Hegelian concept of history is inverted in the way Marx intended and Adorno's anti-system rests in the dialectic of history, which acknowledges negativity and the mediation of the subject between the universal and the particular caught up in the midst of universality (obviously these are the forces of production among other forces that limit the individual). Adorno is also critical of the way the current cultural industry treats the relationship between man and nature; the concept is formed in correspondence with the domination of nature (under the current modes of production): "all concepts, even the philosophical ones, refer to non-conceptualities, because concepts on their part are moments of the reality that requires their formation, primarily the control of nature."¹⁰ The modes of production serve in the dialectical relationship of history and man to manufacture and promote concepts in order for humanity to control nature. For Adorno, these concepts always relate back to the non-

⁸ Ibid., 5.

⁹ Ibid., 6.

¹⁰ Ibid., 11.

conceptual and non-identity of their objects. In this way, the concept is ‘disenchanted’ from its original essentialist thinking. Reflection, in a dialectical sense, on any concept and situation allows an individual to encounter the non-identical aspect inherent in identity thinking and consequently to mediate that concept of reflection in the individual, “Reflection upon its own meaning [the concept] is the way out of the concept’s seeming being-in-itself as a unit of meaning.”¹¹ The negating process of negative dialectics is a realizing of the non-conceptual in the concept in order to transcend the concept (negatively). It is this aspect, given by reflection, which allows an individual and philosopher to create movement in relationship to a dialectical process (i.e. no synthesis, rather, an oscillation and tension between the concept and the non-concept or identity and non-identity in order to mediate and encourage a reflexive process in the individual and in the philosopher). Adorno’s methodology of negative dialectics therefore becomes a useful tool in examining the subject’s realm and activity of freedom (negative subjective freedom).

The idea of negative freedom as elaborated in the book, *Negative Dialectics*,¹² is initially explored in Adorno’s lecture series, *History and Freedom*.¹³ Adorno’s conception of freedom rests heavily upon the relationship between freedom and history (here Adorno’s Marxist background becomes explicitly illuminated through these texts). This relationship is further elaborated by the contingency between the particular (singular being; individual) and the universal (society, unfreedom, etc). It is this dialectic dynamic that defines Adorno’s conception of both history and freedom,

I believe that if we are able to appreciate the particularity of the universal, in this instance of progressive rationality, we shall understand a little about the dialectics of the universal and particular as a structure of history.¹⁴

¹¹ Ibid., 12.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Theodor W. Adorno, *History and Freedom* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006).

¹⁴ Ibid., 13.

Adorno then goes on to suggest that this conception of the universal in history is an attempt of humanity's "rationality" to further the cause of the domination of nature. "This domination of nature was not self-reflective but asserted its control over its so-called materials by subsuming, classifying, subordinating and otherwise cutting them short."¹⁵ This system of the domination of nature extends to manifest in forms of control and unfreedom in human "rationality" thereby limiting human freedom,

antagonism, conflict, is in fact postulated in this principle of dominant universality, of unreflecting rationality, in precisely the same way as antagonism to a subservient group is postulated in a system of rule.¹⁶

This system of rule progresses in history through "rationality" and, "in its unreflective form [rationality] is at bottom nothing other than the exploitation of nature transferred to men and continuing to work in them."¹⁷ This universality of rationality to overcome nature and subdue it is one of the working practices in the dialectic between the powers of the universal over the particular in history. The domination of nature thereby is used as an example of the working of history to *weigh down* the individual freedom of the particular being. This dynamic between the universal and the particular is fully realized in modern sciences. Adorno further explores the relationship between the universal forces inherent in history and the particular's freedom in relationship to those forces. Adorno comes to the conclusion: "In this pre-critical consciousness the dominant, prevailing universality can no longer be equated with the *meaning* of history or indeed with any *positive* value."¹⁸ Thereby we reach a negative history and therefore a *negative* freedom.

This negative freedom and negative history are further related in an individual through Adorno's idea of 'identity thinking.' It is in correlation to an individual's freedom in *history* (the main category of the individual) that dialectical philosophy clarifies certain aspects of our limited freedom. The discontinuity of history and the idea of a universal history

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., 16.

¹⁸ Ibid., 17.

are both at work in the limiting factors of an individual being; history is caught in a dialectical relationship between a seemingly continuous sense of history and a discontinuity which establishes again, a further relationship between the particular and the universal. The role of identity in Adorno corresponds with this notion of the particular and the universal. In relationship to history, and therefore freedom, it is historical practices which subsume and submit the individual to a power relationship of thinking in line with the universal and which do not mediate these overwhelming universal powers between the individual and the universal. This relationship is dialectically examined through identity and non-identity (in history and freedom):

The position is not that an identity rules which also contains non-identity, but non-identity is a non-identity of the identical and the non-identical. Thus non-identity includes what gives history its unity, what enables it to accommodate itself to the concept as well as what doesn't. For the very things that subjugate and submit, these very acts of subjugation and submission in which identity is torn apart, forge the identity of history of which we speak and which we must describe as a negative identity.¹⁹

Thus, recognizing the power relationships (that the universal carries over to the particular individual in not only the reconstruction of history but also of the freedom, which an individual can invoke) becomes a dialectical manifestation between individual acts and the power structures (universals) that bombard and attempt to subsume the individual (particular). It is ideological and identity practices that create a web of dialectical unfreedoms imposed as a category of the universal over the particular individual in his particular action. Ideology is portrayed as if it were in a state of peace attempting to set individuals toward the projected blissfulness of a universal history and *progress* while dominating not only nature and the full dialectical nature of the human individual, but also restricting and limiting the individual's freedom in the universal unfreedoms in which he is caught up: "This is then represented as if it were a state of reconciliation in which people lived together in harmony while in reality society is full of power struggles."²⁰

¹⁹ Ibid., 92.

²⁰ Ibid., 95.

Therefore, the individual in relationship to identity thinking is led to believe that these universal powers (represented in history by the modes of production and the infrastructure of the economy) bind the individual to a set of unfreedoms in which their freedoms are restricted just by existing in the world of production and the world of culture. It is when an individual defines himself by these power relationships that he steps inside and seeps himself in the deluded relations of the universal domination principle thereby giving up his own reflexive dialectical relationship to these unfreedoms and subsuming himself in the midst of the great lie of the universal. It is in this way that the philosopher becomes a mystic and gives himself up to *myth*.

This conception of history and freedom are (as mentioned above) an explicitly *negative* history and freedom: a freedom that is always in the dialectical relationship between the universal powers that be and the particular individuality of the person involved in these power structures. The question for the subjective individual in Adorno's philosophical methodology then becomes: what *is* freedom (aside from being 'negative'), if it is always in a dialectical relationship, in the individual, between its unfreedom and the freedom that is supposedly allowed to enable itself? In the subjective dialectical individual, freedom then becomes more limiting but also more spontaneous and empowering once this freedom is exercised to its full potentiality. Adorno redefines his idea of subjectivity again in the lectures on freedom and history:

freedom appears to us as a subjective quality, as if the judgment about whether freedom exists is one that falls exclusively to the subjective mind, this insight enables us to see how dependent freedom is on objective realities and to gauge the extent to which we are capable of influencing the real world with its overpowering, structured institutions by what we do as formally free subjective agents.²¹

Therefore the subjective, dialectical being is always caught in these power structures, however, through reflection these power structures can be realized in the individual consciousness. Thus Adorno remarks on the dialectically subjective being in relationship to morality (what it means to exercise and invoke our freedom is set about by the morality of the

²¹ Ibid., 204.

dialectical subject) more extensively:

It is a product of history [morality] in the sense that the categories of freedom and unfreedom are themselves the products of history; and in the sense that the entire sphere of morality only came into being historically together with the human subject. If we consider the amorality of the world of myth, we can see that what matters is not the idea that people used to have different ideals about morality –that is the kind of claim made by trivial popular psychology and the like – but that at that time, thanks to the global situation of the human species and the stage of development reached by human society, the entire sphere of a stable, self-contained and responsible subjectivity had not yet emerged...we cannot simply deny the existence of a separation of individual and society, which ultimately led to the problem of individual freedom.²²

In this quote we see Adorno's idea of subjectivity start to refine itself through the development of his ideas of history and freedom. The 'self-contained and responsible' subjectivity Adorno wishes to aim for is the existence of a dialectical self, awakened to the process of his own freedom in the schema of his unfreedom and the dialectical relationship between the individual (particular) and the structured forces (universals). Adorno pushes his idea further by addressing the link between history and freedom,

and in this way the link between history and the question of freedom must be seen to be more than a matter simply of an ever-changing content. The link between the two must lie instead in the constitution of the problem of freedom itself.²³

The nature of history is not a stagnant process, it is a dialectical process and it is the idea of Adorno's subjectivity that calls for a dialectical, self examined individual who is caught up in the dynamic of freedom and history. This dynamic is also in relationship to what Adorno defines as the universal and particular situation of an individual. This situation of the dialectical relationship of self that has the inherent ability to maximize our potentiality of freedom through *spontaneous* acts of

²² Ibid., 207.

²³ Ibid., 208.

history which redefine, restructure, and redistribute the course of history (universal) on a macrocosmic level and redistribute and refine the individual (particular) on a microcosmic level.

The dialectical conception of freedom becomes constituted in the act or redistribution of activity theoretically as well as practically, by mediation and spontaneity. Adorno first defines spontaneity in *History and Freedom* suggesting that spontaneous actions are in fact involuntary and non-thoughtful:

The actual conceptual achievements, by which I mean the achievements thanks to which the world becomes for me the world in which our experience has its being, these achievements are not so much my acts, in other words, conscious activities, but are more like objective, involuntary functions that occur even before any particular mental activities have taken place within the world as constituted.²⁴

Adorno is suggesting that the spontaneous act is an act in which the individual does not consciously pursue this theoretical or practical action: it is an act that is completely involuntary and unconscious. However, using Adorno's first introduction of spontaneity, it can be determined that the spontaneous act can be directed unconsciously. However, Adorno, leaving out the possibility of the hopefulness of the spontaneous act, considers it more of a drive rather than a consciously directed act in contradiction to the universality of the powers of the structures of society and concepts. He, however, goes on to say,

The concept of spontaneity, which might be described as the organ or medium of freedom, refuses to obey the logic of non-contradiction, and is instead a unity of mutually contradictory elements. It points, therefore, to a strict conception of dialectic.²⁵

Adorno is suggesting first and foremost that spontaneous action and thinking is an activation of the dialectic and therefore the key component in living dialectically. Although not inherently promoting (and at first) the mediated spontaneous act, an act, which is induced, predicted,

²⁴ Ibid., 214.

²⁵ Ibid., 217.

and predicated by the dialectical subjectivity, Adorno remarks:

As the human subject separates itself off and becomes a single being, and defines itself as a single being, it must of course, if it is to defend its individuality against others that crowd in on it, insulate itself against the consciousness of its own entanglement in general.²⁶

The conclusion Adorno leads this thinking to is the “monadological veil” in which an individual attempts to salvage his relationship to himself as a neurological ‘obsession’ of sorts in order to retain his individuality in light of the unfreedom and universalities that bear down upon this individual. However, as Adorno remarks (in the quote above), a consciousness attempts to fight off these universalities which leads the subjective individual to the conclusion that a subject is “simultaneously both free and unfree.”²⁷ Therefore, Adorno’s idea of subjectivity in relation to spontaneity remains inadequately unexamined.

It is this notion of spontaneity that is the key to examining how it is to live dialectically. Applying the methodology of negative dialectics, Adorno’s examination of the subject leads to a dialectical relationship between every aspect of an individual’s being in the world. His ethic is a *negative* ethics, his history is a *negative* history, his freedom is a *negative* freedom, but what do all of these *negative* reflections mean for the revolutionary individual in his exercise of revolt? What do these relationships mean for the freedom of the individual? It is again Adorno’s notion of spontaneity and mediation that will further develop the progression of the dialectical life. When Adorno attempted to complete the Hegelian dialectic in a negative sense, he repositioned the dialectic to be a process much like an oscillating circle of reflexivity in relationship to the concepts and situations a being finds himself in, in the world and in theory. This constellation and spiraling notion of dialectical activity, naturally leads to the conclusion that we are caught up in a restricted relationship to everything. Where there is a concept there is always a lack, where there is freedom there is always a lack, etc., and these spiraled constitutions of the world (dialectic constitutions) catch the individual in history in a profound way. The structures of power in a given society

²⁶ Ibid., 217.

²⁷ Ibid., 218.

always weight down upon the individual and produce and reserve our relationship to our own being. Adorno acknowledges these structures as inherently dialectic and presents the individual with a dialectical being in the world. Although Adorno does not take his theory this far, it seems he may even be suggesting that a person who realizes his dialectical subsumption in the constitution of these structures of power, is given a unique opportunity, or even by the realization of these structures and the individuals relationship to them can develop a revolutionary consciousness or the ability to ascertain and make better decisions in the real world as a result of the awakening of his consciousness. Therefore, the initial act of negative dialectics, and the theoretical constitution of the methodology of living by negative dialectics, first starts with this notion of theoretical and therefore practical ‘awakening.’

The study of Adorno’s methodology is attempting to not only complete the Hegelian dialectic, but also pointing out certain conceptions of power and the structures of these powers in the given world and through the culture industry. The conception of freedom in *Negative Dialectics*²⁸ (as explicated and commented on above) leads, again, to a dialectical conception of our being in the world as constituted between the dialectic of freedom and unfreedom. This relationship becomes a *circle* first and foremost because Adorno’s idea of subjectivity is constituted in the concept of mediation or reflection. This conception involves, rather than a synthesis of the antithesis and thesis, an oscillation between the thesis and antithesis, therefore providing Adorno with the key to his dialectical process. This *negativity* is always the realization of the negative aspects of the universal and the particular reflecting back on each other and constantly being mediated by each other in the given situation of the world. It is in this way no longer a positive movement through history and being, but rather a *true* dialectic movement, with the concept of universality always falling back upon the concept of particularity and the concept of non-identity and the non-conceptual always mediating the concept and identity without subsuming these things under a positive notion or a *meaning* such as Hegel’s Geist or Heidegger’s *pure* subject. This *reflexive circle* (dialectic) in the particular individual allows the realization through reflection of the potential for freedom.

²⁸Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*.

Adorno's examination of freedom (as described above) leads the individual subject to hope in freedom as a refusal, or a structural reexamination and reflection in the dialectic of being (being in the world, not in the Heideggerian sense). As an individual caught up in the dialectic (this includes the dialectic between universal and particular and other specific notions of the dialectic examined above) of the world, the first step in exercising one's freedom in the wake of unfreedom lies in the ability to consciously act spontaneous. Adorno promotes the idea of spontaneity as an unconscious ability to redirect power structures in the course of history (and therefore individual acts of spontaneity in the individual's life are acts which redistribute the dialectics of everyday living in a new way). However, Adorno fails to complete his method of freedom by remaining quiet on the ability of a person to be revolutionary or to even consider the notion of revolt in one's own consciousness. This lack of address on Adorno's part may have played a particular role in his own life and history, however, it can be seen that what may be aimed for in negative dialectics in relation to living dialectically is the conscious ability of spontaneity and the resulting awakening of the revolutionary being as a product of realizing the dialectics of everyday life, theory, and practice. Through the realization of the structures of a society, what is an individual to do with his dialectical contingency of living? The structures of the *circular* dialectic correspond to a certain conception of being and it is through the reflexive structure of oscillating between the particular and universal and self-examining one's own relationship that true moments of spontaneity occur. Therefore, spontaneity relies heavily on the notion of realizing these structures of power; it is in this way, that Adorno himself performed an intellectual task of spontaneity when he wrote *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*²⁹ with his friend and colleague Max Horkheimer.

Both of these thinkers engaged in a critical evaluation of the situation in the world, of the modes of production and capitalism through the unveiling of structures of power of the culture industry as a whole. Therefore, this text, which serves to illuminate a consciousness about the modes of production it is caught up in, in a given culture, reflects

²⁹ Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic Of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments* (Stanford CA, Stanford University Press, 2004).

back onto the reader the ability Adorno had for *awakening* the consciousness to its unfreedoms. It is this process of criticality examining the relationships of unfreedom and structures of society (especially in the far-capitalistic world), or what Horkheimer termed, *critical theory* (which is itself a practical application especially in the writing and distributing of texts), that was an act of intellectual spontaneity which also provides the key to what Adorno's own theory should lead in the subjectivity of an individual awakened to his own dialectical being in the world. Using *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*³⁰ as an example, it can be seen that the restructuring through the conscious act of spontaneity and reflection redistributes the dialectic dynamic that the powers of control have over the individual in hope for the actualization of freedom against these powers, through revolt. Although Adorno himself seems rather without much hope for a real Marxist revolution which will distribute the powers and allow for the eventual realization of freedom in every being, with no immanent practical revolution on the rise, the individual is left with spontaneous acts of awakened revolutionary consciousness which redistribute and examine the actual dialectical structure of being in the world and of the ideas which present themselves as theory in the world. Revolutionary consciousness consists in this dialectical realization of the linear-circular dialectic (negative dialectics). It is in this restructuring of the individual dialectical situation to the social dialectical dimension that enables the maximization of the potentiality for freedom through revolt against dominating practices.

Another aspect of Adorno's concept of subjectivity rests heavily upon the concepts of utopia and suffering. These two concepts pave the way for what Adorno wanted to be eventually a negative moral philosophy following the methodology of negative dialectics. These two concepts play a key role in determining the type of subjectivity Adorno felt may not be possible yet, but which, in the future, could attain some sort of further being if we prevent the past suffering in history and remember those who have suffered in order to determine what exactly humanity lacks; to determine the qualities of humanity that are not quite human (through past suffering) negatively, in order to discuss what we *could* be someday. It is here that Adorno is suggesting the conception of human-

³⁰ Ibid.

ity as still in ‘pre-history’ (a term borrowed from Marx). We must become more human by reaching out and aiming for utopia in a negative sense. Adorno states,

What I am describing to you is philosophical depth regarded subjectively—namely, not as the justification or amelioration of suffering, but as the expression of suffering, something which understands the necessity of suffering in the very act of expression.³¹

Thus, Adorno wants suffering to be expressed in subjectivity and in a specific way. He calls for suffering as expression in and through *history*. Since the dialectical being is always caught in the midst of his history, this suffering must be a remembrance of the past atrocities as well as the expression through a negative morality that aims for the concept of humanity. Humanity the idea, for Adorno, is the concept of utopia that we must strive for to reach our full ‘human-ness.’ Learning from past suffering dictates the categories of things that still make us “not yet human” (for example we realize through wars that it seems we should not kill other human beings) and teach us what it could mean to actually become human. This not-yet of Adorno’s philosophy is a key in thinking about how it is we are to live dialectically and what this hope of living dialectically may achieve from Adorno’s negative morality and negative dialectics.

Now the question remains as to whether or not living dialectically is possible in other ways rather than the direct awakened consciousness of the individual being. In the first instance, following Adorno’s own theory, the unconscious spontaneous project (which still does occur in the course of history and in individual subjectivities—however, the aim of the ‘awakened’ process is to *consciously* redistribute and realize the dialectic relationship of the structures of society) is obviously one that occurs in history without the direct awakening of the consciousness of the individual subject (those peoples in history who have never read revolutionary material still contribute to the restructuring of society—for example, Oskar Schindler’s anti-identity thinking during the second world war in contraposition to the Nazi regime). However, beside the unconscious act of spontaneity and the conscious disrupting social spon-

³¹ Theodor W. Adorno, *Lectures on Negative Dialectics* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008), 108.

taneity, there remains, as it seems an outlet for redistributing the dynamic of the dialectical situation. The outlet for this dialectic redirection is inherent in the conception of the work of art.

The aesthetic dimension of reality presents itself as an outlet for the revolutionary individual in a society that doesn't seem able to release itself from the bonds of capitalism and engage in an actual political revolution. In his lecture course, *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*, Adorno addresses this issue of aesthetics (as well in his posthumous work, *Aesthetic Theory*)³² and the methodology of negative dialectics by stating:

Music theory really teaches only how a movement begins and ends, nothing about the movement itself or its development. By analogy, instead of reducing philosophy to categories, the task in a sense is to compose it.³³

This remark is crucial in understanding what role aesthetics plays in the development and analogy of the methodology of negative dialectics to encourage revolt. Adorno is using the example of music theory here to suggest that philosophy and thinking should encourage and engage with how a movement takes place thereby much like a musician or artisan uses the rules of music theory or artistic training to, in a sense, create the movement of the production of the painting or song. In this way the artist mimics what Adorno wants from philosophy: to reject the concept of stagnant categories and in turn use the methodology of dialectics to explain, describe, and carry forth history. It is in this sense, the artisan and art, as process, encourages an individual to engage in a dialectical artistic endeavor which in turn plays a heavy role in the redistribution of structures and reassessing the dialectic, therefore producing revolutionary movements and moments of revolt by the very process of artistic creation itself. Thus, art engages directly in a moment of dialectic living and can also awaken those exploring artistic realms of life to engage in this same dialectical process thereby reinforcing itself as a form of resistance and nay-saying to engagement with categories and static thinking. Through the aesthetic moment an individual contributes

³² Adorno, Theodor W. *Aesthetic Theory* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997)

³³ Adorno, *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*, 148.

directly to redistributing the structures of power and engages in a free act of creation despite these powers that attempt to subsume the individual. Art then becomes a weapon in which to resist the complete domination (absent mediation) of the universal over the particular. Although an art piece may not, by itself contribute to a practical revolution, the act of engaging in the artistic process is an important experience (along with spontaneous action, as described above) of an individual's engagement with an act of revolt and revolutionary consciousness.

Adorno wants philosophy to get back on track and he argues that in order to do this one must practice and be aware of the methodology of negative dialectics. Negative dialectics is, in fact, a philosophy of interpretation and Adorno wants interpretation (non-stagnant) to insert itself back into philosophical discourse by thinking *other*: to use concepts to think through concepts, while at the same time identifying the non-conceptual and moving philosophically in order to de-mystify myth. Adorno calls us to move forward through the concept of utopia of humanity, which is what does not exist but remains an idea *outside* the current reality. Negative dialectics offers philosophers the ability to judge concepts, aim for something that negates the current reality and idea of concepts, take into play the idea of the non-conceptual, and overall gives us a methodology to think *other* and bring philosophy back towards movement to allow hope for the possibility of a different moral world with less suffering and more freedom (in the dialectical sense). Therefore, Adorno's methodology of negative dialectics (again, the 'completion' of the Hegelian dialectic) constitutes, in its actualization in relation to subjectivity, a means and a hope for the individual to awaken his consciousness and to play the game of resistance in the wake of past suffering. Although this resistance may not lead to any practical, overall revolution, living dialectically is an important component in the search for freedom in the midst of overwhelming power structures that attempt to assert defining practices and their different ideological unfreedoms upon us. Thus, living dialectically is a source of hope for a future that could possibly lead us all to freedom, for as Walter Benjamin once astutely put, "It is only for the sake of those without hope, that hope is given to us."³⁴

³⁴ Cited in Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*. 2nd Edition (New York: Routledge, 1991), 257.