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9. Adorno on the Destruction of Memory

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In Theodor W. Adorno's philosophy, memory is analyzed as a form of knowledge that has become problematic. Adorno argues that what we can know through memory is threatened with eclipse by certain allegedly more rational forms. That eclipse, though, amounts to an act of forgetting that is, as he puts it, equivalent to a "destruction of memory."¹ Now obviously not all events or all things can be remembered or ought to be remembered. Adorno's considerations of the issue, in fact, pivot specifically both on the *loss of individuality* and on the danger of forgetting *human suffering*. This places memory at the very center of Adorno's program in which critique opens up the possibility of the reconciliation of subject and object. Yet the idea has received almost no systematic attention within the scholarship on his work.²

Adorno's analysis of the problem of memory is stimulated by the atrocities of the National Socialist era, though what he offers is not simply a sociohistorical analysis of the past. Adorno's contention is that the intellectual and spiritual conditions that generated those events persist. In postwar Germany, however, they take the form of precluding an adequate remembrance of the past. His thesis is that contemporary society does not possess the resources which would allow for a full consciousness of what happened in this period: it lacks the capacity to acknowledge the fact of suffering. And the absence of this consciousness is, for Adorno, a forgetting, a destruction of memory. It is not forgetting in the common-sense meaning of the term, that is, when something slips from the mind. Rather it is the effect of a limited consciousness that has acquired an incapacity for knowing reality as it is. Adorno presents this incapacity as an irrationality, in that to be committed to a misrepresentation of reality is a mark of irrationality if that misrepresentation is incapable of being corrected by countervailing evidence.

In "The Meaning of Working Through the Past," a widely discussed paper of 1959—which reached a broad audience when delivered

as a radio lecture the following year—Adorno lists a number of strategies adopted by those who would seek to reduce the significance of the Holocaust, strategies that Adorno regards as acts of forgetting. Among the strategies are (1) analytical subterfuge in which the notion of “guilt-complex” comes to seem to be a strange, unfounded psychological state of the Germans somehow disconnected from the events, as though there was nothing *really* to be guilty about (*WTP*, 90/556, 91/557); (2) euphemism: “the universally adopted, almost good-natured expression *Kristallnacht*” (*WTP*, 90/556); (3) feigned ignorance of what was happening at the time, which Adorno believes was really either “an impassive and apprehensive indifference” or simply false given that “the determined enemies of National Socialism knew quite early exactly what was going on” (*WTP*, 90/556); (4) attempted moral equivalences that cancel the debt, for example, “as though Dresden compensated for Auschwitz,” “the administrative murder of millions of people” (*WTP*, 90/556); (5) shifting responsibility: “A lax consciousness consoles itself with the thought that such a thing could surely not have happened unless the victims had in some way or another furnished some kind of instigation” (*WTP*, 91/557).

One might regard these claims as essentially the astute observations of a social commentator. But Adorno’s analysis relies on something deeper. In attempting to answer the question about how a group could “remove . . . from memory” murderous acts of unprecedented enormity, reaching for a panoply of alternative explanations and exculpations, we soon find that Adorno’s views are supported by a series of complex philosophical theses (*WTP*, 89/555). These various theses are deployed in an effort to understand what Adorno sees as modern irrationality, an absence of reason that makes it possible to forget in this specific sense.

Adorno’s claim about the irrationality of forgetting emerges from within the framework of his “negative dialectics”—his philosophical system, or “anti-system,” as he preferred to consider it³—in which he sets out his notions of non-identity and the experience of contradiction. It is through the experience of contradiction, the experience of non-identity, that, according to Adorno, we come up against the limitations of our judgment or concept of an event or object. Only through that experience, Adorno tells us, might the remembrance of human suffering be possible. Through the experience of contradiction we might come to abandon glib or casual conceptualizations of that suffering and of events irreducible to concepts by placing them against the enormity of the events themselves. In order then to understand Adorno’s use of the concept of memory we have to appreciate the philosophical framework within which this concept becomes intelligible in the unique form Adorno gives it.

This chapter will set out first the philosophical framework within which the concept of memory operates and then examine Adorno’s specific application of the concept to the postwar German situation. There is also a further dimension. Adorno posits that engagement with certain artworks can provide us with the sort of experience which is required for what he calls “reconciliation,” the positive appreciation of what is other than us.

His critical theory argues that the possibility of this reconciliation—of the absence of antagonism—between individuals or between individual and society is not predicated on any romantic recollection of better times, of memories which might serve as a model for harmonious relations. Interestingly, Adorno proposes that a *denial of certain memories* is the first stage of the process of reconciliation. An analysis of this idea will be the third part of the chapter.

Experience, Affinity, and Guilt: The Philosophical Framework

Adorno's negative dialectic can be considered as a reformulation of the Hegelian theory of experience. Hegel puts forward what for Adorno is an exemplary and by no means utopian model of experience—non-utopian in that it can be achieved under certain conditions—in which experience is understood as a process of intellectual sophistication where beliefs are tested, revised, or rejected.⁴ This process is one in which the concepts of the knower attempt to capture the object without reduction, prejudice, or distortion, and it is thus a process of active rationality. This is driven by a desire for “affinity” in which the subject relates, as Adorno sees it, non-antagonistically toward the object. Reconciliation of subject and object is, for Adorno, the affinity of subject and object in the activity of knowledge: “[The] postulate of a capacity to experience the object—and discrimination is the experience of the object turned into a form of subjective reaction—provides a haven for the mimetic element of knowledge, for the element of elective affinity between the knower and the known” (*ND*, 45/55). Only in this way is knowledge of the object—as opposed to knowledge imposed on the object—possible: “Without affinity,” Adorno remarks, “there is no truth” (*ND*, 270/267). Hence, for Adorno, experience in its fullest realization would be reconciliation of subject and object in that the object would no longer be suppressed, neglected, or forgotten, under convenient concepts.

In Hegel's philosophy the concept of experience is explained and demonstrated in the context of the self-unfolding of the Absolute. It is thereby an essential dimension of Hegel's systematic and developmental account of the concepts of philosophy, society, religion, and art. Adorno excises this concept from its original systematic context in order to reveal what he sees as its potential as an explanation of rational agency in which an individual determined to come to terms with his or her beliefs, to subject them to criticism, to assess them against reality, might operate. Against the realization of rational agency, however, is what Adorno sees as the consciousness-determining influence of contemporary society. Adorno claims that modern society determines the criterion by which we evaluate truth claims. In this way it determines the norms of reasonableness, of what counts as a good or sufficient explanation. (For example, in a racist society certain underlying views of relative racial superiority produce a consciousness to which claims consistent with that underlying view seem to be reasonable.) In this state of “false

consciousness” in contemporary society, a dominant criterion of reason, according to Adorno, is that what is true is *appearance*: any investigation of relations or systems of power that are not apparent seem to be exercises of “speculation” or “metaphysics” and certainly not of valid knowledge. For Adorno it is simply a contemporary stipulation that “will only allow appearance to be valid.”⁵ It follows from this that in a society determined by false consciousness, experience, in the sense critically appropriated from Hegel, does not occur because “false consciousness” does not—because it cannot—subject social norms to scrutiny, and the subject is left with a limited appreciation of objects (in that objects are reduced to appearances). The “withering of experience,”⁶ then, is at variance with a “critical consciousness”—synonymous in Adorno’s work with a fully experiencing consciousness—in that it does not have the capacity to criticize the norms that, without ever being explicit, nevertheless determine the societal life in which we live.⁷

In contrast to what he describes as a “reified consciousness”—one not open to change—Adorno proposed the attitude of negative dialectics. He argues that negative dialectics critically maintains a “determinate negation” in which what was once assumed to be the truth of the object is problematized through our reflections on the adequacy of our concepts. In this way the complex determinations of an object come to be recognized. This determinate negation comes about through experience of contradiction—of non-identity—where our concepts do not meet up with objects. This explains why Adorno regards determinate negation as criticism (*ND*, 159/161). It is criticism of the norms that provide us with the criterion of valid knowledge.

Dialectical rationality, as we might term the model of experience defended by Adorno, is a fidelity to the object: it is the constant self-conscious critique of truth claims. It commits itself to what Adorno sees as the power of contradiction as it attempts to come to terms with an object. Contradiction is not a term of logic or of rhetoric, however: it is a requirement of reason in the face of a world that aspires toward totality. And in this regard a fully reflexive experience is marked by responsiveness to contradiction that the experiencing agent acknowledges as such, as a mark of the failure of his or her concepts to categorize the object: “The less identity can be assumed between subject and object, the more contradictory are the claims made upon the cognitive subject” (*ND*, 21/41). This is a contradiction between the concept and the object, the object being other and more than what the concept describes it as. “Experience forbids the resolution in the unity of consciousness of whatever appears contradictory. . . . Contradiction cannot be brought under any unity without manipulation, without the insertion of some wretched cover concepts that will make the crucial differences vanish” (*ND*, 152/152). The dialectical conception of rationality contrasts with everyday, socially determined rationality in which, allegedly, contradiction is not recognized. In this context contradiction is an act of resistance: “To proceed dialectically means to think in contradictions, for the sake of the contradiction once experienced in the thing, and against that contradiction. A

contradiction in reality, it is a contradiction against reality” (*ND*, 144–45/148). It is a “contradiction against reality” because it aims to confront the totalizing drive of what Adorno laments as the “positivistic” consciousness of contemporary society, which is incapable of recognizing the antagonisms that exist between subject and object (the “contradiction in reality”), between individual and individual, individual and society, allowing a compromised version of social cohesion to gain currency. This systematically required cohesion is in no sense reconciliation.

For Adorno critical theory is the business of uncovering the contradictions that sustain society in its current form, and thereby raising them to a critical consciousness. A consciousness of these contradictions contributes, indeed, to the ending of the conditions that require contradictions. The logic of negative dialectics is therefore what Adorno calls “a logic . . . of disintegration” between concept and reality (*ND*, 145/148). In such a condition the irrational effort to “dispute away the distinction between idea and reality” (*ND*, 335–36/329) would no longer obtain. It employs the category of contradiction to bring about the “confrontation of concept and thing” (*ND*, 144/148). It analyzes alleged self-evident truths and “seeks to grasp, through their form and meaning, the contradiction between their objective idea and that pretension. . . . [It] seeks to transform this knowledge into a heightened perception of the thing itself.”⁸ The sense of the “thing,” the “matter,” the “object,” is heightened by our experience of failure to encapsulate it. And further: “It is up to dialectical cognition to pursue the inadequacy of thought and thing, to experience it in the thing” (*ND*, 153/156).

However, it is important to recognize that in Adorno the motivation to experience the inadequacy of our concepts is not simply the product of philosophy. That is to say, although we can point out, through philosophical reason, the non-identity of concept and object, the motivation to do so is historical. What Adorno tells us, in fact, is that non-identity is an experience with existential dimensions. It is certainly more than what one commentator thinks of as a “logical metaphor.”⁹ He claims that it is the experience of *guilt* that pushes him toward the idea of negative dialectics, toward a philosophy that attempts to retrieve non-identity. Adorno holds that it is because philosophy has hitherto failed to negotiate the question of the individuality of that which does not fall under concepts that negative dialectics is needed. This requires philosophical recognition of that which remains beyond conceptualization; namely, the individual, the non-universal, the non-identical. Adorno sees recognition of non-identity as one motivated by “guilt,” by the sense that part of what the object is has been neglected by our unreflexive knowledge schemas. As he writes: “Dialectics is the consistent sense of non-identity. It does not begin by taking a stand-point. My thought is driven to it by its own inevitable insufficiency, by my guilt of what I am thinking” (*ND*, 5/17). The reflective consciousness is marked by awareness of the inadequacy of its conceptualization, and that leads us to a sense of what the object—the non-identical in our experience—might be: “Our thinking heeds a potential that awaits in its opposite [*das Gegenüber*], and it unconsciously obeys the idea

of making amends to the pieces for what it has done. In [objective] philosophy this unconscious tendency becomes conscious" (*ND*, 19 [translation modified] / 30–31).

The idea of guilt in Adorno's philosophy points to the obligation of thinking, as Adorno puts it, to do "justice to reality" (*ND*, 41/51). "Doing justice," "making amends," "guilt"—all these concepts point in the direction of a mode of knowledge in which the individual moments of history are not to be forgotten. From this, then, we have the idea that philosophy needs a reconstruction of its form in order to negotiate without antagonism or violence the essentially dynamic and particular nature of reality. And this programmatic imperative relates the core ideas of negative dialectics with the problem of memory.

The critical conception of memory is applied, at its most philosophically abstract, to Kant's efforts to deal with the "thing-in-itself." This analysis appears in Adorno's lecture course of 1959 on Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. In Lecture 16 he explores Kant's distinction between metaphysical knowledge and the kind of knowledge conveyed in synthetic *a priori* propositions. This is the distinction that grants preeminence to one form of knowledge—synthetic *a priori*—over another: "What Kant shares with positivism is the insistence on the finite nature of knowledge and the rejection of metaphysics as a 'wild extravagance.'"¹⁰ But unlike positivism, Kant, Adorno claims, recognizes that there is something beyond the realm of synthetic *a priori* propositions about which we must continue to ask regardless of the lack of certainty attaching to our answers. Adorno devises the term "block" to express Kant's dualistic notion in which experience is divided up. The object as it is in itself, as opposed to how it is as we know it through our categories of understanding and forms of intuition, is retained, albeit inconsistently, by Kant. But Adorno describes this as "a kind of metaphysical mourning, a kind of memory of what is best, of something that we must not forget, but that we are nevertheless compelled [by Kant] to forget."¹¹ The object as it is in itself cannot be deleted from consciousness, yet it can be allowed no role within the space of reasons set out by Kant. Nevertheless, unlike the "positivists" Kant cannot retreat from "the memory of the questions philosophy formerly asked."¹² However, Kant's response to the "memory" is dissatisfying. He turns away from the attempt to achieve the identity of subject and object by separating them into different realms: The world as it is known (the active subject) is non-identical with the world as it is in itself (the object devoid of all relations to the subject). The latter is retained, according to Adorno, merely because of Kant's memory of what lies outside philosophical systems of reason. He states: "The decisive feature of Kant is that the anamnesis, the power of memory, thrives because that identity is not possible."¹³ This is an interesting account of Kant's motivations, and no doubt it casts Kant within a set of concerns that would have been quite alien to his intentions. But of particular relevance in the present context is that Adorno, again, makes the connection between "memory" and the relation to an object that might be forgotten. Memory is the preservation of a

kind of knowledge, one that we struggle with, since it is at the margins of what we can conventionally know: it is threatened by an allegedly rational knowledge of the object.

Memory and Working Through the Past

This philosophical framework, which reached its culminating point in the *Negative Dialectics* of 1966, thoroughly informs Adorno's concrete considerations of the destruction of memory in postwar Germany, as we can see in "The Meaning of Working Through the Past." The phrase "working through the past" was used in postwar Germany initially as a challenge to the German people to think of what had been done during the reign of National Socialism and to consider how they might somehow move forward from that point knowing how never again to repeat its evils. But Adorno feared that instead the challenge had been subverted by the perpetrators and their sympathizers into a casual "attitude that everything should be forgotten and forgiven" (*WTP*, 89/555). For Adorno, this forgetting—this "effacement of memory" (*WTP*, 92/558)—is a failure of reason, an inability to understand the evidence, an incapacity to realize the contradictory nature of one's beliefs. Through irrationality what is evident—the facts of the events as well as their immoral character—is not recognized. In essence, it is this modern irrationality that leads to the Mephistophelean "destruction of memory" in which "it's as good as if it [the Holocaust] never happened" (*WTP*, 91/557). As Adorno explains it: "The impulses and modes of behavior involved here are not immediately rational in so far as they distort the facts they refer to" (*WTP*, 92/558). This is irrationality in its essence for Adorno in that it is an insistence that we not subject our concepts to scrutiny. In reality it is irrationality that, in fact, passes for "rationality" in contemporary society in which it is reasonable to deny the obvious. It is conformist rationality—though more truly it is irrationality—that allows the "forgetting of what has scarcely transpired," the attitude of getting along (*WTP*, 92/558).

What is involved here is what Adorno describes as a "not so unconscious defensiveness against guilt" (*WTP*, 89/555). And as we saw in the previous section guilt is a motivation to come to terms with the object, to appreciate it in its individuality, and to reflect on the capacity of our concepts to describe it. The effort to not allow oneself to be motivated by this feeling amounts to an incapacity for "affinity." The problem of the "destruction of memory" is, therefore, closely related to the problem of the destruction of experience. Adorno sets out this problem concretely when noting that anti-Semitic prejudice cannot be explained by an absence of contact between anti-Semites and Jews, as though personal acquaintance would stimulate a more reflective attitude in the anti-Semite. Rather the encounter with Jews does not register experience—does not encourage the revision of contradictory prejudices—simply because the anti-Semite is incapable of experience, and is therefore, in Adorno's schema "irrational." He writes: "All too often

the presupposition is that anti-Semitism in some essential way involves the Jews and could be countered through concrete experiences with Jews, whereas the genuine anti-Semite is defined far more for *his incapacity for any experience whatsoever*, by his unresponsiveness” (WTP, 101 [italics added]/571). It would be too great a task to explore the question of why it is that the anti-Semite actually hates the Jews—Adorno in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, *Minima Moralia*, and his empirical studies offers a wide range of sociological, political, and psychoanalytic explanations—but what is significant is how it is that in the face of evidence the anti-Semite can insist on a prejudiced view.¹⁴ This is the incapacity to be moved by contradiction. According to Adorno it is the denial of the exercise of rationality that leaves the prejudice intact, and that thereby glosses over the acts of the National Socialists by explaining them (as we saw above) under categories that are consonant with the reasons that the perpetrators gave to themselves. Indeed the variety of exculpations proffered on behalf of the National Socialists cannot be refuted by argument simply because rationality (dialectical rationality, Adorno’s idea of rationality) does not operate. As Adorno puts it, “weakened memory . . . resists accepting these arguments” (WTP, 95/562).

What is absent, then, in the period of Germany that concerns Adorno is a realization of the contradiction between the incredible murderousness of the Nazis and trivial explanations of how it must have happened, explanations that cannot fit with the reality of what ought to be obvious. In the context of an inability to experience and a tendency to conform, the kind of reflection that would properly scrutinize facile accounts and explanations of suffering, one that would place the concept (the explanation) against the object (the suffering), is simply not available. And the effect of this is the “effacement of memory,” in which the events are “worked through” without reflection and ultimately, therefore, without reconciliation.

Adorno’s regards the “effacement of memory” of the suffering as having certain roots in the conditions of German political and economic consciousness. Taking a Humboldtian line not commonly found in his work he argues that the overbearing state “renders the majority of people dependent upon conditions beyond their control and thus maintains them in a state of political immaturity” (WTP, 98/567). And Adorno specifies this “immaturity” as the absence of “autonomous subjectivity,” the ideal of German Idealism and eighteenth- and nineteenth-century German liberal thought, the condition in which one might determine for oneself, in accordance with reason, what one ought to accept as true. The “empty and cold forgetting” (WTP, 98/566) is the action of those who “would prefer to get rid of the obligation of autonomy” (WTP, 99/567).

Indeed, working against the realization of autonomy is a comforting dynamic of what Adorno famously describes as the culture industry. Adorno argues that what he calls the culture industry encourages a conformist consciousness, and thereby a consciousness suited to the needs of a society that maintains itself through forgetting: “The power of the culture industry’s ideology is such that conformity has replaced consciousness.”¹⁵

What is required for the effectualization of experience is instead “autonomous subjectivity.” This is a central idea: the autonomous subject, the agent that operates through reason will not conform; that very act of resistance facilitates, among other things, the only appropriate way of “working through the past.” The exercise of reflexivity is, at once, the exercise of confrontation with fact and the scrutiny of one’s beliefs.

The social phenomenon of reification is posited as an explanation of the problem of memory. Adorno explains it in this way: “I mentioned the concept of reified consciousness. Above all this is a consciousness blinded to all historical past, all insight into one’s own conditionedness, and posits as absolute what exists contingently. If this coercive mechanism were once ruptured, then, I think, something would be gained.”¹⁶ The theory that underpins this claim is never adequately set out. In his work on reification Axel Honneth takes Adorno and Horkheimer’s remark that “[a]ll reification [*Verdinglichung*] is a forgetting”¹⁷ and develops it into a theory of the loss of recognition. He writes: “It is this element of forgetting, of amnesia, that I would like to establish as the cornerstone for a redefinition of the concept of ‘reification.’ To the extent to which in our acts of cognition we lose sight of the fact that these acts owe their existence to our having taken up an antecedent recognitional stance, we develop a tendency to perceive other persons as mere insensate objects.”¹⁸ Honneth provides a broad base for this, producing insights from pragmatism, phenomenology, developmental psychology, and indeed Adorno. However, his theory does not capture what is at issue in Adorno. An unproblematic layer of interaction somehow forgotten yet functioning is not Adorno’s position: in such a scheme, literally pathological behavior would be normal. Rather, reification is an obstacle to an appropriate self-understanding, an understanding that would involve an appreciation of one’s contextual entwinements or meditations, among which are included our relations with the past. It is therefore a matter of loss rather than of suppression, as Honneth supposes.

Another way into Adorno’s position might be taken through Lukács’s claim that reification “degrades time to the level of space” and that consequently “temporality loses its qualitative, changing, fluid character: it is transformed into a rigid, exactly delimited continuum, filled with quantitatively measurable ‘things’ . . . it is transformed into space.”¹⁹ This Lukácsian thought—that reification is the transfiguration of time into space—actually opens up a line of support for Adorno’s reification claim. In our reified social ontology a critical engagement with the past must be somehow problematized as the very condition of historical consciousness (qualitative time) is excluded. Adorno, in fact, writes about history in a way that resonates with Lukács’s notion of non-reified time. His philosophy of history develops the notion of discontinuity in history. It specifically opposes the concept of history as a succession of moments. As simple succession, Adorno holds, history would lose its qualitative content: it would collapse into a process of sameness. Instead, history contains qualitative diversity. As Adorno describes it: “The truth is that, while the traditional view inserts facts into the flow of time, they really possess a

nucleus of time in themselves, they crystallize time in themselves. What we can legitimately call ideas is the nucleus of time within the individual crystallized phenomena, something that can only be decoded by interpretation. In accordance with this we might say that history is *discontinuous* in the sense that it represents life perennially disrupted.”²⁰ It is this diversity and discontinuity, however, that the reified consciousness divested of the sense of qualitative time (Lukács) cannot recognize. A reified consciousness, then, which cannot experience the past, which cannot recognize the suffering of individuals in the past, is the cognitive expression of a reified social reality.

Aesthetics, Reconciliation, Forgetting

In view of Adorno’s efforts, as we have just seen, to retrieve the conditions for memory, it is curious that he also speaks about a form of experience in its fullest realization as achievable only by what we might call a regulative and specific act of forgetting. This is, in fact, aesthetic experience. We need to disentangle this form of experience—which can be actualized—from the ideal form of experience for which Adorno’s project sets out to prepare the conditions.

Full, undistorted experience would entail reconciliation between subject and object, a relationship in which the subject engages openly and reflexively in “affinity” with an object, in a constant process of revision. This is reconciliation not in the sense that the subject comes to be identically “at one” with the object, but rather that the subject would operate with a full cognizance of his or her conceptual limitations, which are constantly revealed though the subject’s ongoing efforts to be at one with the object. This is what Adorno means, in fact, by mimesis. It is precisely the dynamic of subject–object interaction in which subjects “adjust to a moment which they themselves are not” (*ND*, 138/142). Adorno’s view of modern rationality is such that he believes that reconciliation is not yet possible, that reification has suppressed mimesis.²¹ Contemporary rationality simply construes the object in terms of the needs of the subject. Against this background Adorno finds in certain forms of aesthetic experience the exemplar of experience that might capture the open, dynamic, or reconciled relationship with the object. This exemplary experience provokes in us a heightened consciousness of our conceptuality and its limits without abandoning it. Experience in this context is non-identity, not a positively non-conceptual experience.

Adorno holds that art can provide us with this first stage of the process of reconciliation. In Adorno’s terminology art can be the object of *negative* experience. This reveals that a characteristic of art—of what counts as art—is determined by its contribution to reconciliation. This excludes, therefore, art that sets out to produce reconciliation through the representation of harmony or oneness (typically the case of propaganda art). The very project of reconciliation in this specific aesthetic concept involves the negation of

reconciliation. Adorno writes: “For the sake of reconciliation, *authentic works must blot out every trace of reconciliation in memory.*”²² The memory of reconciliation—of moments of satisfaction in contemporary society—must be set aside in order to create the conditions in which full reconciliation would be achieved.

In what way can art do this? In *Aesthetic Theory* Adorno specifies that the process or inner logic of an authentic work is “objectively the counterimage of enchained forces” (AT, 226 / 335). The enchained forces refer in fact to the conformist consciousness of modern society in which the individual will feel complete insofar as he or she follows the norms and expectations of society. Against the conformism of the social process where life, according to Adorno, is entirely predictable, we have the authentic work of art. And for Adorno, “every authentic artwork is internally revolutionary” (AT, 228/339). This revolutionary dimension is its innovation of aesthetic form. Through form an alteration of the grammar of experience to that offered by the “administered world” is produced. This, in effect, is the possibility of another form of rational engagement with reality. Hence as Adorno sloganistically puts it: “Art is rationality that criticizes rationality without withdrawing from it” (AT, 55/87). What qualifies certain artworks as authentic, then, is their capacity to deliver a logic of resistance. (An issue of great difficulty in Adorno’s aesthetic theory is that such artworks need not have been created with the intention of producing “negative experience.”)

It follows from the claim that art implicitly criticizes social reality that it is a constitutively historical phenomenon (since each society is a historical phenomenon whose limitations and tensions will be particular to it). As Adorno claims: “The Hegelian vision of the possible death of art accords with the fact that art is a product of history” (AT, 3/12–13). Hence the idea of the potentially revolutionary qualities of aesthetic experience must be historically situated. The revolutionary potential of artworks depends on their location within the historical conditions in which they are produced. If society is, as Adorno claims, reified—dehumanizing and reductive, ossifying the relation of subject to object—then authentic art will somehow express this or make it apparent. The ways in which it does so are quite oblique in that art provokes the experience of contradiction—of not being reconciled with reality—without naming society directly. It is here that Adorno’s well-known valorization of modernist art takes effect. According to Adorno, Kafka’s and Beckett’s works achieve this experience of contradiction as a “mimesis of reification” in that they heighten perception of the structured meaninglessness of modern society (AT, 230/342).²³ Such artworks set out to defy the representation of harmony sought by heteronomous works. As Peter Uwe Hohendahl explains, “[re]conciliation is denied because any harmonious ending would be tantamount to untruth.”²⁴ These artworks are problematic in that they will not conform to a logic of expectation.

The capacity of Schoenberg’s music to provide the possibility of negative experience, in which “every trace of reconciliation in memory” is excluded, is extensively treated in Adorno’s writings. Schoenberg’s modernism offers a particular route to reconciliation in

that it provides an alternative grammar of rationality, one at odds with the false reconciliation of modern society. What, in essence, Schoenberg's music represents for Adorno is that openness to the demands of material that revolutionizes form, that transforms consciousness. Its break with the conventions of harmony is simultaneously a break with the expectations of resolution and totality. The aesthetic reception of modernist, dissonant music can never be achieved without serious effort, and that effort challenges the passive consumption of popular culture, which merely sustains unthinking compliance. Aesthetic experience of modernist art contrasts, therefore, in a critical way with the reduced experience of a reified consciousness: "With Schoenberg affability ceases," he writes.²⁵ In Schoenberg—the dialectical composer—one engages with musical material in which, as in emancipated experience, form (or consciousness) adjusts to the object, transforming both itself and the very idea of the object thereby.

For Adorno, then, authentic art offers a route to reconciliation through its capacity to provoke the experience of contradiction. Authentic art—art resistant to yet embedded in our times—cannot be based on memories of a better time; in fact the project of emancipation rejects memory of reconciliation in this sense for fear that it might distract us from authentic reconciliation, which is possible only when we have fully come to terms with objects. Interestingly, though, forgetting is a feature of genuine aesthetic experience. It involves experience in which the subject ceases to take itself to be an agent in control of its environment. It relates to what Christoph Menke describes as "a processual negation of automatic understanding,"²⁶ in which the conscious operations of our reifying conceptualizations ceases. This moment, indeed, is a loss of the self-certainty of the subject. Adorno writes: "The shock aroused by important works is not employed to trigger personal, otherwise repressed emotions. Rather, this shock is the movement in which recipients forget themselves and disappear into the work: it is the moment of being shaken. The recipients lose their footing" (*AT*, 244/363). We might reformulate Adorno's maxim to capture this: All self-forgetting is a dereification.

The function of memory in the project of critical theory takes on, in Adorno's many discussions of Proust's work, a virtually contrary significance to that discussed above.²⁷ For Adorno, what characterizes Proust's narrative of past experience is its unwillingness to accept "any happiness other than complete happiness."²⁸ However, this notion is predicated on the experience of happiness, of certainly better times, that Proust finds in childhood: "Proust's fidelity to childhood is a fidelity to the idea of happiness."²⁹ The primacy of childhood experience, for Proust, is its immediacy and naïveté. This is, as Adorno reads it, the "childhood potential for unimpaired experience," lost to us through age. Remembrance of this condition prevents us from settling for any compromised version of happiness. Hence for Proust, according to Adorno, "undamaged experience is produced only in memory, far beyond immediacy, and through memory aging and death seem to be overcome in the aesthetic image"³⁰ (that is, in Proust's *À la recherche du temps*

perdu). What is remembered, then, stands in critical contrast to experience which contains no historical consciousness of its own loss.

The basis of this positive assessment of Proust is either problematic or at least at odds with Adorno's general view of the role of remembrance in reconciliation. Adorno praises Proust for "his extraordinary sensitivity to changes in modes of experience,"³¹ yet Proust does not "blot out every trace of reconciliation in memory": his work depends, in fact, on recollections of reconciled experience. It is difficult to follow Adorno's deviation from his own principle of non-recollection in the name of reconciliation (which he finds exemplified in Kafka, Beckett, and Schoenberg) in this specific case. The special contribution of Proust is the exceptional detail of his narratives: nothing is lost. The implication is that experience, for the child, contains all of this phenomenological richness. The ideal of experience should be to recapture the unique experiential immersion in things. Recollection of that ideal of experience places the memory of happiness "beyond immediacy"—beyond current fragmentary moments of happiness—and it therefore does not lapse into any form of consolation that might somehow inhibit the task of real reconciliation. Rather, Adorno claims, Proust's work "represents an unconditional renunciation of consolation."³² It is not consolatory because it laments the loss of experience. At the same time, immanently contrary to Adorno's own interpretation (I am not drawing on any independent view of Proust), it must be seen as conciliatory, as, unlike the issues that surround "the destruction of memory," it is fully engaged with the past. This is precisely what the project of coming to terms with the past would like to achieve. It is engaged with the past and the forms of experience that have come to be precluded. Yet it is difficult to understand what the lament for that preclusion is based on: the resources of Adorno's theory of experience should indicate that recognition of the loss of experience is indeed the rediscovery of experience. Whereas, by contrast, the problem of reification is precisely that it is a forgetting of experience and therefore an absence of any sense of the possibility of experience.

It is interesting that the project of reconciliation within the framework of critical theory can adopt different approaches to the role of memory (we have already noted a contrast with Axel Honneth). For instance, on the very question of the emancipatory potential of art, Adorno's associate Herbert Marcuse argues that art contains the memory of freedom. In his *Eros and Civilization*, in which he attempts to reformulate Freud's notion of the relation between repression and civilization, Marcuse argues that capitalism offers a particular and (contra Freud) by no means necessary repression of the somehow free instincts. These instincts are so repressed, however, so "deep" and "archaic" that they cannot, as Marcuse puts it, provide "standards for the construction of the non-repressed mentality, nor for the truth value of such a construction."³³ That is, these instincts cannot be produced as an argument because they lie outside argument, and beyond conventional—that is, repressed—experience. But there is one route to the non-repressed.

Marcuse claims that art or fantasy provides us with an insight into non-repressive experience. The instincts that cannot be called up from experience make themselves felt in acts of imagination or fantasy. For Marcuse, art does not operate within the reality or performance principle that shapes the individual to the needs of society. Fantasy is useless to a utilitarian world, and it is thereby, in Marcuse's view, free of repression. It is not the product of the ego, that feature of the self that conforms to the reality principle. And art, in this way, provides us with a glimpse of the kind of radical experience that might be available to a non-repressed society. And in this way, as Marcuse puts it, art or imagination "preserves the 'memory' of the subhistorical past when the life of the individual was the life of the genus, the image of the immediate unity between the universal and the particular under the role of the pleasure principle."³⁴ Now it is an extremely difficult question as to what form of "memory" this is: it is not conscious, nor can it be in the unconscious of the individual since he or she has never experienced it. This question must be set aside. But what Marcuse's attenuated notion of memory points to is the image, somehow, of a better time, of a time of freedom. And this highlights the remarkable complexity of Adorno's position that authentic art, in a way quite contrary to Marcuse's thesis—except in the problematic case of his Proust interpretation—eschews the notion of memory of freedom or of reconciliation in order to allow the full experience of contradiction and non-identity.

. . .

It is clear that the notion of memory has a significant role to play in Adorno's philosophy. Although the project of reconciliation, which is the fundamental motivation of Adorno's critical theory, attempts to conceive of non-antagonistic future relations, Adorno's analysis of the idea of memory shows us that reconciliation with the past also forms part of the theory. The same conditions of modernity that inhibit future reconciliation stand in the way of memory. Modern irrationality, in which experience is diminished, provides us with no reflexivity, no stimulus to attempt to grasp the object as it is in itself. The experience of guilt—of a sense of obligation to something we know we have not adequately conceived—is suppressed by forms of reasoning that cannot recognize the limits of our conceptual schemes. The destruction of memory, as we have seen, is another consequence of this reasoning. The retrieval of memory is, therefore, an act of social criticism since it involves a repudiation of false reconciliation—the alleged identity of our concepts and reality—and it exposes our attempts to overcome the past, that is, our failure to come to terms with the past in its unique and specifiable individuality.