I) Relationship to Husserl

1) Adorno and Husserl

"Logical Absolutism, Skeptical Relativism"

> The disruptive force of Husserl's analyses, however, also serves to convulse his own fetishes. . . . But it did not stop with idealism's fundamental concept, that of pure subjectivity. Since critical progress transferred the power of all legality (*rechtssetzende Gewalt*) to that subject, it must ultimately repay the debts of the idealistic movement of the concept.[1]

> As the only German scholastic philosopher of the period, Husserl defended the critical rectitude of reason without inferring from it the claim that the world is to be deduced and totally 'comprehended' from the concept: The emphasis with which he contrasts pure reason and its objectifications from 'mundane' (*mundan*) being directly results in openly and ingloriously retaining the sacrificed empiricality.[2]

In the last sections of *Against Epistemology: A Metacritique*, Theodor W. Adorno finds words of praise for Edmund Husserl's phenomenology—after first having

[1] Theodor W. Adorno, *Against Epistemology: A Metacritique: Studies in Husserl and the Phenomenological Antinomies*, trans. Willis Domingo (Cambridge, UK, and Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2013), 213. *Against Epistemology* is largely based on Adorno's Oxford studies of Husserl between 1934 and 1937 and was first published in 1956. Adorno's 1924 doctoral dissertation, supervised by Hans Cornelius at the University of Frankfurt, was entitled "*Die Tranzendenz des Dinglichen und Noematischen in Husserls Phänomenologie*" (The Transcendence of the Thing and of the Noematic in Husserl's Phenomenology).

[2] Adorno, *Against Epistemology*, 214.

uncompromisingly torn it to shreds. Granted, the significance of such passages is inversely proportional to their homeopathic dispersal in the text in question. Adorno saw Husserl as the last great idealist (*contre cœur*), insofar as he faced up to and wrestled with (and reproduced on all levels) the irreconcilable opposition between the transcendentally real and the transcendentally ideal, instead of fleeing to the shelter of positivism or fundamental ontology.[3] "Tolerate the contradictions" could be seen as the intellectual imperative that runs through Adorno's philosophy like a red thread.

Hans Cornelius, Adorno's doctoral supervisor, had indeed fitted out his transcendentalist philosophy with empirio-critical and psychological "shock absorbers," but he continued to deal in the traditional way with the absorption of phenomena, "recognition," implication in a causal chain, and the analysis of "ultimate data" as facts of consciousness. Any contingent irreducibility of the world of appearances had to give way, in every case, to the firm ground of noncontradiction: "The unaccustomed is always at the same time something that astonishes and disturbs us. Our disquiet is resolved, however, when we are able to recognize the novelty as part of a known context, something that can be grasped from within the same perspective as the known and customary."[4]

Adorno's sympathies lay not so much with this movement of incorporation and classification as with the phenomenological orientation "toward the things themselves," which initially leaves the latter in their singularity. Every cognitive act, on this view, involves something alien to consciousness, which is also treated

[3] Adorno originally intended to give what became *Against Epistemology* the title *The Phenomenological Antinomies* (*Die phänomenologischen Antinomien*), a proposal rejected by the work's first publisher, Kohlhammer.

[4] "Das Ungewohnte ist uns jedesmal zugleich ein Befremdliches, Beunruhigendes. Die Beunruhigung aber löst sich, wenn es uns gelingt, das Neue als Glied eines bekannten Zusammenhanges zu erkennen, mit Bekanntem, Gewohntem unter einem einheitlichen Gesichtspunkte zu begreifen." Hans Cornelius, *Einleitung in die Philosophie* (Leipzig: B. G. Teubner, 1903), 25.

as such and which poses a challenge to it: "If we take a closer look at what is so enigmatic about knowledge, and what causes our predicament in our first reflections on the possibility of knowledge, we find that it is its transcendence. All positive knowledge, prescientific and even more so scientific, is knowledge that takes its objects as transcendent; it posits objects as existing, and claims to make cognitive contact with states of affairs that are not 'in the genuine sense given' in it, not 'immanent' to it."[5] This respectful (provisional) indulgence of things not to be found within the *cogitatio*, "as something that actually exists inside it," was taken up by Adorno, who later elaborated it into the "primacy of the object," successively reformulating it in ever more pointed terms: "Traditional thinking, and the common-sense habits it left behind after fading out philosophically, demand a frame of reference in which all things have their place. . . . But a cognition that is to bear fruit will throw itself to the objects *à fond perdu*. The vertigo which this causes is an *index veri*."[6]

For Husserl, on the other hand, it was from the beginning (that is, from the *Logical Investigations* onward) a matter of clarifying the reciprocal relationship between not really contained, existing objects and clear, immediate givenness, and of bringing that relationship under the sheltering roof of evidence. Only on this condition could the stated goal of a philosophy as "rigorous science,"[7] the encompassing foundation of all special disciplines, be achieved: "I said that the knowledge with which the critique of knowledge must begin may not contain

[5] Edmund Husserl, *The Idea of Phenomenology: A Translation of* Die Idee der Phänomenologie*: Husserliana II*, trans. Lee Hardy, vol. 8 of *Collected Works*, ed. Rudolf Bernet (Dordrecht, Boston, and London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1999), 27.
[6] Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York and London: Continuum, 1973), 32–33.
[7] See Edmund Husserl, "Philosophy as Rigorous Science," trans. Marcus Brainard, *New Yearbook for Phenomenology and Phenomenological Philosophy* 2 (2002): 249–95.

anything that can be questioned or doubted. . . . Nothing transcendent may be utilized as pregiven."[8]

What Adorno proposes is to break through "the fallacy of constitutive subjectivity,"[9] the attempt to ground transcendental being in a philosophy of immanence. In doing so, he prefers Husserl's "miscarriage" (*Misslingen*) to the pathos of intellectual "shipwreck" (*Scheitern*), as in Heidegger, since the former maintains an aporetic fundamental perspective.

Philosophy must become aware of the dilemma in which it finds itself, according to Adorno. If it practices abstract negation—that is, an unreflective and one-sided rejection of the content and methodologies of the special sciences—it becomes an archaic discipline: a ludicrous monad in the realm of scholarship. If it subjects itself to the latter's habitus, on the other hand, and enters into the competition to accumulate facts by means of the division of labor, it renounces its genuine impulse and sets about reverse engineering what has already been established.

Henri Bergson's intuitionism suffers from the weaknesses of the former approach. His dualisms (*durée* versus *temps*, *fonction fabulatrice* versus *entendement*, etc.) tend to wall off "living" forms of experience and knowledge within the closed territory of the entirely other. For Adorno, however, rational sediments are also embedded in intuition. "Inspirations" and "lightning bolts" of intuition are indeed objectively contrary to classificatory reason, but they are nevertheless not its strict opposite: "Intuition is not a simple antithesis to logic. Intuition belongs to logic, and reminds it of the moment of its untruth."[10]

[8] Husserl, *The Idea of Phenomenology*, 27–28.
[9] Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, xx.
[10] Adorno, *Against Epistemology*, 46.

In Husserl, by contrast, the need for an unmutilated knowledge that dissolves reification leads to the postulate "*that each intuition affording [something] in an originary way is a legitimate source of knowledge*, that *whatever presents itself to us in 'Intuition' in an originary way . . . is to be taken simply as what it affords itself as*, but *only within the limitations in which it affords itself there*."[11] Adorno also sympathizes with Husserl's critique of the tendency of naturalism and psychologism to overstep their bounds. Husserl is in the paradoxical position of formulating the implicit subjection of the special sciences to phenomenology's prior clarificatory role in terms of the rigorous methodology that phenomenology has borrowed from those sciences: "But since he does not deny his antagonistic relationship in itself to science, but rather lets it work itself out, he avoids the fraud of irrationalism."[12] Thus far extends the evaluation of phenomenology's unfolding of the tensions in its orientation toward science—an antagonistic relationship, the toleration of which marks, for Adorno, the true side of Husserl's position.

The "untrue" side of this unfolding is summarized by Adorno under the headings of scientism and "logical absolutism."[13] This is in no way a general rejection of logic or logicism. Rather, Adorno criticizes the fact that the

[11] Edmund Husserl, *Ideas for a Pure Phenomenology and Phenomenological Philosophy: First Book: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*, trans. Daniel O. Dahlstrom (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett, 2014), 43; emphasis and bracketed text in the original.
[12] Adorno, *Against Epistemology*, 48.
[13] It cannot be overlooked that the reproach of scientism is primarily directed against the Husserl of the *Logical Investigations*, as is also clear from Adorno's preface (Adorno, *Against Epistemology*, 1–2). It sometimes seems that Adorno takes too little account of Husserl's later critique of objectivism. Nevertheless, even Husserl's greater incorporation of the concept of the lifeworld, for example, did not change anything fundamental, according to Adorno, since "such mathematicism in form dominates all of Husserl's thought, up to the end, even where he was no longer content with the 'clarification of logic,' but rather aimed at the critique of logical reason" (Adorno, *Against Epistemology*, 54). In his preface, Adorno stresses that Husserl's philosophy was the occasion for his text, not its motivation, and that he had given preference to Husserl's "authentic phenomenological writing" over his later works (Adorno, *Against Epistemology*, 2).

clarification of what logic is always already takes place within the framework of science's dominant position and under the aegis of the stringency of the preexisting scientific complex of proof. Research into the historicity of intellectual functions thus also falls under instrumental rationality's abominated "goal" within the canon of scholarship, since "history" can only deal historically with the classification of the cultural products of different eras. Under the primacy of methodological considerations, in Adorno's view, logical principles, as criteria of philosophical scholarship, lose their relationship to their own materiality and so to their own process of coming into being: "But then even logic is tacitly detached from thought. It is not supposed to be the form of thought so much as that of current science."[14] One momentous consequence of this is the decoupling of logic from the history of logic, application from generation.[15]

It is true that logic (as the formalization of language) is for Adorno "the high school of unification,"[16] from the *principium identitatis* all the way to cybernetics. It is not logic pure and simple that is to be pilloried, however, but the naive realism that takes logical states of affairs as existing in themselves.[17] The methods of the mathematical disciplines evoke Husserl's admiration: "They overcome the defects

[14] Adorno, *Against Epistemology*, 51.

[15] "The question is not how experience, whether naïve or scientific, arises, but what must be its content if it is to have objective validity: . . . We are, in other words, *not* interested in the origins and changes of our world-presentation, but in the objective right which the world-presentation of science claims as against any other world-presentation, which leads it to call *its* world the objectively true one." Edmund Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, trans. J. N. Findlay, ed. Dermot Moran, with a new preface by Michael Dummett, International Library of Philosophy, ed. José Bermúdez, Tim Crane, and Peter Sullivan (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 1:130–31; emphasis in the original. Adorno maintains, in contrast, that the "objective" content of experience is itself due to a process of generation "in which subjective and objective moments are chemically united, so to speak." Adorno, *Against Epistemology*, 75.

[16] Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott, Cultural Memory in the Present, ed. Mieke Bal and Hent de Vries (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 4.

[17] Werner Beierwaltes's rhetorical question "whether any kind of thought is even possible *without* the act of abstraction" ("ob überhaupt ein Denken möglich ist *ohne* den Akt des Abstrahierens") is consequently unjustified. Werner Beierwaltes, *Identität und Differenz*, Philosophische Abhandlungen, vol. 49 (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1980), 272.

of our mental constitution, and permit an indirect achievement by way of symbolic processes from which the intuitive element, as well as all true understanding and inner evidence are absent."[18] For Adorno, this is precisely the scandal: "The contradiction could not be characterized better than as a rejection of intuitability, understanding and evidence. That mathematical work could only be performed through reification and by abandoning the actualization of whatever is meant, contradicts the fact that it presupposes the performance of what it taboos as contamination, taking that to be the legal basis for its own validity."[19]

Adorno sees the "reification" of logic whenever it is forgotten that logic is applicable only to propositions, to which truth in relation to objects cannot simply be ascribed. Logical reductionism thus reveals itself as the self-alienation of thought, which Adorno parallels to the societal relationship of commercial exchange, which lacks insight into itself. On the side of the subject, laws of thought coagulate into finished things that dispense with reflection on their constructed and directed nature. However, propositions necessarily involve content, according to Adorno—in light of their evaluative utterance, as well as the material elements that inhere in even the most abstract proposition. On the side of the object, the self-alienation of thought corresponds to "the unity of objects which are coagulated into the thought at work in them, and so to identity. Hence, neglecting their changing content, the sheer form of their unity can be established."[20]

That Adorno does not equate reified thought with logical operations can be analytically established (albeit not starting from colloquial usage) on the basis of the difference in meaning between "identify with" and "identify as." In the former

[18] Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, 1:126.
[19] Adorno, *Against Epistemology*, 65.
[20] Adorno, *Against Epistemology*, 69.

case, logic refers to itself, and the expression would be the thing itself. It is a matter of a purely subsumptive or disjunctive designation, in which the thing is stripped of any quality not included in the predicate. In the latter case, logical propositions refer only to their content, and in principle, qualitative openness is maintained. The thing is specified *as something in its singular condition of existing in the way specified*, a specification that can certainly be subsumptive (i.e., a definition) but that nevertheless makes up only one part of the configurations of specification centered on and ruled by consciousness of the irrevocable material dimension of the object, a dimension that can never be reduced to a concept, without leaving any remainder.

In the former case, logic oversteps its boundaries, mutating from a science of the correctness of propositions to the "imperial" establishment of the laws by which thought must necessarily be governed. Adorno is consequently troubled by the "impermissible move from the *reconstruction* of a rule . . . to the *constitution* of one, and hence to the presumptive logical structures of mental processes themselves."[21]

Nevertheless, does Husserl not come close to what Adorno seeks when he rejects "a growing system of propositions having a naïvely factual validity" and calls for "insight into the essence of the modes of cognition which come into play in their utterance and in the ideal possibility of applying such propositions, together with all such conferments of sense and objective validities as are essentially constituted therein"?[22]

[21] "Nicht zulässigen Übergang von der Regel*rekonstruktion* . . . auf die Regel*konstitution*—also auf voraussetzbare logische Strukturen mentaler Vorgänge selbst." Anke Thyen, *Negative Dialektik und Erfahrung: Zur Rationalität des Nichtidentischen bei Adorno* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1989), 124.
[22] Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, 1:165.

Adorno's answer: "The knowledge of the conditions of the possibility of logic itself is just divested of any movement of spontaneity and subordinated to the positivistic ideal of the sheer acceptance (*Hinnehmens*) of irreducible facts, i.e. 'givens.' That occurs through the concept of evidence. The central role of that concept in all of Husserl's thought is explained by the fact that evidence promises to cover the contradictory demands of foundation through recourse to the subjective and of observation of irreducible 'absolute' states-of-affairs."[23] "Evidence," with its Cartesian flavor, functions in Adorno's eyes as a kind of cement, intended to conceal the hiatus between the demand for a rational foundation for logical states of affairs and their absolute status. In the process, the positivistic primacy of sensible certainty is transferred to the spiritual realm. If subjective conditions for the possibility of a theory are assumed, however, its logical basis cannot be postulated as something "in itself": "If logical propositions were legitimized by the analysis of the 'how' of their 'appearance'—i.e., in consciousness, experiencing them—then . . . some existent would not be far behind."[24]

Nevertheless, the intransigent existence in themselves of logical forms of thought correlates with a ruthlessly empiricist understanding of the material special sciences. "Evidence" generates arbitrary contingence that borders on relativism: "logical absolutism . . . empirical relativism."[25] Subjectivism and objectivism, absolutism and relativism mutually condition one another: "The entirely isolated is sheer identity which refers to nothing beyond itself. The complete reduction to

[23] Adorno, *Against Epistemology*, 57.
[24] Adorno, *Against Epistemology*, 57–58.
[25] Adorno, *Against Epistemology*, 85. Admittedly, Husserl himself attacked the fruitless antagonism between the two approaches, mocking "a wrong skeptical relativism and a no less wrong logical absolutism, mutual bugbears that knock each other down and come to life again like the figures in a Punch and Judy show." Edmund Husserl, *Formal and Transcendental Logic*, trans. Dorion Cairns (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1969), 278.

subject or object embodies the ideal of such identity."[26] What escapes the mass of binding criteria is left to mere meaning. For Adorno, however, this remainder, a sediment deposited on the soil of the concept, is not a matter of chance but rather itself subject to "the law of real society."[27]

The Antinomies of the Intuition of Essences and the *Noema*

Both the early version of the intuition of essences, as "ideational abstraction," and the later version, as "eidetic variation," are subject to Adorno's critique. Nevertheless, here too, he acknowledges Husserl's statement of the problem and way of proceeding as an appeal against classificatory and scientistic procedures: "Even Husserl frequently found in a unique concrete thing—insistently contemplated and elucidated—deeper and more binding insight into far-reaching relations than would a procedure which tolerates in the individual only what can be subsumed under general concepts."[28] How does Adorno evaluate Husserl's attempt "to rescue the essence of comparative universality"?[29]

The intuition of essences is, in the first instance, the positive redemption of anti-psychologism, following the painstaking differentiation between the realms of the ideal and the real in the *Prolegomena*. Pure logic requires a phenomenology free from any suspicion of psychologism, the phenomenology of the "logical experience."

Husserl rejects as "improper" abstraction (i.e., comparative abstraction, or abstraction based on a logic of scope) the formation of concepts by means of the specification of a unitary characteristic of multiple things or states of affairs,

[26] Adorno, *Against Epistemology*, 88.
[27] Adorno, *Against Epistemology*, 86.
[28] Adorno, *Against Epistemology*, 96.
[29] Adorno, *Against Epistemology*, 96.