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BOOK REVIEW OF ONTOLOGIA NATURALE E STORIA. LA GENESI DELLA DIALETTICA NEGATIVA DI ADORNO

Alessandro Cazzola*

Book review of *Ontologia naturale e storia. La genesi della Dialettica negativa di Adorno*, by Mario Farina (Napoli-Salerno: Orthotes, 2019. 268 p.).

This book is a fruitful and radical rethinking of the last distinguished work, i.e. *Negative Dialectics*, that the Frankfurt philosopher managed to complete and publish. It is a close reading of the 1966 masterpiece and aims to contribute to the definition of the historical-philosophical framework that constituted the root of its tenets. *Negative Dialectics* is thus understood as the touchstone whereby it is possible to assess the involvement of Adorno's thought within his philosophical frame of reference, thereby bringing the book into the international debate. The most significant achievements of the book include the investigation of the historical-philosophical sources from which *Negative Dialectics* stemmed from a renewed viewpoint, by

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interpreting its theoretical import within the historical context of its sources, and the understanding of its significance in the light of the set of historical-philosophical problems within which it originated. To that end, it accounts for the *milieu* of the second and third decades of the twentieth century, which the author analyses through Adorno's and Horkheimer's philosophical training with their philosophical mentor, the neo-Kantian H. Cornelius, and then the reflections of W. Benjamin, M. Heidegger, L. Klages, G. Lukács, M. Scheler and M. Weber. The book, thus, interprets *Negative Dialectics* as a reply to certain philosophical questions that characterised the years following the crisis of German idealism.

According to the author, Adorno deals especially with the theoretical remarks of Heidegger's ontology, with regard, in particular, to the Heideggerian category of historicity and the idea of an ontology of history. The genesis of *Negative Dialectics* is then recognised in the attempt to find a suitable reply to the metaphysical foundation of history. The author purposes to investigate the genesis of the work in the light of the philosophical framework from which it sprang, which is that of a reconstruction of the meaning of fundamental philosophical categories (history, historicity, nature, myth, reason, dialectics, subject, object) that took place in German philosophy at the turn of the 1920s and 1930s. As reported by the author, the work stands for the definite negation of any metaphysical effort to determinate being univocally and in particular of the 1920s ontology: in so doing, it dispels the "first naïveté" (Farina 2019:

71, my transl.) of thought, which maintains that the concept thoroughly encompasses any object, unveils the history settled in the concept of the object and, through it, constitutes the coded image of the fragments that compose it by exposing the objective contradiction between the non-identical, i.e. the representation of the object by means of conceptual poles, and the non-essence, i.e. the mark of the concept left on the object. According to the author, the critical function of non-essence covers, at the same time, the alienation that the object undergoes due to subjective mediations (the history settled in the concept) and the non-identical as particular without figuring it out thoroughly. Furthermore, it is not feasible to speak of the essence of the non-identical as non-essence, since the latter stands out from the critique of identity thinking and qualifies as the contradiction of the essence included in the conceptual grasp on the object.

Therefore, ontological thought, according to the author, ought not to be considered as a finalistic process aimed at synthesis but as a “procedure” (Farina 2019: 94, my transl.), which has to be conceived as an element of the objective contradiction of reality. The author thoroughly comments on *Negative Dialectics* in parallel with Adorno’s 1931-1932 writings, which are considered precursors of the 1966 work, by outlining some recurring themes in the subsequent configuration of Adorno’s thought: on the one hand, *The Actuality of Philosophy*, wherein Adorno, by investigating W. Dilthey’s historicism and the ontology of the Enlightenment and Heidegger’s ontology of history, glimpses the pitfall with grounding the understanding of history on subjectivistic abstraction or framing an ontological system

depending on categories (Farina 2019: 16-19, 24-26); on the other hand, *The Idea of Natural History*, wherein the dissolution of the conception of history as ontology and, conversely, the interpretation of history as an expression of the myth that takes on the facet of nature show up by virtue of the influence of W. Benjamin's mythical conception of history and its allegorical figure of transience (Farina 2019: 50-57). This framework is enhanced by *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*, wherein, according to the author, Adorno interprets Kierkegaard as the one who has proved that only through one's faith in the mortal leap and the religious sphere can one directly, i.e. without further mediation, cope with ontology, which otherwise can only be seen in reflections, i.e. in the objective historical condition of the subject. This interpretation, which sets Kierkegaard at the threshold of the crisis of German idealism, is a response to any effort to devise ontology directly by means of the concepts of reason (Farina 2019: 44-50). Therefore, Adorno, as the author clarifies, uses the concepts of cypher and myth to spell out the incomplete comprehension of the ultimate foundation in so far as it is carried out with rational concepts. The author acknowledges that, in these writings, Adorno comes up with the idea of natural history in order to question the legitimacy of ontology: accordingly, Adorno does not only consider untenable the project of founding ontology by means of the foundation, blemished by an original flaw, but also argues the need to be able to name it aporetically through myth and dialectically via natural history.

On this account, the author purposes to outline the gist of *Negative Dialectics* by defining the work as the “natural history of ontology” (Farina 2019: 13, 57, my transl.), which the book examines by assigning a chapter to each section of the work. In order to fulfil this purpose, natural history must be interpreted, as stated by the author, not as an ontological determination, but as a “cypher” (Farina 2019: 48, my transl.), conforming to which the ontology of history is the history of something that is enclosed under the fragment and of natural history as the sphere of the endless repetition of the same thing and, at the same time, of the transient. As a result, the contours of history and nature are at once upheld and frayed since the history that takes on the shape of nature results in the resumption of the mythical condition as the original element of history, whose character is stripped of its irrational or, conversely, absolutist-rationalist entanglements by means of the mingling between myth, history and what evinces its mythical facet without acknowledging naturalised history or second nature as an original category. As the author explains in the introduction, the ontology of history as natural history aims at the “dissolution of the universal ontological claim” (Farina 2019: 57, my transl.), thereby revealing how the category of totality is split up by contradiction to expose reality (*Realität*) as objective existence in contrast to effective reality (*Wirklichkeit*), wherein the “systematic totality” (*Totalität*) (Farina 2019: 92, my transl.), that is, the apparently reconciled reality, shows its non-essential facet – an unreconciled whole (*Ganz*) – in the scattered subjectivity that can be grasped in relation to the reification committed by the universal objectiv-

ity purported by society. As this condition qualifies as the *Nicht-seinsollende* (“the should-not-be” or “what is in the condition of not having to be”) (Farina 2019: 176, my transl.), it is necessary to rethink the relationship between identity and contradiction.

As for the categorial point of view, examined by the author in the first chapter, identity and contradiction are poles of the dialectic. This dyadic relation allows, as the author illustrates, to understand the failure of the concept to enclose the object in its grid and to envisage the addendum (*das Hinzutretende*) as what is not completely fathomable and lies in the middle between identity and non-identical: the addendum stands for the immediate in the mediation of the mediated because of the “upkeep of objectivity as a moment of immediacy within the process of mediation” (Farina 2019: 186, my transl.). Revealing the contradiction inside the thing means, by analogy with the “logic of ‘disruption’” (Farina 2019: 87, my transl.), from which the objectivity of contradiction springs, to interpret it in the light of the dyadic dialectic, which removes/lifts (*hebt auf*) the positive affirmation of the concept while retaining the determinacy of negation. According to the author’s interpretation, dialectics qualifies as a procedure that underlines the objectivity of contradiction without subsuming it under the category of identity.

For Adorno, this framework opens up the topic of the subject-object relationship and the primacy of the determined object (*Vorrang des Objekts*). The asymmetry between subject and object stemming from the pre-eminence of the object does not

invalidate the dyadic dialectic, which would then lapse into outspoken materialism, but re-establishes it in the reflection on conceptuality: it presents itself as self-reflection in which the immediacy of objectivity is reflected in the interest in the non-identical along with the contradiction that immediacy introduces into identity. The intertwinement of symmetry and asymmetry is accounted for, according to the author, by the consideration of the non-identical object, which can be interpreted as a “second naïveté” (Farina 2019: 73, my transl.), as awareness of the limits of thought; it may be re-established as to the subject itself, as an object among objects, by virtue of the recognition of the flaw in “any extramental entity” (Farina 2019: 161, my transl.). This analysis envisages materialism as a non-essence that takes on the figure of the body and the empirical subject and leads to the scrutiny of any cognitive stance that claims to be unitary.

This peculiar gnoseological framework, examined in the second chapter, acknowledges the paradoxical and contradictory coexistence between the empirical somatic individual, recognised by materialism as the non-identical, and the negative totality, which represents the contradiction as for identity. Ultimately, the question of concretising the possibility of utopia in the mediation between the particular and the universal, which is nevertheless detectable in actual reality, sets forth, in the author’s view, the possibility of conciliation within apparent reality. The attempt to denote the individual is disclosed in the “constellation” (Farina 2019: 139, my transl.), which allows the non-identical to be understood in an unsystematic way within

the linguistic exposition of the set of concepts evoked by the unreconciled thing. The author rightly refers to aesthetics (Farina 2019: 130) as the field of forces in which the utopian possibility fully unfolds in virtue of the manifestation in the aesthetic appearance of the promise of what is not.

Owing to critical materialism, Adorno can analyse the relationship between the individual and society, scrutinised in the third and last chapter, wherein gnoseological and social criticism tally. In the final chapter, the author expands on Adorno's conception of the individual, who is determined by contradiction by the material objectivity of the sphere of needs and recomposed as particularity, i.e. an abstract form of the particular, because of the principle of exchange correlated to the social ban. If nature is the figure of the objective spirit in the Hegelian sense, then universal history as a positive process is doomed to failure if it does not take into account the history settled in its concept (Farina 2019: 167-175, 221-227). Thereupon, the Adornian critique of metaphysical or nominalist philosophies of history (Farina 2019: 217, 222) involves the reclaim of metaphysical categories as they should be properly adapted to the negative dialectics.

The conclusive assertion of the author is that negative dialectics turns out to be the "historical figure of a naturalised metaphysics" (Farina 2019: 182, my transl.), conforming to which the historical interpretation of the metaphysical categories conceives of them as elements of the constellation aimed at delineating the non-essence concerning society, thereby understanding nature as

criticising the re-presentation of the “natural pattern” (Farina 2019: 223, my transl.) within society as being endowed with the semblance of naturalness.

Finally, the book qualifies *Negative Dialectics* as an effort to gather the opposition of ends (subject-object, identity-non-identical, totality-particular, conceptual-aconceptual, history-nature, spirit-matter, essence-non-essence) by determining them by contradiction in the light of the logic of disruption. The last of the aforementioned pairs sets forth the final assertion of the author: the apparent freedom of the individual set by the ideology (ban) of society unfolds in the non-freedom determined by the ethical rules of the objective spirit as the mythical destiny of universal history, in conformity with its “naturalised” interpretation (Farina 2019: 240). Therefore, it presents itself as the essence of the course of history (as *Realität*) but is inessential as a conditional product of the material sphere of society. Moreover, as a personal reflection, it may be said that Adorno could not frame a moral theory in *Negative Dialectics* because of the dual nature of freedom, which lies, on the one hand, in the impulse (the addendum), and, on the other hand, in reason, which confirms the interpretative framework, i.e. the split conceptual unity, informing the whole work. The paradox of the work shows up by bringing together the concrete utopia of thinking society without integration and the involuntariness of the individual made explicit in the somatic experience. Through this constellation, *Negative Dialectics* is inherent both to metaphysical thought as its allegory, as far as its categories are employed to determine

non-identity, and to ontology as its natural history, as a procedure without a positive foundation.

As a conclusive remark, the 1966 masterpiece is thus interpreted by the author as a redefinition of a genetic problem in Adorno's thought, which is that of admitting the legitimacy of the ontological question. *Negative Dialectics* presents itself as a natural history of ontology through the relationship between the theoretical conceptual criticism and the social-historical criticism, thereby evincing the un-essential and un-founded character of the ontological purpose to understand the course of history as having its own set of rules. The author distinctly illustrates that Adorno succeeds in providing a reply to ontology on account of the pivotal concept of the priority of the determined object, which affords the transition from the logical and gnoseological critique of ontology to a historical materialist critique of society.

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