

LECTURE 1

9 November 1965

The Concept of Contradiction

Notes

Begun on
25 October 65¹

The special relationship of research and teaching.
The lecture course derived from work in progress.

Plan:

- (1) Introduction to the concept of a negative dialectics
- (2) Transition to neg[ative] dial[ectics] from a critique of present-day philosophy, especially the ontological approach
- (3) Some categories of a negative dialectics.

What is meant by neg[ative] dial[ectics] – the dialectics not of identity but of non-identity. Not the triadic form, too superficial. In particular, the emphasis on the so-called synthesis is absent. Dial[ectics] refers to the fibre of thought, the inner structure, not an architectonic pattern.

Basic conception: structure of contradiction, in a twofold sense:

- (1) the contradictory nature of the concept, i.e. the concept in contradiction to the thing to which it refers (explain: what is missing in the concept and in what respect it is something more. Contradiction = discrepancy. But with the emphatic

- sense of concept this becomes contradiction. Contradiction in the concept, not merely between concepts.[)]
- (2) the contradictory character of reality: model: antagonistic society. (Explain, life + catastrophe; today society survives by means of what tears it apart.)

This twofold character is no miracle. It shall have to be shown that the elements that shape reality in an antagonistic fashion are those that predispose the mind, the concept, to a state of antagonism. The principle of the mastery of nature intellectualized to the point of identity.

This implies that dialectics is no arbitrary invention, no world-view. My task will be to demonstrate the rigour of the dialectical method; that is what this is really all about.

Two versions of dial[ectics]: idealist and materialist.
So why negative dialectics.

The expert objection. Negation the dialectical salt (cite the Preface to *Phen[omenology of Spirit]*, 13.² Subject: thought itself is initially the simple negation of the given.

All dialectics are negative: if so, why use the term? Tautology?

9 November 65

Transcript of the lecture

Dear colleagues, a few weeks ago Paul Tillich³ died. He had occupied the only chair in philosophy at this university from 1929 to 1933, in other words until we were all driven out by Hitler. (Horkheimer's chair was not established until 1932.) It is not my place, nor am I entitled, to speak about the subject that was crucial to both the life and the work of my late friend Paul Tillich, namely theology. Arrangements have been made for Professor Philipp to give a public lecture on his work.⁴ I do not wish to make use of this hour, or a significant part of it, to speak about Tillich. I believe that I am relieved of that necessity by the fact that it is our intention to devote the first hour of the senior philosophy seminar, i.e. the first session next Thursday, to the relationship between philosophy and theology and, in particular, to focus on the problems that were of importance to Tillich.⁵ Nevertheless, I think I owe it to you and also to myself to say that Paul Tillich, who I am sure is no more than a name to many of you, was one of the most extraordinary people I have ever met in my life

and I owe him the most profound debt of gratitude for having approved of my Habilitation thesis in 1931, in other words, at a time when fascism with all that this meant was on the rise. It is a debt such as I owe to few others. Had he not exerted himself on my behalf, something he did despite the differences in our respective theoretical points of view, differences that we frankly declared to one another from the very outset, it is very questionable whether I would be able to speak to you today; it is even questionable whether I would have survived. This is no mere private reminiscence but something integral to Tillich's unprecedented and truly unique qualities of character: an openness and open-mindedness such as I have never encountered in anyone else. I am fully aware that precisely these qualities in Tillich provoked criticism, and I myself was among those who made such criticisms early on. But I should like to take the opportunity to say here and now that Tillich's liberal-mindedness set an example of enduring worth. This is because his almost boundless willingness to entertain every intellectual experience – and I know of no one who could equal him in this respect – combined a genuinely irenic temperament with the greatest resoluteness in his personal conduct. His extraordinary charisma went hand in hand with what can only be called 'leadership' qualities. It goes without saying that the National Socialists made overtures to him – and I know as a fact that they did so. As late as the summer of 1933 when we spent time together in Rügen he told me a good deal about these matters. He unhesitatingly rejected all such temptations – although they must have appeared tempting even to him. His open-mindedness did not prevent him from drawing the necessary conclusions when what was at stake was the need to show whether or not he was a decent human being. And in that particular historical context, the plain statement that a person is a decent human being gains an emphasis that it perhaps does not otherwise possess. If I may say a few more things about Tillich, particularly at the beginning of these lectures which are attended by so many young people, I do so because I am mindful of his gifts as a teacher, gifts that are related to his open-mindedness. I do not exaggerate when I say that I have never seen a man with greater pedagogic gifts than his. In particular, thanks to the boundless humanity with which he treated students' reactions, he was able to draw the maximum out of very modest and even minimal abilities. If one had the opportunity to be present at Tillich's seminars – and I was unofficially his assistant for a number of years before I became a privatdozent – one had the feeling that the way he conducted himself with young people went some way towards anticipating a situation in which the usual distinctions of ability, intelligence and so on were of

no account. It was as if these distinctions were somehow negated by actual human contact, so that even a limited and repressed mind could blossom in a way that has been almost entirely ruled out everywhere nowadays. I should like to add that whatever I have myself acquired in the way of pedagogic expertise and whatever may have encouraged you to place some confidence in me, namely this ability to encourage the growth of objectivity in other people's minds, as far as that is possible, and to achieve a meeting of minds; that whatever of this I have learned – even though I am very aware how far I lag behind Paul Tillich in this respect – I owe to him and the years of our seminars and junior seminars together.⁶ You may take my word for it that not only are there very few people who have meant so much to me but that I attribute an influence to them that far surpasses anything that is contained in their writings. Tillich belongs in the ranks of those thinkers who give far more through personal acquaintance and living initiative than is to be found in their writings. And you who have not known him or have perhaps only seen him once or twice in one of our joint discussions⁷ will really struggle to form any conception of this. – I would be grateful if you would all stand out of respect for Paul Tillich.

Thank you.

Ladies and gentlemen, you are aware that the traditional definition of a university calls for the union of teaching and research. You know likewise just how problematic it can be to achieve the fulfilment of this idea despite the fact that it is still generally upheld. My own work has had to suffer a great deal from this situation: the quantity of teaching and administrative chores that I have gradually accumulated render it almost impossible to continue with my research during term time – if indeed we can speak of research in connection with philosophy – with the diligence that is not only objectively indicated but would above all reflect my own inclination and disposition. In such a situation, and given such compulsion and pressure, one tends to develop qualities that are best described by the words 'peasant cunning'. My solution to this problem, one that I have had recourse to during the last two semesters and shall do so again this semester, is to take the material for my lectures from a voluminous and somewhat burdensome book that I have been working on for six years now with the title 'Negative Dialectics', the same title I have given to this lecture course. I am very aware that objections may be raised to this procedure, in particular those of a positivist cast of mind will be quick to argue that as a university teacher my duty is to produce nothing but completed, cogent and watertight results. I shall not

pretend to make a virtue of necessity, but I do believe that this view does not properly fit our understanding of the nature of philosophy; that philosophy is thought in a perpetual state of motion; and that, as Hegel, the great founder of dialectics, has pointed out, in philosophy the process is as important as the result; that, as he asserts in the famous passage in the *Phenomenology*, process and result are actually one and the same thing.⁸ Moreover, I believe that what characterizes philosophical thinking is an element of the tentative, experimental and inconclusive, and this is what distinguishes it from the positive sciences. Not the least of the tasks I propose in this course of lectures is to explore this question. In consequence, what I shall present to you here are reflections which will retain this experimental quality until, in so far as my own energies will allow it, they have acquired their appropriate linguistic form, their definitive shape. And I can only encourage you – I am reminded here once again of Paul Tillich – to think your own way through what I have to say to you and to assemble your own ideas on the subject rather than for me to transmit definite knowledge for you to take home with you. The plan that I have in mind is roughly as follows. I tell you this as a guide to finding your way around these perhaps rather convoluted lines of thought. I should like to introduce you to the concept of negative dialectics as such. I should like then to move on to negative dialectics in the light of certain critical considerations drawn from the present state of philosophy. I should like, in short, to unpack the idea of a negative dialectics and to present it in all its rigour, as far as I am able. I should then like to give you some of the categories of such a negative dialectics. Perhaps I should add that, in external, crudely architectonic terms, the plan I envisage corresponds roughly to a methodical account of what I do in general. In other words, what you will find here are some of the fundamental ideas that you will find repeated in very many other studies with different material, with different subject matter. I should like simply to try and answer the question that must have occurred to those who are familiar with my other writings: how does he actually arrive at this? What is at the bottom of all this? I want to try and put my cards on the table – in so far as I know what my own cards are, and in so far as any thinker knows what cards he holds. Such things are not as obvious as you might imagine. On the other hand – and this too is a matter I shall treat in the course of these lectures – what I have just outlined is made difficult and even problematic by the fact that I do not recognize the usual distinction between method and content. In particular, I maintain that so-called methodological questions are themselves dependent upon questions of content. A feature of the themes we

shall be discussing is that you may well become confused about the customary distinctions that you have learnt in your subject disciplines, which are in the habit of placing method on the one side and subject matter on the other.

Now I should probably start by anticipating my entire enterprise and telling you what I mean by the concept of negative dialectics, and I should do so in a manner that calls for a resolution of the issues it raises. A rather meagre, formal definition is that it sets out to be a dialectics not of identity but of *non-identity*. We are concerned here with a philosophical project that does not presuppose the identity of being and thought, nor does it culminate in that identity. Instead it will attempt to articulate the very opposite, namely the divergence of concept and thing, subject and object, and their unreconciled state. When I make use of the term ‘dialectics’ I would ask you not to think of the famous triadic scheme of θέσις [thesis], ἀντίθεσις [antithesis] and σύνθεσις [synthesis] in the usual sense, as you encounter it in the most superficial account of school dialectics. Hegel himself, who after all did possess something like a system that aspired as a system to be a σύνθεσις, did not adhere consistently to this scheme. In the preface to the *Phenomenology* which I have already referred to he has spoken of this creaking triadic scheme with utter contempt.⁹ In particular, and to anticipate my discussion of what I believe to be a crucial issue, you will find that in negative dialectics the concept of ‘synthesis’ is very much reduced in importance. I can only explain this here in linguistic terms, namely with reference to my deeply rooted aversion to the term, an aversion I have felt ever since I started to do any thinking at all. And since philosophical thinking consists essentially in reflecting on one’s own intellectual experiences – you may perhaps have seen my ‘Notes on philosophical thinking’ in the *Neue Deutsche Hefte*¹⁰ in which I discuss this – one motif of such a negative dialectics is to try to find out why I resist the concept of synthesis so strongly. A further motif is that my oldest independent (i.e. non-interpretative) piece of philosophical writing, one that has not survived, was concerned with a logic of disintegration.¹¹ This may be regarded as an alternative, albeit rather more pretentious title for such a negative dialectics. So when I speak here of negative dialectics, I would urge you to be clear in your minds that what I mean by it is not this superficial, skeletal format, but the very fibre of thought, its inner structure, the way in which, as Hegel used to express it, the concept moves towards its opposite, the non-conceptual. That is what you should be on the lookout for and not a kind of intellectual scaffolding that in fact you will seek in vain.

Nevertheless, what I intend to present to you as negative dialectics possesses something quite crucially related to the concept of dialectics

in general – and this is something I wish to clarify at the outset. It is that the concept of contradiction will play a central role here, more particularly, the contradiction in things themselves, contradiction *in* the concept, not contradiction *between* concepts. At the same time – and I am sure that you will not fail to see that this is in a certain sense the transposition or development of a Hegelian motif – the concept of contradiction has a twofold meaning. On the one hand, as I have already intimated, we shall be concerned with the contradictory nature of the concept. What this means is that the concept enters into contradiction with the thing to which it refers. I should like to demonstrate this to you quite simply, in a way that perhaps some of you will think almost childish. However, my intention is merely that our discussions should not cause you to lose touch with simple, straightforward realities. For even though I believe that thinking involves raising oneself above primitive things, an essential part of thought is that it should remain in touch with immediate experience. So what I mean here – and in the first instance I am speaking of the concept and of what is meant specifically by the concept in dialectics – that is something that we shall have to discuss. (The fact is that I am not talking about ‘concept’ in the ordinary sense, but about concept that is already theory.) But if you will allow me to illustrate this, I can put it all quite simply. If I subsume a series of characteristics, a series of elements, under a concept, what normally happens is that I abstract a particular characteristic from these elements, one that they have in common: and this characteristic will then be the concept, it will represent the unity of all the elements that possess this characteristic. Thus by subsuming them all under this concept, by saying that A is everything that is comprehended in this unity, I necessarily include countless characteristics that are *not* integrated into the individual elements contained in this concept. The concept is always less than what is subsumed under it. When a B is defined as an A, it is always also *different from* and *more than* the A, the concept under which it is subsumed by way of a predicative judgement. On the other hand, however, in a sense every concept is at the same time more than the characteristics that are subsumed under it. If, for example, I think and speak of ‘freedom’, this concept is not simply the unity of the characteristics of all the individuals who can be defined as free on the basis of a formal freedom within a given constitution. Rather, in a situation in which people are guaranteed the freedom to exercise a profession or to enjoy their basic rights or whatever, the concept of freedom contains a pointer to something that goes well beyond those specific freedoms, without our necessarily realizing what this additional element amounts to. This situation, that the concept is always both more and less than the elements included

in it, is not irrational or random; it is a situation that philosophical theory or philosophical critique can and must define in detail.

Now you may well say, this discrepancy is not necessarily a contradiction. But I believe that it offers us a first insight into the necessity of dialectical thinking. Any such predicative judgement that A is B, that $A = B$, contains a highly emphatic claim. It is implied, firstly, that A and B are truly identical. Their non-identity not only does not become manifest; if it does manifest itself, then according to the traditional rules of logic, predicative logic, that identity is disputed. Or else we say: the proposition $A = B$ is self-contradictory because our experience and our perception tell us that B is not A. Thus because the forms of our logic practise this coercion on identity, whatever resists this coercion necessarily assumes the character of a contradiction. If, therefore, as I observed at the outset, the concept of contradiction plays such a central role in a negative dialectics, the explanation for it is to be found in the structure of logical thought itself, which is defined by many logicians (though not in the way it operates in the various current trends in mathematical logic) by the validity of the law of contradiction. And what this means then is that everything that contradicts itself is to be excluded from logic – and, in fact, everything that does not fit in with this positing of identity does contradict itself. Thus the fact that our entire logic and hence our entire thinking is built upon this concept of contradiction or its denial is what justifies us in treating the concept of contradiction as a central concept in a dialectics, and in subjecting it to further analysis.

However, that is only one side of the matter – and the fact that the question has two sides will enable the connoisseurs among you to identify without much difficulty a number of Hegelian motifs that have been extended and altered. And this side is the subjective aspect of dialectics, the aspect that is *not* the decisive one in the final analysis. Thus for dialectical thought in the sense in which the category of contradiction is central, what is needed is the structure of the concept and the relation of the concept to the thing it stands for. But to say this is also to imply the converse, namely objective reality, the sphere of the object – if, like the naïve realists, you can for a moment entertain the notion of a sphere of objectivity that is independent of thought. The model for this is the fact that we live in an antagonistic society. I shall explain this to you only briefly because I intend to begin my senior seminar in sociology today with a lecture based on a talk that elaborates precisely this idea. And I do not want to waste our time by saying the same thing here.¹² I shall say here only that the essence of this model of an antagonistic society is that it is not a society *with* contradictions or *despite* its contradictions, but *by virtue*

of its contradictions. In other words, a society based on profit necessarily contains this division in society because of the objective existence of the profit motive. This profit motive which divides society and potentially tears it apart is also the factor by means of which society reproduces its own existence. To remind you of an even crasser fact, likewise by way of illustration, it is probably true that today almost the entire economy can be sustained only because a very large part of the social product is devoted to the production of weapons of mass destruction, in particular, nuclear weapons and everything connected with them. This holds good in every country, in both the capitalist nations and the countries belonging to the Russian and Chinese power blocs. This means that the ability of our society to withstand crises, an ability that is generally held to be one of its finest achievements, is directly linked to the growth in its potential for technological self-destruction. I believe that these considerations will suffice for the moment to show you how we are compelled from the vantage point of objective reality to apply the concept of contradiction, not simply as the contradiction between two unrelated objects, but as an *immanent* contradiction, a contradiction in the object itself. Now, ladies and gentlemen, you may object – and I should like especially in these first lectures to anticipate as many of your objections as I reasonably can and to respond to them as best I may – you may object that this dual character of contradiction, the fact that on the one hand we have a contradiction in the realm of ideas and concepts, and on the other that the world itself is antagonistic in its objective form – that this dual character amounts to a kind of pre-established disharmony. Furthermore, this disharmony is a sort of wonder of the world, a negative *adaequatio rei atque cogitationes* [harmony of things and ideas] for which I owe you an explanation. I shall at least make the attempt to give you one, or at any rate, I intend to do so; I don't know whether I can keep all the promises I am making; one always turns out not to be able to say all the things in a lecture that one had intended to say. But I have the best of intentions about showing you that the factors that define reality as antagonistic are the same factors as those which constrain mind, i.e. the concept, and force it into its intrinsic contradictions. To put it in a nutshell, in both cases we are dealing with the principle of mastery, the mastery of nature,¹³ which spreads its influence, which continues in the mastery of men by other men and which finds its mental reflex in the principle of identity, by which I mean the intrinsic aspiration of all mind to turn every alterity that is introduced to it or that it encounters into something like itself and in this way to draw it into its own sphere of influence. This is at the very least a formal

indication, a response in advance to the question that I expect and that I have accordingly posed for myself.

Now, if you can entertain the idea, if only for a single second, that there is some truth in these reflections, and that dialectics is a type of thought whose mode of being and whose substance is essentially contradiction, then it becomes clear that it is no arbitrary construct, nor is it a so-called world-view. For if in fact the necessity of contradiction really does emerge both in the object and in thought in the way I have outlined it to you, it follows that a mode of thought that incorporates it is really no more than an executor, a way of thinking that takes up what its materials make available to it – and that it is not a philosophical position artificially imposed from outside. If I may trail my coat for once, I may say that I think of myself as a Hegelian in that I regard dialectics as the opposite of mere standpoint philosophy.¹⁴ But I am also well aware that simply to protest that something is no standpoint philosophy does not suffice to free it from the suspicion that it might be one after all. For what ideas have not advertised themselves as the very antithesis of standpoint philosophy? What ideas have not claimed that they represented eternal values, vastly superior to particular standpoints? – And how very short-lived the majority of these eternal values have turned out to be in the event! Dialectics themselves are no eternal values – far from it. But I owe it to you to show you as well as I can the rigorous nature of the dialectical method – above all, in the transition to a negative dialectics. In fact, this may well be the principal task confronting me.

Now, you all know that when we speak of dialectics in the succinct sense that I have tacitly been assuming – the ancient Greek concept of dialectics coincides more or less with epistemology and logic, and is far more general than what I have been explaining to you – you all know that dialectics in the sense of contradictions both in things and in concepts exists in two major versions: an idealist version which may to a certain degree be regarded as the pinnacle of philosophical speculation, and a materialist version which has been turned into an official world-view that dominates a very large portion of the globe (and as such it has degenerated into the very opposite of itself). And you may well want to ask me why I do not simply declare myself satisfied with this alternative but choose instead to speak of something else, namely a negative dialectics. You may well ask further whether I am not the kind of professor who tries to brew his own little philosophical soup in the hope that one day he may obtain a chapter to himself in Ueberweg-Heinze (or one or other of its continuations).¹⁵ At this point I should like to mention an objection that has been raised by an extremely knowledgeable source, namely by

someone from your own circle, someone from amongst those present here today. Given that the concept of dialectics contains the element of negativity precisely because of the presence of contradiction, does this not mean that every dialectics is a negative dialectics and that my introduction of the word 'negative' is a kind of tautology? We could just say that, simply by refusing to make do with the given reality, the subject, thought, negates whatever is given; and that as a motive force of thought subjectivity itself is the negative principle, as we see from a celebrated passage in Hegel's *Phenomenology*¹⁶ where he remarks that the living substance as subject, in other words, as thought, is pure, simple negativity, and is 'for this very reason, the bifurcation of the simple; it is the doubling which sets up opposition, and then again the negation of this indifferent diversity and of its antithesis.' In other words, thought itself – and thought is tied to subjectivity – is negativity, and to that extent negativity, and especially dialectical thinking, is negative dialectics from the outset. I should like to respond to this in detail next time. For now I wish only to set out the problem as it has been put to me and to say that it calls for an answer.

LECTURE 2

11 November 1965

The Negation of Negation

Notes

In response:¹

- 1) In Hegel dialectics is positive: reminder that minus times minus equals a plus. The negation of the negation is an affirmation. The young Hegel's critique of positivity. To be illustrated by the critique of abstract subjectivity by the institution: V49² Insertion 2 a

[*Insertion:*] The positive that results from the negation of negation is the same positive that the young Hegel criticizes, a negative born of immediacy.

Contrainte sociale

As Hegel has shown, the institution is right to criticize abstract subjectivity, i.e. it is necessary and specifically on behalf of the subject as self-preservation.

It destroys the illusion of the subject's being-in-itself, which is itself an *aspect* of social objectivity. – However, is not superior to it, but remains external to it to this day, compulsively collective, repressive. – The negation of the negation does not inevitably result in positivity. Today, in a situation that is secretly felt to be questionable, a concept of abstract positivity predominates. 'Herr Kästner'.³

With the erosion of all substantive givens, all ideology becomes increasingly thin, more abstract. Observed in émigrés under pressure.

Whatever is positive ('positive view of life, positive shaping [of life]', positive criticism) is already deemed true in itself, i.e. the movement of the concept is arbitrarily halted. Positivity as fetish, i.e. no one asks what is being affirmed. However, this makes it the negative, i.e. open to criticism.

This is not the least of the factors that led me to the conception and naming of a negative dialectics. [*End of inserted passage*]

This remains valid for the whole: the totality of all negations becomes positive. 'What is rational is actual.'⁴

This has now been put on notice. Just as the positive insinuation of meaning is no longer possible without lying (– after Auschwitz who can still venture to assert that life has a meaning!), so too the theoretical construction of a positivity from the quintessence of all negations is no longer possible.

- 2) This means that dialectics becomes essentially critical. In several senses:
 - a) as critique of the claim that thing and concept are identical.
 - b) as critique of the hypostasis of the spirit that implies (ideology critique). The force of this thesis compels us to make the greatest efforts.
 - c) as critique of the antagonistic reality with its potential for annihilation.

This critique also relates to dial[ectical] mat[erialism] in so far as it sets itself up as positive science. Hence negat[ive] dial[ectics] = ruthless criticism of all that exists.

11 November 1965

Transcript of the lecture

Last time, I had started to reply to the question why there is any need for such a concept as negative dialectics, and whether, in the light of the determining role of negativity in dialectics in general, it is not simply a tautology – I am sure that you will remember this. And I had briefly listed the factors that justified this objection. These were the factors in the Hegelian conception of dialectics that lead to the equation of thinking as such with negativity. I should like now to attempt a provisional response to this very weighty objection. You will have to be clear in your own minds that Hegel's theory repudiates this concept of negativity qua subjectivity; that in the Hegelian

dialectic this concept of negativity does not have the last word but that it is, if I may use the cliché, a positive dialectics. It is no accident that in the history of philosophy Hegel's theory has been given the name of objective idealism. You just need to be mindful of a very simple, elementary fact – if you don't mind my postulating the situation of your first semester here, the situation of a student fresh from school. You must be mindful of the fact that you once learnt in arithmetic that a minus number times a minus number yields a plus, or, in other words, that the negation of negation is the positive, the affirmative. This is in fact one of the general assumptions underlying the Hegelian philosophy. And when you inform yourselves about Hegel, starting with that triadic scheme about which I quoted last time some uncomplimentary remarks by Hegel himself, you will come across this idea that the negation of a negation is an affirmation. What is meant by this can best be seen in Hegel's criticism of what he called abstract subjectivity as practised by the objective social institutions and forms that he sets up in opposition to it. The idea that he develops repeatedly as early as the *Phenomenology*, admittedly with a somewhat different emphasis, and then above all in the *Philosophy of Right*, in the very crude form in which I have explained it to you – this idea is that the subject, which as thinking subject criticizes given institutions, represents in the first instance the emancipation of the spirit. And, as the emancipation of the spirit, it represents the decisive transition from its mere being-in-itself to a being-for-itself. In other words, the stage that has been reached here is one in which spirit confronts objective realities, social realities, as an autonomous, critical thing, and this stage is recognized as being necessary. But Hegel goes on to reproach spirit for restricting itself in the process, for being itself narrow-minded. This is because it elevates one aspect of spirit in its abstractness to the status of sole truth. It fails to recognize that this abstract subjectivity, which is itself based on the model of Kant's practical reason and, to a certain extent, on Fichte's subjective concept of free action – that this subjectivity is a mere aspect that has turned itself into an absolute; it overlooks the fact that it owes its own substance, its forms, its very existence to the objective forms and existence of society; and that it actually only becomes conscious of itself by conceiving of the seemingly alien and even repressive institutions as being like itself, by comprehending them as subjective and perceiving them in their necessity. Here we see one of the crucial turning points of Hegel's philosophy, not to say one of its decisive tricks. It consists in the idea that subjectivity which merely exists for itself, in other words, a critical, abstract, negative subjectivity – and here we see the entrance of an essential

notion of negativity – that this subjectivity must negate itself, that it must become conscious of its own limitations in order to be able to transcend itself and enter into the positive side of its negation, namely into the institutions of society, the state, the objective and, ultimately, absolute spirit.⁵

This, then, is the model of that positive negativity: the negation of the negation as a new positive that appears in Hegelian philosophy as a new model. Incidentally, it should be pointed out that one of the very striking features of Hegel's philosophy, one whose significance has not been sufficiently appreciated, is its dynamic nature. By this I mean that it does not regard its categories as fixed, but instead thinks of them as having emerged historically and therefore as capable of change. Even so, in reality its conceptual apparatus contains much more that is immutable, incomparably more that is constant, than it lets on. And these constants come to the surface to a certain degree against the intentions of this philosophy. They can be seen in the fact that certain arguments frequently recur – in Hegel's *Logic*, but also as early as the *Phenomenology*. I believe I have often made the point – and I direct this comment particularly to the future specialist philosophers among you – I would consider it an especially vital task to identify the constants in Hegelian philosophy whose presence is indicated by these recurring arguments. And the feature that I have just described to you is one such constant, one that recurs in diverse forms in Hegel, above all when Hegel is dealing with matters of substance and not simply with the categories of logic or nature philosophy. Now it is quite remarkable, a historical fact, and one that is perhaps of key importance for what I wish to explain to you today, that this negation of the negation that is then postulated as a positive is a notion that the *young* Hegel sharply criticizes in essays which Nohl published with the title of *Early Theological Writings*.⁶ In their central thrust these youthful essays amount to an attack on positivity, in particular on positive religion, positive theology, in which the subject is not 'at home' [*bei sich*] and in which this theology confronts him as being something alien and reified. And since it is reified and external and particular, it cannot be the absolute that religious categories claim it to be. Moreover, this is an idea that Hegel does not repudiate or abandon later on; he merely reinterprets it. In general, he abandoned or rejected very few of his ideas. What he mainly did was to change their emphasis, albeit sometimes in a way that turned them into their opposites.

The argument that I have just outlined to you is one you can find in the actual programme of Hegel's entire subsequent philosophy, in the so-called Difference essay, '*On the Difference between the Systems*

of *Fichte and Schelling*,⁷ much as I have just explained it to you. In line with this critique the positive realities that are defended in the *Philosophy of Right* against the negativity of a merely thinking subjectivity dependent upon nothing but itself, the realities that today we would term coercive situations – these situations are in reality the expression of what in Emile Durkheim’s language would be called *contrainte sociale*.⁸ Now Hegel has rightly shown that the institution represents a critique of abstract critical subjectivity, that is to say, the institution is necessary, necessary also in the sense that the subject needs it in order to sustain itself. Mere being-for-itself, the immediacy of the subject that believes in its own self-sufficiency, is in actual fact pure deception. Human beings are in fact ζῶον πολιτικόν, ‘political animals’, in the sense that they can only survive by virtue of society and social institutions to which, as autonomous and critical subjectivity, they stand opposed. And with his criticism of the illusion that what is closest to us, namely our own self and its consciousness, is in fact the first and fundamental reality, Hegel has – and this is something we must emphasize – made a decisive contribution to our understanding of society and the relationship of individual to society. Without this Hegelian insight, a theory of society as we understand it today would not really have been possible. – So what I am saying is that he destroyed the illusion of the subject’s being-in-itself and showed that the subject is itself an aspect of social objectivity. Furthermore, he inferred from this the necessary fact that in its dealings with abstract subjectivity, the social aspect proves to be the stronger and prevails as such. However – and this is precisely the point at which criticism of Hegel has to begin if we are to justify the formulation of a *negative* dialectics – we must ask this question: is this objectivity which we have shown to be a necessary condition and which subsumes abstract subjectivity in fact the higher factor? Does it not rather remain precisely what Hegel reproached it with being in his youth, namely pure externality, the coercive collective? Does not the retreat to this supposedly higher authority signify the regression of the subject, which had earlier won its freedom only with great efforts, with infinite pains? This mechanism of coercion binds subjectivity and thought into the objectivity that stands opposed to it. In view of this dependency and of what we might call the logic of the facts, a logic that leads to the triumph of objectivity, it is not obvious why an insight into this mechanism should mean that this objectivity must itself be in the right. The situation suggests pangs of conscience imposed from outside. This is something I experienced most tellingly in my dealings with a Hegelian Marxist in my youth, namely with Georg Lukács, who at the time had just quarrelled with

his party. In connection with that he explained to me that the party was in the right, even though his ideas and arguments were better than the party's. The party was in the right because it embodied the objective state of history, while his own position, which was more advanced both in his view and in terms of the sheer logic of the ideas involved, lagged behind that objective state of affairs.⁹ I believe that I do not have to spell out for you the implications of such a statement. It would imply simply that, with the assistance of the dialectic, whatever has greater success, whatever comes to prevail, to be generally accepted, has a higher degree of truth than the consciousness that can see through its fraudulent nature. In actual fact, ideology in the Eastern bloc is largely determined by this idea. A further implication is that mind would amputate itself, that it would abdicate its own freedom and simply adapt to the needs of the big battalions. To accept such a course of action does not appear possible to me.

And this is why I would say in general – I have exemplified this in *one* instance only – that the thesis that the negation of the negation is positive, an affirmation, cannot be sustained. The negation of the negation does *not* result in a positive, or not automatically. The situation today is one that secretly everyone finds deeply dubious, but it is also one that is so overpowering that people feel they can do nothing about it, and perhaps they can in fact do nothing about it. Nowadays – in contrast to what Hegel criticized as abstract subjectivity or abstract negativity – what predominates in the general public is an ideal of abstract positivity, in the sense familiar to you all from Erich Kästner's venerable but still effective joke in one of his poems where someone enquires: 'Herr Kästner, Where's the positive side?'¹⁰ I cannot resist telling you that my eyes were opened to the dubious nature of this concept of positivity only in emigration, where people found themselves under pressure from the society around them and had to adapt to very extreme circumstances. In order to succeed in this process of adaptation, in order to do justice to what they were forced to do, you would hear them say, by way of encouragement – and you could see the effort it cost them to identify with the aggressor¹¹ – 'Yes, so-and-so really is very positive . . .' And what this means is that an intelligent and sensitive person is rolling up his sleeves and washing dishes, or whatever other allegedly useful social work is required of him. The more everything is sacrificed to pre-existing objects of consciousness, and the less is left over for ideology to feed off, the more abstract all ideologies necessarily become. In the case of the Nazis, it was race, something that even the most stupid people have ceased to believe in. I would guess that at the next stage of

regressive ideology people would be expected to believe in 'the positive', in the same spirit as marriage advertisements regard a 'positive attitude to life' as especially commendable. I am also aware of an organization that has given itself the title: 'Association for positively improving your life'. I did not make this up, as you may be tempted to believe; it really exists. And, of course, what this 'Association for positively improving your life' amounts to is a training programme that helps people to lose their fear of public speaking and turns them into more effective salesmen in the eyes of both God and man. This is what the concept of positivity has come to. Underlying it is the conviction that the positive is intrinsically positive *in itself*, without anyone pausing to ask *what* is to be regarded as positive or whether it is a fallacy that something that exists and is 'positive' in the sense that it has been postulated, that it exists, and that it is furnished with the good, the higher, the approvable attributes – the attributes, in short, that belong among the connotations of the 'positive'. And if I can indulge myself in a little linguistic metaphysics for a moment, it is significant and really quite interesting that the term 'positive' actually contains this ambivalence. On the one hand, 'positive' means what is given, is postulated, is there – as when we speak of positivism as the philosophy that sticks to the facts. But, equally, 'positive' also refers to the good, the approvable, in a certain sense, the ideal. And I imagine that this semantic constellation expresses with precision what countless people actually feel to be the case. Incidentally, this is what we also find in practice when we hear people saying that 'positive criticism' is indispensable. I heard this myself a few days ago when I was staying in a hotel in the Rhineland. The hotel was extremely noisy, but was otherwise very good. When I told the manager that he ought to have double-glazing installed, he explained to me that this was quite impossible for any number of good reasons, but then he added: 'However, I am of course always extremely grateful for positive criticism.' Now, when I speak of 'negative dialectics' not the least important reason for doing so is my desire to dissociate myself from this fetishization of the positive, particularly since I know full well that the concept has an ideological resonance that is connected with the advances made by certain philosophical trends and that very few people are aware of.¹² We have to ask *what* has to be or has not to be affirmed, instead of elevating the word 'Yes' to a value in itself, as was unfortunately done by Nietzsche with the entire pathos of saying yes to life. This yea-saying was to be sure just as abstract as the nay-saying to life we find in crucial passages in Schopenhauer and that so infuriated Nietzsche.¹³ For this reason, therefore, we might say, putting it in dialectical terms, that what appears as the positive is essentially the negative, i.e. the thing that

is to be criticized. And that is the motive, the essential motive, for the conception and nomenclature of a negative dialectic.

What I have told you up to now about that model that is so characteristic of the structure of Hegel's thought holds good likewise for his philosophy as a whole. I mean this in a very strict sense. The fact is that what we might call the secret or the point of his philosophy is that the quintessence of all the negations it contains – not just the sum of negations but the process that they constitute – is supposed to culminate in a positive sense, namely in the famous dialectical proposition with which you are all familiar that 'what is actual is rational'.¹⁴ It is precisely this point, the positive nature of the dialectic as a whole, the fact that we can recognize the totality as rational right down into the irrationality of its individual components, the fact that we can declare the totality to be meaningful – that is what seems to me to have become untenable. The positivist trivialization of Hegel already objected to this conclusion in the nineteenth century. And it must be said that, in its resistance to Hegel, fallacious though its reasoning was and at fault in its failure to grasp that this positivity of the whole did not simply mean that all was well with the world, but that this positive totality was infinitely mediated – for all that, it must be admitted that the criticism of Hegel's core thesis by the positivist philosophers of the nineteenth century¹⁵ was not without merit. Nowadays, however, the positive suggestion that the actual is the rational, in other words, that it has a meaning, is no longer tenable. The idea that everything that exists is meaningful in any *other* sense than the assertion that everything can be explained by a particular, uniform principle, namely the principle of the mastery of nature – that has become quite impossible. I do not know whether the principle that no poem can be written after Auschwitz can be sustained.¹⁶ But the idea that we can say of the world as a whole in all seriousness that it has a meaning now that we have experienced Auschwitz, and witnessed a world in which that was possible and that threatens to repeat itself in another guise or a similar one – I remind you of Vietnam – to assert such an idea would seem to me to be a piece of cynical frivolity that is simply indefensible to what we might call the pre-philosophical mind. A philosophy that blinds itself to this fact and that in its overweening arrogance fails to absorb this reality and continues to insist that there *is* a meaning despite everything – this seems to me more than we can reasonably expect anyone who has not been made stupid by philosophy to tolerate (since as a matter of fact, alongside its other functions, philosophy is capable of making people stupid). In this context, I remember very well a junior seminar I gave with Paul Tillich shortly before the outbreak of the Third Reich. A participant spoke out very sharply on one occasion against

the idea of the meaning of existence. She said life did not seem very meaningful to her and she didn't know whether it had a meaning. The very voluble Nazi contingent became very excited by this and scraped the floor noisily with their feet. Now, I do not wish to maintain that this Nazi foot-shuffling proves or refutes anything in particular, but I do find it highly significant. I would say it is a touchstone for the relation of thinking to freedom. It raises the question whether thought can bear the idea that a given reality is meaningless and that mind is unable to orientate itself; or whether the intellect has become so enfeebled that it finds itself paralysed by the idea that all is not well with the world. It is for this reason in my view that the theoretical notion of a positivity that represents the sum of all negativities is no longer possible – unless philosophy wishes to live up to its reputation of worldly innocence, something it always deserves most when it attempts to become overly familiar with the world and to ascribe a positive meaning to it.

From what I have said up to now, you will have grasped the idea that the concept of dialectics, of negative dialectics, becomes *critical* – and this is a factor that should help to support the choice of the term 'negative' in a not insignificant way. Unlike the kind of dialectics that the late Hegel called for, one in which the affirmative could be discovered at the end of all the negations, this concept calls for the very opposite. And I should like here to propose in a general way the thesis that the negative dialectics I have tried to expound to you is in its essentials identical with a critical theory. I would suggest that the two terms – critical theory and negative dialectics¹⁷ – have the same meaning. Perhaps, to be more precise, with the sole difference that critical theory really signifies only the subjective side of thought, that is to say, *theory*, while negative dialectics signifies not only that aspect of thought but also the *reality* that is affected by it. In other words, it encapsulates not just a process of thought but also, and this is good Hegel, a process affecting things. This critical character of dialectics has to be dissected into a series of elements. The first of these is the one I attempted to explain last time – as you will perhaps recollect – namely the relation of concept to thing. We shall return to this question. We shall see that the thesis of the identity of concept and thing is in general the vital nerve of idealist thought, and indeed traditional thought in general. Furthermore, this assertion of the identity of concept and thing is inextricably intertwined with the structure of reality itself. And negative dialectics as critique means above all criticism of precisely this claim to identity – a claim that cannot of course be tested on every single object in a kind of bad infinity, but which certainly can be applied to the essential structures

confronting philosophy either directly or as mediated through the themes of philosophy. Furthermore, dialectics as critique implies the criticism of any hypostasization of the mind as the primary thing, the thing that underpins everything else. I remember how I once explained all this to Brecht when we were together in exile. Brecht reacted by saying that these matters had all been settled long since – and what he had in mind was the materialist dialectic – and that there was no point in harking back to a controversy that had been superseded by the unreal course of history. I am unable to agree with this. On the one hand, it seems to me that the book whose authority he relied on, Lenin's book on empiriocriticism,¹⁸ in no way succeeds in delivering what it undertakes to perform, namely a philosophical critique of the hypostasization of the mind or of idealism. It remains a thoroughly dogmatic work which simply presents a specific thesis with a torrent of abuse and in endless variations, without at all attempting a fundamental explanation. And the fact that materialist dialectics should have become a world-view in such a dubious sense, instead of becoming what it originally aspired to, namely a science in the higher sense, representing the most advanced state of knowledge, seems to me to be a product of this dogmatism. I believe furthermore that at present a true philosophical critique of the hypostasis of mind is fully justified because this hypostasis is proving irresistible to philosophy, which after all operates in the medium of the intellect, which thrives exclusively and at all times in the mind. I believe that everyone who has ever learnt to appreciate what great philosophy is will have experienced the force of this thesis of the primacy of the spirit that is to be found in every so-called first philosophy. And a form of thinking that simply retreats from this experience instead of reacting, once it has come to be thought dubious, by measuring itself against it and setting it in motion with the aid of its own power, any such thinking will be doomed to impotence. Do not forget that the very fact that thinking takes place in concepts ensures that the faculty that produces concepts, namely mind, is manoeuvred into a kind of position of priority from the very outset;¹⁹ and that if you concede even an inch to this priority of spirit – whether in the shape of the 'givens' that present themselves to the mind in the form of sense data or in the shape of categories – if you concede even an inch to this principle, then there is in fact no escape from it. The enormous power of Hegel – that is the power which impresses us so hugely today and, God knows, it is a power that impresses *me* today to the point where I am fully aware that, of the ideas that I am presenting to you, there is not a single one that is not contained, in tendency at least, in Hegel's philosophy.²⁰

LECTURE 3

16 November 1965

*Whether Negative
Dialectics is Possible*

Notes

3)¹ Today the concept of positivity, as an abstraction, has become ideology.

Criticism in itself becomes the object of suspicion.

In contrast, even at its most abstract the concept of the negative can be justified – as resistance, even if abstractly it does not possess its own positive aspect – this lies in what is negated.

But: what is at issue is determinate negation, i.e. the immanent critique that confronts the concept with its object and vice versa.

Negativity in itself is not a good – that would be a bad positive.

Otherwise, nothing but the vanity about standing above the objects because one is not in them. Warning against narcissistic misuse. – Negativity towards one's own.

Perhaps there is even a positive movens, but it may not express itself (prohibition on images!), i.e. it must not postulate itself. The fixed, positive, must not be denied – but it is purely an aspect, cannot be reduced to this.

In H[egel] the positivity of the dialectic is at the same time its premise (i.e. the subject, spirit) and its τέλος, it carries the system.

This results in two questions that I must try to answer by developing this line of thought:

- 1) Is negative dialectics at all possible? I.e. what is the source of determinate negation without the positive postulation guiding it. On this point: what is the product of the neg[ation] of the neg[ation]. My reply: always a bad positivity. Index falsi. – The gravest reservation to concept of synthesis. Incidentally, in H[egel] the so[-called] synthesis (which plays an astonishingly minor role in his texts) is not simply the better and higher, but the self-assertion of the thesis in the antithesis, the expression of non-identity; in this respect not so very different from emp[irical] phil[osophy]. – Difference of nuance; these are crucial in phil[osophy]

Introd. 3 a²

- 2) Is there – and this is the same thing, differently worded – a dialectics without system? Benjamin's thesis and its task.

16 November 65

Transcript of the lecture

Since these lectures are entitled 'Negative Dialectics',³ I may perhaps be allowed to cast one further glance at the concept of positivity in the form it currently possesses. I believe that I already pointed out to you last time that the concept of positivity in itself, in abstracto, has become part and parcel of ideology today; and that critique in itself has started to become suspect, regardless of its content. In the final analysis, setting particular problems to one side and focusing for once on the larger philosophical architecture, it is this fact that has induced me to talk to you about negative dialectics. Now it would be quite false and superficial (and something I would like very much to prevent) if you were to restrict the phenomenon under discussion to the dominant attitude towards positivity, and, together with that, towards negativity as well. What we are considering here is a process that can probably be followed throughout the length and breadth of contemporary attitudes, namely, a process to which the concept of reification can be said to apply. This concept is one that I very much hope to be able to articulate fully for once and to expound to you at a theoretical level – even though it may be thought to be more of a sociological task than a philosophical one.⁴ What I mean by this – and it is perhaps not entirely unimportant for you to have me draw your attention to this – is that concepts – and here we have already reached the theme of dialectics – are no longer measured against their

contents, but instead are taken in isolation, so that people take up attitudes to them without bothering to inquire further into the truth content of what they refer to. For example, if we take the concept 'positive', which is essentially a concept expressing a relation, we see that it has no validity on its own but only in relation to something that is to be affirmed or negated. Then we find that simply because of the emotional values that it has acquired, that have accumulated around the word, the term is wrenched out of the context in which it has validity and is turned into an independent and absolute thing, the measure of all things. In a similar way, as I pointed out in my introduction to the senior sociology seminar last week,⁵ the great controversy about intellectuals that is such a popular topic of debate nowadays has been conducted in such a way that people have discussed the intellectual as an anthropological, spiritual or moral type, without inquiring about the intellectual issues that are at stake; or whether intellectuality in the succinct sense is the organ by means of which we perceive ideas adequately, and so forth. I have the impression that this tendency on the part of a reified consciousness to bring all the concepts in the world to a standstill simultaneously and to fetishize them, much as happens with the headlines in advertisements, that this tendency is all the more damaging as its universal prevalence prevents people from becoming properly aware of it. And I would take the view that the work of philosophy is concerned not so much with negativity as such – I shall have something to say on this question shortly – as that each person should keep his own thinking under surveillance and regard it with a critical eye in order to resist this reified way of thinking. And if I were to formulate in what way a negative dialectics should come to the assistance of your own thinking – and after all, such a goal is by no means contemptible in a course of lectures – I would see its benefit in bringing this tendency to your attention and preventing you from succumbing to it by making you aware of it.

This tendency can of course be traced back very far both socially and in the history of philosophy. Its principal cause is undoubtedly the irrevocable loss of absolutely binding uniform categories.⁶ This means that the less the mind possesses predetermined so-called substantial, unquestioned meanings, the more it tends to compensate for this by literally fetishizing concepts of its own devising which possess nothing that transcends consciousness. In short it makes absolutes of things it has created. And it achieves this by tearing them from their context and then ceasing to think of them further. Now, I would say that, in the light of this situation, the concept of the negative is not without a certain value, even in the abstract and hence *misleading*

way in which I have been obliged to introduce it. Its value is its right to resist such habits of thought, even if it does not 'have' a positivity of its own. For it is precisely this 'having something', having it as something fixed, given and unquestioned on which one can comfortably rely – it is this that thought should actually resist. And the very thing that appears as a flaw in a philosophy that does not have this quality is in truth the medium in which philosophical ideas that are worthy of the name can thrive. If we start by thinking quite simply of the position of subjective consciousness, in other words, of the intellectual behaviour of each one of us, we could say that such resistant thinking contains positivity in its resistance to the very elements I have attempted to explain to you with the concept of the reified consciousness. But I believe that, if you wish to grasp what I am aiming at but am forced to explain to you in stages, you should be clear in your minds from the outset that we are not speaking here about negativity as a universal, abstract principle of the kind that I was initially forced to develop – or not to develop, but that I placed at the start of my argument because I had to start somewhere, even if I do not believe in an absolute beginning. Instead, the negativity I am speaking about contains a pointer to what Hegel calls *determinate* negation. In other words, negativity of this kind is made concrete and goes beyond mere standpoint philosophy by confronting concepts with their objects and, conversely, objects with their concepts. Negativity *in itself*, if such a concept were not nonsensical – since by virtue of its being in itself, a concept that exists essentially only in context, i.e. *for others*, turns into its own opposite – negativity in itself is not a good to be defended. If it were, it would be transformed into bad positivity. And this false idea of negativity in itself is reflected in the vanity of a particular attitude which proves very tempting for young people, particularly if they have not yet been fully initiated into the relevant disciplines. The attitude that emerges is one that Hegel referred to in a celebrated passage in the Preface to the *Phenomenology*, one I constantly allude to and which I would urgently like to recommend for close study by all of you who attend these lectures. Hegel speaks in the Preface about the vanity and vacuity of anyone who stands above the main issues because he is not inside them.⁷ The abstract negativity involved in instantly sniffing out the defects of phenomena, from the outside, as it were, in order to be able to assert one's own superiority to them serves merely to gratify one's own intellectual narcissism and is therefore open to abuse from the outset. And resisting this temptation is surely among the primary requirements of the discipline of dialectics, one that cannot be over-emphasized – even though it does contain a productive element. This is our

dissatisfaction with what we are being fobbed off with; we feel we are better than the swindle that is being foisted onto us. I have no wish to deny this. Nevertheless, we cannot allow this to be the end of the story, and this is what is implied in the call for determinate negation.

A further implication is that such a mode of thinking also imposes the obligation to reflect ceaselessly on oneself. I should like to say at this point that among the objections that have been urged against my ideas – and they are very numerous, that is to say, if people can think of nothing better (and, unfortunately, in general nothing much does occur to them) they say: does he also apply the principle of negativity to his own ideas? This is a classical instance of what I call a bad abstraction. The issue is not that I should take an a priori negative attitude towards my own writings simply because I am critical of all sorts of phenomena in accordance with a very specific and thought-out theory. After all, if I believed that my own ideas, which in fact constitute themselves only through a process of determinate negation, were in general mistaken or untrue, then I would not bother expressing them. The fact that I do express them means that I have put as much self-reflection into them as I am capable of. But it would make matters all too simple for my critics if they could just join this discussion from outside with the demand that ‘Well, if he has got a negative principle or if he thinks negativity is such an important matter then he ought really to say nothing at all’. I can answer such critics by saying only that they should be so lucky! I mean to say that in all probability – and this is as far as one can go in this respect – there is perhaps a so-called positive motive force of thought; if one does *not* wish it, and I say ‘it’ intentionally, because the ‘it’ cannot be expressed – well, this means that there can be no determinate negation because there won’t be anything at all. But I believe that precisely this aspect of positivity, which acts as a corollary to negativity, is conjoined with the principle of negativity because it resists being fixed once and for all in an abstract, static manner. If it is true that every philosophy that can have any claims at all to the truth lives from the ancient fires, i.e. it secularizes not just philosophy,⁸ but also theology, then we have identified here, or so I believe, an outstanding point in the secularization process. It is the fact that the prohibition on graven images that occupies a position of central importance in the religions that believe in salvation, that this prohibition extends into the ideas and the most sublime ramifications of thought. Hence, to make this quite clear, the issue is not to deny the existence of a certain fixed point, it is not even to deny the existence of some fixed element in thought; we shall in due course, I hope, come to discuss the meaning

of such a fixed element in dialectical logic in very concrete terms. But the fixed, positive point, just like negation, is an *aspect* – and not something that can be anticipated, placed at the beginning of everything. You may well ask me about what I said earlier on: if you admit that the positive, like the negative, is no more than an aspect, and that neither may be regarded as an absolute – why then do I privilege the concept of negativity so emphatically? If you did put this question to me, I would say that I can give you a proper answer only after you have seen a full account of the matters we have only begun to explore, and in particular if I succeed in providing you with a cogent and immanent critique of the premises of traditional thought with their roots in identity philosophy. I must therefore ask you to be patient; I cannot provide you with a proper answer at this moment. However, for practical purposes, from the point of view of our ordinary experience, I would say that the world simply overflows with positivity; and that this positivity itself turns out to be negative to such a degree that, faced with such negativity, it behoves us to assume the attitude that is defined by the concept of a negative dialectics.

This is in fact very different from Hegel, a difference that cannot be obscured cosmetically. It is a difference that is not confined to so-called general attitudes, but extends into individual features. For infinitely rich though Hegel is, and however much every serious philosophy has to learn from him, it is not possible to overlook the differences, particularly at this juncture, or to dismiss them as the superficial differences of systematic approach. In Hegel, the positive nature of dialectics – in other words, the fact that the whole, the quintessence of all negations is the positive, the meaning, reason, indeed the godhead and the Absolute – is the premise that actually sets the dialectic in motion. By the same token, it is also the result that is supposed to emerge, and emerge inexorably, from this dialectic. And this circular procedure was one of which Hegel was particularly proud; he therefore made use of the circle as an image with which to compare his philosophy.⁹ And we might well also take up the analogy provided by a term from a completely different sphere, namely that of mathematics, a term probably formulated first by Henri Poincaré,¹⁰ who said that, rightly understood, Hegel's entire philosophy was a gigantic tautology.¹¹ That would be all very well were it not for the fact that his philosophy desired to have it all, that it was unwilling to make any sacrifices, that there was no concept that was so incompatible with itself that it would have been prepared to refrain from devouring it and claiming it for itself. In short, on the one hand this philosophy presented itself as a gigantic analytical proposition, but on the other hand it claimed simultaneously to be

the synthetic proposition par excellence. In other words, it claimed that this analytical proposition captured in the mind that which is not itself mind, and identified with it. It is precisely this twofold claim, the assertion that something can simultaneously be both a synthetic and an analytical proposition, that marks the point at which I believe we have to go beyond Hegel, if we are to take him seriously (and there is no better way to show him respect than to take him utterly seriously). It is here that critical thinking and Hegel have to part company. And it is here that I identify right from the start the point at which I differ from the form he gives to dialectics, a form that even so I regard as not only the most consummate form attained to by dialectics, but also the greatest achievement of philosophy as such hitherto.

Now, what I have attempted to outline to you up to now leads us to two questions to which I hope to be able to provide some answers by developing further my line of thought and which I would ask you to think of as thematic in these lectures. The first question is: *is a negative dialectics at all possible?* Can we speak of a dialectical process if movement is not brought into play by the fact that the object that is to be understood as distinct from spirit turns out itself to be spirit. Where then are we to look for the source of *determinate* negation in the absence of the positive postulate to accompany it from the outset, namely the postulate of spirit in which everything is included? We could also approach this question by inquiring – and this is a question I have already touched on – what this would mean for what Hegel calls the negation of the negation. I should like to answer this by saying that the negation of the negation is not simply the positive, but that it is the positive both in its positive aspect and in its own fallibility and weakness, in other words, its *bad* positivity. We might say therefore, or rather it is a methodological principle – if I may speak of such a principle for once without your pouncing on me like vultures and claiming that I do have a general methodological principle after all; the issue is not whether one has any fixed or universal principles, but the standing, the function of such principles in the context of a philosophy – so we might perhaps say (this is a formula I have already tried out on earlier occasions)¹² that the Spinozist proposition, one very characteristic of identity philosophy, that *verum index sui et falsi*,¹³ in other words, that the true and the false can both be directly read off from the true, is a proposition whose validity we cannot accept; but that the false, that which should not be the case, is *in fact* the standard of itself: that the false, namely that which is not itself in the first instance – i.e. not itself in the sense that it is not what it claims to be – that this falseness proclaims itself in

what we might call a certain immediacy, and this immediacy of the false, this *falsum*, is the *index sui atque veri*. So here then, although we shouldn't exaggerate it, is a certain pointer to what I consider 'right thinking'.

Now, what I have been suggesting implies the gravest possible objections to the concept of *synthesis*. And I have to confess to you that I cannot help myself, my intellectual reactions are instinctive, I react as it were with my nerves. And so-called theoretical thought is to a great extent no more than the attempt to pursue intellectually the path taken by these instinctive reactions through the mind. If you happen to read the little article on philosophical thinking I recently published in the *Neue Deutsche Hefte*¹⁴ you will be able to understand better just what I have in mind. At all events, from very early on I have always felt a violent antipathy to the concept of synthesis. And without my knowing what it meant – initially at least, it was probably no more than an act of resistance on my part. I was someone who tended to extremes, who detected something false in syncretism and who instinctively objected to happy mediums, following Arnold Schoenberg, who had written that the middle road is the only one that does not lead to Rome.¹⁵ At any rate, I believe that in my attitude to the negation of the negation, which according to the triadic scheme is what a synthesis actually is, my instinctive antipathy has at least been properly conceptualized. At the same time, I should like to draw your attention to the fact that the status of synthesis in Hegel is actually somewhat anomalous. The fact is that, when you read the texts closely, you find that there is much less said about such syntheses, such positivities, than you might expect initially. And I believe that if you were to trace Hegel's use of the term 'synthesis' [*Synthese*] purely lexically – as opposed to the concept of 'Synthesis', as used by Kant in his epistemology – you would find that it occurs very rarely indeed, in contrast to such concepts as 'positing' [*Setzung*], 'position' or 'negation' – and this tells us something about the situation. It is grounded in the subject matter; it is no merely external trait of Hegelian language. In the three-stage scheme – if we allow for once that such a thing is to be found in Hegel – the so-called synthesis that represents the third stage as opposed to negation is by no means simply better or higher. If you consider an example of such a three-stage dialectic – we might look at the famous triad of Being, Nothing and Becoming¹⁶ – you will find that this so-called synthesis is actually something like a movement, a movement of thought, of the concept, but one that turns backwards and does not look forward and produce something complete to be presented as a successful achievement on a higher plane. Hegelian syntheses tend – and it would be rewarding

to follow this up with detailed analysis – to take the form that the thesis reasserts itself *within* the antithesis, once this has been postulated. Thus once the identity of two contradictory concepts has been reached, or at least asserted in the antithesis, as in the most famous case of all, the identity of Nothing with Being, this is followed by a further reflection to the effect that, indeed, these *are* identical, I have indeed brought them together – Being, as something entirely undefined, is also Nothing. However, to put it quite crudely, they are not actually entirely identical. The thought that carries out the act of identification always does violence to every single concept in the process. And the negation of the negation is in fact nothing other than the ἀνάμνησις, the recollection, of that violence, in other words the acknowledgement that, by conjoining two opposing concepts, I have on the one hand bowed to a necessity implicit in them, while on the other hand I have done them a violence that has to be rectified. And truth to tell, this rectification in the act of identification is what is always intended by the Hegelian syntheses.¹⁷ This structure – we are speaking here of a structure of dialectics – this structure is not something that can always be strictly sustained, and I know very well that you could show me quite different structures in Hegel's *Logic*. But I would venture the claim that the *intention* is always *this* intention. And, incidentally, this has the remarkable consequence that the movement of thought which enables us to characterize dialectics as a radically dynamic mode of thought is by no means always a forward movement, a unidirectional movement, but is always also a backward movement that always incorporates within itself, at any rate in its intention, the very things from which it distances itself. Moreover, one of the most astonishing features of the Hegelian dialectic and one that is especially hard to grasp is that, on the one hand, categories are ceaselessly promoted as things that are changing and becoming, while, on the other hand, they are logical categories and as such *simply have to* retain their validity, as in any traditional logic or epistemology. However, if that is the case, then the reason for it lies precisely in the fact that, thanks to this retrograde tendency implicit in the forward movement, whatever advances is simultaneously laid to rest; so that Becoming and Being are also identical in this sense too (this at any rate is the intention of the Hegelian dialectic). So if what I have said is correct, that is, if the so-called synthesis is nothing but the expression of the non-identity of thesis and antithesis, it follows that such an expression of non-identity is not so very far removed, not exactly worlds away, from what I meant by the concept of a negative dialectics as it might have seemed at first glance and even after my general description of it. And we see from

this that the distinctions – and this is actually the great demand that philosophy makes on its adepts – the distinctions that really count in philosophy are not the distinctions to be drawn between large-scale, opposing positions. (This is something I have adverted to on a number of occasions in earlier lectures, but I may perhaps be allowed to repeat it in the hope that it may be of assistance to you in your own studies.) If you compare the great systems with one another, for example, the rationalism of which Descartes was the pre-eminent exponent with Francis Bacon, the founding father of empiricism, you will find that on countless issues they not only say exactly the same thing but that they actually *mean* the same thing, albeit making use of different conceptual tools. The intentions of these philosophies lie much closer to each other than might be expected from their general philosophical or axiomatic positions. But the crucial differences are to be found precisely in such minimal nuances as the distinction between the concept of synthesis in Hegel and the version of the concept of negative dialectics that I have been at pains to formulate. The differences are to be found in such minimal nuances. And the ability to think philosophically is essentially the ability to experience the large-scale implications of these seemingly minute differences.

I have told you of the questions that I feel it is incumbent upon me to answer through this method, however indirectly. The question of the possibility of a negative dialectics leads me to a second question, one that differs from the first one only verbally, but is not so terribly different in point of substance. This is the question of whether dialectics is possible without *system* – and, beyond that, whether you can have philosophy without system. The concept of philosophical system has long since been discredited, first of all by Nietzsche's statement, with which you are all familiar, about the dishonesty of systems,¹⁸ and even more so by the efforts of the various neo-Kantian epigones, such as Heinrich Rickert's so-called open system,¹⁹ in which the discrepancy between the conceptual apparatus and the claims made by his philosophy is immediately obvious. In consequence, no very great act of intellectual courage is required to declare that one is opposed to system. And today, when no one with any ambition will have any truck with systems, it is almost better to inquire whether philosophy is possible without systems than simply to continue to assure everyone in sight that no system is possible. What I am attempting here and would like to show you is the possibility of philosophy in an authoritative sense without either system or ontology – that is what I am aiming at. But to give you an idea of the serious import of these matters, I may perhaps conclude by saying that a thinker like

Benjamin, who enjoys the reputation of an essayist and micro-analyst, vigorously defended the idea that philosophy is not possible in the absence of system – this essay is to be found in the volume of *Zeugnisse* [Testimonies].²⁰ And the thrust of his thinking actually pushed this question of the *possibility of philosophy without system* to the point of a sort of catastrophe. It is a question in which we shall have to immerse ourselves deeply in the course of these lectures – but with the twist previously referred to, that is to say, in the light of the received wisdom that *a philosophical system is not possible*.

LECTURE 4

18 November 1965

*Whether Philosophy is
Possible without System*

Notes

[Insertion 3a:] Beginning 18. XI. 65

Ad vocem system.

Universally discredited, more important to see the necessity for it.

According to all traditional conceptions of philosophy, a philosophy that is not a system is doomed. Traditional conceptions set out to provide an explanation of the world, the ground of the world as a whole.

System = the form which claims to provide this whole.

At the same time, distinction between system and systematization.

Systematization is a uniform mode of presentation, a schema in which there is space for everything, an organization of subjective reason.

System was the development of the subject itself from a principle, dynamic and all-inclusive, so 'that nothing should be left out'. Prototype: Fichte.

So great is the need for system that today systematization has taken its place unobserved. The explanation is assumed to be that the facts should find their proper place in an organized scheme that has previously been abstracted from the facts themselves.

This need ensures that even bodies of thought that claim to be anti-systematic (Nietzsche), or a-systematic, are latent systems.

Haag's insight that, in Heidegger's concept of Being, subject and object are so undifferentiated the one from the other that it assumes the function of a system, admittedly without becoming transparent as such, unlike the great philosophical systems. Combines totality with the renunciation of comprehension.

But the fact that its presence is undeclared causes the impulse to system to be transformed, it is no longer what it was.

Negative dialectics is, from this standpoint, the consciousness of its transformation.

In that case,¹ does thought not become random, arbitrary? Answer: it is accompanied by the figure of (a false) positivity; philosophically, as always, it is accompanied by the historically given shape of thought. It takes its cue, as it were, from the resistance. Instead of the system, [there is] the coercion of the facts.

Only: the power of the system must be capable of being transformed into the criticism of the individual. Criticism in a twofold sense: of both the concept and the thing! Still to be discussed. Thought that consumes the system within itself. The power that is liberated by blasting open the individual thing is what once animated the system, for this is the power which makes the phenomenon, as something non-identical with its concept, more than itself. Aspects of the system to be salvaged: that the phenomena are objectively interconnected, not merely by virtue of their classification. However, this must not be hypostasized or imposed on them from outside, but is to be discerned from within them, from their innermost determination, and the method for doing this is a negative dialectics.

(1)² Philosophy appeared obsolete. Feuerbach theses. Question of the non-identity of phil[osophy] today, its irrelevance, *une barque sur l'océan*.³ Philo[sophy] seems to belong to an incomparably restricted world. Cottage.⁴

To be revised since it has not been realized; not the point from which it can be convicted of nullity.

18 November 65

Transcript of the lecture

You will recall that last time I had moved on to consider the concept of system. I should like to prepare you gently for the fact that I shall repeatedly return to this concept in the course of these lectures. I find myself forced to keep coming back to this concept, which incidentally I discussed inadequately in one of my books, *Against Epistemology*.⁵

And I have the definite feeling that I owe you a clear explanation at this point, but that I am unable to offer you an uninterrupted account. Instead I have to keep reverting to this topic from time to time. I should like to begin by inviting you to exercise your minds in a way that is not so easy for anyone nowadays and to reconstruct for yourselves the processes that drive philosophy towards the system. Today it has become much easier to assert that systematic philosophizing has become impossible – and, in consequence, we must renounce attempts to secure everything that has given the concept of system such enormous emphasis. And I place such great value on this because I believe that you will understand my approach to philosophy only if you see it in its relation to the idea of system and not simply as a random body of thought indifferent to system. A further factor is that in a certain sense the themes that formerly underlay philosophical systems will also be preserved in my own efforts – that, at any rate, is my intention. According to the traditional conception of philosophy, a philosophy that lacks a system is doomed from the outset, namely doomed to arbitrariness, doomed – as modern logic would say – to see its elements unconnected and hence deprived of any binding coherence and unambiguous shape. At the root of this situation is the fact that the traditional conception of philosophy as it has come down to us from Plato to German idealism has set itself the task of explaining the universe – or at least the ground of the world from which the totality might be derived. From this angle, system means the form governing such a totality, in other words, a form from which nothing is left out. Accordingly, the philosophical conception of system is extraordinarily ambitious, so ambitious that it almost coincides with the ambitions of philosophy itself.

In order to make sure that we understand one another, we ought to clarify the distinction between system in this emphatic sense of the word and the thing that has largely come to replace it, namely the systematization of thought. By systematization I understand – and I believe that this is not just playing with words but describes something that corresponds to the facts of a systematic presentation today – by systematization I understand a unified form of presentation, in other words, a scheme in which everything that belongs to the subject matter concerned or to the philosophical topic (if that can be regarded as a subject area) finds its place, the proper place belonging to it. It is therefore an organization of subjective reason. Perhaps the best-known and most effective type of such a systematization today is the functional, structural theory of society developed by Talcott Parsons, a theory that has come to come to exercise such an extraordinary

influence on sociology.⁶ I am not concerned here with the sociology but with the structure of such thinking, which resembles a plan or reference system that can be designed and in which every conceivable phenomenon can be readily accommodated. It seems to me highly significant that at this very moment we should find ourselves in a situation where what we can describe as a genuine philosophical system, that is to say, the development of an objective reality, an ostensible Being-in-itself from a unified standpoint – that this should be supplanted in great measure by what we may think of as systematizations. I take this as a sign that the need to create systems is far greater than the discrediting of the idea of system by philosophers might suggest. And it is this that compels us to examine the concept of system in greater depth. Thus what I have in mind here is system in the strong, properly philosophical sense – as opposed to this concept of systematization, an organizational schema of subjective reason, a schema that can be created by a process of classification. System in this philosophical sense is the development of the fact from a principle, in a dynamic manner, in short, as a development, a movement that draws everything into itself, that takes hold of everything and is itself a totality; it claims objective validity such that, as Hegel would put it,⁷ nothing between heaven and earth can be conceived of as being outside such a system. Fichte's philosophy may offer us the most consistent example. Fichte did in fact attempt to derive everything, including the finite subject and its opposite, the finite Not-I, from a single idea, namely the I, the absolute subject [the self-conscious mind]. And I believe that, if you wish to form a clear idea of the concept of system in the strong sense, you would be well advised to read the two introductions that Fichte subsequently added to his *Science of Knowledge*.⁸ In them you will be able to feel with the entire force of Fichte's logic the need to create a system, a need that is no longer felt by people's enfeebled consciousness today. And, for my part, it is my belief that an a-systematic or anti-systematic form of thought can compete with the system nowadays only if it feels this need itself and – if I may anticipate this programmatic point – if it is also capable of absorbing into itself something of the energy that was formerly stored up in the great philosophical systems. The need for such a system is so great that today systematization – the organizing schema; what might be called the pale imitation of system in an age of positivism – has imperceptibly come to be accepted as a substitute for system. At the same time, what can be urged against all these systematizations is this – and I should like to emphasize this since I am well aware, without really understanding it, of the fascination that is exerted nowadays by such systematizations: it is one thing

to establish a scheme by abstracting from the facts and their sequence so as to organize them more transparently; it is quite another matter, and a highly questionable one at that, to treat such a scheme as if that had been what system aspired to be and what philosophy must always be, namely the explanation, the *interpretation*, of whatever this scheme contains.

This need ensures – and I should like to draw this to your attention so that you should become aware of the seriousness of this matter, distant though it has become from us – this need ensures that even philosophies that are as anti-systematic as Nietzsche, or as a-systematic as modern phenomenology and ontology, are latently systems nevertheless. Husserl, who began with individual analyses of the phenomena of consciousness and their correlatives, was finally honest enough to admit that, as soon as one sets out to reduce everything that exists to the structures of consciousness, this presupposes the existence of a system. And this explains why in his late phase his phenomenology regresses to a system of sorts; indeed, we might even call it straight out a system of transcendental idealism.⁹ But even in Heidegger matters are more complex than might appear at first sight. It is undoubtedly the case that one of the reasons why Heidegger's thought was once felt to be so fascinating was the fact that it claimed to be necessary and logical without being accompanied by the clunking sounds of conceptual machinery. The fact is, however – and I am grateful to Professor Haag for pointing this out to me in conversation a few days ago¹⁰ – that, at the very least in Heidegger's case as well, the latent function of the system can be seen in the circumstance that his concept of Being contains what philosophical systems traditionally attempt to demonstrate: namely the identity of whatever exists with thought in so far as it is implied that this concept of Being is an undifferentiated, immediate unity of the elements from which, precisely because it is undifferentiated, we can then derive the various modes of being and the distinctions of the ontological and the ontic. In short, the concept of Being in his thought has a quite similar 'generative' function and at the same time a similarly all-encompassing function of the sort that systems possessed in the tradition of German idealism – admittedly with the qualification that the relation to such an originary principle has ceased to be transparent. In other words, such a principle is not the product of a logical deduction; nor is it a principle to which recourse may be had, a rational principle in its own right. Paradoxically, then, we might speak in Heidegger's case of an irrational system of philosophy. It combines, we might say, the claim to totality or, as he himself says in a number of places, at least of *Being and Time*, it combines the claim to totality with the

renunciation of comprehension.¹¹ Incidentally, you can already find this curious coupling implied in Kant, since Kant expressly defends the idea of a system of transcendental idealism and had formed the plan of supplementing the three Critiques with a positive system of this sort, while at the same time rejecting the idea of comprehending the objects ‘from within’ as intellectualistic and Leibnizian – even though the reality is that, if philosophy had succeeded in conceptualizing everything that exists without leaving a remainder, it would necessarily have comprehended the phenomena it had subsumed. But this is just one of the many questions that remain unresolved – magnificently unresolved, we must add – in Kant.

I should now like to bring to your attention changes that are becoming evident in the function and shape of philosophical systems. It would be cheap (and something I would not wish to do for all the world) if someone were to argue that, OK, if Heidegger’s philosophy is a system after all, malgré lui, that shows he is an idealist and there is nothing more to be said on the topic. I do not wish to deny that I regard Heidegger’s philosophy as an idealism in disguise. But what is happening here is that the concept of system no longer puts in an appearance as such, but that it survives in a latent form; not everything it contains is explicitly derived or subsumed under its constitutive, generative concept. This circumstance brings about a qualitative change in the concept of system itself. This means – and I am not embarrassed to say that at this point I feel a certain emotion – that the path on which system becomes secularized into a latent force which ties disparate insights to one another (replacing any architectonic organization) – this path in fact seems to me to be the only road still open to philosophy. Admittedly, this path is very different from the one that passes through the concept of Being, exploiting en route the advantages provided by the neutrality of the concept of Being. And it is from this standpoint that I would ask you to understand the concept of a negative dialectic: as the consciousness, the critical and self-critical consciousness of such a change in the idea of a philosophical system in the sense that, as it disappears, it releases the powers contained within itself. This is along the lines of what we may say of theology, since in this latter case the process of secularization released the idea of the system as the idea of a coherent, meaningful world. After hearing what I have been saying, you may be less inclined to regard the question of whether philosophy can be anything but a system as purely a matter of antiquarian or academic interest. In this context it is worth recalling once again that Benjamin in his early essays insisted that philosophy is not possible in the absence of system.¹² The road that led him to abandon this insight

was very tortuous and painful, and his ideas on the subject remained fragmentary. I believe that it is no exaggeration if I say that to this day the question of whether philosophy can exist without system has not been tackled with the seriousness and energy that it calls for. For at first sight it appears as if the thinking that has entirely dispensed with the unity provided by system – the thinking that, as it were, plunges heedlessly into the act of thinking (if I may put it in this unkind way) – were simply being confided to the mercies of contingency and whim. And this very criticism, that of the aperçu-like nature of my thinking, has frequently been levelled at me too, until finally – simply because so many things came together and created a context – it then lost ground in favour of other objections, without my having had to put my cards on the table¹³ and without my having had to show what joins up my various insights and turns them into a unity. And these reflections, some of which I am trying to convey to you in these lectures, are my attempt to make up for lost time.

The answer, the highly provisional answer to the question of whether a philosophy that is no longer able to be certain that the totality of all that exists and can be thought can be deduced from a single unified factor – the answer to be given to this question is very closely linked to reflections on the concept of positivity and the critique of positivity that we have been considering in the last few lectures. Perhaps we may say that such thinking is guided by the shape of the positive reality, however open to question, that confronts it. The structure of a mode of thought is no longer imposed on it by the authority and sovereignty with which it creates and generates its objects from within itself, but by the shape of whatever confronts it; and, in a narrower sense, it is dictated – and there is nothing new in that, since this has always been the case in philosophy – by the historically given shape of the thought with which it engages. We might say that in this sense the unity of thought is always to be found in whatever it negates in its historical context, in its specific situation. This is in harmony with the spirit of the meaning of Hegel's dictum that philosophy is its own time comprehended in thoughts.¹⁴ We might say, then, that thought which aspires to be authoritative without system lets itself be guided by the resistance it encounters; in other words, its unity arises from the coercion that material reality exercises over the thought, as contrasted with the 'free action' of thought itself which, always concealed and by no means as overt as in Fichte, used to constitute the core of the system. I would ask you to combine this with an idea that I have hinted at in quite a different context, that of the idea of the secularization of system or the transformation of the idea of system, in other words, with the fact that philosophical

systems have ceased to be possible. Perhaps you will allow me to formulate this once again in programmatic fashion, in thesis form, as opposed to spelling it out to you in detail. My postulate would then be that the power of the system – what at one time was the unifying power of a structure of thought as a whole – had to be transformed into the criticism of individual detail, of individual phenomena. Criticism here has a double meaning. What criticism means – and I refuse to separate these two aspects in the way that scientific practice has dinned into us – what criticism means is on the one hand criticism *in the noological sense*, in other words, criticism of the truth and falsehood of statements and judgements and of conceptions in general. But criticism must also be brought into a necessary connection with a *criticism of phenomena*. These [two aspects] are measured here against the yardstick of their concept because their non-identity with themselves, which they always claim they possess, also tells us something about their rightness or wrongness. I cannot go further into this question of the twofold meaning of ‘criticism’ at this point. I should just like to point out that, whenever I speak of criticism, I have in mind this double meaning which is at the same time a unity. And I can refer those of you who are interested in this point to the debate with the English logician of the social sciences Karl Popper, which appeared in the volume containing the contributions to the so-called Kleiner Tübinger Soziologentag.¹⁵ Perhaps you could have a look at it yourselves. That, then, would be the programme I want to put before you here. And this programme may well come closest to something that Nietzsche had in mind. Thinking would be a form of thinking that is not itself a system, but one in which system and the systematic impulse are consumed; a form of thinking that in its analysis of individual phenomena demonstrates the power that formerly aspired to build systems. By this I mean the power that is liberated by blasting open individual phenomena through the insistent power of thought. This power is the same power that once animated the system, since it is the force which enabled individual phenomena, non-identical with their own concepts as they are, to become more than themselves. This means that something of the system can still be salvaged in philosophy, namely the idea that phenomena are objectively interconnected – and not merely by virtue of a classification imposed on them by the knowing subject. However, we should not hypostasize this interconnectedness, in other words, we should not turn it into an absolute. Nor should it be imposed from outside, since it is to be found in the phenomena, in their inner determination. And negative dialectics in so far as it is a method – and it is only a method in one of its aspects – should help us in this task.

Ladies and gentlemen, at this point I expect – quite apart from the fact that all of this is necessarily programmatic in character; but I have to present you with my programme so that I can persuade you of the necessity of the steps by which it can be fulfilled – at this point, then, I expect that you will all want to raise an objection. You will all want to say: Aren't you being rather naïve in expecting philosophy to deliver something of which it is no longer capable? In the age of the great systems – in modern times, let us say, from Descartes to Hegel – the world possessed a certain visibility. I must add that there was something of a discrepancy between this visibility and the clarity of these systems – I need mention only the infinitely complex Hegelian system. Even so, the fact is that these systems came into being in a world in which people knew their way around. God knows that I do not mean by this that the world was what Cooley in his sociology has described as a 'primary community'¹⁶ – it certainly was not that. But right up until the early days of the Industrial Revolution it did possess this quality of visibility that was like that of a small town in contrast to a giant metropolis, with its endless tangle of elevated railways, subways, reversing triangles and the like. And I believe that, if we approach philosophy with the sort of claims that I am making, it is our duty to become aware of a certain naïvety. This consists in the fact that, in general nowadays, in the models it applies to reality, philosophy behaves as if the visibility of existing circumstances allowed it to survey all living creatures and subsume them under a unifying concept – this is something it still takes for granted. We might say, then, that there is an element of provincialism in philosophy today. In the same way, it is a sign of the times that whatever resists the general trend, whatever does not allowed itself to be prescribed to, has a certain naïvety and backwardness about it, even if it likes to represent itself as progressive and advanced. In this respect, the provincial elements that I have highlighted in *The Jargon of Authenticity*¹⁷ are no mere accident but are to a certain degree integral to the subject itself, because the traditional conception of philosophy can only be validated if thinking behaves as though it still inhabited the traditional society in which philosophy was able to function. However, once we have recognized the pressures on philosophy to remain provincial, a situation I described in *The Jargon of Authenticity* far less forthrightly than was necessary, we find ourselves confronted with a dual obligation. On the one hand, we must cast off our provinciality. In other words, we should cease to speak as if we could explain a substantive world from within itself, as Hegel believed he was able to do, given that this world's substantiveness has long since slipped out of the reach of the philosophical mind. On

the other hand, if we wish to continue to philosophize and not to act as if we confused a comfortably furnished cottage with the Pentagon, we have to undertake the task, the quite unavoidable task, of describing the path that will turn our thoughts back to philosophy – or, if not describing it, that is a task that goes beyond any reasonable expectation, then at least attempting to reconstruct it in our minds. Only in this way, or so I believe, only by recovering this renewed sense of the necessity of philosophy can philosophy be cured of the provincialism that lurks in the conviction that it is possible for someone to enter his study, or, since such things do not exist any more, to go into his seminar, or, since that doesn't really exist either, to go into his office and believe that he can comprehend the universe from that vantage point equipped only with paper, pencil and a selection of books. I do of course believe that a thinker who fails to rise to this challenge has a priori absolutely no *raison d'être* at all. And I believe further that positivist schools of thought that resist philosophies which reject this challenge are in the right. It is impossible to ignore the smell of the stale atmosphere pervading that 'philosophical cottage'. And if philosophy aspires to anything at all, it must tear down that cottage as fast as possible, and the very last thing it must do is to confuse it with the old shelteredness, to say nothing of a new one.¹⁸

Well, all of that is more or less illuminating. You will find the question of the necessity of philosophy, or rather of the road that will lead thought back to philosophy, rather less illuminating. I believe that my best course will be to remind you of the position that with some justification has been regarded as one possible end of philosophy. I am thinking here of Marx's 'Theses on Feuerbach', the most famous of which goes: 'The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it.'¹⁹ On the one hand, this sentence has placed handcuffs on philosophy with its suggestion that philosophy is nothing more than ideology. On the other hand, it postulates the implied claim that, by finally realizing the ideals of philosophy, above all the freedom of human beings from institutions alien to them, this act of realization turns philosophy itself into an abstract, isolated, merely intellectualized form of reflection that renders it superfluous.²⁰ And in the tradition I come from myself – in so far as it is a tradition of critical philosophy – this was a very essential motif. Now, I also believe that this vantage point from which philosophy appears to be obsolete has itself become obsolete in the meantime. And it would be ideological in its turn, namely dogmatic, if we were not to concede this. The transition that Marx believed was just round the corner, in 1848 or thereabouts,

did not take place. The qualitative leap that would change the world did not occur. And the proletariat failed to constitute itself as the subject-object of history, as it was supposed to according to Marx's own theory. We shall scarcely exaggerate or go too far if we conclude from these observations – whose consequences for a critical theory I do not wish to discuss here; these questions are highly complex – we shall not go too far if we conclude that the failure to convert philosophical theory into practice means that we cannot think of philosophical theory as superseded, obsolete or superfluous, at any rate not in the sense that was suggested by that Marxian idea. And in the next lecture I should like to take up this idea of the actuality of philosophy²¹ and infer its continued relevance from the fact that the abolition of the subject itself failed to take place.

LECTURE 5

23 November 1965

Theory and Practice

Notes

23.XI.65¹

No dichotomy of theory and practice; Feuerbach theses not to be interpreted in this way. The meaning is not that phil[osophy] lags behind the aspect of its realization. On the one hand, i.e. according to the state of the forces of production, it would in fact be more possible than ever; thwarted by relations of production. But

- 1) it should not be thought of as if it were all about to happen, at least in its general trend, especially as in M[arx] that possibility goes against the trend. Anyone who fails to recognize this commits himself to the bad.
- 2) It is wrong to infer from practice any restriction on thinking. Brecht and idealism. But the fact that philosophical idealism was criticized only dogmatically by Lenin is a case of false, i.e. heteronymous, practice.
- 3) Interpret means elucidate, not necessarily recognize. My thesis: interpretation is criticism. Without interpretation in this sense, there can be no true practice. M[arx] probably really did mean to say that philosophers should abandon their activities in favour of politics.
- 4) Ambivalence in M[arx]: on the one hand, he calls for complete scientific objectivity; on the other hand, phil[osophy] is

denounced. There is a problem in this; but it has to be thought through.

- 5) No relapse into mere contemplation. We cannot think any true thought unless we want the true. Thinking is itself an aspect of practice. The intention remains change – but against pseudo-activity. Against the over-hasty question of practice that shackles the forces of production. Probably only the non-restricted thought is capable of being practical.

23 November 65

Transcript of the lecture

Ladies and gentlemen, I have received a letter from one of you that I found extremely moving. It was connected with what I said last time about the Theses on Feuerbach and also took issue with some of the statements contained in my essay ‘Why Still Philosophy’ from the collection *Interventions*.² Before responding to this letter (and I wish to do that) I would like to begin by carrying on with the observations that I was really only able to touch on last time, so that they came out much more crudely than I had intended (as is always the problem in such cases). What I wanted to say quite simply was that if the ‘nucleus of time’³ and the transition to practice are as crucial as they are in the Marxist conception – then we cannot retain our detachment at the level of theory from the fact that the transition to practice did not occur in the way in which it had been predicted. We cannot bring the moment of transition to a standstill – I was tempted to the use the term of ‘the moment’, favoured by Kierkegaard or Tillich⁴ – we cannot conserve the moment or bring it to a standstill. And today we simply cannot think any more as Marx thought, namely that the revolution was imminent – simply because, on the one hand, the proletariat in his day was not integrated in bourgeois society and, on the other hand, bourgeois society did not yet possess the vast instruments of power, both actual physical instruments of power and also psychological instruments in the broadest sense, that it now has. Both factors, together with the increasing process of integration, have come together to make the concept of a revolution highly problematic nowadays. Ideas of practice cannot afford to ignore the fact that, on the one hand, the revolution has turned into an administratively introduced despotism, and, on the other hand, this is opposed by the mere technical innovation of the atomic bomb – Jürgen von Kempfski has written an extremely interesting article about this and I would recommend that you look it up in *Merkur*.⁵

The fact is that the possibility of a violent overthrow of existing society by the proletariat has come to seem touchingly innocent, and this means that the entire problem of reformism⁶ – even the famous question of reformism which as you know was violently attacked in classical Marxism – has now assumed a completely different aspect from the one it had previously. And I wanted in the first instance merely to make you aware of this entire problem complex. A revolutionary practice that has been endlessly postponed and has to be deferred further to the Greek calends, or else to be utterly transformed, can no longer act as the court of appeal that authorizes us to dismiss philosophy as hopelessly out of date. My view would be that, to reflect on why it did *not* happen and why it *could* not happen – this theoretical question is a matter of no small significance for a philosophy that claims to be relevant today. It belongs, if I may express it in this way, to a dialectical anthropology which is assuredly no small part of the problem of philosophy in our time.⁷ On the other hand, philosophy's own claim to identity as proclaimed by Hegel faltered at the crucial step, namely the transition to practice in which, according to Marxist doctrine, the realm of freedom is supposed to coincide with the realm of necessity.⁸ Hence philosophy itself is in need of radical self-criticism and must give some thought to why all that failed to come to pass. Last time I spoke to you of the idea of the de-provincialization of philosophy and, in doing so, I had all this very much in mind. I was very aware that philosophy, particularly in the way that German idealism interpreted itself as a philosophy of history, entirely ignored these truly decisive world-historical factors. Perhaps I may strike a personal note here: in *The Jargon of Authenticity* – about which I shall have more to say presently – I attacked a number of representatives of philosophy, such as my Tübingen colleague Bollnow, by quoting from their writings. My intention was not to arouse any feelings of hostility towards them. I do not know Mr Bollnow personally; I have never met him. I wanted only – and you would do well to read such books from this philosophical standpoint – I wanted only to offer you some graphic illustrations of the provincialization of which philosophy needs to be cured. I wished to call for an antidote to the view that 'all is right with the world' so as to enable philosophy to transcend the realm of edifying Sunday cant. For it is undoubtedly true that philosophy has become a secularized theology in the less than positive sense that it lapses into a preaching tone – something that unfortunately can already be seen in Hegel on occasion and that a progressive theology would no longer trust itself to adopt nowadays.

I would like now to come back to the letter I received from one of you. I believe that it expresses in a very admirable and, if I may say so, very succinct way something that I am certain has occurred to you in response to the issues that I touched on towards the end of my last lecture and the beginning of this one. I am very well aware that many of you have felt very strongly about what I have said and that your genuine interest in philosophy has been aroused. For that very reason I would like to discuss this particular question in greater depth. I should like to start by saying that there is no simple dichotomy between theory and practice,⁹ and that presumably Marx himself did not believe in a simple dichotomy either – this letter pointed this out and I believe that, if you reflect a little, you will not find what I have to say objectionable. It is quite certain that it would be a mistake to interpret the Feuerbach Theses as the expression of a purely practicalistic view. What speaks against such a view is Marx's criticism of the theory of absolute action, independent of theory, that he levelled at the various anarchist currents of his time, whose pure activism he equated with this lack of theory. When Marx talks about 'science' a number of different things are run together. One aspect of it quite certainly is the model of the natural sciences, which he was far more impressed by as a model for the social sciences than is possible for us nowadays – or, at any rate, for those of us in the non-conforming trends of sociology. On the other hand, what this concept of science probably meant to him was that society could be understood theoretically and that it had to be explained theoretically by reference to its own concept, i.e. the concept of exchange, in order for us to be able to act correctly. That was his belief. And when he says, 'Hitherto the philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways', what that 'hitherto' implies is not the renunciation of theory and the view that all we need to do is to wade in with our fists and there will be no more need for thought. This idea is in fact fascist, and it would be grossly unjust to Marx to impute such views to him. Nor did I mean to suggest that philosophy can regress to a state prior to its 'realization' and that we can comfortably make ourselves at home with Aristotle's notion of the dianoetic virtues,¹⁰ in which philosophy is sufficient unto itself. For philosophy – I believe that sometimes it is important to state the obvious – differs from art in that it is no autonomous structure complete in itself, but that it constantly refers to a reality outside itself, outside its own ideas. It is in fact this relationship between thought and that which is not thought that constitutes the core theme of philosophy. If philosophy is concerned with the real, then it is evident that a purely contemplative relation to this reality, a relation that does not envisage any practical action, is

nonsensical because an act of thought about reality is – whether consciously or not – always a *practical* act.

However, when we say that philosophy must not regress to a point anterior to its realization, we have to point to something far more drastic from the side of the object, namely to something that the feeling of imprisonment, of incarceration, which we all have, makes us all too prone to forget. And this is why I am so very grateful to the writer of this letter, since he has made me realize that something had to be said that I suppose had seemed so obvious to me that I omitted to say it and the result was that I gave a misleading impression. The fact is that this too is a very drastic situation – namely the fact that from one perspective, that of the forces of production, it would be possible to organize the world in such a way that there would no longer be any want and hence deprivation and pressure, and that this would be immediately possible now. In this sense the saying of Franz Pfemfert ‘Now or in a hundred years’ is as topical now as it ever was.¹¹ And if we fail to follow up this idea that the forces of production could satisfy human needs and enable mankind to enter into a condition worthy of human beings – if we fail to give voice to this thought, then we certainly will be in danger of giving ideology a helping hand. Such an outcome is prevented only by the *relations* of production and by the extension of the forces of production into the machinery of physical and intellectual power. I believe, then, that we have to begin by saying this, and that a possible starting-point for a correct practice is to rethink how to put a society on the right path when, on the one hand, it threatens to stagnate owing to the ossified relations of production and the attitudes resulting from that situation, while, on the other hand, it ceaselessly produces the forces that initially promote destruction but that tomorrow or the day after, if I may put it crassly, could actually make possible a paradise on earth. But I believe that we have to make a distinction here; the gentleman who wrote the letter said we must make distinctions, and I am more than happy to oblige. So in my view it would be a mistake to believe that, even with the inconceivable acceleration in the relations of production that we have witnessed, the transformation into the realm of freedom might be on the verge of taking place, in line with the historical trend. The situation is rather that society has discovered ways and means of channelling the unstoppable growth in the forces of production and of keeping it under control. In consequence, what Marx regarded as the self-evident equivalence between the advances of the forces of production and the emancipation of mankind has ceased to hold good. Moreover, it is not enough for us to live in hope that the history of mankind will move towards

a satisfactory state of affairs of its own accord and that all that will be required from us is a bit of a push from time to time to ensure that everything works out. Even though – and here too I would rather err on the side of caution – we should bear in mind, and in this respect Marx was undoubtedly right to maintain that the forces of production, in other words human energies and their extension in technology, have a tendency of their own to overcome the limits that have been set by society. To regard this overcoming as a kind of natural law, however, and to imagine that it *has to* happen in this way, and that it has to happen *immediately*, that would render the entire situation harmless, since it would undermine every kind of practice that placed its reliance on it. And, finally, in taking the link between theory and practice seriously, one of our most vital tasks is to realize that thought is not a priori impotent in the face of a possible practice. This was in fact the point of Marx's criticism of an abstract utopia.

To fail to recognize this is to fail to recognize that the possibility we have to hold on to today is not simply one that goes along *with* the trend, with the historical tendency, but one that runs *counter* to it. I would say that anyone in this position will probably find himself subscribing to the bad tendency, that is, the negative, destructive trend. I would maintain, further – and I believe that this is the point that will be of immediate importance for you, and I would ask your indulgence if my remarks are excessively *ad hominem* – that there is a very great risk that the idea of practice will lead to a shackling of theory. By this I mean that ideas of all sorts are restricted by the insistence on the question 'Yes, but what must I do in practice? What can I do with this idea?' Or even, 'If you think in this way, you will stand in the way of some possible practice or other.' It is always happening that when you address the enormous barriers facing every conceivable political intervention stemming from the relations of production and the social institutions built around them – that when you address this, you instantly receive the reply 'Yes, but . . .', an objection that I regard as one of the greatest dangers in intellectual life. Indeed, how can we hope ever to get anywhere if we think in this way? We shall never be able to achieve anything since we shall be forced to sit around twiddling our thumbs! And I would say the feature that seems to me to be characteristic of the application, the consistent application, of the Feuerbach thesis I referred to earlier is actually the idea that theory itself should be captured from the end-point of the *terminus ad quem*. Perhaps I may be allowed to tell you about an incident that took place a long time ago, it must be twenty-four years, between Brecht and myself in Los Angeles.¹² I had just worked out the main thrust of my book *Against Epistemology*, a

book that did not appear until many years later. My idea was not to criticize idealism dogmatically by contrasting it with a materialist philosophy, but to explode idealism from within, by judging it according to its own yardstick. I explained this to Brecht on one occasion. It did not occur to Brecht to take this idea at all seriously. Instead, he remarked that there already existed a book that was, so to speak (he often expressed himself in such terms), a classical book – he meant Lenin’s book on empiriocriticism. In it all that work had already been done; this was a book that had authority, and if anyone were to undertake this philosophical chore once again it would simply be a wasted effort. . . . And I could not avoid the impression that he tended a little bit to think that, if Lenin had accomplished this in such a book, it was something of an impertinence on the part of someone who was unable to boast of a comparable political success to do all that was claimed and recited – in what I can only call unending and desperately monotonous repetitions. Now, I would say that the standpoint adopted by Brecht – who after all has to be taken very seriously in such matters – seems to me not only theoretically insufficient; it seems to me not only to replace the strenuous effort of the Notion¹³ with dogma, but I would say – and I say this with particular emphasis to those among you who are inclined to give absolute precedence to practicism – that such a view contributes to a *bad* practice. For to take a dogmatic view of that book of Lenin’s, or indeed all books by Lenin or even all the books ever produced by Marxism, is the precise equivalent of the procedures adopted by administrations that have set themselves up in the name of Marxism, that have absolved themselves of the need for any further thought and that have done nothing but base their own acts of violence on these theories without thinking them through and developing them critically. I believe that this is a particularly drastic example. Those of you who have escaped from the East – and this will be true of quite a number of you – will remember how over there materialism was dogmatically institutionalized as a kind of world-view to which people had to commit themselves. But by that very fact the authorities fell below the standards of their own theoretical ambitions, their scientific ambitions, in particular the claim that their consciousness was to be the most progressive consciousness; and that we should make this insight our own. Such claims are trampled on. That is the decisive factor, and I would maintain that it simply cuts the ground from beneath the feet of a certain kind of practicism – to say nothing of its naïvety and helplessness in the current situation.

The letter I have received goes on to ask about the meaning of the word ‘interpret’, and in this connection a sentence of Marx’s was

referred to in which interpreting was said to amount to the same thing as 'recognition'.¹⁴ Marx presumably used the notion of 'recognition' alongside that of 'interpreting'. If my correspondent (if I may refer to him in this way) asks me – and he puts his question in a very friendly way, he asks me very trustingly – whether 'recognition' is necessarily contained in the concept of interpretation, I would reply, No, it is not necessarily implied, but what is essential is what I have been attempting to explain to you in the course of these lectures – and this is crucial – namely, that interpretation is much the same as *criticism*; that there can really be no interpretation that is not critical interpretation – as opposed to affirmative interpretation. That is what might be described as the general thesis I should like to present you with here. But without *such* an interpretation, that is, without a fully thought-out idea in control of itself, I believe that there can be no such thing as true practice. That aside, I believe that Marx really did believe – and we have to think back to the period in which the writings we are considering here were written, that is to say, around the year 1848 – that philosophers would in fact be best advised to pack it in and become revolutionaries, in other words, man the barricades – which, as is well known, cannot be found anywhere nowadays, and if they were to be erected in any advanced society today they would be quickly eliminated by police or security guards. But he probably did mean something of the sort. And the idea was this – I believe this shouldn't be softened up too much – that the end of classical German philosophy (as it was called at the time) would be succeeded by the heritage of socialism in which this philosophy would realize itself, and in so doing – in this respect Marx and Engels were good Hegelians – would negate, would abolish itself so that there would in fact no longer be any place left for philosophy. I believe that if we do inquire into Marx's view of this problem we find that his position was highly ambivalent. And this ambivalence points to the presence of a problem that needs to be thought through anew and in a principled way. It is always the case that whenever thinkers as powerful as Marx or Hegel or Kant arrive at an impasse it is not a good idea to be too clever in resolving the resulting antinomies. In general, it is far better to assure oneself of the necessity of such antinomies. On the one hand, as a student of classical economics, Marx called for full scientific objectivity. If you look at the passage that Horkheimer and I quoted in the preface to Dr Schmidt's book on Marx you will see how resolutely he expressed himself on the subject of a science that has a *thema probandum*.¹⁵ On the other hand, he was unsparing in his denunciations of a self-contained philosophy. The possible answer that suggests itself is of course that the realm for which he

demanded autonomy in this sense was science, and that to a certain degree he naïvely played science off against philosophy, which he dismissed as old hat, while at the same time he endorsed a science based on a Darwinist model as the appropriate standard for his day. In the meantime, we have come to realize something that he and Engels also understood very clearly: that science is not only a force of production but that it is implicated in the social power relations and command structures of its age. It follows from this that we cannot simply transfer to science the authority purloined from philosophy or the authority denied to philosophy by criticism. Meanwhile, the conceptless science – it too has been subject to a dialectic of history; it is no longer the same as it had appeared to Marx and Engels – a conceptless science in the meantime has undergone a development, as a result of which it is quite certainly unable to carry out the critical function that the founders of a so-called scientific socialism had entrusted it with. If anything, it has been moving in the opposite direction. In consequence, so-called scientific problems inevitably turn into problems of how science is to reflect on itself, of how science is to be criticized, the way in which science understands itself. In other words, these problems refer science back to the philosophy from which they were originally stolen. And it is this very process of referring science back to philosophy by virtue of its own reflection on itself that appears to me to be so closely bound up with the call for the actuality of philosophy, its contemporary relevance, that I have raised here.

Finally, however, I should like to say that there is no intention here of advocating a relapse into contemplation, as was to be found in the great idealist philosophies and ultimately even in Hegel, despite the great importance of practice in the Hegelian system – no such a relapse can be contemplated here. The late Karl Korsch, who as you perhaps know had been Brecht's philosophy teacher, criticized Horkheimer and myself even more sharply, already in America and also later on, after the publication of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. His objection was that we had regressed to the standpoint of Left Hegelianism.¹⁶ This does not seem right to me because the standpoint of pure contemplation can no longer be sustained. Though we should note, incidentally, that the polarity Marx constructs between pure contemplation on the one hand and his own political philosophy on the other does only partial justice to the intentions of Left Hegelianism. This is a difficult question, one that will be resolved only by the detailed analyses of the Left Hegelian thinkers that are only now starting to get under way¹⁷ – although we cannot deny the impressive political instincts which alerted Marx to the presence of the

retrograde and, above all, nationalist potential in such thinkers as Bruno Bauer, Stirner and Ruge. Now, I believe that what has transpired since, in both theory and actuality, means that we need have no fear of such a regression from a dialectical theory which happens not to be naïve. At least, that is my hope. I mean that it is not possible to think a right thought unless one *wills* the right thing [to happen]; that is to say, unless, underlying this thought, and providing it with a truly animating power, there is the desire that it should be right for human beings to enter into a condition in which meaningless suffering should come to an end and in which – I can only express it negatively – the spell hanging over mankind should be lifted. For thinking itself is always a form of behaviour;¹⁸ it is, whether it likes it or not, a kind of practice, even in its purest logical operations. Every synthesis it creates brings about change. Every judgement that links two ideas together that were separate previously is, as such, work; I would be tempted to say it always brings about a minute change in the world. And once thinking sets out in its purest form to bring about change in even the smallest thing, no power on earth can separate theory from practice in an absolute way. The separation of theory and practice is itself an expression of reified consciousness. And it is the task of philosophy to dismantle the rigidity, the dogmatic and irreconcilable character of this separation. But what I mean here by refusing to operate with the concept of practice, as many people do and as I am sure many of you do find tempting, is that I would not like to confuse practice with pseudo-activity.¹⁹ I would like to prevent you from becoming involved in this, not so as to set myself up as an authority, but simply to impress you a little bit with the arguments I have put forward today in the hope that you will think these matters through yourselves; that you will not imagine that you are achieving anything essential if you become an ‘organizer’ – to use the term thought up in America to describe people who bring people together, organize them, agitate and do other things of this sort. In every activity, there has to be a relation to the relevance, the potential it contains. Nowadays especially, precisely because decisive activity is blocked and because, as I have already explained often enough, thinking itself has become paralysed and impotent, chance practice has become a substitute for the things that do not happen. And the more people sense that this is not actually true practice, the more doggedly and passionately their minds become fixated on it. This explains why I wish to proclaim my reservations about those who are too quick to call for action, about the ‘passport inspectors’ who no longer ask every practice for its theoretical justification – which is certainly just as misguided – but, conversely, demand that every thought produces

its visa: OK, but what can you do with it? My view is that such behaviour impedes action instead of promoting it. And I would add that the possibility of a valid practice presupposes the full and undiminished awareness of the *blockage* of practice. If we measure a thought immediately by its possible realization, the productive force of thinking will be shackled as a result. The only thought that can be made practical is the thought that is not restricted in advance by the practice to which it is directly applied. So dialectical, in my view, is the relation between theory and practice. And I hope that I have succeeded, as far as was at all possible in my reduced condition today, in going some way to satisfying the request for a fuller explanation of what I said last time.