The goal of transcending idealism by leading its concepts via their own immanent logic to the point of self-liquidation was one to which Adorno kept returning. As he wrote in the preface to *Negative Dialektik*:

> To use the strength of the subject to break through the fallacy of constitutive subjectivity - this is what the author felt to be his task ever since he came to trust his, own mental impulses....[45]

This was the impetus for his major study on Husserl, *Zur Metakritik der Erkenntnistheorie*,[46] and it was the task which he first proposed for philosophy in his inaugural lecture. Indeed, it is tempting to suggest that Adorno may have had this latter document before him when he was writing the introduction to *Negative Dialektik*, so great is the affinity of their philosophical intent.[47] "Die Aktualität der Philosophie" is therefore a key document for introducing the concepts of Adorno's "logic of disintegration" and the "negative dialectics" into which it evolved.

In the following discussion of those concepts in their original formulation, attention will be given to the way in which each embodied a specific configuration of the idea of nonidentity.[48] In the process of demonstrating the extent of Adorno's indebtedness to Benjamin (as distinct from Horkheimer and the Frankfurt Institute)[49] I shall document the consistency of Adorno's theory over time by noting parallel passages from *Negative Dialektik*.[50]

THE CONCRETE PARTICULAR AND THE DILEMMA OF BOURGEOIS PHILOSOPHY

> Philosophy, in view of the present historical situation, has its true interest where Hegel, at one with tradition, registered his disinterest: with the nonconceptual, the singular and the particular; with that which since Plato has been dismissed as transitory and insignificant, and upon which Hegel hung the label of "foul existence."[51]

If, in his inaugural address, Adorno was not yet attempting a systematic eduction of a materialist logic out of the ruins of idealism, he nonetheless made it clear that the problem of "Die Aktualität der Philosophie" could not be detached from the history of philosophy. He began by summarizing briefly the problems encountered by current philosophical schools, and concluded:

> I have discussed the most recent history of philosophy not for a general intellectual history [*geisteswissenschaftliche*] orientation, but because only out of the historical entanglement of questions and answers does the question of philosophy's actuality emerge precisely.[52]

Adorno's point was that his program for "the dissolution of that which has long been termed philosophy"[53] (i.e., bourgeois idealism) was not an arbitrary choice of subjective fancy, but that it emerged out of the "demands of the philosophical material in its present stage of development." "Actuality" referred to:

> ... whether, after the failure of the last great efforts, there exists an adequacy between the philosophical questions and the possibility of their being answered at all: whether the actual results of the most recent history of these problems is more, the essential inanswerability of the cardinal philosophical questions. The question is in no way rhetorical, but should be taken very literally. Every philosophy which today does not depend on the security of current intellectual and social conditions, but instead upon truth, sees itself facing the problem of a liquidation of philosophy.[54]

Adorno used terms of *natural* decay in his speech to describe idealist concepts and tenets of philosophy, treating them like material objects with a life and a death of their own, and thereby conveying their *historical character*, that is, their transitoriness.[55] He argued, in critical reference to Heidegger's then popular ontology of being:[56] The idea of being has grown feeble in philosophy; it is no more than an empty form principle whose archaic value helps to adorn any contents whatever."[57] And he used language of decay to describe what he saw as the crux of philosophy's present difficulties, the dissolution of the premise of identity between subject and object, considered by bourgeois idealism to be the prerequisite for knowledge of truth, which it assumed was necessarily both absolute and total: "The adequacy of thought and being as totality ... has decomposed.... "[58]

> The *autonome ratio* - that was the thesis of all idealist systems - was supposed to be capable of developing the concept of reality, arid all reality, from out of itself. This thesis has disintegrated.[59]

Horkheimer, in the more pedestrian, less metaphorical language of *Ideologiekritik*, described the death of the identity principle upon which bourgeois metaphysics had been founded in terms of a change in the social relations of production:

> The idea of unbroken harmony between reality and reason belongs to the liberalist phase. It corresponds to a social economy marked by a plurality of individual entrepreneurs.[60]

The correspondence had historical validity. The building of great metaphysical systems did in fact coincide with the pre-1848 period of bourgeois liberalism, before the events of that year placed the bourgeoisie on the defensive. No longer advocates of revolution, they thenceforth became protectors of their own status quo, now threatened by a growing industrial proletariat. Since the 1860s the slogan "back to Kant"[61] had articulated the disillusionment among philosophers with all metaphysics. Yet neo-Kantianism, the product of new historical conditions, never really did go "back." Whereas Kant's critique of metaphysics had been radical in its social implications, these new Kantians turned critical reason to the growing "crisis of idealism" the "given" world of the bourgeois social order became increasingly difficult to justify.[62] As reason and reality lost touch with each other outside of philosophy, they lost touch within philosophy as well, and the relationship of subject and object became the most urgent technical problem

confronting modern philosophy, threatening, in fact, its very existence.

Adorno claimed that no matter what their class allegiance, philosophers could not avoid acknowledging this problem if they heeded the philosophical material itself,[63] even if their adherence to idealist premises prevented them from resolving the issue - for it didn't occur to them that the subject-object relationship could be philosophically grounded in the very nonidentity which appeared so problematic. Contemporary bourgeois philosophers felt instead compelled to opt for either (formal, absolute) reason or (historical, relative) reality as the foundation of theory. At one pole, the Marburg neo-Kantians held onto the idealist concept of reason as universal, but paid dearly for this by sacrificing (historical and social) content:

> [The Marburg School] renounces every right over reality and withdraws into a formal region in which every determination of content is condemned to virtually the farthest point of an unending process.[64]

At the opposite pole, *Lebensphilosphie*, by accepting the historical relativity of truth, as well as the necessity of philosophy's dealing with empirical content (lived experience),

> ...has admittedly maintained contact with reality, but in so doing has lost every claim to make sense out of the empirical world which presses in upon it ...[65]

Edmund Husserl, whom Adorno considered the most progressive of current bourgeois philosophers, tried to hold onto both reason and reality. Phenomenology was a stubborn attempt to reach knowledge of the object, the "things themselves" ("*zu den Sachen*" was Husserl's slogan) without letting go of the traditional idealist concept of reason as universal and absolute.[66] Husserl failed; but according to Adorno his failure was precisely his success, for it brought the dilemmas and inner antagonisms of idealist philosophy to their fullest articulation.[67] Protesting against abstract formalism, Husserl maintained that knowledge was always knowledge of *something*, yet at the same time he shied away from empirical existence because, as transient and contingent, it could not afford a base for absolute knowledge. He therefore tried to distinguish between the material, "natural" object and its presence within thought, hoping to establish a transcendental realm of "thought objects" which could be analyzed by a pure logic uncontaminated by empirical heterogeneity. He used the following example: In thinking of the apple tree in the garden, the object of one's thought, while particular, is not the same as the actual, "natural" tree. The latter can be "bracketed out" in phenomenological analysis, because even if it burns up, the "meaning" of the tree remains as the "intention" of the thinking act.[68] Adorno had already protested against this distinction in his thesis for Cornelius in 1924, arguing the empiricist position that the fact that the real tree could burn was precisely the point- "*particular things can burn up*":[69] the meaning of the tree, the truth that it could change, resided in just that heterogeneity which Husserl had tried to eliminate.

It is important to realize that what was being debated as a philosophical problem was of more than scholastic concern. At stake was the very

possibility of rational understanding. For if reality could not be brought into identity with universal, rational concepts, as idealists since Kant had claimed, then it threatened to splinter into a profusion of particulars which confronted the subject as opaque and inexplicable. These intractable, ineluctable "things," which Hegel, from the macroscopic perspective of a rational totality, had been able to dismiss as "foul existence," suddenly lost their easy familiarity and loomed upon the human horizon as alien and threatening, the source of overwhelming anxiety. Testifying to the historical specificity of this experience of anxiety was its frequent recurrence as a theme in the literature of the twenties and thirties.[70] It was perhaps nowhere more vividly expressed than in Jean-Paul Sarte's novel *Nausea* (1938). His description of a chestnut tree in the park (it might just as well have been in Husserl's garden), experienced as a totally "unintentional" object, with none of its material contingency bracketed out, merits quoting:

> The roots of the chestnut tree were sunk in the ground just under my bench. I couldn't remember it was a root any more. The words had vanished and with them the significance of things, their methods of use, and the feeble points of reference which men have traced in their surface. I was sitting, stooping forward, head bowed, alone in front of this black, knotty mass, entirely beastly, which frightened me.... And then all of a sudden, there it was, clear as day: existence had suddenly unveiled itself. It had lost the harmless look of an abstract category: it was the very paste of things, this root was kneaded into existence.... All these objects ...[71]how can I explain? They inconvenienced me; I would have liked them to exist less strongly, more dryly, in a more abstract way, with more reserve. The chestnut tree pressed itself against my eyes....
> *In the way*: it was the only relationship I could establish between these trees, these gates, these stones. In vain I tried to *count* the chestnut trees, to locate them by their relationship to the Velleda, to compare their height with the height of the plane trees: each of them escaped the relationship in which I tried to enclose it, isolated itself, and overflowed.[72]

Adorno, whose high regard for Sartre the artist was not extended to Sartre the philosopher,[73] might have recognized the validity of this description, but not the philosophical conclusions which Sartre drew from it. The latter argued that the impossibility of subsuming particular phenomena under general, abstract categories was proof that existence was absurd.[74] To Adorno it proved only the absurdity of the whole classificatory process, and the equation of such pigeonholing with knowledge. In his 1931 speech he stated:

> If philosophy must learn to renounce the question of totality, then it implies that it must learn to do without the symbolic function, in which for a long time, at least in idealism, the particular appeared to represent the general....[75]

This philosophical mandate was in agreement with Sartre's experiential observation. But where Adorno felt existentialism (as well as phenomenology and *Lebensphilosophie*) made its mistake was in accepting "natural" phenomena as "given" immediately in experience. Hegel had already demonstrated the illusory nature of such attempts at "concreteness" in the

opening pages of *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, arguing that the immediately given "this" or "here" was in fact the most abstract. Adorno made use of Hegel's argument (although he couched it in the language of Walter Benjamin) in his critique of the founder of modern existentialism, Sören Kierkegaard:

> It may be said that abstraction is the seal of mythical thinking. The ambiguity of the guilty connection with nature, whereby everything communicates with everything without differentiation, knows no true concretion. Here the names of the created things are confused, and in their place remains the blind matter or the empty sign. The wide-spread custom of ascribing to mythic - archaic - thought the highest degree of concreteness, due to the conceptually immediate perception of the "this-here," leads to error.[76]

For Adorno, "concreteness" necessitated grounding the particular in its dialectical, mediated relationship to the totality. The object was thus *more* than itself, and knowledge of it was more than the tautological A=A. But only by the mediation of conceptual reflection could this relationship be understood, precisely because it was not immediately "given" in experience.

Of course, the "totality" which Adorno had in mind was not that of Hegel's closed metaphysical system, but the Marxian meaning of the total socioeconomic structure of relations which characterized the bourgeois order.[77] Abstracted from this whole, looked at as an isolated, "natural" entity, the object "congeals ... into a fetish which merely encloses itself all the more deeply within its existence."[78] The fallacy of existentialism and (Husserl's) [79] phenomenology was that by stopping with the immediately given object, they did not see past this fetish-like appearance, whose reified form Lukács had analyzed as "second nature." [80] (Both Sartre's and Husserl's blindness to the social nature of objects was clear from the start in their very choice of a tree, a "first nature" object, to illustrate the essence of the cognitive problematic.)

But (as might be anticipated with Adorno's penchant for juxtaposing opposite positions) there was another side of the issue as well. If the existentialist view needed the corrective of dialectical mediation, then dialectics, in turn, in abandoning closed, metaphysical systems, needed to confront the particular phenomena of everyday life, Hegel's "foul existence," to which *Lebensphilosophie* and existentialism had justly drawn philosophical attention. Wrote Adorno, philosophy "must give up the great problems, the size of which once hoped to guarantee the totality, whereas today between the wide meshes of the big questions, interpretation slips away."[81] What distinguished Adorno's approach was not only his Hegelian assertion of the dialectical relation between the particular and the general, but the fact that, unlike Hegel, he found the general within the very surface characteristics of the particular, and indeed, within those that were seemingly insignificant, atypical or extreme. At the crossroads of two seemingly contradictory positions, insisting on the dialectical relationship of the phenomenon to the totality and, at the same time, on the necessity for microcosmic analysis, Adorno grounded his concept of the "concrete particular."

There can be no doubt that it was Walter Benjamin who convinced Adorno of the validity of this approach. Although the rejection of holistic theories and

a respect for the individual and particular formed a common theme among the diverse early influences on Adorno, no one, in his opinion, had made this concern more methodologically fruitful than Benjamin.

All those who knew Benjamin were impressed by his acute sensitivity for the "minutiae," (*das Kleinste*), the seemingly insignificant detail. Ernst Bloch wrote:

> Benjamin had something, which Lukács so frightfully lacked; [83] he had an extraordinary eye... for the unusual and unschematic, the disruptive, individual being (*Einzelsein*) which doesn't fit into the mold...[84]

Benjamin's "microscopic gaze," as Adorno often called it, through which the most common objects appeared remarkable, was a uniquely personal characteristic, but it was more. As a tool for philosophical cognition, it provided a means for making the very particularity of the object release a significance which dissolved its reified appearance and revealed it to be more than a mere tautology, more than simply identical with itself. At the same time, the knowledge it released remained bound to the particular, instead of sacrificing material specificity by moving to a level of abstract, ahistorical generalization.[85]

In order to clarify precisely what was unique about Benjamin's approach, it will be helpful to draw a comparison. In his inaugural address Adorno made critical reference to Georg Simmel because of the "irrationalistic" and "psychologistic" orientation of his *Lebensphilosophie*.[86] Yet on several other occasions he acknowledged Simmel as a precursor of his own intellectual circle.[87] Significantly, Simmel also focused his analytical eye on particular phenomena, and also had a gift for interpreting the minutiae of existence.[88] Lukács, who had studied with Simmel in Berlin before the war, described his former teacher by referring to

> ...the lightening-like grasp and the strikingly meaningful expressions of as yet undiscovered philosophical evidence, the ability to view the smallest and most inessential appearances of everyday life so intensively *sub specie philosophae*, that they become transparent, revealing behind their transparency a relational pattern of eternal philosophical meaning.[89]

The above description is remarkably similar to Bloch's of Benjamin, except for the word "eternal." That this one exception, however, provides the key to the critical difference in their respective methods of dealing with the "particular" is apparent in the following illustration.

Simmel's short essay "Sociology of Mealtime" was an interpretation of this common human activity inspired by an insight into the essential paradox of meals: what all men shared in common, "that they must eat and drink," was at the same time the most individualistic, ego-centered activity:

> ...what I think I can let others know, what I see I can let them see, what I speak can be heard by hundreds - but what the individual person eats can under no circumstances be eaten by another.[90]

Precisely this fact, he argued, provided the key to interpreting the social rituals

surrounding meals. Regularity of time and place, the use of utensils and of identical dishes, aesthetics and table manners - these ceremonial details symbolized the necessity of socializing individual wants, which in their "natural" form threatened the cohesiveness of the community.[91]

Now consider this short statement from Walter Benjamin's *Einbahnstrasse*:

The way a dinner party has gone can be told at a glance by whoever stays behind to view the placement of dishes and cups, of wine glasses and food.[92]

It is clear that whereas Simmel's analysis of the meal points toward an eternal verity of (subjective) human existence, [93] the observation encouraged by Benjamin remains bound to the particular (objective) historical event: "His philosophical interest was not at all directed at the ahistorical, but instead at precisely the most temporally determined, the irreversible. "[94] At the same time these minutiae, the "remains of the physical world" (*Abhub der Erscheinungswelt*)*,* as Adorno, citing Freud, referred to them, [95] lack the absurdity of mere existence which characterized Sartre's chestnut tree. Benjamin was able to educe a meaning which was more than tautological, which transcended the immediately "given" objects without transcending their particularity. The uncleared dinner table does not bear witness to some general principle concerning the nature of society; but it might indeed reveal the nature of that particular society whose members have left their traces behind them in the dining room.[96]

It should be noted that microscopic analysis was an early characteristic in Benjamin's writings, predating his move to Marxism, at a time when he was influenced by German romantic theories of literary criticism (especially Novalis and Schlegel) [97] and by the Kabbalah, the tradition of Jewish mysticism to which Gershom Scholem had introduced Benjamin in the 1910s. An outline of this method in its pre-Marxist form was provided by Benjamin in *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* (1927), where he applied it to the task of literary criticism.[98] Here the phenomena were historical texts rather than natural objects: the "idea" of Baroque tragic drama was "decoded" out of the arrangement, not of dishes and cups, but of the extreme and often contradictory elements which the texts of those dramas contained. It was as a method of textual analysis (but placed within the frame of Marxist theory) that Benjamin's approach appeared to Adorno as such a potentially fruitful tool for his own project, the liquidation of idealism. A microscopic analysis which could identify the general (i.e., the bourgeois social structure) within the particular (the details of bourgeois philosophical texts) could indicate more than the social function of ideas (*Ideologiekritik*)**;** it promised to make possible statements of objective truth, albeit historically specific. Instead of simply demonstrating the ideological implications of philosophical schools, the way in which general positions (positivism, irrationalism, and the like) acted as supports to the status quo, this method took Adorno deep into the particulars of the philosophical texts, so that the very words and their arrangements, apparently insignificant details, became meaningful, releasing a significance not even intended by the author. Indeed, "unintentional truth" was

precisely the object of Adorno's critical inquiry. But before examining more closely this idea of unintentional truth (which was also Benjamin's originally), it may be helpful by way of summary to make explicit the aspects of "nonidentity" contained within the concept of the "concrete particular."

The particular was not "a case of the general"; it could not be identified by placing it within a general category, for its significance lay in its contingency rather than its universality.[99] Further (and this was what separated the theory from nominalism), the particular was not identical to itself. It was more than the tautological "rose is a rose" because of its mediated relationship to society.[100] Like Leibniz's monads,[101] each particular was unique, yet each contained a picture of the whole, an "image of the world,"[102] which within a Marxist frame meant an image of the bourgeois social structure. Because this general social reality was also not absolute, but a particular moment within the historical process,[103] instead of being ontologically and eternally valid, it was itself "sedimented history."[104] There was also a utopian dimension to nonidentity as it related to the concrete particular. The transitoriness of particulars was the promise of a different future, while their small size, their elusiveness to categorization implied a defiance of the very social structure they expressed. Reading the nonidentity of the particular as a promise of utopia was an idea Adorno took from Ernst Bloch.[105] Insisting on recognition of the "not-yet-existing" (*Nochnicht-seiende*),[106] Bloch grounded hope for the future in those nonidentical "traces" (*Spuren*)[107] of utopia already experienced within the present. In his inaugural lecture, Adorno echoed this thought: "only in traces [*Spuren*] and ruins" was there "hope of ever coming across genuine and just reality."[108] That the locus of utopian hope was in the small things, in details which slipped out of the conceptual net, was an idea Adorno had already expressed in his philosophy of music, and it remained important in his aesthetic theory. As he wrote in 1928 in regard to Schubert's music:

> ... change succeeds only in the smallest thing. Where the scale is large, death dominates.[109]