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## The Utopia of Eidetic Intuition: A Phenomenological Motif in Adorno

Amalia Trepca

Institute of Philosophy, University of Grenoble &  
Alexandru Dragomir Institute for Philosophy, Bucharest

### Abstract

In this article I attempt to discuss several phenomenological imports in Adorno's work, which center around his various interpretations of Husserl's eidetic intuition. In the first part, I underline the presence of a phenomenological component in Adorno's interpretative method and show that the interest in concrete, singular phenomena motivated Adorno to retain the idea of a non-reducible, immediate given, emphasizing its function as a moment of resistance in the face of classificatory thought, be it scientific or philosophical. In the second part, I focus on how eidetic intuition is discussed by Adorno in relation to the methodological difficulty that consists in moving from the level of first order givenness to theoretical, conceptual insight, and I argue that eidetic intuition plays a methodological role here insofar as it carries a utopic promise. In the last section, I tackle the question of language and the possibilities it opens for approaching this utopic promise, and I attempt to show that, in spite of its failings, eidetic intuition is further employed in relation to what Adorno calls the configurative use of language.

**Keywords:** eidetic intuition, phenomenology, utopia, language, constellation

### 1. The question of method

From as early as his inaugural address, *The Actuality of philosophy* (1931), in which he emphatically declared the demise of philosophy's claim to grasping the totality of reality and called instead for its rebirth as interpretation, and up until

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his full-fledged late investigations from *The Negative Dialectics* (1966), Adorno engaged in the contradictory pursuit of giving a conceptual account of phenomena that could never be fully accounted for in the realm of thinking. Placing the non-identity between concept and reality at the heart of philosophy, and refusing any all-encompassing, synthetizing figures of thought meant that philosophy had to constantly jump over its own shadow and, firmly keeping in view its defining paradox, proceed “methodically unmethodically” (Adorno 1986, 161). We are certainly not dealing here with the classic universal method that can be applied at will by any theoretician, but rather with an approach in which the philosopher’s work resembles to some extent that of an artist, insofar as it relies on a certain type of creative immersion in the subject matter. So, while Adorno did not develop a method in the classic sense, and even though his work is predominantly critical and deconstructive, a certain working model can be detected throughout his writings<sup>1</sup>. Whether about sociology, mass culture or the history of philosophy, the blueprint of Adorno’s analysis can be sketched out starting from a handful of concepts, such as “model,” “configuration” or “constellation.”

For the elaboration of this string of concepts, Adorno famously drew inspiration from Walter Benjamin’s theory of ideas, sketched out in the prologue of *The Origin of the German Tragic Drama*, but also from Max Weber’s ideal types. What united these two thinkers was the fact that, admittedly with very different styles and pursuing different objectives, they had put to work a type of interpretation that accounted for the facticity of the phenomena under scrutiny as well as for the inadequacy of a theoretical, concept-based language for doing justice to these very phenomena. With this same problem in view, Adorno develops his own so-called constellative approach, which, put briefly, sets out to bring concepts together in such a way that, similar to a constellation, a web of conceptual relations, a certain configuration will emerge, and the phenomena themselves rather than the concepts will come to expression. In this approach, both the limits and the possibilities opened up by language play a decisive role.

It is also generally known that Adorno had been influenced by phenomenology and that a perspective that emphasizes not only the negative, more prominent side of Adorno's philosophy, but also the admittedly more elusive "positive core"<sup>2</sup> of it will inevitably discover a phenomenological moment of his method<sup>3</sup>. This moment is reflected for example in the concept of "physiognomy," which clearly draws on phenomenology by taking as its starting point "the living-experience of the radio listener" (Adorno 2006, 66), as well as in his similar concept of "unregulated experience" (Adorno 2019, 123), which envisages phenomena as they are lived and encountered in daily life, undistorted by the lens of theoretical categories. It is certainly from the point of view of a direct interest in concretion and material contents that Husserl, together with Bergson, is praised in the beginning of *The Negative Dialectics*, which consists of a critique of philosophy's disinterest in factual life – a centuries-long omission that, in Adorno's eyes, Husserl and Bergson had partially begun to set straight. More concretely however, when discussing the idea of constellation or configuration, Adorno also constantly references, along with Benjamin and Weber, Husserl's eidetic intuition. If we consider *The Actuality of Philosophy* to be the first programmatic exposition of Adorno's shift to a metacritical position, in this new perspective, Husserl, who Adorno had formerly tackled in his dissertation on the concept of noema, is now credited with having recognized the meaning of the "non-reducible given," while the eidetic intuition receives a special mention as a method that has proven to be "externally effective" (Adorno 1977, 121). Nevertheless, Adorno had an ambiguous, seemingly contradictory position towards Husserl's eidetic intuition. On the one hand, in a letter from Benjamin to Adorno from 10 June 1935 the former says, referring to a previous, lost letter that he would like to know more about Adorno's project of destroying eidetic intuition (Adorno and Benjamin 1994, 132). On the other hand, Adorno will continue to speak of the eidetic intuition in positive terms, linking it with his own efforts of bringing forth something essential about the phenomena under investigation (Adorno 1992, 167).

Rather than raise questions about the possibility and legitimization of knowledge, Adorno investigates knowledge in its relation to power and to social processes. The shift to a metacritical perspective rests on the conviction that the field of philosophical thought reflects contradictions pertaining to reality and is ultimately determined by it. Accordingly, the primacy of epistemology has to be measured up against the background of a historical and social development in which intellectual work is only a component. The content of philosophical works can therefore be linked back to determined historical situations and to underlying driving forces and needs, which philosophers themselves were not necessarily aware of but tacitly driven by. In Adorno's philosophy, historical, economic, sociological, and psychoanalytic insights are mobilized together in order to reveal the formation processes and the functions of central concepts of the history of philosophy.

From a bird's-eye view perspective, the philosophies of Husserl and Adorno are divided by an unbridgeable gap: whereas the first wanted to found transcendental phenomenology as a science and thereby re-establish faith in reason, the second aimed at providing a metacritique of the universality traditionally assigned to philosophical concepts, in light of their embeddedness in a socio-economic context. For Adorno, any comprehensive, unitary view of the world is just an illusion that reason has been feeding to itself for some time. If Adorno himself believes that there is a certain affinity between his critical endeavors and phenomenology that goes beyond an initial general interest in concrete phenomena, it is due to the fact that the objective of investigating "the things themselves" forced Husserl to break out of the confines of idealism and to ultimately develop ideas laden with subversively fruitful self-criticism (Adorno 1940, 18). However, while Adorno's critique of Husserl's logical absolutism and then of the latter's conception of transcendental subjectivity falls in the domain of his metacriticism of the history of philosophy – linking it therefore with bourgeois ideas and certain naïve ideals of modernity –, the problem of eidetic intuition touches a central theme of Adorno's own "methodological" difficulties.

In the following, I attempt to determine why is it that, in spite of a negative diagnosis of Husserl's attempt at eluding comparative abstraction, Adorno considers eidetic intuition to be phenomenology's "moment of truth" (Adorno 2017, 41) and keeps referencing it in his key writings. How does this concept that Adorno wanted to destroy also serve as a springboard for his own interpretative approach? Doesn't Adorno's approach, which relies heavily on language and interpretation, eventually do away with any descriptive content, which is ultimately to be denounced as falsifying in its ambition to "read" an underlying reality? Is the idea of configuration or constellation truly phenomenologically inspired on the basis of a relation to the Husserlian eidetic intuition or is it actually a complete transformation of a concept that Adorno cites rather ironically?

In the following, I first underline the presence of a phenomenological component in Adorno's interpretative method, which is reflected in his interest in the concept of the "non-reducible given" and in the singularity of phenomena. Second, I deal with Adorno's critique of eidetic intuition, which denounces the fact that Husserl hit upon the singularity of phenomena only to actually eliminate it through the reintroduction of general concepts. I then argue that the idea of an eidetic intuition that can retain singular phenomena becomes methodologically relevant for Adorno from the perspective of a utopic component. Finally, I tackle the question of language, and the possibilities it opens for approaching the unattainable unity of concept and thing, and I attempt to show that, in spite of its failings, eidetic intuition is further employed and re-configured in relation to what Adorno calls the constellative use of language.

## **2. The non-reducible given**

For Adorno, the suspicion towards theories of knowledge and philosophical systems goes hand in hand with a suspicion towards concepts themselves. Concepts inherently disregard the particular: any judgment of an object is only an element of an infinite series of other possible judgments. The object will always be infinitely richer than a concept can express. True to this principle and avoiding all rigid conceptual delineation, Adorno does not offer a unique determination of how objects

exceed concepts, but thematizes this excess in discussions about suffering, language, and art. Most frequently however, non-identity is discussed in the context of philosophical thought itself, which, especially in its idealist version, is for Adorno the best representation of how concepts lose sight of this excess, withdraw in an immanent field and claim to hold the key to reality. A makeshift solution Adorno constantly warns against is the reliance on concepts which are meant to formally designate precisely that which escapes them. Categories such as “facticity,” “historicity” or “life” are all another way of obstructing access to the object. More particularly, against Heidegger, Adorno underlines the fact that the category of “historicity,” for example, will never allow us to account for “history itself, in its most extreme agitation” (Adorno 1984b, 114), in its factual details and radical contingency. The hypostatization of history in the concept of historicity only serves to void the former of its content, relevance, and implications. What Adorno calls for, therefore, is an immersion in the social and historical material, a new “extremely material-based work and theory” in which the theoretician, similar to Weber, sees himself “pressured by the weight of facts” towards conceptualization (Adorno 2019b, 11). In Adorno’s eyes, Weber managed to strike a balance between an attention to facts and concrete data, and the necessity to transcend them towards a theoretical stance. This was not a bad kind of theoretical transcending because Weber did not allow concepts to be anything more than auxiliary tools which can be discarded as soon as their function had been accomplished, and a certain understanding (*Verstehen*) had been brought to light. This understanding was attained from within in order to “find a way of identifying something substantive or essential about the interrelatedness of social actions” (Adorno 2019b, 5). So, if the first step consists in the thinker’s “immersion in the concretions” and in an insistent devotion to the individual materials, the second step is the more problematic one as it should consist in revealing “more than simply the blind, concept-less material” (Adorno 2019b, 11). This two-step model is present in most of Adorno’s methodological considerations, even though the demarcation line between them tends to get

blurred. The first step consists in a focus on a first order phenomenality and a moment of resistance to classificatory thought, while the second implies, in Hegelian fashion, the dissolution of the irreducible unity pertaining to the first step. We will first take a closer look at this first step, which is definitely the more phenomenological of the two, even though, as we shall see, eidetic intuition is brought into play in relation to the second step. Adorno's tendency to conflate the two steps into one distinctive experience is also reflected in his interpretation of the Husserlian concept.

The immersion in the concrete phenomena presupposes that they should be seen in their singularity, in their *hic et nunc* particularity and not as instantiations of universal categories. This is clearly expressed in the striking mission that Adorno assigns to the essay in *The Essay as Form* (1958), when he affirms that the essay sets out to make the transitory eternal. By focusing on that which cannot be grasped through timeless, universal categories, on social and historic contents in their contingency and singularity the essay salvages these contents *as singularities*. As such, phenomena are saved both from the passage of time with its inexorable forgetting and from a science which would only use from these phenomena whatever corresponds to its interests and concepts. As we have already seen, this means that critical thinking, instead of subsuming experience under pre-established concepts, will take a phenomenon in its singularity as its starting point and will apply to it "a monadological insistence," hoping to pry it open "from within" (Adorno 1992, 163).

The first step of the interpretative work, the immersion into concretions, echoes the presence of a phenomenological moment that consists in the focus on a particular moment and its irreducibility. This idea of a "non-reducible given" is what motivates the talk of monads as well as the choice of the term "physiognomy" in Adorno's radio study, perhaps more than whatever use Lavater and the other physiognomists had made of it. As Adorno puts it: "within our experience of live voice and faces the phenomenon is not merely a superficial sign of whatever is behind it, replaceable by another as well" (Adorno 2006, 49). Along with the anchorage in the lived, concrete



experience, holding on to the one given object also implies that pre-made categorical schemes and imported objectivities will not sabotage the analysis. The phenomenological vow to presuppositionlessness is clearly invoked: “This, of course, does not mean that the consideration has to stop with the phenomenon. To ‘penetrate’ it actually means to dissolve it and to reduce it to its conditioning factors. It makes all the difference, however, if we actually start from the phenomenon and then ‘reduce’ it, or if we think in terms of objectivity before having determined whether that ‘objectivity’ can actually be spotted within the living-experience of the radio listener” (Adorno 2006, 66). Thus, when speaking of the “within” of the object or of an understanding “from within” (*Von-innen-her*), Adorno refers to a focus on first-hand experiences and to the primary observation of what pertains to those lived experiences.

Keeping all exterior objectivity at a distance implies that a new, unprejudiced objectivity must be pursued, and this is where we come to the second step of the interpreter’s work. The reduction that Adorno applies to the phenomenon is equally reflected in the idea of monad, face or voice. While these elements seem to carry their own, irreducible meaning, this meaning is only explicable in relation to their exterior. For Adorno, the real reduction is the one that accounts for the object’s dependence on a web of social and practical relations and for its grounding in the “collective life of the spirit” (Adorno 2019a, 201). This is undoubtedly one of the main points of tension in Adorno’s philosophy, reflected in contradictory remarks: on the one hand, playing on this phenomenological moment, Adorno emphasizes the need of upholding the irreducible given – or the insoluble (*das Unauflösbare*) as he calls it (Adorno 1992, 134) – while also pointing out, on the other hand, the *illusion* of its autarchy and the need to *dissolve* it in the elements that give it life. According to him, phenomena should not be reduced to self-sufficient entities, but to the form of an index, of an intersection of sociological, psychological or technological aspects.

On the one hand, a problem that Adorno identifies is that philosophy, and Adorno’s main interest goes to idealism, actually still operates on the premise of fully determining its

objects and does this, more notably, by *stopping* at “insoluble” elements. Even when the temporal becoming behind an irreducible given is accounted for (and here we can safely assume that Adorno is thinking of Husserl’s “inner historicity of thought” (Adorno 1992, 54), this philosophy subsumes this temporal becoming *under the concept* and retains the primordially of the latter. Negative dialectics, however, shows that this becoming took place under certain exterior conditions and is indicative, as we’ve seen, of the falsehood of the “insoluble.” This insolubility is not only an illusion, but when not seen as such, it also becomes the warrant for immutable knowledge and for building theories of knowledge. If, however, this necessary moment of immediacy is dissolved, if the concept is approached by denying it, the object will open up to its true becoming. The constellative method, in which concepts cite one another without any of them taking centre stage is Adorno’s answer to the issue of the dissolution of the insoluble.

A further phenomenological moment is echoed in Adorno’s emphasis on the subjective, individual experience. According to him, a first person account of experience, such as that provided by Proust, brings to light “necessary and compelling perceptions about men and their social relations which science can simply not match, while at the same time the claim of these perceptions to objectivity would be neither lessened nor left up to vague plausibility” (Adorno 1984, 156). In the face of scientific claims to universal objectivity, it is the subjectively mediated experience that needs to take center stage, but only insofar as it is – and any view to the contrary would be an illusion – indicative of an all-encompassing social and collective field. Like Benjamin, Adorno envisages experience not as the isolated acts (*Erlebnisse*) of an individual consciousness but as a comprehensive whole (*Erfahrung*) in which the life of a community is reflected. If Benjamin was signaling the atomization of experience in the urban environment and through factory work, according to Adorno this reality had its counterpart in modern thought: for instance, Husserl’s laser-focused analysis of perception and cognition were indicative of a subjectivity that had lost its substance (Adorno 1982, 91). What both Benjamin and Adorno oppose to

isolated experiences is a type of experience that is mediated by memory and tradition and that is, to borrow a phrase of Miriam Hansen, “discursively organized” (Hansen 1949, 12) – which is hence formed through language.

For the kind of creative work in which individual consciousness crosses the false barriers of its individuality by becoming the expression of its immersion in a social and linguistic milieu Adorno coins the term of intellectual or spiritual experience (*geistige Erfahrung*)<sup>4</sup>. This is the experience in which a further element will accomplish the move from the conceptless material or from the immediate experience of singular phenomena to the “essence,” which is the constellation-like theoretical insight into the matter. This experience is also linked to phantasy: if in the *Actuality of Philosophy* Adorno talks of “an exact fantasy” (Adorno 2019, 21), a creative production that is “exact” in as far as it crystallizes out of an immersion in facts, in *Philosophical Elements of a Theory of Society* “productive imagination” is the tool that the researcher needs in order for his work to be more than a mere registration of facts (Adorno 1977, 131). Adorno often likens this move from the subjective to the objective to musical compositions: they are subjectively produced but work only when their product, the constellation, acquires objectivity (Adorno 1992, 165). The two steps are clearly dependent on each other: the immersion in the realm of unregulated experience is done in view of the spiritual experience, and the latter takes its experiential character from its factual basis. What holds these two kinds of experience together is the immersion into the subject matter. At both the stage of the individual, subjective, irreducible moment and of the social, objective moment, it is neither the autocratic, transcendental subject and nor the theoretician that projects his categories, but the object that speaks. It is however true, that at different times, Adorno underlines one or the other aspect of this interpretative procedure, often with a tendency to suppress the first step or to identify the two by talking of a unique moment of immediate insight, in which a singular object isn’t just given as such but also suddenly brings out the constellation that it is embedded in. Proust’s work is in itself the locus of the

emergence of a new constellation, and so are all singular works of art as well as all forms of philosophical reflection. If Adorno often goes back to splitting this procedure in two moments, it is not only, as we have seen, in order to emphasize the resistance against classificatory thought that pertains to the first, but also to warn against the dangers of neglecting the second. Relating to Benjamin for example, Adorno often praised his immersion in a wealth of details about his subject, but also often criticised him for what Adorno had perceived to be an insufficient theoretical insight, which in his view, could easily lend descriptive thought to propaganda. For Adorno, renouncing the concept of essence and its link to theoretical, interpretative work would amount to embracing positivism and to blindly accepting as truth what is merely ideology.

Adorno employs the term “essence” in an emphatic way, sometime as we do in normal conversation to mean “the most relevant aspect” or what will give us the real measure of a phenomenon. For example, in the *Dialectics of Enlightenment*, we read: “A statistical compilation of those slaughtered in a pogrom, which also includes mercy killings, conceals its essence, which emerges only in an exact description of the exception, the most hideous torture” (Adorno 1991, 92). The emphasis is on the direct, lived experience and its testimony as opposed to the quantitative approach that purports to measure phenomena and that will ultimately actually mask the essential. The counterpart of essence is *Unwesen*, non-essence, which refers to a depravation of the true essence, by denying its existence. Thus, the ideology of mere facts as well as the dismissal of suffering in the name of the law of fatality amount to a resignation that eliminates the idea of essence and the need for its search. Consequently, the concept of essence is separated from the idea of an adequacy to a model or to an immutable truth and is engaged in a search of intellectual insight that includes a reflection on its own relevance, beyond the issue of verifiability: “The stubborn urge to check the accuracy of irrelevancies rather than to reflect on relevancy at the risk of error is one of the most widespread symptoms of a regressive consciousness” (Adorno 1992, 170). In the face of a conceptuality that arbitrarily truncates phenomena, Adorno

believes that there are moments of insight that stem from an immersive, language-mediated type of work that finds and affirms its own relevance.

### 3. Against eidetic intuition

Once again, it is not singularity *as such*, it is not the *hic et nunc* or *tode ti* character of phenomena that needs to be emphasized, but the fact that specific, singular phenomena themselves need to take the philosophical stage. If Adorno's interest goes to the ephemeral and the transitory, and he is not merely looking to set up the category of "*the* transitory," he tries to provide a method for bringing out that "something essential" that pertains to each individual phenomenon. Beyond a starting point in concrete phenomena and in the directly intuited, Adorno was also interested in the way Husserl proposed to move from particular experiences to the development of a universal science. This was obviously Husserl's main concern once the phenomenological reduction was set into place: how can a science be developed if all that we are left with is a Heraclitan flow of phenomena in which only singular *tode ti* come to view? This is where the eidetic intuition came into play. By further abstracting from the *tode ti*, by converting our intuiting from the red as this particularly given red to "red in general," one could, according to Husserl, take hold of an *eidos* and thus move from intuition to eidetic intuition, which would allow phenomenological descriptions to bring to light eidetic laws.

The main aspect of eidetic intuition that Adorno was interested in was its claim to be able to "extract" essences from singular phenomena and thus to bypass the procedure of comparative abstraction, in which essences are abstracted on the basis of the identity between multiple objects. However, what the eidetic intuition promised to do was exactly that which Adorno believed concepts can never accomplish: designate a singular object and not limit itself to designating one or some features that the object shares with others. Unsurprisingly, Adorno believes that the idea of eidetic intuition is fallacious and points out that Husserl makes certain illegitimate equations in order to set it up. In *Against Epistemology*, Adorno takes issue with the fact that in speaking

of the identical red that can be abstracted directly from a particular intuition of a particular red, first of all, the use of the term “identical” is justified only in relation to a multiplicity, which for Husserl is the multiplicity of red aspects that we intend in perception as one red. So even at this level, identity is played against multiplicity. Secondly, the shift from the particular to the species red within eidetic intuition cannot be justified, according to Adorno, if red as a concept isn’t already instituted, *i.e.* if there is no awareness of the fact that there is such a thing as an *eidos*, the nature of which is to apply to multiple objects (Adorno 1982, 98). In general, Adorno reproaches Husserl a constant purification of his objects of study of all mediation, even within the field of individual consciousness, tendency which is mostly due to the extreme separation Husserl instituted between the real and the ideal in his attempt to refute psychologism. Besides this “extracting” procedure, Adorno also reproaches Husserl the fact that the essences that he was interested in were the very general concepts that Adorno was trying to ward off: “The logician Husserl, on the other hand, sharply contrasted the mode by which one becomes aware of the essence against the generalizing abstraction. He had a specific intellectual experience in mind, which was supposed to be able to descry the essence in the particular. The essence, however, to which this referred, did not differentiate itself in the slightest from that of the then-current general concept” (Adorno 1992, 9). The essences that Husserl was aiming at were just the classic general concepts, brought to their utmost idealistic expression and not at all analysed in relation to mediation. We can already see that, in Adorno’s interpretation, eidetic intuition is equated with spiritual experience. Adorno is interested in the passage from singular phenomena to their essence in such a way that this essence will guarantee the preservation of that very singularity. He therefore believes that *there is* an eidetic intuition: Husserl brought to light the need for such an intuition but oversaw its real application. Both the first and the second step of Adorno’s own interpretative procedure are missing: the first because for Husserl the starting point were the particular *Erlebnisse* of individual acts and not experience

as an encompassing whole and the second because the sought-after essences where the general concepts that are actually responsible both for evacuating singularity and overlooking mediation. In *Against Epistemology*, as well as in *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno explained this mediate character in terms of historical mediation, affirming that Husserl did not see that essences are themselves a product of a process of becoming, point which can be easily disproven by taking into consideration Husserl's later reflections on habituality and sedimentation. However, is not only historical but also subjective as well as linguistic mediation that Adorno is looking at.

Adorno contends that Husserl, by trying to give categorical thought unities a perceptual like-givenness, falsifies the very process of thinking, which is intrinsically linked to action and social agents. In Adorno's understanding, the fault lies in the way this immediate character is used to justify an idea of givenness that serves to veil a subjective mediation that is not however that of the transcendental subject. If Husserl uses eidetic intuition to smuggle ready-made ideal unities in the immediate field of perception, Heidegger, says Adorno, will mishandle this immediate character even further by using it to justify an idea of donation of being which completely does away with the subjective moment. In *Ontology and Dialectics*, Adorno emphasizes the fact that Heidegger's own deconstructions of philosophical concepts are only paving the way to further reifying termini, the emptiest of which is that of Being. So, while Heidegger's philosophy might approach concepts from a certain historical perspective, the main issue here is that this history is reflected back on an anonymous process, failing to "break the spell that human beings have made of their concepts" (Adorno 2019a, 204). Instead of giving this donation over to an impersonal, demiurgic being, it needs to be related back to human agency. Even though most of the time it is Heidegger and the emptiness of his concept of being that Adorno takes issues with, this objection towards the de-subjectivation of meaning is also applied to Husserl. Adorno says that by endowing the subject with transcendental powers, Husserl rightly shows that the subject is condemned to obeying laws there where he seemed to be prescribing them. However,

this powerlessness is aggravated by the fact that this subject which is ultimately another type of object is placed in relation to pre-set essences and laws which cover up “the essential laws of society” (Adorno 1992, 168) and thus amount to nothing less than a fall into ideology and a masking of true essence. A subject that is itself non-identical will acknowledge its historical character and its own constitution through a mediation that, while out of its controlling hands, is decipherable under concepts of its own doing. While essences are not the *ex-nihilo* production of an autonomous subject, we can say with Martin Jay, that it is Adorno’s objective to reintroduce the individual subject in constellations (Jay 1984, 261).

The critique of eidetic intuition can be related to a more general theme in Adorno, of central significance for the development of negative dialectics, which is that of the utopia of knowledge. There is a kinship between the ambitions of eidetic intuition and the model of the name, which was taken up by Benjamin most notably in *On Language as Such and the Language of Man* and which is based on the premise that the essence of language is to name and not to communicate subjective intentions. The originary adamic language was the language in which things were directly named rather than intended, whereas the fallen languages of today are limited to communication. For Benjamin, it is only through commentary that thought can attain some of that initial power of the adamic language. It is of course hard to imagine how such a language would work, and if we could even call it a language. In *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno invokes this model in order to point out its inherent utopia: according to the archetype of the language of names, things would not be covered up by categories, but, in the same time, knowledge as such would also be impossible. Adorno often invokes the model of the name, only to underline its utopic character and the necessity of its negation (Adorno 1992, 53). Names cannot give us the truth of their unique objects anymore, which is why concepts have to be placed in constellations, be brought to cite one another. Constellations are the only form of retaining something “of the hope of the name,” or, he might as well have said, of the hope of eidetic intuition. So, we could argue that one reason why eidetic



intuition became a constant reference for Adorno is because it allowed him to underline a utopic intention.

The focus on singular essences, in spite of the call for their dissolution, can thus be interpreted from the perspective of the hope of the name. This hope is in turn linked to what we might call the ethical imperative of Adorno's work, which consists in doing justice to the phenomena, despite the impossibility to do so. The key to this whole endeavor is linked to this utopic element that resides in the targeting of an unattainable comprehensive unity. But the positive core of Adorno's philosophy is not concerned solely with the first order givenness of phenomena but also with the ways in which this unattainable unity can nonetheless be approached. That which the concept cannot adequately designate can be expressed through language and Adorno often mobilizes considerations about rhetoric and literature in order to highlight that there is a point of convergence between art and knowledge where the sought-after unity becomes material. The configurative power of the second step of the interpretative work relies on the expressive power of language, and here eidetic intuition plays a role as well.

#### **4. Language**

Another one of Adorno's early programmatic writings is *Theses on the Language of the Philosopher*, in which he emphasises the pivotal role of language for philosophical thought. He denounces the idea of the arbitrariness of signs<sup>5</sup>, claiming that this is a symptom of the idealist philosophy that gives the naming power to the subject and thus veils the historical nature of language and thereby of all philosophical thought. Because truth stands in an essential relation to language, philosophy is only possible as a critique of language. In his lecture courses on *Philosophical Terminology*, Adorno first underlines the fact that philosophical concepts can only be understood from the perspective of their historical developments and in their transitions from a philosopher to another. To understand a philosophical argument is in a way to understand the whole of philosophy. The shifts in meaning, however, are not just the consequence of concepts being placed by a philosopher in a new construction but are also due to the fact that this very

construction is subjected to a historic lawfulness, that has social implications. Philosophers therefore also stand in a direct relation to “unregulated experience” because their concepts are the expression of the socio-linguistic context they live in.

In *The Essay as Form*, Adorno actually compares spiritual experience with language learning, stressing the fact that this particular experience is similar to the immersion of a language learner in the speaking context, where he will repeatedly hear and see words being used in various combinations and thus acquire an understanding for the possibilities of those words that are far superior to whatever definitions a dictionary might provide (Adorno 1984, 161). Philosophical terminology, Adorno notes, has its sources in such immersive experiences but loses its connection to them by closing itself in an immanent conceptual realm. Therefore, for Adorno, the task of anyone who wants to understand philosophy is to “awaken the congealed life in words, in terms” (Adorno 2016, 18; my translation). In relation to Plato, for example, Adorno makes the point that the term “eidos” was so effective philosophically because it was commonly used in the Greek language of the time and carried a wealth of meanings and nuances. On the other hand, he also praises Plato as a first constellator, as someone who has brought words into rich philosophical figures of thought and incriminates the observations of someone like Diogenes Laertius, who had criticized the fact that Plato had not pinned concepts down to clear definitions but had allowed them to acquire different nuances depending on the constellation they were in (Adorno 2016, 49). We note in passing that, for Adorno, phenomenology shares Laertius’ drive towards exact definitions and consequently ends up fetishizing language (Adorno 2016, 49). Indeed, Husserl’s initial objective of accounting for the donation of ideal unities required the development of an ideal language, in which the possibility of applying concepts to different objects had to be curtailed (Husserl 2009, 140). This seems to be for Adorno yet another way in which eidetic intuition fails its true mission by proceeding reductively rather than configuratively.

The objectifying tendencies of rational and objectivistic thought have their roots in an inherent tendency in language

itself to lose its initial, adequate content. As contended in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, language and the drive for self-preservation, which then transforms into a drive to dominance, are coextensive. The magic practices that were instituted in the face of fear, in an attempt to respond to the recurrent natural phenomena, were also the birthplace of language (Adorno 2002, 15). The tendency to reification that plagues conceptual thought is the reification inherent to the social development that led to modern societies. In the modern, bourgeois society, language becomes subjected to fetishization: like commodities, words appear now to be independent of objects, and the experiences that went into establishing their signification have become forgotten. Words do not adhere to particular experiences anymore: “The more completely socialized the world becomes, the more densely its objects are enveloped in universal determinations” (Adorno 2019a, 202). So is language itself at fault for its classificatory, reductive, fetishizing use? The implicit premise for Adorno seems to be that, similarly to Ulysses’ cunning use of reason, that was the condition for his liberation from natural forces, there is a cunning use of language that allows for knowledge but doesn’t however fall into the trap of the autonomy of the concept and can bypass its fall into vacuity. So, if today, due to the human need of dominance and stability, language has become an empty creation, and words have lost their adequacy towards content, it is precisely a method of bringing experience and language together that is called for.

We can thus see that the idea of constellation is not some made-up solution but the theoretical crystallization of a method that follows the model of the language. It is the expressive power of language that offers a way out: rather than purify language through logic and mathematics or introduce neologisms, concepts should be brought in constellations that mirror the expressive power language has in the first place. Language itself, in its expressive dimension, opposed to the limitedness of the individual concept, is what reveals the object: “Language thus serves the intention of the concept to express completely what it means” (Adorno 1992, 162). For Adorno, it is also language that has the ability to store the real history and

social embeddedness of the investigated object and thus carry further a certain experiential load.

It would be useful to draw here a parallel between Adorno's idea of awakening the congealed life in terms and Husserl's regressive inquiry into the origins of geometry. Husserl's leading question was if the historical tradition of eidetic unities, in particular, of knowledge of geometric laws, entails a loss of meaning that is in turn the source of the crisis of sciences. Adorno however doesn't seem to imply that this awakening has a retrieving function, which would bring us back the initial, lost meaning of concepts. The premise here seems to be that the history stored by language can only show itself in a new configuration. In other words, the awakening of the congealed life implies placing concepts in new constellations in which, in virtue of their embeddedness in language, their functions will be reawakened by acquiring new meaning. The way Adorno re-uses the term "eidetic intuition" in his own conceptual configuration is a case in point.

Now, it has been pointed out that Adorno's works themselves are structured configuratively (Müller-Doohm 2008, 48), perhaps even in a somewhat systematic fashion (Römer 2012, 85). His criticism of central philosophical concepts eventually amounts to a reconfiguration in which some of their previous layers of meaning are preserved, while new significations emerge according to the context in which the concepts are placed. Thus, coming back to eidetic intuition, as we have seen, this concept also undergoes this re-configurative procedure by taking a new place in Adorno's negative dialectics. So, if as Adorno affirms: "today the philosopher confronts disintegrated language. The ruins of words are his material, to which history binds him; his freedom is solely the possibility of their configuration according to the force of truth in them" (Adorno 2007, 37), we could say that the historical bind and truth that comes to expression in Husserl's eidetic intuition is its relation to singular phenomena and concrete experience. It takes the form of a ruin in its claim to warrant the in-itself of concepts. What is then the new force of its truth?

In *Against Epistemology* Adorno pointed out that "only language, which denotes both the singular red moment and the

species red, entices one to the hypostasis of the latter” (Adorno 2019a, 98). The possibility to work “eidetically” pertains to language, but, once again, and as he had already pointed out in *Theses on the Language of the Philosopher*, language should not be seen as a system of signs but as the basis of the performative, creative work that is the mark of spiritual experience. Doesn’t this view of language eliminate the need for talking about an eidetic intuition? Eidetic intuition, in spite of its initial claim of reaching essences instantaneously, which is most likely what motivated Adorno in his intention to destroy it, is attributed a positive function, similar to that of the phenomenological moment as such. Adorno notes that Husserl has the final word because: “what belongs together in a judgement reveals itself in an exemplary rather than a merely comparative fashion. There is a sense in which you should regard a judgement not merely as something abstracted in comparison with other states of affairs but as something with an immediacy of its own where a specific state of affairs is ‘evident’ in this individual determinate judgement” (Adorno 2019a, 201). We can assume that the reason why Adorno gives priority to eidetic intuition rather than the irreducible given is because it allows him to bring together the two steps or moments we have already underlined and to emphasize the conceptual and in the same time immersive nature of the second moment. There is an experience in which concepts impose themselves to us in the attempt of expressing that which transcends them. Even though the classic notion of essence, as a general concept, has been stricken out, eidetic intuition is equated with spiritual experience because a) it serves to underline the notion of essence beyond the primary givenness with its ideological pitfalls and, I would argue, because b) it also carries the meaning of an evident, non-reducible given. So, even though both subjectively and historically mediated, Adorno’s essences are out of the hands of the subject and retain an irreducible quality themselves. These new essences have a truth value that speaks for itself and doesn’t require any scientific or exterior validation. Adorno even seems to imply that they accomplish this essential function through the linguistic work alone, sometimes in

contradiction with the ideas expressed in it. It is telling what Adorno says in this respect about Nietzsche, who defended an extreme nominalism – which is obviously in contradiction with Adorno’s view of language as the medium of historical truth – thus “doing injustice to the spirit of language and its objectivity, to which his own work brings, nevertheless, great testimony” (Adorno 2016, 25; my translation). The emergence of philosophical thought in its linguistic configuration is its own phenomenological, irreducible moment.

In spite of the shortcomings of eidetic intuition and of the reification of language that Husserl was set to operate, Adorno believes that this type of productive theoretical work is nevertheless to be found in Husserl too, noting that: “even Husserl frequently found in a unique concrete thing – insistently contemplated and elucidated – deeper and more binding insight into far-reaching relations than would a procedure which tolerates in the individual only what can be subsumed under general concepts” (Adorno 1982, 96). Beyond the somewhat ironic move of relating his own interpretation of the eidetic intuition to exemplify its authentic use in the work of its initial proponent, this observation seems to imply that the far-reaching relations that Adorno is hinting at here relate to phenomenological figures of totality, such as horizon, world and eventually the life-world, that could all prove very fruitful in a discussion about the mediation of experiences through their relation to all-compassing wholes but that Adorno has never explicitly addressed.

Given that, as Adorno had declared in the *Actuality of Philosophy*, philosophy does not dispose of any ultimate principle of the legitimation of knowledge, we can ask ourselves if the hope of configuring non-identity is a sufficient criterium for the truth value of any newly crystallized configuration. As much as we should strive towards theoretical insight and a transcending of primary observation, can linguistic essences themselves completely avert the spell of ideology? On this note, we can perhaps reproach Adorno a surreptitious import of a layer of meaning that eidetic intuition had in Husserl and in the philosophical tradition in general and that makes its use in the new Adornian configuration seem somewhat illegitimate,

which is that of the reassuring function of having reached a definitive truth. This objection can be easily countered by taking into consideration the fact Adorno never shied away from highlighting the risks of a philosophy of non-identity. So, to conclude, even though Adorno is known for his critical, deconstructive analyses, he is always looking to bring out that moment of truth in each philosopher, which is not limited to a correct versus incorrect evaluation but is focused on the ethical imperative of deconstructing the dominance built into concepts and of bringing forth constellations that do justice to life “in its extreme agitation.”

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Susan Buck-Morss even names one of the chapters of *The Origins of Negative Dialectics* “The method in action: liquidating idealism,” convincingly stressing the fact that we can identify a certain “idea” that is at the basis of all of Adorno’s essays. (Buck-Morss 1977, 96)

<sup>2</sup> I take this term from Steel’s *Adornos Philosophie der Kontemplation*. According to Steel, the emphasis on the negative that is present in most of Adorno’s book titles gives only a partial and even skewed perspective on his thought, which includes however an undeniable “positive core”. (Steel 2004, 21)

<sup>3</sup> The relationship between Husserl and Adorno has been in recent years the object of different studies which focus either on Adorno’s work on Husserl (see Wolff 2006, Ferencz-Flatz 2019a), on his critique of both Husserl and Heidegger (Tengelyi 2012) or on establishing a dialogue between critical theory and phenomenology starting from their intersection points, the most prominent of which is undoubtedly the concept of experience. Thus, the recent *Husserl Handbuch* (2017) includes a chapter on critical theory, in which Bedorf underlines the fact that actually critical theory and phenomenology do share a certain skepticism against the ideas of origins, immediacy or the immanence of consciousness. Römer (2012) investigates the possibility of identifying spiritual experience in the works of Husserl and Heidegger, and Ferencz-Flatz (2019b) draws a parallel between the handling of pre-theoretical experience in Adorno and in phenomenology. Monographies dedicated to Adorno such as Roger Foster’s *Adorno. The Recovery of Experience* (2007) or Peter Gordon’s *Adorno and Existence* (2016) also underline the presence of a phenomenological component in Adorno.

<sup>4</sup> Here I agree with Roger Foster, who believes “spiritual experience” to be a better choice than “intellectual experience” for translating “*geistige Erfahrung*” due to the fact that the term “intellectual” places too much emphasis on the role of the subject. The term “spiritual,” on the other hand, has the advantage of maintaining “the perceptible link with the Hegelian

notion of *Geist* and *geistig*, as well as the Proustian understanding of *expérience spirituelle*” (Foster 2007, 4), as well as that, I would add, of hinting at the immersive nature of this experience.

<sup>5</sup> Even though Adorno doesn’t reference Saussure, there seems to be an implicit reference at the latter’s then emerging semiotics. Philip Hogg has provided an illuminating parallel between the critique of the modern subject in Adorno and the critique of the idea of language as a system. Hogg (2010).

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**Amalia Trepca:** My main research interests are phenomenology, theories of self and also critical theory, with a focus on Benjamin and Adorno. The PhD thesis I'm currently working on focuses on the relation between Husserl's concept of subjectivity and the problem of the self. I have co-edited a volume in Romanian on the problem of animality in phenomenology—*Fenomenul "animal": Abordări fenomenologice ale diferenței antropologice* (2018), which also includes an article of my own on the question of the animal in Heidegger.

**Address:**

Amalia Trepca  
03 Rue de la Paix,  
38000 Grenoble, France  
E-mail: [amalia.trepca@gmail.com](mailto:amalia.trepca@gmail.com)