



Idiosyncrasy and Primary Experience

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The notion of “primary experience” (*primäre Erfahrung*), to which Adorno refers on occasion, is a bit of a riddle. Is it not mere superstition and the hallmark of mythological thinking to insist on what is primary?¹ In this vein, Adorno generally considers the superficially similar notion of “primal experience” (*Urerfahrung*, referring to Husserl’s use of the term) to be highly problematic. Should the dialectician not be more interested in “spiritual” experience (*geistige Erfahrung*)?

However, in a passage from the introduction to *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno accords striking importance to primary experience, noting in passing that even the phenomenological *Urerfahrung* “points to something true, while pompously doing damage to it.”² His point is this: “Not every experience that surges up as primary is to be denied point-blank. ...

- 1 Theodor W. Adorno, *Philosophische Terminologie I und II*, ed. Henri Lonitz (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2016), 191–92.
- 2 Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (London: Routledge, 1973), 39; *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 6, ed. Rolf Tiedemann et al. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970–1986), 49–50.

Whatever part of the object goes beyond the determinations imposed on it by thinking first turns up as something immediate for the subject; and conversely, the subject is least of all a subject where it feels most certain [*gewiß*] of itself, in primary experience.”³

The reference to subjective certainty may suggest that we should associate Adorno’s primary experience with the Hegelian critique of “sensory certainty” (*sinnliche Gewißheit*). To be certain of the immediacy of the given is the first error of consciousness; and its first lesson is that this immediacy is, in fact, mediated. Primary experience would then be a synonym of false immediacy. However, Hegel’s point—at least in the first chapter of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*—is that grasping sensuous singularity requires the universality of concepts, whereas Adorno anticipates later stages of the dialectic of spirit. He stresses the presence of an objective, non-intentional surplus that is non-discursively enciphered into primary experience. This objective surplus “turns up as something immediate for the subject.”

In this regard, primary experience might be seen as a medium of the “priority of the object,” understood not as an objectivity independent of us, but as something constitutive that happens “behind the back of consciousness.”⁴ As such, primary experience would point to the objective conditions of visceral existence in the moment of their weighing most heavily and incomprehensibly upon the subject. It would point to something in need of critical attention.

However, visceral existence is not yet knowledge, let alone critical. In many cases, its objective content may only be discernible obliquely, *e.g.*, at the level of blind somatization, as the physical or emotional inscription of objectivity. The insomniac’s perception of time may betray their unconscious sense that life’s potential is constantly being transformed into irretrievable loss.⁵ The lover’s neurotic reaction to an imagined slight may also register, unbeknownst to them, a very real social coldness.⁶ In such cases, primary experience would seem to be the expression of a problem, not its solution.

But as Adorno also points out, primary experience is something of which we should be “capable.” “To what extent,” he asks, “are people who live under conditions of centrally controlled mass culture, and who tend to adapt to these conditions, still generally capable of having genuine, primary experienc-

3 Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 39; *Gesammelte Schriften*, 6:49–50.

4 G. W. F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. Michael Inwood (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 41; *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 9 (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1968–), 61.

5 Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 1978), 165–66; *Gesammelte Schriften*, 4:188–189.

6 Theodor W. Adorno, “Anhang [zu *Minima Moralia*],” in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 4 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1979), 294–295.

es [*noch fähig, echte, primäre Erfahrungen zu machen*]?”⁷ What would it mean to be “capable” of anxious or neurotic immediacy?

It is here that the fundamental ambiguity of primary experience comes into view. Adorno does not only see it as the expression of a problem (of false immediacy), but also as the real, material condition of “advanced consciousness”—understood as a progressive “consciousness that is able to sublimate idiosyncratic reactions or experiences [*idiosynkratische Reaktionen oder Erfahrungen*] into theory.”⁸ Idiosyncrasy is therefore at the heart of experience. It names the seemingly irrational subjective impulses that register exactly those objective forces which theory has to decipher. To be capable of primary experience would mean being capable of feeling “innervation or timely nervous reactions, such as those of the artist—which should also be those of the scientist, or in any case of the philosophical scientist.”⁹ More specifically, being capable of primary experience would mean not deflecting nervous reactions, thereby making their social content legible.

However, strictly speaking, there is no “science of the idiosyncratic experience of consciousness” and the question of capability may come down to whether, in the absence of such a science, we can read anything at all out of the reality of primary experience. For this, we may require outside assistance.

This aspect comes out clearly in a well-known anecdote. When Adorno, in the company of Charlie Chaplin, absent-mindedly shook Harold Russell’s prosthetic hook at a party in Malibu, his surprise and awkwardness inadvertently showed us how we can stumble back into the very coldness that we would most wish to escape: “When I shook his right hand and felt it return the pressure, I was extremely startled, but sensed immediately that I could not at any price reveal my shock to the war casualty. In a split second, I transformed my frightened expression into an obliging facial contortion that must have been far ghastlier.”¹⁰ Chaplin’s prompt and clownish imitation of the scene provided its dialectical counterpoint: the artist’s spontaneous reaction, over against the philosopher’s, publicly reveals that things ought to have unfolded differently. We may even viscerally cringe at the mortifying scene precisely because things ought to have unfolded differently. Of course, the mockery does not solve the problem it puts on display, but it at least suggests that we stand in need of a solution. It puts the spotlight on the “ought.”

7 Theodor W. Adorno, “Einführungen in die Darmstädter Gemeindestudie,” in *Gesammelte Schriften* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1986), 20.2: 637.

8 Theodor W. Adorno and Peter von Haselberg, “Zeitadäquates Bewußtsein statt Vorurteil und Ideologiebefangenheit,” *Akzente: Zeitschrift für Literatur* 12, no. 6 (1965): 494–95.

9 Adorno and Haselberg, “Zeitadäquates Bewußtsein,” 493.

10 Theodor W. Adorno, “Chaplin Times Two,” trans. John MacKay, *Yale Journal of Criticism* 9, no. 1 (1996): 60; *Gesammelte Schriften*, 10.1:365.

What should not be overlooked is that this “ought”—the incomplete transcendence that laughter may evoke and which progressive theoretical consciousness may also register—is already that of “spiritual” experience. We might even say that primary experience “is” (speculatively) spiritual experience, as the latter is viewed from the uncertain standpoint of its materially, somatically given possibility.

In this configuration, primary experience is primary only because spiritual experience must “pre-suppose” it and thereby become its reflection. But they are torn halves; and so, more generally, the riddle of primary experience is not so much that it is primary, but rather that spiritual experience, once it leaves the path to systematic totality, has no way of knowing in advance whether the failure of a socially disfigured grin will ever meet with the success of its critical mimesis.

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