Discussing the sexual meaning and dream content of jazz, Adorno provides an example of his method. Although he refers to the “social function of jazz” as a “concrete historically determined constellation of social identification and sexual energy” this concrete constellation is conditioned by his interpretation of its elements: hot music, derivations of salon and march music, authoritative expressions of the band leader and the unfree subject – “a victim of the collective” (2002b: 488). If we follow Adorno’s original exposition of the method we will, presumably, benefit from the flash of knowledge the agglomeration of elements will produce. While he argues for what is concrete and historically determined underlying the connection of the elements of the constellation, the absence of historical evidence and clarity as to the relations among elements become glaring omissions. The absence of these, however, affirms for Adorno the power of esoteric theorizing, of thought that is generated by an image, a snapshot of reality as perceived.

At least in his initial period of intellectual activity, the method was the construction of constellations for philosophical interpretation. From an historical materialist perspective a number of questions arise from this approach. Is there any accounting for the determinants of a constellation’s elements, or any accounting for what these elements are determinate of? What is the character of the relationship of each of these elements to others, to the complex as a whole? In other words, is this complex an inter-connected whole, dialectically sustained and changeable through its historically determined internal relations?

With modifications, Adorno appropriated Walter Benjamin’s somewhat obscure exposition of a method in his The Origin of German Tragic Drama (Trauerspiel), to form the basis for his 1931 inaugural lecture, “The Actuality of Philosophy” (2000a). The employment of constellations as a presentation of his thought was a more or less continuous component from that point on of Adorno’s cultural criticism. Notwithstanding his consideration of materialism and dialectics in “Actuality,” his use of constellations as a form of analysis brings into question his relation with
Marxism most certainly at the level of method. A focus on constellations draws attention to a key point of Adorno’s perspective – that whatever degree of development took place over the years, his philosophical and political outlook retained a strong coherence with its original moment. Benjamin, too, continued to compose many of his works around the idea of constellations, such as Arcades Project and the “Second Empire” essay on Baudelaire. But Benjamin’s approach was far more grounded in the material of history and the structure of social relations than Adorno’s use of this perspective.

In “Actuality” Adorno was attempting to formulate a program for his own work and to identify the task of philosophy. While his claims to a materialist perspective are numerous in that lecture, it is not of great depth and is of significant distance from the historical materialism of Marx; as well, Adorno affirms the significance of dialectics for philosophy without much substantiation. Whatever the impact of materialism on his program, it is overshadowed by some fundamental shortcomings in the method. In the 1931 lecture, Adorno reduced philosophy to tasks that fundamentally originate in the subjectivity of the philosopher.

Adorno began his lecture with a brief review of late trends in philosophy and the relation of the discipline to science, the latter with respect to whether science could take the place of philosophy – “liquidate” it; essentially, whether philosophy had been negated altogether by the positivism of the distinct sciences. It was his intention to reinvigorate philosophy by explaining and contextualizing its actuality; namely, could the “cardinal philosophic questions” (2000a: 29) be answered. The empirical methods could be left to the sciences; philosophy would emphasize interpretation. Adorno juxtaposed science to philosophy while retaining (2000a: 32) an aspect of the relation at least from the side of philosophy: “the idea of science is research; that of philosophy is interpretation,” and more specifically, “philosophy perceives the first findings which it lights upon as a sign that needs unriddling” (2000a: 31). Finding or assigning meaning – “to portray reality as meaningful” (2000a: 31) – is not the task of philosophy and it is not to “justify” reality as implied in the work of the positive sciences. This position is related to Adorno’s use of ‘intentional’ and ‘unintentional’ truth and reality. He eschewed the teleological version of history which was history as ‘intentional.’ ‘Unintentional history’ or ‘unintentional reality’ emerged from human-constructed constellations. The connection with materialism is superficially present in that the interpretive task of philosophy is centered on this unintentional reality, aspects of reality that do not emerge individually through subjective intentions but come