

The Redemptive Dimension in Adorno's Thought

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Adorno's thought is redemptive in nature. Adorno combines Benjamin's view of religious redemption and Marx's view of technical salvation, and sees art as an important way of human salvation. Adorno considers history as a dialectical movement of barbarism and civilization, and historical suffering can be recalled and imitated through art. The redemption of thought requires the reconciliation of subject and object, and in the language of art, the subject and object achieve true reconciliation.

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There are strong redemptive overtones in T. Adorno's philosophical and aesthetic thought. This idea of redemption in Adorno's thought originates from the Jewish messianic thought and the messianic secularization view of K. Marx and W. Benjamin. Adorno, in turn, transformed and synthesized them, and finally formed his own view of redemption. This view of redemption differs from both Judaism, which places its hope in the coming of the Messiah and claims suffering should be borne in silence, and from the revolutionary utopia of Marx, E. Bloch, and H. Marcuse—who secularized the Messiah and believed that all humanity could be liberated through the power of revolution. Adorno pines his hope for salvation on the transformation of reified language and the demonstration function of artistic language. He hopes to explore the rational subject-object relationship and the functions of mimesis and remembrance in the language of art, so as to restore the unity of human language and thus achieve the redemption of human understanding and social structure. Art seems to have become a new savior, appearing in front of people, in a world that has been destroyed by human instrumental rationality. Adorno sees the power of human liberation in the truth of an artistic language, which is neither a saving power of God or Superman, nor merely individual self-redemption, but rather the combined power of the collective and the power of the individual. This power is again a power of absolute negation, which cancels the possibility of a certain teleology. Redemption is a realistic hope, but this hope will never be realized. In his *Minima Moralia*, Adorno says,

Philosophy, as it can only be justified in the face of despair, would be the attempt to look at all things as they appear from the point of view of redemption. Knowledge has no light other than that which shines on the world from redemption: everything else is exhausted in the reconstruction and remains a piece of technology. Perspectives would have to be produced, in which the world is similarly displaced, alienated, its cracks and fissures revealed, as it will once lie there as needy and distorted in the Messianic light. (2014, p. 283)

Never-ending philosophical self-reflection is also determinant negation, so that things are no longer veiled and controlled. Therefore, we must reveal the world from the cracks and fissures that are not completely controlled—the art of language that reflects the unidentity, so that all things appear in the light of truth.

Adorno believes that the intellectual, social, and cultural structures of human beings are all in trouble, and the root cause of this problem lies in the irrational development of human rationality. Therefore, we need to redeem those objects that have been controlled and oppressed by instrumental rationality, so that they can play their proper role again. For the structure of knowledge, we need to redeem those objects that have been controlled by the subject and concepts, so that the subject can face the object directly again and know the object through a new cognitive way and linguistic form. The social structure of human beings and the structure of knowledge are mutually influencing and mediating. Through the revision of the structure of knowledge, they can slowly influence the social structure. Therefore, Adorno does not agree to directly carry out a violent revolution on society; at least he does not directly intervene in the revolution. Adorno hopes to provide a good example for cultural change and social change through the transformation of language and the interpretation of artistic language.

Thus, the landing point of Adorno's redemption is placed on the redemptive function of human aesthetic language and the language of art. He tries to construct a rational and non-violent linguistic structure and aesthetic structure through the transformation of reified language and the change of unreasonable aesthetic characteristics and artistic structures, and the redemption of the repressed rational elements in them—mimesis, reminiscence, self-discipline, ugliness, truth content, etc.—to achieve the transformation of human knowledge and art. Let us examine in detail the ideological origins and main contents of Adorno's theory of redemption.

Oppression and Redemption

The idea of redemption has its roots in religion, especially Judaism and Christianity. Redemption means that the world, society, and people have some kind of imperfection. In religion, it means that people and things in reality are "sinful" to God, "Sin is a breach of fidelity toward God and an impious rejection of God's promises" (Weber, 1965, p. 140). It is because of this imperfection and guilt that salvation is needed. Benjamin, in speaking of the division of human language, regards this division as a sin, the result of man's betrayal of God. Because mankind has a heart for good and evil and produces judgments, people try to name things directly, bypassing God, so that names and things are no longer unified, and language splits, hence the need to redeem mankind by redeeming language.

Knowledge of good and evil abandons name; it is a knowledge from outside, the uncreated imitation of the creative word. Name steps outside itself in this knowledge: the Fall marks the birth of the human word, in which name no longer lives intact and which has stepped out of name—language. (Benjamin, 1996, p. 71)

Redemption can be divided into redemption on this shore (in the real world) and salvation on the other shore (in heaven). Both Christianity and Buddhism believe that mankind can only be completely redeemed in the kingdom of heaven or by jumping out of the cycle of reincarnation. Judaism, on the other hand, believes that mankind must be saved on this shore, through a "savior" or "messiah". Suffering is therefore considered to be God's punishment for the guilty and the redemption of the guilty for their sins.

In the Age of Enlightenment, with the gradual disintegration of faith, the understanding of sin gradually changed. Intellectuals considered sin as an imperfection and contradiction, an intellectual and social structure of irrationality rather than an ethical evil. This idea of salvation from within is more from confusion and reflection on the external world, and intellectuals demand to understand the world in a unified sense. The world, after the removal of magic, i.e., after the dispelling of the charm, lost other meanings and was left with mere existence,

thus requiring another meaningful order. The conflict between this demand for meaning and actual life experience made intellectuals look inward for escape or salvation. At the same time, the sin of salvation is seen from a social perspective. The social root of this sinful thought comes from class oppression, which is an indoctrination of the privileged class into the unprivileged class. The disprivileged's particular need "is for release from suffering. They do not always experience this need for salvation in a religious form, as shown by the example of the modern proletariat" (Weber, 1965, p. 108). It is the existence of a division between the oppressed and oppressor classes that gives rise to the fixation of this oppressive relationship, and this fixation is the primary source of the idea of salvation. For Marx, this oppression comes from the social division of labor, from the inequality of relations of production. The idea of salvation is the result of the secularization and popularization of religion, and is an important expression of the irrational structure of society.

However, just as mankind used Enlightenment reason to disenchant the world, Enlightenment rationality gradually broke away from any constraints and developed inexorably into instrumental rationality, with science and philosophy becoming the new religion and the new oppression of the ruling class over the ruled class. "Religion as an institution is partly directly intertwined with the system, partly transposed into the pomp of mass culture and marching" (Adorno & Horkheimer, 2003, p. 265). Religion is the infinite worship of human beings to the unknown power, which can be some kind of natural power or power of class domination. If human reason develops without any restraint, it will be used by this ruling power and it will become a new religious type of worship. Along with this unrestrained appropriation of religious worship, the original sin in religion is also arbitrarily appropriated, and anything else that opposes the development of reason and the subject is sinful and evil in relation to human reason and the subject, such as object, nature, irrationality, imitation, etc. For these sinful things, complete control and atonement must take place. The religious type of redemption is maintaining this relationship between oppression and oppressed, hoping to make it a rational and fixed structure. Adorno's idea of salvation, on the other hand, is to expose this oppressive relationship and to rebel against it, a redemption of the irrational structure of reality. If Benjamin's critical and redemptive thought is called "negative theology" because of its religious nature (Wolin, 1982, p. 70), Adorno's redemptive thought is influenced by Benjamin, but without the religious dimension in his thought, so it is "approximated 'negatively theology'" (Wolin, 2006, p. 51).

In *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, Horkheimer and Adorno further examine the anthropological basis of oppression. They argue that this oppression arises from an act of human "false projection", which seeks to confuse the inner world with the outer world and to present what is most familiar to us as hostile (Adorno & Horkheimer, 2003, p. 212). This projection is merely a mechanism for human survival. Therefore, it is a natural process from adaptation to the external environment to conquest of the external environment, not a religious original sin. The suffering that Judaism endures is actually imposed by the oppressor, not something that is destined to be endured. The root of this oppression should be recognized.

To set up a savior is to fix and sanctify a certain theoretical model, to religiousize it, as Benjamin says (1991, p. 696), "The Messiah does not only come as the Redeemer; he comes as the conqueror—of the Antichrist". Basing hope on the power of others necessarily requires sacrifice in exchange. The religious concept of savior is abandoned by the new theory of salvation. What we need is not a savior, but some opportunity for salvation, some "self-redemption" to save ourselves.

Of course, the so-called "self-redemption" of intellectuals cannot be truly redeemed by their own personal power alone. Every human being living in society and history is controlled by some unconscious force beyond

nature. This power is the power of God in religion, the “intention of nature” in Kant, and the “cunning of reason” in Hegel. “From Kant to Hegel and beyond, this secularization is associated with a force in history that operates ‘unconsciously’ behind the backs of individuals, but eventually brings about the ultimate well-being of humanity” (Fritsch, 2005, p. 43). For Marx, this unconscious force is a technical productive force, and the working class—as the master of advanced technology—necessarily becomes the bearer of the task of integrating freedom and necessity through this force. For the working class to take on this task, they must be awakened from the cultural illusion of capitalism, which is an important task of Marx’s critical thought. For Benjamin, this awakening was not limited to a particular class but was part of a revolutionary force.

Adorno inherited Marx’s idea of technical production. Artistic activity for Adorno is also a productive activity, and modern art contains the opportunity for redemption. Adorno suggests that the subject of artistic expression is not the individual artist, but the collective society. What is expressed in the language of art is what the collective subject wants to say, and the collective subject is the sum of repressed things and people in history and society. The artist’s artistic experience is pre-formed through society, shaped by the history and society in which he lives. Rather than being the master of the artwork, the artist is a kind of mediator of the artistic material and content; he is an extension of a technical force. “Society, the determinant of experience, constitutes the works as its true subject” (Adorno, 2016 p. 134). The truth content in artworks needs to be interpreted by philosophy; therefore, the collective subject, the artist, and the interpreter together constitute the creator of the truth content in art, which is like a constellation in the sky that illuminates the dark human world. Thus, the power of salvation gradually develops from a religious supernatural theory into a combination of the power of production technology and the power of the individual. Instead of expecting an unknowable savior, one should seize every opportunity of salvation and redeem through one’s own and society’s power.

Decline and Progress

In the Jewish theory of redemption, the history of the world tends toward destruction and is reborn in destruction, but whether this reborn world is light or dark is not known. Salvation comes at a certain moment of historical rupture, and the only thing one has to do is to grasp this opportunity of salvation. The Jewish theory of salvation contains a different view of progressive history from the linear one. This view of history was uncovered by Benjamin and became a new historical view of redemption theory, which was inherited and developed in Adorno.

Benjamin sees human history as a dialectical history of barbarism and civilization:

It is never a document of culture without being at the same time one of barbarism. And as it is not itself free from barbarism, so is not the process of transmission in which it has fallen from one to the other. (Benjamin, 1991, p. 696)

History is written by the oppressor, and in the spiritual world this oppression is the history of the oppression of identification against that which is unidentified, the history of the oppression of subject against object, of spirit against imitation, of beauty against ugliness. Horkheimer and Adorno express a similar meaning to Benjamin’s: “Under the known history of Europe runs a subterranean one. It consists in the fate of human instincts and passions repressed and distorted by civilization” (Adorno & Horkheimer, 2003, p. 265). The status of oppressor and oppressed is not permanent, and some oppressed become oppressors, for example, Christianity used to be the oppressed in its inaugural period, and when it developed, it became the oppressor of all pagans. Thus, Benjamin does not agree with Marx’s theory of the purpose of history, which, when it ends in

the realization of some utopia, implies that a new kind of oppression may be born. Benjamin claims what makes an action "messianic" is not its relationship to the future classless society, but its opening up of memory. This conception of the messianic does not, however, oppose the past and the future on a conception of linear time that Benjamin explicitly rejects as underlying the theory of progress (Fritsch, 2005, p. 37).

Utopia may never be realized, but what can be realized is the constant remembrance of past oppression and the constant reflection on human brutality. *Dialektik der Aufklärung* shows Adorno's inheritance of Benjamin's view of redemptive history. Human civilization has not always been progressive, and the view that mechanically understands history as progressive actually ignores the dialectical side of culture. History develops in the alternation and contradiction of civilization and barbarism. Enlightenment is a kind of progress, but it becomes barbarism when man develops reason beyond its limits and sees man himself as a means. Adorno points out that in this history of intertwined civilization and barbarism, history is a kind of reincarnation, where progress equally means death. Thus, some of Marx's key categories are not limited to the period of capitalism, but accompany the entire history of civilization, appearing in different ways. For example, "exchange", "sacrifice", and "instrumental rationality" have become universal human behaviors that have been around for ages. "It is the formula for the cunning of Odysseus that the detached, instrumental spirit, by nestling resignedly in nature, gives him to nature and deceives it just by this" (Adorno & Horkheimer, 2003, p. 76).

Likewise, enlightenment has become a constant concept in human history. Myth is an enlightenment in a broad sense, and both are aimed at dispelling the charm and seeking truth, at getting rid of fear and establishing autonomy. In this process of enlightenment, reason replaces mimesis and constantly expands itself to achieve the conquest of nature through the sacrifice of the individual and the human ego. When reason developed into enlightened rationality, which completely swallowed up nature through inner identification and thus also swallowed up man's inner nature, enlightenment regressed to primitive obscurantism.

Adorno also sees the development of art as a dialectical history of decline and progress. He believes that art itself has a kind of self-destruction, with all artworks seeing other artworks as enemies, and only itself as the only art that shows beauty. This sense of competition is similar to the self-preservation of human, and it is the reflection of artwork as a social monad to society. Therefore, Adorno says (2014, p. 84) that the destruction of art is also the salvation of art. The destruction of art is the destruction of artistic appearance, the destruction of artistic self-certainty. This destruction, however, allows the truth content of art to blossom, and the opportunity for this destruction is the opportunity for salvation.

History is not continuous, and treating it as such only justifies a certain history of oppression. Benjamin criticizes the situation at the time by saying: Ruling classes still dominate in the present as they have in the past as mirrored in the linear, often progressivistic construction of historical thought and time (Fritsch, 2005, p. 52). He argues that one continuous cultural history should not be substituted for another continuous cultural history, but rather should take the form of interruptions in history and attention to the "present". The understanding gained from a continuous history is influenced by that continuous history. The historian should break with this continuity, remove himself from the current history, recall the non-identical things that have been sealed and obscured by history, and combine them with the "present" to grasp the "constellation of history". If a linear, continuous history is an epic, then a fractured history is a montage, but it is in this montage that we can remove ourselves from the history we are in and better examine and reflect on it. Jews are forbidden to study the future, and one should expect redemption in retrospect. For Benjamin and Adorno, utopia is not a speculation about

the future, but is based on constant reflection and remembrance. Reminiscence becomes a real practice of resistance to oppression, as Adorno says in his *Ästhetische Theorie*,

But because art's utopia, that which is not yet existent, is blacked out, through all its mediation it remains a memory of the possible against the real that repressed that, something like the imaginary reparation for the catastrophe of world history, freedom, which under the spell of necessity has not become, and of which it is uncertain whether it will. (2016, p. 204)

Reminiscence is the recollection of suffering, and it is also the capture and acquisition of some kind of true nature. Reminiscence in art allows one to return to a certain state of authenticity, to access the repressed and forgotten impulses of mimesis. Philosophy should draw on historical methods rather than predicting the future. Recollection and mimesis are the two important methods of Adorno's artistic redemption. With the development of human reason, human beings are slowly forgetting their own nature while transcending themselves. After the enlightenment of rationality, rationality developed into instrumental rationality with human as a means. This forgetting became a kind of non-choice and passive forgetting, and the free nature of human beings along with other animal instincts were forgotten. In these forgotten things lies the mimetic power of man, "In the bourgeois mode of production, the inevitable mimetic legacy of all practice is consigned to oblivion" (Adorno & Horkheimer, 2003, p. 206). No matter in the form of art or the content sedimented in the form, art itself is a kind of recollection. There is a contradiction in art: the contradiction between the past and the present. What is experienced through a perceptual medium is a present, but art expresses this experience as something of the past, that is, in recollection and representation. Art transforms reality into memory through the act of imitation. As far as the content sedimented in the form is concerned, art retains some pre-conceptual experiences and understandings which, beyond the bonds of instrumental reason, become non-identical in Adorno's sense. In critical theory, the reminiscence function of art means resisting repression, returning to the authentic state of human beings, and looking for the mimesis function of human beings.

Reconciliation

In Judaism, man and man, man and thing are reconciled in God, and the purpose of salvation is to obtain this reconciliation. In Benjamin's theory of language, God's language is the basis for both human language and the language of things. The opposition between man and thing occurs when man tries to cross over to God and name things directly, and in order to eliminate this opposition and bridge the language divide, man and thing must still return to God. Although Adorno is influenced by Benjamin's idea of salvation, he does not fully accept God as the basis of reconciliation, but considers language and art as the basis of reconciliation.

First of all, reconciliation means a kind of reconciliation of subject and object. In instrumental rationality, the subject adopts an attitude of domination and subjugation to the object. Adorno wants to change this subject-object relationship. He suggests that the subject should adopt a posture of imitation to the object, and think about the object according to the logic of the object, and the subject and the object are finally in a state of peace.

In its proper place, also epistemologically, would be the relation of subject and object in the realized peace both between people and between them and their other. Peace is the state of a different without domination, in which the different participates in each other. (Adorno, 1977, p. 143)

It is through language that the subject comes to know the object; therefore, the subject and the object need to be reconciled in language. This language is not the separated, reified language, the language that tries to fix

things with concepts, but a language that has been transformed, an aesthetic language. Adorno sees art as a language, and it is in art and aesthetic activity that we can feel this reconciliation of subject and object. According to Kant, pure aesthetic activity has no interest and does not aim to possess the other, so that people can achieve a certain kind of functional harmony as well as spiritual freedom. Adorno inherits Kant's concept of aesthetics, and he believes that human beings, when performing aesthetic activities, would not use the object or transform it as scientific activities do, and would not sacrifice each other to maintain self-preservation. "Nature as appearing beautiful is not perceived as an object of action. The renunciation of the purposes of self-preservation, emphatic in art, is equally accomplished in the aesthetic experience of nature" (Adorno, 2016, p. 104).

In art, the dichotomy between man and thing is alleviated. Art is one kind of human language, which attempts to imitate and translate the language of things, to give voice to the speechless. In the creative activity of art, the artist performs an aesthetic synthesis of artistic materials which is non-violent and transforms the materials according to their logic. In the appreciation of art, the appreciator treats the artwork with a non-interest attitude, without the purpose of possessing the other. Art "does not mean reconciliation according to the classicist recipe: this is its own behavior, which becomes aware of the non-identical" (Adorno, 2016, p. 203). Thus, the subject-object relationship is reconciled in art.

Secondly, reconciliation also implies the reconciliation of language, which is based on the reconciliation of subject and object. This reconciliation is achieved in the language of reconciliation, so that the two reconciliations are almost unified. The reconciliation of language is first and foremost the reconciliation of words and things. In reconciled language, words are no longer an abstract fixed symbol or concept, but a concrete configuration of things. This concrete configuration is the idea, which is changing and constantly revised with the development of society and history. If we compare things to a star, then ideas are the constellation built around that star. In addition, the reconciliation of language also means the reconciliation of symbols and images. With the development of abstract thought, the symbols and images in language are gradually splitting up. Adorno attempts to reconcile and unify the symbol and the image through the figurative transformation of the concept, that is, the constellation into the idea. Adorno believes that art is a kind of writing, pictograph, and enigma that integrates symbols and images. In art, the symbols and images of language are also unified.

Thirdly, reconciliation is the reconciliation of science and art. The social division of labor has caused the division of language, and science and art have gradually separated. Science has become synonymous with rationality, and art has become synonymous with irrationality. The philosophy of identity attempts to bridge the gap between the two, but fails. And Adorno believes that a reformed philosophy of non-identity could bring about the reconciliation of science and art. The spirit of reconciliation is the common means of art and philosophy, and this spirit is also the embodiment of the two leading to reality, the common utopia (Wellmer, 2003, p. 9). The "reconciled spirit" is the nonviolent unity made up of those things that are reconciled. In artistic and philosophical forms of knowing, this reconciliation crosses in a non-violent form the gulf between intuition and concept, the particular and the universal, the part and the whole. Only when the state of reconciliation is imbued into the spiritual form of man is it possible for man to attain true awareness.

Thus, the opportunity for reconciliation between people and things, between people, actually lies in language and art, as Benjamin acknowledges. However, Benjamin attributes the roots of language and art to God, and thus reconciliation ultimately lies in God. Unlike Benjamin, Adorno does not seek a theological home

for reconciliation and salvation; language and art are both human practical activities, and the opportunity for reconciliation ultimately lies with humans themselves.

To sum up, redemption is the goal and practical significance of Adorno's philosophical and aesthetic thoughts. Adorno does not place the possibility of redemption in religion, but hopes to achieve it through the transformation of language and cognition, while art as an ideal language and cognition has become an important way for Adorno's thought redemption. However, we must also point out that Adorno's transformation of traditional language and art is too idealistic and elitist, and this top-down transformation is doomed to be difficult.

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