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From Absolute Essence to Finite Experience: On Adorno's Critical Reinterpretation of Traditional Metaphysics

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Abstract

Traditional metaphysics is a speculative paradigm that long held a dominant position in Western philosophy. Grounded in identity thinking, it persists in the pursuit of a transcendent and immutable absolute essence, holding that universal reason stands above sensory experience and that a unified order takes precedence over individual difference. As a distinguished representative of the Frankfurt School, Adorno was consistently committed to reflecting on the alienation of rationality under modernity and maintained throughout a negative philosophical stance oriented toward reality. Against the backdrop of the crisis of modernity, he not only systematically examined the conceptual defects and internal contradictions of traditional metaphysics but also, in response to the homogenization of rationality in modern society, actively explored a path for its modern transformation. His critical reinterpretation of the identity system of traditional metaphysics admittedly lacks a constructive practical pathway and thus entails certain theoretical limitations; nevertheless, it both draws on the speculative resources of German classical philosophy and breaks through the inherent constraints of a traditional dialectic oriented toward convergence and reconciliation. In doing so, it advances philosophical speculation from the inquiry into transcendent essence toward the examination of individual finite experience, and offers an important theoretical reference for enriching the post-metaphysical theoretical framework.

Keywords

Adorno; traditional metaphysics; identity; negative dialectics.

1. Introduction

In the wake of the full-blown crisis of modernity in the twentieth century, the identity-oriented defects embedded in traditional metaphysics became fully apparent, and the alienation of rationality together with the homogenization of society provoked searching reflection across Western intellectual circles. Having witnessed the inexorable decline of traditional metaphysics, Adorno nevertheless held fast to a metaphysical pursuit of his own. Through an in-depth analysis of the inner logic and real-world harms of identity thinking, he demonstrated that the identity thinking of traditional metaphysics is not merely an epistemological error but a form of systemic violence deeply rooted in the Western rational tradition. As Adorno observes, "identity is untrue; the object of a concept can never be resolved into the concept." Traditional metaphysics construed the diverse and fluid reality of existence as so many subsidiary appearances of an absolute essence, and accounted for the manifold and concrete world of experience by means of an abstract, unified system of concepts; it therefore lacked any respect for, or tolerance of, individual difference, finite existence, and real contradiction. In his view, identity is the goal that metaphysics has pursued: whether in the affirmative mode of thought characteristic of philosophical theory or in its intrusion upon people's social life under the

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capitalist system, the principle of identity has always entailed the suppression and disparagement of the non-identical.

Confronted with the extreme suffering of Auschwitz, Adorno deployed negative dialectics to lay bare the alienation of language and the limits of expression within the crisis of modernity, and to reflect, through a critique of reason, on the relation between language and social oppression. Adorno contends that absolute rational speculation severed from lived experience will ultimately degenerate into an instrument of domination and oppression. For him, the essence of the modern predicament lies in the coercive assimilation of heterogeneous existence by identity thinking; to remedy this defect at its root, one must break open the closed identity system of traditional metaphysics, abandon the obsessive pursuit of a transcendent absolute essence, and thereby reconstitute the speculative foundations and the critical horizon of metaphysics. He is no nihilist who categorically negates and discards metaphysics, but rather a reformer who critically transforms it—offering a valuable intellectual reference for Chinese philosophy today as it upholds a critical stance and grounds itself in real-world practice.

2. The Identity Essence and Intrinsic Predicament of Traditional Metaphysics

2.1. The Construction of Identity Speculation in Traditional Metaphysics

The construction of identity speculation in traditional metaphysics was by no means accidental; it was the inevitable product of Western philosophy's pursuit of certain knowledge. What traditional metaphysics established was an abstract and unquestionable discourse of identity, one that strenuously denied and effaced the existence of all difference. As early as the Greek period, Parmenides advanced for the first time the proposition that "thinking and being are the same," setting the basic tone of metaphysics: he held that what truly exists is eternal and unchanging, whereas what changes is unreal. Building on this, Plato argued that the Forms are separate from sensible things, that sensible things are caught up in "flux," and he accordingly established the intelligible world of Forms as the sole realm of true being, with sensible things being merely copies or participants of the Forms. True knowledge can be directed only at the eternal and unchanging Forms, never at the fleeting and ever-changing particulars of sense.

Although Aristotle valued empirical inquiry, his metaphysics still took the "first principle" as its highest goal. In the Metaphysics he states explicitly that "the task of philosophy is the study of causes," seeking to penetrate the manifold apparent differences among things and to uncover the unchanging origin underlying all things. Medieval philosophy joined this identity thinking to Christian theology: God, as the supreme and absolute unity, is the final ground and ultimate end of all that exists, and all things attain their highest unity in God. In the modern period, Descartes took the "I think" as the Archimedean point of all certainty and established self-consciousness as the first principle of philosophy, so that subject and object achieve an epistemological identity in the act of thinking. Spinoza, with "substance is its own cause," reduced everything in the universe to a single absolute substance, individual things being merely its modes, whose difference is wholly dissolved at the level of substance. Fichte treated the absolute self as the highest principle of philosophy, interpreting the genesis and development of the world through the dialectical movement of the self, and dissolving all object-difference and opposition within the identity-construction of the self. Schelling advanced the "philosophy of identity," maintaining that subject and object, the ideal and the real, are undifferentiatingly identical in the absolute. Hegel, finally, completed the ultimate construction of identity through the dialectical movement of absolute spirit, treating all difference, opposition, and flux in the world as transient moments in absolute spirit's own self-unfolding and self-unification, so that all difference is ultimately sublated into the absolute identity of the rational concept. It is thus evident that German classical philosophy pushed this

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identity speculation to its peak: traditional metaphysics completed a closed and self-sufficient system of thought that excluded all externality, drawing the entire world into the identity-network of the concept and refusing to acknowledge any being truly external to thought.

2.2. How Identity Thinking Obscures Sensory Experience

In Kant's view, human cognitive capacity is limited, and the categories of the understanding can yield objectively valid knowledge only on the basis of the empirical material supplied by sensible intuition. Once reason attempts to overstep the bounds of experience and to inquire into such transcendent objects as the soul, the world as a whole, and God, it falls into transcendental illusion and antinomy. As Kant puts it, the spuriousness of traditional metaphysics results from reason's arbitrary construction in detachment from sensible intuition and from the empirical foundation. Traditional metaphysics constructs so-called knowledge of transcendent objects through the mere deduction of concepts, thereby giving rise to unresolvable contradictions and dogmatic disputes. By setting limits to reason, Kant in effect exposed a fatal problem in identity thinking: once concepts are severed from experience, the "identity" in question is an empty form devoid of any cognitive content. Building on this, Adorno points out that the identity thinking of traditional metaphysics is not merely an epistemological error but a systemic violence done to sensory experience. As the basic instrument of thinking, the concept is by nature generalizing and abstracting: it forms general determinations by extracting the common properties of individual things, and this very process of abstraction necessarily discards a large number of the concrete features and distinctive qualities of things. The problem with traditional metaphysics is not that it employs concepts, but that it refuses to acknowledge this abstractness and limitation and instead regards the identity-world constructed by concepts as more real and of a higher order than sensible reality. The Forms are thus held to be more real than sensible things, absolute spirit more authentic than individual consciousness, and universal law more important than particular situation.

2.3. The Theoretical Impasse and Internal Paradox of Traditional Metaphysics

Many thinkers after Hegel launched fierce attacks upon and criticism of traditional metaphysics. Adorno, however, held that their critique and negation of rationalist philosophy remained incomplete and that they did not destroy or deconstruct traditional metaphysics at its philosophical foundations. Schopenhauer assailed Hegel's rationalist system with his philosophy of will, yet the "will" he posited was itself a metaphysical absolute. Nietzsche thoroughly repudiated the metaphysical conception of truth through perspectivism and the will to power, but his radical negation ultimately lapsed into relativism and nihilism and never genuinely answered to the legitimacy of the metaphysical question. Heidegger sought to raise the question of being anew through the "ontological difference," yet his "authentic being" still bore a certain new coloration of absolutization. Logical positivism judged metaphysical propositions to be meaningless pseudo-propositions from the standpoint of linguistic analysis; it appeared to eliminate metaphysics once and for all, yet it evaded a fundamental question: why has metaphysics possessed such enduring and powerful vitality in the history of human thought? All of this demonstrates that traditional metaphysics cannot escape its internal paradoxical predicament: while pursuing absolute and systematized ultimate truth, it inadvertently exposes its own finitude, historicity, and non-self-sufficiency.

Once metaphysics attempts to carry its claims of identity into social reality, serious practical consequences ensue. When a philosophical system installs itself as the sole correct worldview and demands that reality be remade according to its principles, identity extends from the speculative sphere into the sociopolitical sphere. In the extreme experience of Auschwitz, Adorno discerned the outcome of this logic of identity, observing that "Auschwitz confirmed the philosopheme of pure identity as death." The critique of metaphysics is therefore by no

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means a mere intramural dispute within the academy; it is a matter that bears on the dignity of human existence.

3. Adorno's Critical Reflection on Mainstream Modern Metaphysics

3.1. The Critique of Hegel's Identity-Oriented Dialectical System

Hegel maintains that "absolute identity" requires subject and object to be undifferentiatingly identical within the absolute; in Adorno's reading, this position dissolves concrete difference and leaves the diversity of the real world unexplained. For Adorno, Hegel's philosophy is on the surface full of contradiction and negation, yet the ultimate destination of his dialectic remains the absolutely affirmative identity. Hegel understands the world as the self-unfolding and externalization of absolute spirit, so that nature, history, and society are merely necessary moments in spirit's realization of itself. Any difference, opposition, or conflict is merely temporary and transitional and is ultimately sublated into the higher unity of absolute spirit. Hegel therefore understands difference only as an appendage of identity, never as a dimension of existence with independent significance.

The limitation of Hegel's dialectic lies in the self-identity of thought, that is, in dissolving external objects solely through thought's own self-identity. In Hegel, external objects, natural things, and the consciousness of others are all absorbed into the self-movement of spirit; their opposition to the subject is finally overcome in absolute knowledge, as thought prescribes being by its own logic, dissolves the contingency of the real through the necessity of the concept, and negates the openness of experience through the completeness of the system. Adorno objects that "to equate the negation of negation with affirmation is the quintessence of identity, the formal principle in its purest form." A genuinely negative dialectics should acknowledge that there are things the concept cannot digest, differences that cannot be synthesized, and suffering that cannot be rationalized.

Adorno's critique of Hegel further targets the optimism embedded in his philosophy of history. Hegel holds that history is the progress of the consciousness of freedom, the process in which absolute spirit realizes itself, so that every catastrophe and every instance of suffering in history can be understood as the "cunning of reason," serving the ultimate good and freedom. Auschwitz shattered this myth of the philosophy of history. Adorno contends that, after Auschwitz, any philosophy asserting that history possesses an inherent rationality and a necessary progressiveness is unacceptable. This is not to say that Adorno denies the entire value of Hegel's philosophy, but that he demands of philosophy an openness to the suffering of reality and a confrontation with the irrationality and rupture within it.

3.2. The Critique of Kant's Transcendental Reason and Its Suppression of Experience

Through the critique of pure reason, Kant draws a strict distinction between appearance and the thing in itself, holding that we can know only things within the world of appearance, whereas the thing in itself is unknowable. Although his critical philosophy appears modestly to restrain the presumption of reason, it establishes in epistemology the priority of the subject over the object: it is the transcendental subject that legislates for nature through the a priori categories and imposes unity upon the manifold of sensibility. Adorno's analysis of self-preservative reason continues this account of Kantian transcendental reason: the principle of action on which individuals in capitalist society rely ultimately points toward a transcendental and logical subject that has shed its natural determinations. In modern capitalist society, this principle of self-preservation has expanded from the domain of cognition into every facet of social life. To survive in a competitive social environment, individuals must ceaselessly subject

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themselves to self-discipline and self-optimization, thereby molding themselves into subjects that conform to social requirements.

Adorno recognizes that under capitalist conditions the multiple dimensions of transcendental reason in Kant's sense have not been fully unfolded; what has actually been realized is only the "transcendental understanding" in the sense of the Critique of Pure Reason, which takes systematic knowledge as its goal and the comprehensive mastery of nature by human beings as its practical outcome. The moral autonomy to which Kant's practical reason points and the aesthetic common sense to which his power of judgment points have been marginalized and repressed under actual capitalist conditions, while instrumental understanding alone has enjoyed unprecedented development. Such instrumental reason converts every problem into a technical one, reduces every value to utility, and simplifies every relation to calculation. Adorno's critique of Kantian transcendental reason is not intended to negate enlightenment itself but to reflect deeply on the process by which enlightenment turns into its opposite.

3.3. The Critique of the Ultimate-Truth Paradigm in Modern Metaphysics

Since the seventeenth century, the idea of "I think, therefore I am" advanced by Descartes has directly inaugurated the modern surge of metaphysical inquiry and has probed deeply into the possibility and the limits of human reason's attainment of certain knowledge. From Descartes to Leibniz, modern philosophers consistently believed that the systematic exercise of reason could reach the ultimate truth concerning the world, the soul, and God, and all of them manifested a persistent pursuit of certainty, necessity, and universality. Adorno does not accept this view, holding that it ignores the historicity and sociality of all cognitive activity; as he puts it in criticism, "the immutability of truth is the illusion of prima philosophia." Any doctrine hailed as ultimate truth is in fact produced under specific historical conditions and within specific social practices, and inevitably bears the limitations and prejudices of its age. To absolutize a historically conditioned cognition into eternal truth is itself a non-historical and dogmatic attitude. At the same time, it represses the openness and the processual character of truth itself. True truth is not a static state of possession but something generated through ceaseless critique, negation, and revision. A philosophy that claims to have reached its endpoint has in fact ceased to think. Genuine philosophical thinking should unfold a continuous self-reflection grounded in concrete historical reality, indefatigably pursuing more adequate conceptual expression while always retaining a sober awareness of the limits of the concept; it does not supply ultimate answers to the manifold questions of the world but keeps the questioning awareness eternally open.

4. Adorno's Critical Reinterpretation of Traditional Metaphysics

4.1. Breaking Open the Closed System of the Philosophy of Identity

Within the horizon of negative dialectics, the theoretical focus is the resistance of the other to identity, since the defect of traditional metaphysics lies precisely in its deep-rooted logic of identity. Breaking this logic requires that we change the way we use concepts. Traditional metaphysics regards the system of concepts as a closed and self-sufficient structure, whereas Adorno proposes to understand the concept as an open and provisional instrument. The task of philosophy is not to build a perfect palace of concepts but to reach reality through them, sustaining the vitality of thought in the tension between concept and reality.

Adorno opposes the philosophy of identity in the Western metaphysical tradition, holding that truth is not a correspondence-theoretical proposition underwritten by identity thinking but something that exists in a state of becoming and mutation. Truth is no longer understood as the static mirroring of the object by the concept but as a continuous process of interaction and revision between concept and object. A concept is "true" because it can guide us toward a

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deeper and richer understanding of the various aspects of its object while remaining aware of its own inadequacy and limits. Philosophy is no longer a truth-proclaiming authority standing above the world but a practical undertaking that participates in the cognition and improvement of reality.

Breaking open the identity system also means rethinking the relation between philosophy and other fields of knowledge. Traditional metaphysics upholds a hierarchical conception, supplying the ultimate philosophical foundation and legitimation for the particular sciences. Adorno, by contrast, holds that philosophy should relinquish absolute authority and enter into an egalitarian and interactive partnership with the empirical sciences. Philosophy must absorb the concrete findings of the sciences in order to enrich its own substance, and at the same time, through reflection on the premises and methods of the sciences, help them avoid degenerating into mere instrumental reason.

4.2. The Turn from Absolute Essence to Finite Experience

Western traditional metaphysics has long been trapped in the error of placing the infinite absolute essence above finite sensory experience, attempting to draw the whole of a rich, varied, and fluid reality into the identity-framework of abstract concepts. From Parmenides' "being" to Hegel's "absolute spirit," none of these positions escaped the speculative path that dissolves existence by thought and obscures the particular by the universal. In Negative Dialectics, Adorno insists on safeguarding the "non-identical" and the truth borne by bodily suffering as the last bastion of resistance to the tyranny of identity. The thoroughgoing liquidation of the identity logic of traditional metaphysics will necessarily bring about a fundamental shift in the focus of philosophical speculation, and this alone is the possible path by which metaphysics may attain legitimacy in the post-metaphysical age. By drawing philosophy's gaze back from the transcendent kingdom of the Forms to concrete human suffering and bodily experience, Adorno re-establishes an intrinsic and irreducible connection between metaphysics and the human condition, and thereby rescues the truth-content of metaphysics in the very act of criticizing it.

4.3. Constructing a Negative Post-Metaphysical Critical Paradigm

The negative post-metaphysical critical paradigm consists in thoroughly negating the closed system of the philosophy of identity and, with the non-identical as its core category, grasping the dynamic process by which truth is generated within the sustained tension between concept and reality, subject and object. Traditional metaphysics never truly touched the richness and difference of reality, because it adhered to the transcendental presupposition of the identity of thinking and being; once confronted with heterogeneous experience and historical change, it falls into the error of dissolving reality by means of concepts. The post-metaphysical critical paradigm, by contrast, understands truth as a continuous process of interaction and revision between concept and object: the concept is at once an instrument for grasping reality and something that must constantly be broken open, so that an open intellectual posture with negativity as its inner dynamic may be established.

Negativity is the driving mechanism within metaphysics' own constitution: when the negative force of metaphysics manifests itself as the negation of traditional metaphysics, metaphysics generates the momentum of self-deconstruction and indeed of self-reconstruction—its own self-development. In examining the identity logic of traditional metaphysics, Adorno sets out a critical path that dissolves systematicity through negativity. Philosophy must transcend the conservatism of merely interpreting the world and turn instead to exposing the falsity of identity thinking and awakening the subject's revolutionary consciousness of a reified reality; this is the inevitable outcome of critical theory's movement toward practical emancipation.

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5. Conclusion

Adorno's negative dialectics and his critical theory of metaphysics possess considerable research value and intellectual depth, both for the renewal of metaphysics and for the critique of modern society. Yet his theory has limitations that cannot be ignored: an absolutized stance of negation leaves his critical system without a constructive practical pathway, and in over-dissolving identity it also entangles him in a purely critical paradigm of metaphysical speculation. We therefore need to view Adorno's critical reinterpretation of traditional metaphysics objectively and dialectically, and to draw out the positive core and contemporary value of his theory. At present, with information technology advancing rapidly and social structures, ideas, and culture changing from day to day, diverse and heterogeneous social trends interweave and collide, while such modern problems as the ossification of identity thinking and the alienation of instrumental reason remain pronounced. The development of philosophy in the new era still calls for dialectical thinking to break through cognitive constraints and to grasp the tenor of the times. Research on Adorno's critique of metaphysics and on negative dialectics is therefore by no means outdated. Grounded in reality and building on strengths while avoiding weaknesses, such research can both remedy the speculative defects of traditional metaphysics and uphold the core of scientific dialectics, thereby offering important theoretical support for the contemporary transformation of philosophy and for the analysis of real-world problems.

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