

On Adorno's Rejection of Identity in Negative Dialectics

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Abstract

Adorno hoped to see the irrational and real social reality beneath the veil through the rational world. He paid close attention to the reification phenomenon that binds people and the desolation of human beings as subjects. He proposed constructing a constellation-style communication model to guide human beings to awaken themselves, pursue active reconciliation, respect the value of life as subjects and individual differences, so as to achieve harmony where differences and struggles exist but there is no hierarchy or harm. However, the harmonious state of the constellation-style communication model is not operable in real life, and even contradicts the logic of collapse and the principle of non-identity it advocates. The negative dialectics constructed by Adorno seems to aim to reveal the potential metaphysical attributes of dialectics, but in the end, negative dialectics still collapsed on itself. Nevertheless, this does not mean that negative dialectics is meaningless. He inherited Marxist dialectics to criticize the metaphysical thinking mode of Hegel and traditional dialectics. At the same time, although negative dialectics moved towards metaphysics in its negation, the process of this analysis and criticism also brilliantly presented the essential characteristics of criticism and revolution of Marxist dialectics.

Keywords

Adorno; Negative Dialectics; Rejection; Identity; Constellation.

1. Introduction

Adorno endowed philosophical thought with social criticism. Especially on the issue of epistemology, he not only affirmed that philosophy has promoted the progress of capitalist society to a certain extent, but also acutely pointed out some inherent defects exposed by epistemology in dealing with practical problems. In order to criticize the cognitive defects of traditional epistemology and find solutions, Adorno conducted in-depth research and criticism on epistemology. In Adorno's view, the true mission of philosophy is not to construct grand systems, but to penetrate the fog of ideology and reveal the social reality obscured by identity thinking. Traditional epistemological philosophy takes subject prior to object and identity prior to non-identity as its essence, and analyzes issues such as division of labor and freedom in capitalist society, revealing the ugly face of identity philosophy. What Adorno criticized was actually the consciously violent identity of systematic philosophy, which in modern capitalist society manifests as the dominant identity thinking of bourgeois ideology. Under the capitalist social system, for the greedy purposes of monetary interests and commodity circulation, human beings are almost equivalent to commodities, and society is imposed with an overall ideological illusion. Under the rule of power, human thinking is confined to a closed and limited system, and the freedom and liberation of human beings are even out of the question. Therefore, identity philosophy is the initiator of real tragedies behind capitalist society. Thus, it is necessary for Adorno to deconstruct, criticize and reflect on identity philosophy, and reconstruct an open, free and constellation society that allows differences to exist.

In the history of Marxist development, as an important member of the Frankfurt School, Adorno made an outstanding interpretation of Marxist philosophy, which transcended its historical limitations and exerted an important influence in the field of contemporary world thought. Adorno's negative dialectics is not only a criticism of traditional philosophy, but also a profound response to the crisis of modernity. As some scholars have pointed out, the general idea of Adorno's Negative Dialectics is to conduct internal criticism on the popular philosophical trends in the West during his time through the "logic of disintegration", so as to seek a way out for modern philosophy since the Enlightenment.

2. Theoretical Background of Negative Dialectics

2.1. Internal Dilemmas of the Western Metaphysical Tradition

Adorno proposed negative dialectics presumably because he conducted in-depth research on the epistemological dilemmas inherited from the Greek traditional metaphysics. Adorno was not a cynic. He analyzed social reality in depth, but did not put himself in the position of a savior to completely bid farewell to reason. Instead, he found that when enlightenment reason seemed to exert its maximum significance, human beings actually fell into fear of themselves. Adorno hoped to penetrate the myth-like rational world covered by the Enlightenment and see the irrational reality beneath the veil.

In the earliest period of Greek natural philosophy, Parmenides founded existential philosophy, made a distinction between being and non-being, essence and phenomenal world, and put forward the well-known theory of the identity of thought and being, and taking being as the object of philosophical ontology research. Since then, Western philosophy has been deeply trapped in the pursuit of an eternal and unchanging ontology. Later, on this basis, Plato distinguished the world of ideas from the world of things, but did not break the opposition between the two. Later, Aristotle founded first philosophy, and more clearly proposed to take being itself as the research object to study first philosophy, and being itself is a substance that can be relied on by other things and can exist independently. The reason why first philosophy is the highest level of knowledge is also due to the supremacy and primacy of its research object, that is to say, metaphysics is an epistemology on the ontological level.

In the modern philosophy period, philosophers mainly focused on solving the opposition between the two worlds and the separation of subject and object. In modern philosophy, the most well-known are Husserl and Heidegger. However, no matter how good their theoretical original intentions and ideas are, they always return to the past due to the needs of thinking logic and theoretical systems, and overly pursue supremacy and absolute purity, failing to abandon the characteristics of first philosophy. Adorno called these characteristics of first philosophy that overly pursue supremacy and absolute purity "first philosophy".

Since traditional Western metaphysics, epistemology has been pursuing eternal truth, such as being, idea, absolute, etc. Non-being, which represents change, has been abandoned and rarely valued or even become the object of cognition, because to a considerable extent, non-being is unknowable. Just as truth is considered to be impossible to extract from variable objects, the truth grasped in a non-dialectical way is just as Adorno put forward in his works: once invariables are fixed as a priori, they become ideology and are non-dialectical. The traditional way of studying epistemology always starts with the subject subjectively cognizing the object, making cognition possible, thus being able to theoretically see through the objective world and grasp the object, and then the subject returns to itself. Due to the supremacy of first philosophy, it logically constructs an ontology beyond itself, which governs the subject and object worlds to make up for the problem of subject-object dualism separation. In other words, the essence of first philosophy is that ontological philosophy uses concepts to construct a priori existing things beyond the ontology as the principle governing the world.

2.2. Adorno's Criticism of Traditional Epistemology

Since the origin of traditional Western metaphysics, epistemology has always revolved around the core issue of "how the subject cognizes the object", forming a research paradigm with identity as its essence and a priori concepts as its core. With negative dialectics as his theoretical weapon, Adorno put forward sharp and systematic criticisms on the research methods of this traditional epistemology, breaking its long-term theoretical monopoly. Adorno believed that the fundamental defect of traditional epistemology lies in endowing "concepts" with two unreasonable attributes - they are both products of human thinking activities and preset as ontologies independent of experience and prior to reality. When such concepts with both thinking attributes and a priori ontological attributes intervene in the cognitive process, cognitive activities will fall into fundamental deviations.

Specifically, the intervention of such concepts will greatly exaggerate the dominant ability of the subject in cognizing and transforming the object, place the subject in an absolutely dominant position, and then ignore the material basis necessary for the subject to cognize the object - that is, the objective reality of the object and the realistic experience and practical conditions on which the subject's cognition depends, and finally lose the core premise for the subject to cognize the object. In Adorno's view, cognitive activity should be a process of interaction and mutual mediation between subject and object. It is impossible to talk about the subject's cognitive ability in isolation from the objective attributes of the object, nor can we use a priori concepts to obliterate the differences and concreteness of the object. However, traditional epistemology precisely violates this basic logic. This cognitive process, which is divorced from the material basis and exaggerates the subject's ability, is bound to fail to draw true conclusions in line with reality, and will push the subject and object into an awkward dual dilemma: both are real and interrelated beings in the real world, and are kidnapped by the ontological presuppositions of traditional epistemology, reduced to products of a priori concept deduction, and lose their authentic existence form. For this reason, Adorno believed that the core question of traditional epistemology, "which is primary, matter or consciousness", cannot be truly answered within its own theoretical framework - because it fundamentally distorts the real relationship between subject and object, is divorced from the realistic basis of cognitive activities, and its conclusions are inevitably one-sided and false.

Based on the criticism of the core defects of traditional epistemology, Adorno directed his spearhead at the identity philosophy behind it, and used the term "utopia" with a critical and contemptuous meaning to name identity philosophy, so as to expose its nature of being divorced from reality and pretentious. In Adorno's context, the "utopia" here does not refer to the reasonable yearning of human beings for a better future, but specifically refers to the abstract theoretical system constructed by identity philosophy that is divorced from realistic experience and closed and self-consistent - this system blindly pursues the unity of concepts and the perfection of logic, ignores the diversity, differences and contradictions of the real world, and as its own theory continues to deduce, it becomes more and more distant from the real world, but still regards itself as the absolute truth governing the world and adheres to its own theoretical hegemony. Adorno further pointed out that in the face of specific and achievable utopian possibilities (i.e., human beings' reasonable pursuit of freedom, reconciliation and non-alienated state), traditional dialectics has become "the ontology of the false state of things" - it no longer pays attention to the real contradictions and alienated dilemmas of the real world, no longer has the power to criticize and transform reality, but only becomes a tool to maintain the identity system and cover up the falsehood of reality, while the correct state of things and the real needs of human beings are always outside the scope of its theoretical control. Adorno's criticism just highlights the core problem of identity philosophy: it seems to control the right to interpret the world, but in fact, it has long been

divorced from the reality it tries to interpret, becoming a self-closed and self-satisfied theoretical illusion.

Some scholars have incisively pointed out that there is a profound complementary relationship between Adorno's two core works, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and *Negative Dialectics*. This complementarity together constitutes his complete critical system of traditional epistemology and the crisis of modernity: *Dialectic of Enlightenment* mainly focuses on the alienation process of enlightenment reason, deeply analyzes how enlightenment reason has gradually degenerated from a progressive force of "disenchanted myths and liberating human beings" into an instrumental reason that controls nature and enslaves human beings, revealing the source of the crisis of modernity; while *Negative Dialectics* further expands this critical perspective, extending from the criticism of enlightenment reason to a comprehensive reflection on the entire Western traditional metaphysical epistemology, focusing on systematic deconstruction and criticism of mainstream epistemological forms such as Kant's transcendental philosophy, Hegel's dialectics and Husserl's phenomenology, with the core of emphasizing the two principles of "priority of the object" and "non-identity", and completely dismantling the identity system constructed by traditional metaphysics.

Adorno clearly pointed out that although Hegel's dialectics seems to emphasize contradictory movement and development, its essence is still a continuation of identity thinking - Hegel, with the abstract absolute idea as the core, uses a unified conceptual system to dominate all differences, contradictions and specific experiences, simplifies the rich and diverse real world into the logical deduction of concepts, and finally suppresses the differences and subjectivity of individuals, becoming the philosophical basis of totalitarian ideology; positivism, on the other hand, goes to the other extreme. It overemphasizes the verifiability of experience, dissolves the subject's value, emotion and creativity with poor logical forms, simplifies cognitive activities into mechanical induction of objective facts, and also falls into the misunderstanding of identity. In Adorno's view, although Hegel's dialectics and positivism seem to be opposed in position, they actually lead to the same goal. Both together constitute the ideological root of the crisis of modernity - they both ignore the priority and non-identity of the object, suppress differences and dissolve the authenticity of the subject in different ways, and finally become theoretical tools to maintain the alienated reality and hinder human liberation, which is also the core focus of Adorno's criticism of traditional epistemology.

2.3. The Dialectical Fate of Enlightenment Reason

In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, co-authored by Adorno and Horkheimer, from a dialectical critical perspective, they deeply revealed the dialectical fate of enlightenment reason from a progressive force of "liberating human beings" to gradually moving towards its opposite and becoming a tool for enslaving human beings. This analysis also became an important theoretical foreshadowing for Adorno's thought of negative dialectics. The original intention of the Enlightenment was to break the imprisonment of human thought by medieval theology, use reason as a weapon to dispel the fog of myths, and pursue human liberation and progress - it advocated the supremacy of reason, advocated replacing superstition with knowledge and blind obedience with science, and tried to achieve human domination over nature through understanding and controlling nature, so as to obtain freedom and dignity. However, Adorno and Horkheimer acutely found that the view of knowledge held by the Enlightenment from the beginning had fundamental defects, which laid the groundwork for its subsequent alienation.

This flawed view of knowledge limits the value of knowledge to the two utilitarian dimensions of "describing nature" and "controlling nature", overemphasizes the instrumental value of knowledge, and completely ignores the core contribution of human reason in pursuing

meaning, constructing value and highlighting subjectivity. Under the guidance of this view of knowledge, enlightenment reason gradually deviated from its original intention of "liberating human beings" and step by step became an instrumental reason serving utilitarian purposes - reason is no longer a means for human beings to understand the world and realize themselves, but has become a tool to dominate human beings and control nature. The proliferation of instrumental reason has ultimately led to the alienation and reification of human beings: modern people no longer take human essential needs as the starting point, but from the utilitarian purpose of "controlling nature and obtaining interests", blindly imitate the operation logic of nature, equate themselves with things that can be calculated and controlled, and lose their subjectivity, initiative and creativity. Human beings who once tried to control nature and master technology, under the domination of instrumental reason, unconsciously became slaves of technology and appendages of things, falling into the dialectical dilemma of "the more they pursue liberation, the more they are enslaved", which is the core paradox of the dialectical fate of enlightenment reason.

In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer always focused on the core theme of "enlightenment moving towards self-negation" and analyzed the complete process of the alienation of enlightenment reason. However, this criticism did not stop at the reflection on instrumental reason, but was further deepened and expanded in *Negative Dialectics* - if the theme of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is to reveal how enlightenment thought gradually moves towards its opposite through an internal dialectical movement and becomes an alienated tool; then the theme of *Negative Dialectics* is to further point the spearhead of criticism at the deep root behind the alienation of enlightenment reason - the metaphysical mode of identity thinking, trying to dismantle the logic of alienation from the epistemological root.

In *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno repeatedly tried to show that the negative dialectics he advocated is essentially different from Hegel's dialectics. The core of this difference lies in the different attitudes towards "concreteness, difference" and "identity", which also determines the fundamental differences between the two in critical function and theoretical direction. The negative dialectics advocated by Adorno always puts "concreteness" and "difference" at the core, emphasizing that the essence of dialectics is "negation" - it does not pursue the reconciliation and unity of contradictions, but focuses on the differences, contradictions and alienation of the real world, and through continuous negation, reveals the falsehood of reality and guards the differences and subjectivity of individuals; while Hegel's dialectics, although seemingly emphasizing contradictory movement and development, its essence is still bound by metaphysical identity thinking - in an abstract conceptual movement, it overemphasizes the "identity" aspect in the relationship of unity of opposites, and subsumes the rich and diverse concrete reality and individual differences into the abstract system of absolute idea, ultimately suppressing concreteness and difference, and becoming a tool to maintain identity and cover up real contradictions, which is also the core of Adorno's criticism of Hegel's dialectics.

3. Rejecting Absolute Identity

Adorno clearly stated in the "Introduction" to *Negative Dialectics*: "Dialectics is the consistent consciousness of non-identity." [1] For him, since the identity logic of traditional metaphysics is manifested as the coercion of the subject over the object and the concept over the non-conceptual thing, the "consciousness of non-identity" elaborated by Adorno here does not mean completely reversing the relationship between subject and object, concept and non-conceptual thing in traditional metaphysics, that is to say, it does not mean a dominant power of the object over the subject and the non-conceptual thing over the concept.

At this point, we can summarize the main reasons why first philosophy falls into epistemological difficulties as follows: first, first philosophy separates subject and object into dualism; second, the illegal suppression of the object by the subject; third, the illegal cancellation of mediation. Based on this, Adorno provided solutions to the epistemological difficulties of first philosophy: first, deconstruct first philosophy from within, break the falsehood and illusion of identity, establish non-identity as the basic principle, and re-establish the principle of mediation; second, establish a constellation model to establish the principle of non-identity and a model of harmonious coexistence. In other words, human beings begin to exist as non-identical subjects, and the society in which human beings live becomes a harmonious existence that tolerates differences.

3.1. Deconstruction of Identity Philosophy

Identity philosophy puts forward the requirement of identity, making the heterogeneous content subject to this supremacy a priori to exhaust its objects. This supreme rule of identity annihilates the content different from it, and seems to achieve a perfect harmony, but in fact it is not. Due to the logical priority of concepts in identity philosophy, which dominate objective things, but things are actually diverse, concepts will inevitably be omitted. But the key point is that identity philosophy does not recognize the difference between things and concepts, but forcibly equates things with concepts. Thus Adorno said: Identity only sees the common part of things and neglects the existence of things with non-identity characteristics.

In Adorno's view, the fundamental reason why enlightenment reason eventually moves towards its opposite lies in the abstract identity inherent in enlightenment reason itself, which makes enlightenment reason eventually degenerate into the rule of instrumental reason. In this sense, the criticism of instrumental reason is actually the criticism of the abstract identity of enlightenment reason itself. Because "the ideal of the Enlightenment is to establish an all-encompassing system. Rationalism and empiricism are no different in this regard in their understanding of the Enlightenment. Various forms are reduced to states and sequences, history to facts, and facts to matter." [2] The abstract identity principle of enlightenment reason is essentially the dominant power of the meaningful subject over the meaningless object, which constitutes the basis of the unity of nature that sacrifices the diversity of qualities. The result is that "human beings pay the price of their constant alienation in the exercise of power for the expansion of their power. The Enlightenment treats all things like a dictator treats people." [3]

When Adorno thought about the problems of bourgeois epistemology, he found that the so-called reason of the bourgeoisie is completely a world under reification when understanding the world. Because the bourgeoisie urgently needs a quick and convenient way of cognition to earn large sums of money. Therefore, once the object does not conform to the subjective provisions of the subject, the bourgeoisie's approach is to make the subject identify the object, resolve contradictions with concepts, and make everything in the perfect reconciliation of concepts. At the same time, Adorno also argued that after the methodology of first philosophy is legally confirmed, only the logic and symbols left by first philosophy exist in the world, which replace and alienate all real existing things, making the world an identity world. The methodology of first philosophy gives birth to the emergence of absolute identity, leads to the demise of heterogeneity, completely buries the objectivity hidden in the subject, and loses the realistic foundation between subject and object. Therefore, Adorno rejects identity. He saw that individuality is suppressed, and the happy and harmonious scene constructed in the identity scene is only an illusion and false. As the absolute identity of the illusion of first philosophy, in order to obtain overall cognition, concepts obliterate heterogeneity, eliminate it in identity, and then convert it into concepts, enter subjective cognition, and even immediately equate concepts with existing things to avoid the middle, leading to people's

inability to distinguish the true from the false in their understanding of existing things. Thus, ideology becomes the combiner of the false identity of subject and object abetted by first philosophy.

However, the concepts made beyond the existing things ignore their own complexity and variability, and also try to cover up the non-identity between quality and quantity among existing things, so that the concepts must be regarded as illusions of the real existing things. Absolute identity tries to assimilate non-identity and heterogeneous things into the melting pot where concepts are located. But the final result is that contradictions can never be melted into such a furnace. The eternal and unchanging ontology explored by first philosophy cannot adapt to the changing society, but it seems that it does not want to make up for and change such loopholes, but only resists negative dialectics blindly. Therefore, the absolute identity under first philosophy can only be confused and resist in new scenarios.

3.2. Rejecting Absolute Identity

Adorno's rejection of absolute identity is rooted in his profound insight and sharp criticism of the existing alienated world. He revealed the internal connection between absolute identity and the existing world with a highly impactful assertion: "As long as the created world remains as it is now, all images of reconciliation, peace and tranquility are similar to images of death." In Adorno's context, the existing world is an alienated world firmly dominated by instrumental reason, commodity logic and identity thinking. The "reconciliation, peace and tranquility" here are not true free coexistence, but false harmony suppressed by identity - it dissolves all differences and contradictions, obliterates the subjectivity and uniqueness of individuals, and makes everything fall into a rigid and static state. This "harmony" without vitality, resistance and difference is no different from the silence of death, and is essentially a strangulation of human vitality and creativity.

Therefore, to break free from this alienated world similar to death is essentially the same proposition as getting rid of the shackles of absolute identity and getting out of the detour of absolute identity - absolute identity is the ideological root of the existing alienated world. The false harmony it constructs covers up the real contradictions and pains and hinders the liberation and progress of human beings. Faced with this dilemma, Adorno gave a simple and resolute answer: negation. In his view, the best way to save the future, get rid of alienation and realize human freedom is not to compromise and affirm the existing world, but to completely negate the existing world - negate the existing alienated order, negate the ideological hegemony of identity, and negate all false existences that suppress individuals and cover up contradictions. And the historical task of saving absolute identity, resolving alienation and leading human beings towards liberation naturally falls on negative dialectics, which thus becomes the core theoretical weapon for Adorno to reject absolute identity and criticize the alienated reality.

Adorno's rejection of absolute identity is also rooted in his deep disappointment with the identical society constructed by identity philosophy. In his view, the fundamental fallacy of identity philosophy lies in using abstract concepts that have shed their objective veil to create a false identical society - such abstract concepts are divorced from realistic experience, lose the essential attributes of things, and become a purely logical construction. All the harmony and beauty it shows are only very false illusions, which cannot reflect the real face of the real world, let alone respond to human beings' real needs for freedom and happiness. Even if such abstract concepts claim to pursue a happy and beautiful future, the future conceived is stubborn and arbitrary: it is kidnapped by identity thinking, ignores individual differences and real contradictions, and forcibly incorporates human beings into a unified and rigid framework, ruling people's thoughts and lives, forming a sharp opposition with human

beings' real experience and real demands. In the end, it not only cannot bring happiness, but also further suppresses human freedom and exacerbates the dilemma of alienation.

Therefore, Adorno clearly pointed out that the only way to get rid of the control of identity and break free from the shackles of false illusions is negation - only through continuous negation, breaking the thinking pattern of identity, dissolving the rule of abstract concepts, can people's suppressed freedom be liberated, can the false harmony be broken, and can the true happiness that conforms to human essential needs be found. This negation is not a simple negative negation, nor is it meaningless nihilism, but a dialectical negation with critical spirit and revolutionary significance. Its core is to open the way for real existence and human liberation by negating the false existing.

Based on this negative position, Adorno emphasized that negative dialectics must penetrate into all ideological and practical work and become the fundamental way of thinking for people to understand and transform the world. Establishing the principle of non-identity is the primary and core task of negative dialectics - non-identity is the key to rejecting absolute identity, and the core criterion for guarding individual differences and highlighting the priority of the object. Only by establishing the principle of non-identity can we completely break the hegemony of identity and get out of the dilemma of alienation. To complete this core task, Adorno proposed two key paths: first, to liberate non-concepts, make non-concepts on an equal footing with concepts, and break the violent assimilation and one-way rule of concepts over non-conceptual things. Non-conceptual things are concrete, realistic and full of differences, which cannot be completely covered and assimilated by concepts. If the non-conceptual part is simply equated with the conceptual part, ignoring the differences between them, it will distort the nature of truth and lead to misunderstanding and distortion of reality; second, to face up to the existence of heterogeneity, recognize and respect the diversity and differences of the world, and refuse to dissolve heterogeneity with the logic of identity. Adorno further pointed out that the inherent attribute of negative dialectics is the contradiction between heterogeneity and homogeneity, and this contradiction is precisely the internal force to dismantle identity philosophy - because of the existence of this contradiction, the absolute identity and perfect harmony pursued by identity philosophy will inevitably be broken by the heterogeneity that it cannot dissolve, thus falling into the dilemma of self-collapse.

In the process of rejecting absolute identity, Adorno's negative dialectics itself hides a profound internal paradox, which has been in-depth analyzed and explained by some scholars: if we want to completely oppose the traditional dialectics' ultimate pursuit of affirmation - the core logic of traditional dialectics is "affirmation-negation-negation of negation", which will eventually move towards an affirmative and unified ultimate result, and Adorno's negative dialectics precisely opposes this ultimate affirmation, then we must regard "negation of negation", in other words, the third term of dialectics (negation of negation) as an open link, abandon the closed-loop logic of traditional dialectics, move towards continuous negation of "affirmation-negation-negation-negation...", and make negation an eternal process without end and never compromise.

But questions arise: what is the significance of such continuous and endless negation for thought itself? Because we know that even traditional dialectics that pursues affirmative results does not stay at that ultimate third term (negation of negation), but turns this affirmative result into a link to be sublated in the new dialectical movement, always maintaining the vitality of the dialectical movement. From this sense, the "negative" meaning in Adorno's "negative dialectics" has gone beyond the understanding of negation in the dialectical tradition - negation in traditional dialectics is dialectical and mediated, aiming at achieving a higher level of affirmation and unity, while Adorno's negation is absolute and continuous, negating for the sake of negation, and rejecting any form of affirmation and unity.

At the same time, this negative dialectics itself has a certain internal paradox: the pursuit of the essence of affirmation in the dialectical tradition is incompatible with Adorno's absolute negation of all affirmative essence - negative dialectics must not only adhere to the critical spirit of dialectics, but also completely negate the core logic of the dialectical tradition. This internal tension constitutes an unavoidable paradox of negative dialectics, and also becomes an important inducement for its subsequent self-collapse.

3.3. Constellation: The Existence Mode of Non-Identity

Adorno constructed the existence mode of non-identity with the "constellation" in astronomy as the core metaphor. This mode is not only a complete transcendence of traditional identity thinking, but also a concrete expression of the core principles of his negative dialectics, providing a new logical framework for the coexistence of contradictory relationships such as subject and object, thinking and existence. In the astronomical context, the vast sky is divided into various distinct constellations with their own characteristics by human beings according to the distribution and connection of stars. Each constellation is composed of stars with different shapes, brightness and orbits connected to each other, forming a unique visual form and being endowed with different cultural connotations and symbolic meanings. More importantly, each star in the constellation has its own independence and uniqueness. There is no hierarchical relationship or dominance between them. They neither suppress nor assimilate each other, but each maintains its own heterogeneity and forms an organic whole - constellation through the connection of a third-party medium. This means that in the relationship paradigm of constellation, differences are respected and diversity is tolerated. There is no one-way power relationship of who rules or suppresses whom. This relationship of equal coexistence and harmony in difference is a vivid portrayal of the non-identity existence state pursued by Adorno.

Based on this core characteristic of astronomical constellations, Adorno introduced the category of "constellation" into the field of philosophy to explain a series of contradictory opposite relationships such as subject and object, thinking and existence, phenomenon and essence, and solve the dilemma of traditional metaphysics resolving contradictions and suppressing differences with identity thinking. In Adorno's view, traditional metaphysics always tries to dominate one side by the other, either assimilating the object by the subject or dissolving the non-conceptual thing by the concept, and finally falls into the rigid misunderstanding of identity. The constellation mode provides a reasonable path for the coexistence of these contradictory relationships - it rejects any form of one-way rule, and advocates that both sides of the contradiction achieve equal coexistence and mutual mediation on the basis of retaining their own heterogeneity.

Regarding how the subject and object under the constellation can coexist without abandoning heterogeneity, Adorno gave a clear explanation: "Concepts gather around the object, potentially determine the interior of the object, and achieve in thinking what must be cut off from thinking." This discussion reveals the core logic of the subject-object relationship under the constellation mode: the subject grasps the object through concepts, but unlike traditional metaphysics, concepts do not forcibly incorporate the object into their own logical framework to achieve assimilation and rule of the object, but "gather around the object", take the object as the center, respect the objective reality and its own characteristics of the object. The role of concepts is to potentially reveal the internal essence of the object, not to forcibly stipulate the existence form of the object. At the same time, Adorno emphasized that the distance between subject and object is the premise for abstract thinking to be established. The existence of dialectics does not mean that the object will be completely incorporated into the concept and assimilated by the concept, but that the concept as a tool to grasp the object itself is dynamically changing, not a rigid and unchanging abstract dogma.

Therefore, in the process of cognizing the object, the subject does not pursue the absolute grasp and ultimate cognition of the object, but continuously deepens the understanding of the object in the contradictory relationship between the object's "what it is" (real existence form) and "what it should be" (authentic existence form). This cognitive process is not closed and rigid, but open and dynamic. It does not pursue the absolute knowledge and eternal truth advocated by first philosophy, but acknowledges the limitations and openness of cognition, respects the differences and diversity of the object, and always maintains awe and adherence to non-identity. In addition, Adorno further pointed out that the unity between subject and object does not rely on the identity principle or supremacy principle of traditional metaphysics, but on letting concepts enter the constellation - letting concepts get rid of the shackles of abstraction and rigidity, and form a constellation relationship with objects, non-conceptual things and other elements, achieving dynamic unity through mutual mediation and correlation. The essence of this unity is the understanding of things themselves and the respect for the authentic form of the object, not the assimilation and rule of the object.

It should be made clear that the concept of "constellation" is not original to Adorno. Its ideological origin can be traced back to Benjamin. On the basis of inheriting the core connotation of Benjamin's constellation concept, Adorno made creative transformation and development in combination with the theoretical demands of his own negative dialectics, endowing the constellation concept with a new philosophical significance. In Benjamin's philosophical context, constellation is closely related to "idea". He once clearly put forward: "The idea is an eternal constellation, in which the elements are grasped as points, so that the phenomenon is decomposed and saved at the same time... The collection of phenomena is the task of concepts, and the dissolution of phenomena that occurs in concepts through discriminative understanding is more important because it completes two tasks at the same time in the same event: the salvation of phenomena and the representation of ideas." In Benjamin's view, the idea is eternal and unchanging, and the constellation is the concrete presentation of the idea. Various individual phenomena, as "points" in the constellation, are governed by the idea. In the constellation relationship, the phenomenon is not only decomposed into independent individuals, but also saved by the idea, realizing the unity of phenomenon and idea. This constellation mode has a certain messianic color, pointing to an ultimate redemption.

Adorno took over Benjamin's image of constellation and introduced a crucial difference, completely reshaping the connotation of the constellation concept. For Benjamin, "the idea is an eternal constellation", and the constellation is a fixed and unchanging mode of existence corresponding to the eternal idea; while Adorno clearly talked about "historically changing constellations", emphasizing that the constellation is not an eternal and unchanging abstract paradigm, but dynamically develops with the changes of historical context and social reality. This seemingly subtle modification contains a profound theoretical turn: Adorno thus secularized the messianic plan contained in Benjamin's constellation concept, abandoned its religious appeal for ultimate redemption, and combined the constellation with specific historical reality and social alienation dilemmas, making it a realistic path to break the hegemony of identity and realize non-identity existence. At the same time, Adorno did not give up the "redemptive pathos" which is the core of Benjamin's thought and also the internal driving force of his own aesthetics and negative dialectics - this pathos is no longer the longing for ultimate redemption, but the deep concern for the human alienation dilemma, the persistent pursuit of non-identity existence, and the internal driving force to retain hope for human spiritual liberation and social reconciliation through the constellation mode in differences and contradictions. The modified constellation concept not only inherits the essence of Benjamin's thought, but also conforms to the critical demands of negative dialectics, becoming the core carrier of Adorno's non-identity existence mode.

4. The Modern Value of Negative Dialectics

In Negative Dialectics, Adorno was committed to elaborating the non-identity between subject and object expressed by his "negative dialectics", aiming to serve as the "logic of disintegration" for the identity principle of traditional metaphysics. At the same time, he also used the non-identity "other" concept of "constellation" to metaphor his longing for the ideal existence state of human "reconciliation" and "coexistence". In this sense, Negative Dialectics reflects that Adorno further expressed his reconstruction of modernity on the basis of the metaphysical criticism of modernity in Dialectic of Enlightenment, but this reconstruction is essentially carried out within the scope of metaphysics.

Negative dialectics is one of the most radical and extreme cultural criticism theories in the last century. Such extreme criticism and negation have attracted many criticisms and accusations, but we cannot ignore the practical significance brought by Adorno's negative dialectics. First of all, it reminds the whole society that the attitude towards science cannot be blind worship, because science itself has duality. People talk about science and put science on the altar, which will result in science itself, which enlightens human beings, turning into a God that enslaves human beings. It was in such a chaotic situation that Adorno gave people a bitter medicine. Secondly, Adorno's call for human awakening is not only a concern for human beings' own pursuit of freedom and liberation, but also his concern for nature. Is not the disaster of the second nature such as the Auschwitz concentration camp a tragedy under the power of science? Precisely because of these, even though many people have misgivings about Adorno's radical theory, they cannot erase the value and significance of his thought.

4.1. Unveiling the False Veil of Identity Philosophy

After the Enlightenment disenchanted myths, it pushed itself to the supreme position and became a myth, just like first philosophy. Myths once existed only in the material age, controlling human beings. The Enlightenment once highly praised reason, leading ignorant human beings into the auditorium of civilization. When people celebrated 狂欢 for themselves from hell to heaven, the Enlightenment quietly pushed itself to the former altar, leading ignorant human beings into another abyss.

The pain of the Auschwitz concentration camp was not given to human beings by nature. Human beings pursued reason and science, but were also quietly enslaved by reason, entering another era of enslavement. Although entering the era of civilization, people did not expect that such an era still had myths. It was the Enlightenment, which once led people out of ignorance, that has now become the God of the civilized era. People in modern society tirelessly appreciate various myths under instrumental reason. People pursue famous cars and watches, and under the upgrading of electronic products, how many people are even willing to sell their body organs to buy them. May I ask if you really need it? Is the functional role it brings really irreplaceable?

Now we are oppressed in the life kidnapped by reification, becoming complete fetishists. Now we are out of breath under the oppression of money. Now things have endowed people with materiality, and ignorant human beings have been silently deprived of their own subjectivity, and human life is like things. But do we really want to live such a life? When we are covered with scars by the thorns in life, how can people get rid of such shackles?

Adorno's thoughts and theories are just like sharp swords that severely cut off the shackles of myths controlling human beings, leading human beings to uncover the falsehood of identity philosophy from the epistemological level and from the level of consciousness, and expose its false veil. In this way, we can break the rule of enlightenment myths over human beings in the context of instrumental reason and the reification that kidnaps us, thus saving us from the cage of thought and truly living as non-identical subjects with individuality. As the saying goes,

without destruction, there is no construction. Adorno systematically analyzed his theory of establishing the status of non-identity after breaking the identity principle, and pointed out the defects of the Enlightenment. Although some of his remarks are radical, it is undeniable that he really cut through the dark sky at that time like a sharp sword.

Some scholars have deepened this understanding from the perspective of linguistic criticism. In Adorno's view, even if language has become a constitutive element of ideology, it is by no means a pure tool. The ideological criticism of language is to reveal the internal connection between language and identity thinking, and in this revelation, try to open up a dialectical philosophy of language, so that language can regain the ability to express non-identical things, thus becoming a condition for the expression of truth. The ideological criticism of conceptual language is to reveal the falsehood of concepts dominated by the subject in ideas and reality. Since the Enlightenment, the awakening of the subject and instrumental reason have led to the degeneration of language. Conceptual language, as a symbol of the Enlightenment's pursuit of progress, has ultimately become a linguistic condition for shaping new myths in modern society.

4.2. Harmonious Existence with Difference as Its Essence

In Adorno's view, although the object can only be thought by the subject, it is always something different from the subject; and the subject is inherently an object from the beginning. Even as an idea, we cannot imagine a subject that is not an object; but we can imagine an object that is not a subject. The subject is also an object, which is part of the meaning of subjectivity; but the object becoming a subject is not part of the meaning of objectivity.

The so-called identification of thinking is to grasp complex and different objects, that is to say, identity takes grasping non-identity as its own responsibility. [4] But traditional philosophy mistakenly takes the identity generated in the process of identification as the object of cognition, but negative dialectics wants to restore the connotation of non-identity, that is, to overcome the identity generated in the process of identification, and then construct harmony that allows differences to exist.

First philosophy leads to epistemological problems due to its own contradictions, which are difficult to explain, resulting in the separation of thinking and existence. At the same time, the social reality isomorphic with it also has an irreparable rift between ideal and reality. Human existence should show its subjective ideological liberation according to the way of human existence, rather than making ideas obey the primacy of practice leading to irrationality. However, even Marxist theory itself, under the slogan of so-called integrating theory with practice, has been reduced to a servant role. Because the real theory is paralyzed and despised by the activities that dominate everything, it is no longer scientific cognition, no longer a clear criticism and reflection on reality, but degenerates into a tool for policy argumentation.

In the constellation society, although there is struggle between subject and object, there is no harm. The reason for the struggle is based on the difference between subject and object. When the subject wants to grasp the object, it is inevitable to leave the mark of the subject's identification on the object, so that the object moves towards the subject in the subject's own way and becomes the object of the subject. The subject and object are inherently different in nature, and two things with different natures inevitably need a certain identity to establish a connection. That is to say, a certain degree of identification is necessary. But the object, as a part different from the subject, cannot be integrated into the subject, so in the process of moving towards the subject, the object both turns to the subject and retains a part of itself, that is to say, this is a process of mutual struggle. But such a struggle process does not involve harm, because this struggle is a process of seeking common ground while reserving

differences, achieving a balance between the two, just like the operation of stars in the vast universe, each with its own orbit without harming each other.

Although Adorno once clearly stated that Negative Dialectics is "anti-system", he repeatedly emphasized: "In criticizing ontology, we do not intend to establish another ontology, even a non-ontological ontology. If that were our purpose, we would simply be setting up another thoroughgoing 'first philosophy' - not absolute identity, being, concept, but non-identity, existent, facticity; that would be realizing the concept of non-conceptuality against its meaning." [5]

From this, we can see that this non-identity by no means means "first philosophy". Now we have to ask, what exactly does this "consciousness of non-identity" expressed by the "anti-system" "negative dialectics" mean, and how is it possible? Let us first analyze the following discussion by Adorno:

"At the height of history, what philosophy is really interested in is what Hegel, following tradition, showed no interest in - the non-conceptual, the individual and the particular. Since Plato, these things have always been dismissed as temporary and meaningless, which Hegel called 'inert existence'. The substance that constitutes the subject of philosophy devalues quality to a negligible quantity in terms of quota. What is very urgent for the concept but which it cannot reach is what its abstract mechanistic theory excludes, that is, what has not yet become an instance of the concept." [6]

Here Adorno discusses that the internal paradox of the entire Western metaphysical tradition since Plato is the irreconcilable opposition and contradiction between subject and object: on the one hand, the subject tries to eliminate the object or non-conceptual thing through abstract concepts to ensure the absolute supremacy of the concept itself as "first philosophy"; on the other hand, the subject tries to understand and grasp the object or non-conceptual thing through abstract concepts, and the farther the object is from the subject, the more efforts the subject makes to grasp it, and the more the subject does this, the more the object shows an attempt to break free from the subject's domination and rule. This is a typical feature of modern epistemological philosophy.

In Adorno's view, this opposition and contradiction between subject and object in traditional metaphysics is fundamentally insurmountable. On the contrary, any attempt to achieve the unity of the two on the basis of transcending and overcoming the opposition and contradiction between subject and object will ultimately be futile. This is because "the subject is not entirely a subject, nor is the object entirely an object; but the two are not strung together by a third thing beyond them. This third thing is also deceptive. [7]" And this deceptive "third thing" is traditional metaphysics, which is manifested both as the abstract identity of ontological "first philosophy" and as the dominant principle of subject-object dualism and its totalitarian dialectics.

Then, what kind of relationship should exist between subject and object to be the ideal state in Adorno's mind? In his view, "the difference between subject and object cannot be simply negated. They can neither be an ultimate duality nor a screen covering ultimate identity. The two constitute each other, just as they are separated from each other by this constitution. [8]" Here Adorno mainly wants to maintain an ideal state between subject and object, concept and non-conceptual thing that has differences but does not lead to division. The essence of this ideal state is to construct a new type of "equal dialogue relationship" between subject and object, concept and non-conceptual thing that is non-hierarchical, non-dominant, non-ruling and non-oppressive, that is, the "triple constellation" between collective subjectivity, individual subjectivity and the objective world. [9]

For "negative dialectics", the task of criticism is to completely eliminate identity with non-identity. For Adorno, the "negative dialectics" based on non-identity is not inclined to the

identity in the difference between each object and its concept, but doubts all identities; its logic is a logic of disintegration, which disintegrates the a priori identity of traditional metaphysics, because it is this identity that first sets a "framework" to ensure that the object is placed in this pre-set or prepared "framework" completely and impartially. This identity is to achieve the unity of subject and object.

The tragedy of the Auschwitz concentration camp made Adorno extremely angry. He hoped that the future society would tolerate differences, and both subject and object could live in harmony with differences. This ideal construction is indeed yearning, just like the ideal of a great harmony society in ancient China, which shows that both Chinese and Western countries have a longing for harmony. But this harmony contradicts negative dialectics and endows negative dialectics with metaphysical attributes.

4.3. The Internal Paradox and Self-Collapse of Negative Dialectics

Adorno's negative dialectics, with "non-identity" as its core principle and unceasing "negation" as its critical weapon, seeks to break the shackles of identity in traditional metaphysics and resist the alienated reality of modern society. However, a profound and insurmountable paradox lies inherent in its theoretical system—one that not only shakes the theoretical foundation of negative dialectics but also becomes the internal inducement of its self-collapse. Some scholars have astutely pointed out that the core of this paradox directly targets the vitality of negative dialectics: if "negation," the soul of negative dialectics, is established as an insurmountable convention and a fixed mindset that researchers and creators must adhere to; if the "dissonance" advocated by Adorno is tamed into a standardized norm within academic circles, reduced to a replicable, imitable, and mass-producible academic routine and artistic paradigm, then this negating force, originally intended to break shackles, resist alienation, and sting reality, will ultimately lose its critical edge and revolutionary vitality, falling into a predicament of self-negation and self-alienation. This acute theoretical problem is precisely the core issue Adorno confronted in his later lecture "The Aging of New Music," and it also reflects his profound self-reflection and self-analysis of his own negative dialectics, demonstrating the extremely honest and contradiction-confronting critical character in his thinking.

At that time, the post-war Western avant-garde music ushered in a wave of so-called "radical innovation." Avant-garde musicians, represented by the French composer Pierre Boulez and the German composer Karlheinz Stockhausen, pushed the twelve-tone technique founded by Arnold Schoenberg to its extreme, further developing the radical musical composition paradigm of "total serialism," which became one of the mainstream forms of post-war new music. Unlike Schoenberg's twelve-tone technique, which only subjected pitch to serial control, total serialism incorporated all constituent elements of music—pitch, duration, dynamics, timbre, and even the details of performance techniques—into a strict mathematical serial system, dominating every link of musical creation with absolute rational order. It attempted to demonstrate a complete rebellion against traditional tonal music through this extreme formalist stance, seemingly perfectly inheriting the radical critical spirit of new music since Schoenberg and superficially aligning with the core proposition of Adorno's negative dialectics of "rejecting identity, highlighting difference, and negating reality." Surprisingly, however, Adorno responded with a cold and severe criticism to this seemingly radical artistic stance, refusing to affirm it due to his consistent avant-garde position or compromise because this composition paradigm seemingly conformed to the principle of "negation."

From the sharp perspective of negative dialectics, Adorno acutely perceived the alienation crisis hidden behind this extreme rational control: total serialism completely reduced musical creation to a process of mathematical logical deduction, and extreme rational control ultimately led to a complete vacuum of artistic meaning. Under this creative model, music was

completely alienated into pure mathematical arrangements and formal games, losing the emotional connotation, ideological depth, and critical spirit that art should carry. Its auditory result was akin to "meaningless noise," failing to arouse any emotional resonance or ideological reflection among the audience, let alone fulfill the artistic mission Adorno expected of "stinging reality and resisting alienation." Adorno profoundly pointed out that the core value of new music should lie in breaking the false illusion of traditional harmony through "dissonance," embodying the pain and struggle of the subject in an alienated society, and demonstrating criticism of instrumental rationality and commodity logic. However, when dissonance no longer serves as a true expression of the subject's pain, no longer possesses the power to sting reality and criticize alienation, but merely becomes a formal expression following the dogma of "forbidding consonance" and an artistic routine divorced from reality and the subject, new music completely loses its critical edge and practical significance.

It is no longer a sharp weapon against alienation; instead, it becomes safe, neutral, and even reduced to another cultural ornament that can be collected by museums and sought after by academic circles. Contrary to the "resistant art" Adorno envisioned, it completely falls into the alienated predicament it criticizes. This phenomenon precisely demonstrates an extremely honest self-devouring in Adorno's negative dialectics: new music, which he hoped would be an important weapon against alienation, ultimately cannot escape the fate of being alienated and becomes the object of its own criticism in the course of its development. This self-devouring is a vivid embodiment of the internal paradox of negative dialectics. This profound despair goes far beyond simple pessimism; it sharply reveals a cruel reality: even "resistance" itself, once standardized, dogmatized, and formalized, will lose its essential nature of resistance and face the risk of becoming a standardized stance and being assimilated by the dominant order—a risk that negative dialectics cannot avoid.

Faced with this profound theoretical dilemma and practical paradox, people inevitably wonder: in Adorno's seemingly impenetrable negative dialectics, in this unceasing and uncompromising absolute negation, does redemption still have a place? The answer is yes—redemption does exist, but it does not manifest in the positive form of hope or reconciliation; instead, it must lurk in negation in the form of despair. This is the uniqueness of Adorno's view of redemption, which is also highly consistent with his core viewpoints that "art is the code of society" and "art is the last fortress against alienation." In Adorno's view, in the face of this false reality fully dominated by instrumental rationality, completely permeated by the logic of commodity exchange, and firmly bound by identity thinking, all art that seems harmonious, understandable, consumable, and communicable has been assimilated by the logic of alienation, losing the possibility of criticism and redemption and becoming an ideological tool serving the dominant order.

Therefore, to realize its redemptive function, new music has no choice but to take an unconventional and anti-secular path: by making itself incomprehensible, unconsumable, and incommunicable, it completely cuts off its connection with alienated reality, refuses to be assimilated by commodity logic, and refuses to become a consumer product of mass entertainment. Only in its closedness can it preserve the remnants of human spirit not yet assimilated by the logic of exchange value and safeguard the independence and authenticity of the subject. This is also the only path for art to resist instrumental rationality and highlight non-identity. Adorno compared this state to the monad in Leibniz's philosophy—Leibniz proposed in *Monadology* that the monad is the smallest indivisible spiritual substance constituting all things in the universe. It has no windows, cannot directly communicate or interact with the external world, but in its internal structure, it completely reflects the distortion and alienation of the external world, resists external assimilative forces through its closedness, and upholds its own uniqueness and independence.

To more vividly explain this state of "redemption in despair," Adorno put forward the famous metaphor of "a message in a bottle," which accurately summarizes the existential significance and redemptive direction of new music: Schoenberg's new music is not composed for the current alienated era. It does not pursue understanding and acceptance by contemporary audiences, nor does it cater to current aesthetic tastes, let alone attempt to fulfill the mission of redemption in the present. It is like a message in a bottle thrown into the ocean of history, carrying human longing for truth, freedom, and reconciliation, and pinning hopes on a possible future subject who has escaped alienation and restored subjectivity. When this future subject accidentally picks up this "message," they can understand the critical spirit, painful cries, and redemptive expectations contained within, thereby achieving spiritual awakening and liberation. This is the last glimmer of light left by Adorno's negative dialectics for human spiritual liberation in the predicament of self-collapse, and it further confirms the profundity of its internal paradox—even in the conception of redemption, it cannot escape the background of despair or break out of the logical cycle of self-devouring.

4.4. The Critical Significance of Negative Dialectics

Although negative dialectics has inherent paradoxes—its constructed constellation-like harmony lacks practical operability, and it ultimately moves towards self-negation in the logic of absolute negation, falling into the metaphysical predicament it criticizes—this does not prevent it from becoming a highly iconic theoretical achievement in 20th-century Western Marxist philosophy, still possessing irreplaceable important theoretical value and practical significance. The research value of negative dialectics is reflected not only in its profound criticism of the reality of capitalist society but also in its innovation and reflection on dialectics itself. Its radical critical stance and unique thinking perspective have provided valuable ideological resources for subsequent philosophical research and social criticism. It is true that under the guidance of the "absolute negation" logic of negative dialectics, critical social theory gradually moved towards self-termination, becoming a dialectics with metaphysical characteristics. In addition, claiming to be the orthodox inheritor of Marxist dialectics, the highly impactful and incendiary discourse in its texts made it revered as a classic of critical theory in a specific historical period, and even triggered an erroneous ideological trend—some scholars, influenced by it, one-sidedly denied the contemporary value of Marxist dialectics, claiming that Marxist dialectics is outdated, and various misinterpretations and erroneous criticisms of Marxist dialectics once prevailed. However, when examining negative dialectics, we should not be limited by its internal paradoxes and the controversies it has caused; instead, we should uphold a dialectical and rational attitude, focus more on exploring its positive significance, critical spirit, and modern value, and recognize its important role in breaking ideological shackles and promoting social reflection.

In the current era characterized by highly developed network information technology, the rapid iteration of new things every day, and increasingly diverse and complex social structures and values, both individuals and society are facing unprecedented opportunities and challenges. To accurately grasp the pulse of the times in the complex tide of the times, understand the essential laws of social development, and firmly hold the opportunities for development in our own hands, we urgently need the theoretical guidance of dialectics, and Adorno's negative dialectics just provides us with important ideological enlightenment. With "non-identity" as its core principle, Adorno's negative dialectics sharply reminds us that any attempt to forcibly simplify the rich, complex, and fluid real world into an abstract, fixed, and rigid conceptual system will inevitably obscure the diversity and complexity of reality, further leading to the suppression and negation of individual differences and particularities, and ultimately falling into one-sidedness and dogmatism in thinking. In this sense, the criticality of negative dialectics is not only directed at the thinking mode of traditional metaphysics that

pursues absolute identity and negates differences but also extends to a high degree of vigilance against any form of ideological hegemony, discourse monopoly, and cognitive rigidity—it warns us that whether it is the absolutization of scientific rationality, the singularity of ideology, or the homogenization of cultural concepts, all may become shackles that bind human thinking and suppress individual freedom. Only by always maintaining respect and reflection on "non-identity" can we avoid falling into ideological misunderstandings.

As some scholars have noted, the German philosopher Albrecht Wellmer, on the basis of inheriting the core ideas of Adorno's negative dialectics, transformed Adorno's core viewpoint that "art presents a non-reconciled world" into an artistic theory of truth with the characteristics of communicative rationality through a paradigm shift in the theory of truth. Wellmer broke Adorno's limitation of regarding art as the sole carrier of "negating reality and highlighting non-identity," emphasizing that the truthfulness of art does not originate from the absolute negation of reality, but is realized through equal dialogue and mutual understanding between subjects. As a communicative practice, the truthful content of art is contained in the dialogue and interpretation between different subjects. At the same time, through the integration and reconstruction of rational paradigms, Wellmer broke the implicit tendency of Adorno's monopoly on aesthetic rationality—in the process of criticizing instrumental rationality, Adorno once regarded aesthetic rationality as the only effective path to resist instrumental rationality and highlight non-identity, while Wellmer advocated that scientific rationality, ethical rationality, and aesthetic rationality are not opposed or mutually exclusive, but should form a relationship of pluralistic coexistence and equal dialogue, constructing a polyphonic constellation of reason rather than a confrontational rational pattern. This innovative interpretation provides a new perspective and thinking for us to re-understand Adorno's concept of "constellation": the constellation is not merely an abstract philosophical metaphor used to explain the non-hierarchical and non-dominant relationship between subject and object, concept and non-conceptual things, but also has clear practical orientation—it points to a path of liberation characterized by the coexistence of diverse cultures, the symbiosis of diverse rationalities, and the respect for individual differences. It enlightens us that in real society, we should abandon hierarchical and homogenized thinking modes and construct a social relationship and cultural pattern that embraces differences, respects pluralism, and promotes equal dialogue. This is also an important extension and embodiment of the critical significance of Adorno's negative dialectics in the contemporary era.

5. Conclusion: The Contemporary Enlightenment of Negative Dialectics

Adorno's negative dialectics is a thorough reckoning with the tradition of Western metaphysics. Through his criticism of identity philosophy, he revealed the suppression of non-conceptual things by conceptual thinking, the domination of the object by the subject, and the manifestations of this suppression and domination in social reality—the expansion of instrumental rationality, the standardization of the culture industry, and the reification and alienation of individuals. On this basis, Adorno proposed negative dialectics with non-identity as its core, attempting to break the false illusion of identity through the "logic of disintegration" and save the suppressed, forgotten individuality, difference, and particularity.

The proposal of the concept of constellation provides a theoretical model for this salvation. In a constellation, there is no hierarchy, domination, or suppression between various elements; they form an open and dynamic whole through mutual mediation. This constellation relationship is not only a metaphor for the ideal relationship between subject and object but also a metaphor for the ideal relationship between humans, between humans and nature, and

even a metaphor for the ideal future society. However, negative dialectics also faces a profound internal paradox. If thorough negation becomes a principle and a new form of "identity," then it will inevitably turn against itself. In the process of negating all positivity, negative dialectics ultimately falls into the predicament of self-collapse. But this does not mean that negative dialectics is meaningless. On the contrary, it is precisely this self-collapse that reveals the true nature of dialectics: dialectics is not a formulaic method, nor a theory that can solve problems once and for all, but an unceasing criticism and a vigilance against any form of rigidity and closure.

In the contemporary context, Adorno's negative dialectics still has important enlightenment significance. Today, in the era of globalization and informatization, various forms of identity thinking still play a role—the logic of capital attempts to reduce all differences to exchange value, technological rationality attempts to transform all problems into computable technical problems, and various cultural hegemonies attempt to universalize their own values. Faced with these forces of identity, we need to maintain critical vigilance, respect individual and cultural differences, and maintain a dynamic balance between the universal and the particular, identity and difference. As Adorno put it, what philosophy is truly interested in is what traditional philosophy has ignored and suppressed—non-concepts, individuality, and particularity. This concern is not only a theoretical interest but also an ethical care: it cares about the individuals and groups who have been sacrificed, forgotten, and suppressed in the course of history, and the life experiences and existential feelings that cannot be fully captured by concepts. In this sense, negative dialectics is not only a philosophical theory but also a memory of suffering and an expectation of liberation.

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